

In the Company of
SHADOWS

THE
INTERLUDES



Sonny
& Ais

Interludes

Book Three
of
In the Company of Shadows
by Sonny & Ais

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Third Party Reject

The room was stuffy, warm, and the sweat from their bodies added a near humidity to the air that was completely still other than the low, rhythmic moans and heavy breathing.

"Jesus Christ, Zach," Morgan murmured, her eyes shutting as she threw her head back, dark hued lips parted as soft sounds of pleasure escaped them.

Their bodies were pressed together as she sat straddling his lap, her arms outstretched behind her, hands pressed flat against the bed to support the motions of their bodies that were becoming more urgent with each passing moment and each exclamation that escaped her mouth.

Carhart swallowed heavily, his head tilted back against the headboard as he gripped her waist, thrusting inside of her wet, willing body as her muscles clenched around him tighter. He swore under his breath, the words nearly unintelligible as his fingers tightened around her, clenching hard as he began moving faster.

"Oh, God, Oh God, yes!" Morgan surged forward, her arms wrapping around him and crying out louder, sweaty thighs clenching around him as his hands slid up her toned back.

Carhart pressed his face against her damp neck, breath coming faster and groans getting louder as his orgasm drew closer. He inhaled her scent, sweat mixed with perfume mixed with a musky smell of sex and something that he just recognized as undeniably Morgan.

His body was reeling as she rode him faster and it was just as every muscle in his body clenched with tension, with need for the impending release, that the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Carhart's eyes snapped open and focused on the doorway to his bedroom over Morgan's shoulder.

Emilio smirked at him and arched an eyebrow, his expression a mixture between impressed and envious as his eyes went up and down Morgan's naked form.

Carhart's eyebrows drew together in annoyance but he just closed his eyes and grit his teeth, unwilling to stop now that he was so close-- even if they did have an audience.

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"Yes, yes, Zach-- God-- like that-- Oh fuck--" Morgan growled out as he fucked her harder, harder than usual and she encouraged it with her loud shouts of ecstasy. She leaned back on her hands once again so that he could have a better angle to thrust, to get in deeper, and it was then that her eyes focused on Emilio.

"What the he--"

Carhart came hard inside of her before she could complete the sentence, groaning loudly, his eyes squeezing shut as he bit down on his lower lip. He thrust into her once, twice, one last time as he finished before collapsing backwards against the headboard with a grunt.

"Zach-- what the hell--"

Morgan rolled to the side, movements quick and stiff as she scrambled off the side of the bed and grabbed her underwear as she shot a furious glare at Emilio, who just smiled at her serenely, unapologetically letting his eyes wander over her full breasts and flat stomach, down to the wet area between her toned thighs.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" she shouted at him, face red with embarrassment but more with fury as she yanked her underwear up hurriedly.

"Getting a free show," Emilio replied with a filthy grin, eyes flicking over to Carhart and giving him a once over. "Good job, Zachary. You were tearin' it up, bro."

Carhart sighed and scooted off the bed, picking up a pair of jeans and stepping into them without looking at Emilio as he tried to get himself together, tried to ignore the raw, unbalanced feeling of having just recently had an intense orgasm.

"You disrespectful fucking asshole," Morgan yelled, her naturally low voice thick with contempt as she struggled into her loose black cargo pants. "How dare you--"

"Blah blah blah," Emilio cut her off, waving his hand dismissively. "Since y'all are finished, just be on your merry way. I got to talk to Zachary about something and your presence is no longer needed."

"Shut up, Emilio," Carhart said tiredly, running a hand through his short blond hair before he finally turned to the two.

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Morgan scowled at Carhart darkly as she tugged a white tank top over her head. "How long did you know he was there?" she demanded, her words muffled by the fabric of the shirt.

"Don't be all pissed off at him," Emilio said mildly, smirk firmly in place as he looked over at his former partner. "It wasn't until just before he came."

"Ugh. I can't stand you already." Morgan strode out of the room and elbowed past Emilio violently, heading down the hallway and into the living room.

Carhart just gave Emilio a narrow-eyed, impatient stare and followed Morgan, ignoring the other man's obvious amusement at the situation.

He didn't know how Emilio had gained access to his apartment but truth be told, he wasn't entirely surprised. It wouldn't be shocking if it turned out that Emilio had altered his key card on his own; the man was capable of it if he wanted to and he'd done it in the past. Emilio's talents as an agent went far beyond physically fighting-- he was highly intelligent, a fast learner, and had taught himself a lot about computer programming. That skill and him granting himself access to what should have been secure areas had actually been what got Emilio in trouble in the first place.

"I don't see what you're so pissed off about," Emilio said as he followed the two of them leisurely, his hands in the pockets of the dark blue jeans he wore. "Me and Zachary used to share women. I'm surprised he didn't tell you 'bout that."

Morgan's eyes snapped over to Carhart and her hands froze on the sweater that she'd grabbed from the sofa.

Carhart just rolled his eyes. "He's lying."

Emilio laughed and didn't deny it. "Oh, right. That was Douglas."

"*What?*" Morgan looked even more scandalized now. "Instructor Ferguson?"

"Uh huh." Emilio raised his eyebrows innocently, pressing his back against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest, smile still in place. "He was my best buddy before Zachary came along. You shoulda seen 'em back in the day. The way they used to squabble over me..."

"That's not true either," Carhart corrected impatiently, glaring at his former partner.

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"Not *entirely* true," Emilio retorted, a challenging edge making its way into his tone. "Don't lie, Zachary."

"Is there something you wanted or did you just show up to be a pain in my ass?" Carhart demanded finally, tired of Emilio's antics.

"I need to talk to you about something but not in front of her." Emilio pointed his chin at Morgan. "Tell her to get lost."

Morgan looked at Emilio incredulously, her eyes narrowed and face wrought with anger. "You must think you're really something special to think you can barge in here and treat me like that."

"I am something special, baby," Emilio replied easily, his gaze settling on her almost lazily. "And you're just the flavor of the month."

"You don't know shit about me. You've been gone for a long time, Vega," Morgan said coldly, standing up straight and staring him down without a shred of intimidation in her body. "Things have changed. You're not as important as you think you used to be. I'm higher rank than you, I'm more--"

"Awesome!" Emilio cheered, twirling his finger in the air sarcastically. "You're higher rank! Congrats! What's your specialty? Riding cock? You seemed pretty pro at it, sweetheart. I wouldn't be surprised if they utilized that talent."

"Emilio, shut the *fuck* up," Carhart seethed between clenched teeth, raising a hand to massage his temples.

"Actually I'm a Captain," Morgan replied icily, although her face was burning. "And you're nothing but a field agent who is just as expendable as any other field agent. I have no doubts that you will be discarded eventually just as all of the rest of them are no matter what delusions of grandeur you possess."

Carhart was so startled by the words that he actually forgot about his irritation with Emilio and looked at Morgan sharply. He knew she always had a very cutthroat view of the world and the Agency but to hear her make such a statement bothered him a great deal because even if in a way it was true that they sent agents out in very dangerous situations-- he didn't agree with her. She made it sound as though the Agency

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deliberately sent agents out to die and considering the fact that his position put him in charge of all field agent activities-- he strongly disagreed.

"And I thought Vivienne was a cold-hearted bitch." Emilio arched one dark eyebrow at Carhart, a slight sneer twisting his striking features. "Can we ditch this person now and get down to business? You already shot your load-- what other purpose does she serve here?"

Morgan looked like she wanted to do nothing more than lunge across the room and throttle Emilio but instead she shook her head disgustedly and tried to adopt a cool expression. "You know, Zach's told me about you."

"Is that a fact?" Emilio asked with obvious disinterest, not seeming very impressed by the proclamation as he pushed himself away from the wall and moved closer to her. "What'd old Zachary have to say?"

Carhart watched the two of them with obvious discomfort and although he knew he should intervene, he also knew that whatever he said wouldn't stop either of them. Morgan and Emilio were both the same to an extent when it came to confrontations-- neither of them would stop once they got going and they'd only consider it finished when one of them hit the lowest blow.

"He told me what you did to your son. How you fucked his head up and turned him into what he is now."

Emilio's eyes moved to Carhart and he looked at him in consideration before sliding his gaze back over to Morgan. His lips were still twisted upward but now the expression was colder, his eyes glinting with something more akin to annoyance than amusement. "And what is he?"

"A danger to everyone on this compound," she replied instantly. "A liability-- a risk to himself and others. And he's that way because of you."

Emilio nodded mock seriously, eyes flashing dangerously even as he told Carhart in a casual tone, "Why don't you get rid of her before I knock her fucking teeth out? You know me, bro. I'll smack a bitch."

"Fucking try it," Morgan growled, taking two bold steps forward, her body tense and ready. "I dare you. I *dare* you."

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"Enough," Carhart snapped at the two of them, finally moving forward to stand between them. He pushed one open palmed hand against Emilio's chest, forcing him to back up even though Emilio was looking at Morgan like he really wanted to follow through with his threat.

"Get rid of her," Emilio repeated, his eyes not moving from her face.

Carhart sighed wearily and glanced down at Morgan who was glaring at him.

"If you listen to him, we're done," she said flatly.

"Why does it have to be this way?" Carhart asked no one in particular, shaking his head. "I don't care if you don't like each other but don't try to involve me in this ridiculous behavior."

"Because you're choosing this disrespectful piece of shit over me!" Morgan shouted at him furiously, apparently already knowing Carhart's decision before he'd even voiced it. "You fucking stand here and let him talk to me like I'm one of those stupid little slut field agents who hound you all the time and you don't even defend me!"

"You seemed to be doing a good job defending yourself," Carhart said tiredly, going back to rubbing his head. "I didn't think you needed a white knight."

Morgan scoffed and stepped into her shoes, yanking her sweater from the sofa finally. "What I needed was a man to show he cares-- to show he isn't cowed by some pathetic fucking hoodlum who needs to go back to the slum he crawled out of."

"Ouch! That one stung a little," Emilio said with mock sadness even as he grinned at her smugly, wagging his eyebrows.

"You need to calm down and you--" Carhart looked over his shoulder at Emilio with barely concealed irritation. "You need to shut the hell up."

Emilio pouted and leaned against the wall again.

Morgan scoffed in disgust again and reached down to fix one of her shoes, her hands trembling slightly. "I can't even believe you would throw our relationship away over that despicable creature."

"Morgan, I'm not throwing anything away--"

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"Hey baby, it's not his fault that I'm awesome and you suck," Emilio butted in again, cutting Carhart off.

"Emilio, shut the fuck up!" Carhart shouted at him, turning entirely to give his friend an incredulous look. "What's wrong with you?"

Emilio shrugged innocently, raising his eyebrows high. "I don't know how to take instructions slash am a bad person?"

Carhart nearly rolled his eyes at the reply but turned at the sound of Morgan's footsteps stomping towards the door. She gave him one last furious look before slamming it closed and disappearing from the apartment entirely.

Carhart stared after her for a moment before sitting down on the sofa with another weary sigh.

"She'll be back," Emilio said confidently, eyes trained on Carhart as satisfaction brightened his eyes and caused a small smile to cross his lips.

"No, she won't," Carhart said with a shrug. "I know Morgan. She has too much pride to come back after what just happened."

"Oh please." Emilio made a face and sat down next to Carhart, turning sideways and resting one elbow against the top of the sofa as he leaned his face against his hand. "If that's the way it is, she isn't your type anyways. She's all bitchy and has no sense of humor and is all self-important and retarded. I can't even believe you've been knocking someone like that. I thought you liked submissive women who like, I dunno, picked daises and baked and like, had potlucks and shit."

Carhart covered his face with his hand and closed his eyes. "I'm just completely blown away by the ridiculous things that you say. I can't even reply."

Emilio shrugged and studied Carhart, gaze sweeping over him and taking in the weary posture and slumped shoulders. "Well if you're going to be all bent out of shape over it, why didn't you tell her to stay?"

"Because."

Emilio made a face and reached out to shove Carhart's hand aside. "Because what?"

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Carhart sighed in exasperation and turned his cerulean blue eyes onto Emilio as he shrugged his shoulders. "Because you were my best friend and I thought you were dead for twenty years and she's a woman I sleep with."

They looked at each other for a moment before the smile on Emilio's face widened considerably and he leaned forward to hug Carhart. "Awww, buddy, maybe you do still like me after all! And here I thought you were just feeling obligated to be civilized to me. Here I thought I was going to have to go on disliking this brand new you and keep forcing myself to play nice."

Carhart started at the comment and gave Emilio a searching stare as the other man pulled back after a moment. Although Emilio had been the one to initiate the physical contact, there had been obvious tension in his body and Carhart didn't know why that was. There was something off about Emilio's behavior, something Carhart couldn't readily identify, but it made him wonder seriously if Emilio's last comment was really true.

After a moment, Carhart shook his head. "I don't understand why you feel such a burning need to completely disrespect everyone you come in contact with, especially a woman I'm involved with."

"I dunno," Emilio said carelessly, although he seemed to rethink that decision because he forced a more serious look onto his face. "I guess I'm just a jackass?"

"No kidding." Carhart extended his legs in front of him and curled his toes in the carpet. "What did you want? And it better be good."

"Ahhh, *that*." Emilio stood up and stretched luxuriously, arching his back and simultaneously shrugging off his leather jacket to reveal a long-sleeved black shirt that was adorned with buckles and straps on either shoulder. He held his jacket in one hand, apparently thinking it was too warm for the garment or maybe he just wanted to show off how good he looked in his shirt.

"I want to stay here until they give me unrestricted access to come and go as I please. I'm tired of them keeping me on the Fourth."

Carhart's eyebrows drew together and he looked at Emilio in surprise. "What?"

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"I want to crash here until I can get my own place off compound," Emilio repeated impatiently, frowning at Carhart. His lips turned down in a frown and the cheerful expression, or the seemingly cheerful expression, melted away almost instantly. It made Carhart wonder if it had ever been truly genuine; he was beginning to doubt his ability to read Emilio.

Emilio narrowed his vivid green eyes at Carhart. "Don't tell me you're going to say no," he added flatly, disappointment and annoyance clear in his suddenly sharp tone.

"I didn't say no but I just--"

"Good." Emilio leaned down to slap Carhart on the back violently, although some of the irritation was still glittering in his eyes, as if Carhart's hesitation had truly bothered him. "My shit is already packed. I'll be back in a few."

"Wha--"

Emilio didn't even give Carhart a chance to reply before he was striding out of the apartment quickly.

Carhart stared at the closed door in bewildered awe before he let his head thump back against the sofa as he sighed and looked up at the ceiling wearily.

Verge

The early Spring air was chilly but not nearly as cold as the season had been in the last several years. The fact that the temperature had actually climbed into the mid-thirties in the middle of March was a surprising but pleasant change from two decades of spring starting out in the 'teens.

Sin supposed that it was fortunate for Boyd, who had begun additional exercise in order to keep up and improve in his official Level 10 training; he'd decided that now would be a good time to take up running in order to improve his stamina.

They slowed down gradually along Boyd's street and stopped entirely in front of his house. When they entered the gate, Boyd sat briefly on the steps, hunched forward with his arms resting on his knees, breathing heavily.

"We didn't even run that far," Sin commented blandly, staring down at his partner.

"If you call three miles not far," Boyd panted, looking up at Sin from beneath his eyebrows.

Sin shrugged. "I suppose."

Boyd shook his head briefly and didn't answer, apparently concentrating on regaining his breath. Golden blond strands of hair caught along the sides of his face and on his open lips as he tilted his head toward the ground, his pale skin flushed. Boyd threaded his fingers through his hair and pulled it back from his face and up off his neck, eyes closing briefly. Sweat trickled down Boyd's skin, sliding down his neck and beneath the dark red track jacket he wore.

Several long moments of silence passed, the cool wind lightly shifting their clothing and the only sound being Boyd's breathing starting to slow and even. Boyd's street was empty and quiet like usual, a marked contrast from the other areas of the city which were so overcrowded or high in crime that no matter the time of day, something was happening.

Sin briefly noticed movement across the street and when he looked over, he saw the blinds shifting in the main window of the house across the street, as if someone had been looking out. The large blue house was well kept, making it obvious that the owner took very good care of it.

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After a moment and when the motion was not repeated, Sin dismissed it from his mind and returned his gaze to Boyd, who was just pushing himself up and dusting off his pants. He seemed to mostly have his breath under control and he went inside the house, holding the door open for Sin and looking over his shoulder.

"How long would you call far?" Boyd asked belatedly, seeming half curious and half bemused.

"I don't know." Sin followed Boyd inside, eyes absently focused on Boyd as he took off his jacket, looking away from the sweat-soaked t-shirt beneath and the way it clung to Boyd's back and shoulders. "Long enough so that I'm tired."

"Yeah, and what is that?" Boyd asked dryly as he dropped his jacket on the back of a chair, looking over at Sin in amusement. His cheeks were still flushed and his hair was messy from the run, with some strands remaining caught against his face. "Thirty miles? Fifty?"

"Obviously." Sin unzipped his own hoody and shrugged it off, standing near the door awkwardly and not moving in any further.

Noticing Sin's delay, Boyd's expression very briefly grew more reserved but it was gone almost before it was there, replaced by a somewhat bemused smile. He tilted his head toward the living room. "Come in. Do you want anything? Water?"

Sin continued to stand by the closed door and there was a long pause before he finally shook his head silently and entered the room entirely. It was the first time he'd been there since the night of Philip's death.

Boyd looked at Sin briefly but didn't comment; instead he collapsed on the couch, leaning his head back and covering his face with his hands. "Damn," he groaned, then dropped his hands into his lap as he stared at the ceiling. "I wonder how long it'll take before I feel like training isn't trying to kill me anymore."

"I don't know." Sin crossed his arms over his chest, gaze absently moving over the room before returning to Boyd. "Why did you even ask me to go with you?"

Boyd's eyes slid over to focus on Sin. "Because I wanted company," he said with a shrug. "And I thought you may like the exercise."

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"Why didn't you ask Kassian?" The question was out of Sin's mouth before he could stop it and although there wasn't an edge to his voice, he was sorry that he'd said it. He didn't really want to talk about Kassian and bringing him up was just a horrible idea.

Boyd didn't seem fazed; he simply watched Sin. "Because I wanted to run with you, not him."

"I see." Sin leaned his back against the wall. He idly remembered slamming Kassian's head into it and didn't feel entirely remorseful about it. "Well I can't help you with the rest of your training."

"I'll probably do a lot on my own and for the rest I'll try to solicit help from a number of places," Boyd said easily, likely aware of how little patience Sin tended to have for teaching. "I'm just happy to have you involved whenever you're interested."

"Why?" Sin asked bluntly, eyebrows raising at Boyd. He didn't really understand why Boyd wouldn't prefer Kassian, who was likely more of a compassionate and engaging person to go running with or be around in general. "What's so great about me being involved? I'm not a very entertaining person."

Boyd leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees as he studied Sin more seriously. "I've liked being around you for over two years." His honey brown gaze was open and genuine as he met Sin's eyes, his tone earnest. "I know some things have changed but that hasn't. I'm busy with training lately but I still want to spend time with you so it's good when they coincide."

Sin stared at Boyd silently for a moment before nodding and finally moving to sit down. Despite the fact that he wished more aspects of their previous relationship had remained, it was a good thing to hear and it shed some of his self-doubt. It was true that they'd gotten along platonically long before Monterrey, even if the incidences of them simply spending time together had never been very frequent.

"I wonder if it will still occur to you to want to see me whenever I'm not your partner anymore," Sin said finally. "That wasn't meant as a dig or something, either. It's just... out of sight, out of mind, right?"

"It won't change anything," Boyd said without a hint of hesitation or doubt. "But I do wish you'd reconsider."

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Sin tilted his head back against the arm chair and gazed at Boyd through his long eyelashes. "It's possible I would have changed my mind but since he's going to be reinstated as an agent and officially added to the unit, I have no desire to remain there, even more so than before."

There was no doubt that by 'he,' Sin meant his father, Emilio.

Boyd nodded, looking slightly relieved and understanding, but still he hesitated. For a moment, it seemed as though he was debating saying something, his eyebrows drawing down slightly before he asked, "Did you talk to him?"

Sin's mind automatically shifted back to that night on the roof of the Tower, his father staring at him disapprovingly as he dissected Sin's personality and past. "Yes, that first night but not again after."

"How did it go?"

Sin's fingers idly toyed with the fraying pocket at the side of his cargo pants as he gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I didn't shove him off the roof so that's saying something."

For some reason, Boyd's gaze was briefly caught by Sin's fidgeting fingers and he seemed contemplative before he met Sin's eyes again. "If you don't mind telling me... What happened the night you thought you'd killed him?"

Sin looked at Boyd, somewhat thrown off by the question. Although he did avert his gaze, he only hesitated briefly before replying. "My father found out some things about Connors and Connors sent a hit out on him. I didn't know about any of this but my father already had a pre-determined plan; I suppose he figured it might happen eventually. Now that I spoke with him and I think back, it seems he wanted them to believe that he'd died but when I saw him go down and appear to not get back up, I snapped. I suppose I went into what they're now calling an episode."

His mouth turned down slightly in a frown and he sighed, closing his eyes briefly. It all seemed so stupid now, so pointless. Despite his father's claims that he'd thought Sin would be able to handle the situation and the idea of his father being killed in front of him, it all would have gone according to Emilio's half-assed plan if he'd just bothered to fill Sin in beforehand. Although, Sin supposed, maybe he'd worried that the reaction wouldn't have been genuine then.

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"Anyway, I guess... he'd somehow figured that one of the men, Peter, wouldn't stay-- he apparently had an aversion to killing kids and maybe even killing my father because they acted familiar with each other. So Peter ordered the other agents not to kill me until he was gone and they'd finished with my father, and after that my father began demanding that I wait, that I not help fight, and I listened for some reason even though I had no idea what was going on. I believe he wanted to wait until Peter left to report in that the hit was complete. It was a risky plan and my father was going on the slim possibility that Peter wouldn't verify that he was actually dead instead of just appearing to be dead at that moment. Which worked but it was pure luck. Although, my father gave a good performance since I thought he was dead too."

At first Boyd seemed mildly surprised by the information but it faded quickly as he nodded, taking it all in thoughtfully. "And in the midst of an episode, you accidentally shot him?"

Sin nodded, finally looking at Boyd again. "He looked dead. He was covered in blood, he wasn't moving. I snapped, I murdered the other two assassins. I was completely caught up in it, completely... out of it. And in the midst of it, my father either decided to interrupt or maybe he'd actually been unconscious and at that moment he awoke, but I turned on him and shot before even realizing it was him."

Boyd watched Sin quietly for a moment before nodding in understanding. "Were you aware after it happened?"

"No. Otherwise I wouldn't have blocked it out for so many years. I didn't come back to myself until several hours later and at that point I just found myself in the bloody apartment with no idea as to what had happened." Sin sat up straight again and cleared his throat. "Anyway, I wonder why Connors took me in. He had to have been aware of my existence before I actually came here. It's curious."

"I don't know," Boyd said, shaking his head to himself. His tone was mostly simple but a faint hint of distaste was in his eyes as he thought about Connors. "Maybe he was uncertain of how much you knew, so rather than kill off a potential replacement for his Level 10, he decided to keep you close where he could watch you."

"Maybe," Sin said thoughtfully. "I'll never know for sure since Connors is dead, though."

Boyd nodded and was quiet for another moment. He searched Sin's features almost absently and shifted on the couch, tilting his body more toward Sin to see him fully, and

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asked tentatively, "Did Emilio tell you what his plan was with you if everything had gone how he'd anticipated?"

"Not really." Sin replied and a frown crossed his otherwise stoic expression. "I don't know. Why?"

"Well," Boyd said slowly, studying Sin closely as if trying to gauge his mood, "I think it's possible he's not quite as much of an unrepentant asshole as he makes himself out to be. Sort of the way you used to be. Not that I particularly like him, but he did come to my house that night looking for you and we briefly talked."

"I'd figured you spoke to him. He implied it several times." Sin narrowed his eyes slightly at Boyd. "What did he say that made you come to that interesting conclusion?"

"Part of it was what he said and part are actions," Boyd said thoughtfully, his eyebrows drawn down slightly as he didn't look away from Sin. He had the sort of expression Sin was accustomed to seeing when Boyd had been contemplating something for a while and had finally gathered enough evidence to speak up.

"For one thing, he picked you up from China. It's possible he's fathered other children with the numerous women he's likely slept with but he went out of his way for you. Not to mention," Boyd added, tone nonjudgmental as he seemed to be simply saying the situation as he saw it, "your mother was a prostitute. It would have been incredibly easy to claim no responsibility; to leave you there. But it sounds like at one point he actually cared about your mother on some level, even if that obviously didn't go far. And not just that-- he said he planned to go underground with you."

Sin just shrugged, not feeling any more positive towards his father even with that information. It didn't change anything for him; it didn't change the fact that his father's flawed plan and risky behavior had ultimately led to where Sin was now or that his father had no remorse over that fact. "I wonder if he does have other kids," he said, ignoring the rest of Boyd's statement.

"He might, with his reputation," Boyd said honestly, shifting on the couch and crossing his arms loosely. "You could ask him sometime; you may have siblings."

"I'm just curious about it; I wouldn't actually want to meet them or anything."

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"Are you sure?" Boyd asked, drawing his eyebrows down slightly. "You don't know what they'd be like or even how their mothers would be. Maybe you'd find that somewhere in this world you have a family."

Sin gave Boyd a long look before raising an eyebrow. "The idea of family is a social construct that wouldn't apply to my situation. I'd consider you my family more than random offspring from my father." There was a brief pause and then Sin added with a faint smirk, "But then the social construct of incest would come into play and that's never a good thing."

Boyd looked somewhat caught off-guard by the answer and it wasn't immediately clear why. He seemed at once amused, pleased, and something more indefinable that may have been slightly sad. He shook his head to himself with a smirk pulling at one side of his lips.

"Yes, well. We can't have that. Social constructs are very important to people in our line of work," Boyd said lightly.

The sound of a motorcycle roaring down the street caught Sin's attention, mostly because the sound was atypical of the usually quiet residential neighborhood. He turned his head and looked out the window just in time to see a black and silver motorcycle flying past. Sin turned back to Boyd and was reminded of an earlier question he'd had.

"What happened to your black car?"

Boyd looked slightly distracted as his eyes tracked the motorcycle just as it disappeared from the view through his window, then returned his gaze to Sin. "I traded it in."

"Why?"

"It was time to switch to electric," Boyd said with a shrug. "I'd been considering it for a while and I finally had enough money to afford it so when it was convenient one day I just went."

"Ah." Sin had preferred the look of the more understated look of old car but he chose to keep the information to himself.

A beat of silence passed between them, partially awkward because Sin still didn't know how to act around Boyd and Boyd seemed determined to keep the conversation going or at least make the visit go as smoothly as possible.

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When it became apparent that neither of them knew what to say immediately, Boyd glanced at his watch, made a face, then stood. "I should probably have another shake." He gestured toward the kitchen. "Are you sure you don't want anything..?"

"I'm not hungry," Sin replied, following Boyd to the kitchen, shoving his hands in his pockets and watching as the other man gathered ingredients for his protein shake. As a part of Boyd's training routine, he'd taken to drinking two protein shakes a day in order to build more muscle.

Boyd paused before he measured any of the ingredients, his hand resting on the blender's lid sitting on the counter. "Actually, I got you something," he said, looking at Sin briefly before he grabbed a plastic bag sitting on the far end of the counter and handed it to Sin.

Sin raised an eyebrow and looked at Boyd questioningly before opening the bag. Inside was a box of chocolate donuts.

"Why would you buy me anything?" he asked, looking up at Boyd as he popped the lid open and extracted one of the donuts. He hadn't had any good junk food in a while.

Boyd shrugged as he turned toward the ingredients again, although a faint smile crossed his face. "I thought you'd like it," he said simply, measuring different amounts of ingredients from a tub of whey protein, a bag of frozen berries, as well as a container each of coconut milk and flax seed meal. He dumped each part into the blender but didn't immediately press any buttons.

"I do." Sin chewed thoughtfully, eyes focused on Boyd. It was a small gesture but it was something that reminded him of the way things had been early on in their friendship, before everything had gotten complicated.

Sin looked down and swallowed, trying to pinpoint the exact moment that the complication had started; it occurred to him that it had been after the realization of his attraction to Boyd. After that it had been all miscommunication and insecurity on both of their parts which had inevitably led to incredibly bad situations all around.

He took out another donut and studied it as if it had the answers to the question he found himself posing in his mind; wondering if Boyd was right to try to get back to those moments, back to when things had been relatively simple between them or as simple as they'd ever get.

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"Thank you," Sin said finally.

Boyd's smile grew and he looked over at Sin, pausing with his hand pressing the lid down on the blender. "You're welcome."

They watched each other briefly before Boyd looked away, pressing the button to blend the ingredients. Loud noise filled the kitchen, making it impossible for any conversation to occur, and Sin sat on the counter chewing silently.

Boyd poured the shake into a cup once it was finished and turned around, leaning against the counter and watching Sin silently for a moment. Silence fell between them as Boyd drank his high-protein, low-carb shake and Sin ate chocolate donuts one after another. Although the silence wasn't as comfortable as it had once been, it wasn't quite as awkward as it had been even just earlier that day.

"You know... There was another reason I thought Emilio may care more than he acts like he does," Boyd said at length, tone completely casual as he returned to the previous topic.

Sin gave a long sigh and shook his head. He didn't really understand Boyd's desire to speak about his father. "Yeah?"

"Remember I told you Lo Más Chingón stopped us as we left Monterrey?" Boyd asked, tone leading as he waited for Sin to respond.

"Yes, I remember." Sin raised an eyebrow at Boyd expectantly. "What of it?"

"Well, after I realized Lo Más Chingón was your father, I started thinking about that night. I'd always thought it strange that he let us go and that he'd given me information," Boyd explained.

He held his glass loosely in his hand, his elbows resting on the counter behind him as he watched Sin thoughtfully, head tilted slightly. "That made me think of how it must have seemed to him when he saw you-- especially with how you looked like a murder victim."

Sin couldn't help feeling morbidly curious about how he'd actually looked during that time. All he had to go on was Boyd's description; the coma had lasted so long that when

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Sin had finally awoken, every trace of his wounds had been gone. "What did I look like?"

"Dead," Boyd said bluntly, and although he met Sin's gaze evenly he didn't seem very happy about the memory; it was in the way his eyebrows drew down just slightly, the way his lips turned down faintly on the edges, and the way light tension straightened his back. Despite that, his tone remained explanatory.

"You were completely covered in blood. Your skin was ash white, your lips blue, your chest wasn't moving. There were bruises and burn marks and with all your broken bones, your limbs hung at odd angles..." He paused briefly, eyes darkening subtly as he narrowed them. "Honestly, it seemed impossible that you were even alive. Kassian said they must have left you to die either because they got everything or because they got nothing out of you. You were barely alive when we found you and when we reached the tunnel, you stopped breathing, you started having convulsions." He shook his head once, eyes twitching. "You were so far gone that Kassian had to administer CPR over and over before he could even revive you."

Sin quieted briefly at the mention of Kassian and for a moment he couldn't help feeling a sense of discomfort at the idea of Kassian having given him CPR. Despite the outcome of the situation was that Sin lived, the idea of Kassian's lips having even once been that close to his still seemed almost like a violation. Sin let his gaze stray back to Boyd, eyes slightly narrowed as an undeniable bolt of jealousy jolted him at the idea of Kassian's lips now being on Boyd.

"I..."

The sentence trailed off and Sin ran a hand through his hair distractedly, trying not to let his irritation show, not to ruin what was a relatively civil conversation due to his own jealousy. For the first time, Sin honestly understood why Boyd had been so upset about the thing with Ann. It didn't matter if Sin's heart hadn't been in it; he understood that now because just the idea of Kassian touching Boyd was nearly enough to send Sin into a homicidal rage.

Sin shook his head, feeling stupid and annoyed with himself, almost wanting to apologize to Boyd for having ever been so oblivious and idiotic, forever hurting him the way Sin was hurting now. "I didn't tell them anything."

Unaware of Sin's thoughts, Boyd hesitated very briefly, probably misreading Sin's distraction as something related to the torture. "What happened? We thought they took

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the chip from your neck and you flat-lined in the process, but... How..." He seemed uncertain how to word the question he wanted to ask. "What did they do, how did you make it through that?"

Sin shrugged. "I don't know. How do I make it through anything? I'm not quite sure. I'm surprised I didn't bleed to death before you found me. They were deliberately making incisions throughout my body to cause me to bleed out slowly and to cut tendons to prevent me from moving. The Agency must have done major reconstructive surgery on me during the time I was in the coma. I don't even understand how they got me back to normal without therapy, unless I was physically responsive before fully emerging..." He trailed off thoughtfully, grateful to have something else to think about.

"We must have found you fairly recently after they abandoned you or else I don't know how we made it in time, either," Boyd said frankly. He drew his eyebrows down slightly. "Were they trying to find out what group you were with or inside information? Or was Hale just pissed off and that was all there was to it?"

"Hale was angry but it wasn't just about him. They would have tortured me for information regardless for the group I was with and they wanted to know where you were because they knew I had a partner. Hale just made sure the experience was more drawn out than it needed to be," Sin said with a shrug, not really feeling anything at the memories.

It had been unpleasant, several times he had even felt himself slipping away into oblivion, but there had never been a moment when he'd lost himself completely to his psychosis and Sin wondered now if that had been because the entire situation had been his choice. They'd had him strapped down and helpless but at any time Sin could have given them what they wanted to know just so they'd put him out of his misery for good. Maybe the fact that he hadn't done that had allowed his subconscious to believe that he was really in control the whole time or at least making choices regarding his own fate.

The entire thing was odd and Sin didn't think he'd ever understand depersonalization disorder.

Something akin to discomfort crossed Boyd's face. Although a lot had happened between them, Sin could still read Boyd's expressions well enough to know when he was thinking about something fairly intently, and when he wasn't entirely pleased by whatever conclusion he'd drawn.

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"And you didn't tell them anything at all?" Boyd asked slowly. "Even about me, even something small at first to make them stop?"

Sin gave Boyd an odd look. "No. Why would I?"

Boyd's expression twisted a little and he looked away, eyes darkening guilty, almost ashamed. "Sin," he began slowly, uncomfortably. His fingers tightened against the glass and he distractedly set it down on the counter.

"I-- Well, you should probably..." Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly and although when he looked over again he seemed willing and determined to continue, he still wouldn't quite meet Sin's eyes. "I just... wanted you to know that the Agency knows everything about us. And... they know you slept with Ann."

Sin frowned. "What?"

"It..." Boyd looked truly uncomfortable but it didn't stop him from continuing. "During R2I... I'm sorry," and his tone was sincere, "I really didn't want to tell them anything about you. They'd gotten everything from me about everyone else but with you I was determined..."

He sighed and shook his head, finally meeting Sin's gaze although he still looked as though he felt regretful of the actions he was explaining. "But then... I know it's stupid but I still... I can't really handle being held down still, and drowning... They're my greatest fears, so the waterboarding..." He trailed off helplessly, looking as though he felt it was a poor excuse even to his own ears.

Sin just watched him silently for a moment, realizing now how Vivienne had found out about he and Ann. He'd never been able to figure it out before but now it made sense, especially considering the timing of everything. But he chose not to share that information with Boyd; he didn't necessarily think Boyd would be very interested in learning about Ann's demotion anyway and in truth, Sin wasn't too surprised. He knew how ruthless the Agency was during torture training and he wouldn't have expected any of the trainees to completely withstand it.

After a brief pause he just shrugged and wiped his hands on a towel that was sitting on the counter, his fingers sticky from the chocolate. "It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it."

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Boyd studied Sin, as if trying to determine if there was anything Sin was hiding, if he actually cared after all or would look down on Boyd. What he saw apparently reassured him because some of the tension that had built in his shoulders relaxed and he nodded, although he still didn't seem entirely pleased with himself.

"I don't know; I feel like I'd never give the same information to enemies but that's easy to say when I'm not in that situation," Boyd, shaking his head to himself. "I mean, honestly, other than the fact I mentioned Ann and confirmed our relationship, they mostly just got a lot of embarrassing things out of me. But it doesn't change that I gave it up. Hopefully I'll improve with training but I don't know how you do it. I wonder if it's genetic for you," he added lightly, tilting his head as he watched Sin. "I somehow doubt that Emilio gave anything to the Agency, even with months of interrogation..."

"Back to him again, I see," Sin said blandly, losing some of his previous interest in the conversation. "I was hoping you'd forgotten to finish whatever you were saying about him."

Boyd gave Sin a sidelong look with a slight smirk. "You should know me better than that by now. I can be pretty stubborn..."

Sin sighed and shook his head. "Well go on then, I guess."

Boyd nodded and continued, his tone becoming more serious and explanatory. "At any rate, what I was saying was that you looked terrible when we left with you." He shifted against the counter and crossed his arms, eyes narrowing in memory. "Our top priority was speed because you desperately needed medical attention. So I chose a tunnel that I thought would be quick; it was stressful and only got worse when we found out 4FF had taken control of the tunnel."

"And he was there?" Sin asked, referring to his father. It was difficult for him to say 'my father;' he'd had no trouble saying it in the past but now after the recent revelations had come to light... Now Sin didn't really feel the need to give Emilio the title although it felt just as odd simply calling him 'Emilio.'

Boyd nodded. "Ching-- Emilio," he corrected himself, "seemed almost amused by the entire situation." Although Boyd had been speaking of Emilio, he still apparently found it a little difficult to reconcile that Emilio was Chingón when he was recounting his interactions.

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He drew his eyebrows down slightly and looked at Sin significantly. "At least, until I stepped between him and the van. I'd already told him we had someone who was hurt but he seemed unconcerned until I got in his way. I thought his attitude had changed because I wasn't listening to his commands. Now that I think about it, even when he had a gun to my head he was definitely serious but he seemed more challenging than anything. Somehow... that seemed to change when he saw you."

Sin opened his mouth to say something sarcastic and belittling of the situation but for some reason Boyd's description made him pause. "How?"

"He grew quiet." Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly in thought. "He ran the flashlight entirely along you, like he was searching out every wound. I couldn't see his face and I didn't really know him well, but I think he was surprised... maybe a little disturbed, I'm not sure. The way he was before, it was almost as though even when he was being challenging it was part of an act or just to intimidate me or play with me for interfering."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down. "But when he saw you, it seemed more... genuine, somehow. Quietly serious, like he was struck by what he saw. And I could feel his stare on me like he was dissecting me, like he wondered how you'd gotten so fucked up with me around and if he could trust me to leave with you. He must have realized we were partners so he was probably doubting my ability to protect you, which was obviously well warranted."

Sin gazed at Boyd for a long moment before sighing quietly and bringing his hands up to cover his face. He didn't know what he thought of that but he couldn't deny that the information made him feel oddly satisfied. After all these years, after all that had happened, Sin still felt the same pathetic sense of secret satisfaction at the idea of his father paying extra attention to him as more than just a student and a fighter.

He ran his fingers through his hair, which was growing too long and falling well past the back of his neck now, and groaned. "Why are you trying to make me stop loathing his existence?"

"Partially because, like it or not, he's going to be at the Agency and even if you transfer from this unit you'll end up seeing him," Boyd replied frankly, his gaze steady on Sin. "I'm sure you'll have to deal with at least the idea of him because people will talk about him now. So staying stressed about him isn't going to help you and regardless of what he did or failed to do, it's still good that he's alive, that you didn't actually kill him."

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Boyd leaned back in the couch and considered Sin. "But also because I've been thinking a lot lately, and even if I still think it was bullshit that my mother promoted me, and even if she was a terrible mother and did a lot of things wrong... Like Emilio, maybe she wasn't a good parent, but there are still things she did that she didn't have to. I guess in this case, I just thought you should know about the things I doubt Emilio told you."

"That's fine but I'd still rather avoid him if I can. If you hadn't noticed, he's annoying and I'll probably just want to beat the shit out of him constantly." Sin made a face, wondering why everyone always seemed to be instantly taken with his father despite the fact that he was so obnoxious. Even Boyd was sitting here being pro-Emilio and he'd previously despised the man.

"Besides," Sin added, "I don't leave my apartment often enough to ever run into him, unless for some idiotic reason he comes searching me out."

"Why aren't you leaving your apartment?" Boyd asked, frowning slightly. "You used to at least go to the gym. Are you still doing that?"

"No. I work out in my quarters."

"Why, though?" Boyd asked again, eyebrows furrowing.

"What do you mean, why?" Sin asked, narrowing his eyes at Boyd impatiently. "Why should I? So people can stare at me or harass me?"

"I know there are a lot of people who take issue with you," Boyd said, crossing his arms, "but I still think sometimes you don't give people a chance. People who already are interested in being around you, people who you may find you like."

"Oh, wonderful, here we go again." Sin sat up straight and didn't bother to hide his disdain with the direction the conversation was going. "Is this the part where you reiterate your desire for me to 'put myself out there?' If so, please stop. I didn't badger you into inviting me here-- you invited me and I almost didn't even come, so there's no need for you to try to get me to befriend other people. It's not like I'm waiting for you around every corner or something."

"What?" Boyd looked baffled. "What are you talking about?"

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"All I'm saying," Sin said blandly, "is that you don't have to worry about me harassing you or badgering you into being with me again. I won't. So this whole thing is unnecessary."

"What the hell-- Sin, that's not what this is about at all," Boyd said intently, eyebrows drawn down. He looked truly surprised by Sin's comment. "It didn't even occur to me to interpret it that way. I honestly want to be your friend, I'm not lying about that. That's why I invited you. And the reason I'm encouraging you to find other people aside from me is because it's not good for you to be isolated; because I'm concerned."

Boyd frowned slightly and shook his head, studying Sin closely as he leaned against the counter. "If it makes you feel better, it's something I realized about myself during training-- everyone thought I was an asshole who thought I was superior to them because I automatically decided ahead of time they didn't need me and were useless to me, that there was no point. But once I made myself work against that impression, I realized I had things in common with other people... that I could get along, that I could even have fun. And I'm concerned about you. Maybe it's still a little awkward between us but we're both trying and I'm happy about that. But what if I'm killed tomorrow on a mission? I just don't want you to have no one again; I don't want you to feel like no one can ever see anything good in you. And I'm worried that's what would happen."

"I don't care so I don't see why you do," Sin replied stubbornly. "I didn't need anyone before and I don't now."

"Because I care about you; I care about your wellbeing," Boyd said firmly, apparently unwilling to give up the topic for the moment. "Because you've told me before you can't go back to the way it was, that you were alone all the time. And because I know you act like a lot of things don't bother you but they do; when people are cruel to you and you have no one to lean on, anyone would feel unhappy. I just want you to have options."

Sin stared at Boyd silently and couldn't help feeling irritated by the entire discussion. "Well, I don't know what to tell you."

Boyd studied Sin at length then finally released some of the tension in his shoulders with a sigh. "Just think about it."

There was a longer silence and this time it was more than a little uncomfortable-- Sin looked out the kitchen window and tried to ignore the frustration that he was feeling. Boyd, like Carhart, seemed to have some misguided notion that Sin was capable of making friends and getting close to other people. They failed to understand that Boyd

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had been a great exception in Sin's extremely isolated life and the possibility of Sin ever getting that close to anyone else in his current circumstances was more than slim.

The only way Sin ever saw himself opening up to people or even wanting to be around them was if his life magically changed and he was transported into a place where nobody knew who he was and therefore had no preconceived judgments about him. The fact that Boyd and Carhart thought he'd even *want* to spend time with people on the compound, people who looked at him like some kind of specimen at a freak show, was disturbing.

The only exception to that was possibly Ryan and even he was always a little too awed by Sin's presence for it to not become annoying and uncomfortable and Sin didn't see it being any different with anyone else. People here would never act like he was just another person; they would never have the casual familiarity like the people in Lunar.

Sin looked at Boyd again and pressed his lips together, not knowing what to say and not knowing if he wanted to say anything at all. Just the fact that he didn't even know how to act around Boyd anymore should be telling as to how socially inept he could be; he had no plans to think about ever even going out of his way to force himself to think of conversation with people on the compound who he didn't even like.

"I'm going to go," he said finally.

Boyd looked caught between being unsurprised and mildly disappointed. He hunched forward and sighed quietly, pushing blond hair out of his face.

"I'm sorry. I just realized I invited you over and spent most of the time badgering you about things you probably don't want to talk about." Boyd dropped his hands to his sides and gave Sin a bemused look. "Next time maybe we can make it more fun." His tone was light but there was something almost questioning about it.

Sin slid off the counter with a shrug, wondering once again if Boyd was offering his company out of pity or a sense of obligation, but pushing it to the back of his mind without really analyzing it. "Okay. If that's what you want."

"It is but what do you want?" Boyd asked with a slight frown as he searched Sin's expression.

"I don't know what I want anymore, Boyd," Sin replied plainly, meeting Boyd's gaze steadily. "All I know is that I don't want to not see you, even if all it amounts to is

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awkwardness. And I know I still want to touch you, even though you don't want me to anymore."

Boyd hesitated and his expression turned slightly pained although he didn't look away. "Sin, we can't..."

"I know," Sin said curtly, eyebrows drawing down over his eyes. "I wasn't asking you for anything. I was just making a statement. I told you I wouldn't be harassing you. I know you don't want me. You have Kassian."

Boyd sighed, shaking his head with a gaze that hid a hint of frustration amidst mild discomfort. "Kassian has nothing to do with this and it's not that I'm not attracted to you anymore. It's just that it can't be casual between us-- it wouldn't work." He didn't say it cruelly-- his tone was honest and not unkind-- but his steady expression made it clear that to him, it was an undeniable fact.

"Fine." Sin pushed himself away from the counter, the burn of rejection making him feel uncomfortable, dejected; desperate to be gone from the house and away from Boyd for the moment. If he stayed any longer, if the conversation drew out any longer, he knew he'd just end up pushing the topic until it was just as uncomfortable for Boyd. "I'll see you around."

"Sin..." Boyd watched Sin pensively for a moment, but ultimately he just said, "I'll call you again and I hope you know you can always call me too." He tilted his head toward the hallway. "Do you want a ride back?"

Sin shook his head, sliding his gaze away from Boyd although he couldn't help allowing it to linger slightly on his toned arms and the still-flushed complexion of his skin; skin that Sin knew was surprisingly soft and smooth to the touch. "No. I'll walk or take the bus."

He turned away from Boyd and headed out of the kitchen, closing his eyes briefly as he wondered if this new routine would ever get any easier.

Flip Side

Part I

The information scrolled across his panel at an almost dizzying pace and Kassian's light blue eyes scanned each line quickly, trying to absorb the information without having to move back and reread anything. The amount of data on the thin hand-held computer was phenomenal and not for the first time Kassian forced himself to put the panel down and look away from it, rubbing his tired eyes vigorously.

He reclined in the high-backed chair and sighed long and loudly, rolling his cramped shoulders as he tried to adjust his eyes properly. After a moment he relaxed against the chair and looked around the empty conference room idly, for no real reason other than the fact that it was the first time he was sitting in the room specifically used for General Carhart's elite and secretive unit.

Kassian had always wondered what exactly went on in the highly classified meetings and now he was finally getting his chance to find out. Unfortunately, this was apparently at the cost of reading hundreds of pages of text until his eyeballs felt ready to fall out of their sockets.

His first official briefing as a trial member of the unit was occurring within the next hour and he'd arrived early in order to make a valiant effort at studying the information that he had to learn. But there was so much that Kassian wondered if he'd ever get it all straight-- there were so many names and groups, sectors with numbers and foreign rebels with exotic names, different locations and codes-- it was a lot to see in one sitting and it was all beginning to run together in his mind.

As a level 10 field agent, Kassian had a lot of responsibilities already but the added work of ingesting this much information was overwhelming and once again he wondered why he'd even agreed to a trial. The last thing he wanted was to be at the Agency more-- ever since returning from Russia he'd begun to enjoy his isolation from the compound, the fact that he only had to go in when specifically classified missions came up or when they needed his help on something.

But with this trial, all of it changed.

It wasn't even that he was uninterested in the subject matter-- on the contrary, Kassian found himself to be almost surprisingly patriotic at times and despite the fact that the

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Agency was shady on its best day, he still agreed with some of their goals. He agreed that Janus had become just another power hungry and dangerous organization that performed terrorist attacks and he was very interested in seeing them stopped or at least controlled and downsized.

But at the same time, Sin and Boyd had apparently been having their own success with that so Kassian wasn't really needed for the job; it would be done without him, which took Kassian back to his original musings of why he was even there.

The door to the conference room opened and Ryan Freedman entered. He had a laptop computer under one arm and a black backpack dangling from one shoulder. His jet black hair was a mess of cowlicks, waves and random curls which hung around his thin face messily.

"Hi Ryan."

Ryan appeared startled to see him or maybe startled that Kassian had addressed him by his first name. They'd never formally met and the younger agent seemed genuinely surprised by the greeting.

"Hey, Senior Agent Trovosky. Wow, I don't really have to call you that, do I?" Ryan made a face and dropped his backpack on the floor as he plopped himself down in a chair across the table from Kassian. His wide indigo eyes focused on Kassian and he grinned again, this time almost bashfully. "I mean I will if you want me to, it's just kind of..."

"You don't have to," Kassian assured him with a shake of his head, sitting up straight and picking up the panel again. "Just call me Kassian."

"Okay, Kassian." Ryan said it as if he was testing the sound on his tongue and he nodded, seeming pleased. He opened his laptop and began booting it up, simultaneously pulling out a thick folder which splayed open. A few black and white photographs and pages full of numbers and codes spread across the table. "Why are you here so early? The briefing isn't for another forty minutes or so."

Kassian shrugged noncommittally, studying Ryan with interest, watching how the younger agent dexterously clicked things on the computer with one hand while arranging the fallen paperwork with the other. Ryan's eyes moved across the screen rapidly, as if he was reading something.

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"Just getting a head start. Trying to get an idea on what you guys do here."

Ryan nodded distractedly and sighed after a brief moment, returning his gaze to Kassian before flicking it right back to the computer. "Yeah, I'm trying to get a head start myself. I'm a wreck-- all of that downtime and I've forgotten how to freakin' maintain my work."

Kassian smiled faintly, not really thinking that being locked in a hospital room should be considered downtime but he supposed it was at the Agency. "You seem to be doing fine," he observed. "You multitask like you have three brains."

Ryan looked up again and gave a startled laugh, his eyes brightening with amusement, lips stretching into a wide smile. After a moment his laughter died down but he continued to smile at Kassian in appreciation. "What do they have you doing?"

"Well, nothing yet." Kassian indicated Ryan with the panel. "Not really, anyway. Just a lot of reading to do, a lot of playing catch up with all of your Intel. But they want me to know everything that Sin knows, so..."

Ryan raised one thick black eyebrow. "Well that should be easy; Hsin doesn't know anything."

There was a brief silence and Kassian narrowed his eyes slightly, not really knowing how to take such a comment. Did Ryan mean that literally? Was he seriously sitting here insulting his team member's intelligence in front of a relative newbie to the unit? Or was this some kind of weird test-- some kind of cliquey unit hazing thing to get Kassian to start trash-talking so that they'd have a reason to dislike him?

"Excuse me?" he asked finally, staring at Ryan with a carefully neutral expression.

Ryan sighed and gave Kassian an almost stern stare. "That's his name, you know."

Kassian's eyebrows drew together and he shook his head. "What are you-- I know that. That isn't what I meant."

Ryan blinked at him owlishly for a moment before a light bulb seemed to go off over his head and he gave Kassian a comical frown before shaking his head back and forth rapidly. "No-- no I didn't mean that literally, like, he doesn't have a thought in his head. I meant he just doesn't know the material."

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Relaxing somewhat, Kassian had trouble hiding the amused grin that wanted to ghost across his face. Ryan was like a large and very animated child; it almost detracted from his good looks, making him seem far younger than he really was and making it difficult to take him seriously at all.

As Kassian observed the other man for a brief quiet moment, he wondered how someone who'd basically been born and raised in the Agency could have turned out so lively when everyone else quickly got so jaded. But the thought was only fleeting and Kassian focused on what Ryan had actually said.

Once again confusion clouded Kassian and he squinted at Ryan. "How can he not know the material? He's been in this unit for-- what? Four years?"

"Well, yeah, but he doesn't really pay attention to the material. He glances at the mission outline and does his assignments but he doesn't really bother to listen to all of the rest of it." Ryan gave an incredible shrug that involved him lifting both shoulders nearly to his earlobes. "That's just how the man operates."

Kassian glanced down at his panel and frowned deeply, something akin to irritation beginning to creep up inside him. "So then why do I have to sit here and read all of this data? Aren't I Sin's replacement?"

"Well yeah but..." Ryan trailed off and scratched the back of his head, peering at Kassian through his thick-rimmed glasses. "I guess they know you *will* pay attention to it?"

"What-- wait a minute." Kassian set the panel down on the table with a clatter and leaned forward, his eyebrows lowering over his eyes as he stared at Ryan seriously. Some of his irritation was beginning to become very apparent because Ryan actually scooted backwards in his chair.

"So you're telling me that even though they let Vega get off with just... doing whatever he does, they expect me to perform all of these other functions despite the fact that I'm assuming his role."

Ryan nodded, nonplussed. "Yeah?" He obviously didn't see Kassian's point.

"Well, that's just phenomenal." Kassian sat up straight and brought a hand to his forehead, massaging his temples. The irritation was boiling up into pissed off resentment now and Kassian couldn't help replaying Sin's words in his mind from so

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many months ago: "*And you could try to stop pretending to be so fucking perfect. Maybe then people will stop expecting perfection all the time.*"

The words had rung true at the time, just another thing that had irritated and frustrated Kassian about the entire confrontation, but this moment was just a testament to how right Sin had been.

Tapping his fingers against the table agitatedly, Kassian sighed quietly and returned his gaze to Ryan, who was staring at him in confusion and possibly even guilt. It was strange and Kassian had no idea what the kid could actually be feeling guilty about; the notion was so absurd that he dragged himself out of his annoyance to speak again.

"I'm just aggravated. It has nothing to do with you."

"Why are you mad?" Ryan asked obliviously, his full lips drawing down in a frown. "It's just that General Carhart knows you're a super good agent."

"Well, that's very reassuring. Thank you." Kassian shook his head once again and marveled at the irony of the entire ridiculous situation; Sin got to do whatever he wanted because he was super agent and Kassian had to do everything they wanted because he was super *good* agent. Fantastic.

Kassian asked himself once again why he was even there.

The door opened yet again and this time it was the super agent himself. Sin walked in, stopped briefly in the doorway and stared blankly at Kassian.

"Well, hello to you too," Kassian said blandly, raising an eyebrow at Sin.

"You're in his chair," Ryan whispered across the table.

Kassian nearly rolled his eyes and didn't move, instead keeping his gaze trained on Sin. He sincerely doubted the look on Sin's face had anything to do with seating choices.

"Hey Sin," Ryan said with a grin, automatically switching to Sin's unofficial Agency name. It was an interesting change and Kassian wondered if Sin actually had a problem with people addressing him as 'Hsin.'

Sin barely even looked at Ryan before walking around the table and sitting down far enough away from Kassian to give himself space but close enough to show that he

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didn't feel intimidated by Kassian's presence. Or at least, that's how Kassian interpreted it because it was likely what he would have done if he'd walked in and found Sin already in the room.

"We were just talking about you," Ryan went on in his apparently typical oblivious fashion. Kassian could have smacked Ryan in the back of the head. Did the kid seriously not know that there was bad blood between the two senior agents at the table?

"Were you." Sin stared at Ryan before sliding his gaze over to Kassian.

"More or less," Kassian replied with a shrug, picking up his panel and scrolling through the data again. He could feel those steady green eyes on him and couldn't help looking up to meet them.

"You people must lead very dull lives if I'm the topic of conversation," Sin said finally, adopting a non-expression and crossing his arms over his faded red t-shirt. It looked slightly too small for his broad shoulders and clung to his muscular chest and arms.

Kassian just shrugged again and had to give Sin props for actually being half-way civil. Kassian hadn't expected as much.

He went back to his panel and as soon as he did, he could feel Sin's gaze once again return. It was uncomfortable and the intense stare was enough to cause some seriously annoying anxiety. Despite that, Kassian continued to stare at the data even though after a moment he just found himself clicking through the file idly, not reading it at all, and mostly just watching Sin out of his peripheral vision.

"So what are you up to?" Ryan queried suddenly.

Kassian looked over at him. "What?"

"The file-- the data." Ryan pointed a stylist at Kassian's panel.

"Oh. Sector 11." Kassian frowned and tried to recall what he'd just glanced at; he'd very obviously failed to retain any of the information with Sin as a distraction. "Leader name... Nicolai St--"

"Wrong."

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Kassian frowned and looked at Sin questioningly but Sin just raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, that's right, Nicolai is from Sector 62. 11 is Christof--"

"Wrong."

Kassian grit his teeth and narrowed his eyes at Sin. "Are you going to be helpful or just sit there and act like a game show host?"

Sin scoffed at him without changing expression. "Why would I help you?"

So much for civilized.

"Maybe because by me being here, I'm helping you," Kassian replied sharply, dropping the panel on the table yet again. "I'm sitting here memorizing all of this crap so that I can take your job, and then some."

Ryan gave Kassian an alarmed look and glanced at the door as if mentally willing someone else to appear.

"So leave then," Sin said with a shrug. "Maybe Boyd can do the job on his own. I doubt they need someone who can barely memorize a few names."

"Oh, screw you, Vega," Kassian retorted disgustedly. "I bet you're just busting my balls, anyway. I bet you don't even know the damn guy's name since you apparently don't even read the material."

"Ah," Sin said in a calmly knowing tone, narrowing his pale green eyes and sliding them over to Ryan. "So that's what you were talking about."

"What!" Ryan shook his head again, not wanting any part of this.

"He's got nothing to do with it," Kassian said, frustrated that he was, as usual, allowing Sin to get a rise out of him. It never failed.

"So then how could you have known that information."

This time when Sin looked at Kassian, his eyes were colder, more suspicious, and that familiar look of dislike transformed his stoic expression. Kassian met the stare evenly

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but something nagged at the back of his mind and it occurred to Kassian that Sin was likely wondering if Kassian had gotten information from Boyd.

The epiphany caused Kassian to wrench his gaze away and give a long, exasperated sigh, although some of his anger and disgust turned to discomfort at the idea of Sin jumping to the conclusion that Boyd was feeding Kassian information on how terrible of an agent he was.

It was far from the truth but that wasn't even what bothered Kassian the most. What nagged at him was the fact that he was sitting there claiming that he was helping Sin out when in reality, he was the reason Sin wanted to leave the unit at all.

For a moment Kassian could almost put himself in Sin's place; he could imagine what it would be like to have to go on a mission with his ex-lover and ex-lover's current lover. Just the idea of how shitty that would feel was enough to make Kassian shut his mouth entirely.

"It doesn't matter, Vega. No one told me anything," Kassian said finally, frowning. "Just forget I said anything to you."

"Forgotten," Sin said flatly, and he slid his gaze away to focus on some point on the wall.

Kassian once again shook his head in irritated frustration and grabbed the hated panel. He stared at it blankly for several minutes before he realized that the briefing was actually starting soon, which was made apparent when both Boyd and Jeffrey simultaneously came through the door. Kassian had worked with Jeffrey on previous assignments but it had always been on a mission-by-mission basis and never as frequently as he'd be seeing the other man now.

Jeffrey slid his eyes over the room and he barely blinked at the new addition, although his back straightened and he somehow looked pleased to note Kassian holding the panel. Jeffrey sat down a few chairs away from Ryan and immediately started unloading his briefcase with perfectly placed piles of paper.

Boyd's entrance was a little less oblivious; he seemed to note the tension in the room immediately and his gaze swept past Kassian, Sin, and the seats between them. For the most part his expression remained unreadable and he sat down next to Ryan.

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"Hey," Boyd said with a faint smile that seemed aimed at everyone equally, pulling his messenger bag off and setting it on the floor next to him.

Sin didn't even acknowledge Boyd but Boyd didn't seem to mind so Kassian figured this was normal or at least normal as of late. Feeling out of his realm and mildly put off about being so unsure of how to behave or what to say to anyone, Kassian just nodded at Boyd and didn't bother trying to hide the fact that his mood was down the shitter.

"Hey Boyd, Jeff. Did you get the my e-mail?" Ryan asked, looking Jeffrey with a slight frown and went on before Jeffrey could reply. "My contact dropped out so I don't have up-to-date Intel. You may have to re-run the simulation to add in the possibility of anomalies."

Jeffrey raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I know; I already did it." He shuffled some papers around, looking rather self-important. "It does change the parameters a little but we'll get into that when the meeting starts."

"Okie-doke." Ryan looked relieved.

Boyd looked between them curiously but didn't say anything. Before anyone could speak, the next member of the unit arrived.

Owen entered the room clenching a steaming cup of coffee; he was watching the floor as he entered but when he looked up, he was so thoroughly shocked that it was comical.

"Great Moogly's Ghost!" Owen nearly shouted, almost dropping the cup. "It's a nexus of the 10s!" He stared at Sin and Kassian in shock and confusion. "What's happening? Did I walk into an alternate universe? Wait, where are the other two?" He looked around the room as if expecting the other two Level 10s to be hiding in the woodwork.

"Sit *down*, Owen," Jeffrey hissed, looking at once highly affronted and embarrassed.

Kassian stared at Owen in confusion, wondering if the linguist had lost his mind since the last time they'd worked together or if he'd just smoked something really strong.

"No," Owen replied to Jeffrey distantly, still staring at Kassian, aghast. Kassian's eyebrows drew together, not knowing how to respond. "No, I think I'll stand here until I'm sure this isn't a dream and I'm not naked if I look down or something."

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"Owen," Jeffrey said sharply, turning a full glare on him. "Sit the hell down! We finally get someone serious in here and you're embarrassing the entire unit."

But Owen didn't immediately move. Disgusted, Jeffrey actually got out of his seat and yanked Owen down into a chair. "We should have warned you about him, Senior Agent Trovosky," Jeffrey said with a frown, looking over at Kassian. "I know you've dealt with him before--"

Jeffrey and Owen started talking over each other at the same time.

"No really, what's happening?" Owen was saying in the background, looking around the room in complete confusion.

"But you probably hoped the way he acted was an anomaly--" Jeffrey continued.

"We had a meeting, remember?" Ryan reminded Owen.

"I think I'd remember a memo about both old skool super dudes in one room," Owen said somewhat haughtily.

"Unfortunately it's his natural state--"

"I'd've prepared myself with at least a little espresso," Owen continued.

"But he still gets the job done." Jeffrey looked over at Owen in annoyance as it became clear that Owen wasn't ready to stop talking.

"You said the same thing at the meeting, though," Ryan said. "Nexus of the 10s..."

"I did?" Owen asked, looking startled as he eyed Ryan. "Are you sure that wasn't evil me?"

"Owen, honestly--" Jeffrey started to say in irritation.

"I'm pretty sure," Ryan's eyebrows drew down as he seemed to seriously be trying to remember.

Owen seemed to consider this seriously. "Well, I guess great minds think alike, then." He took a sip of his coffee and made a face that was quite dramatic. "Espresso?" He sounded scandalized. "Did I remember until I walked in--" His eyes narrowed in

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paranoia and he immediately glanced toward the hallway. "Someone must've released a memory suppression bomb along the way."

"Jesus Christ," Jeffrey said in disgust, apparently giving up on salvaging the moment.

"Wow. That was-- wow." Kassian shot a glance at Boyd, wondering mildly if this type of scene occurred regularly in the unit. Boyd just met his gaze evenly and raised his eyebrows slightly, looking more amused than anything. Nobody else looked especially surprised or dismayed by Owen so it seemed that this was normal.

General Carhart had apparently selected the most eccentric characters possible to be in his unit. Although, it was said that the most eccentric people were usually the most brilliant.

"Hello, Owen. We haven't worked together in a while," Kassian said finally.

"Yeah, I remember, I was there," Owen agreeably, making a face as he took a drink of coffee. Jeffrey's eyes narrowed and he reached over, forcefully making Owen set the cup down when he went to take another drink almost immediately. Owen shot Jeffrey an indignant look but otherwise seemed unaffected.

"What's up?" Owen asked, looking at Kassian again, as if this were a completely casual conversation and he hadn't walked in talking about alternate universes. "I see you have a scrolly-mcthingy there." He gestured to the panel. "Find anything exciting yet?"

"Not especially." Kassian tapped his index finger against the panel and studied Owen's disheveled red hair and hastily put together clothes.

"That's too bad." Owen actually looked disappointed as he slouched back in his chair.

The door opened again and Kassian was relieved to see that it was General Carhart. Kassian had been wondering if Emilio Vega would be sitting in on the briefing but wasn't too surprised that he wasn't; Boyd had said that the senior Vega would be undergoing Agency reintegration and retraining for months.

"Good morning, everyone," Carhart said, sitting down at the head of the table and glancing at each of them briefly. His eyes rested on Kassian and he inclined his head slightly, "Good to see you, Kassian."

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"Thank you, sir," Kassian replied automatically, sitting up straighter and temporarily putting all of his discomfort and confusion aside. He saw Sin make a face but Kassian didn't react.

"We recently received Intel that Sector 13, otherwise known as Project Underground, has once again started working to become a major Janus cell." Carhart picked up a small remote and hit a button, turning on the projector as an image of a group of men and women appeared on the screen.

Kassian narrowed his eyes slightly and tried to remember what he'd just read about Sector 13/Project Underground. He knew that they were primarily based out of Eastern Canada and specialized in the research and development of weapons that should be exclusive to the military. There were theorized links between the leader, Nicks Harris, and government officials but nothing had been verified as of yet regarding such a tie.

"They had a period of downtime over the last couple of years," Ryan spoke up, nodding at the screen and glancing from Sin, Kassian and Boyd in turn. "That's why we haven't been dealing with them lately. There was a big bust up on the inside but in the past few months they re-organized and have been trying to strengthen ties to Janus and become relevant once again."

Carhart hit the button again and the image changed to one of a middle-aged Indian man with curly black hair and light brown eyes. He had a jagged scar on his chin and wore wire-rimmed glasses. "This man, Jerald Joshi, is the second in command of Nicks Harris and the resident brain of Sector 13's research think tank. He has recently developed a formula for a new plastique that is capable of large explosions from mere ounces of the material and it's rumored that he has also figured out a way to shield it from generic scanners."

Kassian's eyebrows drew together at the possibility. An explosive small enough to fit into someone's pocket that wouldn't be picked up by airport scanners? The idea was disturbing. "Is that confirmed?"

"No, but it's highly possible, especially since whatever they are doing has re-captured Janus' attention," Carhart replied with a serious frown.

Kassian looked down at his panel and used the touch screen to keyword 'Joshi.' The man's image and profile came up; he was a genius who had received a PhD in nuclear engineering from MIT at the age of thirteen, many years before the start of the war.

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"The guy is brilliant," Kassian observed, almost feeling impressed.

"He is," Carhart agreed. "That's why, if possible, we want him alive."

The General changed images again and this time it was an aerial view of a large factory. "It is believed that this is the site of Sector 13 and Joshi's lab. We want samples from the lab, Joshi captured if possible, and the whole thing taken down. Every trace of their research must be destroyed."

Carhart changed the image again, showing the building from a different angle. It was located in what appeared to be a mountainous and wooded location, although a long and well-used road went in front of the main entrance.

"The issue is that during business hours, the facility is a legitimately run plant which is operated by civilian employees. In addition to finding where exactly the lab is located within the building, you will have to ensure that there are no civilian casualties. Otherwise this will turn into a media frenzy that Vivienne wants avoided at all costs."

"Yeah, but there's a problem," Ryan said with a wince. "My contact within the factory, a worker named Vanessa Marshal, went silent within the last two days. I tried getting in touch with her but I think she got spooked-- paranoid that she'd be tied to whatever she knows is about to go down and since she's just a civilian that we got our hooks in, I can't blame her..."

"How does that affect the mission?" Boyd asked, looking between Jeffrey and Ryan.

"It lengthens it, most likely," Jeffrey said, picking up one of his stacks of paper and sliding small packets to each person. "I ran a new simulation based on the fact that she's not responding. With the size of the facility and the number of civilian staff, you'll probably have to do a lot more recon."

Boyd slid the pages closer and flipped through them, eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he skimmed the information. "Three to five days?"

"Depending on how quickly you can locate the lab and finish the mission," Jeffrey said as he absently straightened the remaining sheets of paper. "It could be longer or shorter."

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"Hmm." Boyd looked over at Ryan. "Is it possible there's more to her disappearance than fear? If she knows when we're coming and 13 discovers her, they could get the information from her and it could be a trap."

"I think it's unlikely," Ryan replied with another one of his high-lifted shoulder shrugs. "She has no idea who Sector 13 is or that a lab even exists. She was arrested some time ago for an unrelated incident and since it was in a high activity sector, I looked into it. As far as she knows, I'm an undercover police officer looking into suspicious activity at the plant and she's my informant. But she's also super scared of jeopardizing her job so when I started asking for a specific timetable of events, I think it just spooked her-- like she thought her info would lead her boss back to her?"

"Hmm." Kassian sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully as Carhart brought up an image of Ryan's contact. She was in her late twenties to early thirties and had blond hair shot through with pink and red streaks. "Has she provided legit Intel in the past?"

"Yeah, I mean, I got the tip-off about Joshi actually being in that specific building from Vanessa. She gives me weekly reports of the comings and goings, any oddities within the plant, and she sent his description and an attached cell phone image that she managed to capture whenever she noticed him coming around toward the end of her shift." Ryan frowned slightly.

"Is it possible that she was snooping a little too deep and someone in 13 picked her up?" Kassian queried, eyebrows drawing together as his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "If so, they may be tipped off that someone's onto their set up. They may have blackmailed her into talking, or worse."

"I hope not," Ryan worried, chewing his lower lip. "She's a single mom... I'd hate to think--"

Sin gave Ryan a withering look. "Don't start getting all worked up. Just because Mister Wonderful jumps to the worst scenario doesn't mean it's the case."

"I'm just exploring the possibility," Kassian replied, glaring at Sin.

"Aside from her disappearance, do we have any information that would lead us to believe Joshi or anyone in 13 is aware of our interest?" Boyd asked calmly, keeping his gaze on Ryan. "Strange occurrences in the surrounding area, suspicious or unusual

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activity reports sent to the admin in the factory, any sort of media that may be possibly related... The sort of thing unrelated civilians may report not knowing what it's about?"

Ryan shook his head and shrugged again although this one was less expressive. "No, not really. I've been keeping an eye on things pretty closely ever since I got word of Joshi's appearance. But I guess it shouldn't be ruled out that they may have a notion of an idea that they're about to have company."

"Even if they do, it won't change anything," Carhart said finally. "All it means is that we have to act now. This is the first time we've got a location on Joshi with the added bonus of his lab being in the same area. If there's an anomaly during the course of the mission, I expect you to compensate for it and deal with it."

Kassian nodded, not really having expected anything else. The fact that they were given a three to five day recon window would provide more than enough time to factor in any possible movements or increases in security. It wasn't anything they wouldn't be able to handle. Although it was the type of mission that would normally be assigned for an entire team or two, Kassian had the suspicion that Carhart and Vivienne counted Sin as a team all by himself.

"Kassian, your role here is mostly to observe how Sin and Boyd work, to become acquainted with their style and the way they carry things out. Take your cues from them and as Boyd is the tactician, for the moment follow his orders." Carhart's eyes went from Kassian to Boyd and back again, and his eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Yes, sir."

Boyd's eyes flickered briefly in mild surprise but it was there and gone almost immediately. He nodded, his gaze steady on Carhart.

"If no one has anything else to add, let's wrap this up. Meet at transport in two hours." Carhart pushed his chair back and stood, clicking off the projector. He started to turn but paused and looked at Kassian again. "Kassian, see me before you leave."

Kassian watched the general depart and wondered what else there could possibly be to talk about. He couldn't help a slight sense of trepidation at being summoned to Carhart's office, especially knowing that the general hadn't been exactly pleased with him following the incident at Boyd's house on New Year's Eve.

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Kassian shook his head slightly with a sigh and slid the panel into his pocket. He looked at the rest of his trial-unit and studied them as they began gathering their things before they left. The briefing had been odd-- a distinct change from what he was used to whenever he'd gone out on group missions in the past. He supposed that if this unit was anything like how he had been with Harriet, Archer and Blair, perhaps they were just comfortable enough around each other to behave so oddly.

Sin got up and left the conference room without a backwards glance and Kassian didn't know whether or not he should feel surprised by that. Kassian turned his gaze to Owen, who looked like he'd dozed through some of the briefing, and Kassian couldn't help wondering why the man had even been present for it.

Jeffrey left almost immediately, taking the time to smack Owen on the shoulder as he passed. Owen jerked at the touch and looked around wildly for a moment before blearily resting his eyes on the mostly-full coffee cup in front of him. Looking as though it took great effort, Owen gathered his things and wandered out of the room with a large yawn. Ryan wasn't too far behind Owen; bearing Kassian farewell and telling Boyd to call him after the mission.

Boyd finally looked over at Kassian more fully now that most of the unit was gone. He'd placed the mission file in his messenger bag and although he'd placed the bag on the table, he didn't look ready to leave immediately. Instead, he stayed seated, leaning against the table as he watched Kassian.

"First impression," Boyd said with slightly raised eyebrows, his tone questioning at the same time as it was curious.

"Not that impressed," Kassian replied honestly with a shrug. "Between Owen and Ryan... I don't know who's stranger. And the fact that you're the team leader is just... no offense, but you'd think that job would go to Vega, which obviously it doesn't because he doesn't care about anything. But the fact that they let him get away with that attitude is just ridiculous."

Boyd nodded easily; judging by his calm, unsurprised expression, he didn't appear offended by Kassian's analysis. "I didn't think to warn you about Owen, and Ryan mostly gets off-topic only when it's about Sin. They're both really good at their jobs, though. Sin's more cooperative now than before; when I first started, he wouldn't come to the briefings and I pretty much did all the missions alone."

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Boyd shrugged. "That's why they needed a partner for him, though. He's extremely good at his job but he's uninterested in the details. They know they wouldn't get anywhere trying to force him to be otherwise so that's just the way it ends up being."

"Uh huh." Kassian wasn't entirely placated by this explanation. He idly wondered if he was the only person who actually cared about being professional and doing a good job. But instead of going on with that line of thought, he just shook his head with a sigh. "Any idea what General Carhart wants with me?"

Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly and shook his head. "No... Actually, I was wondering the same. It could be about the mission but since he wants to talk to you privately it may be more about getting along with Sin for the sake of the mission or something. I don't know."

"Of course," Kassian said dryly, pushing his chair back to stand. Of course he was the one to get the pep talk on how to behave when it was Sin who instigated a dispute every chance he got. The concept was ludicrous and Kassian already started formulating a civilized reply to Carhart in case that was really what their meeting would be about.

"Are you headed there now?" Boyd asked, idly leaning against the table as his gaze followed Kassian's movement.

"Yeah. I'll meet you in Supplies." Kassian walked towards the door. "Don't you anticipate a wonderful week of being stuck in a safe house with Vega and me?"

Boyd smiled wryly despite himself. His expression softened slightly and it was unclear whether it was simply due to amusement or if it was due to something else. "It'll be interesting, to say the least, but I'm not about to complain."

Kassian looked over his shoulder just as he opened the door. "I can interpret that so many ways, kid. Seriously."

"I wonder how many of them are right," Boyd said innocently with raised eyebrows.

"Hmmm." Some of his irritation faded slightly and Kassian couldn't help a quiet chuckle of amusement. He sincerely doubted that Boyd had meant anything even remotely close to what Kassian wanted to imply but it wasn't really the time or place for sex talk. "I'm going before I say something that shouldn't be said in our current location."

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Boyd laughed and shook his head to himself.

Kassian left the conference room, heading to the elevator bank.

It wasn't the first time he'd been summoned to General Carhart's office but it was the first time he'd been summoned there without a clue as to what the General actually wanted. As Kassian got farther away from the conference room and exited the elevator, anxiety flooded him. Kassian stopped just inside the long corridor that led to conference rooms and offices belonging to the lower ranked generals and captains.

"Hey!"

Kassian turned his head and realized, as Agent Michael Alvarado approached him with a cautious smile, that he'd been standing in the hallway for longer than a brief time as he simply stared into space. Kassian forced the perplexed frown off his face and nodded at Michael politely.

"How are you, Agent Alvarado?"

Michael's smile wilted even more at the coolly detached tone of Kassian's voice and Michael shrugged dejectedly. Kassian had dropped the other man from his unofficial team shortly after the Monterrey mission and Michael had since been demoted to level 8 upon Kassian's suggestion. Since Kassian made it his business to rarely be on the compound and they no longer had reason to be assigned together with such frequency, Kassian hadn't seen the other agent since.

"Not too good, Senior Agent Trovosky," Michael replied stiffly, looking away for a moment as he put his hands in the pockets of his black slacks. "But I guess you know that."

Kassian nodded, not seeing any reason to play ignorant. He hadn't masked his displeasure with Michael on the plane back from Monterrey and he saw no reason to do so now. "You can get your rank back if you put more effort in. They promoted you for a reason before; there's no reason why they wouldn't do it again after you prove yourself."

Michael frowned and his brown eyes returned to Kassian's face. He looked half desperate and half angry before sighing as resignation slumped his shoulders and slackened his face into a dull-eyed and hopeless expression. "I guess."

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"Well, good luck to you." Kassian started to turn away, no longer familiar with Michael in a manner that would make the moment anything but awkward, but Michael looked up again.

"Can't you put in a word for me, Senior Agent Trovosky? I mean--"

"No," Kassian cut him off bluntly. His tone was serious but not cruel, and when he looked at Michael again it was with some sympathy but his expression was otherwise stern. "You let me down, Mike. I had high hopes for you as an agent, as did General Carhart and Marshal Connors. You have so much potential but you let unprofessional foolishness ruin it for you."

Michael sighed in frustration, eyebrows drawing together. "Man, it was just one stupid mistake!"

"Yes, one mistake," Kassian agreed calmly, nodding. "But it was a stupid mistake that nearly cost a man his life. I like you, Mike, I always did, but our jobs aren't about friendships and they certainly aren't about compound gossip and personal biases. When you let something like that get in the way of your duty-- that's the worst mistake you can make. I'd have looked kinder on you if you'd mishandled your gun and accidentally shot me. At least then it'd have been an honest mistake."

The younger man just shrugged his shoulders again, looking for all the world like he wanted to knock Kassian out but in the end he just nodded shortly. "Fine. Thank you for your time."

Kassian just shrugged and walked away, feeling an angry glare burning into his back. He couldn't help feeling a measure of disappointment in Michael and his inability to accept his punishment, accept the fact that he'd been deadly wrong. More than the fact that Kassian was disappointed in Michael, Kassian actually scolded himself for not seeing that aspect of Michael's character before including him in the unofficial team of people that Kassian hand-selected for specific assignments and storms.

When Kassian arrived at Carhart's office, some of the anxiety returned although the distraction of Michael had quelled most of it.

Kassian knocked once, waited, and started to knock again but the door opened. Emilio Vega stepped out, brushing rudely past Kassian and giving him nothing more than a vaguely interested glance before walking out of the lobby.

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Kassian found himself staring after the senior Vega dumbly, unable to move for a moment after his first encounter with Sin's father. He'd heard that they looked alike but the similarities were amazing...

"Come in, Kassian," Carhart called impatiently.

Shaken out of the momentary stupor, Kassian stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "Sorry, Sir. I was momentarily distracted by Senior Agent Vega... Senior." Kassian frowned, unsure of how he was supposed to refer to Emilio.

"Don't call him that," Carhart advised, his clear blue eyes looking at Kassian with something akin to amusement. "He'll just mock you relentlessly."

"Ah." Like father like son. "Did I interrupt anything important?" Kassian asked when the General just stared at him.

"No. Emilio was here for no real reason." The General sat back in his chair and studied Kassian closely, his direct gaze taking in every aspect of Kassian's body language. There was nothing overtly intimidating about General Carhart, not in the way that most people had feared Marshal Connors or were even shaken up by Inspector Beaulieu, but Kassian always felt anxiety when he was in Carhart's presence.

It may have been because they both shared a similar military background, or maybe because they'd both joined the Agency around the same age; Kassian had no real idea why but their similarities made him feel even more pressured to live up to a certain standard. It was why he shifted slightly under the General's stare, why he had trouble maintaining eye contact even when the General gave him those genuine but impersonal little smiles.

It was difficult to explain, difficult to understand, especially when Kassian hadn't even felt anything similar to this kind of nervousness around Marshal Connors. It likely had something to do with the high esteem in which he held General Carhart; Kassian genuinely feared making a fool of himself, or failing at something, in the view of someone he respected so much.

"I ran into Michael Alvarado," Kassian said for lack of anything better to comment on when the General continued to study him.

"Ah." Carhart nodded his head, pursing his lips together slightly, the expression giving him an air of distaste. "Agent Alvarado. He's been attempting to regain his rank."

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"Will he be granted it?" Kassian asked curiously.

"I don't know. I need to go over his records and see how they are in comparison to the other field ops in line for promotion. He seems to think he can just win this thing over. He fails to realize he has to redo the entire process."

Kassian nodded in understanding, wondering if that meant Michael would be re-trained as well if he ever did get promoted again. If so, Kassian had no doubts that whatever dislike Michael felt for him now would triple in its intensity. "That's unfortunate for him."

"I didn't call you in here to talk about Agent Alvarado," Carhart said with a raised eyebrow.

"I know. I'm unsure what it is that you do want to talk about, sir." Kassian frowned slightly and figured that the best approach was to be direct. "Did I do something wrong?"

"I don't know," Carhart replied calmly. "Did you?"

Kassian's eyes narrowed slightly in confusion. "I'm not sure what you're implying, sir."

Carhart sighed and leaned back in his chair, eyes drilling into Kassian steadily. He didn't look angry but at the same time he didn't look pleased. His entire demeanor was hard to place, hard to figure out. "I want to know what you're doing here, Kassian. Why are you going through with this trial?"

"I--" Kassian stopped talking, realizing he didn't have an answer to that question. He'd almost replied with a default of 'I'm doing what you asked me to do,' but Carhart had never asked him to go through with it. The idea of the trial hadn't been anything more than a suggestion.

After a moment, Kassian could do nothing but admit honestly, "I'm not sure."

"Okay let me phrase it another way." Carhart tapped a finger against the desk. "What do you hope to gain by doing this?"

Kassian paused, staring Carhart directly in the eye as some of his anxiety was replaced by a mild sense of indignation and defensiveness. He sat up straighter and lifted his chin slightly, unconsciously, although the rest of his expression was calm and

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unreadable. "I don't hope to gain anything, sir. I'm not sure what you think my intentions are."

"I don't know what your intentions are," Carhart replied calmly. "But I'd like to understand them. I find it difficult to believe that a man of your rank, of your tenure and with your reputation would willingly put himself in such a position without having an underlying goal."

"I'm not trying to be difficult, sir, but I really don't know what you're getting at here," Kassian replied evenly, not letting any of his frustration get through.

Carhart reclined slightly in the chair, eyes narrowed at Kassian, a touch of impatience glinting in the cerulean blue. "Do you think Agent Alvarado deserves to be promoted again?"

"No," Kassian said without hesitation, failing to see the relevance.

"But you think Boyd deserves to be level 10?" Carhart asked shrewdly.

There was a long pause this time and Kassian found himself hesitating, not wanting the conversation to be about Boyd and the sham of his promotion, not wanting to go into the details of something that had been so upsetting to his friend. "What does that have to--"

"Answer the question, Kassian."

Kassian set his jaw and sighed. "No. I don't."

"Why?"

Kassian looked away, focusing on the view out the window, the broken skyline and the surprisingly light sky. "He's too emotional," he replied grudgingly. "Or he can be. He can also be rash, reckless. But at the same time, he's a new agent and he has potential." Kassian looked at the General again. "He's a good kid."

"A good kid," Carhart replied with a slight smile. "If this were anyone else, you wouldn't be giving me this half-hearted speech on potential. If this were anyone else, you would never stand by and allow me to assign a 'good kid' as your team leader without an argument or at least a mote of resentment. I know you, Kassian."

"Okay, you're right. Boyd's my friend and I think given the circumstances he's been--"

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"Shut up."

Kassian closed his mouth, embarrassed by his own behavior but unable to help it. At this point Boyd was probably the closest friend he'd had in over ten years.

It was hard to find someone outside the Agency who he didn't have to constantly lie to in order to maintain a friendship. And it was difficult to find someone in the Agency who didn't have a skewed view of him, who didn't have expectations that his outside life wouldn't meet.

Boyd was the only person who didn't cause either of those issues for Kassian and because of that, Kassian had found himself confiding in Boyd and generally enjoying the younger man's company.

He hadn't expected them to get as close as they were but he was fond of their friendship and so he couldn't help giving Boyd the benefit of the doubt, even though he would likely never do it for anyone else if they were in similar circumstances. It was that part, the obvious flip-flopping, that was embarrassing.

"I'm not expecting you to sit here and slander Boyd," Carhart said dryly. "Far from it. I agree with you-- he has potential to be a great agent and despite the conditions of his promotion, I don't entirely disagree with his mother's motives. Boyd has more invested in this place than most and because of that, he is loyal."

Kassian nodded noncommittally, understanding the sentiment but unable to really support it. In the grand scheme of things it was unfair to everyone else on the compound who had to work for their positions and when Kassian just thought about how it affected Boyd, it made it even worse. It made Boyd feel used and it put his life in danger on missions he might not be ready for.

Carhart gave him a long look before continuing. "However, what I am expecting is honesty. I want you to honestly tell me why you're doing this trial if you're going to be in my unit. I hand-selected everyone in it because I can read every single one of the team very well-- I understand them. I thought I understood you but now I'm not so sure because this move doesn't make any sense. You're doing a favor for a man who despises you and who you don't really have very fond feelings for either and in the process of granting this favor, you're being downgraded in status and put beneath someone who should technically be lower than you in every regard professionally. Why?"

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Kassian looked away again, frowning, wanting this conversation to be over. He wished he could be like Sin at that moment-- that he could sit there with a steely glare and resolute silence and just wait it out until Carhart gave up and sent him away. But Kassian knew he couldn't do that-- he had too much respect for the General to ever disrespect him that way and he knew for a fact that he wouldn't be allowed to get away with it even if he thought to try.

"I can't explain it, sir. I just thought it was the right thing to do."

"I see." Carhart raised his eyebrows again, tilting his head inquisitively. "Is it because you're having sexual relations with Boyd?"

Kassian's gaze snapped back to the General and his back stiffened, eyes narrowing; at first he couldn't even formulate a reply. His heart began to beat faster in his chest and for a moment he really thought he was going to have an anxiety attack as a strange sort of panic overcame him. It was odd and he couldn't explain it, but the idea of Carhart knowing about his sexual orientation, let alone details about his sex life, was humiliating.

"I don't know why you would say something like that," Kassian said, his tone flat and unemotional but he still couldn't allow himself to outright lie; not to General Carhart, not when the man was looking into Kassian's eyes so knowingly and would likely see through any falsehood.

"Really?" Carhart looked at him in the same calm manner, neither agreeing or disagreeing.

"Really." Kassian forced himself not to look away, not to shift uncomfortably, not to show how disturbed he was.

He'd never had any doubts that Carhart, that even Marshal Connors and Inspector Beaulieu, had anything but respect for him professionally. Kassian grimaced inwardly at the possibility of the Inspector or General Carhart finding out details about his personal life, seeing pictures or videos, overhearing things whispered in the halls. Once a superior found out about his or anyone's dirty laundry, about the things he did behind closed doors, they would never look at him the same way again.

Where there had once been total confidence would now be hesitation, wondering; concern that extracurricular sexual activities would interfere with a partnership, with a

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mission. And even though Kassian had no doubts about being able to keep things professional no matter who he was fucking, his superiors wouldn't know that for certain.

"This isn't the military, Kassian. You won't be discharged for homosexual conduct," Carhart said mildly.

"I'm not a homosexual," Kassian snapped, sharper than he'd intended. He winced, mouth drawing down. "Please let this subject drop, General Carhart. I have a lot of respect for you as my commanding officer and I would hate to say something stupid out of anger."

"I didn't say you were a homosexual," Carhart continued, completely ignoring the last part of Kassian's statement. "But I've seen your file, Agent. I know you're inclined to be attracted to both genders."

Kassian mentally cursed himself and his Level 10 torture training, shaking his head and closing his eyes briefly in embarrassment. They'd grilled him mercilessly about his personal life, likely to find out if there was anything compromising in it that would give him trouble as a Level 10, and he'd slipped up in his delirium and mentioned being attracted to a 'he' at some point in his life.

He didn't even remember exactly what he'd said now because he'd shut down completely after the slip-up, not letting anything else go, but obviously they'd remembered and made a note of it.

"I'm not judging you, Agent Trovosky," Carhart said when Kassian didn't respond. This time the General's voice was more personal, serious; his brow slightly furrowed as he studied Kassian's troubled expression. "I'm just trying to understand your reasons."

"What does this have to do with the trial?" Kassian demanded in frustration, shaking his head. "I don't understand."

Carhart studied him for a long moment, a tense moment, before he inclined his head slightly as if accepting something. "I think you're telling the truth and that you really don't understand your own reasoning but my theory is that even if you haven't yet accepted it, you're willing to do this so that Sin can get out because you feel guilty for having sex with Boyd. I think it bothers you that Sin feels hurt and betrayed by the two of you and now you're trying to even the score because I doubt you intended him to react this way."

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Kassian didn't respond but his face was burning. Carhart had obviously put some thought into this theory to have pegged it so closely-- even before Kassian had figured it out for himself.

He'd been bothered by Sin's reaction, so much so that it had actually surprised him. Yet for some reason he had never consciously admitted that he was sacrificing his own contentment with his current state in a lame attempt to square things with Sin. It was likely due to the fact that deep down, Kassian didn't want Sin to hate him and it bewildered him that Sin did. They frustrated each other and their personalities clashed completely but Kassian had never understood the loathing that Sin possessed for him and Kassian had never returned the sentiment as strongly.

"I don't know what to say," Kassian said finally. "With all due respect, sir, I'm not going to talk about my personal life. I don't think it's Agency business and I don't think it's relevant. Besides, at this point Vega is leaving the unit due to his father."

"Yes," Carhart agreed without hesitation, finally dropping his close scrutiny of Kassian to pick up a mug of coffee that had sat cooling on his desk. "But I wasn't trying to blame you for Sin's attempted departure. Like I said, I just wanted to know why. Do you accept my conclusion?"

Kassian watched the General, watched the way he took a long gulp of coffee, the way he glanced back at Kassian with the slightest raise of an eyebrow, the way his eyes appeared void of all judgment. Kassian just shrugged slightly. "If I were having sex with Boyd, your theory would be acceptable."

"I see." Carhart set the mug down again but his long fingers stayed curled around it. "Well, if this trial does succeed and you actually join this unit, that would be fortunate. I don't enjoy lover's quarrels and drama on my team."

"Well, sir," Kassian replied in the same toneless voice. "If I were sleeping with a member of your unit, I would hope that you'd read my file deeply enough to understand that I do not form romantic attachments any longer and any dalliances I do have would not be a cause for potential drama."

"Well, Kassian," Carhart said, looking at Kassian skeptically. "Any dalliance with a Vega attached is cause for drama."

Kassian said nothing in response, unwilling to further incriminate himself. He'd only said as much as he had because the cat was already out of the bag; it didn't really hurt his

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cause to reassure Carhart that he and Boyd weren't actually in love or something ridiculous like that.

The General shook his head slightly and picked up the mug again. "Good luck on your mission, Kassian. I expect a full report upon your return."

Even though Sin never had to do that, Kassian added silently before standing up with a short nod. "Yes, sir."

Part II

Kassian's boots crunched over the leaves and brush as he made the long trek back to the safe-house. In the otherwise silent wooded area, the sound seemed louder than it was. He found himself actually enjoying the walk and the crisp spring air that had topped out to low 40s; the only thing missing was a gorgeous sunrise but the sky still wasn't clear enough for that.

He coughed quietly, muffling the sound with his arm, and hoped he wasn't starting to get sick. The last thing he needed was to come down with a cold now that he was going to spend at least a couple more nights doing surveillance.

The factory was in a heavily wooded area fifteen miles from a main town but only five miles from a small work site that was allegedly being renovated for a cabin resort in the mountains. Work hadn't been done on the resort for years but the cabins were still livable and despite the fact that the actual resort wasn't finished, the owner rented them out for camping.

Because of the destitute area and the security around the factory, they'd decided to surveil it in alternating shifts-- one person actually on site as to be less noticeable and two people in the cabin keeping an eye on the live-feed satellite images that showed an aerial view of the location and the surrounding roads.

It was Kassian's first graveyard shift and other than extreme boredom, not much had gone down. Boyd had had the early morning shift, Sin the midafternoon to night, and so far all they'd surmised was that most employees seemed to be gone for the day by at least eight in the evening although others stayed for overtime until about eleven at night. The three agents met up for a few moments between each shift to collaborate and plan before heading back out to the surveil spot.

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Kassian climbed the hill that led to the property their cabin was on and switched on his comm unit to notify Boyd that he was on his way. It took another several moments to arrive but when Kassian was finally inside, the smell of brewing coffee consumed his senses.

The idea of sitting down for the first time all night and inhaling the entire pot of coffee was a welcoming one, although a nap did sound pretty good at the moment too. Normally Kassian would stay as alert as possible throughout an entire mission but since it wasn't exactly high-activity for the next few days, he didn't see the reason.

He'd already made the decision that since he wasn't doing more than participant-observation, he wouldn't be taking what seemed to be a relatively straight forward mission as serious as he normally would. Besides, Kassian told himself as he shrugged off his jacket and let his gaze fall on Boyd's location by the surveillance laptops, he wasn't the team leader anyway.

Kassian tossed the jacket on the table in the small kitchen area. The cabin was equipped with a kitchen with all amenities, a full living room and a small bedroom that they'd established as storage for weapons and gear instead of an actual sleeping area.

Kassian grabbed one of the chipped yellow mugs and poured himself a cup of coffee, drinking it black. His gaze swept the room and he saw Sin gearing up to take his turn at the early morning shift. He was adjusting a gun holster, his face turned towards the floor and hair curtaining most of his expression.

"Not much going on last night," Kassian said after swallowing the nearly scalding-hot coffee. "Weird amount of guard activity considering it's supposed to be deserted but that was expected."

Boyd nodded in acknowledgment although he didn't look away from the live feed; he was especially diligent watching the cameras during their shift changes when there wasn't someone at the surveillance point. "Nothing particularly unusual on the feed, either."

"Try to circle around to the eastern section," Kassian told Sin as he took another sip of coffee. "There seemed to be more guards in that region but it's difficult to get close because there's less coverage there."

Sin didn't respond and pulled on a black jacket, zipping it up.

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Kassian shook his head, not terribly surprised by the non-response, and finished his coffee, standing to get another cup. "Your coffee-making skills are improving, Boyd," he commented idly. When they'd first started hanging out, Boyd had made horrible coffee, likely because he was a tea drinker.

"I'll take your word on it," Boyd said lightly, gaze still firmly on the screen. "It still tastes terrible to me but I got desperate for caffeine somewhere between 2 am and nothing happening, and I thought you may want some anyway."

Kassian took another gulp. He started to reply but before he could, Sin walked out of the cabin without comment. Kassian stared at the door for a moment before letting his gaze go back to Boyd. "Is he always like this on assignment?"

"Not really," Boyd said with a shrug. "He's just understandably unhappy to be in the same room with us."

Having nothing to respond to that with, Kassian finished his coffee before moving from the hard wood chair to the frayed couch that sat along the wall of the living room. He closed his eyes half-way, directing his gaze out the window as the day gradually got lighter as he idly kicked off his boots and stretched out.

It was kind of disappointing that the mission as a whole was relatively low activity and straight forward. Even when they infiltrated the lab, they didn't count on having a difficult time unless there were more hostiles than the worst-case scenario that they'd come prepared for but that possibility was unlikely. It would have been difficult for Joshi to keep his lab so discreet if he had that much manpower on site.

At the same time, Kassian was grateful for the opportunity to not be in charge and to not feel obligated to play a large role like he would have had to in a more complicated mission. Even though he was on an assignment, he wasn't being forced into Senior Agent Trovosky mode. That, he decided belatedly, would actually be one bonus of being in the unit and being paired with Boyd.

The thought made him relax slightly and Kassian allowed his eyes to drift closed completely. When he opened them again he realized that he'd dozed off and that it must have been at least thirty minutes because he heard Boyd talking to Sin on the comm.

"Alright," Boyd was saying, still leaning forward as he stared at the screen. "Nothing's changed on the aerial so just let us know as usual if anything happens."

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Boyd was silent a second, probably listening to a response, then leaned back in the chair with a quiet sigh. He sat like that, watching the screen for a long time, until the majority of civilian workers had arrived at the factory and the normal sequence of events had begun. Even after one day of observation, they'd realized that the possibility of something important occurring during the first shift when the civilian population was present was extremely unlikely at best.

Almost an hour passed before Boyd rubbed his eyes with a grimace. "Jesus, my eyes hurt. I feel like I've been staring at that screen forever."

Kassian didn't move from his spot on the couch, trying to force himself to fall asleep but somehow unable to achieve it. "Did you get any rest last night?"

"A little." Boyd rested an arm over the back of the chair as he looked over at Kassian. "Not much. I was tired but couldn't sleep so I got up to watch the live feed."

"This mission is pretty boring," Kassian commented, rubbing his stomach slowly through the thin, long-sleeved shirt he wore. Hunger pains were beginning to make themselves obvious, which wasn't too surprising given the fact that all he'd eaten in the past day were a few protein bars.

Boyd nodded then pushed himself up and walked over to the couch. Kassian moved his feet so Boyd could sit before propping them up in his lap. Boyd closed his eyes and tilted his head back against the couch, absently dropping his hands onto Kassian's feet.

"It almost seems like overkill to have three of us," Boyd said belatedly.

"Well, technically I'm just supposed to be observing so it's not like I was necessary here or anything." Kassian arched his back off the couch in a stretch and looked over at Boyd. "How about a foot massage?"

"Hmm." Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly and gave Kassian a considering look. Boyd almost absently slid his hands along the length of one of Kassian's feet; his fingers were strong and traced the arch but he didn't take off the sock. "Do you want one?"

Kassian closed his eyes and let his head rest against the cushion, grinning slightly. "If you wouldn't mind, it'd be great."

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Boyd made a soft sound in his throat and didn't immediately answer, but his fingers slid back up to Kassian's ankle and he pulled off the sock. With firm pressure, he kneaded the muscles in one foot.

"Mmmmm." Kassian opened his eyes and looked over at Boyd appreciatively. "You're a real sport."

Boyd smiled briefly as he continued to massage Kassian's foot. His thumbs pressed into Kassian's arch and his gaze flicked to where the laptops sat on the desk before returning to Kassian. "Is that enough pressure?"

"Uh huh." Kassian raised his eyebrows slightly. "You're pretty good at that, actually."

"Actually," Boyd echoed Kassian's wording as he smirked in mild amusement. "I'm improving on my coffee and surprisingly decent at massages." His hands slipped away as he pulled the other sock off and started working on Kassian's other foot. "Is there anything you think I'm good at right away?"

Kassian's grin widened and his eyebrows rose higher. "You were pretty pro at sucking my cock."

Boyd grinned rather smugly, looking at Kassian sidelong. "You liked that, huh?"

Kassian nodded, grin turning wicked. "Even better at swallowing."

"Well, a guy has to have some natural talents," Boyd said with a smirk.

"I don't know, though. It's been awhile... you might be getting rusty." Kassian let his eyes flick over Boyd before focusing on his lips. "Maybe you should take this opportunity to get some practice in."

Boyd's gaze sparked with amusement as he watched Kassian's eyes. His smirk lingered, becoming a touch mischievous. "I don't know. I don't think you could handle it. You get pretty overwhelmed."

Kassian's eyes narrowed slightly and he felt his stomach clench, his dick becoming partially erect as he thought about the last time they'd fooled around. It'd been almost a month since anything physical had occurred between them but he very vividly recalled the image of Boyd's lips wrapping around his cock.

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Kassian sat up and leaned forward, grabbing Boyd's shirt and pulling him across the sofa.

"Wha--" Boyd started to say but Kassian pulled him over to straddle Kassian's lap. He cut off Boyd's word with a kiss. As their lips met, Kassian glanced over Boyd's shoulder at the screens, half-focused on the laptop.

Tension built in Boyd's back and he made a muffled noise, his body hovering partially off Kassian's legs. Kassian's tongue slid into Boyd's mouth and Boyd hesitated, starting to pull back but Kassian took the opportunity to deepen the kiss. There was a moment where the tension only seemed to increase in Boyd's shoulders but Kassian thoroughly explored Boyd's mouth, and Boyd seemed to relax despite himself, his eyes falling half shut.

As Kassian intensified the kiss, Boyd fingers spasmed on Kassian's shoulders, his breath quickening.

Kassian's hands moved from Boyd's waist to slide up beneath the back of his shirt, allowing Boyd's taste, his smell, and the feel of his body to completely overtake any other sensation. Kassian began rocking his hips up absently, grinding his denim-covered erection against Boyd's, a thrill going down his spine at the feel of Boyd's cock just as it always did.

He didn't know if he'd ever get used to the idea of being able to touch Boyd, of being able to kiss him and fuck him. Kassian had never been so close to someone physically and mentally without having some kind of romantic feelings between them; the fact that he and Boyd could have such amazing sex without the caveats was astounding to him. The people he usually fooled around with always had desires for something more permanent, more stable, and would eventually try to force a relationship on him.

"Your body's incredible," Kassian muttered against Boyd's mouth, his breath coming faster as his hands wandered. Boyd didn't answer, his breath catching and forehead dropping forward as Kassian ground up against him.

It was the first time they'd done anything since Boyd had started his strict work-out regime and the results were already showing.

Boyd had always been slightly toned but now his body was sleekly muscled, his stomach subtly defined instead of just flat, his shoulders stronger, his arms harder. All of

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it combined with his smooth hairless skin, the paleness of it, the fall of long blond hair... it made Kassian incredibly hot for him.

The kiss intensified, their tongues clashing, and Kassian shifted again, lifting Boyd up and turning so that Boyd was sprawled on his back on the couch as Kassian immediately pressed against him. Boyd's moan was caught between them as his hips suddenly snapped up. He started grinding up against Kassian.

They were both panting against each other's mouth and after several moments of breathless kissing, Kassian ripped his mouth away to slide it down Boyd's neck. He sucked lightly, enjoying the way Boyd groaned and arched up. The way his fingers dug into Kassian's hair.

Kassian could feel his dick getting harder, almost painfully so in the tight confines of his jeans. He kissed back up before mumbling in Boyd's ear, "I want to fuck your tight ass."

"Fuck," Boyd hissed, panting heavily. His eyes were half closed and dilated with lust as they focused intently on Kassian, his mouth open and cheeks slightly flushed. His eyebrows drew down a little even as the comment served to make him grind against Kassian more vigorously.

"I don't--" Boyd started to speak but seemed to lose his train of thought as Kassian snapped his hips against him especially hard. His words trailed off into a moan.

"I know you want it," Kassian growled, rocking his hips faster. His gaze was enraptured by Boyd's expression, by the look of unbridled pleasure on his face. "I'll make you fucking scream."

"Ahh," Boyd groaned again and squeezed his eyes shut, mouth opening wider as he breathed heavily. His body was still pounding up against Kassian of its own accord. But his fingers tightened on Kassian's shoulders and he started shaking his head back and forth. "Shit... Shit, wait..."

"Just real quick," Kassian said breathlessly, already yanking impatiently at Boyd's pants. Hurriedly undoing the belt, his lips parted and eyes darkened with lust.

"Fuck-- Wait," Boyd said more urgently, grabbing Kassian's hands before he could finish.

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Boyd dropped back against the couch, fingers trembling lightly on Kassian's wrists, gaze intense with desire as he stared up at Kassian, lips slightly swollen and parted. He looked as though he wanted nothing more than to be fucked long and hard, but he didn't let go of Kassian's hands. He shook his head once more and his tone was firmer when he spoke again despite the fact that it was still slightly husky.

"Kassian, we can't. It wouldn't be right, we shouldn't even be doing this. Sin..." He trailed off but the heaviness in his tone and the troubled expression on his face made it quite clear to Kassian that Boyd was worried about Sin seeing them together. It was unlikely due to the distance of the surveillance location but even so, Kassian knew Boyd was right.

Kassian groaned and collapsed on top of Boyd, closing his eyes briefly. As frustrated as he felt sexually, he knew Boyd was right. Wrong place, wrong time, just... wrong. "You owe me later," he said finally when his heartbeat had slowed.

Boyd nodded and dropped his head back, relaxing once it became obvious that Kassian wasn't going to argue the point. "I'll do whatever you want next time," he said lightly, eyes half open and focused on Kassian. "How's that sound?"

Kassian grinned and turned his head to look at Boyd. "That actually makes it worth it."

"Good." Boyd closed his eyes and a faint smirk curved his lips. "Start planning now so it's interesting for me, too."

"I won't let you down," Kassian reassured. He let out another long groan, this one more theatrical than anything else, and sat up again. His body was still thrumming with unreleased pleasure and all signs of tiredness had all but faded. "I'm gonna wash up and run to town for supplies. Unless you want to-- you've been cooped up here for hours."

Boyd shook his head but didn't move from his position. "It's alright. That screen's already burned into my retinas; I may as well watch a little longer."

Kassian shook his head and ruffled Boyd's hair playfully before standing up and heading to the small cramped bathroom. He stripped off his clothes entirely and turned on the lukewarm water before stepping into the shower.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall, letting the water pour over him, over his face and hair, as the tension slowly released from his body and the unrelenting need for

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an orgasm drained away. It was only then that he allowed himself to think back on the last few moments.

If anyone at the Agency could have seen him writhing on top of Boyd, practically pleading for sex, they likely would have died of shock. It wasn't the sex part-- Kassian had had dalliances with other agents and civilian staff in the past-- so much as the fact that he was on a mission.

True, it was a pretty low key mission with a lot of downtime, but it was a mission nonetheless. It was very odd and Kassian was the first to admit that fact to himself. It wasn't even like he and Boyd had sex very frequently. The majority of the time they hung out it was just that-- hanging out, watching movies or eating, taking long rides on his motorcycle or playing video games. Hell-- they'd even started reading the same books and comparing opinions and commentary later.

Sex only happened occasionally and Kassian wondered why now of all times the desire to put his hands on Boyd had started burning so hot.

Maybe, Kassian pondered as he picked up the bar of hard soap and rubbed it across his chest-- Maybe it was because deep down he knew it was something he wasn't supposed to do. He wasn't supposed to fuck his would-be partner, especially on an active mission. It was a breach of protocol, an error in judgment and probably something Sin would do.

It was probably something Sin and Boyd had done in the past.

The idea of Sin and Boyd together, of them having frenzied, violent sex after a gun fight or a chase-- Kassian didn't deny that it turned him on. It was strange but not unfamiliar-- the thought had crossed his mind ever since Boyd had mentioned their sex life. Although Boyd was typically very careful to never give Kassian much information about his sexual relationship with Sin, the occasional detail that had slipped out or Kassian had inferred had been intriguing.

Ever since then Kassian would idly find his mind wandering off in that direction, trying to figure out what Sin's expression would look like as he pounded into Boyd or even the reverse-- what he would look like if he actually let Boyd fuck him.

Kassian shook his head, a self-deprecating smile on his face, and banished the thoughts. He spent way too much time thinking about getting laid-- it was on the pathetic side of hilarious.

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He quickly finished his shower and dressed, leaving the cabin to take the truck the ten miles into town. The road he used was well-traveled so he didn't stick out very much as the dark grey vehicle bounced on the uneven road.

All the commerce was located on one street in the small town and Kassian got all the supplies he needed from the general store. He got plenty of water, several packs of protein bars, some aspirin, a few cans of coffee and some basic canned food. Kassian started to go to the check-out but he remembered Boyd asking him to buy some junk food for Sin.

Apparently sweets were the only thing Sin really liked to eat, a fact that was incredibly surprising to Kassian considering how thin the other senior agent was. Kassian worked out several times a week to burn off the amount of alcohol he consumed-- he could only imagine how his metabolism would react to an excess of sugar and beer.

It took longer than expected to figure out what Sin would even want. It annoyed Kassian that he was going out of his way for someone who wouldn't even deign to speak to him but he tried to push it aside and grabbed a large package of chocolate chip cookies before going to pay.

"You're a new face," the older lady at the check-out said with a smile when he put everything on the counter.

Kassian smiled and kept his gaze firmly fixed on the cashier, ignoring the tempting bottles of vodka that lined the wall to the right. It was difficult and three times he'd had to stop himself from adding one to his basket.

"Yes--" He looked at her name tag. "Yes, Belle, I am. Me and my brother are looking to move out here."

"Oh really?" Belle nodded as she rang up his items. "That ain't too surprising, actually. The plant's got more openings than we've got residents. A lot of folks from the surrounding towns've been pouring in, trying to get a job."

Kassian nodded, still smiling at her warmly. "Well, times sure are hard, Belle. I got laid off months ago, my brother's never even been able to find a steady job but he's just a kid."

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Belle nodded sympathetically. "I been hoping the economy will get turned around some day but I doubt it'd be in my lifetime. Hopefully someday I'll be able to look down from heaven and see that my kids is prosperin'. That's all I can hope for."

"That's all anyone can," Kassian agreed, and he meant it. He knew he'd never find peace in his own life, he knew it was unlikely that he'd survive past forty in the Agency or that he'd come back alive from his next stint in Russia-- all he could hope was that his little sisters would grow up safer and happier in their lives.

"That'll be fifty-four dollars, sir," Belle said after she'd bagged all his items.

Kassian whistled, eyebrows raising. She was using an old fashioned register-- one that she manually input prices into. He wondered idly if she was ripping him off but couldn't really blame her if she was; that's just how things were. "Pretty steep for some canned soup, ravioli, cookies and water," he noted, tugging his wallet out.

"Like you said, sir. Times sure are hard." Belle accepted the assortment of mixed bills and smiled at him a little guiltily before quickly throwing in a mini bottle of Jack Daniels, looking around to make sure no one saw.

Kassian just chuckled and picked up his bags, unable to get over the irony of her overcharging him and then supporting his alcoholism out of guilt. "Take care, Belle."

The drive back was uneventful but as he drove through the winding roads that led to the cabin, Kassian found himself fingering the slim bottle of whiskey longingly, unable to deny to himself that the idea of drinking it was incredibly tempting. It had always been hard to ignore his thirst for alcohol but after two years of drinking and doing drugs in Russia, his alcoholism had reached an all-time high.

Kassian ached for a drink, he ached to gulp down the small bottle, and he found himself idly justifying his desire by saying that it was a low-key mission, he was nothing more than a tag-a-long anyway, why should he try to be the professional and responsible agent when he was taking the place of someone who made no effort to hide the fact that he didn't give a shit.

But in the end Kassian just put the whiskey into his inner jacket pocket without drinking although the bottle's weight against his chest made it nearly impossible to ignore.

When he finally returned to the cabin, he switched places with Boyd at the computer. The hours passed slowly and Kassian was beginning to grow impatient with the

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mission. So far nothing of note had occurred, not even anything minor, and he was seriously beginning to think they were going to have to break in and do recon on the inside.

He mentioned it to Boyd, who agreed, and they spent a couple hours going over blueprints of the plant. Sin returned from his shift and when they informed him of their mutual decision to go in if nothing happening during the next couple days, it was greeted with stony silence and this time he didn't even look at either of them.

Boyd left for his shift and Kassian realized belatedly that somehow he'd gotten the overnight watch again. It didn't really bother him, though-- he actually preferred the night. He wasn't as confident in his stealth as he'd been prior to the Russia mission and the night gave him better cover.

"I got some food," Kassian told Sin after Boyd was in his position in the wooded area around the plant. "Just some shit out of a can."

Sin didn't respond and kept his gaze on the monitors as he sat ramrod straight at the small desk in the living room.

Kassian stared at him for a long moment before raising an eyebrow. "This is pretty ridiculous, Vega."

When Sin still didn't respond, Kassian frowned and walked over to the desk. "I know I'm not your favorite person but do we really have to bring this with us on a mission?"

Sin's gaze finally rose from the laptop and the expression on his face actually surprised Kassian. Where he'd previously been blank-faced and emotionless, Sin now glared, his narrowed eyes shooting hateful sparks and his lips turned down into a dark frown as his jaw clenched.

"Unless you have something to say about the mission, shut the fuck up," Sin said coldly and looked at the screen again.

Kassian crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at Sin. "We need to talk about this, man."

"The only thing you need to do," Sin said slowly, looking at Kassian again but this time he controlled his expression more despite the fact that his tone remained the same. "Is shut. The fuck. Up."

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"You need to grow the fuck up," Kassian retorted, turning away from Sin finally, although he didn't walk away. He was angry and frustrated because he couldn't really do anything about it.

"And you need to just get the fuck over the fact that I hate you and stop trying to make nice so you still come out looking like the good guy."

Kassian whirled around incredulously. "Are you kidding me? You think that's why I'm talking to you?"

Sin didn't look up from the screen as he replied tonelessly, "Yes."

Kassian stared at Sin with narrowed eyes, crossing his arms over his chest and he couldn't help the indignation he felt at Sin's insinuation.

Was that really what Sin thought of him? That all he really wanted at the Agency, why he was so by-the-book, why he tried to be professional, was because he wanted people to perceive him a certain way? Because he wanted to impress the people on the compound-- he wanted to look like the hero and the good guy?

It was insulting and so incredibly incorrect that Kassian couldn't even reply. He was by the book because he didn't know any other way to be-- he was professional because he didn't like to disappoint people who looked to him for leadership, because he wanted the respect of his commanding officers-- If he thought of the Agency as nothing more than a popularity contest, Kassian would have made more of an effort in the past ten years to immerse himself with the other agents instead of living off compound and isolating himself unless he had to be on compound for a mission.

"You're wrong," he said finally, eyebrows drawing together.

"Then why are you standing here going out of your way to make small talk?" Sin asked, sitting back in the chair and raising his gaze to Kassian. His full lips were drooping in a scowl and he raised one dark eyebrow at Kassian, not doing anything to hide his obvious disdain. "You don't like me. You know I can't stand you. Why bother? Why waste energy trying to coerce me into conversation unless you have some kind of motive?"

"Because--" Kassian broke off with a scowl, staring down at Sin in frustration. Once again, it was a question that he couldn't answer because there was no logic behind it.

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Sin was right; they never got along and probably never would. What was the point of trying to change the situation? Kassian didn't even know why he would want to; nothing had changed, he still didn't like Sin's personality. The only thing they had in common was Boyd and even Boyd wasn't going out of his way to get them to be friends.

It was strange and Kassian just shook his head, coming to the conclusion that a lot of things were strange now that he'd gotten himself mixed up in the drama of Sin and Boyd's lives.

"Just forget it, man," Kassian said finally. "You can think what you want but you don't know me. You don't know anything about my life except the shit you assume because you dislike me."

Sin gave him a mockingly sympathetic expression, frowning as though he were in deep thought, raising his eyebrows high. "How sad for you. It must be hard being so... misunderstood."

Kassian grit his teeth in annoyance, shaking his head again. "I'm not trying to make this a competition about who is more misunderstood or whose life sucks more, Vega. I know your life sucks but I'm just saying you don't know shit about mine."

"Ah." Sin nodded, looking at the screen again although his eyes narrowed slightly, a flicker of something that Kassian couldn't readily define making its way briefly across them as Sin bit out, "Maybe I'll get Boyd to fill me in on it."

An exhalation of exasperation escaped Kassian and he wished that he could just make himself walk away and let it be. He wished he could just not give a shit that Sin had some skewed notion of what exactly was going on with Kassian and Boyd. He wished he wasn't so ridiculously stubborn when it came to attempting to make things right, especially when the situation had never been right from the beginning.

But he couldn't-- Kassian couldn't let it go, not when he was only on this ridiculous mission and in this awkward situation because of his own guilt regarding Sin's apparent and obstinate need to misunderstand everything entirely.

"I think you have the wrong idea about me and Boyd," Kassian said finally, trying to lose the edge in his tone even though it was impossible for him not to feel aggravated by the entire discussion.

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"Yes, I'm obviously very mistaken," Sin replied drolly, his expression not changing as he stared at nothing in particular.

Kassian scowled; Sin had the most frustrating ability to make him feel completely moronic and inconsequential with very few words. "I think you think he isn't back with you because of me."

One of Sin's broad shoulders rose casually although his posture was a lot stiffer than it had been before the topic turned to Boyd; the tension in his frame was obvious. "What does he need me for now?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sin looked up at Kassian again and this time his expression was darker; his eyes were narrowed, his mouth set in a tight, angry line. His long fingers were clenched around the edge of the desk and he practically radiated anger; his glare intense. "It means," he said in a black, hateful tone, standing up and facing Kassian entirely.

The intensity of Sin's stare and fury made Kassian want to take an automatic step back but he didn't. He'd determined long ago that he would never back down from Sin.

"It means what the hell does he need me for when he's got you to fuck his tight ass and make him fucking scream," Sin said coldly, jaw clenching and nostrils flaring slightly as he tried to control his rage. Now that the words had left his mouth he was practically shaking with anger, his hands clenching into fists and eyebrows drawn down low over his eyes.

"You--" Kassian stopped, staring at Sin blankly, unable to even properly respond or comprehend what Sin was saying.

"Next time turn off your fucking comm unit."

The reality of the situation hit Kassian and he realized with something very close to horror and humiliation that Sin had heard every single thing that had happened between them on the previous shift. He'd likely heard every gasp, every shift of clothing, every moan...

And Kassian realized quite embarrassingly that when he'd growled lustily to Boyd about what he'd wanted to do his voice had probably been like surround sound in Sin's ear.

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The guilt of the situation wasn't surprising-- Kassian was feeling a lot of that lately and had been ever since finding out how heartbroken Sin had been after Boyd confessed that he and Kassian had slept together. He didn't want to feel remorse, Kassian didn't really feel like he was doing anything wrong, but even so it was there nonetheless.

"That was unintentional," Kassian said stiffly, mortified by the situation. "I'm sorry."

"I don't need your fucking apology," Sin growled, taking a step forward as he glared at Kassian. "I don't need your fucking pity."

"It's not pity," Kassian retorted, not backing away, not breaking Sin's stare. "I'm just saying that I'm sorry."

"And I'm just saying that I don't need you to fucking feel sorry for me," Sin spat, taking another step forward, dark hair falling into his eyes. "We'll see what happens on the storm, Trovosky. When you have to rely on me to watch your back. We'll see how sorry you feel for everything then. Maybe it will give you a reason to give up your pathetic attempt to make amends."

Anger flooded Kassian and he was floored by the amount of contempt that Sin truly had for him. At that moment Kassian had no doubts that Sin would let him die on the mission-- his hatred was truly that strong. Kassian didn't know if Sin always felt that way or if he was speaking and behaving out of irrational fury but regardless, Kassian couldn't deny that it made him just as furious in return.

"I'm not trying to make amends for everything, Vega," he snapped. "I'm sorry you had to hear it, not sorry that I want to fuck Boyd."

The fist that slammed into Kassian's face didn't come as a surprise so when his head snapped to the side, Kassian did nothing for a tense moment but stare blindly at the wall as his jaw throbbed violently. He could feel anger building up inside him, spreading and almost entirely consuming him until every thought that crossed Kassian's mind was colored with red-hot fury and indignation. But then he took a deep breath and looked at Sin again.

Sin's expression was one of pure menace; his face was tilted down slightly, curtained by his silky black hair as the look in his pale green eyes promised violence.

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"Don't be more of a fucking idiot than you already are, Vega," Kassian said as a low warning, his eyes narrowed as his breath came faster, feeling his body tense and shift almost of its own accord into a defensive posture.

This time when Sin swung at him, Kassian was prepared for it. He jerked backwards out of the way of Sin's iron-like knuckles and felt a whoosh of air across his face as he avoided the punch by mere centimeters.

Kassian responded with a right hook and a nearly simultaneous jab of his left fist, both of which Sin blocked automatically. Kassian raised one knee and slammed it into Sin's solar plexus, the only attack that Sin failed to dodge because of the speed with which Kassian performed it.

The only sign that Sin had even been affected by the blow was a low release of air as he hunched forward slightly but even having the wind knocked out of Sin didn't slow him down. He lunged at Kassian from his newly stooped position and they went flying backwards. Kassian grunted in surprise as his back crashed against the low coffee table which collapsed under his and Sin's combined weight.

Sin reared his fist back and slammed it into Kassian's face, pounding mercilessly against Kassian's cheekbone. He pulled his arm back to punch again but Kassian abruptly surged forward and head-butted Sin, his forehead slamming into the bridge of Sin's nose.

Momentarily stunned, Sin faltered and Kassian rolled backwards, flipping to a low crouch and staring at Sin as his breath came heavy and fast. Kassian's entire face throbbed with pain and he could feel it already beginning to swell up.

"Back off, Vega," he panted harshly.

Instead of replying verbally, Sin lunged forward again, his eyes narrowed dangerously and teeth grit as he swung unrelenting strikes at Kassian with the speed of a cobra. Kassian twisted out of the way, nearly tripping over the broken wood of the coffee table, and choked abruptly as Sin jabbed his throat without remorse.

Kassian stumbled backwards and Sin immediately assaulted him again, wrapping his disturbingly strong fingers around Kassian's chin and jaw before lifting him off the floor and instantly throwing him back down.

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Kassian's head slammed against the floor and he gasped slightly, seeing stars but still managing to raise one long leg and slam his booted foot viciously into Sin's stomach just as Sin had begun to advance on him again.

Sin's eyebrows drew down in annoyance, the only visible indication that he'd felt pain, and he moved to grab Kassian again but Kassian stumbled to his feet and took a step backward, once again dropping into a defensive stance as he faced off with Sin.

"You're being a fucking moron," Kassian shouted in aggravation.

"I thought I was a fucking idiot," Sin growled back, circling Kassian like a hawk waiting for the kill.

Sin's lips were drawn back over his teeth and his eyes were narrowed dangerously but Kassian didn't seriously think Sin wanted to kill him so much as beat the shit out of him. If Sin wanted him dead, he would have killed him by now, although it was good to see that Sin only seemed completely superhuman in the midst of a psychotic, adrenaline-crazed episode.

Despite the fact that he was in pain, bloody and swollen, Kassian couldn't help feeling a little proud that he was holding his own.

Sin slid to the side so quickly that Kassian barely even realized that the other man had moved and just as he turned his head to track Sin, a fist slammed into Kassian's kidney.

Kassian shouted in pain, his eyes widening as he crumbled forward and hit the floor. He curled up as his eyes teared, pain radiating through his entire body as he clenched his teeth together. Spots of color danced before his eyes as he panted harshly and tried to scramble to his feet.

Sin stood over him, eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't move to attack again. He just stared down at Kassian as though he were scrutinizing a bug under a microscope, trying to decide if he wanted to torture it more or just kill it right away, and some of Kassian's assurance that Sin wasn't planning to actually finish him off slipped away.

Kassian reached up and pressed his palm against the wall, pulling himself up as he turned and faced Sin again. "You want to kill me, Vega?" he hissed, his voice hoarse with pain, his lips parted as bursts of air continued to escape as he struggled to recover from the brutal blow.

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"Yes," Sin replied without hesitation. His hand shifted slightly and Kassian had his gun whipped out before he could even properly translate Sin's motion. He didn't know whether or not Sin was actually drawing his weapon but upon seeing Kassian's, Sin jerked his gun out as well.

Kassian realized belatedly that it had been stupid to elevate the fight to the next level but the pain emanating from his lower back made his thought process not as sharp or logical as it could have been.

"You're going to shoot me, Trovosky?" Sin asked in that same low tone, his voice thick with loathing and quiet fury. "Go ahead and do it, then. I could fucking care less."

Frustration seeped through Kassian, overshadowing the anger, and he stood up straighter although he was still leaning against the wall and he didn't lower his gun. "I don't want to shoot you, idiot," he yelled angrily. "I don't want to fucking fight with you at all! You're so fucking worked up and angry about something that doesn't even matter. Boyd isn't choosing me over you-- I'm not some fucking replacement."

"Yeah." Sin smirked humorlessly, the expression disturbing and almost frightening as his eyes glinted. "I'm sure."

"I'm not!" Kassian glared at Sin, shaking his head as he narrowed his eyes at the younger man. "Boyd fucking me--"

"Shut your fucking mouth about Boyd!" Sin shouted so loudly and abruptly that Kassian stopped short, watching Sin silently for a moment.

Some of the tough guy facade, the sarcastic act, had cracked and Kassian could see real pain in Sin's eyes. Sin was shaking with anger, his fingers white-knuckled as they gripped the gun that was pointed at Kassian's head, but Sin's mouth had trembled slightly even though he tried to hide it and he shook his head stiffly as he tried to cover his expression.

He looked a cross between homicidal and brokenhearted.

"Sin, just listen to me," Kassian went on stubbornly, finally catching his breath despite the fact that his body still ached with intense pain. "Boyd fucking me--" He threw his gun on the floor at Sin's feet. "Is just as inconsequential to him as fucking Ann probably was to you. I'm just a distraction, man."

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Sin's lips pressed together in a tight line but there was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes that was apparent enough for Kassian to see immediately.

"Don't fucking judge him for shit you did yourself. Maybe if you got your act together and stopped being such an angry little bitch all the time--"

Sin's eyes narrowed.

"--and figured out the real problems you two have, he'd consider getting back with you. Until you make an actual fucking effort instead of all of this silent treatment sadface crap, don't complain that he's fucking someone else."

Kassian stared at Sin challengingly, unafraid and unremorseful for his harsh words. There was no point sugarcoating it. Being upfront was the only option with someone like Sin.

"And if you still want to shoot me, go ahead and do it."

Sin stared at him evenly, some of the outright hate disappearing even as he said, "Go fuck yourself, Trovosky."

Kassian didn't even see the gun coming before the butt of it slammed into his face. He barely remembered hitting the floor before everything went black.

He didn't know how many hours had passed since their fight but it seemed like a lifetime later that freezing cold water splashed against his face.

Kassian jerked up with a gasp, eyes opening wide as he looked around the darkened cabin before he squinted up to see Sin standing over him with an empty glass in one hand. "Wha--"

"Naptime's over, sweetheart," Sin drawled blandly. He stared down at Kassian evenly for a moment before turning away and walking back to the desk with the laptops. He sat down in the hard-wood chair and looked at the screen blankly.

"You're such a jackass," Kassian muttered, looking at his watch blearily and noting that it was well past ten thirty at night. He'd apparently been unconscious for nearly five hours, although he wasn't entirely sure if he'd actually been legitimately knocked out the whole time or if his body had just finally forced him to fall into a deep sleep after the initial bout of unconsciousness.

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"So I've been told," Sin replied with disinterest, his voice flat and empty, none of his previous anger making its way into his tone.

Kassian stared at Sin for a moment, ignoring the aching of his body as he pulled himself up from where he'd been sprawled on the rug. Sin was so calm and collected that if it weren't for the bruise on his face, Kassian would have thought that the entire fight had been a dream and the pain he was feeling had actually resulted from something else entirely.

"You know, what if you'd killed me?" Kassian asked after a moment, walking to the corner of the room to flick on a lamp. His body ached with every movement but Kassian ignored it, feeling slightly grateful that at least the pain from his kidney wasn't as devastating as it'd been before. If Sin had hit him as hard as Kassian knew Sin was capable of, the organ would have ruptured and Kassian had no doubts that he would have died.

"Then you'd be dead." Sin crossed his arms over his chest and sat back in the chair, eyes flicking between monitors as the light illuminated the angry bruise that spilled from the bridge of his nose to his left eye. "And I'd have to listen to Boyd's bitching about how I ruined his little mission."

As absurd as it was considering the fight they'd just had, Kassian couldn't help a startled laugh at the comment. Sin glanced up at him briefly before returning his gaze to the live feed.

Kassian turned away and made his way to the kitchen area, pressing a hand against his side although he didn't wince or show any other visible sign of pain. He caught sight of his reflection in one of the windows and made a face at the angry black coloration on his forehead, the purple bruises that stained half his features.

He shook his head and grabbed the bottle of aspirin he'd purchased earlier and swallowed a few of them dry. His head was throbbing and Kassian cursed himself silently as he poured himself a cup of coffee, realizing that his shift started in under an hour. Starting a fight with Sin had been one of the stupidest ideas he'd had in a long time.

Kassian leaned against the counter and nursed the cup of coffee, closing his eyes and trying to get himself together. Despite the fact that he was sore, he actually felt better rested. He no longer felt the near-delirium that came with sleep deprivation, when

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everything seemed to be moving a little faster than he was, when his eyes couldn't quite focus and his hands seemed to tremble of their own accord.

He didn't know how Sin did it, how he could go so long without food or sleep and still look so composed, so unaffected. It was a testament to how well-trained Sin actually was and Kassian couldn't deny that he felt envy regarding that fact. He couldn't deny that a part of him was jealous of Sin's power and speed, his resilience and strength of mind. Despite the fact that Sin had an extraordinary amount of mental problems and a phenomenally bad temper, his only vice seemed to be cigarettes while Kassian did his best to drown his minimal sorrows in alcohol every chance he got.

Kassian glanced over at Sin again, watching him idly as he finished the coffee and poured another cup.

It was ridiculous that he was mentally complimenting Sin after they'd just kicked the shit out of each other but Kassian found that he couldn't really be angry with Sin about it. If he were Sin, he probably would have reacted the same way. Having the love of his life's new sex life thrown in his face couldn't be easy.

"ETA five," Boyd's voice said in Kassian's ear abruptly.

Kassian grimaced as the sound made his head throb violently and he couldn't help wishing that the mission would end quickly so that he could go home and down a few drinks until the pain had dulled.

The door opened a few minutes later and Boyd stepped in, already unzipping his heavy jacket as his breath puffed out in a cloud. His pale skin was flushed with the cool temperature and his golden blond hair was mostly pulled back in a ponytail, although some of it fell forward to partially shade his face.

He shut the door behind him and stopped short once he saw the broken coffee table.

His gaze moved evenly between Kassian and Sin, taking in the bruises and somewhat ginger way Kassian was still holding himself, and although Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly, he didn't immediately comment. Instead, he pulled off his coat and tossed it on a chair before heading to the kitchen. His gaze did flicker briefly, questioningly, toward Kassian as he passed him, but Boyd didn't address the topic.

"Nothing unusual again," Boyd said calmly, as if he hadn't walked into the obvious aftereffects of a fight. He reached for a glass in the cupboard and poured himself some

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water before turning around so he could see the other two. "If the next shift yields the same, two of us should go inside tomorrow night. The quietest time so far seems to be around ten to eleven, which should give us plenty of time to explore. I didn't see anyone stay for overtime today."

Kassian nodded, grateful that Boyd hadn't started questioning them. The last thing he felt like dealing with was having to explain why exactly the fight had even started. He couldn't even decide when would be a good time to tell Boyd that Sin had overheard their brief tryst.

"Did the guards in the eastern wing strengthen when the last of the civilians departed?" Kassian asked, leaning against the counter. "That seemed to be what occurred last night."

"Yes, so it seems like a good candidate for further investigation." Boyd leaned against the island separating the kitchen from the main room, his eyes narrowed slightly in thought. "The only thing of note was an older black Volvo came by just after nine with four people inside but when it left there were only three. I didn't get a good look at them since the car went out of my sight but the passenger could have gone into the far entrance of the eastern wing."

Kassian rubbed the side of his head, forcing himself to ignore the throbbing pain as he tried to concentrate. "I'll keep an eye out for the visitor so I'll lurk in the east again. Just in case, I suggest both of you monitor the feed and focus on other locations. There's no point putting all of our eggs in one basket just yet."

He pushed himself away from the counter and set the coffee cup down, grabbing a few protein bars as he got ready to head out.

Boyd nodded in agreement. "Especially since the activity in the eastern wing could be a fluke or a decoy. I'm interested in the complete lack of activity in the south; I'm going to monitor that tonight as well."

"Good idea."

Kassian grabbed his jacket and a bottle of water and headed for the door. He glanced at Sin briefly and was unsurprised to see that Sin gave the appearance of not paying attention to the conversation at all.

"I'll check in soon," Kassian told no one in particular and left the cabin.

Part III

Kassian stood at the counter in the kitchen, prying open a can of chicken noodle soup with a knife. Despite the fact that the cabin had come equipped with an electric stove and a microwave, they were lacking a can opener.

Sunlight brightened the interior of the cabin slightly, the rays stronger in the early morning than any other time. It was something he usually appreciated but his face and head still throbbed from the previous day's fight and the brightness just annoyed him. His overnight shift had been anything but enjoyable with his new injuries but Kassian supposed that it could have been worse; he could have been pissing blood and dealing with severe kidney damage instead of just bruises.

"So you and Sin are going in tonight, then?" he asked Boyd randomly, grabbing a plastic spoon and eating the soup directly out of the can.

The previous night's surveillance had once again proved to be inconclusive from the outside.

The mysterious visitor who'd arrived during Boyd's shift had left in the middle of Kassian's, being picked up in the same dark car that had dropped him off. They'd captured a satellite image of the man but it was too indistinct to make out his features entirely, although from the facial structure, height and build they'd determined it was very possible that it'd been Joshi.

Even so, they weren't positive if his arrival that night had been an anomaly or a pattern and since they needed to take down the lab before any material could be recovered or stored by Sector 13, they hadn't made the grab then. Decimating all traces of the material and gaining samples were more important than snatching Joshi so a move then would have likely just alerted 13 to their arrival.

Kassian was frustrated with the lack of Intel and the fact that they couldn't just go in and take the entire structure down tonight but the last thing they needed was to have a bunch civilians caught in the crossfire and the Canadian government to somehow link the bombing back to America and proclaim it a terrorist attack. They had to be very careful to avoid such a situation and while Kassian had no problems being cautious, he was impatient with the idea of spending three more days in the cabin with Sin.

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The plan was for Boyd and Sin to go in that night, split up and investigate the southern and eastern areas of the plant. They would regroup, surveil for one more day to ensure minimal civilian presence during the chosen hours and then make their strike the following day. Kassian just hoped there would be no snags; the mission was fairly simple but the heavy civilian presence bothered him.

He knew civilians could be caught in the crossfire and in the case of a mission where the end-result could be taking such a dangerous explosive off the street, Kassian could force himself to accept that, but it still was something that he'd do anything to avoid if possible. The fact that they were in a small blue collar town somehow bothered him even more; it was not unlike the town he'd grown up in and even if they avoided killing innocents, they would still be taking away the population's major source of employment. To ensure maximum containment of data and materials, they would have to destroy the entire plant, leaving no wing left standing.

Boyd nodded absently, at first continuing to watch the screens, eyebrows drawn down slightly as he zoomed the view in on a particular area. But after a moment of scrutiny, he relaxed and zoomed out to the main view again, apparently determining that whatever he'd seen wasn't suspicious after all.

He turned in the chair to look at Kassian more fully and, as he had been happening on and off that morning, his gaze flicked between the bruises that had become more prominent on Kassian's face overnight, and over to the coffee table that still lay broken and untouched to the side of the room.

Maybe he decided that now was as good a time as any to ask, or maybe the mention of Sin's name reminded him. Regardless, Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly, mouth drawing down a little, and curiosity finally seemed to overcome him. "What the hell happened, anyway?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Kassian asked with a shrug, pulling himself up to sit on the counter.

Boyd rolled his eyes. "The fight is, the reason isn't. I've never seen you two actually go after each other before and you didn't attack each other the first shift."

Kassian stirred his room-temperature soup and debated whether or not he really wanted to go into it. Even though the fight had been about Boyd, he didn't know if there was necessarily a benefit to Boyd knowing that and Kassian wondered if Sin would even want Boyd to know all the details. From what he could tell upon returning from the

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overnight shift, Sin's aggression hadn't turned on Boyd at all and Sin obviously hadn't talked about what had happened.

Kassian drank the cool broth and set the can down beside him. On the other hand, keeping Boyd in the dark wasn't necessarily fair either. "Is your comm transmitting?"

"What?" Boyd gave Kassian an odd look but automatically checked anyway. "No, why?"

"Well, mine was yesterday." Kassian shook his head and scowled. "I was so fucking burned out. I must have forgotten to turn it off or thought I did-- I don't know what but it was definitely on the entire time Sin was on his shift."

Boyd stared at Kassian and his eyes widened, face paling as realization dawned on him. "Oh, fuck," he said intently. His hand automatically checked his comm unit again even though he'd just verified it was off, and he looked at once horrified, embarrassed and guilty.

Boyd automatically looked toward the broken coffee table again, which also put the couch in view as a reminder of where they'd been fooling around the day before. "Shit," he hissed. His eyes narrowed and he seemed angry with himself judging by his stiff posture. "I can't believe--" He cut himself off. "I should have made sure they were off. No, I shouldn't have even let that happen..."

"It's not your fault," Kassian asked, picking up his can of soup again. He spooned some of the thick noodles and slurped them off the plastic spoon. "It's totally my fuck up, kid. I'm the one that's sorry. I never should have started all that in the first place."

Boyd shook his head and still looking troubled. His gaze was distant as he frowned.

"It's not like he blamed you, Boyd. He knows it was me."

"I know, but we still both fucked up by even doing all of that," Boyd said heavily, leaning back in the chair and kicking his feet out in front of him. Guilt still stained his expression, the tension strong in his shoulders, and he pushed hair out of his eyes with an unhappy sigh. He looked over at Kassian after a moment. "It's not like all of this was your fault."

"Actually it was," Kassian admitted with a shrug, finishing the last of the soup and squinting across the small kitchen at the other cans. His eyes definitely weren't as good as they used to be. Perhaps it was time to take the Agency up on their offer of laser eye surgery.

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Boyd drew his eyebrows down further. "How?"

Kassian slid off the counter and looked at Boyd more seriously, not really comfortable with his bare bones explanation of the fight and the way it'd pretty much implied that Sin had suddenly attacked him out of jealousy. "Because he wasn't talking to me or arguing with me-- he didn't get pissed off until I started bugging him and trying to get him to talk things out with me. Even at the point when he actually hit me it was because I said something to make him angry."

Boyd watched Kassian, studying his expression. "What did you say?"

"I was trying to apologize and he didn't want to hear it and we started saying insulting things back and forth." Kassian grabbed a can of chicken and rice soup and twirled it between both hands before glancing back over to Boyd. "In the end I said I wasn't sorry for fucking around with you and that's what started the fight. It wasn't the best thing to say."

Boyd watched Kassian for a long moment before he shook his head to himself and tilted his head down. His eyes were narrowed and he seemed to be thinking about something seriously. He was silent until he finally sighed, looking at Kassian through a curtain of golden blond hair.

"I guess it's just good you're both okay," he said at length.

Kassian just shrugged. "It is what it is."

Boyd looked at Kassian thoughtfully. "Even so, I won't do that with you again on a mission. I don't want anything even remotely like that to happen again. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt him."

Kassian shrugged in agreement but he continued to look at Boyd in consideration. "You know, if you don't want to hurt Sin, we can just stop fooling around in general. We'd still be friends regardless, it won't change anything."

"I know." Boyd considered Kassian then looked away, expression contemplative. "If I thought it was jeopardizing my chance to become friends with Sin again, I would in a heartbeat. But he already told me the fact I fucked you at all is what bothers him so the damage is already done. I don't think stopping now would mean anything to him,

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especially since he's spent time with me since and hasn't been angry since he first found out."

He met Kassian's eyes, his eyebrows dragging down thoughtfully. "So stopping wouldn't change anything at all between Sin and me-- the only thing it would do is take away one of the few outlets I have. And as much as I want to be friends with Sin, I don't want to compromise my own happiness to get there any more than I want him to do that for me, or we'll be right back where we started."

Kassian nodded in agreement. It was true; Sin had appeared to generally accept the fact even if he was obviously not thrilled about it. Even now after their fist-fight, Sin was behaving in his typical way and didn't seem excessively outraged anymore. "Just be sure about it. I don't want to become some source of stress for you. I mean I don't want us to stop messing around but I don't want to complicate other aspects of your life, either."

"I'm sure right now." Boyd's gaze almost absently moved toward the laptops, tracking movement across the screens. "If circumstances change, I might change my mind."

Boyd zoomed in on a section of the screen, scrutinized it for several long seconds, then double-clicked the mouse to return the screen to its original overview. He watched the aerial view for another few moments before he pushed the chair away from the table and stood with a long stretch, then padded into the kitchen on socked feet.

He quirked an eyebrow at the cold soup Kassian was eating and bypassed him to head toward the protein bars. The wrapper made quiet crinkling noises as he opened one, walking back to the island where he leaned against the edge of the counter and watched Kassian idly.

"I think I'm going to take a shower," Boyd said absently, as if he were thinking aloud.

"Go for it. There isn't much going on this time of day anyway. Eighty percent of this mission is just pointless downtime."

Boyd nodded, finished the protein bar, and crinkled the wrapper in one hand. He pushed himself away from the counter and tossed the wrapper into the garbage as he headed toward the bathroom. "Well if anything changes, you know where I'll be."

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"Well I won't be coming to search for you," Kassian replied, matter-of-fact, although he couldn't help an amused grin from crossing his face. "Who knows what calamities may occur if Sin happened upon me appearing to accost you in the shower."

Boyd just shook his head to himself as he disappeared into the bathroom.

The rest of the morning and evening shifts were spent doing heavy surveillance and going over the blueprints of the plant. As the time grew closer to infiltration, Kassian began to get more serious despite the fact that he continuously tried to tell himself not to default into Senior Agent mode since technically they were all senior agents and he wasn't even a real part of the team yet. But it was something so ingrained in him that Kassian couldn't help it.

He made notes on the blueprints of areas that would serve well as a lab in the eastern and southern wings and together with Boyd created a route that Sin and Boyd would take later that night. When Boyd went on the middle shift and Sin returned, Kassian kept his eyes on the blueprints and began analyzing the structure of the building as he figured out the best locations for the charges that would decimate it.

The only time he and Sin exchanged words was when the time for the recon-infiltration loomed and Sin set out into the darkness to meet Boyd.

The next hour was spent diligently monitoring the live-feed as Kassian relayed the positions of the guards outside the plant to Sin and Boyd as they snuck inside. The black Volvo made its reappearance and Kassian instantly began downloading captured screens of the man who exited, zooming in and getting him from all angles before he disappeared into the heavily guarded area.

Kassian was positive that it was Joshi and relayed the message to Sin and Boyd, advising them to be on their guards as there would now be movement in one or both of their areas.

The recon didn't take more than forty-five minutes and it was only over an hour later that Sin returned with Boyd only a few moments after him.

"Something was happening on the third floor," Boyd said as soon as they'd gathered around the blueprints. He pulled his coat off and tossed it over a nearby, unused chair; his long-sleeved, plain black shirt shifted with the movement, briefly revealing a slice of pale skin above his waistband.

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He absently straightened his shirt and leaned forward, eyes narrowed slightly as he studied the blueprints. His hair fell forward, partially hiding his serious expression. One hand was held in front of him, trailing the lines until he stopped on a small room tucked away in the southeast corner of the third floor. "Here."

"That's too small to be a lab," Kassian noted, looking at the paper thoughtfully.

Boyd nodded and stood up straighter, arms crossing and eyes still narrowed as he stared at the blueprints in contemplation. "I didn't get the feeling it was necessarily related, but something seemed odd. It was dead quiet in most of the building but I could hear voices in there. Maybe even someone crying, I couldn't tell." He looked up at Kassian and Sin. "I couldn't investigate further without being discovered, though."

Kassian's eyebrows drew together. "That's strange. It could be anything. It could be internal arguing within 13. It could have even been the television."

The sound of crunching interrupted his thoughts and Kassian looked over to see Sin sitting across the cabin in a dark corner, eating the first food Kassian had seen him consume in three days: the chocolate chip cookies.

"Anyway... Do you think we should investigate further or let it go?" Kassian looked at Boyd again, trying to give him the respect of a team leader even though it was difficult not to just state his own opinion first.

"Depends." Boyd met Kassian's eyes for a moment before he looked over at Sin thoughtfully. "Did you see anything of import?"

Sin shrugged, looking as uninterested as ever. "There was a likely location for the lab. A reinforced corridor that leads to the sublevel. Heavily guarded; twelve hostiles in the general area."

Boyd watched Sin steadily for a moment, seeming to consider the information before he returned his gaze to the blueprints. He studied the different sheets, leaning forward with his hands on the edge of the table, and asked Sin without looking over, "Can you show us on the blueprints?"

Instead of getting up, Sin began describing the area and Kassian's eyes automatically went to the northeast section of the diagram. The location in question was on the ground floor but was sectioned off from the rest of the plant by a set of reinforced doors and a long corridor.

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"The doors are locked and from what I can see, not even all the guards know the key code," Sin told them, eyes focused on them although his face was generally expressionless. "If you look at the blueprint, you will see that the corridor leads to an elevator and two sets of stairs, which both lead to an underground floor."

Boyd nodded thoughtfully, eyes slightly narrowed as he studied the blueprints. After a moment of comparing the section Sin had found to the other ground floor and sub-level areas, he nodded and gave Sin a satisfied look. "Excellent; I think you're right."

Boyd's gaze shifted to Kassian again. "I don't think the room I found warrants further investigation unless we run across new information that leads us in that direction. For now, we'd be better off focusing on the area Sin found and planning the storm accordingly."

Kassian nodded approvingly; he'd formed the same conclusion. There was no point over-extending themselves and including something outside the mission profile when their target was within view, especially when they were spread thin as it was. They would have to plant the charges, retrieve samples and attempt to capture or kill Joshi all within a very tight time frame and before Sector 13 had the chance to escape. Going out to explore other locations that were likely to be unrelated to their directive would have been a poor plan in the bigger picture.

He was pleased to see that Boyd was doing a good job as team leader, even with the tension between the three of them and the personal issues flying around the room. Despite the fact that he'd been with Boyd throughout training, this was the only time Kassian had seen Boyd on a real mission other than the Mexico debacle. That mission had all but convinced him that Boyd could never be rational and level headed in times of emotional stress and that he was too immature to handle certain aspects of what they had to do; Kassian was relieved that this mission proved otherwise.

"I think we should make it a point to take Joshi alive," Kassian said, looking at Boyd and then at Sin. "Even with samples, the Agency scientists will take some time to understand the components that Joshi created. Having him alive will make the process easier since he's the one with the knowledge."

It would also make the mission even more of a success and make Boyd look even more commendable, Kassian mentally added. He couldn't help rooting for his friend, especially considering how cynical Boyd was over the promotion.

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"I agree," Boyd said with a nod, still studying the blueprints before he looked to the side in slight distraction and tilted one of the laptops toward him. He pulled up the images of Joshi that Kassian had downloaded and looked at them a moment before he straightened. "Joshi entered the eastern side." He looked over at Sin again. "Did you see him at all in your search?"

"No. I imagine he was in the lab and I couldn't enter without detection." Sin chewed one of the cookies slowly, watching Boyd before he spoke again. "Unless you brought a descrambler, we'll likely need to use a foam explosive to get through the door."

"I have one but we should bring the explosives anyway," Boyd said with a contemplative look. "I don't know what their defenses are or how long the decryption would take."

Kassian considered the situation thoughtfully. "In my experience we would need a several minute window in order for the decryption to work but that all depends on the sophistication of their locks. The foam also needs a couple of minutes to set in but it would be half the time of a highly protected key code. It depends on the route you're willing to go-- trying to take out the guards on the down low and slip into the lab to take them by surprise or make a big commotion with the foam and risk them damaging or destroying information and material before we make it down there. Even then, in either scenario there's the chance that one of the guards will alert Joshi and his men before you get through the door."

"Ideally, staying covert is better precisely for that reason, but it depends on how much time we have." Boyd's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward again, running his hand along the blueprints as he spoke. "According to this, that's the only entrance and since they chose an underground location we don't need to worry about windows. So even if they did destroy any material, at least we have three people and as long as we can capture Joshi in that scenario it would work out as best it could."

Boyd frowned to himself and straightened, crossing his arms and looking between Kassian and Sin. "I think it should happen like this-- Sin, you watch the lab while Kassian and I set explosives around the building; that way Joshi won't escape while we're busy. We'll all meet up at the lab for infiltration. We'll have to determine which way we enter but in the event of a fight, one of us will collect the samples while the other two provide cover and try to take out as many enemies as possible. Whoever sees Joshi first captures him. I'm probably the poorest shot between the three of us so I can collect the samples, but I've never worked with you before, Kassian. In that scenario, where do you think you'd work best?"

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"Me and Sin can cover you," Kassian replied agreeably, seeing nothing wrong with Boyd's plan.

Kassian glanced at Sin, trying to keep his expression as neutral as it'd been when he looked at Boyd. "What about you, Vega?"

Sin barely looked at him. "My lack of care is phenomenal."

Oddly enough it seemed that Sin seemed to be in a better frame of mind since their fight. He'd gone from cold angry silence to his typical sarcastic behavior. Kassian found it odd in a way but then again, he wasn't really holding too much of a grudge over the fight either and he was glad that at least they'd gotten some of the issues out in the open.

"We'll have to go over the finer details of the plan and develop contingency plans but if no one has any objections then I'm going to recommend we go with that, then." Once again, Boyd looked between the two of them.

"Fine with me, kid," Kassian replied, looking away from Sin.

Boyd nodded and judging by the way he returned his satisfied gaze to the blueprints, he must have taken Sin's lack of reaction as assent.

"No-- Please!"

The girl's screams echoed through the courtyard like something spectral in the freezing night air. The sound was high-pitched and nearly frightening in its desperation but the men who surrounded the girl only laughed at her helplessness, at the frantic way she scrambled to get away.

Darkness surrounded them with only dim light shining outward from the open double doors that led back into the barn. The wooden steps creaked as his heavy black boots took them one at a time, moving slowly, not wanting to get any closer.

"Kostya!" One of the men looked over his shoulder, tattoos of tears darkening his pale cheeks. "You're next!"

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Kassian jerked upright with a gasp, panting wildly as he stared into space for a long moment, his fingers digging into the rough fabric of the couch. For a moment all he could see was Polyva's pale face, the way her thin body jerked each time another man entered her, the way her eyes rolled in her head as she screamed in pain.

He jumped off the couch, disoriented and not entirely out of the nightmare yet as he crossed the small cabin without really seeing and fumbled with his jacket. The small bottle of whiskey was still tucked inside and he began impatiently untwisting the cap.

Cold sweat slid down the sides of his face and down into his shirt and Kassian cursed himself for ever allowing himself to fall asleep. He'd rationalized it as getting rest before the storm-- being one hundred percent on the mission without letting something stupid like sleep deprivation deter his skills. He'd never expected to have that nightmare again, now of all times on a mission.

Kassian leaned against the wall and shut his eyes, removing the cap and bringing the bottle up to his lips.

"That's probably not a good idea, Trovosky."

Kassian's clear blue eyes snapped open and his gaze jerked over to where Sin sat near the desk. He was watching Kassian with a slightly intrigued expression although it didn't appear mocking.

Kassian's eyebrows drew together and embarrassment filled him, pushing the last remnants of the nightmare out of his mind slowly even though Polyva's screams still rang in his ears.

"Mind your business, Vega," he returned gruffly.

Sin raised both dark eyebrows and his pale green eyes briefly dropped to the bottle of whiskey that Kassian was still clutching although it remained unsipped. Kassian had a strong urge to chuck the bottle across the room and into the darkness of the kitchen area but that would only make the situation more humiliating.

Sin had already seen it and he'd likely seen Kassian squirming in his sleep from the nightmare; he was going to put two and two together.

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"You getting drunk and getting Boyd killed is my business," Sin replied in the same bland tone. "I expected more from Perfect Agent Trovosky."

"Well I never fucking said I was perfect," Kassian snarled at Sin, blue eyes narrowed. "That's what you say-- that's what the rest of them say. Believe me-- I know it's anything but true and it just pisses me off that every fucking person expects me to be."

Sin scoffed quietly in the back of his throat, almond shaped eyes never ceasing their close examination of Kassian. "I don't give enough of a damn about you to expect anything."

"So then stop saying it!" Kassian snapped, hunching forward and dropping his face into his hand. He set the bottle of Jack Daniels down onto the floor with the other, ignoring the fact that his body was practically aching with the need to ingest the liquor. "I don't call you the Monster and all of that other shit they say about you, I don't even like to call you Sin-- at least have enough decency to not mock me in return."

"Who said I was mocking you?" Sin asked calmly, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back in the chair.

"Oh, please," Kassian scoffed. "Every time you open your mouth you mock me. Even when I try to get along with you, you mock me. And this is before Boyd even came to the Agency so don't use him as a cop out."

"I don't need a cop out. I just don't like you and I never have."

"*Why?*" Kassian demanded, looking up at Sin again, eyes narrowed into slits. He was raw and emotional from the nightmare-- the memory, whatever it was-- and it was making it impossible to rein in his annoyance and impatience. It was making it impossible not to have natural reactions when in other times he'd have enough control to let not them out. "What did I ever do to you?"

Sin raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Besides this thing with Boyd," Kassian added impatiently, glaring at Sin.

"I find it amazing that you fail to own up to the fact that your 'thing' with Boyd is a slight against me. The fact that you try to make me appear irrational by being angry just makes you seem like more of an idiot."

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"I never said you were irrational. I just said--"

"You said what? That you don't understand why I dislike you?" Sin continued to stare at Kassian with the same unimpressed look, his full lips pursed slightly and one eyebrow slightly arched.

"Well, let me break it down for you, Senior Agent Trovosky. I don't like you because you think you're better than me. Because you talk down to me and you always have. You assume the worst of me just like everyone else does but yet you try to act like you're different. It's just like when you showed up in front of Annabelle's office calling me unprofessional, proclaiming that I was ruining your sad little life because I was too irresponsible and hopeless to show up for training."

Sin looked down his nose at Kassian, a cold smirk on his lips. "It never once occurred to you that something else may have happened. It never even occurred to you to ask. If there's one thing I despise, it's when people assume things about me and you've done it from day one."

Kassian frowned and his mind went back to the day in question but before he could even sum up the memory, Sin was going on.

"I don't like you because you cry and whine about how hard it is for you to continue to appear perfect when you could very easily stop trying so hard to live up to perfection. You do it because you like the fact that everyone looks up to you and I think you like the fact that you're considered better than me even though I am more skilled than you in every possible way."

"That's not true," Kassian denied, although he frowned slightly.

Sin just scoffed again and continued, "I don't like you because you think I should like you. I don't like you because you're so up in arms about the fact that I can't stand you when you don't even care too much for me yourself-- but even then, it just bugs you so much that there's one person in the world who thinks you're a phony."

Kassian opened his mouth to retort but Sin continued his calm assessment of Kassian's character and personality.

"I don't like you because you're fucking Boyd and you still act so mystified by the fact that I want to beat the shit out of you. You act like you can't possibly understand my motivation when in reality you knew all along how I would react probably before you

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even fucked him. The fact that you try to appear like the good agent, the bigger person by attempting to badger me into conversation after you gave me even more reason to despise you is laughable and the fact that you have Boyd so convinced that you're a good guy with perfectly innocent motives is pathetic to me."

This time Kassian dropped his eyes, some of the indignation dying slightly at words he couldn't fully deny.

"And most of all I don't like you because you act so exasperated by all of this. You act like you're caught up in some unprofessional drama when you're the one who put yourself in the middle of it. Apparently Boyd went whining to you about all of his issues during his idiotic training so you knew exactly what was going on even then. And even knowing it was me involved, you threw yourself into the mix and now you're rolling your eyes and talking down to me and acting like I'm the one with the problem because I treat you like the fucking asshole that you are."

This time Kassian didn't even attempt to reply and Sin continued to stare at him with that same cool gaze.

"Did I leave anything out?" Sin asked with a humorless smirk. "If you're still confused, I can go on."

Kassian's eyes focused on the bottle that sat beside him and he really had to fight the urge to drink it. It was hard to deny some of the things that Sin had said, especially when Kassian was feeling vulnerable and all of his defenses were buckling under the weight of a memory he wished he could forget.

How could he deny that a part of him did like having respect? That he did get a slight kick out of it whenever a lower-ranked agent looked at him with a polite smile before turning to Sin with scorn in their eyes. It hadn't started out that way but as the years went by and Kassian's resentment of Sin came into play, he couldn't deny that he'd felt vindicated by the fact that at least he got the respect even though Sin got the accolades of a place on Carhart's elite unit while Kassian got a two-year stint in Siberia.

And how could he deny that he'd gone into the situation with Boyd with both eyes open and hadn't even briefly hesitated about doing so? Even though Kassian always went out of his way to avoid scandal and drama at the Agency and in his private life, he'd barely given a second thought to pursuing Boyd even though Boyd had been a trainee on top of everything else.

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There was no denying that he was legitimately sexually attracted to Boyd but Kassian had enough self-control to know that if he'd really wanted to, he could have suppressed those desires. Emma had caught his eye long before Boyd had, yet Kassian had never even considered hitting on the woman-- he'd known better.

So why Boyd?

What had made him risk his reputation, his relationship with General Carhart and Doug and his peace of mind regarding the fact that very few people knew about his sexuality? He'd known Sin would be angry-- it was a miracle that Sin wasn't taking his revenge by broadcasting Kassian's sexual orientation around the compound. Kassian wouldn't have been surprised if he had-- the fact that he'd risked that to fuck Boyd for the sheer fun of it was mystifying and Kassian once again wondered what possessed him to have started this all without even the slightest doubt as to whether he should.

Sin seemed to think there was more to it than simply wanting casual sex and Kassian was starting to wonder if he wasn't right.

Kassian genuinely cared for Boyd as a friend and he'd enjoyed spending time with Boyd long before sexual attraction had even come into the picture but was it possible that he'd allowed himself to act on that attraction despite everything because of Boyd's connection to Sin?

Had Boyd's attachment to Sin added an extra incentive even if Kassian hadn't been consciously aware of it? Had it made it more exciting, more intriguing-- had a part of him wanted to see how Sin would react? Or had it even been exactly what Sin was implying-- that he'd wanted something to hold over Sin? Had the fuck up with the comm been a legitimate accident, or had it been some unconscious desire to get at Sin?

Kassian didn't think he was capable of being that calculating but at the moment when his mind was whirling and his desire to drink was at its strongest, he was willing to accept any negative assessment of himself.

"So then why are you even being remotely civilized to me now?" Kassian asked quietly, not meeting Sin's unrelenting stare. "I agree that I gave you even more reasons to hate me so I don't understand what's changed."

Sin's eyes dropped back to the laptop and some of the confidence left his expression as he lifted one shoulder slightly. "You had a point before about Ann and I appreciated the fact that you put enough thought into the situation to even be thinking of it. Even though

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I still don't believe that you went after Boyd just to get a few sexual kicks, it made me think that you weren't being as malicious as I'd previously thought."

"I see."

"I still think you're a fucking asshole, though."

Kassian's gaze rose from the floor and he sat up straight, leaning against the wall to look at Sin wearily. "I don't get you, Vega. I don't understand you or why you do the things you do. I just can't fucking win when it comes to you."

"And I don't understand why you would even want to," Sin replied flatly.

"Because you're right," Kassian admitted finally, hands curling into fists as his eyebrows drew together. "It does bug me that you hate me, especially because I never understood why. And a part of me can't stand you because of your behavior but another part of me wishes that you'd stop being such a hardass to me all the time because Boyd made a good point one day about us having a lot in common. If we got past all the bullshit, I bet we could even get along."

"And once again, I don't understand why you would even want to."

Kassian tilted his head back against the wall and closed his eyes again with a long, drawn out sigh. "Why do I need a reason to want to get along?"

"Because I don't trust you," Sin said bluntly, glancing up at him again. "And you've never given any indication of wanting to get along with me before you decided to play hide the dick with Boyd."

Kassian's mouth twitched slightly and once again he found himself wanting to laugh at one of the hideous things that Sin said. Some of the tension released from his shoulders and he slowly found himself regaining control even if he wasn't entirely sure why Sin's ridiculous comment helped.

"Maybe because all of Boyd's talking about you made me realize that there was more to you than the jackass who always has some stupid smartass remark to make." Kassian shook his head slightly. "For that kid to have been so in love with you, there *has* to be more to you than that and I think it sucks that you don't show anyone else your good sides."

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Sin stared at him silently, a crease between his eyebrows as he frowned slightly in what appeared to be confusion.

Kassian felt mildly foolish about telling Sin that after everything, he wanted to try to be something a notch lower than mortal enemies but he pushed on anyway. "People expect shit from both of us-- they expect me to be perfect and they expect you to be an asshole and we give them what they want generally. But just by talking to Boyd I know you're capable of being something more than that and I'm sure you're more than aware by now that I'm anything but perfect, dude. I'm a drunk and an asshole and I can be spiteful and petty but whatever, I'm human and I have flaws. I never said I didn't."

"You act like you don't," Sin said after a moment, the same bemused expression on his attractive face.

"And you act like you don't have a shred of humanity in that weirdly strong body of yours," Kassian retorted. "But even when we fought before, I could see it in your eyes that you feel pain and you get hurt and I could see that you're pretty hardcore in love with Boyd, but you sit there and act like you don't have anything in you but contempt for everything."

This time Sin didn't reply at all and Kassian just shook his head and pulled himself to a stand. He picked up the bottle of whiskey, walking around the counter to stand in the kitchen area where he began to mournfully pour the bottle of Jack Daniels down the drain. It felt like he was betraying a long lost friend and he couldn't help the pained frown that creased his face even though Sin continued to stare at him.

"I have a question," Sin said abruptly.

Kassian's eyes flicked over to the other man as he dropped the bottle in the sink with a clank. "What?"

"What possessed your idiotic self to jump out of sleep and into an alcoholic frenzy?"

Kassian made a face and grabbed a bottle of water off the counter. "Why do you have to describe everything that way? It's so annoying."

"Answer the question," Sin demanded, obviously refusing to be diverted.

"I'm surprised you didn't figure out that I was having a nightmare." Kassian shrugged, dropping his gaze to study the white label on his bottle of water.

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"About what?"

Kassian scowled and opened his mouth to reply but hesitated before shrugging slightly as shame washed over him. It was like a blanket that covered every other feeling, every other thought, and once again he could do nothing but think about the past and remember Poly's slack face when they'd finished with her. "Something that happened in Russia. Something I feel guilty about."

"I see."

Kassian could feel Sin staring at him for a very long time but Kassian just continued to look at his bottle, no longer feeling interested in conversation or meeting Sin's challenging gaze. The tense silence stretched uncomfortably until it was Sin who once again broke it.

"Well I suggest you get your act together, Trovosky. We don't have much time before we storm."

Kassian nodded unnecessarily and he turned away entirely to walk into the bathroom. He flicked the light switch after shutting the door and the fluorescent bulb blinked a couple of times before it came on entirely, casting the small closet-like space in a dim sickly white light. Kassian moved in front of the sink and looked into the small round mirror, closing his eyes briefly and taking a deep breath before opening them again.

He looked exhausted; there were dark circles around his eyes and he was paler than usual. Even though he could run on empty for quite a while before letting the effects of exhaustion affect his performance, it didn't stop him from feeling like hell and apparently looking it.

He couldn't help contrasting his own appearance with Sin's, who looked unfazed by even less sleep and food than Kassian'd had. It was just another example of how right Sin was; he was naturally more skilled and naturally stronger than Kassian would ever be. It wasn't exactly anything new but the even though in the past he would have felt the need to better himself, to achieve more and even surpass Sin, now Kassian just felt a dull sense of acceptance that didn't even necessarily bother him.

The last several minutes, the entire mission really, had had a strange humbling effect on him and he didn't entirely understand why. Maybe it was being in such close quarters with Sin and being unable to hide all of the glaring flaws that Kassian usually tried to

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swallow and to downplay, even to himself. Somehow having it all come out felt like a load off his shoulders. Things were out in the open; there was no need to go into hardcore Senior Agent mode now that the dirty laundry was aired.

It was just one less person to put on that act for.

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The foam explosive they'd sprayed on the door hissed wildly as sparks began to fly everywhere, burning through the heavy doors as though they were nothing more than butter. One of the fallen guard's radios began going wild, demands ringing out in the hall that was now deserted by everyone other than Kassian, Sin and Boyd.

"What's going on out there!" a gruff voice demanded through the small device.

Sin slammed the bottom of his boot against the metal of the door, clearing the hole that they'd just made for themselves. None of them acknowledged the radio as they slid through the lab's entrance, moving quickly and silently as footsteps rang out from the staircase that led down to the lab.

Two rebels appeared in the corridor with mixed looks of surprise on their faces but neither had a chance to do anything before Sin shot each of them cleanly in the head.

The three of them were at a disadvantage coming from the top with no idea about what lay in the entrance to the lab but Kassian crept down the stairs, dragging one of the bodies behind him, and when they approached the entrance, he shoved it through hurriedly.

The rebels on the other side unloaded into the corpse and Kassian lunged through the door, landing in a roll and immediately slamming his back against a heavy desk as shots rang out around him. He could see Sin moving in and firing methodically, not even flinching as bullets came close enough to graze his face, and Boyd using the gunfire as a distraction to slip in and move deeper into the lab.

Sin disappeared from sight just as Boyd slid around a corner and Kassian narrowed his eyes, leaping up and spinning in an arc, unloading a burst of bullets quickly before ducking down again. He heard a couple low thuds that meant at least two bullets had met their mark.

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From what he could see of the lab, it was larger than they'd expected it to be and was teeming with hostiles. He'd seen equipment in the general area but he suspected that the real research was being done farther back and wherever Boyd had disappeared to.

Kassian rolled to the side and flit his gaze across the area before allowing his gun to automatically aim at the targets he'd seen, firing with precision and dropping rebels one by one as Sin moved in deeper, likely to follow behind and cover Boyd.

The sound of bodies falling, grunts and ricocheted bullets made the underground research facility sound like a war zone and Kassian was jogging deeper in, ignoring the blood that streaked the floor, when a movement to his side caught his attention.

A dark figure leaped out of a cupboard and ran for the door. Kassian didn't hesitate to pursue, even before he realized that it was Joshi.

"He's in my sights," Kassian said harshly into his comm unit as his feet pounded against the floor.

Joshi glanced over his shoulder with narrowed eyes, appearing more inconvenienced than frightened as he sprinted up the stairs and flung himself through the blown out hole in the double reinforced doors.

Kassian pushed himself to go faster, his long legs closing the distance between the two of them as Joshi nimbly avoided the bodies of fallen rebels that they'd taken out on their way into the eastern wing of the facility.

Just as Kassian was within arm's length of Joshi, the scientist spun out of the way and turned back, extending an arm and spraying a small black bottle in Kassian's direction. Kassian automatically turned his head downwind but the substance caught his face anyway and as his eyes burned and watered, Kassian realized that it was some kind of mace.

"Fucker," Kassian couldn't help but grunt in annoyance as his eyesight went completely blurry.

He squinted and ignored the burning sensation, ignored the tingling pain, and focused on the sound of Joshi's footsteps, on the skid of his shoes against the linoleum flooring as he took a sharp right. Kassian barely even broke his stride as he began relying on secondary senses as if losing the first wasn't more than a slight hindrance.

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"We're clear," Boyd's voice rang out in Kassian's ear.

Kassian blinked rapidly, trying to clear his eyes of the extra moisture as Joshi's footsteps abruptly stopped. The only indication that the man had actually switched to offense was a low whooshing sound that came toward Kassian quickly.

He dodged out of the way and saw a blur fly past him before Kassian grit his teeth. Squinting through the tears, Kassian lunged at Joshi's shape that was now crouched in a shadowed corner; he slammed into the thinner man heavily.

"Detonating in five," Sin gruff voice added.

Kassian and Joshi rolled backwards on the floor and even though the scientist struggled violently, Kassian yanked him up as though he weighed nothing more than a child.

"That should have blinded you temporarily," Joshi hissed, appearing annoyed that his homemade pepper spray hadn't had the desired effect.

Kassian grunted and rubbed an arm across his eyes as he dragged Joshi down the corridor. If he hadn't turned his face in time, it was likely that he would have been blinded. A slight mist of the substance had completely thrown him off balance even though his sight was getting clearer by the second.

Kassian hauled Joshi down the corridor, running quickly and practically dragging the scientist behind him. The man barely put up a struggle now that he was actually caught; he likely knew that if he hadn't already been killed, he wasn't going to be any time soon.

The southeastern exit seemed deserted as Kassian dragged Joshi out of the building. Joshi waited until they were in the open before he suddenly struggled harder, apparently thinking he may be able to break loose now that they were no longer confined. Kassian casually slammed a fist back into Joshi's face, rendering the man temporarily submissive.

As Kassian ran toward the rendezvous point, he saw Sin and Boyd already waiting. Sin was looking up at the facility as Boyd watched him doubtfully.

"I know what I heard," Sin said flatly.

Boyd glanced at his watch then shook his head. "There's less than three minutes-- what are you suggesting?"

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Sin ignored Boyd and pointed up at the facility abruptly. "There."

Kassian pushed Joshi to the ground and removed a small tranq-gun from his belt; he injected the scientist in the neck before Joshi even had a chance to protest. Joshi fell to the ground unceremoniously and Kassian's eyes followed Sin's finger.

Movement could be seen in the corner of one of the third floor rooms. Kassian squinted but even through his still teary eyes, he could make out the shape of a woman through the window. She appeared to be tugging at the door and her blond and pink hair hung around her face, curtaining it and concealing her features; yet with that hair, there was no question who it was.

"It's that informant!" Kassian exclaimed, truly surprised. Sector 13 had gotten onto her after all; that was likely who Boyd had heard crying during recon.

Sin was on his feet before either of them really realized it, sprinting back in the direction of the building.

"Hsin, wait!" Boyd shouted, immediately starting to run after him.

Kassian yanked Boyd backwards automatically and pushed him back down. "Leave him."

Boyd jerked against Kassian, eyes narrowed and intent on what he could see of Sin, and Kassian shifted so he could hold Boyd down. Boyd's eyebrows drew down and his entire body was taut with energy he wasn't releasing; although he didn't push against Kassian's grip again, the way his teeth grit and shoulders tensed made it pretty clear that he was struggling not to.

"The building's going to blow," Boyd said tightly, turning an intense stare on Kassian. "If he's going to run into it he needs backup."

"You're not backup for Sin," Kassian said bluntly, his eyes narrowing at Boyd seriously. "You'll just slow him down even if you did catch up which is unlikely anyway since he's extremely fast. Don't let your emotions make you act stupid, Boyd."

Everything from his expression to his tone of voice was very similar to the first time he'd met Boyd in Monterrey but he didn't try to tone it down.

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Boyd nearly glared at Kassian for a long moment, eyes narrowing further, something almost cold coming into his expression as the tension only seemed to grow in his body. There was a distance in his eyes that Kassian had never seen aimed at him; an iciness that was reminiscent of Inspector Beaulieu and seemed impersonal, as if Kassian and Boyd hardly knew each other.

But then Boyd abruptly looked away, gaze shifting pensively to Joshi, and he forced himself to relax enough that he no longer seemed ready to jump up at any second. Even so, his jaw was set and he didn't look happy.

"Fine," Boyd said tensely. He looked at his watch then up at the facility, expression calculating. "He has two and a half minutes, which should be enough time given his speed. But if it becomes clear he needs help, I'm not going to stand here watching. Even if I'm not fast enough, I'm going to try." His eyes narrowed slightly and his tone was blunt and stubborn as he added, "It has nothing to do with me being overly emotional; he's my partner and I'm going to support him."

Kassian just shook his head and frowned, turning his attention to Joshi as he slapped a pair of restraints on the man's wrists. While both Sin and Boyd's intentions were admirable and brave in their own ways, Kassian didn't really see much intelligence in either of their thought processes at the moment.

There was a chance that Sin would make it out but it was slim; it was likely that both he and the woman would die. And then Boyd was basically putting himself in the same situation but giving himself even less time. He didn't know what made Boyd think he'd make it in and out if Sin couldn't do it; he'd be throwing his life away for nothing.

"Take Joshi to the van," Kassian said curtly. "And I'll go after Sin."

Boyd hesitated briefly, watching Kassian very seriously before he looked past him toward the building. His honey brown eyes were narrowed and the worry was clear in them despite the fact he didn't let it move to the rest of his expression. He seemed to be struggling with something within himself; the tension rising in his body even as he shifted slightly away from the building, his fingers curling even as determination set his features.

It was only a couple seconds before he met Kassian's eyes again, the concern not entirely hidden even though it didn't make it to his voice. Yet eclipsing that all was trust. "I'll bring it around for transport."

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Kassian nodded and took off running, his long legs closing the distance between the line of trees and the building. Instead of going into the entrance they'd come from, Kassian looped around the side and headed for the doors that led directly into the southern wing. His boots pounded against the pavement, the only sound that seemed to ring out for miles in the darkness, and as he approached the entrance something else disturbed the still night air.

The sound of someone breathing hard mixed with muffled sobs came from his left and Kassian spun, instantly raising his gun.

Vanessa Marshal skidded to a stop in front of him, her pale face stricken and glinting as she burst into a new flood of tears. "Please don't shoot me!"

Kassian's eyes flit around the area impatiently, not acknowledging her question even as he lowered the gun. "Where's the man who rescued you?"

Vanessa breathed loudly through her mouth, hugging her arms to her chest as though she were trying to calm down. "I-I don't know, he kicked out the window and I came down the fire esc--"

Kassian brushed past her, running back in the direction from which she'd come. When his feet crunched over broken glass, Kassian's eyes flew upward and focused instantly on the fire escape that led up to a third floor window. He distantly heard Vanessa approaching behind him with questions mixed into her sobs but he didn't respond as his gaze locked on a silhouette in the window that could only be Sin's.

His shadowed figure was still in the darkened room and Kassian shook his head slightly as worry, irritation and panic starting to set in-- he knew there were only seconds before the entire building exploded.

Yet Sin just stood there as if he were waiting for something-- there were no hostiles near him, there was no reason why he shouldn't be moving--

"Vega, what the fuck are you doing!" Kassian screamed at the top of his lungs, thoughts a whirlwind of confusion as he watched Sin contemplate suicide.

The sound of his voice must have shook Sin out of whatever stupor he'd allowed himself to fall into because his face turned to the side, green eyes narrowing down at Kassian. Suddenly he lunged forward just as a loud boom shattered the silence of the night and

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the building shuddered in several successions of explosions, the majority of the complex erupting into a ball of flames.

"Oh my God!" Vanessa screamed and Kassian turned, his body slamming into hers from the impact and shielding her from the debris that rained down on them. He dragged her backwards awkwardly, feeling the heat of the fire on his back and glass slamming into his skin. Even as he tried to get out of range of the soon-to-be collapsing facility, he frantically scanned the area for Sin.

"Run northeast if you want to live!" he shouted at Vanessa. "Head for the tree line, look for a black van."

The woman stared at him in petrified confusion. "Wha--"

"Move!" Kassian shouted, pulling her up and shoving her in the direction before he ran back towards the building. The heat of the flames was so powerful that it burned him without touching him but Kassian ignored it and searched the area until he saw a dark figure laying crumpled on the ground a few yards away from him, half hidden in a shallow ditch.

As Kassian moved closer he saw that Sin was struggling to pull himself up from the ground. There was a large bloody gash in the side of his head and one of his arms hung awkwardly at his side as Sin tried to work with the other. His clothes appeared darkened and singed and Kassian had no doubts that there were a large amount of injuries beneath them. Still, it would have been a lot worse had Sin landed on the pavement instead of the grass.

"What the hell are you thinking, Vega!" Kassian demanded as he grabbed Sin. The other man just collapsed against him limply and Kassian sighed, picking Sin up and throwing him over one shoulder before he turned and jogged to the spot where the van would be.

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"He's received three shots of tranquilizer," Boyd was saying, watching Joshi expressionlessly as two agents reached in the open van doors to drag the man out. "The last was nearly an hour ago and he hasn't stirred since."

Agent Lowe shrugged, unreadable eyes trained on Joshi as she checked his pulse. "Well, you didn't kill him. That's all that matters."

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Boyd's gaze shifted over to her steadily. "I wasn't implying that would be an issue. The medical staff will want to know what he's received."

The look Lowe gave Boyd was stiff. "My mistake, Senior Agent Beaulieu." She spoke calmly but the tone when she said Boyd's title didn't hide the fact that she had an issue with him or his position or that her comment hadn't been an accident.

The other agent, Williams, looked between the two of them before getting a good grip on Joshi's upper body. "Let's get going, Rachel," he said firmly, tilting his head toward Joshi. "We don't have all day."

Lowe watched Boyd for a moment longer, her eyes narrowed and lips tightened before she broke eye contact and nodded toward Williams. She grabbed Joshi's legs and helped load the man onto a stretcher that they then strapped him into. Lowe pointedly avoided looking at Boyd again as she and Williams wheeled Joshi away.

Boyd watched her, expression completely unreadable, although Kassian could tell by the lack of tension in Boyd's shoulders that he was unsurprised by the reception.

Kassian shook his head slightly, nodding at the two politely as they left the area. He didn't know what issue Lowe had with Boyd, but she'd always been nice enough to him. Whatever the case, he wasn't particularly interested in the details at the moment.

What had started out as a relatively easy mission had turned incredibly stressful and the nagging questions of what the hell Sin had been thinking and what had the Agency done with Vanessa when they picked her up at the US-Canadian border wouldn't stop hounding Kassian. He knew it was entirely possible that they were going to move her and her kids to a secure location to surveil her and keep her safe from 13 but it was also likely that they were going to terminate her because she'd seen their faces.

It could go either way but he planned to follow up on it. As reluctant as he'd been to support Boyd and Sin getting killed to save her, he was glad that she'd lived. She'd been an asset to them and the entire mission and her life had been endangered for it. If it hadn't been for Sin's efforts, her life would have ended entirely.

Kassian's gaze drifted from Lowe's retreating back and focused on Sin. He had a serious head injury as well as a fractured arm and ankle, but somehow the guy was still walking around as if he felt no pain. Sin mostly seemed irritated that he'd been ordered to go to the medic unit, as if he'd be better off tending to his own wounds.

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It was hard not to feel respect when looking at Sin now. Sin had done something risky and reckless and stupid but at the same time it'd been so selfless and brave that Kassian felt like a coward in comparison. For all that people thought he was so much better than Sin because he didn't do assassinations, Sin had showed far more concern for a civilian than Kassian ever had.

Sin started to walk away and the movement seemed to catch Boyd's attention as he looked over. With everyone gone except the three of them and the only guards too far away to see much, Boyd's gaze slid almost unconsciously along Sin's length. He'd been periodically doing the same during the time that Sin had been unconscious in the ride back to the Agency, and every time it almost seemed as if he was checking Sin's wounds, making sure they hadn't worsened when he wasn't looking.

The same concern that hadn't been entirely hidden in Canada remained in his eyes now, although it was far more shuttered with the Agency cameras glaring down on them from every angle in the underground loading area.

"Sin," Boyd said abruptly, already heading toward him.

Sin stopped walking and looked at Boyd. "Yes?"

Kassian watched the exchange and wondered if he should leave, a thought that strengthened when Sin's green eyes flicked to him seemingly unconsciously, but Kassian didn't move. He needed to speak with Sin too.

Boyd, however, seemed unconcerned with Kassian's presence; he simply dropped his voice so it wouldn't echo across the entire room. He stopped right in front of Sin, searching his eyes with slightly drawn down eyebrows. He didn't entirely hide the intentness or faint worry that made it into his tone. "You're heading to the medic unit, right? Not to your apartment?"

"I hadn't decided yet," Sin replied with a shrug. "I can take care of myself."

"It's not a question of what you're capable of," Boyd protested in an undertone, gaze straying briefly toward the wound hidden by the bandage wrapped around Sin's head. There was a subtle twinge in Boyd's expression, a slight tightening of his lips and faint narrowing of his eyes. "Just because you can deal with pain doesn't mean you have to. You could have died and serious head injuries shouldn't be taken lightly, not with the complications that can occur. Please go to the medics, or at least seriously consider it."

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Sin gave a half-shrug but his eyes once again drifted from Boyd to Kassian and he cocked an eyebrow at him instead of answering Boyd. "What?"

"Nothing. I just want to have a word with you," Kassian replied.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down a little and gave Kassian a slightly odd look, likely wondering what he wanted to talk to Sin about but Kassian just looked at him neutrally and didn't explain.

Sin frowned slightly but he didn't address Kassian again, instead saying to Boyd, "I'll let them splint my arm."

Boyd all but ignored Kassian again for the moment, turning to study Sin with a hint of concern still visible even as some of the tension left his shoulders. "Alright," he relented, then paused and sighed quietly, running a hand through his hair.

Golden blond strands fell back into Boyd's face, partially concealing his otherwise serious expression. "For the record, I really wish you wouldn't do such risky, last minute things like that, but I hope it works out with her. I don't know what they intend to do with her and I doubt it will mean anything to my mother, but I'll recommend in my report that she and her children be placed in protective custody." He shrugged with one shoulder. "Especially if the emphasis can be on her use as an informant, maybe that's the route they'll take if they haven't done anything already. I'll say the same thing if anyone asks my opinion as team leader for the mission."

"I'll do what I have to do," Sin said bluntly, his face otherwise expressionless even though he lifted his eyebrows. "Even if they end up blowing her head off, I'd do it again anyway."

"Well, that's a cheerful statement of hope," Kassian mumbled from the side.

"I know you will," Boyd said evenly, gaze steady on Sin even as his eyebrows twitched down briefly, "but you just leave before anything can be decided, you don't even give anyone the chance, and I wish you wouldn't because your life is more important than that informant's. If you're that determined to risk it for other people, at least let me help-- let us work together to save them. Don't forget that you have a partner."

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Sin just shrugged and said nothing in response. However, when Boyd just shook his head slightly and after a moment of silence turned and left, Sin's eyes followed him seemingly of their own accord and almost absently ran along the length of Boyd's body.

Kassian cleared his throat slightly and moved closer when Boyd had left the garage entirely. "Vega."

Sin looked at him and made a face. "If you're planning to give me a grandstanding lecture on reckless behavior, save it."

"Not at all. I do think it was reckless and foolish but at the same time it was also incredibly brave." Kassian studied Sin briefly and was mildly pleased that the man actually seemed taken aback by the compliment. "In fact, if more people saw that side of you I'm sure you'd be the one who would be deemed Captain America and Mister Morals and all of the ridiculous names they give me."

Sin made a face at that, rolling his green eyes. "Don't kiss my ass, Kassian. What the hell do you want to talk to me about?"

"I'm not kissing your ass," Kassian retorted. "I'm making a statement of fact."

"So you've made it. Are we done here?"

Kassian sighed and narrowed his gaze on Sin's pale blood streaked face. "I want to know why you didn't escape right away."

A distinct look of discomfort clouded Sin's expression and he shrugged again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do," Kassian said sharply. "You had nearly forty to forty-five seconds between the time Vanessa escaped and the building blew and you just stood there until the last minute. I'm not stupid, Vega. I know what I saw."

Sin brought a hand up to push his overgrown bangs out of his eyes, appearing to need something to fidget with under the scrutiny of Kassian's stare. For someone who was typically so quick to have a retort or a witty comeback, Sin appeared at a genuine loss for words.

"You were going to kill yourself," Kassian accused when Sin didn't respond.

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He'd expected Sin to deny it but instead, Sin finally met his eyes again and looked completely unapologetic as he replied, "It crossed my mind."

"*Why?*" Kassian demanded, taking a step forward and fighting the urge to grab Sin and shake intelligence into him. "Because of me and Boyd?"

Sin scoffed at him. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Then why?" Kassian persisted.

"Why didn't you tell Boyd about this?" Sin completely switched topics, moving to cross his arms over his chest and then wincing slightly as he dropped one arm back to his side. It was the only indication of pain he'd given so far.

"It's not his business," Kassian returned matter-of-factly. "You're not his lover anymore. If you were, as a friend, I'd probably tell him. But you're not and since the mission was already complete, it had no effect on that and there was no reason to bring it up. Besides, I didn't think you'd appreciate it."

"I wouldn't have," Sin agreed, some of the cold sarcasm slipping out of his voice as he eyed Kassian. "But I don't see why I should tell you anything."

Kassian sighed wearily, his eyebrows pushing together as his mouth turned down into a frown. "Because even though I didn't go blab to Boyd before I knew all of the facts, if it turns out that you're going to endanger your life on a mission like that, you could potentially be endangering your teammates as well. Especially Boyd, since he gets all emotional when it comes to you and tries to endanger himself in the process. He tried to run after you and I stopped him-- Imagine if he had; something bad could have happened. So I think that if you're that messed up mentally right now, we need to be aware of it and if I believe that, I will go to Boyd because I think as your partner, he should know."

They stared at each other evenly for a stretch of time and Kassian was ready to give up and walk away but then Sin shook his head slightly and averted his gaze. "My life is empty and pointless. It briefly occurred to me that I could easily escape it at that moment and then I wouldn't have to continue going through the motions anymore."

Kassian couldn't argue with that; he knew how difficult Sin's life had always been. For several years he'd known that the Agency had kept Sin in a holding cell when he wasn't on missions, that they put collars on him and locked him in a box, that he was treated

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like nothing more than a pit bull that they took out of its cage when they wanted him to fight. And Kassian also knew just by hearing Boyd speak of Sin and their relationship, that Sin's life had briefly been more than that.

It was no surprise that Sin felt lost and miserable now; that he felt like he'd been returned to square one. It was a large part of the reason Kassian had felt the need to make an attempt, as lame as it was, to help Sin by agreeing to replace him in the unit. So he understood why Sin would want to kill himself; if Kassian really thought hard about it, he couldn't pinpoint something that Sin would think he had to live for.

Still, Kassian wasn't going to support the idea even if he understood it. "Why did you change your mind?"

Sin exhaled slowly and he tilted his head to the side slightly as if he were contemplating his own answer. After a while he just lifted one shoulder and said plainly, "Because I don't think I want to give up yet."

Kassian was surprised by how relieved he felt but then again he'd also felt surprised by his own desperation to revive Sin in the back of the van in Mexico. His own opinions and thoughts regarding the other man were so conflicting and confusing that he didn't know what to make of it sometimes. For all that they clashed and disliked each other and couldn't get along, Kassian didn't like the idea of Sin not being around anymore even if he didn't entirely understand why.

"Things can get better," Kassian said finally.

"Maybe." Sin didn't seem very agreeable but he did look thoughtful as his intense gaze bore into Kassian. After a while he closed off his expression completely and just nodded neutrally. "I'll be seeing you on our next mission together, Senior Agent Trovosky."

Kassian screwed up his face and sighed heavily. "If it's as exciting as this one, I can't wait."

Sin smirked at him and turned entirely, walking away.

The garage was silent around Kassian and he stood there for a long moment, staring after Sin then staring into empty space before finally shaking his head and leaving as well with the intentions of going home to a nice stiff drink.

Alter

Part I

"So you were able to confirm it was a Janus base?" Carhart asked.

"Yes, not far out of Volos," Boyd agreed. "We only counted about fifteen to twenty rebels but the base could probably support up to three times that. I'm not sure if it's been entirely developed yet or if they're using it for another purpose. We couldn't get more information without compromising our cover."

"Since then I've been hearing about some activity around Ioannina, too, and there may be something going down in Crete," Owen said, drawing his eyebrows down and shrugging. "I'm still waiting on information from trustworthy sources on that one but I think maybe they'll be bigger. Sounds like there's a lot of stuff going on around there but it's hard to tell until the right informants get back to me."

He'd seemed more awake than usual during this debriefing, possibly because it was the middle of the day or possibly because the mission had dealt with his area of jurisdiction.

Carhart nodded. "Once the information has been verified, a follow-up mission will be planned. Until that's resolved, you're all on standby."

He moved his chair back slightly as if he were about to leave but before he could, Owen raised his hand. "Oh wait, bossman! I have a question."

Carhart looked over at Owen. "Yes?"

"Well," Owen said, looking slightly unnerved by Carhart's stare although in the end he was undeterred. "Uh, so, I was just wondering what's up with the Original Vega. Will we be having four agents going on missions in the future or something?" He looked alarmed by the idea.

Carhart's gaze flicked to Kassian and Sin before he focused on Owen again. "Not necessarily. At the moment Emilio is being retrained and reconditioned after being on the outside for nearly two decades so it will be some time before he receives his full reinstatement and classification levels. He will continue to give us pertinent information as an outside informant and when he is reinstated he will be able to sit in on meetings

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and in the future, he will be in the field. However if Kassian's trial is successful, there will be three agents, not four."

"And we'd all be going out together, sir?" Kassian asked uncertainly.

"If a mission calls for it, yes. But having three level 10 agents in this unit will ensure that I have the manpower to send people out and follow up on more than one mission at a time."

Boyd considered the information before glancing briefly at Sin, who looked slightly irritated but otherwise had a blank expression. "How long will the reconditioning take?" he asked Carhart.

"You mean re-brainwashing?" Sin muttered quietly.

Carhart looked at him narrowly but only said, "They may extend it since he's been out so long. I'm currently unsure of the precise timeline. His case is very unique to the Agency."

Boyd watched Carhart steadily and nodded but didn't say anything further. He imagined it would take a while before the Agency determined Emilio could be trusted to send on missions, yet Boyd couldn't imagine Emilio ever fully being conditioned no matter how much time they took. Emilio didn't seem the type to care about the Agency's propaganda, especially after he'd been gone for twenty years.

Owen's eyebrows twitched upward slightly as he looked between the three of them but he didn't say anything.

"If there are no other questions, I have another meeting I need to get to," Carhart said after a moment. When no one said anything, he pushed his chair back and left the room without further comment.

Ryan watched as the door shut behind Carhart and appeared mildly troubled but he didn't say anything about it out loud. Instead he just turned off his panel and sighed, glancing at the others. "So how was the weather in Greece?"

Jeffrey quirked an eyebrow at Ryan but didn't speak

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"It was pretty nice," Boyd said with a shrug. Ryan looked honestly curious and Boyd suspected it was because of Ryan's interest in Europe. "Around fifty to sixty, thinner cloud coverage."

"Awesome," Ryan breathed, his mouth turning up into a wide smile. Kassian was looking at Ryan oddly but Ryan didn't appear deterred. "Was it sunny?"

"More than here. From what I could see, the water's nice, too." Boyd shrugged. "Not that we really had time to explore that. It's probably a very nice destination, especially later in the summer."

"Yeah, it is," Owen put in from the side. He tilted back in his chair until it was on the hind legs and he moved his feet up and down to try to stay balanced; he had to keep touching the table to avoid falling over. "It's kinda chilly for the beach then but if you go around the country, it's crazy beautiful in some areas. Oh! Also!" He perked up and said with great import as he looked seriously at everyone else, "Bungee-jumping in the Corinth Canal." He nodded to himself, as if that said everything.

Boyd quirked an eyebrow. "You've been there, I take it?"

"Yeah, man. I was there a few months for vaca one time." Owen said it like 'vaycay' and shrugged. "Course, next time we went through was war time so that sucked more."

"As exciting as this is, I have more interesting matters to attend to," Jeffrey said rather stuffily as he stood and headed straight for the door.

"Alright," Owen said, drawing the word out as he rocked back and forth. "Don't be sad if you ever go there and miss out on all the sweet stuff we cool folk talked about here, though."

Jeffrey's only answer was the door shutting firmly behind him.

"Man, that guy never wants to stick around," Ryan complained, shaking his head at the door disapprovingly. "We've been in this unit together for like three years now and he still doesn't want to spend even two extra minutes of his time with us."

"Speaking of..." Boyd tilted his head slightly and looked at the others in the room. Although he'd individually spent time off compound with most of them, he hadn't spent time in a group like he had even with the other trainees who he'd only known for a few

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months. "I was thinking of getting food after this and I thought it may be good to hang out even after the meeting. Does anyone want to come?"

"Yes!" Ryan enthused and Sin simultaneously gave Boyd an odd look and asked, "Why?"

"For fun," Boyd said with a shrug, meeting Sin's eyes. "We never really get a chance to all hang out after missions. You should come if you aren't busy."

"Yeah, I'm sure I have a lot of stuff on my schedule," Sin replied dryly although there was no animosity in his tone. If anything he seemed vaguely amused by the possibility of having plans.

Kassian snorted and sat up. "Well I'd go but I have a pseudo-date. Can I get a rain check?"

"Of course," Boyd said easily, then looked at Kassian in mild curiosity. "With who?"

"Christina." Kassian gave a half-grin and didn't elaborate further. "I need to get going or I'll be late but I'll see you guys later."

Ryan looked somewhat disappointed but he waved anyway. "I count on you hanging around later next time. Don't be all-- Jeffrey Junior!"

Kassian stood up and shrugged his jacket on. "I won't." He headed to the door and nodded at them again before leaving.

"And what about you, Owen? Back out on me and *die*." Ryan narrowed his eyes threateningly.

There was a loud thump as Owen dropped back onto all four legs of the chair. "What?" He looked perplexed as he eyed Ryan. "I've been all in from the start-- weren't you getting my vibes?" The question was rhetorical and he quickly followed up with, "Heyyy, does this mean we get to go to the cafe?" He looked at Ryan expectantly. "The fieldies wouldn't beat us up with their eyes if we went with two 10's, right?"

"Ugh, why would you even want to go there?" Ryan asked, making a face.

"Come on, man!" Owen enthused. "How often will we get the chance? I wanna know if it's as bad as they say. And what if they have bad ass food we're missing out on?"

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Boyd drew his eyebrows down and looked between them. "What are you talking about?"

"You know, dude. The invisible territorial flags-- the stink eye to the Not Belongs-- the lifelong struggle between good and evil." Owen said the last part rather dramatically and looked at Boyd as if all of this should be incredibly obvious to him.

"What?" Boyd asked, even more confused now; he had no idea what in the world Owen was talking about. He looked over at Ryan questioningly.

"Oh. I guess it never came up before," Ryan said, his tone surprised as if they were talking about something very important and well-known. "There--"

"It's ridiculous," Sin interjected blandly, shaking his head.

"Well, the field agents started it like twenty or thirty years ago, dude!" Ryan crowed, pointing a finger at Sin as if by default he'd been involved in the decision just because he was also a field agent, even though he was in the wrong generation.

"Uh huh." Sin didn't look very impressed.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Boyd pressed, slightly frustrated by the lack of clear explanation. "What about the field agents and people not belonging? Is there some sort of rule about the cafe?"

Sin sighed and looked at Boyd as if it was very painful for him to spend his time discussing such a thing. "Apparently," he drawled. "And this is not my experience because I don't eat in either location. But apparently, a long time ago it was unofficially decided by field agents that the on-compound cafe was their special place and so by default, support staff and analysts, etc., decided that the Tower cafeteria was theirs. It's childish and utterly pathetic."

"It is not pathetic!" Ryan protested, eyebrows drawing down over his eyebrows defensively. "The last time I went in there it was like-- it was like high school on old TV shows where the nerd was trying to sit at the jock table! I had field ops five years younger than me calling me kid and being all condescending and-- grrr!"

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly and looked at the three of them. It did sound pretty stupid to him and even as he tried to think back, he didn't remember anyone having mentioned that before. Still, if people actually acted that way, he could see why the

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unspoken territories would have continued since each group would feel uncomfortable in the other space.

"Ah," Boyd said neutrally, leaning back in his chair. "I had no idea."

"Geez," Owen drawled, eyebrows raised as he gave Boyd a half impressed, half dumbfounded look. "First you didn't know Sin had freaked out and now you don't even know about the Age Old Rule? I mean, seriously, dude. People call me oblivious but you've got it down to an *art*."

Boyd felt a mild spike of indignation that Owen, of all people, was saying that. "I almost never eat on compound," he said evenly, looking over at Owen. "So I didn't know."

"Yeah but it's been three years, man! No one says this shit around you?" Owen watched Boyd far more alertly and with more interest than he typically showed throughout entire meetings. He waved a hand dismissively. "I mean, I'm not saying you suck or anything. I kinda wish I had that power. I could be all, 'What? That mission profile that would take me thirty hours to do and you don't plan to use anyway? I didn't hear anything.' And they'd be all--"

Owen straightened his back and tilted his body to the right, voice dropping to mimic another person's voice, "'But it's on your calendar from now until the end of time and you have to do this every other week.' And I'd be like," he returned to his usual slouch and mimicked himself, "'What? I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention the last three years. Come again? Where am I?'"

Owen raised his eyebrows and looked at Boyd, intrigued. "It's like a superpower, dude."

Boyd stared at Owen with slightly narrowed eyes; although Owen's tone wasn't derisive and there was nothing cruel in his expression, Boyd still felt like Owen was making fun of him. "Well, obviously it isn't the sort of topic that would come up in everyday conversation," he said somewhat stiffly.

"Yeah, but..." Owen scratched his head and looked perplexed. "What else don't you know about? Oh! Hey," he leaned forward and met Boyd's eyes seriously, speaking in an undertone, "You *do* know your mom's head of the Agency, right?"

"Yeah; I got that, Owen, thanks," Boyd said sarcastically.

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"Okay, good." Owen leaned back in his chair, looking relieved. "'Cause if you'd missed *that...*"

Boyd nearly rolled his eyes and looked over at Ryan and Sin. "So is this actually going to be a problem either way, then? Regardless of where we go, someone has issues with one of us?"

"Well since Sin is an outcast from society as a whole, people may react oddly wherever," Ryan admitted with a serious frown as Sin made a face. "But it will likely be less obnoxious in the Tower."

"Let's just go there, then," Boyd said, not wanting to spend time debating something like this.

"Aww, man!" Owen interjected, looking thoroughly put-out. "This is mutiny! I really wanted to see the cafe... We could make faces at the jerkwads behind Sin's back and shit and if they made some face back Sin could be all, 'What was that? You feelin' lucky, punks?' And they'd run away." He looked between all of them, slightly accusatory. "I was really looking forward to that."

"I don't remember ever saying I was going anywhere," Sin said flatly. "Especially not if he's going to ramble incoherently the entire time."

"Whoa, dude, I'm not being incoherent." Owen briefly raised his hands in a surrender gesture and eyed Sin briefly, his expression becoming a little more serious. "Sorry if I offended or whatever; seriously, I hope you come. Jokes aside, it'd be cool to hang out a bit; I feel like I barely know you guys. I guess I don't even care if we go to the cafeteria."

Sin stared at him blankly for a moment before sitting back with a barely audible sigh. "Fine."

"Yay!" Ryan cheered again, flashing a grin at Owen.

Boyd stood, raising his eyebrows at the others. "Alright. I'd like to actually eat some food at some point today instead of just debating where it happens," he said dryly.

Owen stood immediately, grabbing the files he had brought with him and shoving them into a bag next to his chair. "Oh man, I hope," he started to say enthusiastically but he

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suddenly looked over at Sin with a slightly startled and sheepish look and finished in a quiet, quick mutter to himself, "they have cornbread with butter today."

Sin rolled his eyes and left the conference room without further comment with Ryan not far behind him.

It didn't take long for the four of them to arrive at the cafeteria, not really talking about anything in particular along the way. When they walked into the cafeteria and headed toward the line, several people scattered around the room gave them odd looks and in a few cases, the someone nudged the person next to them and tilted their head toward the group.

Most people didn't seem to have an obvious issue with their presence; more than anything, the people who paid any attention seemed primarily surprised and perplexed, and they seemed to especially be eyeballing Sin. A few people did give them a narrow-eyed stare that didn't look entirely pleased.

The overall reception didn't come as a big surprise to Boyd; neither he nor Sin made a habit of eating on compound so the fact they showed up at all was strange, and it was even stranger for them to be seen with other people. Regardless, Boyd didn't acknowledge the looks and simply walked toward the line with the Ryan, Owen and Sin.

"Mmmm macaroni and cheese and chicken strips," Ryan said happily, putting a container of each on his tray. "Food in the med building was so lame and boring, guys. I get excited every time I have something that I didn't get there."

"You lead such an exciting life," Sin said dryly, looking at his food choices with a slight scowl.

"I know I do, you're just jealous," Ryan replied with a grin.

"Yes, that's me. Jealous."

Boyd briefly watched Ryan and Sin out of the corner of his eye and couldn't help feeling pleased to see the casual interaction, especially since Sin had been doubtful that he could spend time with anyone else and enjoy it. Boyd honestly thought that, although there were many people on compound who would probably always look down on Sin, it was precisely for that reason that Sin deserved and needed more people on his side.

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Ryan had been Sin's proponent for years so Boyd hoped that eventually Sin would have the opportunity to feel comfortable around Ryan too. Maybe there would even come a day when Ryan and Sin would be able to just hang around without anyone else and have fun.

It was one reason he'd hoped that Sin would agree to join them, to give Sin a chance to interact a little more in a comfortable environment.

Boyd returned his attention to the food lined in front of him and was trying to decide what to choose when Owen suddenly surged forward.

"Cornbread!" Owen exclaimed, looking entirely too excited as he grabbed two plates. "Sweet, this is my lucky day!"

Boyd looked sidelong at Owen and shook his head to himself in bemusement. "So how are the chicken strips here?" he asked Ryan.

"Pretty good," Ryan said. "I mean all of it is pretty good for cafeteria food. I think it's because they want us to eat and have energy so we can still do their bidding."

"Probably," Boyd said with a half-shrug, grabbing a container of chicken strips and a small salad.

As he glanced over at Owen, he noticed a woman behind them in line who he vaguely recognized. It took him a few seconds but then he recalled that she was the person who had seemed friendly to Sin in the elevator months ago, and after a few more seconds he remembered that her name was Rebecca. She was looking at Sin at the moment with a somewhat surprised and thoughtful expression but she hadn't said anything.

Sin didn't either didn't notice her or didn't acknowledge her; they paid for their food and started toward an empty table. She trailed after them hesitantly without actually getting anything of her own and seemed to be trying to decide whether or not she really wanted to speak when Ryan noticed her.

"Hi Becks," Ryan said with a friendly smile as they started to sit down. Sin looked up and his gaze finally fell on her although he didn't immediately speak.

Rebecca's eyes switched from Sin to Ryan and she stood there awkwardly although she seemed relieved to see an apparently familiar face. "Hey Ryan."

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"How's things?" Ryan asked in the same tone, although he looked mildly confused as to why she was behaving so awkwardly.

"Oh... okay, I guess. I got a new position in the Civvie Squad." Rebecca's gaze absently slid over to Sin, who just stared back.

"That's great. Last time I was up in payroll you seemed bored out of your skull," Ryan said encouragingly. She didn't reply immediately and Ryan shot Owen and Boyd a mildly confused look. "Uh... So, what's up?"

Rebecca looked at them again and turned slightly red. "I'm sorry for disturbing you all. I just wanted to say hi to Sin."

Boyd wasn't particularly surprised that Rebecca had gone out of her way to greet Sin; it fell in line with what he'd seen of her in the elevator. He glanced over at Sin.

Sin's eyebrows shot up and he gave her an incredulous stare. "Why?"

Rebecca shrugged and smiled slightly. "I don't know? I was just glad to see that you're doing better. I was there-- I mean, I'd hea..." She stopped and shook her head slightly, red hair moving with the motion. "Anyway, hi."

Sin stared at her oddly for a moment but just nodded slightly although he still seemed baffled.

"Well, I'll see you guys later," Rebecca said slightly lamely before turning around and going back to the counter.

"What the heck?" Ryan looked at Sin in confusion but Sin just shrugged dismissively.

"Who was that?" Owen asked, looking perplexed.

"She works in payroll, or well she did. Her name's Rebecca. I don't know why she's suddenly wanting to be Sin's best friend though," Ryan replied, raising his eyebrows high.

Sin opened his bag of potato chips, the only food he'd gotten. "She helped me figure out my bank account information."

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"Why'd she act so strange though?" Ryan wondered out loud, his gaze following Rebecca as she seemed to have trouble deciding between a chicken sandwich and a bowl of pasta. "Maybe she has a crush on you."

Sin cast Ryan a withering glance as he crunched the chips.

"Would that be so terrible?" Ryan asked with a laugh. "She's cute! Don't you think she's cute?"

Sin shrugged, his expression unreadable. "I suppose."

Owen raised his eyebrows a little and looked between Boyd and Sin curiously as he opened up a packet of butter and cut through the first cornbread cake with a knife. He put parts of the butter within and set the rest of the pad on top, where it started to melt and soak into the inner layers. He didn't say anything, though, as he cut the cornbread into pieces, spearing one with a fork and starting to eat.

Boyd kept his body language calm and neutral, looking down as he idly opened the container of chicken strips. He didn't know what he thought about Rebecca having a crush on Sin; part of him didn't like the idea of it at all. For the moment, he didn't want to examine the vague feeling of discomfort it induced, not when they didn't even know what her intentions were. Especially since it wasn't any of his business anymore who liked Sin or who Sin found to be attractive.

Yet he had nothing against her as a person and saw no reason to form an opinion about her. In fact, if it ultimately turned out that she and Sin became friends, that would be a good thing.

Before anyone could say anything further, Owen suddenly straightened, looking across the room with widened, excited eyes even as he seemed alarmed. "Holy crap, it's one of the Reapers!" he hissed, hunching down almost immediately as he stared intently over Boyd's shoulder.

"What?" Boyd asked, starting to tilt his head discreetly to look behind him but Owen shook his head emphatically.

"Don't look, don't look!" Owen said urgently, then shifted his intense stare to Boyd, as if to pretend that was who he'd been looking at all along. "Wait until she's turned around at least. I'll give you the okay."

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Ryan rolled his eyes and finally peeled the lid off of his macaroni and cheese bowl. "Those are just dumb rumors, O."

"No way, dude, it's the truth!" Owen insisted, looking over at Ryan with an almost comically large frown, shaking his head in a tsk, tsk manner. "I can't believe you're actually a non-believer." He sounded truly disappointed.

"What are the Reapers?" Boyd asked, looking between the two of them. He half expected Owen to make fun of him again but he was intrigued enough by the topic to ask anyway.

"They bring people back from the dead," Owen said ominously, leaning forward and dropping his voice. He looked between them with an unusually serious expression, eyes narrowed just slightly and mouth turned down at the corners.

When Boyd just gave him an odd look, Owen continued. "They say people with nearly a hundred percent chance of fatality-- sometimes even people who are straight up dead-- go into that weird lab building and come out alive. Sometimes creepily so; like they changed in there."

Owen raised his eyebrows pointedly. "It's said the Reapers'll give you back your life but you never know at what cost." He stabbed his cornbread suddenly and lifted part of it off the plate, staring intently at Sin and Boyd as he took a large bite and somehow managed to chew forebodingly.

Boyd looked over at Sin to see if he'd heard the same rumor.

Sin was actually eyeballing Owen with interest. "What lab building?"

Owen seemed pleased that the topic wasn't just brushed off. "You know that short brick one over by bunker three? It's all nondescript and half covered in trees?"

This time Sin's eyebrows drew together slightly and he sat back in his chair, seeming to consider this. "And people say... what about this place?"

"That they bring back people to life who should be, or were, dead," Owen said, watching Sin with a quirked eyebrow as he idly finished one cornbread and started on the other one. He'd lost the ominous quality of his tone, probably because it wasn't as dramatic the second time around. "And weird shit happens in the process-- like, you come out different. I mean, there's all this stuff people say about it, really. Experimentation, the

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fact people sometimes go in and never come out, or disappear and suddenly come out of there even though no one saw them go in..."

"I see." Sin continued to stare at Owen, obviously thinking about what had been said before he asked again, "The red brick building-- That's the one, right?"

Ryan gave Sin an odd look before turning his indigo eyes over to Boyd as if silently asking why Sin even cared.

But Boyd had no idea; he was bewildered as to why Sin, who often seemed to ignore the conversations happening around him, was looking honestly intrigued by the information. He shook his head slightly at Ryan then turned his attention to Sin.

"Yeah," Owen was saying enthusiastically. "That's it."

"Why are you so interested?" Boyd asked, drawing his eyebrows down slightly as he studied Sin in confusion.

Sin looked at Boyd and shrugged. "That's where I was when I woke up from the coma."

"It is?" Boyd asked in surprise; if that was the case, it almost lent some credibility to what Owen had been saying. Boyd knew how close to death Sin had been after Monterrey and he'd seemed surprisingly healthy when they'd next seen each other.

"I knew it!" Owen said loudly, eyes going wide as a mixture of excitement and intrigue seemed to overcome him. He dropped his fork and leaned forward, his attention fully focused on Sin in a way that was abnormal for him. "People try to say that lab isn't actually in use with patients but I knew it was! And it was weird as hell the way you suddenly disappeared and then were all fine and dandy later, when all we knew was there was a coma involved. What was it like in there? Has any weird shit happened since? How'd you get out?"

Sin frowned at Owen and was beginning to look sorry for ever mentioning it. "It wasn't very exciting. There was a lab on the floor I was on, an office and rooms with locked doors. The only thing of interest was the fact that every door locked automatically when it shut, even doors leading to and from the staircases. You need a keycard to go anywhere."

"Whoa..." Owen seemed entranced by the information.

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Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly and looked over at Sin more fully. Although Sin had told him how he'd escaped the building, he'd never mentioned the locking doors. "That's strange... The only place I've seen anything like that is Seventeenth and Fourth in the Tower. I've never heard of that in a lab..."

"Wait, wait, back up," Owen said, holding his hands in front of him. "How'd you get through the crazy weird security without a keycard?"

"Yeah, I was about to ask the same thing," Ryan added, a forkful of macaroni hovering just in front of his mouth.

Sin scowled at them. "Can we drop this?"

"No! You shouldn't have been such an Obvious Marvin if you didn't want us to ask questions," Ryan chastised, finally putting the fork in his mouth and looking at Sin disapprovingly.

"An Obvious Marvin," Sin repeated, unimpressed. "You were a lot better when you were afraid of me."

Boyd couldn't help a short chuckle at that, a small half smile playing on his lips. He still remembered when Ryan had told him he'd nearly dropped a box of donuts that first time Sin had appeared at a briefing, and he recalled the way Ryan used to stare at Sin in wide-eyed silence, barely saying anything or almost squeaking when he did.

The contrast of that time to their interaction now was amusing and, more than that, promising. It pleased Boyd to see the relaxed, casual interaction continuing on both ends; not only on Sin's side but also for Ryan, who was finally becoming himself in Sin's presence.

"I wasn't afraid of you!" Ryan protested. "I was half intimidated, half infatuated, and I didn't know how to act because of it."

Sin made a face at Ryan and picked up his chips again. "How could you be infatuated with me when you didn't even know me."

Ryan scoffed and pointed his cheese-covered fork at Sin. "You're gorgeous and tragic--gay boys like that kind of thing."

Sin just stared at Ryan flatly and didn't bother to reply.

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Owen raised his eyebrows at Ryan, looking mildly interested and not particularly surprised by the information about Ryan's sexual orientation. Boyd realized Ryan had never mentioned aloud that he was gay before-- at least not in public. But Owen's expression was brief and nonjudgmental before he narrowed his eyes more seriously again. "Okay but we're missing the important point here," he insisted, picking up his fork and taking another bite of a small piece of the cornbread.

"Weird ass security in a weird ass place. So-- the lab." Owen eyed Sin dubiously. "Number one-- keycard? Actually needed for infiltration, or no? Number two-- there reaaaally wasn't anything else odd about it? Like, really-really nothing? Details, man; there had to be something cool. Like, rooms with creepy voices or doors that seem to lead to nowhere..."

"It was fairly innocuous," Sin responded, shaking his head at Owen. "Sorry to disappoint."

Owen sighed heavily, shaking his head and looking truly disappointed. "This is ruining my dream," he muttered to himself.

"Why don't you just ask one of the other people who were there?" Boyd asked as he took a bit of a chicken strip. "Maybe there are different areas and they were in another section."

"No can do, man," Owen said, shaking his fork at Boyd as if wagging a finger. "Won't work. No one knows exactly who's come out of there, you know? It's always one of those I Know Someone Who Knows Someone Who Heard deals. Plus, even then they say the people come out without much info." He gave Sin a sidelong look and added, "Which could be something like brainwashing, even. I mean, how do you *know* it was really innocuous in there? What if they made you forget what you saw?"

"Well, if a person subscribed to that theory," Boyd said reasonably, "then it could be like Fourth. That floor is completely innocuous when you walk through it but that doesn't stop what's happening behind soundproof doors."

"Okay, or that!" Owen said triumphantly, wielding his fork at Boyd.

"Well I just think people are making stuff up," Ryan said after a moment. He pushed some of his unruly hair out of his face and shook his head slightly. "I mean Sin came out and he's perfectly normal."

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Sin raised an eyebrow at Ryan skeptically. "Am I."

Ryan paused and looked at him seriously before grinning slightly. "Well maybe not perfectly. But still--"

Something caught Ryan's attention and he stopped in mid-sentence to wave at someone with a smile. "Ivan!"

Boyd looked over and saw a studious-looking man start in their direction. His hair was pale blond and tied back in a loose ponytail with strands hanging in front of the silver wire-framed glasses that he wore. As he moved closer, it became obvious that he was extremely slender and that his clothes were slightly ill-fitting because of it. His dark button-down shirt hung lower than it should, the too-wider collar dipping down below his collarbone.

"Hello, Ryan," Ivan said, his voice low and deep. His grey eyes flit around the rest of the table, focusing briefly on Boyd before moving to settle for an even longer time on Sin. Despite that he didn't give any indication of what he was thinking and only added, "Owen. Senior Agents Beaulieu and Vega."

Boyd briefly stared at Ivan; he'd never seen the man before but it struck him that they vaguely resembled each other. Boyd had received so many derogatory comments about his androgynous appearance since coming to the Agency that it was startling to see someone else on the compound who shared similar features to his that had been so singled out.

There were obvious differences between them-- Ivan was older, his hair was a pale ash blond whereas Boyd's was more golden, his eyes were a steel grey and his features were more angular and chiseled. But even though he seemed less effeminate than Boyd, there was still something undeniably androgynous about his thin body and the fall of his long blond hair. That, combined with his serious expression and seemingly reserved mannerisms, were enough to draw parallels between them.

"Hey Ivan, what's up?" Owen said amiably, finishing the last bite of his cornbread.

"Same shit, different day," Ivan replied with a shrug. His gaze drifted back to Ryan and he smiled slightly, the corner of his mouth lifting. "I haven't seen you in a long time, friend. I'm glad you're well."

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Ryan smiled back and looked genuinely happy to see Ivan. "Oh, I'm stupid. Boyd, Sin, this is Ivan Andel. He's a fellow R&D agent. Whenever I get sent to work with General Willis, me and Ivan are partnered up like me and Owen tend to be here."

"It's nice to meet you, Ivan," Boyd said calmly, watching Ivan idly and stopping himself from staring due to the oddity of the situation. Ivan's expression was difficult to read and for some reason it made Boyd automatically want to hide his thoughts too, as if they were in a competition-- or maybe he just felt the need to mirror the look. Considering how ridiculous that reaction was, Boyd was a bit bemused by it.

"Sit down!" Ryan encouraged, moving his chair over to make more room between he and Sin.

Ivan hesitated briefly and glanced down at his tray before looking over at Sin. His eyebrows drew together slightly and he appeared questioning. "I don't want to intrude."

"Sin doesn't care," Ryan replied quickly, looking over at Sin.

Sin looked up as if he'd just become aware of the conversation and stared at Ivan blankly. He raised an eyebrow slightly and his gaze seemed to automatically shift between Ivan and Boyd before he shrugged. "Whatever."

"That means yes," Ryan translated, beckoning Ivan closer.

After another moment of reluctance, Ivan moved closer and sat between Ryan and Sin, looking down at the bowl of pasta on his tray and going quiet. He didn't appear to be appalled by the proximity to Sin but it was apparent that it was distracting him in some way.

"So you work with General Willis?" Boyd asked after a moment. "Do you have an area of expertise?"

"I'm currently keeping track of a third of the major international terrorist organizations. My colleagues Adrianna Smith and Mark Stanley are in charge of the others," Ivan replied as he opened his carton of juice.

Boyd nodded, taking a drink of his tea and not breaking Ivan's gaze. "Have you worked in other divisions?"

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"I've mostly done work in Counter-Terror but since the two can go hand in hand I'm also in Insurgency a lot, especially when Ryan was out." Ivan glanced at Ryan again, his steady gaze taking in his friend once again before shifting back to Boyd. "R&D agents can have a lot on our plates."

"Amen to that," Ryan agreed. "Sometimes I'd prefer to be a field agent but I kind of gave up on that."

"Yeah, dude, sometimes I don't sleep for weeks it seems," Owen said in a long-suffering tone, leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet out in front of him. He crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows. "But if you were a fieldie you'd have to worry about all the dying and killing and shit and I can't decide what's more annoying."

Ivan gave another brief smile and raised his eyebrows slightly. "At least it'd be a quick end and not a long suffocation brought on by bombardments of paperwork."

"Well according to Owen, we shouldn't worry about dying anyway. He's a believer of the Reapers rumor and thinks Sin is living proof." Ryan made a face, still apparently skeptical of the entire idea but Ivan looked at Sin thoughtfully.

When Sin looked up at him, Ivan didn't drop his gaze and he tilted his head thoughtfully, some of the hair falling out of his hairband. "What makes you living proof?"

Sin eyed Ivan for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as though he were weighing different responses before he finally just said, "No comment."

Ivan didn't seem necessarily surprised by the response and his mouth twitched up into another slight smile.

Boyd was silent as he drank more tea, watching the interaction with an unreadable expression. He tried to ignore the fact that the more Ivan smiled and looked at Sin so familiarly, the more he wanted Ivan to leave.

"It's so tragic, dude," Owen said idly, frowning at Ryan and starting to rock his chair back and forth. "You grew up on compound and you still don't believe in all the cool stuff. It makes me sad for you. I think I'll light a candle in memory of your imagination. But just for the record," he added with quirked eyebrows, "the point was you *do* need to worry about dying, 'cause the Reapers'll take your soul to give you back your body."

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"You're an idiot," Sin replied blandly. There was no real bite to his tone and he just shook his head to himself before allowing his pale green eyes to drift away from the table again.

"How did that crazy Ivory Coast assignment end up?" Ryan asked, turning to Ivan. "You were in the thick of it whenever the raid happened."

Ivan shrugged and made a so-so gesture with his hand. "Things got complicated after the raid. We lost some good men and had to bring in replacements for the assignment. Chuck and Nancy were killed but they called in Kassian and Archer to help clean up the mess."

Ryan frowned thoughtfully. "Did it turn out okay after that?"

"Meh." Ivan didn't look too thrilled. "Not really. It was an ongoing thing and since Kassian was cleared for extended downtime last fall, we had to find someone else to prep and get up to speed once again but it was resolved eventually. It's just hard to fill positions of people who had such high classification-- we don't really have too many level 9 and 10 fieldies to spare."

"What about that Logan guy who was just promoted?" Owen asked curiously.

"I believe he's going to be doing a lot of Intelligence." Ivan tilted his head slightly. "I don't know much about him. I've only met him a couple of times but I've been told he's going to be used a lot in undercover assignments, so he won't be around too much."

"Ha, good luck finding replacements, then," Owen said, thumping the chair back down on all four legs and leaning against the table with exaggeratedly raised eyebrows.

"Maybe you should write a letter to Carhart asking for more promos to 9, since he's hogging all the 10's right now."

Ivan arched one blond eyebrow. "In the past I may have considered it but lately it just seems like General Carhart has a ferociously wild hair up his ass."

A startled laugh escaped Sin's mouth and he looked at Ivan again, appearing genuinely amused by the comment.

Boyd was surprised enough that he looked over at Sin immediately. He didn't let the surprise get to his expression, although his fingers tightened subtly, almost unconsciously, on his mug.

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Ivan appeared just as surprised as Boyd felt but his mouth curled up into a pleased half-smile. "Is it untrue?" he asked mildly, directing the question to Sin.

Sin just scoffed and absently ripped up a napkin, the smirk of amusement not entirely gone from his face. "Not at all."

"Don't get me wrong," Ivan added easily, his eyes still on Sin. "I have the utmost respect for him, probably more than any person of authority we have but lately I'm unsure if I'm going into his office for an assignment or a lecture over some minuscule mistake. And a lecture from General Carhart has a way of making one examine their self-worth, something I typically like to avoid."

"Why's that?" Ryan asked cluelessly, obviously never having been the recipient of such a lecture.

"Because General Carhart has a way of saying things in a way that makes you..." Ivan trailed off slightly, a thoughtful frown crossing his androgynous features.

"It makes you start to see things his way even if you initially don't want to," Sin drawled. "And then he either intentionally or not makes his case in such a way that makes it seem like he's disappointed in your decisions in a way that's more parental than condescending, so as resistant as you try to be, it's difficult not to want to improve under such scrutiny."

"Exactly." Ivan nodded, and when Sin's face began to settle back into its usual stoicism, Ivan inclined his head towards Sin slightly. "You should smile more. It's nice."

Sin stared at him oddly and said nothing in response but Ivan just shrugged and looked back to the others calmly, as if the quick exchange hadn't even happened.

Ryan's eyebrows shot up and he glanced at Boyd.

Boyd couldn't help feeling on guard due to the interaction; Sin was smiling and laughing so quickly with Ivan-- he was actually taking the time to interact and, almost annoyingly, they even seemed to be on the same wavelength.

It left Boyd feeling like his territory was being encroached upon. He wanted Ivan to stop smiling so familiarly, to move away from Sin, to stop talking about Boyd's unit, to stop acting like he knew everything. Boyd couldn't stop that irritation, which only grew when

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he realized he wouldn't have cared if Sin had interacted that way with anyone else at the table other than Ivan. That, in fact, he probably wouldn't have cared as much even if it had been Rebecca.

It was undeniable to Boyd that what he felt was jealousy, and equally undeniable that he had no right to feel that way. He'd been the one to break up, he'd been the one to encourage Sin to interact with more people. He just hadn't realized he would feel this way-- that the moment Sin seemed to have an instant connection with someone else, that he would feel jealous. He'd thought he was okay with the idea of space between them, and he still was... just not when Ivan was involved.

But because it wasn't any of his business anymore, Boyd studiously kept the tension out of his shoulders and the thoughts out of his expression, even if his fingers were still a little tight on the mug. He told himself Ivan was just being nice and it wasn't Ivan's fault anyway, or Sin's, and he didn't meet Ryan's eyes because he didn't want to risk any sense of iciness or annoyance to slide through. He just made himself drink his tea and stay silent.

Owen leaned against his hand and raised his eyebrows. "No kidding! He's a pretty cool guy but half the time I think he's ready to cap my ass for not being spic-span-and-shiny like him in the morning. Plus, have you ever gotten the Carhart Look? He's all--"

Owen sat up straight and lifted his chin, and with a completely serious expression and narrowed eyes that seemed to be hiding some sense of disapproval, he stared evenly at each of them in turn. When he spoke, it was in a surprisingly good imitation of Carhart's low voice. "Did you have anything of import to add or were you wasting our time? I'm the only one who takes anything seriously. I saw you roll your eyes; drop and give me twenty, soldier, and don't whine about it."

Ivan shook his head, looking amused, and Ryan burst out laughing although he tried to muffle it after a moment. "Aww, I love Zachary. Don't make fun of him, guys. It will make me sad."

"Nahh, we're laughing *with* him, not at him," Owen reassured Ryan as he dropped back into his typical slouch.

"Uh huh..." Ryan didn't look convinced but he grinned slightly despite himself before looking at Boyd again. His eyebrows drew together slightly and his expression turned questioning.

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Ivan followed Ryan's gaze and focused on Boyd. "What brings you and Agent Vega to the cafeteria? I don't think I've ever seen either of you here."

To eat, Boyd wanted to reply curtly but he didn't; instead, he met Ivan's gaze evenly and shrugged. "Our unit rarely interacts outside of briefings and it was lunch time so we all came here."

Ivan nodded, his eyes still on Boyd even though he didn't reply out loud.

"I wanted to go the cafe but Ryan's a pansy and wouldn't let us," Owen said in an undertone to Ivan.

Ryan's wide indigo eyes rolled and he gave Owen an exasperated look. "Geez, I'll never hear the end of this. I don't like it there and I doubt Sin would have either. They would have just been assholes the whole time."

Ivan looked at Sin again, his expression appearing mildly intrigued as if he was wondering about Sin's opinion on the matter.

"And like you said before," Ryan continued to Owen. "Then Sin would have had to kick their asses and I'd feel bad about causing him to get into an unimportant fight."

"I don't mind unimportant fights," Sin said idly, crumpling his bag of chips. "In fact I used to look forward to them. It's a good way to release tension."

"Or you could just go to the gym like you used to," Ryan retorted with a note of disapproval.

Sin shrugged uncaringly. "Or that."

Ivan twirled his fork around in the bowl of linguine, still watching Sin curiously, taking in all of Sin's motions and mannerisms. "Do you work out a lot?" he asked in the mild quiet tone he seemed to use for everything.

"Yes." Sin picked up his bottle of water and unscrewed the cap.

"I do too." Ivan paused and smiled ruefully. "I do it for meditative reasons though, not to get extremely built. Obviously..." he added, gesturing to his thin frame.

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Boyd stared at Ivan briefly then shifted in his seat and set his mug down, deciding to make more of a concentrated effort to be part of the conversation. For as much as Ivan's constant looks toward Sin were annoying him, it wasn't like Ivan was doing anything wrong, and being pissed off about something that was basically his own fault wasn't going to get him anywhere.

"Meditative?" Boyd asked, pulling some hair behind his ear and watching Ivan.

"Exercise has the ability to put me in a zen-like state, I suppose," Ivan explained, continuing to twirl his fork although he didn't take a bite. "For some reason when I'm running or even strength training, I'm able to focus on what my body is doing and push every other thought to the wayside. It's the only way I can unwind after spending hours and days at a time worrying over mission profiles and research."

This time it was Sin who looked at Ivan with mild interest.

Boyd remembered that Sin had once told him that was the same reason he exercised. He nodded and leaned back slightly in his chair. "I could see how that would be a favored pastime for you, then, especially with your position. I've really only experienced that during *retzev*." He paused briefly. "I suppose with long-distance running, too."

"What is *retzev*?" Ivan asked slowly, as if testing the word out on his tongue.

"Continuous motion of attacks in Krav Maga," Boyd replied. He noticed Owen was watching him curiously too and it occurred to him that this was probably the first time he'd mentioned anything even approximating details from the level 10 training he was going through concurrently with taking missions.

"A lot of martial arts teach you how to defend yourself but with Krav Maga, they teach you how to neutralize your enemy quickly. You go completely on the offense until your opponent is finished; you keep moving, keep attacking... You can practice *retzev* on your own too, just going through the motions of the attacks repeatedly."

"Sounds tiring," Ryan said around a mouthful of chicken strip.

"I think it sounds interesting. I've read about Krav Maga before-- it seems to be a particularly ruthless form of martial arts but an exercise like that would definitely allow me to clear my mind." Ivan seemed to be really considering the information, a thoughtful look on his serious face.

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Boyd shrugged. "You could probably choose to do continuous attacks with any martial art, depending on its teachings. If your goal is primarily for meditation, you may be more interested in something like Tai Chi, unless you actually wanted to get involved in something more ruthless like Krav Maga."

"Well, I'm not much of a fighter or else I don't perceive myself to be. Anything I take up would be strictly for exercise so it may be that Tai Chi is better for me." Ivan tilted his head in consideration, hair once again falling into his face. "Thank you, I'll look into it."

Boyd nodded and glanced past Sin, who was watching Ivan without a particular expression. The fact that Sin was paying attention to Ivan at all, though, made the spike of jealousy resurface.

He couldn't help feeling threatened by Ivan's presence, partially because Ivan and he resembled each other enough that it made it more difficult not to automatically compare, and partially because Sin was getting along with him unusually well right away. Even so, the fact he felt that way at all annoyed him.

Before Boyd could say anything, his phone suddenly rang in his messenger bag. Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly and leaned over to pull the phone out, flipping it on immediately when he saw David Nakamura's name.

"Hey little B," David said amiably before Boyd could speak. He seemed to be in an especially good mood judging by his tone. "Where are you?"

"Eating, why?" Boyd asked, confused by the phone call.

"Because you're standing me up right now and I look like a fool in the training room," David said, although a grin could be heard in his voice.

"Wh--" Boyd's eyebrows drew down further and it took him a second before he realized that this was the week his physical training switched from fully with Doug to occasionally with David, who still wasn't back to full duty from the spinal injury he'd received during the raid.

Doug had only briefly mentioned the other day that he was going to be unavailable today and Boyd was supposed to stop by the Tower's training room a few hours earlier than normal to check on David's availability, since David was supposed to be returning to work this week.

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"Oh, shit," he said more urgently, automatically grabbing his messenger bag as he stood. "I completely forgot; I'm sorry."

"I won't beat your ass in training this time but next time..." David let the sentence trail off ominously.

Boyd couldn't help a half grin; he knew David was in a great mood because he was finally able to do some more hands-on training. "Yeah, just try it, gimp," he said in genuine amusement and he heard David laugh on the other side.

"Just get over here," David said with a chuckle and suddenly hung up.

Boyd flipped his phone closed with an amused smile then looked at the others, his expression becoming more serious as he glanced past Sin and Ivan, although he didn't make it an obvious transition. "I have to go."

"What? Why?" Ryan frowned, appearing truly disappointed. "We've barely been here."

Sin just shook his head and gave Boyd a look that could only be interpreted as, 'why the hell did you suggest this and bring me here if you had something to do?'

"I have training," Boyd said, looking at Ryan first then letting his gaze settle on Sin slightly apologetically. "David's back. I forgot Doug told me he wouldn't be around today and to stop by early to see if David was available."

"Oh hey, the legend's back?" Owen asked in interest, perking up. "No lasting injuries or whatever?"

"He's cleared for some of the lighter duties of training but won't be able to go completely hands-on or full duty for another few months, most likely," Boyd replied, opening his messenger bag and dropping his phone inside. "He should eventually be back to normal, they're hoping. But he has expertise in certain areas Doug doesn't so they're sending me to him for some of my training from now on whenever Doug is unavailable."

Owen nodded thoughtfully and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "Got it, home boy," he said seriously.

Boyd quirked an eyebrow at him then shook his head slightly to himself and turned to leave. "Bye."

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"I'll talk to you later," Ryan called after him, still looking disappointed.

Boyd nodded and raised a hand in a farewell wave but didn't turn around or pause as he hurried out of the cafeteria.

Part II

Music blasted from the stereo, the singers alternating between screams and more melodic singing, while incredibly fast drums blasted in the background. The new sound system Kassian had installed in his truck was nearly overwhelming in its intensity, making it even louder since the windows were rolled up. Kassian was really getting into the song, drumming and occasionally banging his hands against the steering wheel as he drove, alternating between singing and shouting the lyrics to Fear Factory's song Corporate Cloning.

Boyd leaned back in the passenger seat, his purchases from the music store they'd just visited in his lap as he smiled sidelong at Kassian. He would have said something but it was too loud to have a proper conversation so instead he just relaxed and enjoyed music that he wouldn't have chosen for himself but liked anyway.

Kassian was just turning them down one of the main streets through the city when Boyd felt his bag vibrate. He immediately pulled out his phone, and as soon as he saw Ryan's name he flipped the phone open even as he reached over and turned the music down. Kassian was in the middle of belting out an especially loud part and cut himself off when he realized the background music was no longer at that level. He made a face at Boyd, who only grinned teasingly.

"Hey Ryan," Boyd said into the phone.

"Boyd! You're not busy, are you?"

Boyd automatically glanced at Kassian. "Not exactly but Kassian and I were just about to get some food. Why?"

"I wanted to talk to you about some stuff," Ryan said, undeterred. "Would you guys mind if I tagged along?"

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"I don't think so but hold on," Boyd said, looking over at Kassian with a quirked eyebrow as he covered the phone. "Ryan had something to talk about and wants to meet us for food."

Kassian shrugged. "If you want to. I don't mind."

Boyd nodded then said into the phone, "That's fine. Do you need a ride?"

"Well I was gonna suggest Cafe Milan and I could walk there but if you wanna go anywhere else, I'll need a ride."

Boyd shook his head even though Ryan couldn't see it. "No, I know where that is. That's fine; we'll head there. We can meet you in about," he looked out the window to see where they were, "ten, fifteen minutes. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, that's great! Awesome." The line disconnected after that.

After flipping closed the phone and sliding it into his messenger bag, he looked over at Kassian. "Do you know where Cafe Milan is?"

"Yeah." Kassian took an abrupt turn, cutting off other people in the process. They drove silently for a moment before Kassian said slowly, "So I could just drop you off..."

"There's no reason for that unless it's what you'd prefer," Boyd said with a shrug, then looked over at Kassian. "It didn't sound like Ryan would mind if you were there; if anything, he'd probably prefer it since you didn't get to come with us last time."

"Blah." Kassian leaned his head back against the seat and pushed his sunglasses up his nose, stopping at a red light. "I guess I'll go. I don't want him to think I hate his guts or anything. I just don't feel very social."

"I doubt it will be long but if you feel the need to get out of it in the middle you can always make up an excuse," Boyd said reasonably and pulled some hair behind his ear. "Like you have another date with Christina."

There was a brief pause as Kassian switched lanes to go around one of the slow moving and decrepit city buses before he shook his head slightly. "It's fine. I'll go. I wouldn't use her as an excuse anyway."

"How did your date go with her, by the way?" Boyd asked curiously after a moment.

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"Eh." Kassian seemed to be in the mood to express his thoughts in nonwords. "I keep making a valiant effort to like spending time with her but I just don't. I'm pretty sure that was the last time I'll be seeing her."

"Why don't you?" Boyd asked, belatedly putting the bag of music into his messenger bag, before putting it on the floor.

"She's kind of annoying," Kassian admitted reluctantly, lips turning down in disappointment. "She's so into consumerism and capitalism. It's kind of disgusting, especially in this day and age when the average person is hovering just above the poverty level. I just sit there and debate with her constantly about our differing views. She thinks it's because I'm from a working class background, like I'm bitter-- I just think she's a stuck-up bitch."

"Ah," Boyd said, leaning an arm against the door along the window and tilting his head toward Kassian. "I wasn't around her long but I suppose from the bit I saw, I could see that being the case. That's too bad."

Kassian just gave a faint shrug. "I guess. She asked too many questions, though, so it's probably for the best. She was really hung up on the fact that I work for the government but could afford to pay for a vehicle in cash. After all of her talk about how poor people just need to work harder to get where wealthy people have made it, I'm surprised she cared about where the money came from as long as she knew I had it."

"Wow," Boyd said, raising his eyebrows. "If she actually said that, I would have been annoyed too."

"See what I mean?" Kassian shook his head, frowning. "And it's really rare to find someone who holds views like that outside of the really wealthy people. After the war it seemed like people like her-- so focused on material things and shit like that-- I dunno man, I can't even believe she exists. It doesn't make sense. She's a saleswoman at a dealership-- she lives in a one room crappy ass apartment in order to afford all of the other shit she thinks she needs. It's ridiculous."

"Maybe she works there so she'll find Mr. Right who also happens to be Mr. Rich," Boyd said with a shrug.

"Well good luck to her with that venture," Kassian muttered, reaching over to turn up the music again although it was at a more tolerable volume.

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Mutual silence fell between them as the music took over the truck again and Boyd idly looked out the window. Within a few minutes, they arrived at Cafe Milan and, after taking a bit to find a parking space, they went into the coffee shop. It was interesting that Ryan had chosen the same establishment for his meeting place as Ann had; although it could have been simply due to its location near the compound, Boyd wondered if it was also because the Connors and Ryan had visited the place in the past on anything approximating family outings.

Ryan was already seated at a table toward the back and smiled when he saw them enter and head toward him. Boyd smiled slightly in return once at the table. "Were you waiting long?" he asked as he pulled his messenger bag off his shoulder, set it on the floor just under the table, and sat down. He pulled some hair behind his ear that had started to fall into his eyes, although half of it fell forward again anyway.

"Not really. Hey Kassian!" Ryan smiled at the other man as he sat down beside Boyd.

Kassian pulled off his sunglasses and set them down on the table, stretching his long legs out in front of him and nodding at Ryan amiably. "How are you?"

"Doing good. I've had some time on my hands the last couple of days since that follow-up got cancelled," Ryan replied, taking a sip from the glass that was sitting in front of him on the table.

Kassian nodded, looking thoughtful now that the mission had been mentioned. "I'm kind of disappointed about that actually. I was wondering what they were up to out there."

"Well," Ryan started, looking at Boyd and Kassian in turn. "Carhart called me and Owen in and we went over all of the data again but honestly, there's no reason to go in there and make it obvious that we're aware of that location yet. He decided that our best bet is to hand it over to the Euro division and have them continuously surveil it to see if we can learn anything of import."

"Hmm." Boyd rested his arms on the armrests and leaned back in the chair, shifting his feet so they weren't kicking his messenger bag. "Will we get updates on it if anything of import is seen or is it completely in their jurisdiction now?"

"They're just watch-dogging for us right now," Ryan replied and shook his head back and forth as though he wanted to get off the topic. "I didn't call you here to talk about work, though."

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Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly. "What did you want to talk about, then?"

Ryan made a face. "Did you really think I called you here to talk about a mission that isn't gonna happen? Geez. No, I wanted to talk to you about Hs--Sin, actually."

Boyd nearly rolled his eyes. "Well, no, but it could have been about work in general," he said, tone amiable. He raised his eyebrows slightly and watched Ryan idly. "Anyway, what about him?"

Ryan looked at Boyd seriously and sighed, looking like he was about to start but then he shook his head. "Maybe we should order something so we're not just sitting here like weirdoes. Like it's the three of us sharing my soda."

At first, Boyd watched Ryan a little more suspiciously, wondering why he was hesitating but in the end he simply nodded. "Alright."

He looked around until he noticed the nearest waitress and got her attention. She came over and handed them each a menu, waiting while they quickly perused the choices. Once they had ordered, she collected the menus and left.

"Why are we here talking about Sin?" Kassian asked with a raised eyebrow, staring at Ryan.

"Well, Boyd mentioned to me that he thought Sin should broaden his horizons as far as having friends and being around other people then, well, him, and I think it's a great idea." Ryan shifted in his seat, a grin finding its way onto his pale face.

"I did say that," Boyd agreed, giving Ryan a somewhat odd look. "What does that have to do with this?"

"Because I was thinking about things since Wednesday and I think Sin has serious potential. I'm super shocked that he's actually making an effort," Ryan said, completely switching from his use of Sin's real name. He only seemed to say 'Hsin' when it was just he and Boyd. "After Carhart called me and Owen in not too long after you left, he didn't even leave. He stayed after with Ivan."

Kassian tilted his head questioningly. "Ivan, the R&D agent?"

"Uh huh," Ryan nodded.

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Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly at the information but he caught himself almost immediately and forced his expression back to neutral. The information surprised him and, he had to admit, didn't particularly sit well with him. It was unusual for Sin to remain around other people any longer than necessary so it seemed especially telling that Sin had with Ivan.

But even following that acknowledgment, he had to grudgingly admit that in truth that was good; Ivan and Sin had seemed to have some things in common and, really, why shouldn't Sin hang around someone he could talk to about topics he was interested in? It was exactly what Boyd had been hoping for so he needed to get over the fact that for some reason something about Ivan put Boyd on edge.

"He really does seem to be making an effort," Boyd agreed. "I suppose that must mean he saw some merit in the suggestion."

"He must have," Ryan agreed. "He seemed to get along with Ivan. I talked to Ivan recently and, well it wasn't like they hung out together and became best friends, but he mentioned that Sin didn't immediately leave or pull his smart-ass routine either."

Kassian didn't look too surprised by the information and he continued to stare at Ryan oddly. "Well, I know Ivan and he's a pretty chill guy to be around. If Vega was going to get along with anyone, I'm not surprised it's someone like him. But I still fail to see why this was so urgent..."

Ryan made a face at Kassian and pushed his thick black glasses up his nose. "Well, I got to thinking about maybe trying to hook Sin up with someone. Like to date."

Boyd blinked. The thought hadn't even occurred to him to recommend such a thing, especially since Sin had made it clear he thought it unlikely he could even find friends. For the moment, the idea itself and the fact that Ryan had suggested it was too surprising for Boyd to even think about it clearly. "What?"

Kassian looked at Boyd sidelong but didn't comment as he took a long sip of the water the waitress had brought to their table.

"Well," Ryan started in the same reasonable tone. "I've really been giving this some thought, it's not just me trying to play matchmaker and I think it would be good for him. Yeah trying to make friends would be great for him, but if he actually actively went on a date with someone or even more than one person, it'd be him having a one-on-one connection with them and not just having someone to say hi to on the compound."

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"Makes sense," Kassian said around his cup.

"He's doubtful enough he'd be able to make friends," Boyd said, drawing his eyebrows down slightly and watching Ryan more closely. He was trying not to think about this as anything other than an objective suggestion but that was difficult with the words 'date' and 'Sin' in the same sentence. "The fact that he's willing to try for that is one thing but why do you think he'd want to date anyone? Not to mention, dating introduces other aspects that could make it all the more awkward if it doesn't go well, which would be defeating the point."

"How do you know he wouldn't want to?" Kassian asked, raising both blond eyebrows this time. "You think he's never going to get involved with anyone again?"

"I don't know if he'd want to or not but I don't see why we're throwing this idea out there the second he decides to maybe take our advice about trying to make friends," Boyd said evenly, looking over at Kassian. "He's already so doubtful about finding anyone to be friends with that the suggestion right now of anything more seems sudden. If he wants to date someone why can't he just decide it on his own without us interfering?"

"Well I'm sure Ryan wasn't planning to attempt some kind of blind date surprise attack," Kassian replied with a shrug, his eyes tracking the waitress as she approached with their food. "What's the big deal if he actually agrees to it?"

The waitress dropped off their food, briefly mixing up Kassian's pizza with Ryan's sandwich before disappearing into the kitchen area again.

Boyd was trying to ignore the discomfort and jealousy he felt at the idea of Sin actually agreeing. In the two years he and Sin had been together, it had been rare for them to just spend time together. Although they'd occasionally spent time together simply for fun, even in Monterrey most of the time they'd just had sex. In that way, they'd never managed to have a real relationship. Despite the chemistry between them, even Boyd had never gotten the opportunity to date Sin.

The idea of Sin automatically making the effort to do that with someone else, to spend time with someone else simply for fun despite having just met them, and for someone else to experience something Boyd wished he had-- there was no denying that it hurt to think of that.

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But he had no right to say that aloud. Whatever he felt was inconsequential and he wasn't about to selfishly try to impose on Sin's life just because something upset him. It wouldn't be right and it certainly wouldn't be fair.

"Well, obviously he can do whatever he wants," Boyd replied calmly as he pulled his plate of lemon pepper fish closer.

"Obviously," Kassian agreed, a smirk playing on his lips.

Ryan looked at the two of them strangely before clearing his throat. "Anyway, so assuming Sin goes along with it I have someone in mind already but I'd like to give him options but I don't really talk to that many people about him to know who'd be a good candidate to suggest. Any thoughts?"

Boyd shook his head and looked down at the fish as he started to cut it into pieces. He wasn't going to say no to this but there was no way he was participating in choices.

Kassian observed Ryan thoughtfully for a moment, his food sitting untouched as he appeared to debate something. It was obvious that he was championing Ryan's idea. "I don't know any gay guys but there's a woman I'm familiar with who would be interested."

"Really?" Ryan asked around a mouthful of roast beef. "Who?"

"Jenny White. She's a level 9 field agent in Intelligence, valentine op." Kassian finally picked up a piece of his mini-pizza. "But I wouldn't actually recommend her."

Ryan looked disappointed at that and shifted in his chair. "Why? I know her-- she's really pretty and funny."

"Because while I think he'd enjoy her in a sexual sense," Kassian cocked an eyebrow, "they don't have anything in common, I doubt he'd even agree, and she just wants to fuck him for the notoriety."

"Oh." This time Ryan made a face, obviously nixing the idea.

Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly; as if Sin didn't have enough going on, the idea of someone wanting to use Sin even more just to become infamous themselves annoyed Boyd. Thankfully, Ryan didn't look like he was going to push her as a candidate because if so, Boyd would have certainly argued against it.

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"She's off the list then," Boyd said decisively before taking a bite of fish and looking at Ryan. "Who did you already have in mind?"

Ryan hesitated briefly and looked from Boyd to Kassian. After a pause he shrugged and said, "Ivan."

Boyd very briefly paused with his fork just spearing the next piece of fish and he watched Ryan for a moment. He wasn't surprised by that given the fact that Ryan had brought the topic up shortly after mentioning Ivan's name.

But still-- of all people... Not Rebecca, who at least seemed honestly nice and quietly awkward; not someone else who Boyd hadn't felt on guard about since meeting him. Ivan's presence made Boyd feel like he had to compete with the man; like Ivan was starting up where Boyd had left off, taking over the space that Boyd had left vacant.

The annoyance regarding Ivan hadn't fully dissipated but he did his best to ignore it. Although Ivan had seemed interested in Sin at the table and Sin had actually interacted with him in return, Boyd couldn't quite stop himself from asking, "Why him?"

"Well, first of all he's one of the few people that never judged Sin based on the stuff everyone says. Whenever I mentioned the unit or you or Sin in the past, he never gave any indication that he ever believed any of the stuff." Ryan's eyes met Boyd's and he smiled slightly. "That's pretty important, I thought. That's the main reason why Sin has so much trouble with people here in general. 'Cause they judge him."

Boyd considered that for a long moment then decided that if he was going to be honest, it was true that if Ryan was determined to go through with this, then someone who was open-minded was a necessity. It was too bad that person wasn't someone else but it was probably good fortune that someone so nonjudgmental had been found right away. In the end, he just nodded noncommittally.

"I didn't know he was gay," Kassian commented idly, wiping sauce from his mouth onto a napkin. "Although I guess I always assumed he was just because of the way he looks."

"Yeah he's a little androgynous, but Sin was hot for Boyd so I figured he likes that type of thing?" Ryan asked, eyebrows raised slightly as if he were waiting for the two of them to confirm his reasoning.

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Kassian just gave a half-grin and didn't say anything.

Boyd couldn't bring himself to comment on that because the similarities between his appearance and Ivan's was a large part of his discomfort with the entire idea. If that aspect didn't exist, it would have been easier to look at things objectively and not feel like Ivan was going to take over where he had left off-- to move in and confuse matters when Boyd had been trying to give he and Sin space to figure things out. To figure themselves out.

He just shrugged and hoped Ryan wouldn't press it.

"Anyway, he's really attracted to Sin. I could tell anyway but he confirmed it on the phone-- he said it was too bad that Sin was so unavailable to everyone because he'd like to really get to know him more." Ryan picked up his sandwich again. "So I wanted to like-- broach the topic to Sin but I wanted to tell you first. Get your opinion and stuff."

Boyd was silent at first, taking a drink of water as he tried to think objectively. When no one else immediately spoke, Boyd realized that Ryan was waiting for him to respond. Boyd set his glass down and met Ryan's eyes.

"Bring the subject up to Sin if you want," he said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "It's up to him what he wants to do."

Kassian scoffed into his drink and Ryan just looked confused. "Do you not like Ivan?" he asked with a disappointed frown.

No, Boyd wanted to say, but he truly had no reason to feel that way other than because Ivan liked Sin. Instead, he sighed quietly and leaned back in his chair. "I hardly know him." He paused briefly and added so it wasn't completely obvious that he was against it, "But Sin seemed interested in talking to him, which is rare, and they seemed to have some things in common."

Ryan nodded, once again enthusiastic. "I mean I know it seems far-fetched, Sin of all people being set up with someone, but the fact that we're always so quick to be like 'yeah, Sin would never do that' kind of sucks because we're not even giving him a chance and these are things that probably wouldn't occur to him on his own to go after, right?"

He shook his head, unruly black hair falling around his face in disarray before he blew some of his bangs out of his eyes. "And I think this would help him get over you, if he

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found someone else to spend time with and stuff so he wasn't always alone. I mean, you moved on-- I just want to give him a chance to do the same. I feel bad for him sometimes because it seems like it's impossible for him to ever find someone else because of the way he is and the compound and stuff so Ivan just... I don't know. I just thought it's an opportunity."

Boyd didn't feel like he'd 'moved on' the way Ryan was trying to get Sin to-- just because Boyd sometimes had sex with a friend didn't mean he felt anything romantic for Kassian.

Yet even if Boyd said no right now, even if he tried to get back together with Sin as if to fend off competition, nothing would have changed between the two of them. If anything, that would have just proven the point more. They were still messed up, it was just that now they both realized it.

Precisely because they were dysfunctional, Boyd had been pushing for Sin to get friends. It wouldn't be fair for Boyd to say it shouldn't be anything beyond that, especially because Ryan was right that Sin wouldn't think of it on his own and that everyone automatically assumed he wouldn't do certain things. If Boyd truly wanted to be a good friend to Sin, he had to agree to this, regardless of how it made him feel.

And Boyd did truly want Sin to have a chance to live as much of a normal life as he could on compound-- Boyd just hadn't realized how strongly it would make him feel the first time something like this came up. As he thought about it, Boyd realized how selfish and unfair he was being about it all.

Boyd had to tell himself all of this very firmly before he could make himself nod. "Sin deserves any chances for happiness there are for him," he said, truly meaning that even if it hurt to think that such chances wouldn't necessarily include him. "And he deserves options."

"Great!" Ryan crowed, gesturing at Boyd with his half eaten sandwich. "So you'll go with me to talk to him?"

"What?" Boyd asked in surprise.

"Well, you're really the only person he'd listen to," Ryan said reasonably. "At least if you're there he'd give it more thought or think it's more credible."

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Boyd automatically glanced toward Kassian, who was watching him knowingly. He could tell that Kassian was aware of how reluctant Boyd was about this idea, that it stemmed from jealousy, and Boyd met Ryan's eyes again. Boyd wished he could make himself feel okay about this idea but he just couldn't. He didn't want to be the one suggesting all this to Sin but he would go with if Ryan did the talking. He just didn't want to say that here with Kassian's gaze burning into him.

"When were you planning to go?" Boyd asked instead.

"In the next couple of days," Ryan replied happily around a mouthful of roast beef and potato chips. "He just went on a mission today but he should be back soon."

"Okay." Boyd picked up his fork and tilted his head slightly as he watched Ryan. "Call me when you're going, then."

Ryan agreed and the rest of the meal passed uneventfully. It didn't take long until they were parting ways, with Ryan turning in the direction of his apartment building with a cheerful wave, saying he wanted to walk when asked if he needed a ride.

Boyd and Kassian headed toward the truck without really speaking, and the silence continued at first when Kassian started to drive them toward their neighborhood. Boyd stared out the passenger window as the buildings passed, his elbow against the door and chin propped on his hand.

"Does Ryan know about us?" Kassian asked seemingly out of nowhere, glancing over at Boyd through the darkened lenses of his sunglasses.

Boyd looked over, dropping his hand into his lap. "No. I told him I was sleeping with someone else on and off but didn't specify who." He leaned back in the seat and watched Kassian with a slight frown. "I suppose it's possible he could make assumptions on his own but I never told him you're bi."

"Well, I think he has an idea of it," Kassian replied stiffly.

"He might, but I wouldn't indicate to anyone your sexual orientation or imply we're anything other than friends," Boyd said, drawing his eyebrows down. "Not unless you told me it was alright-- not even Ryan, even though I know he could be trusted. The only person I told about us was Sin and that was obviously extenuating circumstances you knew about ahead of time."

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Kassian grunted and drove silently for a moment, turning off the main avenue and taking the side streets to their neighborhood. "Well, if he does have some idea and he lets you in on it, you better tell him to keep his mouth shut about it."

Boyd watched Kassian a moment then looked out the window again, eyes narrowed slightly. He couldn't help feeling mildly insulted by Kassian's attitude; the man had no problem fucking Boyd until he screamed behind closed doors, he didn't hesitate to whisper in Boyd's ear how his androgyny turned him on so much, or didn't hold himself back from coming in Boyd's mouth-- yet the way Kassian said that made it seem like being attracted to men was bad, like it was shameful or embarrassing.

And as much as Boyd liked Kassian and thought he was easy to get along with, that didn't sit well with Boyd, who felt that a significant portion of his identity dealt with the fact that he was gay.

Although Boyd had no doubts that Kassian preferred women above men and that didn't bother Boyd in the least, he still didn't appreciate the implications-- Not only that Boyd would be a bad enough friend to tell others about something he specifically knew Kassian wanted to remain confidential but also that there was something wrong about wanting another man.

It was the first time Boyd saw Kassian in another light; the first time Kassian said something that made Boyd feel like there was something inherently wrong with himself simply because of something as natural to him as his sexual orientation. The first time Kassian made Boyd feel inadequate.

Familiar buildings and houses he'd driven by many times flashed by them and he focused on them for a moment before he said evenly, "Okay."

There was another silence before Kassian once again broke it. "And what was that all about anyway?"

At first, Boyd didn't answer as he continued to stare out the window; he knew Kassian was referring to the conversation and probably Boyd's reactions, but he didn't know how much he immediately wanted to discuss it.

"The suggestion caught me off guard," he said with a one-shouldered shrug.

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"Oh, so you didn't originally plan to begrudge poor Vega a date?" Kassian asked with a smirk.

Boyd made a face, his reflection pale in the window. He was mildly frustrated by the fact that Kassian was probably not going to let this go, although at least the other man was being somewhat lighthearted about it.

"Considering the fact I never even got to date him, the thought did cross my mind." Boyd forced some of the tension that had built in his shoulders to release; he crossed his arms and leaned back in the seat with a sigh, looking over at Kassian. "But obviously that wouldn't be very fair."

"You were all jealous and mad," Kassian commented, shaking his head. "Captain Oblivious didn't seem to notice though but I couldn't decide if it was hilarious or ridiculously selfish."

"I didn't say no to it, did I?" Boyd asked stiffly. "I'm even going with him to Sin's."

"That's not the point," Kassian retorted. "It's just the fact that you're mad about it all-- that you originally tried to shoot down the idea by saying it might be awkward for him before his opinion was even weighed into the equation. It was pretty lame, kid."

Boyd frowned, kicking his feet out in front of him, arms still crossed and eyes narrowing.

He felt a spike of irritation with Kassian-- combined with the older man's earlier comment, it almost felt like Kassian was attacking Boyd. But Boyd knew that wasn't true and that his interpretation was probably just skewed due to his mood. After having spent the last half hour aware of how unfair and illogical his feelings and reactions were, he didn't exactly feel like listening to Kassian point out even more how he was a failure at life.

"I don't know why you think I wouldn't feel anything about this," Boyd replied in a strong, even-tempered tone as he stared out the window. "I know I'm just being jealous, I know it's stupid to feel that way, especially since I've been the one pushing all this. I just didn't expect the idea of him dating others to come up so soon and I didn't realize how much it would bother me. I'm trying to ignore that reaction because I know how unfair it is to Sin."

"Well kid, you're the one who started immediately fucking me and said Sin had no reason to be bothered by it if he wanted to be your friend so I was pretty surprised to

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see you initially trying to discourage Ryan from setting the dude up on a date that probably won't even work out," Kassian replied, matter-of-fact. "I'm not trying to get on your case or anything but I'm just letting you know my opinion on the matter. You're not the only one allowed to have fun. If Sin wants to get laid, you should be happy for him because he's not beating himself up over you anymore."

"I know," Boyd said with a frown, looking out the window again.

The irritation strengthened, especially with Kassian's mention of Boyd fucking him immediately. Kassian was the one who came onto Boyd first and it wasn't like the first time Boyd stopped by the man's house he was jumping in his pants. But Boyd knew Kassian hadn't meant it that way and he couldn't deny the truth that it would be hypocritical to tell Sin he couldn't do something he himself had.

"It just threw me off," Boyd said with eyes narrowed distractedly. "You and I, we're friends who happen to fuck so it's not like there are any feelings between us. Our relationship was purely friendship for months before anything else even came up. But the idea of Sin right away dating anyone..." He shook his head. "I don't know. It just hit home that he may start actually getting involved with others, he may care for someone else eventually."

Boyd sighed in annoyance with himself and ran his hands over his face. "I think in the back of my mind I was thinking with enough time maybe we'd get back together again. But if he finds someone else to like, that won't happen." He dropped his hands into his lap and shook his head. "But it doesn't matter because you're right. If I'm messing around he should get to too, and the fact that it bothers me like it bothered him just proves even more I need to work on my issues. Especially since I do want him to be happy so if that's what makes him happy then that's what he should do."

"I thought you didn't want to get back together with him," Kassian said, confusion obvious in his voice as he turned onto his street. "Shit-- did you want me to drop you off home or were you still coming over?"

"It doesn't matter; it's not exactly a strenuous walk regardless of if I stay," Boyd said with a shrug.

He leaned forward to grab his messenger bag off the floor and set it on his lap, his expression and tone turning pensive. "I don't want to get back together with him if things haven't changed and I don't know if we're capable of what's needed to make it work. Right now, we would just end up where we started since nothing has changed, but

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maybe I subconsciously thought if we had enough time the issues would be fixed. But it's possible... Maybe there's someone out there who's far better for him than I ever was, anyway." He shrugged uncomfortably, for some reason not liking that idea and feeling frustrated with himself for feeling that way.

Kassian took the keys out of the ignition and looked over at Boyd. After a moment he just shook his head slightly and opened his door. "You two are a wreck."

"I know," Boyd said with a sigh as he got out of the truck, shutting the door behind him.

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Boyd leaned against the wall between Sin's kitchen and the living room, arms crossed as he tried not to look at Sin, whose hard muscles gleamed with a coat of sweat, the planes of his body unhidden as he sat shirtless on the edge of the couch. His pants were low-slung as usual and Boyd made it a point to keep his eyes up on Sin's face and away from any other part of his body that Boyd wanted to run his gaze over instead.

Apparently, when Ryan had called Sin, he'd caught him in the midst of working out. Boyd wished Sin had taken the time to put a shirt on before he'd let them in.

To keep himself from staring at Sin, Boyd looked around the apartment. The place looked basically the same as it always did, but when his gaze passed through the kitchen, he noticed a pile of books on the table that he hadn't seen before. It was difficult to see books piled there and to avoid remembering the day he'd first brought a stack of books over for Sin; when their attraction to each other had first been growing and they had seemed so close to kissing.

Boyd looked away from the kitchen table abruptly, mildly irritated with himself because thinking about the better times didn't make the worse disappear, and the impending conversation that he'd been dragged into participating in would probably make moments like the one in his memory be that much further away.

At the same time, he found himself doubting whether Sin would even want to go along with this anyway, and he couldn't deny that he secretly hoped Sin would immediately say no. Not because Boyd wanted Sin to pine after him but because of the implications it would have if he agreed.

Boyd's gaze automatically drifted to Sin again, studying that familiar, blank expression as Sin's captivating green eyes stared at Ryan, unimpressed. Sin seemed to be waiting

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for Ryan to speak, but for all that Ryan had shown enthusiasm in Cafe Milan, he now seemed nervous as he kept examining Sin then looking away. The mood was more awkward than tense and Boyd simply stayed quiet with a neutral expression in the background.

"Are you going to speak, or what?" Sin asked finally, frowning at Ryan as he sat back on the couch and wiped a hand across his sweaty face.

"Um..." Ryan glanced over at Boyd helplessly but seemed to remember that he'd agreed to do all the talking because he cleared his throat almost immediately and returned his gaze to Sin. "I wanted to talk to you."

Sin's eyes narrowed at Ryan impatiently.

"About... a thing... that I... thought up..." Ryan said slowly, pursing his lips tightly together as he winced.

"Yes?" Sin looked a cross between exasperated and irritated as he arched one dark eyebrow and shot a questioning look toward Boyd.

"Well, see," Ryan burst out finally. "I think you're great. And I think that you should be friends with other people who think you're great and that since there's other people who think that and they're like, around, you should look into spending time with them so your little circle is not just limited to like. Boyd. And me on the sidelines looking dumb most of the time. Right?"

"I have no indication as to what you're babbling about, Ryan," Sin replied flatly.

Ryan sighed, an explosion of air that lifted his feathery bangs and tousled them even more than they already were. "Okay, let me ask you a question."

Sin just stared at him blankly so Ryan frowned and continued. "If there was someone you got along with, and they were interested in spending time with you, a person who is *not* in our unit-- would you agree?"

Sin's blank expression turned thoughtful and his gaze switched from Ryan to a close examination of Boyd. He seemed to be turning the question over in his mind, analyzing it and perhaps even wondering if this was actually all Boyd's idea judging by the way Sin's gaze sharpened on his partner.

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It wouldn't have been too surprising-- Boyd had been pushing the idea of Sin making friends since their mission in China but the major difference this time was that Sin didn't automatically look suspicious or annoyed by the suggestion. That was a positive sign; a sign that he wasn't automatically distrustful and negative about Boyd's motives.

"Why do you ask?" Sin queried finally.

"Obviously because such a person exists," Ryan replied, a grin making its way onto his pale face. "Why else would I ask?" Sin stared at Ryan skeptically and opened his mouth to speak but Ryan added hurriedly, "And it's someone you recently met."

"Are you talking about Ivan?" Sin asked finally, appearing to once again grow impatient with Ryan's roundabout approach.

"Yes. He's interested in getting to know you. He thinks you're intriguing." Ryan's previous confidence about the idea seemed to have abandoned him entirely because now that Ivan's name had been mentioned, the nervousness appeared to set in again. He shifted from foot to foot, chewing on the side of his lip as he stared at Sin seriously.

"I know your first response is gonna be to say no, but just think on it. He's a cool guy, really mellow, smart, you two have stuff in common-- working out and reading and stuff. Also, the fact that you actually talked to him says you must have thought he was okay. I mean, how many people do you actually get along with right off the bat?" Ryan asked rhetorically.

Boyd kept his expression completely unreadable but watched Sin closely, trying to gauge what he thought, watching for his reaction. For some reason, it bothered him that Sin had automatically brought up Ivan's name; it was a stupid thing to feel because who else would it have been, yet it also showed that Sin hadn't completely dismissed the man from his memory.

It made it even worse for Boyd to realize with a twist in his stomach that even he and Sin hadn't gotten along right away, they hadn't for months after they'd first met. That was partially circumstances, or so Boyd thought, but what if Sin had met Ivan instead at that time... Would it have been different? Boyd didn't like the doubt and uncertainty that shifted within him at the question.

Sin was silent for another stretch of time as he appeared to take Ryan's comments into actual consideration instead of just brushing them off. He lifted a hand and ran it

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through his hair idly before shrugging his broad shoulders. "If you think I'm going to go seeking him out and try to become friends, you're deluded."

"But--"

"I didn't say I'm disagreeing, that I didn't find him to be a completely ridiculous person like 99% of the other people who work here, but that doesn't mean I'm going to run after him like a desperate idiot when I don't even care about having friends or connections in the first place," Sin added flatly, leaving little room for argument.

Ryan tilted his head thoughtfully and studied Sin with slightly narrowed blue eyes before asking, "Okay but what if he sought you out? Would you scare him off just for the heck of it?"

Once again Sin studied Boyd and Ryan in turn before he said, "No. I don't see the reason for such behavior anymore."

"Excellent!" Ryan crowed, pumping his fist in a gesture of success as he grinned happily.

Sin just stared at Ryan and appeared completely nonplussed at his reaction before he finally spoke directly to Boyd, "Why are you here? To morally support his ridiculous behavior?"

Boyd studied Sin for a long moment, wanting to tell that Sin this hadn't been his idea, that he wasn't supporting it by being here... That he felt conflicted by this entire situation.

But in the end he ignored all of his discomfort and jealousy and shrugged. Boyd pushed himself away from the wall, sliding his hands into his pockets and watching Sin with unreadable honey brown eyes partially hidden by his hair. "I'm here for accompaniment," he said calmly.

Sin crossed his arms over his chest loosely and studied Boyd. "And what do you think about this?"

Boyd knew as he stared into Sin's intense green eyes that Sin was honestly asking his opinion and Boyd felt his reservations and self-doubt shift and crumble. It showed that Sin was thinking of him like a friend, a confidant, and that after weeks of awkwardness they'd somehow managed to reach that point again. The knowledge made Boyd no

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longer think about what he wanted in this-- he thought instead about what was best for Sin.

"I think it's difficult enough for you to find people at the Agency who haven't prejudged you," Boyd said slowly. "So it's not a bad idea for you to make connections with people you're interested in. And I think if you find you want to do something, you should do it. There aren't many things that you seem to truly want or like so when you find them, you should probably explore them in some capacity."

"Well, I never said I wanted to do anything." Sin shrugged. "I just won't deliberately sabotage someone who doesn't have bad intentions like I used to do in the past. It's a foolish way to behave and just makes my own situation worse. I realized that recently."

Boyd nodded, glad to hear that Sin had reached such a conclusion because he thought it would ultimately make Sin's life easier.

"Well, I think all of this is great," Ryan said cheerfully, practically beaming from ear to ear. "I have high hopes."

Yet Boyd's feelings were the inverse of Ryan's, because it felt like either way something was going to go wrong.

TwoStep

Enemy. My enemy, your enemy-- the enemy. This term has become convoluted to the extent of abstraction and one can never be certain of what exactly it means.

I watched Jaime rail against the enemy-- against people he didn't know, people he didn't understand, and define them with information that he has been spoon-fed by an oligopoly that tells us what to think.

"Good choice."

Sin looked up from the page he'd just flipped to and his gaze focused on Ivan. He was looking down at Sin with one of his subtle half-smiles on his face, holding a disc and a backpack, dressed in his typically grungy uniform of cargo pants tucked into beat up combat boots and a too-big t-shirt under an open flannel shirt.

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Ivan shrugged the green camo-colored backpack onto one shoulder after he slipped the disc away inside the front pocket, looking at Sin through the blond hair that still managed to escape his backwards cap.

"Excuse me?" Sin asked, sitting up in the arm chair he'd been sprawled in as he shut the book and let it sit on the arm of the chair.

He'd grown bored of the white walls of his apartment, something that had been occurring lately after months of isolating himself from the rest of the world, and had come to the library on the fourteenth floor to start on the second book from his newly acquired collection.

Ivan pointed at the book-- a thin paperback edition that was matte black with the title in white cursive letters. "*The Egress of Word*, by Ian Stone. I have the first edition-- the hardcover. It's brilliant."

Sin looked down at the book and raised an eyebrow, somehow unsurprised that Ivan was familiar with the work. It was the memoir of a man who had lived through the bombing of New York City only to join the military and be sent out to fight in Europe. The book was a retelling of his experiences and an explanation as to how it had all led to him becoming one of the biggest advocates for direct democracy in the United States instead of the representative democracy that existed now.

In the past few weeks it had somehow happened that Sin and Ivan had run into each other a handful of times. Each time, Sin had forced himself to respond to the man with something other than his typical sarcasm and disinterest and each time, Sin had found himself in an extended conversation with the R&D agent. It hadn't taken long to realize that Ivan was a very politically cynical person and Sin wasn't surprised that he'd read something by Stone.

"It's interesting," Sin said when the silence stretched and Ivan stared at him patiently, looking in no rush to leave and seeming not at all put off by Sin's quietness.

"Do you agree with him so far?" Ivan asked with interest, stepping forward.

"I'm only in the second chapter," Sin admitted with a shrug. "It's too early to have a thorough opinion."

Ivan nodded, hooking his thumbs on the straps of his backpack as his steel colored eyes studied Sin through the thin wire frame of his glasses. He tilted his head to the

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side thoughtfully and once again Sin couldn't help being struck by how the other man reminded him of Boyd. Their appearances and even some of their mannerisms were so similar-- it almost overshadowed the fact that their personalities were incredibly different.

Sin had only spoken with Ivan a handful of times, once by a chance meeting in the courtyard and twice near the medical wing-- but even in those instances, despite Ivan's typically reserved countenance, Sin had learned something of the man. He was actually opinionated about international politics, appeared to have a strong stance against many of the Agency's policies and in general appeared quite unimpressed by the world as a whole.

It was information gathered from a number of side comments but it had been enough to give Sin an idea of Ivan's personality; those side comments were what had prompted Sin to actually continue the dialogue between them. He'd found himself actually being intrigued by Ivan's caustic regard for the government, for the Agency. The fact that Ivan seemed so educated and informed about the issues had made Sin actually interested in the other man's opinions.

"Where did you even find the second edition?" Ivan asked, peering down at the book with interest. "After the harsh reception the first printing got-- I didn't think any bookseller would carry it again. It's been mostly an underground thing-- it has a cult following on the Internet if you know where to look."

"I bought it from Grover Books."

Ivan raised his eyebrows, expression appreciative. "That place is amazing. It's like a warehouse of every forgotten and resold used book in existence but if you dig deep, you can find a lot of gems. I don't know if you knew this but they're one of the few independent booksellers left in the city and the only one who actually carries a lot of the newer, more opinionated political works from our generation. They're also the only ones who officially carry the Journalist Guild pamphlets. They actually have a section for it and archives of old issues."

Sin raised his eyebrows at that. "Really. I always thought the Guild just self-distributed secretly. I didn't realize they actually had a deal with any particular book or newspaper distribute."

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Ivan shrugged, half-smile returning. "Well, they do. I only meant official as in they consistently carry the paper, so the people from the Guild must know the guys who own Grover are on their side."

"Interesting."

Ivan nodded, appearing pleased that Sin was actually intrigued by the morsel of information he'd shared. "Did you find anything else interesting?"

Sin shrugged and thought back to the titles he'd purchased. He'd gotten several old science-fiction novels but had also purchased more recent titles that had to do with current events. It was something he'd been interested in ever since the art show at the Solar Convention Center-- ever since he'd seen the painting *Atonement* by the Brazilian artist Yara, he'd found himself very intrigued by how artists and writers viewed the goings on of the world.

"Some things you may not be interested in, but I did purchase *Thought Locust* by Jory Paine and *Escape Artist* by Laura Downs."

The first was a book of poems regarding the war and the second was a novel about an American CIA agent who'd turned and joined a rebel insurgency group which was obviously loosely based on Janus.

"Did you finish both of those?" Ivan queried, moving closer and leaning against the wall directly beside Sin's chair. His gaze was steady and unflinching as he peered down into Sin's eyes, looking completely at ease as if it was a natural thing to be discussing literature with the Agency's most infamous agent.

"I did." Sin raised an eyebrow. "I assume you've read them as well, then?"

"I've never been able to get my hands on *Thought Locust* but I've read *Escape Artist*. It's an entertaining book with some good messages but her writing style is very distracting as well as the dramatic plotline and overblown fight sequences. It detracts from the point of the novel, which I assume is a criticism of the United States government and a more sympathetic view of organizations who oppose them."

Sin nodded, having come to a similar conclusion although he'd found that the plot, as outrageous as it'd been at times, had been a good cushion for what would have otherwise been a soapbox for Downs' opinions.

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"Would you like to come over for coffee?"

Sin's eyebrows drew together and he stared at Ivan oddly, thrown off by the sudden question. "What?"

Ivan raised his pale blond eyebrows. "I'm inviting you over for coffee."

"Yes, I got that part," Sin replied, making a face. "But why?"

"Do I need a reason?" Ivan smiled at Sin, appearing somewhat amused by Sin's confused expression. "I'd like to continue our discussion without Kaspar the friendly ghost listening in on us."

Sin turned his head and glanced through the path from the sitting area at the back of the library to where the library keeper, Kaspar, appeared to be shelving some books. Sin hadn't really paid much attention to the man and he had no idea if he was actually eavesdropping or if Ivan was joking.

"So, are you coming?" Ivan asked in the same patient tone, his voice quiet and unassuming. He flexed his fingers slightly as he waited for Sin's response.

"No," Sin replied automatically, not really giving his answer much thought. He picked up his book again and began leafing through it, trying to find the page he'd left off on.

"Okay." Ivan considered Sin thoughtfully before asking neutrally, "Why not, though?"

Surprised, Sin raised an eyebrow at the other man. "Because I said no."

"Yes but are you saying no because that's your default reaction or because you really have no interest in continuing to speak to me?" Ivan didn't seem particularly offended by the possibility and shrugged his thin shoulders slightly.

"Well--" Sin cut himself off and frowned at Ivan. He'd started to say something unfriendly but there was really no reason for it and in fact, he did have interest in talking to Ivan to an extent. Or at least it was nice to have someone to interact with who wasn't talking about his problems or missions or reminding him of one or the other.

It also helped that they shared similar interests. Besides, Sin mentally added as he sat back in his chair to look up at Ivan, what was the point in brushing off one of the rare people he actually got along with?

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"Fine. I'll go."

Ivan smiled again. "Good."

Sin rolled the thin book up and shoved it in his back pocket, shrugging on his hoody and following Ivan to the exit. They passed Kaspar on their way out and the man gave them a discreet stare before turning back to his work.

They took the elevator down to the ground floor and Sin felt Ivan's thoughtful eyes on him the entire time, as if the R&D agent was trying to figure him out. After the first few floors went by, Sin met Ivan's steady gaze and was almost disconcerted by the fact that Ivan didn't immediately look away like almost anyone else would have.

Instead, Ivan just flashed his brief half-smile and maintained eye contact, his stare penetrating and intrusive but Sin just raised an eyebrow, wondering what Ivan was thinking.

"I live off compound," he informed Sin as they exited the elevator, keeping his thumbs hooked over the straps of his backpack as they walked to the exit.

"Is it far?" Sin asked as they walked through the crowd going through the double doors of the main entrance.

"Not really. It's in the old industrial district but I ride my bike here so if you prefer to drive us, that's fine by me," Ivan replied as they headed across the courtyard and to the main gates.

"I don't own a car. I don't see the need when public transportation and feet are perfectly viable options." Sin put his hood on, pulling it slightly over his face and ignoring the way Ivan seemed to take in the action with interest.

"Well then we can walk or take the bus. Although it would make an interesting picture to the masses of the compound if we pedaled out of here-- me riding my bike and you standing on the pegs in the back..."

Sin snorted and glanced at Ivan, amused. "I'll pass."

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Ivan chuckled quietly and they headed to the main gates but just as they started to pass through, one of the guards stepped in front of Sin, his eyebrows drawn down as he looked at the senior agent seriously.

"I have to clear it before you leave," he told Sin flatly, holding out a hand in front of himself as if silently telling Sin not to come any closer.

Sin narrowed his eyes slightly and looked from the guard, Officer Glen Charles, to Officer Deena Lorde, the guard who was usually posted at the gate and seemed to be in charge of the location. "I've been unrestricted for months."

Officer Charles shrugged one shoulder, not seeming too concerned, and touched the comm unit at his ear. "Maybe if you weren't such a basket case, these things wouldn't happen."

Ivan's eyebrows raised and he said in his typically mild tone, "There's no need to be a dick."

Sin glanced at him, surprised, and Officer Charles wheeled on him entirely. "Are you talking to me?"

Ivan shrugged agreeably. "I don't see who else I could possibly be talking to."

Officer Charles loomed above the R&D agent; he was the same height as Sin and brawnier, cutting an imposing figure against Ivan who was thinner and much shorter in comparison but Ivan just looked at him with an enigmatic smile. "Are you going to beat me up now, Officer Charles? If so, maybe we should move to the school yard. It may be more fitting."

"Maybe I should. Maybe I should wipe that smirk off your face, you punk ass." Officer Charles glared down at him before glancing at Sin. "What's with you and fairy-looking blonds?"

"Just do what you have to do before I lose my patience," Sin replied flatly, pale green eyes trained on Officer Charles with a promise of a beating if the man didn't stop fooling around.

Officer Charles shrugged and raised his eyebrows, looking Sin up and down before glancing at Ivan again. "I'm just saying that you're not doing yourself a whole lot of

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favors by hanging out with gay dudes all the time. People talk shit about you enough as it is."

"Would you shut up, Glen?"

Sin's eyes didn't leave Charles' face even as Officer Lorde called over to the man. Charles held Sin's glare for a moment before looking over at the female guard. "What?"

Lorde slipped out of the booth by the gate and walked over, glaring at each of them in turn before focusing on her colleague. "You're mixing him up with his father, smart guy. Emilio Vega can't leave. Check the agent number next time-- not just the name. This one is good to go. Now stop causing a scene; it's embarrassing."

"Oh." Charles actually looked vaguely chagrined and shrugged his shoulders before glancing at Sin again. "My fault."

"Just get out of my way," Sin replied with a scowl and shoved the man out of his path unceremoniously before leaving the gates and not looking back to see if Ivan was following.

The entire scene hadn't done anything but irritate the hell out of him. He didn't actually care what Charles thought but the fact that Sin couldn't even do something as simple as leave the compound without harassment and a grand production was a never-ending source of aggravation for him and the main reason he'd taken to once again staying inside his apartment.

Ivan caught up to him easily and walked alongside him quietly as they approached the bus stop. Once there, Sin crossed his arms over his chest and glared out at the street while Ivan leaned against the pole that designated the area a bus stop and watched Sin thoughtfully.

"He's right, you know."

Sin looked at Ivan with a frown. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Ivan shrugged and reached up to shove some of his hair under the cap; a battered old black hat that was faded to the point of looking grey. "About me. About you hanging around with me visibly. I am gay and everyone knows it. They'll just attach it to you and make all kinds of insinuations just like they did with you and your partner."

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Sin relaxed slightly, feeling less defensive now that Ivan had explained but his eyes remained narrowed at the other man. "How does everyone know you're gay? Did you make a big banner and tape it to the entrance of the Tower doors?"

Ivan blinked at him before laughing, an actual loud laugh that brightened his face slightly even as he shook his head. "No, but like your partner, I'm androgynous-looking with long blond hair, maybe not as effeminate as Boyd but we are similar in that regard. Because of that people always assumed I was gay and whenever someone made a rude comment regarding it, I didn't deny it. I'm not ashamed of it and I don't care about their childish behavior. So now it's well known."

Sin raised an eyebrow at Ivan, mildly impressed. It was rare to find someone at the Agency who didn't care about how they appeared to others. "Well, they already think I'm a mass-murdering rapist who is possibly screwing my partner. They can think what they want, I don't give a damn."

Ivan nodded, a satisfied grin on his face and he studied Sin thoughtfully for a moment, giving him another one of those direct stares.

It was interesting to behold-- most people, especially people Sin barely had contact with-- were so intimidated by him that they would never think to stare at him outright but Ivan hadn't shown any hesitation from day one. It made Sin wonder exactly what the other man thought of him and it made him wonder what exactly his motives were for this sudden desire to become friends.

"Is it true, then?" Ivan asked after a while.

The bus rolled up, graffiti-covered and as dilapidated as always, and Sin ignored the question as they paid the fare and boarded. Ivan automatically headed to the back of the bus and sat in the two-seater, Sin dropping down in the seat beside him and stretching his legs out. He could feel Ivan's eyes burning into the side of his face and once again, Sin turned his head to return the gaze evenly.

It was almost uncomfortable; they were sitting side by side and now their faces were mere inches apart but even then, Ivan didn't flinch away. His eyebrows raised slightly and his grey eyes momentarily skimmed Sin's features before once again meeting his eyes.

"If you don't want to answer, I won't ask again," Ivan said finally when the bus roared to life. "I was just curious."

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Sin shrugged and dragged his eyes away, although after a moment he looked back. He found himself doing the same as Ivan had done, tracing the other man's features, taking in every detail of his face but Sin knew it was only because Ivan resembled Boyd.

Sin had known for a long time that Boyd used to worry over whether or not Sin actually, truly wanted and was attracted to him, or if they'd just ended up together because Sin hadn't had another choice. It was something he'd picked up on from various comments Boyd had made over the last few years and although Sin had wanted to reassure Boyd, he'd never known what to say.

But as Sin looked at Ivan again, he felt that his strange desire to take in every aspect of Ivan's face and even his form, was a testament to how much Sin was attracted to Boyd. It was like Sin was attracted to Ivan by default, and Sin wondered if that sense of familiarity was what prompted him to even agree to spend time with the R&D agent.

"We were together for a time," Sin said shortly and Ivan nodded in return, not seeming very surprised.

They sat together in silence for the next few stops and Sin began to have doubts about agreeing to go to the other man's home. As Ivan stood up and they headed off the bus silently, Sin couldn't help giving Ivan a mildly suspicious stare which Ivan immediately picked up on.

"We don't have to go there if you prefer not to," he said, looking up at Sin calmly. "I'm just a homebody and it was my first thought."

"I see." Sin looked down the street and saw that Ivan really did live in the heart of the industrial district. It was actually not too far away from where Jared Strickland had been squatting; it was known for being a hard scrabble neighborhood.

"You have no reason to trust me," Ivan said with a nod, looking away briefly as a woman walked by them, smiling alluringly at them in turn and murmuring promises under her breath. She was obviously a prostitute and, judging by her ragged stockings and dirty clothes, she was having a tough time of it in life.

Ivan looked at Sin again and shrugged simply. "I only wanted to spend time with one of the rare people I clicked with. I have no ambushes planned or great seductions-- just coffee or beer and book talk."

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Sin smirked slightly and when Ivan raised a questioning eyebrow, Sin just nodded and they began walking down one of the streets that led away from the cluster of factories that sat on the south side of the neighborhood.

The sidewalks were cracked and dirty-- the occasional crack vial lying along the street, and Sin could feel numerous sets of eyes on them as Ivan led them deeper into the heart of the area despite the fact that the streets appeared nearly desolate other than them and the occasional homeless person. Sin was actually surprised that nobody approached them-- he wasn't a regular of the area and a lot of people automatically mistook his lanky body for weakness.

"You get along okay in this neighborhood?" Sin asked as a police siren went off somewhere nearby.

Ivan glanced over at him, appearing completely unconcerned as he walked casually, dragging his boots along the half-crumbled sidewalk. "At first it was somewhat obnoxious because a lot of the gang guys would make comments to me or threaten me for the hell of it but nothing serious has ever happened and they're mostly used to me now. Some of the guys even think I'm cool for living here because for some reason they think I'm a yuppie. I think it helps that I never appeared nervous or afraid of them."

Ivan stopped in front of a looming building that he explained was an old doll factory and they headed inside after Ivan unlocked a variety of bolts before making their way through a dark hallway and to a freight elevator that Ivan manually pulled closed behind them. It reminded Sin of the loft his father had once owned in the city but he quickly pushed the idea aside, not wanting thoughts of his father to invade his brain like had been the case frequently in the past few months.

"So this is it," Ivan said as they got to the top floor, gesturing towards the open floor plan of his space.

Sin walked in slowly, taking in the hardwood floors and floor-to-ceiling windows and the corner that was completely dominated by computers and computer parts. There was an expanse of wall that was covered with newspaper clippings and a large white board that had small neat handwriting nearly completely covering it.

The furniture was limited to one sagging sofa, a mattress on the floor, the desk and computer chair, a long bar counter with stools in the kitchen area and a large flat panel television that, judging from the array of wires, seemed to be hooked into one of the computers.

Interludes

"Interesting."

Ivan smiled slightly and shrugged off his backpack, setting it to the side. "Boring and weird, you mean."

Sin shrugged. "My apartment isn't very exciting so I have no room to judge."

Ivan went to the kitchen and approached an ancient-looking coffee maker, pulling out a filter full of old coffee and tossing it in the trash. "Do you have a coffee preference? I have original flavor and hazelnut. Don't expect gourmet. I buy whatever is on sale."

"I don't care either way," Sin replied, sitting down on one of the stools and watching Ivan as he moved around the kitchen.

Ivan added water to the pot and pressed a button, leaning against the counter and turning to Sin as the coffee began percolating. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Both. A lot." Sin pulled the book out of his back pocket and set it on the counter, tired of the spine digging into his back. "I like sweet things."

Ivan looked at him for a moment before raising a pale blond eyebrow. "Do you."

Sin made a face, eyes rolling. "That wasn't an innuendo."

The blond man chuckled quietly and pushed away from the counter, once again going to his refrigerator. "I know. But it sounded like one. I wouldn't honestly expect you to flirt with me, S--"

Ivan broke off and looked over at Sin, pausing in front of the open refrigerator door. "Do you prefer to be called Sin?"

"I'm used to it." Sin didn't prefer it one way or the other-- he was so used to people bastardizing his name that it didn't even occur to him to care anymore.

"Then would you mind if I called you Hsin?" Ivan pulled a container of milk out and approached the counter again, setting it down. "Ryan is the only one who refers to you as your real name and I don't think I'm entirely comfortable calling you something that is likely meant to be pejorative."

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Sin stared at Ivan blankly. "Why do you even give a damn? You don't know me."

Ivan didn't look surprised by the statement and he leaned against the counter, folding his fingers together in front of him as the steady drip of the coffee filled the briefly silent room. "I like you, and I respect you, so I have no desire to treat you like other people do."

Sin just arched one dark eyebrow and gave Ivan the same blank unimpressed stare. "We've spoken a handful of times. You don't know me enough to like me. Whatever information you think you gathered from those moments is likely false anyway."

"On the contrary," Ivan replied serenely, reaching up to take off his cap and toss it across the kitchen and onto the opposite counter. White blond hair spilled across his forehead messily and he combed his fingers through it. "I like you because you don't care what anybody thinks. You don't try to appease anybody or make yourself appear more approachable-- you do what you have to do and that's it."

They stared at each other and Ivan tilted his head questioningly. "Am I incorrect?"

"No."

Ivan turned away and removed two chipped coffee mugs from a rack. There were other dishes sitting in the sink but he didn't seem to own very much flatware since there were no actual cabinets to store things. "Is it that shocking that someone other than Boyd and Ryan finds you to be an interesting person?"

"Yes."

Ivan looked at Sin and appeared genuinely amused by the reply but Sin just shrugged. Ryan and Boyd had been forced into his presence-- forced to think about him and forced to work with him. Without that, he highly doubted they would have made an effort to talk to him.

"Well, I'm not attempting to deceive you. I have no reason for it. I was already intrigued by your personality and from what I heard of the tidbits Ryan would mention now and again." The coffee pot beeped loudly, signaling that the coffee was finished.

Ivan poured two cups, drinking his black as Sin reached for the milk. "However, I grew more intrigued by the scene in the med wing a few months ago. The contrast between then and how you were in the cafeteria was amazing."

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Sin's hand froze slightly as he poured milk into his cup and his green eyes rose to bore into Ivan from under his eyebrows.

Ivan just shrugged again, continuing. "I'd never seen someone so strong. You're an amazing fighter. I suppose I'm a bad person for having been secretly glad that all of those field agents got injured but they were retarded to have swarmed you like that. Darwinism does come into play now and again."

Sin's gaze became incredulous and he shook his head before looking at his coffee again, heaping in spoonfuls of sugar. "You're very strange."

Ivan nodded in agreement. "Yes."

They sat quietly for a few moments, drinking coffee and looking at each other and Sin couldn't help wondering at how odd the situation was. It wasn't even the fact that Ivan had apparently been prompted to befriend him due to the fact that he generally didn't care about anyone or try to make nice.

The weirder aspect of the situation was the fact that Sin found himself actually loosening up-- that the tension that typically built in his shoulders when he was around someone unfamiliar and someone potentially untrustworthy wasn't nagging at the back of his head like it usually did. It likely had to do with the fact that Ivan looked him directly in the eye and didn't seem to hold any of his true opinions back.

"I'm not going to lie," Ivan said seemingly abruptly and Sin looked at him again. "I am very attracted to you-- it would be difficult not to be seeing as I am a gay man and you are incredibly striking, but I didn't invite you over for that purpose. I invited you over because we have similar interests and because I want to get to know you better because I think we mesh well."

Sin swallowed the rest of his coffee, not really having an opinion one way or the other on that.

"So, *Escape Artist*," Ivan said after a while, pulling himself up to sit on one of the bar stools. "I already told you my opinion-- what was yours?"

Kith and Kin

Interludes

The sound of water lapping against the side of the tub was continuous as muted light from the setting sun cast golden rays on the two figures.

Kassian's eyes were closed, his lips parted as he arched his back and gripped either side of the old-fashioned white claw foot tub, each knee spread apart and thrown over the sides to give Boyd easier access.

Kassian's blond eyebrows drew together as a hiss escaped his mouth, breath hitching as Boyd knelt before him in the water, sliding his fingers inside Kassian's ass and crooking them slightly to massage the other man's prostate.

"Fuck," Kassian groaned, his voice low and deeper than usual as Boyd milked his prostate with obvious talent, causing shocks of pleasure to radiate throughout Kassian's body. Kassian's cock was painfully swollen and already seeping pre-come from just moments of Boyd touching the sensitive spot.

"I told you it'd be good," Boyd murmured, his honey brown eyes darkened with lust, his mouth twisted slightly in a nearly smug smirk as Kassian released another helpless moan.

Although sex with Kassian was amazingly satisfying, Boyd found that he still missed being able to fuck someone-- to pound into them and come hard and intensely. It was a frustrating aspect of their arrangement considering the fact that Kassian also refused to give oral sex.

Boyd had gone into it knowing full well Kassian's stance on the subject and so he hadn't pushed it. That is, until Kassian had commented on how good Boyd's tight ass felt around his cock.

From there Boyd had idly mentioned the idea of him getting to fuck Kassian's tight ass for once. He'd never expected Kassian to agree but Boyd had idly queried how Kassian knew he wouldn't like it if he'd never tried. He'd gone on to ask if Kassian ever wondered *why* a man would scream in such pleasure from being fucked-- Didn't it ever make him curious to see what it felt like?

Weeks of going back and forth on the subject had passed before Kassian even considered the idea of being on the receiving end of anal sex-- which for some reason he was more comfortable with than oral sex.

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Even then, Kassian had changed his mind at the last minute, leaving Boyd frustrated sexually, although they'd taken care of that after a few moments of bickering. In the end, Kassian had appeared to feel genuinely guilty over his refusal to reciprocate things sexually for Boyd and he'd agreed to at least 'try it out.' As in, get a taste of what it could feel like if he let Boyd take his ass every now and again.

So here they were.

Kassian's breathing was labored as Boyd positioned his index and middle fingers into a hooked position, stimulating each side of the other man's prostate with circular rubbing motions that caused Kassian to swear loudly, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Kassian's toes curled up, knees locking around each side of the tub as the sound of his deep moans joined the continuous lapping of water and echoed in the large, tiled bathroom. One of his hands released the tub and moved towards his cock, red and hard and pulsating between his legs, but Boyd used his free hand to capture Kassian's wrist.

"Don't."

Kassian growled loudly, his lips pulling back over grit teeth, and he shook his head back and forth even as Boyd began moving his fingers a little faster, although he didn't increase the pressure.

"I need--" Kassian choked out, his eyes opening into slits as his breath came out in harsh sobs. "Oh, fucking Christ, I can't--"

Boyd licked his lips, ignoring the desire to touch his own dick as Kassian's entire body tensed, every muscle rock hard and rigid, his face amazing as he got completely lost in ecstasy.

"Ahhh, ahh, oh... Boyd, fucking--"

The doorbell abruptly rang, causing Boyd to jump slightly, completely caught off guard by the sound. He paused in his motions to look over at the window but Kassian shook his head back and forth wildly.

"Don't stop," he pleaded, his voice twisted with agony, his face flushed with pleasure and the heat of the steam from the water.

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Boyd nodded, moving his fingers again, ignoring the bell as it rang again, moving his hand faster as Kassian arched his back out of reflex. His moans became more frenzied-- louder and more frequent--

Ring--Ring--Ring--

"Fuck, make me come, make me come--" Kassian chanted in a low, pleading voice; breathless and desperate.

The person at the door put their hand against the doorbell and kept it there this time-- a long, unending shrill ring that irritated Boyd enough to cause his own erection to wilt even as he continued to finger fuck Kassian.

"Fuck yes," Kassian groaned. "Oh-- Ohh... Oh fu--"

Kassian came hard, violently, without even touching his cock. Streams of semen erupted from his throbbing erection, spraying all over his chest and the tub as Kassian collapsed against the side to groan helplessly.

"Kassian!"

The shout was so unexpected that Boyd was startled again. His gaze ripped away from Kassian's reddened and dazed face to look out the window even though all he could see was the sky from his angle. The voice didn't sound familiar to him at all.

"What?" Kassian asked, completely out of it and confused as he stared at Boyd blearily.

"Are you expecting someone?" Boyd asked, eyebrows drawing down slightly.

Kassian licked his lips, absently washing his chest off with the water and he sat up, his skin squeaking against the tub loudly. "What? No."

He pulled himself out of the tub entirely, his bare wet feet padding across the tiled floor to the small window near the sink. He looked out and down and froze. "*Fuck!*"

"What?" Boyd asked, starting to stand.

Kassian pushed himself away from the window and began looking around the bathroom in something very close to panic before he grabbed a towel. "My fucking parents are here."

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"*What?*" Boyd's eyebrows shot up incredulously and he immediately looked for a towel too. "I thought they lived in California."

"They came to visit the goddamn memorial mound in Philly," Kassian growled, grabbing his underwear from the floor and swearing under his breath. "I completely forgot."

The doorbell rang again, over and over.

"My sisters are here too," Kassian grumbled, going into the master bedroom hurriedly.

Boyd dried off and followed Kassian, searching for his clothes quickly. He found his underwear and pulled it on then grabbed his pants. He knew Kassian's family didn't have a clue that Kassian was bisexual and that Kassian wanted to keep it that way.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, pulling his hair back and wishing it wasn't damp. Of all the days to be messing around in the damn water... "Should I go out the back?"

"Fucking motherfuck," Kassian was saying as he yanked on a pair of loose black pants. His eyes were darting around quickly as he chewed on his lower lip.

"Kassian," Boyd said firmly, pausing after he pulled his shirt on as he watched Kassian intently.

"What?" Kassian demanded, looking at Boyd finally.

"What do you want me to do?" Boyd repeated, the edge leaving his voice now that he had Kassian's attention. His honey brown eyes were serious as he studied Kassian.

"Fuck." Kassian headed to the bathroom door, scowling darkly. "Just... dry off and try to look like we weren't just fucking around. Knowing my youngest sister she's running all over the property looking for Peaches-- if she sees you slinking out it'll just be fucking stranger."

He disappeared out the bedroom door and then backtracked, looking back in. "Don't come down right after I open the door."

"I'll wait a few minutes," Boyd said with a nod, already looking for a hair band he knew he'd thrown off at some point.

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Kassian left without another word and Boyd tried to quickly dry off his hair even more but he knew it wasn't going to help much. He finally found the hair tie and pulled his hair back into a pony tail as best he could, but with his stylized haircut most of it fell forward regardless.

His eyes narrowed and he couldn't help feeling a twinge of disquiet over the entire situation; he didn't know how this was going to play out but he doubted it would go well. He wished Kassian had remembered ahead of time so they could have avoided this all. Not that he blamed Kassian but the last thing he wanted to do was cause any problems for his friend and he wasn't sure how to go about this.

He'd never really been around normal families, especially large ones, so it seemed awkward enough on its own without the fact that he'd just been finger fucking their closeted son in the bathroom. At least he knew enough about Kassian's family to hopefully try to minimize any damage. He quickly ran over what he knew of them, reminding himself of their names and the little Kassian had mentioned of their personalities.

He waited several minutes, trying to straighten and clean up as best he could. When it seemed like an appropriate amount of time had passed, he slipped out the door and strained his ears to hear the conversation as he approached the stairs. It didn't sound like anything terribly traumatic was happening other than Kassian's father, Maxim, was annoyed that Kassian had forgotten the memorial.

Boyd kept his expression mildly curious as he walked down the stairs, his shoulders loose and body language more bored than anything. He noticed Kassian's youngest sister, Courtney, clinging to Kassian's side with a huge grin while Kassian's mother was digging through a duffel bag. The entire family was blond-haired and blue-eyed with the exception of Audrey, Kassian's mom, who had mouse brown curly hair.

Boyd's gaze swept through room and fell on a girl who looked a few years younger than he was, with dyed jet black hair, a hoop through her nose, blood red lipstick and stars tattooed behind her ear. Judging from her appearance and the fact that Kassian had told Boyd in the past that his middle sister was a bit of a rebel with an attitude problem, Boyd suspected that was probably Kimberly. He didn't see Kassian's other sister Leighton but he assumed she was somewhere around.

He could tell from afar that they all seemed pretty tall; even the women looked like they would be around his height. And when Maxim looked over, Boyd could see where

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Kassian had gotten his good looks; Kassian's father was tall, well-built, and had those same attractive features. When most of Kassian's family noticed Boyd, they looked surprised, but Boyd didn't speak immediately, letting Kassian decide how he wanted to go about this.

"Oh, I forgot to mention--" Kassian started, not attempting to detach Courtney from his side although he looked uncomfortable with her closeness, likely because he'd just been having sex. "This is Boyd, he's staying with me for a few days."

Kimberly stared at Boyd blankly, her blue eyes moving up and down him with suspicion before sweeping back over to her brother.

Maxim turned to Boyd with interest and Audrey stood up.

"Hello, Boyd," Maxim said.

"Hi," Boyd said with a smile. He pretended he didn't notice Kimberly's reaction, although at least Maxim seemed friendly enough. "I'm sorry to interrupt... I just got curious when I heard noises."

"It's a pleasure to finally meet one of Kassian's friends," Audrey said, moving forward to shake Boyd's hand. "I'm Audrey, this is my husband Max."

She released Boyd's hand after a moment, smiling warmly before turning to indicate her daughters. "My little one--"

"I'm not little!" Courtney protested even as she pressed her cheek against Kassian's chest, appearing to be very hesitant to release him.

"Is Courtney-- the sullen brat over there is Kim, and my oldest is Leighton but she was desperately in need of urination so--"

"Mom!" Kassian gave his mother a mildly embarrassed look, shaking his head. "You're ridiculous."

"Oh it's okay, Kass," a voice rung out and Boyd looked at the entrance to the kitchen to see a tall blond woman entering the room. She looked only a few years younger than Kassian; she was incredibly beautiful and incredibly pregnant.

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Leighton patted her round belly and gave Boyd a wan smile. "Lots of peeing comes with the job. Hi. I'm Leighton."

"Nice to meet you." Boyd's smile widened as he glanced down at her belly. "Congratulations, by the way. How far along are you?"

"Eight months," Leighton breathed, rubbing her stomach even as she rolled her eyes. "I can't wait. I feel like a hot air balloon. This is my third and I still can't get used to feeling this way."

"Yeah," Audrey agreed, nodding and winking at Boyd. "The problem with female fertility being affected by radiation obviously didn't affect the Trovosky family."

"I bet you wish it did," Kimberly muttered quietly but no one really acknowledged her except for Kassian, who narrowed his eyes slightly.

Boyd grinned at Audrey, deciding once again to seem as though he hadn't noticed Kimberly. "What about the genders?" he asked, looking toward Leighton curiously. "Are you batting mostly girls so far or did you mix it up for the next generation?"

"This one is a boy," Maxim said proudly, walking over to put an arm around his oldest daughter's shoulder. "I look forward to having a grandson."

"I bet you do, since your real son is never around," Kimberly sniped from the side.

This time Kassian's expression switched into a full on glare. "Why don't you keep your mouth shut for a change?"

"Yeah!" Courtney agreed, glaring at her sister as she finally detached herself from Kassian. She'd gone from looking sweet and innocent to pissed off in moments.

"Yeah!" Kimberly mimicked, rolling her eyes at her youngest sister. "You're such an idiot. We're not in cheerleading practice, you know. Next thing we know you'll be jumping up and down and kicking up your legs like you do for all the football players at school."

Courtney tensed up and balled her hands into fists. "Maybe I should just kick your ass?"

"Girls!" Audrey glared at her daughters. "Save it. Don't embarrass your brother in front of his friend."

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Kimberly's scathing gaze settled on Boyd again and she said shrewdly, "Why are you both damp, anyway? Were you taking a shower together?"

This time it was Leighton who transformed into pissed-off Trovosky mode and she strode across the room, grabbing her younger sister's arm violently and dragging her into the kitchen as Kimberly whined pitifully. Maxim followed shortly after, a deep scowl on his handsome face.

Boyd gave Kimberly a bewildered look as she was being dragged away, as if it had never even occurred to him for anyone to assume such a thing. "Well, Kassian just added a pool heater, so--"

"Don't even dignify my daughter's bullshit with an explanation," Audrey cut him off, shaking her head and crouching down to dig through the bag again as Kassian shot Boyd a grateful look. "She's the most bitter eighteen-year-old I've ever met."

"Welcome to my generation," Courtney said, rolling her big blue eyes. She was the exact contrast of Kimberly with pink lip gloss, a fluttering skirt and perfectly styled blond curls. "More than half the kids at our school are like that. They weren't even around to remember what it was like before the war but they still act like it all defines their being and stuff."

"It'll probably be that way for a while," Boyd said with a shrug, thinking briefly that it was strange how different the sisters were. It almost put him in mind of Harriet and Emma; two polar opposites, although strangely enough, the two level 9 agents seemed to get along far better than the siblings did.

"I was born a few days before the war first hit so when I was growing up, most of us were still dealing with losing parents and wondering why the sky wasn't blue anymore. It made a lot of people bitter." Boyd said it idly, nothing in his tone to indicate how difficult growing up in that time had been for some people. "But every generation has something that defines it, so even if the war hadn't been there I'm sure something else would've come up."

Courtney nodded, looking at him intently with her expressive blue eyes, absently reaching up to smooth back her hair. "That's true..."

Kassian raised an eyebrow at his sister and smirked just as his mother stood up finally with a triumphant, "Ah ha!"

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"I found it," she said, beaming up at Kassian.

"What are you even looking for?" he asked warily.

Audrey brandished a picture at him. "Her name is Laura, she's my co-worker's daughter and--"

"Oh for God's sake." Kassian turned and walked into the kitchen in exasperation as his mother followed him, describing the woman with determination.

Courtney laughed and looked at Boyd, still playing with her hair. "She's been trying to get him remarried for the past five years."

"Does she screen the potentials first or is she just grabbing whatever cute woman she sees?" Boyd grinned jokingly.

Courtney giggled and moved closer to him, crossing her arms over her stomach and subtly checking him out. "She's really picky. She loved Kelly so like, my mom has super high standards for a replacement."

"That might be tough, then," Boyd said easily with a shrug. It was pretty obvious that Courtney liked him but he decided not to react to it either way unless she became overt.

He found it interesting that Audrey had apparently liked Kelly, since Boyd had always gotten the impression from Kassian that Kelly had been rather high-maintenance and superficial. Then again, Audrey hadn't been living with Kelly so who knew, maybe the woman had been different around her in-laws. Still, Audrey seemed like a nice woman so he wondered what it was about Kelly that she'd liked.

"Yeah. I mean-- I was like seven at the time but Kelly was super sweet," Courtney said, looking mournful. "Whenever she was around she'd talk about how she couldn't wait to have a daughter so she'd be like me. I liked her a lot..."

Courtney trailed off with a deep shrug and peered after her family, whose voices were spilling out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Boyd absently looked toward the kitchen, finding the difference to be odd between what he'd heard of Kelly from Kassian, to what Kassian's family apparently had thought of

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her. "Do you like your brother-in-law?" he asked curiously. "Assuming Leighton's married, anyway."

"Billy's okay, I guess," Courtney replied with a shrug. She opened her mouth to add something but glanced down the hall first before adding quietly, "He and Kassian don't really like each other though. I'll tell you all about it sometime," she promised with a big grin.

Mildly intrigued, Boyd raised his eyebrows but just nodded. She headed toward the kitchen and he followed.

Kimberly was notably absent from the room as Leighton and Audrey appeared to prepare dinner they'd brought for Kassian. They were talking quietly to each other and opening Tupperware containers as Maxim looked at Kassian sternly.

"I don't understand why it is that you never manage to attend the memorial with us. They're your family just as much as ours-- I can't even remember the last time you showed your face in Philadelphia."

Kassian leaned against the kitchen wall, his muscular arms crossed over his tattooed chest as he stared at his father evenly. "I've explained it to you so many times-- why do we have to talk about it again?"

"Because this year you didn't even remember," Maxim barked, scowling at his son and leaning forward to jab a finger at him. "You're so devoted to your duty at that piece of shit Murphy Corps--"

Maxim halted and looked at Boyd briefly before switching to rapid-fire Russian, his tone growing angrier as he unleashed a frustrated tirade onto his son. Courtney looked between her father and brother with obvious distress, chewing on her lower lip before focusing on Kassian's blank look of indifference.

Kassian was so respectful around his superiors at the Agency that Boyd would have expected him to be the same with his father. But Kassian just looked at Maxim as though they were strangers-- as though Maxim's anger and disappointment didn't affect him one way or the other. The oddest part was that Kassian didn't even appear malicious or annoyed by the lecture-- he just looked as though he was allowing it go in one ear and out the other.

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"Max, do you really need to do this now?" Audrey interrupted, looking embarrassed for her family and for the fact that Boyd was witnessing back-to-back arguments.

Maxim continued to glare at Kassian from under his blond eyebrows before stepping back, turning his head to the side. "I suppose not."

There was a tense silence that Kassian didn't even try to break. He just stared at his family blankly, all traces of his normal behavior all but gone.

"So Boyd, tell me about yourself," Audrey said finally after Maxim settled down onto one of the stools at the counter with a sigh. She poured some kind of sauce into a pot and flicked on the electric burner.

Boyd walked over to sit on one of the stools as well, leaning against the counter as he glanced briefly at Kassian then focused on Audrey. She looked completely comfortable in the kitchen and he found himself wondering what it would have been like to have a mother who seemed kind and approachable; who would mediate between arguments and who would even take the time to make food with the family.

He was completely unaccustomed to being around families-- normal families with more than a single dysfunctional parent. The Krauszers were the closest he'd ever been to seeing a more relaxed family and even they had been atypical, with Lou's parents absent a lot like Boyd's had been, and a nanny left behind to fill the gap.

As he sat there in the room with Kassian's family, he wished he could have grown up in such a setting. Despite the fact the Trovoskys had argued a few times, that meant nothing to Boyd since they kept coming back together. And the fact they were arguing meant at least they were still talking, still interacting, regardless of if they agreed. Even Kimberly, who didn't seem to get along with everyone else, seemed to have a place in the family.

He wished he could have experienced that when he'd grown up; wished he could have woken up to a house with a mother who would actually smile and speak with him rather than disappear for years and then use, ignore, or lecture him if she had to be in his presence. Lou had been as close to a brother as Boyd had ever known but now he found himself wondering what it was like to have actual siblings; what it would have been like to have a sister. To have nieces or nephews and an extended family.

It was a foreign concept to Boyd but he still couldn't help thinking how nice it would have been to have had that, rather than to have felt alone and isolated for much of his life.

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"What do you want to know?" he asked curiously.

"How do you and Kassian know each other?" Audrey asked, wiping her hands on a towel before moving to turn on the oven. "Do you work together?"

Maxim looked at Boyd closely as if he was very curious about the answer.

"Sort of," Boyd said, hooking his feet behind the bars on the stool and watching Audrey idly. He rested his forearms on the counter and leaned forward. "I'm a lab assistant at Johnson's so sometimes I see Murphy Corps around, like when we have huge shipments or something big is happening."

Ever since Boyd had started running into civilians when he spent time with Kassian, he'd realized the importance of having what amounted to a fake identity. Months ago, he'd gone through Admin to receive an official cover story and Johnson's Pharmaceuticals ID that stated he was a lab assistant with the company.

At one point he'd even spent time researching the position in the real Johnson's Pharmaceuticals factories, figuring out what he would need to know for his cover story should anyone ever question him on specifics. Although he could have said he was in Murphy Corps, he felt that he just didn't look the part enough; it would have been something that stood out to people when he told them and they probably would have asked a lot more questions. The best cover story was one that was believable and easily dismissed.

"Oh, that's interesting," Audrey said, looking up at him with a half-smile. "How did you and Kass cross paths?"

"Yeah." Leighton looked at Boyd, seeming genuinely curious. "What made you and my big bro meet in the first place? I thought all the Murphy guys did over there was stand around and make sure nobody goes in to hijack all of the drugs."

"That's mostly the case," Boyd agreed with a nod. "Honestly, I didn't pay much attention to them most of the time since they didn't have anything to do with the labs. But I had a friend who worked transport--"

Boyd paused and glanced toward Kassian almost self-consciously before he frowned and looked at Leighton and Audrey. "Well... We're really not supposed to talk about things much, since they're super paranoid and think somehow in normal conversation

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the formula secrets will get out or the place will be compromised or who knows what. So I guess first as a disclaimer, don't tell anyone I told you this?"

The family members exchanged looks as Kassian raised an eyebrow at Boyd, smirking discreetly as if he was wondering what story Boyd had manufactured so quickly.

"We won't say anything," Courtney promised quickly. "So you better tell us 'cause Kassian won't for sure."

"Well," Boyd said slowly, glancing between them before he straightened his back and seemed to get into the story more. "So the way it works, we have what we call runs... It's when we're transporting shipments of drugs to the distribution centers or wherever they're going. But that's pretty dangerous with the way things are now, because even though the vehicles are reinforced, sometimes people will lie in wait and attack. So that's one of the main reasons Johnson's contracts Murphy Corps, to help with higher level protection."

"My son has mentioned this," Maxim commented with a nod, picking up the beer that Kassian was silently and knowingly setting on the counter for his father.

Boyd nodded. "The thing is-- I had a friend who worked in transport, Eddie, and they get all sorts of training for what they do that obviously we wouldn't in the lab, and I thought it sounded pretty cool. I used to bug him about it all the time until I finally convinced him to let me go with on a run. Even though," he added, looking mildly chagrined, "technically I wasn't supposed to. But we figured it wouldn't be a big deal, it's not like things usually go wrong, and his immediate supervisor was our friend so we finagled an okay out of him."

Courtney sat down at the kitchen table and looked at Boyd, her expression rapt even though the story wasn't even very exciting at the moment. Kassian and Leighton exchanged knowing looks as Courtney nodded at Boyd encouragingly.

"Kassian and some other guys from Murphy Corps were with us and I wasn't really paying attention to them. But then about halfway to the distro center, we suddenly got attacked. There was this just-- *huge* explosion, and the vehicle in front of us was suddenly in flames and we didn't know what the hell was happening. And then all these bullets were flying everywhere and our driver got killed and I could hear some people in back screaming and suddenly going silent."

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Boyd drew his eyebrows down and let his eyes fall shut a little more than usual; he affected a troubled expression to show that he was still disturbed by the memory. Or would have been, if it hadn't all been a lie he'd formulated a few minutes ago. All he knew was, as soon as he'd seen Maxim upset about Murphy Corps, he'd wanted to give the man a reason to feel proud of his son for even one small thing, regardless of if the situation was fictitious.

With the extreme secrecy of the Agency, Kassian would never be able to tell his family of the things he'd done that had been good; he'd never be able to tell stories of when he'd chosen his morals over an assignment, or say that he was generally regarded as one of the most professional and best agents in the Agency. Neither of them would be able to explain that he'd once saved the life of the person Boyd loved.

Still, Boyd could at least give them a story that would show his friend in a good light.

"So Kassian saved you?" Courtney breathed, glancing between her brother and Boyd.

Maxim looked at his son briefly, a frown on his handsome face before he turned his gaze back onto Boyd.

"Yeah, he did," Boyd said seriously. "I would have died. I didn't know what to do-- I was so scared, I wasn't thinking. Eddie got shot right next to me and when I couldn't get him to move, I had some crazy idea that if I ran away, I'd be safe or get help or... I don't know what. I think I was afraid our vehicle would get bombed too and I'd die. So I started to leave but Kassian yanked me back and shut the door before all these bullets hit the side. I could hear them denting the metal like it was tinfoil. Then he and the other Murphy Corps people started returning fire, and he held me down the whole time to make sure I'd be alright. It made it a lot easier, like-- like someone knew what they were doing. I was terrified but he was super calm and I knew if I just followed his lead, I'd make it out okay."

"Wow!" Courtney sat up straight, her blue eyes round as she gazed at Boyd. "I would have been so terrified!"

"Me too," Audrey agreed as Leighton nodded her head vigorously, frowning over at Kassian as if she'd never realized how dangerous working at JP could actually be for him.

Maxim's eyes dropped to the counter top and a guilty shadow crossed his face before he shot Kassian a wry smile. "And here I was, talking poorly about your job."

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Kassian just shrugged, his eyes on Boyd as his mouth twitched up into a small grin. "Mmhmm."

"It's just that--" Maxim broke off and turned to Boyd as if he wanted to defend himself and his opinions in the face of such a heroic story. "All the time in the papers and on the news-- especially during and right after the war even though you're all mostly too young to remember, we'd hear about these Murphy Corps guys who were contracted to do things overseas. And there's all of these scandals, all of these stories about the aggressive force they used-- their quick triggers, even civilians caught in the crossfire--"

"If they were that bad," Audrey interrupted reasonably as she sorted through a cabinet of unused pots to find whatever kind she needed, "our Kassian wouldn't work for them. He's a very honorable young man."

"Yes," Courtney agreed enthusiastically. "He just wants to save everyone, that's all. Like he told us he joined Murphy 'cause of the fact that he'd get to be in the heart of the action, right on the frontlines instead of spending weeks and months wasting away on military bases like can happen sometimes in the army or whatever."

Maxim made a face at his youngest daughter. "I'm sure those weren't his exact words."

"Can we change the topic?" Kassian pleaded finally, looking intensely uncomfortable the more Courtney sang his praises. "Let's talk more about Boyd."

Boyd smirked slightly at Kassian, very briefly, before he shrugged. "I don't really know what there is to say."

"How long are you staying with Kass?" Audrey asked as if she'd been waiting to get a chance.

"I don't know," Boyd said, grimacing slightly. "My girlfriend kicked me out and I'm sort of in limbo until I know if we're done for good this time or not. But I don't really have a lot of money so if she takes the apartment, which she would, then I have to save enough to get my own place."

"Are you any cleaner than my slob brother?" Leighton asked, winking at Kassian.

"Just a little," Boyd said with a teasing grin.

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Kassian scoffed and moved to open the fridge again, likely to get a beer for himself. "Instead of rent I've deemed that he can be my cleaning bitch."

"Don't call him that!" Courtney protested with a frown at Kassian. "Be nice."

"Be nice," Kassian mimicked in a high girly voice. "You're so disgustingly cute, Court. It makes me physically ill at times."

"You and Kimberly both," Courtney replied, rolling her eyes.

"Speaking of Kim-- where is she? I'm just reheating this sauce. Dinner will be ready soon and then we have to hit the road to get to the train station on time," Audrey said with a frown.

Maxim sighed and looked at his wife exasperatedly. "She's out by the pool but I'm not going after that girl. I've had it with her for the day. She knows what time the train is-- she'll come in before then."

"I'll get her," Boyd offered, already jumping off the stool.

Kassian looked at Boyd with a skeptical expression on his face. "Why?"

Boyd shrugged, pausing even as he turned toward the entrance of the kitchen. "Your family probably doesn't see each other much so you should spend what time you have together. And," he added with a mild smirk, "it's a nice day out so it's not like I'm being totally altruistic here."

Kassian just shrugged although it was obvious that he didn't really have high hopes for getting along with his sister or even wanting to try. "Suit yourself."

Boyd headed through the house, wondering briefly why Kassian's family as a whole seemed to take such issue with Kimberly. She did seem to have an attitude but it wasn't anything completely out of control that Boyd had witnessed, although he also wondered why Kimberly was so bitter and angry.

He wasn't sure which side had come first; Kimberly became angry due to how she was treated, or she ended up being treated this way because she was angry. Because he didn't live with the family, he couldn't say either way. Still, it was almost like Kimberly was the Sin of the Trovoskys' Agency and he found himself uninterested in judging her immediately regardless of how she acted.

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As he stepped into the backyard, he saw her sitting by the pool, smoking. She was facing away from the house so he couldn't see what her expression was, and even when the door audibly shut behind him she didn't look over. He walked over and stopped a few steps away from her side.

"They're about to eat dinner," he told her.

"I hope they choke on it," she replied flatly, exhaling a cloud of smoke slowly as she gazed down at the pool.

"Well if you want something to choke on, too, before you have to catch the train you may want to go inside," Boyd replied, unperturbed.

"Why don't you fuck off?" Kimberly asked with lazy hostility.

"Why do you want me to?" Boyd watched her curiously.

Kimberly gave him a scornful look, finishing her cigarette and flicking it into Kassian's newly cleaned pool. "I don't know you and I don't give a shit about knowing you so your presence here is unwanted and unneeded."

The comment made her resemble Sin even more in his mind, back when they'd first met. He couldn't help smiling and he nodded as he slid his hands into his pockets.

"Alright," he said easily. "Fair point. I'll leave you alone."

Just as he turned to leave, Leighton came out of the back door and walked over to them, not appearing surprised that Boyd had been about to depart.

"Hey Kimmie. Just grab a plate and go in the living room if you don't want to deal with them," she told her sister.

Kimberly looked over her shoulder at Leighton and opened her mouth to likely say something scathing but she stopped and sighed before rolling her eyes dramatically and standing up. "Whatever."

"Standard teenage response," Leighton replied with a smile.

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Kimberly just made a face, shot Boyd another glare, and walked sullenly back into the house.

Leighton looked at Boyd and tilted her head slightly to the side of the house when Kimberly closed the back door behind her. "Wanna take a short walk? Show me my big bro's motorcycle?"

"Sure," Boyd said, glancing toward the house. "You don't want to eat, though?"

"I'll be fine," Leighton assured him, walking along the small path that led around the side of the house where Kassian had his bike out. "I just wanted to chat with you for a few minutes. It's true that we don't really meet any of Kassian's friends."

Boyd nodded. "I heard you live across the country so I could see that happening."

Leighton stopped walking as they reached the side of the garage and leaned against the wall, studying Boyd with a small smile before nodding. "That's true. But Kassian makes it even more impossible. He can be very secretive. *Very*, secretive. It's the reason why he and Kimberly aren't close anymore."

"How so?" Boyd asked, intrigued by the comment.

Leighton paused and absently rubbed a hand against her belly, gazing at Boyd. With her golden hair, clear blue eyes and mild smile, it wasn't difficult to understand why Kimberly was hesitant to be rude to her older sister. All of the Trovosky's shared the same features but Leighton had such an unassuming presence, as if she was unaware or uncaring of her own good looks, that it made it difficult not to be at ease in her presence.

"It has a lot to do with his job," she replied finally. "He can't talk about certain things and, naturally, we all have a lot of questions. But after a few years of being in the Corps, he changed a lot. On the outside he's the same, still funny and smart and sweet, still a good guy-- but once you infringe on the territory he's designated for himself, he just shuts down and that's it. And I don't know how well you know my brother but sometimes he has a way of talking to people that just makes them feel... vastly inferior. That kind of behavior became more frequent-- really prevalent in the rare times we even see him and Kimberly just got sick of it."

Boyd hadn't really experienced that much himself, but it did sound reminiscent of the way Kassian had been in Monterrey-- the 'Senior Agent mode' as Boyd thought of it.

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And that day when they'd driven away from Cafe Milan, with Kassian telling Boyd to keep Ryan quiet... there had been a hint of it there, too; something that hadn't sat particularly well with Boyd. Something that had made him feel like, somehow, Kassian was looking down on him.

Still, that had been a brief moment in their friendship and Kassian hadn't acted the same way on any of the missions since Monterrey, so it was difficult to imagine Kassian being like that on a regular enough basis for it to become a problem. Then again, Kassian had basically told Boyd before that he didn't have to hide anything around Boyd and Kassian had been strangely blank that moment in the kitchen.

Leighton smiled wryly and a breeze disturbed some of her hair, causing it to briefly fly across her face. She pushed it away and dropped her eyes to examine the bike, moving to idly run her fingers over the gleaming surface. "Kimberly is just... a very angry girl. She thinks the family kisses Kassian's ass and sees him as doing no wrong even though she thinks he's a dickhead who forgot all about her and all of us because of his job."

It was a warm, fairly bright day and Boyd pulled some hair behind his ear, although that section of his hair was just short enough that it fell forward immediately anyway. He watched Leighton calmly and with interest, leaning against the side of the garage with his arms crossed.

"Were they especially close before Murphy Corps?" he asked, eyebrows drawing down curiously.

"Kass was the big brother every kid always dreamed of before Murphy Corps," Leighton assented, her smile wilting slightly. "But stuff happens, right? It's just hard sometimes because even when I try to ask about his everyday life, he keeps us at arm's length. Even me, and he used to tell me everything when I was younger. He even hides things he knows I wouldn't disapprove of..."

Boyd didn't know what to say to that at first; working at the Agency changed a person, made them more hardened, less trusting. Yet he didn't know exactly what had happened with Kassian; he didn't know if Kassian had pulled away from his family even more than necessary to retain the secrecy of the Agency and if so, why he had.

All he knew was that Kassian found relating to civilians to be especially stressful because they asked so many questions. He'd told Boyd once that it was wearying that he couldn't even answer simple questions about why he was tired because it ultimately

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related to missions, to the Agency, to things he'd done that he hadn't wanted to or that had been hard on him.

It was also possible Kassian was being subconsciously protective of his family. If the partner Kassian had cared for had been terminated for potentially leaking information to a relative who'd probably also been killed, maybe Kassian wanted to be especially certain that wouldn't happen to his parents and sisters.

Regardless, he did think it was unfortunate if Kassian had a family who Boyd felt seemed pretty supportive, yet this distance had started to erode even Kassian's relationship with someone like Leighton, who Boyd found himself liking as much as Audrey. They both had something gentle in them, something motherly Boyd had never truly been exposed to, and something that made him want to be around them.

"What do you mean hiding things?" he asked rather than comment on the other parts.

Leighton hesitated and a flash of uncertainty crossed her face. She chewed the inside of her lip and looked down at the motorcycle again, seeming to be debating something before she said haltingly, "I mean-- it's just-- well, things like his personal life."

He wondered what she knew, or thought she knew. With how hesitant she was to say anything, it could have been a range of things; she could even have an idea that something more had been going on when they'd arrived than Boyd and Kassian were letting on. Yet he could also tell she wasn't going to outright say it.

"Well," Boyd said reasonably after a moment, "whatever it is, I'm sure he's not doing it to be hurtful. I think his job makes a person look at things a little differently, it kind of makes a person distrustful... it even works that way for me, and I'm not in Murphy Corps. But in Johnson's we have to be careful about what we say and to who... I think sometimes that can make a person become more cautious than they need to be, even for things that seem unrelated."

Boyd slid his hands in his pockets and looked thoughtful even as he watched Leighton. "Like, Beth and I... we used to get into all these stupid arguments and she always got mad because she thought I was lying to her or hiding something. Sometimes it would be about things that seemed so insignificant to her-- like why I had a headache-- but it related back to something that happened at work so I wouldn't say anything. I think it probably hurt her and I didn't mean it to but I would get annoyed that she wouldn't just take me at face value. So it became a vicious cycle..."

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Bethany had been his classmate and was Kassian's neighbor, which is probably why her name was the first he thought of for his pretend girlfriend. He was making up most of this but he tried to use some of the things Kassian had told Boyd before, partially because maybe if Boyd could explain it to Leighton, it would make Leighton feel a little better since Kassian probably never would.

Leighton nodded, frowning. "I understand, it sounds a lot like what happened with my brother and his ex-wife. I mean, we all get it-- we get that his job is demanding and requires a lot from him but sometimes, even if it's not intentional, it hurts to be completely shut out of someone's life in every single way. I wish he would just know that he can trust me with some stuff-- I'm telling you because he must trust you immensely to have you actually living in his house..."

Boyd nodded and absently looked toward the house, glancing at the windows, although he couldn't see much from his position. "I imagine that would be difficult," he said honestly as he returned his gaze to her.

He studied the troubled expression clouding her pretty features and for some reason it made him realize even more how hard it must be for the family. Kassian spoke of the situation from his view, which was understandable, but Boyd wondered if Kassian truly understood the toll it had on his family as well; that this situation wasn't stressful only for him.

He wondered if Kassian understood that one of the reasons for Kimberly's anger was, honestly, what sounded something like the reason Sin had said he had for feeling angry at the Agency. It wasn't Kassian's fault how others decided to view him or whether or not they decided to forgive him for any faults he may have, but Boyd wondered if Kassian ever had the chance to see the situation from the outside looking in.

"I don't know if I could be much help but maybe I could mention it to him sometime, if something comes up," Boyd offered as he pushed himself away from the garage and dropped his arms loosely to his sides. "That maybe not everything has to be a secret. Maybe he could try to include at least one person back in his life on some level. I don't really know his reasons for everything but it's possible it would help..."

"Thanks," Leighton said sincerely, smiling at Boyd with warmth. "You're a great guy."

Boyd smiled in return, tilting his head slightly. "Well, I just think Kassian's lucky to have such a great family. It would really suck if anything came between all you if it didn't need to happen."

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Leighton nodded and walked closer, intertwining her arm with his. "If only you could talk sense into my blockhead brother... Stubbornness and a tendency to see things from our own point of view tends to run in my family."

Boyd had to laugh at that, golden brown eyes sparking in amusement. He almost subconsciously found himself leaning toward her a little closer, not feeling the need to pull away from her touch. She was warm and kind and made him feel at ease the same way Kassian had when they'd become friends, when Boyd hadn't felt the need to be anyone but who he was around him.

"We'll see," Boyd said with a grin as he looked over at her. "If it's stubbornness we're talking about, it's possible I may be your long lost brother."

Leighton laughed quietly at that and shook her head as they started to walk back to the house.

News Flash

"What is all of this?"

Sin walked along the wall in Ivan's loft, taking in the dozens of news clippings from international magazines and periodicals. It was the third time he'd been inside the other man's apartment but the first time he'd actually felt at ease enough in the foreign environment to walk around.

He stopped in front of the whiteboard and stared blankly at the tiny words that were scrawled across it. He recognized that it was coded but he didn't care enough to attempt to figure it out -- it was unlikely that he'd be able to anyway.

"What?" Ivan looked up from where he was sitting crouched by the television, doing something with the wires that were strewn across the floor and to the computers. "Oh."

Sin looked over his shoulder and raised one dark eyebrow at the other man. "You don't have to explain. It just makes you look stranger than I've already figured out you are."

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Ivan smiled and shook his head, getting to his feet and walking over to where Sin stood surveying the mural of newspaper articles. "Is that a bad thing?"

Sin shrugged indifferently. If he thought it was a bad thing, it was unlikely that he would have spent so much of his free time with Ivan as of late.

It'd been a month since the first time he'd come over and he had to admit that Boyd and Ryan had been correct. It was surprisingly pleasant to have someone to spend time with who didn't make him tense all the time.

He still spent time with Boyd from time to time but it wasn't nearly as frequent as it used to be and in addition to that, Sin was always left feeling unsure of how to act around his former lover for fear that Boyd would misinterpret his actions or words. The last thing Sin wanted to deal with was for Boyd to think Sin was trying to coerce him into getting back together.

It wasn't even that he didn't want that-- to an extent he did, he missed being with Boyd and he missed the way things had been briefly between them. But even then, it didn't stop the bitterness he still felt at times towards his partner or the fact that he didn't intend to grovel after being rejected.

But even with all of that in mind-- it didn't stop him from looking at Ivan at times the way he looked at Boyd and Sin cursed the R&D agent on a regular basis for physically resembling Boyd so much. It was ridiculous and almost felt like the entire situation was a practical joke or something-- like someone was playing a trick on him, or testing him, to see how he'd react to someone with the same physical characteristics even if the personality was entirely different.

"That's my Agency Bullshit Wall," Ivan informed him seriously, rubbing his eyes and leaning closer to peer at his own handwriting for a moment. He'd taken off his glasses earlier and apparently had trouble seeing the words clearly.

Sin arched an eyebrow and looked at the newspaper clippings again. "Agency cover ups?"

"Yes." Ivan crossed his arms over his chest, surveying his work intently as if seeing if he'd missed anything since the last time he'd added something. "The spin Vivienne puts on things for the media to cover up the things that we do. For example--"

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Ivan walked forward and extended one slender finger, indicating a two-page spread that was tacked to the wall. The headline read, 'Drug Cartel Strikes in Laguna de Sanchez.' "That was one of yours, wasn't it?"

Sin leaned forward and skimmed the article with interest. It blamed the gunfights they'd had on and around Hale Clemons' property on alleged ties Hale had harbored with the Mexican drug cartel. Sin had no idea whether or not that part was true but the article seemed credible as it cited many 'sources' although he knew that the entire thing was false.

"Ha."

Ivan nodded. "Poor drug cartel. Being blamed for your handiwork," he said with a frown.

Sin glanced at Ivan out of the corner of his eye and managed to keep from laughing at the comment. Ivan still had the same serious expression on his face-- sometimes it was difficult to tell if he was being straightforward with his comments or if his sense of humor was really that deadpan.

"And what's all of this gibberish?" Sin queried, nodding at the whiteboard.

Ivan just gave him a flat stare and raised one slender, naturally arched brow. "Why would I spend so much time encoding it if I was going to tell the first attractive man to enter my apartment? I'm not that retarded. You could be an Agency spy for all I know."

"That's very likely." Sin scoffed and crossed his arms over his chest, eyes dropping to another clipping that was faded and yellowed. It dated back years ago but he recognized it as another high profile mission that he'd botched during one of his trial runs with the first handful of potential partners.

Ivan watched him with a neutral expression on his face and seemed to be waiting for Sin to comment further.

"And what's the point of all of this?" Sin asked finally when Ivan just continued to watch him.

Ivan shrugged again and scratched the back of his head, his ash blond hair loose and spilling over the collar of his button-down flannel shirt. Flannel shirts and combat boots seemed to be his uniform of choice. "To remind myself daily that the Agency is bullshit."

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This time Sin turned to Ivan fully and he observed the other man, not entirely surprised by the statement. In the half dozen times they'd seen each other in the past month, many of Ivan's comments regarding the Agency had reeked of bitterness.

"It is," Sin agreed plainly, seeing no reason to dispute the statement.

Ivan gave him a long look before his wide mouth broke into an abrupt and rare full smile. "See, that's what draws me to you, Hsin."

"The fact that I hate the Agency?" Sin asked dryly, walking away from the whiteboard to retrieve his bottle of water from the bar.

"Yes. And you don't try to hide it. You have an even more blatant fuck the world attitude than I do," Ivan replied, continuing to stand near the whitewall even as his grey eyes tracked Sin's movements. "I appreciate that."

"Why?" Sin asked with a snort, turning around and pressing his back against the bar as he looked back at Ivan. "Because it makes you feel better that there's someone else in the world as hateful and cynical as you are?"

Ivan nodded. "Yes."

This time Sin actually did laugh out loud although he quickly muffled it by taking a drink of his water, averting his gaze to focus on the wires that Ivan had been fiddling with.

Ivan's eyes narrowed slightly and he also looked away for a moment before he shoved his hands in the pockets of his baggy cargo shorts and walked closer. "I know it sounds ridiculous and selfish-- but people on the compound, those people who act like we're on some college campus, they really piss me off."

"College campus?" Sin echoed, not really knowing entirely how to interpret the comment.

"Yeah." Ivan stopped a few feet away from Sin and made a face. "They walk around making friends and laughing merrily or working to achieve all of these accolades and promotions as if any of it actually means anything. They are so busy living with their heads in the clouds that they're too blinded to see that they're doing exactly what the Agency wants them to do."

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"And what's that?" Sin asked, not voicing it out loud that he actually agreed that people like that annoyed him to an extent as well.

It'd been part of the reason he'd been against the idea of Boyd going for the Level 10 promotion-- he'd been unable to figure out why Boyd wanted to make the effort to move ahead in an organization that continuously fucked them both over.

"They want us to become brainwashed puppets that live and breathe for the Agency," Ivan said, his low voice taking on a dark and very bitter quality.

"These people-- they walk around talking about how great it is that the cafeteria has such great food, how nice it is to have all of these lounges in the residential buildings-- that the grounds are so nice, that there's a cafe, etc. They completely miss the fact that the Agency isn't doing all of that as a way for thanking the people who slave for them. The Agency does it because they don't want anyone to have a reason to leave the damn compound. They even have the service staff do laundry and restock personal supplies-- half the people who live on compound rarely leave it. Why do you think they specifically try to recruit people with no families unless you have some fantastic skill?"

Sin watched Ivan quietly as the younger man began to go off in a full on rant.

"It's just so mind-boggling to me," Ivan said, shaking his head back and forth in dismay. "They're completely ignorant to the fact that we're essentially captives. We're forced to do things that we would not normally do, things we don't necessarily agree with, things that can get us killed-- and if we disagree, if we refuse, if we get sick, if we slow down-- the moment the Agency decides we're not useful anymore, we're dead or doomed to a life of being shadowed. The organization is so hypocritical-- they claim to be fighting for the greater good but yet they do to us, their soldiers, what they're allegedly fighting against."

Ivan sighed and rubbed a hand against his eyes, wincing slightly as though it hurt to squint at Sin from the short distance between them. "I don't want you to misunderstand- I'm not against the alleged goals of the Agency, but I am against their ways. I hate it. I hate the whole organization and I hate the people who ignore what it so blatantly is."

Sin eyed Ivan, not really sure how he felt about the fact that the other man spent so much time and energy reminding himself about his hatred of the Agency. "How did you even get here?"

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"Ah, well, that's a story." Ivan didn't say whether it was an interesting or long one and he lifted one thin shoulder. "I used to work for the CIA as a computer tech but then I was arrested and put in jail for attempting to embezzle money from them."

Sin stared at him. "You must be an idiot."

Ivan made a face although he did chuckle, his expression wry and slightly amused by his own actions. "I was. I wasn't even trying to steal it for myself. I was putting it into random charity accounts that I knew were fraudulent. They called me the Robin Hood Hacker in the papers for a while."

This time Sin shook his head, incredulous. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"No real reason. For fun, I guess."

Sin just continued to stare at him with the same expression. "There is something wrong with you."

Ivan nodded. "Yes."

Sin dropped the bottle down onto the counter and observed Ivan, taking in the other man's open and unassuming posture, the way he looked at Sin directly as if waiting to be judged over his past stupidity. Sin just tilted his head to the side and said shrewdly, "So they took you out of jail in exchange for working with them?"

The blond man nodded, mouth turning down at the sides. "If they'd made it blatantly clear that I was signing my soul away, I'd have kept my felony and four years in prison but I was a stupid kid who thought I was making good with a sweet deal working in the covert world just like on the James Bond movies, or some nonsense."

"And I suppose," Sin started almost before Ivan had finished speaking, figuring out the other man's story and the reason behind his bitterness out loud. "That if you ever wanted to leave, they claimed they'd drop you back in prison with a more creative sentence."

"You know them well, Senior Agent Vega," Ivan replied with a nod. "But now since I'm a high level R&D agent, I know too much about a lot of things. Believe it or not, us little guys know a lot more and are more highly classified than you field agents. You get sent out into the field but we know the contacts, the sources, and the inner workings of the machine. It's highly unlikely that they would ever just let me leave this place alive if I

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wanted to do so. I know too much and I've already made myself known as being a troublemaker."

This time both of Sin's eyebrows shot up in surprise and he leaned both elbows back onto the counter as he observed the other man. "You?"

Ivan smirked at Sin, a subtle movement of his lips, and pushed his hair back idly as they locked eyes. "Not all trouble comes in the form of fisticuffs. After the first couple of years when I realized that I was stuck here indefinitely, when I realized what this place was capable of, I've been pretty vocal about my opinions. I mean I wouldn't call myself the compound crier but... most people who know my name associate me with certain things."

"Like?" Sin was surprised by how interested he actually was in the other man's past.

"Firstly, that I'm gay. I'm not in the closet and I never will be. I see no reason to hide who I am. Most people assume I'm gay anyway because of my appearance or at least make jokes about it and all I do is confirm that yes, I am, and ask if they have a problem with it. Secondly, that I think the Agency sucks. I have a lot of theories about a lot of things that go on in this place and I'll tell people who are interested. However, our superiors do not look kindly on this behavior and proceeded to put me on a combination of medication to deal with an alleged paranoid personality disorder."

"Wow." Sin eyed Ivan for a moment before nodding in understanding. "Is that why you were in the medical wing one of those times we ran into each other there?"

"Yes. Both times, actually. They switched my medication and it gave me strange side effects so I was in and out of there for a few days as it got straightened out." Ivan gave Sin one of his enigmatic little smiles. "Did you think I was following you?"

Sin shrugged carelessly. "It crossed my mind." He didn't mention the fact that he'd been there for nearly the same reason.

"And they say I'm paranoid..."

Sin rolled his eyes and shook his head, shifting positions to cross his arms over his black t-shirt. "I'm surprised you even take the pills."

The smile melted off Ivan's face and he shrugged. "Well, I didn't at first but then I decided to try them and see if it changed anything. Maybe to see if they're right. But it's

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been months since I started cooperating with that aspect of my so called treatment and so far, nothing's changed. I think the same."

They stared at each other for a moment and Sin decided not to comment further on the matter. He'd just started allowing himself to trust the Agency psychiatrists and the last thing he wanted to hear was that they really did give phony prognoses to control unruly agents. Although he supposed that it was different with Ivan; he wasn't diagnosed with something so obviously psychotic as hallucinations and out of body experiences so in that way, Ivan's diagnosis was arguable.

"This still doesn't sound sufficiently troublesome to me," Sin said after a while.

"I figured you'd say that," Ivan replied knowingly before he turned slightly and nodded towards his desk. "Step into my office."

Ivan slipped his hands into the pockets of his loose ripped up jeans and walked over to his 'zone of technology,' as he called it. He stopped by the desk chair and looked over at Sin, nodding at it invitingly. "Sit down, please."

Sin gave him an odd look but shrugged, sitting. "Okay?"

Ivan knelt beside Sin and leaned slightly across him, moving the mouse to click some things on the screen and opening folders within folders. His grey eyes moved across the monitor intently and with their faces so close together, Sin found himself momentarily distracted by the way Ivan's fine blond hair fell across his face.

His nose was slightly thinner and sharper than Boyd's, his mouth wider, but Ivan possessed the same understated features as Boyd did, features that neither seemed overtly masculine nor feminine, especially when obscured by a fall of silky hair that was cut the same way Boyd's had been when they'd first met...

"Look," Ivan instructed, nodding at the screen as Sin dragged his eyes away from the other man's profile.

On the screen was what appeared to be a 2-D computer game with a blood dripping title that read, 'We're All Level 10 Now!'

"What the hell?" Sin asked, suitably distracted as his mouth turned up into an unconscious smile of amusement.

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Ivan grinned slightly, nudging Sin's hand with the mouse. "Go on."

Sin pulled the chair closer and grabbed the mouse, clicking on the screen to start the game. A small story dialogue popped up that stated all 'JP' staff were now in the running to achieve Level 10 status but in order to get it, they had to go through the list of targets and assassinate them all within five minutes.

The list started with General Hughes and ended with Connors, a rough digitized avatar made for each person on the hit list.

Sin played through the first-person shooter style game, chasing the targets through what was actually a good rendition of the main compound design, and laughing out loud when it came time for him to track down Vivienne. Her avatar was designed to look like a blond bombshell with Xs in place of eyes. Her main attack was throwing what appeared to be make-up compacts at the player character, although if he looked close enough he could see that each compact said 'cover up' which was subtle and hilarious at the same time.

By the end of the 'fight,' Sin's shoulders were actually shaking slightly with mirth and he had to stop looking at the screen in order to get control of himself. It was only then that he noticed Ivan watching him with a small, warm smile on his face.

Sin's own grin faded and he scowled at Ivan defensively. "What?"

"Nothing," Ivan said quietly, giving another discreet shrug although he didn't look away or change his expression. "It's just..."

The R&D agent trailed off briefly before he said, "It's just that you're truly, honestly, breathtakingly gorgeous, Hsin. It's difficult for me to ignore as it is but when you smile like that it's impossible. Your entire face lights up. It's very striking."

Sin stared at him blankly and Ivan sat back on his haunches with a shake of his head. "Why do you do that? Why do you hide your natural responses from people? Why not just smile and laugh?"

This time Sin looked away with a scowl, unable to answer the question because he honestly didn't know. It was ingrained in him to hide things from people he didn't entirely know or trust and, obviously, it had even extended at times to people he was close to which had been the case with Boyd. It was something he'd decided to make an effort to change which was easier said than done.

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"I don't know."

Ivan nodded and his intense grey eyes continued to bore into Sin, leaving him feeling mildly disturbed yet intrigued by the fact that Ivan showed him no fear whatsoever.

"Did Boyd see those sides of you?" he asked finally, curiously.

Sin nodded without hesitation, seeing no reason to downplay the connection he'd had with Boyd. "Boyd saw more than anyone likely will again."

Ivan nodded once again and he raised his eyebrows slightly, questioningly. "Will the two of you get together again?"

This time Sin hesitated and he tried to harden himself but the question caused his chest to clench slightly and after a moment he said, "I don't think so."

"So no one gets to see the real Hsin ever again?" Ivan asked with a slight frown. "Boyd was the first and only person you will ever allow yourself to connect with-- to get close to?"

Sin looked at Ivan again and shrugged although he couldn't hide the uncertainty in his expression, the automatic way his full lips turned down and his brow furrowed. "I don't know, Ivan. It's not as easy for me as it is for others."

"Okay." Ivan nodded his understanding as he shifted slightly, intent gaze still trained on Sin. "What if I made it easy for you?"

Sin's eyebrows raised skeptically. "How?"

Ivan leaned forward and up, brushing his lips against Sin's softly but not hesitantly. Sin froze and stared at Ivan, who still didn't avert his gaze even as he repeated the action, eyes only flickering down when their mouths made contact again.

Sin automatically raised his hands to grip Ivan's shoulders, intending to shove him away, but he didn't. He didn't entirely know why until the third time Ivan kissed him, when Ivan's lips parted slightly and a hint of moisture touched Sin's lower lip before sliding away in a manner that was undeniably sensual.

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A shudder went through Sin's body and he closed his eyes briefly, his hands tightening on Ivan's thin shoulders, trying to force himself to tell Ivan to back off but failing because the contact had sparked something inside him that he hadn't felt in a long time; since the last time he and Boyd had touched, had kissed.

With his eyes closed, it was easy to forget who it was in front of him. It was easy to forget the differences and just focus on the feel of long silky hair, of a slender, slightly toned but undeniably masculine body and soft lips against his.

So when Ivan kissed him again, encouraged by Sin's stillness, when Ivan parted his lips wider and he flicked his tongue more fully against Sin's mouth, Sin reacted.

His hands slid up Ivan's shoulders and neck, tangling in his long hair and pulling the younger man closer as Sin began to kiss back.

Sin kissed Ivan the way he would have kissed Boyd; he kissed Ivan the way he kissed Boyd in his dreams, in his thoughts, in a make believe make-up scene that would never happen, in a reconciliation that only existed in his head.

He savored the kiss, making love to Ivan's mouth with his tongue, losing himself in the feel of it and in his imagination, still seeing what he wanted to see even after opening his eyes.

Ivan's breath was coming faster when their lips finally moved apart and he looked at Sin with obvious desire in his storm grey eyes-- his mouth swollen from the kiss, his hands flexing against Sin's body as he uttered in his low voice, "If you don't want to do this..."

Sin just shook his head slightly, lost in fantasy, and this time Ivan pulled him forward more confidently and engaged Sin in another intense, searching kiss. He stood up as their tongues moved against each other languidly, pulling a pliant Sin with him, and didn't hesitate before walking backward toward the sagging mattress that lay on the floor; he only stopped when the backs of his ankles bumped into the worn bed.

Ivan hesitated for the first time then, pulling his lips away from Sin's, looking up at the other man briefly, steadily. Ivan's grey eyes were slightly narrowed and darkened with undeniable desire but still aware-- aware of what was happening and who it was happening with.

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But the hesitation lasted for barely a moment before he was tugged forward by Sin and their mouths met again, their bodies pressing together as Ivan finally knelt on the mattress.

They broke apart again only when Ivan pulled Sin's shirt up, lifting it over Sin's head and exposing his powerful chest and well-defined body.

Ivan took this all in, biting his lower lip slightly, eyes moving over Sin slowly as if he wanted to fully experience him visually as well as physically. As if he were aware that this experience could be the first and the last between them.

He reached down to unzip Sin's pants just as Sin ripped Ivan's shirt open, popping the buttons off carelessly as they went bouncing over the hardwood floors-- fastening his lips against the side of Ivan's throat and kissing it, just the way Boyd always liked.

Ivan exhaled noiselessly, his eyes shutting and brows drawing together at the sensation, at the feel of Sin's full warm lips massaging his throat, tongue gliding along the cool flesh of it, and Ivan shuddered at the sensation.

The taste of Ivan's skin was different from Boyd but Sin didn't notice as he kissed and licked along Ivan's throat.

Sin's pants sagged below his hips, exposing his naked body beneath. The lack of underwear and the nearly entirely erect cock that brushed against Ivan caused Ivan to swallow with difficulty, his fingers clenching against Sin's arms and spasming in what appeared to be nervousness.

But Sin saw none of it.

He drank Ivan in as though he couldn't get enough-- his hands sliding up and down Ivan's smooth, naked back, the skin like cool porcelain against Sin's rough fingertips. Their breath came faster now with anticipation as Ivan mumbled something faintly against Sin's ear, something Sin didn't entirely hear because he wasn't entirely there. He was too far gone, lost in his head and in a moment that was happening with someone else, somewhere else.

Ivan pulled away from Sin with a grunt, his lips open as he panted, his gaze caught on Sin's dick. He twisted and leaned across the bed, hurriedly grabbing a tube of lotion that was laying on the floor near the bed; he likely used the lotion for sexual purposes on his own.

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"It's all I have," Ivan said in his usual quiet tone, the only change being that he sounded hoarser, gruffer.

There was no verbal response and none was needed; Ivan moved instinctively, knowing what he wanted and knowing what Sin wanted without having to ask. He seemed even more turned on by Sin's silent intensity, by the green fire that burned in his eyes. Ivan didn't seem to pick up on the fact that Sin was thinking of someone else-- feeling someone else.

Ivan squeezed his eyes shut when he turned on his stomach, knees bent and ass up against Sin's groin as Sin's large cock pressed against him insistently. Even slicked with their makeshift lubricant, he was so big that Ivan shouted with hoarse pain at the pressure and gasped against the pillow. Ivan's mouth hung open, panting harshly, eyes tearing with pain at the burning sensation of Sin's cock searing into his tight opening.

Sin's eyes shut again, the pressure overwhelming him, a feeling he hadn't experienced in so long that it was almost alien to have it flooding his senses once again. He barely seemed to notice Ivan's discomfort until Ivan hissed quietly--

"Fuck, it hurts."

Sin's eyes opened and awareness came back to him-- the simple words somehow acted as cold water on his fantasy and he was back in the present, back with Ivan. If he hadn't already been hard and ready with his cock half in Ivan's ass, it was entirely likely he would have backed off.

He couldn't help feeling disturbed but it was almost immediately eclipsed by the need he felt to just fucking feel this-- feel good-- feel something-- His fingers clenched on Ivan's shoulders harder just as Ivan groaned:

"Do it."

Sin slid entirely into Ivan, the intensity of the pleasure clouding his mind like a fog and momentarily allowing him to just focus on the tightness in his stomach and the clenching of his body.

He fucked Ivan thoroughly-- moving in and out of the other man with an unrelenting rhythm that left them both panting noisily as Ivan pushed back onto Sin's dick as though he couldn't get enough.

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The mattress squeaked quietly beneath them, jolting with their movements and causing their hair to shift with each slam of their bodies against each other. Sweat started to gather on their skin, causing Sin's fingers to slide on Ivan's shoulder where his fingers clenched powerfully. He leaned forward over Ivan, slamming Ivan back harder against his dick as he got lost in the sensations.

The familiar feel of it was incredible and his mouth dropped open, well-formed lips reddened from the kissing.

Aside from the mattress bouncing beneath them, the only sound in the room was their harsh breathing and the slapping of their bodies against each other. Sin panted and tightened his hold on Ivan, who dropped his head forward and rode Sin's dick faster. Long, ash blond hair bunched against his neck, catching on the sweat of his skin and brushing against Sin's fingers on his shoulder.

Sin's head fell backward, black hair sliding against his face to touch the backs of his shoulders as his hips snapped against Ivan's ass firmly.

Sin couldn't feel anything but the tight, hot body encasing him, and the intensifying pleasure as it started in his clenched stomach and spread quickly through his bloodstream.

He only realized when Ivan orgasmed by the breathless pants turning into muffled cries; when Ivan's muscles clenched around Sin's cock deliciously.

Sin continued to drive into Ivan and groaned between grit teeth-- he could feel it all building in him more intensely and he slammed into Ivan harder as his orgasm approached. He only cried out loudly when he finally felt himself reaching the end, every muscle in his body sweaty and taut as he came hard inside Ivan.

They stayed that way for a moment, Sin clutching Ivan's thin shoulders violently tight, until Ivan shifted and pulled away to roll onto his side with a grunt.

Sin allowed himself to fall to the bed, briefly pressing his face into the sheet as he squeezed his eyes closed and tried to gather himself, his thoughts and his senses. As he tried to figure out what he'd just allowed to happen and why.

"I don't think you know your own strength," Ivan said in his deadpan way after nearly five minutes of heavy breathing ticked by.

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Sin turned his head and looked at Ivan before dropping his gaze to Ivan's pale shoulder, a shoulder that was red and irritated by the pressure of Sin's fingers. "Sorry."

"The rest made up for the pain," Ivan replied, sitting up and shifting slightly. "I could have said something but I didn't want you to stop."

Sin nodded silently, looking away and also sitting up. His body felt sated but his mind was racing as confused thoughts swarmed in now that the intense sensations had faded and gone. He could feel Ivan's watchful gaze on him, steady and curious, and Sin shook his head after a moment. "Can I use your shower?"

Ivan shrugged. "I didn't plan to send you on your way covered in sweat and come now that I've had my way with you."

Sin's gaze switched back to Ivan and his eyebrows drew together slightly, too intent on his own thoughts to even properly interpret the comment before Ivan just said, "I was kidding. Go ahead."

Sin looked away and stood up, walking across the wide open space of the loft and to the spacious bathroom. There was a tub and a separate shower which was wide, tiled and encased on all sides by glass.

The knob whined slightly when he turned the water on, stepping into the shower and sliding the doors shut before he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, allowing the hot water to soak his hair and burn against his skin.

He stood that way for what seemed like an eternity, his long dark lashes resting against his cheeks like shadows with his hands pressed against the glass wall-- water streaming down on him that was nearly too hot to be comfortable.

He wanted the water to wash away the troubled thoughts that were taking over his brain-- he wanted to be able to behave like a functional person, to be able to have a friend without getting so hopelessly ridiculously confused because of that friend's resemblance to Boyd.

Sin couldn't deny to himself that he felt guilt but he didn't entirely know who he felt bad about. Was it for Ivan, because he'd imagined someone else the entire time they'd had sex, because he'd been disappointed after coming back to reality and realizing that it wasn't Boyd who was beneath him? Or did he feel guilty about Boyd-- for having dragged his image and the memory of their time together into bed with someone else?

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Sin shook his head and backed away from the direct spray of the water, sliding down the wall and sitting under the water with his head tilted back and eyes closed.

Why did everything have to be so complicated when it came to him? Why did casual sex seem so easy and normal for Boyd, for Kassian-- but it just left Sin feeling unsatisfied and empty? It'd been different with Ann-- he'd just been trying to escape in the physical aspect of sex, he'd never intended it to be anything more and he'd never wanted it to be.

But with Ivan, it was different. It was confusing with Ivan. It was so easy to slip into thoughts of Boyd with Ivan-- so easy to relive moments that would never happen again...

Sin didn't react when he heard the bathroom door creak. He didn't look up when the shower slid open and he heard Ivan's footsteps splash in the water that had pooled at the bottom.

"What's wrong with you?"

Sin shrugged and finally opened his eyes, looking up at Ivan and not caring that he likely seemed very strange sitting on the shower floor with the water pouring down on him. "I'm a mess," he replied tonelessly. "Isn't it obvious?"

Ivan raised an eyebrow and turned off the water before sitting on the opposite side of the shower. He'd put underwear on and they likely became instantly soaked.

"It is," Ivan said amiably after a moment. "But that doesn't explain much."

Sin stared at Ivan evenly as he continued to lean against the wall, unmindful of his nudity and not feeling any desire to leave. It was actually surprising-- normally he would have left by now, put on his clothes and gone away at the first moment of uncomfortable regret, but Sin realized that he didn't want to do that to Ivan. They actually genuinely got along and Sin didn't feel any such desire to fuck it up like he always did.

"It's complicated." Sin didn't drop his gaze and stared directly into Ivan's eyes. "I'm not like normal people. I don't know what to do most of the time in what should be relatively easy social interactions and it's even more difficult when I'm incredibly fucking confused."

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Ivan watched him studiously, nodding simply and raising a hand to tuck long strands of blond hair behind his ear before he asked plainly, "Are you confused because Boyd and I resemble each other?"

There was a tense pause before Sin admitted flatly, "Yes."

Ivan didn't appear very surprised by this comment and it even seemed as though he'd been expecting it because he nodded. This time, he raised his eyebrows slightly. "Are you only spending time with me because of that fact?"

Sin frowned and sat up. "No," he said vehemently. "I started spending time with you because I actually enjoy your company. I like you as a person, which is shocking because typically I hate everyone. It had nothing to do with how you look."

Ivan's expression was difficult to read but his mouth lifted slightly on one side and he inclined his head after a moment. "Good. I like you very much Hsin, but I won't run after you if you don't really have interest in me as a person. If that ever came to be the case then I'd hope you would tell me and not let me make an ass of myself thinking we have something more than we actually do."

Sin just shrugged, not replying verbally although he didn't look away.

"And I won't suggest we sleep together if it's something that you don't want," Ivan added after a moment although a flash of disappointment crossed his face. "If I remind you of Boyd then I assume it's pretty disturbing to fuck me."

There was another silence and Sin finally stood up, stepping out of the shower and smoothing his hands over his wet hair, pushing it back out of his face. Ivan left the shower as well and pushed the door shut, looking at Sin seriously. He put a hand on Sin's upper arm, gripping the hard muscle with his thin fingers.

"Don't go silent on me. I need to know where we stand so I can behave accordingly."

Sin sighed and wiped moisture from his face. "I'm not trying to shut you out. This is just the way I am."

Ivan looked at him neutrally before saying evenly, "I understand that. But I'm involved in this too and I need to know what's going on. I won't deny that I'm attracted to you and that I want more than friendship. So, knowing that, do you want to stop spending so much time together or not?"

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Sin frowned and looked to the side briefly, his gaze caught by their reflections in the mirror. He saw himself-- how stoic his expression appeared, how unmoved by Ivan's words he seemed, and was disturbed by it because it wasn't true. He was conflicted and irritated by his own inability to behave rationally but he had no intentions of brushing Ivan off like he had a tendency to do with others in the past.

He had no intentions of sabotaging the first human interaction he'd had in months that didn't leave him wrought with tension. And he couldn't deny it felt good to be wanted by someone who was coming into the situation with their eyes wide open even if it wasn't the person Sin thought he needed it to be.

"No," Sin said finally. "I don't want to stop."

Ivan smiled his slight subtle smile and slid his hand along Sin's arm in an almost comforting caress. "Good. We'll figure the rest out from there."

Masquerade

Boyd held the plastic bag with the food from the cafe to his side and leaned against the wall of the elevator as he waited for the rest of the people to load in. There was the typical mess of confusion as each individual or group had to determine whether the button for the floor they were headed to had already been pressed, and Boyd got an odd look or two when he hit the button labeled 13. He didn't know how much of that was superstition and how much had to do with the fact that field agents probably rarely stopped on the Research & Development floor.

He had to admit that in nearly three years, he'd never once been on the thirteenth floor; he didn't even know what the layout was like or where Ryan worked. But when he'd called Ryan to ask if he wanted to have lunch together and Ryan had said even though he was really hungry he was almost too busy to breathe, Boyd had decided to stop by with some food for his friend.

By the time the elevator reached the thirteenth floor, only a handful of people remained. Boyd stepped onto the Research & Development floor and was mildly surprised by how sleek and expansive it seemed, considering the fact it was the same size as all the other floors. The hallway was extra wide and the clean floor reflected the pale lights

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above. There were several doors that he could see leading into larger rooms, but he realized that he didn't know where Ryan was.

A woman with a clipboard and brown glasses with a modern shape had also gotten off the elevator on that floor. When Boyd stopped her to ask where Ryan Freedman was, other than a mildly strange look she gave him, she pointed him toward the second door on the right.

Boyd thanked her and headed toward the room where he paused just inside the door. The room was large and, like the rest of the floor, seemed expansive. The full length windows along the far wall provided ambient lighting and a clear view of the half-broken city beyond.

There were dozens of desks spread across the huge, open room, with small half-walls separating them, providing a sense of delineation while still allowing a person to look across the entire room from their seat or talk to their neighbor. Some of the desks seemed larger than the others and as Boyd's gaze scanned the room to look for Ryan's familiar shock of black hair, some people entered the room behind him.

"No," a man was insisting enthusiastically, "it was so great because--"

The abrupt way the words cut off and the vaguely familiar voice caused Boyd to look over.

Kaspar was staring at Boyd in surprise while a woman he'd been talking to stopped as well.

Kaspar's clothing would make him easily blend into a crowd. He wore a pale blue button-down short-sleeved shirt with a faint vertical grey stripe pattern on it. His faded dark blue jeans seemed somewhat ill-fitted and pooled at his feet over worn and chunky sneakers that were charcoal grey.

Yet the woman did anything but blend in.

She looked to be about Boyd's age, her hair straight with the occasional curl; it was long enough that it fell between her chin and shoulders, with full bangs cut straight across. Her hair was pitch black and streaked with deep red, and her eyes were a pale lavender that Boyd was almost certain was due to contacts.

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She wore a black tank top dominated by a distressed picture of a guitar, dangling black guitar pick earrings, a short purple and black plaid skirt, detached purple and black sleeves with the fingers cut out, and tall black boots that reached past her knees.

Before the moment could become awkward, Boyd smiled slightly. "Hello, Kaspar."

"Senior A--" Kaspar started to say but Boyd quirked his eyebrow just a hint and Kaspar stumbled in his words, changing it slightly shyly to, "Uh-- Boyd."

For some reason, Kaspar and the woman next to him exchanged a sidelong glance and she returned her gaze to Boyd, seeming very pleased.

"Um," Kaspar continued a little awkwardly. "What brings you here?"

"Lunch for Ryan," Boyd said, gesturing to the bag in his hand. "Do you know where his desk is?"

The woman raised her eyebrows; or at least, Boyd thought she did-- her bangs were so low that he couldn't fully see them. Her black-rimmed eyes focused on him intently, her voice nearly a purr. "Ryan Freedman? We know exactly where he is."

She smiled widely at Boyd and grabbed his arm suddenly, holding it against her side as she started to walk. Boyd saw Kaspar's eyes widen at the movement but he was being pulled across the room before he could see anything more. After a second, Kaspar padded after them.

"So can I call you Boyd, too?" she asked slyly, giving Boyd a sidelong look as she smiled with full lips that glittered with faint, pale blue-tinged lip gloss.

"I don't mind," Boyd said, looking at her sidelong.

Most people kept their distance from him yet she was being quite familiar right away. He could tell by the way she looked at him and the way she pressed his arm against her breast that she was attracted to him, which was an odd sensation only because he wasn't accustomed to that coming from a woman. Especially since it was well-known on compound that he was gay, her reaction was bemusing to him.

He decided not to comment on that and asked instead, "Do you work with Kaspar?"

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"Sort of," she said, weaving Boyd around a few desks and smirking smugly at the few people who looked up, startled, and stared after them. "I'm Level 6, but we're in the same field so we collaborate sometimes. I'm Callie, by the way."

"Nice to meet you," Boyd said automatically and her grin only widened.

"The pleasure's all mine," she said in a low, smooth tone and jerked him to an abrupt halt. "Here we are," she announced cheerfully and Boyd looked over to see Ryan sitting at a huge desk that was completely covered in papers and folders that nearly buried his computer.

His space seemed to be one of four large areas in the room but his was the most secluded and was situated in the far corner near the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. No one else was at the desks around him, making him almost seem like he was in his own little island.

Ryan looked up with barely concealed surprise. "Boyd! What are you doing here?"

Boyd held up the plastic bag, eyebrows raised slightly. "I brought you lunch," he said, ignoring the way Callie and Kaspar hovered not that far in the background. "I have something for Owen, too, if he's around."

He glanced around, briefly searching for a desk that looked like it may be Owen's. He wasn't sure what that would translate to, but somehow he imagined Owen's desk to be as random and chaotic as the man was himself.

"Awesome! Thanks for going out of your way." Ryan sat up in his chair and looked around briefly before grabbing a spare chair that sat at a smaller adjoining desk that also seemed to be designated for Ryan. "You're going to stay and eat, right?"

"If you're not busy," Boyd agreed as he walked over to the chair. He noticed as he sat down that Callie and Kaspar were still watching him. When it became clear they weren't immediately going to leave, he said, "Thank you for your help."

Kaspar flashed that same shy grin from the library while Callie looked at once pleased and smug; she nodded and smiled slowly. "No problem." She turned abruptly and, grabbing Kaspar's arm, she started dragging him away much the same as she had dragged Boyd toward Ryan's desk.

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Boyd watched them go, noting Kaspar looking back over his shoulder briefly before the two hunched toward each other and presumably started talking intensely. With a glance toward the other R&D agents in the vicinity, Boyd noted that many of the agents ignored the interaction entirely, some looked intrigued by Boyd's presence and eyed him appraisingly, while others seemed exasperated as they looked at Kaspar and Callie.

Returning his attention to Ryan, Boyd pulled out the To Go containers of food he'd gotten for himself and the drink and container he'd gotten for Owen, setting them on a cleared part of the desk, then handed the plastic bag to Ryan so he could get out his own food.

"You have interesting coworkers," he observed mildly.

"They're both a part of your fan club," Ryan said as he unloaded the bag onto his desk eagerly.

"What?" Boyd asked, giving Ryan an odd look. It took him a moment to vaguely remember something Ryan mentioned once about people liking Boyd or the idea of him with Sin or something like that, but that had been years ago and he'd never really taken it seriously. He'd forgotten about the conversation entirely until just now. "They actually exist?"

Ryan opened a container of baked ziti and grinned at Boyd in appreciation. "I told you they did! You thought I made it up?"

"I don't know what I thought," Boyd said with a shrug as he pulled out a sandwich. "But even so, that was a while ago and I've been out of public view for months at a time. I wouldn't have expected anyone to still care."

"Well," Ryan started around a mouth full of pasta and cheese. "There's Callie and Kaspar, obviously. Then there's Rita--" Ryan pointed to a black woman who appeared to be in her mid-thirties and was dressed smartly in a pantsuit. She was writing something on a whiteboard.

"Then there's Wanda--" This time Ryan indicated a chubby, younger-looking girl with a head full of blue liberty spikes. "And Jacob."

Boyd looked at Jacob and saw a very tall, pale man with a black goatee and short hair. He was sitting on the edge of his desk and scrolling through a panel thoughtfully, both of his forearms entirely encased with tattoos.

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With a feeling of bemusement, Boyd thoughtfully chewed a bite of his sandwich as he took in the collection of strangers who apparently were either pro-Boyd or pro-Boyd with Sin. It was a little odd to realize not only that such people existed but that they were such a hodgepodge of people. With Callie, Wanda and Jacob on one end, then the put-together Rita and shy Kaspar... it made Boyd wonder what their personalities were like that they would even care.

Looking at Ryan again, Boyd took a drink from his water bottle before he asked curiously, "What are they like?"

"Well--"

"I don't give a *fuck* about your deadline, dude!" a female voice shouted loudly.

Ryan and Boyd looked up to see Wanda standing up and shouting at someone on the phone but from the non-reactions of the people around her, it apparently was not abnormal or surprising.

"Don't fucking rush me-- I don't care if you're team leader-- the info will get dealt with when I fucking deal with it so *deal*." Wanda slammed the phone down violently and sat down in her chair with a furious expression on her face, the buckles and chains on her wide legged pants jingling loudly.

"Um. Yes-- so, Wanda," Ryan started again around a mouthful, looking at Boyd with a grin and obviously waiting for a reaction.

Boyd couldn't help feeling amused, his eyes sparking and eyebrows raising slightly as his mouth stretched in a small smile. For some reason, it gave him a strange sense of satisfaction that someone who obviously had no problem saying it like it was, or perhaps just had a short temper, was part of this alleged fan club. Maybe because Boyd himself typically went by the rules so he found Wanda to be mildly intriguing.

"Is she always like that or just when told to hurry?" Boyd asked before he took another bite of his sandwich.

"Nah, she's always like that." Ryan dug into the bag and pulled out a container of sugar water masquerading as juice. "It's pretty awesome because most of us just kind of take crap from field agents just because we know we're support staff to an extent but she's

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like 'rawr, screw you-- without me you're nothing!' Which is also pretty true and I heart her for it."

Ryan glanced at Wanda again with a smile. "But yeah, she's a huge faghag. She loves the idea of you and Sin together, and it all started-- well she caught the attention from the rest of the fanclub because one day somebody made some lame comment about you two-- and this was like a couple of years ago-- and she was all like 'Yeah? So what if they're gay! They're so hot that they *should* be together! You're just jealous because you'll never be that hot!' and like, cursed the guy out."

"What?" Boyd asked, startled into a brief laugh.

The argument was so ridiculous to him that he could only feel bemused. It was bizarre to him that a complete stranger would care at all about any of it, but then, Boyd and Sin had always been high profile people and he knew there were plenty of people out there who had looked down on Boyd and even more on he and Sin being close. So maybe it wasn't so strange that there were a few people out there who would look at it as a good thing.

"So basically," Boyd summed it up, "she liked the idea of us together because she thinks we're hot?"

"Yeah. And Jacob is, as far as I know, not gay but he's pretty pro you guys too, probably just because he likes to go against the grain. He's our resident genius, by the way. He knows like-- everything, although it could also be because he has a photographic memory."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, mildly impressed. "I've never met anyone who actually has that. Where does he work?"

"He's hardcore cross-divisions," Ryan said, looking over at Jacob with a small frown as he unwrapped some garlic bread. "They work him like a dog because of that talent. It's too bad... we never get to talk much usually. I kind of have a teensy crush on him."

A half-smile pulled at Boyd's lips and he discreetly looked over at Jacob appraisingly. "I could see why; he's very attractive," he observed, gaze drawn to his tattoos. "It's hard to tell what his personality is like but he seems like he'd be pretty laid-back. Although, if he's not gay, is he bi or just very open-minded?"

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"He's super open-minded," Ryan said with a smile, dragging his indigo eyes away from Jacob and reddening slightly. "I love when I get to talk to him. He's so smart and funny and he never gets judgmental or like, acts like I'm a kid. I even talked to him about Andrew a couple of times. But I'm not sure what he is though-- he never talks about it. I know he's single but he doesn't say anything about who he finds attractive."

Boyd nodded, watching Ryan with a slight smile before he finished his sandwich and opened the bag of chips he'd grabbed as well. "Well, if he's open-minded enough to support gay relationships then that's promising, in a way. Maybe with enough time you'll get the chance to find out what he's into."

"He's too hot for me," Ryan said blandly with a shrug. "I give up on the idea in advance."

Boyd laughed. "That's not true."

Ryan screwed up his face and shook his head back and forth but didn't say anything more on the topic, instead switching back to the 'fan club'. "Next up is Callie-- AKA Calliope-Joan, which she hates, resident musician and hot girl who thinks she can convert you to bisexuality. She's also Captain Chase's niece."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, briefly looking over at Callie again. She was sitting on the edge of a desk, kicking her feet and talking to a tall man with dark skin and a brilliant white smile.

Of all the people he'd met at the Agency, Callie did not fit the picture he would have imagined being related to Morgan Chase. Morgan seemed so serious and by-the-book, and Callie... well, Callie did not.

"She is?" he asked in surprise.

"Yeah. I don't think Morgan like, got her the job or anything. As far as I know it's coincidental. They don't even act close or anything," Ryan replied with a shrug.

"Does Morgan's sister or brother work here too?" Boyd asked, looking at Ryan again.

"Nope, both of Callie's parents are dead. I never really talk about the details with her or anything, though."

"Oh," Boyd said, not really knowing what else to say to that.

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Ryan switched his gaze to Rita, who was still standing at the whiteboard but appeared to be glancing in their direction every now and again although her expression was mostly neutral. "Rita is actually funny. She's pretty traditional Christian and isn't exactly down with the gayness but when you first arrived on the compound she thought you were the cutest thing and wanted to protect you from big bad Hsin."

"Really," Boyd said, mildly intrigued. He wasn't expecting someone with that mindset to be included in the group of people. "What did she think about the rumors or me being fine with Sin, then?"

"She thinks he corrupted you," Ryan said with a smile, sauce staining his teeth as he snickered at the idea. "But she still loves you. She was sad when you came back with shorter hair."

It was quite strange but mildly amusing to hear what people thought about him from the outside. He hadn't thought anyone would have cared about his hair but he smiled slightly at that.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to know that unless another mission dictates, I'll probably be keeping it long," Boyd said with a shrug, sitting back in his chair a little more comfortably and eating a few chips. His eyebrows drew down slightly, thoughtfully. "I don't like it short for some reason... There's nothing to hide behind if I need to and I can't pull it back."

"I like it long too," Ryan said agreeably. "Although I can't decide what opinion I have on Hsin's hair. Is he just too lazy to cut it? I've never seen it this long before."

"We actually did talk about that once," Boyd said, popping another chip in his mouth and chewing it thoughtfully. "He just said he hadn't thought about it." He smirked slightly in amusement. "And when I asked if he liked it or was planning to keep it that way, he said he didn't know."

"Typical Hsin," Ryan said with a snort, wiping his hands on a napkin. "I think Ivan prefers it long, though. Maybe that will influence him."

The comment made something twist abruptly, uncomfortably in Boyd, but he kept his expression the same as it had been. It had been over a month since Ryan had proposed the idea of Sin dating Ivan, and Boyd knew that the two had hung out at some point because Sin had mentioned it in passing.

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"Do you think? I heard they hung out," he commented, briefly looking down at his bag of chips as he poured out the last few broken bits at the bottom. "I haven't heard anything else."

"Really?" Ryan stopped eating and looked at Boyd with surprise. "He hasn't said much more than that?"

"No," Boyd said slowly, watching Ryan somewhat oddly. "Why?"

The other man shrugged and scratched the back of his head. "Well, I guess I don't see why he'd broadcast it to you anyway, though. It'd be odd if he randomly started telling his ex-boyfriend about his sex life. Hsin never struck me as the type to really talk too much about his sex life with anyone, really."

Boyd's stomach clenched and he stared at Ryan for a second before forcing himself to echo calmly, "Sex life?"

"Well I called Ivan last night to ask about some work stuff," Ryan said, glancing at his monitor and pausing briefly as he clicked something and read an e-mail. "Uh-- and he said that he'd call me back because Hsin was about to leave. I called back and asked how they were getting along since I guess they started talking about a month ago but in the last couple of weeks Ivan had mentioned they'd been getting along very well-- and he told me they'd slept together."

Boyd remained silent for a breath, trying to hold back his thoughts, trying to gather the facts first. Even so, his hand almost absently tightened a little on the empty chip bag, but he did his best to seem normal to Ryan. "Have they been seeing each other a lot?"

"I'm not sure, really," Ryan replied, his gaze still distracted by the computer screen, a slight frown on his face. "I know they've spent some time together but this is the first I've heard of anything sexual-- I mean Ivan told Hsin that he liked him as more than just a buddy pretty much right off the bat but he also said he wasn't trying to push Hsin into some sexual thing and that he mainly just wanted to spend time with him."

Boyd felt that quiet collection of feelings grow-- resentment, jealousy, hurt, irritation with himself-- but he tried to ignore it. Even so, it somehow made it worse to know Ivan had said that and they'd still had sex... because then it made it seem like Sin had gone more out of his way since he could have continued the friendship without sex.

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And even thinking of Sin running his hands along Ivan, of fucking him, made the feelings grow stronger briefly before Boyd stifled them.

Yet even as he thought about it, he had to consider it in terms of his own experience with Kassian... it could have been the same thing. Maybe Sin and Ivan were attracted to each other and one day the two of them had been horny and they'd just decided to have sex. That was more understandable to him.

He couldn't be upset with Sin for having sex with anyone when Boyd continued to occasionally have sex with Kassian. More than anything, what bothered him was the fear that feelings were, or would become, involved with Sin and Ivan. Because for Boyd, he and Kassian felt nothing for each other than friendship and purely physical attraction.

"So... Last night was the first time?" Boyd asked, distantly wondering if he was a masochist for asking all these questions, while at the same time he felt like if he didn't then he would just come up with conclusions on his own that would probably be untrue.

"Yeah, that's what he said," Ryan replied with a nod, turning back to his food.

And with that simple comment, Boyd felt discomfort grow sharply within him. He didn't want to immediately analyze why-- he made himself ask first, "If they were attracted to each other, if Ivan told him that right away... why did they wait?"

"Ivan just said like-- he didn't really want to hang out with Sin for that. He said he wasn't trying to make it all about sex." Ryan finished his ziti and dropped his plastic fork in the container, rubbing his stomach slowly.

Boyd had to look down, fingers curling against the empty bag as something sharp moved through him. He couldn't help comparing that to his own relationship with Sin-- couldn't help feeling at once pained and doubtful...

Sin and he had never really spent much time together; they still barely knew each other in ways. It had never been normal between them, had never involved focusing on that. As soon as they'd acknowledged their mutual attraction, they'd immediately started having sex-- frantic, hungry sex that had overshadowed everything else. That had become all that there was between them.

And even as he felt self-doubt, wondering if that was something he'd done wrong himself, wondering if Sin liked it more Ivan's way, if Sin was more comfortable with that-- At the same time, he couldn't help feeling thrown off that Sin was okay with it all.

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That after all those times of insisting Boyd was crazy to think Sin could ever bring himself to tolerate anyone, of making it seem like Boyd was an idiot for even suggesting the idea-- it certainly hadn't taken Sin long to find someone he liked to hang around with, someone he also coincidentally wanted to fuck.

It was frustrating to know that within a few weeks, Ivan was achieving things Boyd couldn't in years... That Ivan was sliding his way into Sin's life and so easily doing the things Boyd and Sin had gone through hell to conclude-- the stupidly simple idea of actually saying what they felt.

He and Sin had never really discussed their feelings; they'd basically gone from acknowledging attraction straight to having sex and had never taken the time to make it clear between them what they felt or wanted. It made Boyd feel like there was something wrong with himself even as, hurtfully, it underscored his quiet fear that maybe there had been someone out there all along who was better for Sin.

Boyd realized he had been silent a beat too long and he nodded even as he crinkled the bag up and slid it into the plastic bag to throw away later. It occurred to him that it was still possible that sex would change everything for Ivan and Sin the way it had with Boyd, but even as he thought that, he somehow doubted it. Not if they'd taken the time to get to know each other first; not if they hadn't made it only about sex.

Not if, maybe, Sin liked Ivan more.

Even so, he found himself asking, "Was it still... comfortable between them when Sin left?"

Ryan shrugged but his face reddened slightly and he absently pushed some of his unruly hair off his forehead. "I guess. Ivan seemed to be in a good mood. He... said it was um... yeah."

"What?" Boyd was unable to stop himself from asking as he watched Ryan. He purposefully kept his expression as calm as it had been before and forced the hint of tension he'd had in his shoulders to relax.

Ryan began to fidget, as uncomfortable as ever to talk about sex. "He seemed... happy and impressed with how stuff went."

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"Impressed..." Boyd echoed, staring at Ryan briefly before he added a curious tone when he asked, "What do you mean?"

"I dunno." Ryan gave one of his big shrugs and appeared embarrassed. "Well, he didn't go into specifics or anything but he did say that Hsin was an incredibly intense person in every possible way."

Boyd didn't even want to think about how that made him feel, especially since he'd brought it on himself by continuing to ask questions. He nodded and was just trying to figure out something to say to get it off this topic when he realized Kaspar was heading toward them from across the room, looking hesitant and a little shy but undeterred.

Boyd looked at him fully, feeling a strange sense of gratitude to the man for inadvertently interrupting an otherwise increasingly uncomfortable conversation.

"Hey Ryan, um, Boyd," Kaspar said almost nervously, eyes darting between the two of them somewhat questioningly when he saw Ryan's expression. "Uh, I'm sorry to interrupt?"

"No, it's fine," Boyd said with a shake of his head, meeting Kaspar's eyes steadily. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong?" Kaspar asked, eyebrows drawing down even as he fidgeted absently with the hem of his shirt. "No, it's just... earlier, I wasn't eavesdropping-- Well, I mean I guess I was? But I didn't mean to. Anyway when we brought you to Ryan, you said you were looking for Owen, right?"

"Oh." Boyd had completely forgotten about that in the wake of the new information. "Yes, I was. Is he here?"

"No but he just called Terry," Kaspar glanced at Ryan to include him in the conversation, "and Callie and I were by him so we told Terry to tell him you had some food for him or something and what should you do with it. Terry made me listen to his answer because he said Owen was being too cracked out. So Owen said to tell you to put it in his little fridge and also--"

Kaspar seemed to be diligently reciting this from memory as his gaze tilted up to the side in concentration. "That it didn't matter what you got him, he's decided you're his favorite today and you're invited to his parties any time even though he doesn't plan to have any but you can come anyway, and..."

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His eyebrows drew down slightly as he seemed to be seriously trying to remember the rest. The fidgeting increased before he brightened. He rambled the rest quickly, which made it end up seeming especially like it was coming straight from Owen.

"And he'll be back in an hour so he hopes whatever you got won't poison and kill him but if it does he wants you to tell Carhart so he doesn't posthumously get the smackdown and, PS, he hopes it's coffee because he's running low on steam."

Kaspar stopped and took a deep breath, watching Boyd almost uncertainly.

Boyd stared at him, not sure whether he was amused that the man had apparently taken the task so seriously that he'd remembered Owen's rambling word for word, or bewildered as to why Kaspar hadn't just summed up that insanity with, 'Put it in the fridge and Owen says thanks.'

"Thank you," Boyd said amiably. "I'll do that."

Ryan looked at his computer screen and seemed to be studiously trying not to laugh.

"Okay, great," Kaspar said brightly, either not noticing Ryan's reaction or not finding it odd. He smiled at Boyd, twisting the hem of his shirt briefly before abruptly seemed to notice he was doing that and shoved his hands in his pockets instead. "Um... Do you want me to tell him anything in return?"

Ryan took a deep gulp of his drink, turning away slightly as if he couldn't bear to look at Kaspar anymore.

Boyd kept his gaze firmly on Kaspar even as he was increasingly intrigued as to what Ryan was finding to be so hilarious about this. "No, it's fine; I'm sure he'll find it," he replied easily, tilting his head and studying Kaspar. "Although... I don't know where his desk is. Could you show me on the way out?"

Kaspar straightened and nodded immediately. "Yeah, no problem! You walked right past it before-- well, sort of, I mean we were in the vicinity since he's a lot closer to the door, but... Well, obviously you wouldn't have known that. Not that I'm saying you're stupid for going past it or anything, or that you thought I was saying that..." He seemed to realize he was rambling and he drew his hands out of his pockets to fidget again.

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Taking pity on Kaspar, Boyd smiled slightly and leaned back in his chair. "Thanks." He almost glanced toward Ryan but could tell that his friend was still struggling to contain himself so he decided to ask Kaspar something he was curious about instead. "Does Jeffrey Styles have a desk in here too?"

Kaspar stared at Boyd blankly for a moment. "Who?"

"He's an analyst in my unit," Boyd explained, eyebrows drawn down slightly.

"Ohh, Buttrey!" Kaspar said enthusiastically then suddenly stopped and looked highly embarrassed.

"What?" Boyd stared at Kaspar, almost incredulous.

Kaspar was starting to look mortified and couldn't seem to bring himself to meet Boyd's eyes. "He-- Owen," he started out saying in a normal voice but it started fading as he spoke until he ended in a mumble. "He talked about an analyst in your unit and used to call him Buttface but then he said Buttrey rhymed better..."

Boyd's eyebrows rose and he couldn't help a faint smirk of amusement. He didn't know if he was more entertained by the idea of Owen calling Jeffrey that in front of other people and what Jeffrey would say if he found out, or that Kaspar remembered that entire, ridiculous monologue of Owen's but had forgotten Jeffrey's real name.

"You probably shouldn't go around telling that to people," Ryan said, finally looking at Kaspar and seeming to have controlled his mirth. "Jeffrey would get super pissed."

Kaspar looked between them, not seeming to know how to interpret their reactions. "Sorry... I didn't-- I mean, I wouldn't normally..." He trailed off then sighed and straightened his back.

"I won't. Anyway," he said more seriously, looking over at Boyd. "Analysts have a whole floor below us so you'd have to go there to see him. I can show you that, too, or Ryan could..." He glanced toward Ryan questioningly, with a look like he didn't want to overstep his bounds.

"I'm too busy," Ryan said, appearing confused by Kaspar's expression. "So... feel free!"

"I can't today," Boyd said before Kaspar could reply. "I have to get to training pretty soon. I was just curious."

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Kaspar nodded, although disappointment darkened his hazel eyes. His shoulders actually slumped and his fidgeting stilled even as his eyebrows drew together briefly. "Okay, well..." He glanced around Boyd, as if he couldn't quite bring himself to meet Boyd's eyes, then frowned distractedly. "If you ever need help or want a tour next time you're around, just let me know. I actually know the Analyst floor pretty well 'cause my mom's there now."

Boyd nodded, mildly curious about what that area would look like although he didn't know if he cared enough to ever actually get a tour. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

Kaspar looked between the two of them again then suddenly looked over his shoulder; that made Boyd glance over as well and notice that Callie was watching them impatiently. Kaspar's frown deepened before he took a step back. "Okay... Uh. You know, actually, I could even put that in his fridge for you... If you're busy and don't want to take the extra time?"

Boyd shrugged, not particularly caring either way. He started to grab the container but then paused, wondering for a moment whether he should leave Owen a note to point out that this came from the cafe, but then decided against it.

Owen had seemed to think the food in the cafe would be better than the cafeteria so Boyd decided to see if Owen would comment on the superiority of the cornbread on his own or if he wouldn't know the difference. Boyd suspected the latter since he figured they were the exact same thing.

Boyd handed the food and drink to Kaspar. "That's fine. Thank you."

Kaspar smiled hesitantly. "I'll do that right now."

Boyd nodded and watched as Kaspar abruptly turned and strode away, apparently deciding to leave before he could start rambling further. Callie watched Boyd closely for a long moment before she turned her attention to Kaspar and Boyd looked over at Ryan.

"What was so funny?"

"He's just dumb sometimes," Ryan replied, his attention fully on the monitor now as his fingers flew over the keyboard. Sometime during the course of Kaspar talking, Ryan had once again returned to his work. "I thought he'd realized that Owen tells him to repeat

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stuff like that just to mess with him. Kaspar has this habit of like, memorizing quotes and random stuff and O gets a kick out of it."

"Ahh," Boyd said with a nod; he could see Owen doing that. He watched Ryan for a moment then shoved the empty food containers into the plastic bag. "You probably need to get back to work and I should go soon."

"But I wasn't finished telling you yet!" Ryan protested with a frown although his eyes remained on his computer, a furrow between his brows as he ran into some kind of difficulty or annoyance. "And--"

"Don't get on my case, Bree! I'm tired of these *fucking* fieldies whipping their cocks out every time they feel the need to act like big shots and I'm not takin' their shit!"

Wanda's voice rang out in the room and the two of them looked over again. The stout girl was standing up with her fists on her hips, glaring at a woman with pixie-styled blond hair and tinted, square-rimmed glasses.

Boyd remembered Ryan mentioning Bree in the past and he had to admit that the woman across the room wasn't what he'd expected for the R&D supervisor. Bree was wearing pink high top sneakers with green jeans and a faded vest with a skull on the back of it. She replied to Wanda but Ryan's desk was too far for it to be heard over the din of other conversation and the hum of computers.

"Awesome," Ryan said, sitting up straight and waving his hand at Bree to get her attention. "I've been trying to get ahold of her all day. Wanda did me a favor by getting another complaint against her."

Bree glanced over at Ryan with an arched eyebrow before waving a dismissive hand at Wanda and making her way to Ryan's corner. As she moved closer, Boyd saw that she was actually in her early forties even though she gave off a more youthful air.

"Sup, Ry-Ry." Bree said, stopping by the desk and glancing briefly at Boyd before returning her gaze to Ryan. She had very light green eyes and petite elfin-like features. There was a rope necklace dangling from her neck with a rainbow pendant on it.

Boyd's gaze lingered briefly on the necklace; there was no doubt in his mind that she wasn't wearing that just because she thought it was pretty. Bree was the first openly gay woman he'd seen at the Agency and he found that to be rather interesting. Then again,

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from what he'd seen so far, many of the R&D staff seemed unique and unafraid to show their differences. He had to admit that, in a way, he found that to be refreshing.

"Can you talk to General Carhart for me?" Ryan asked, his voice completely serious now that he was speaking to his supervisor. "He's talking about putting me on downtime because of that Janus node in Oahu."

"You mean the non-Janus node in Oahu," Bree replied easily, crossing her arms over her slight chest and peering down at Ryan through her purple-tinted glasses.

"It was there! My contact was reliable!" Ryan exclaimed, obviously frustrated. "It's like they cleared out as soon as I passed over the Intel! I don't know how-- but it's like-- like they somehow found out I got wind of it!"

Bree studied Ryan for a moment before shrugging. "Maybe. And maybe you just need some rest. You've got a lot on your plate, Ry. Maybe too much, too soon."

Ryan's dark eyebrows drew together and something very close to anger clouded his expression as his lips pursed and he looked to the side briefly. "My work load is a third smaller than it used to be. This is nothing..."

"You're a sick kid, Ry. Your health isn't what it used to be. Maybe you're just tired." Bree shrugged and reached up to adjust her glasses with a low sigh. "I'll talk to Zachary, though. I can't spare you right now, anyway. Well-- I'll try to. Trying to talk to him lately is like trying to talk to Jesus. I never get an answer."

"I'd appreciate it," Ryan muttered, still not looking very happy.

"Uh huh." Bree stared at him a moment longer before finally looking at Boyd. "What're you doing here?"

"Ryan was busy so I stopped by with lunch," Boyd said, tilting his head toward the empty To Go containers. He didn't know if for some reason Ryan could get in trouble for eating on the job when he was so busy but Bree didn't seem like she would care and the containers were pretty obvious. "But I know he has work to do so I was about to go."

Bree nodded, peering at Boyd through her glasses before shrugging. "Okay. I'll walk with you out."

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Boyd glanced briefly at Ryan, who just looked mad, then nodded and grabbed his things as he stood. "I'll see you later, Ryan."

Ryan nodded faintly, moodily clicking his mouse. "I'll call you later..."

Bree looked down at her employee again and shrugged before turning to head toward the door. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and toyed with it idly as Boyd followed. She didn't speak to him until they were out in the hall and even then, she only did after giving him another long stare.

"So you're the sexy devil that's got some of my people all aflutter."

Boyd was mildly caught off-guard by the comment but he just met her gaze steadily. "I don't know about that but I do apologize if I interrupted any work schedules."

Bree gave him an arch look and sauntered towards the elevator bank, removing a long skinny cigarette and flipping it between her fingers. "I know my staff. Between Kaspar acting like a spaz and Callie tramping up the place trying to get your attention, I don't know what to do with them. Maybe I ought to just recommend termination for the whole lot since they can't even maintain concentration around cute boys. What good are they, right?"

Boyd shrugged, not really knowing what to say to that as he ended up walking with her. He paused briefly to throw the plastic bag into a garbage near the end of the hallway.

"Good," Bree went on, nodding. "I'll inform Marshal Viv that her boy concurs with my decision."

Boyd looked at her sidelong and quirked an eyebrow. He hadn't heard anyone call his mother 'Viv' since his father had died; but then, Bree seemed to have a thing for nicknames.

"I imagine their necessary skills for R&D range a little wider than keeping their head straight in front of someone they find attractive," he said mildly. "But if that's really the only requirement then I think she may agree. Personally, I'd say give them another chance and ban me from the area for being distracting."

"Nah. I secretly want them dead, anyway. You give me a good excuse." Bree jabbed her finger against the down button and looked at Boyd with a smirk. "I hope you realize I'm not being serious. I can never tell with you blond types."

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"You would be an incredibly odd supervisor if you were serious," Boyd said with a slight smirk. He watched Bree thoughtfully; she was a curious person but somehow she really seemed to fit as someone he could see successfully managing the interesting group of personalities that seemed to come from R&D. "What do you mean, anyway? You're blond too."

Bree winked at him as the elevator finally arrived. "Exactly. And I know how dense I can be sometimes. For all I know you were sitting there taking me seriously and planned to go crying to Zachary about how I wanted to kill off Ryan and all of your new friends."

Boyd shook his head to himself, mildly amused. "The only person I'd expect to actually recommend termination for something small like that would be my mother, and I'm fairly certain even she would think twice. So, feel free to threaten your staff in my vicinity all you'd like; I promise I won't tell."

Bree smiled at him and glanced at the elevator when it arrived. They both boarded and she looked over at him again, this time curiously. "So how's Zachface these days, anyway?"

"I'll only answer if you tell me what nickname you're going to come up with for me as soon as I walk away," Boyd said, raising an eyebrow.

"Butt Boyd?" For someone that was nearly twice his age, Bree had a very immature sense of humor.

"I hope that's not your final answer," Boyd said evenly, looking at her mock-seriously with raised eyebrows.

"We'll see," Bree said with a grin.

Boyd shook his head to himself and leaned against the wall idly, crossing his arms. "Do you know General Carhart well?"

"Mmmm." Bree considered the question, studying Boyd for a moment as if deciding whether or not it would hurt to respond truthfully. "We used to be close like twenty years ago but then Emilio pretended to die and Zachary got all emo and serious and it wasn't the same, especially after he became top General in charge of everything under the moon."

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The information was mildly intriguing to Boyd, and a little odd just because it was strange to imagine Carhart twenty years ago, closer to Boyd's age now. Imagining Carhart's entire generation as his age was odd in general; some of them, like Bree and Emilio, seemed immature enough in their forties that it was difficult to imagine them in their early twenties.

If Boyd lived long enough to even just reach their age, he wondered what people would assume he had been like now.

Still, if she'd been Carhart's friend then she deserved a more serious answer. He shrugged with one shoulder. "He was extremely stressed for a while but after Emilio's existence was basically made public, he seems to have relaxed a little. He's still General Carhart whenever I'm around him, though, so I don't know what he's like around his friends."

Bree arched an eyebrow at Boyd as the elevator finally reached the ground floor. "Now that Emilio's back, I highly doubt Zachary will pay attention to any other friends," she said knowingly.

They got off the elevator and Bree stuck the cigarette between her lips. "It was good to finally meet you, Double B."

"It was nice to meet you, too," Boyd said, then smirked at her briefly and crossed his arms. "That one's much better, by the way. I may even answer to it if you yell it in a crowded room."

"Good, 'cause I most certainly will next time we cross paths." Bree grinned at him and waved before turning and walking away.

Boyd turned and headed toward the training room to meet up with Doug. They had been using one of the smaller, private rooms attached to the main space. Typically, David had used those for one-on-one instructions and Doug was using the space for the Level 10 continuation training.

As Boyd headed into their designated area, he idly wondered if Jon would be back from the extended mission he was on yet or if it would be another delightful day of training with Doug alone. He was in the main training room and was about to enter the private room when David appeared at his side and slapped him hard on the back.

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"Way to not be late for once, slacker," David said cheerfully, putting his arm around Boyd's shoulders and nearly tugging him off balance.

David's ecstatic high of being able to return to work still hadn't worn off and Boyd was beginning to wonder if it ever would. David seemed to be embracing life even more fully after he was nearly killed during the raid. He'd even mentioned the other day that he and Aolani were thinking about having another kid.

Boyd rolled his eyes. "I was late once," he said in a long-suffering tone. "If you hold grudges this long, I pity Lani if she ever showed up a few minutes late to a date even years ago."

"She did and I do." David grinned widely, unabashed. "And I'll lord it over her for the rest of her natural-born life." He dropped his arm from Boyd in favor of holding his hand to his chin as he looked up to the side with a serious expression. "I remember it well. It was a summer day, the wind was warm; it was 92 degrees but it felt like 98..."

"Shut up," Boyd said with a laugh, shaking his head to himself as he turned toward the private room.

David started to follow him and Boyd gave him an odd look, since David wasn't scheduled to help with training today. Because Doug was in charge of high level promotional training, David was typically involved only when Doug wasn't available for combat training.

"I have to ask the illustrious Ferguson about something," David explained with a shrug. "I got a batch of pretty shitty rookies over the weekend and he had some suggestions for one of them."

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding.

When he walked in, he saw that Doug was already there and, somewhat surprisingly, Emilio was as well. Emilio was shirtless, wearing only a pair of shorts, and was covered in sweat. It was the first time Boyd had seen so much of Emilio's body since the man had always been completely covered up in Mexico.

Although Emilio and Sin were nearly clones in facial features, Emilio's body type was much more reminiscent of Kassian's; he was well-built and muscular, causing Boyd to subconsciously give a brief, discreet once-over of the man. Every time he was

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presented with obvious differences between Emilio and Sin, it was impossible for him not to take notice.

With much of Emilio's body bared, Boyd could see now that the ornate design on Emilio's forearm wasn't the only tattoo the man had; among others, there were also the numbers 1 and 3 tattooed on his front shoulders.

Emilio was laughing loudly and, oddly enough, Doug looked relaxed as he smirked at Emilio. There was nothing of the sour, mocking expression Boyd had become accustomed to seeing on Doug's face; he looked much more normal and approachable now.

Boyd paused briefly in the doorway, eyebrows raised; David shoved him lightly and Boyd looked over. "They're actually taking the time to train him again?" he asked dubiously.

David shrugged. "Marshal's orders. Treat him like any other trainee."

Although Boyd couldn't imagine that Emilio actually needed to be trained in fighting-- after all, he'd trained Sin-- it didn't really matter if that was the order sent down from above.

Boyd pulled off the light, long-sleeved shirt that he'd worn and tossed it to the side of the room, leaving himself in one of his workout outfits of a simple t-shirt and loose pants. He headed toward the other three.

Doug's expression almost immediately turned to distaste as he caught sight of Boyd and he grimaced as if it was difficult for him to be in his presence.

"Hey, blondie," Emilio greeted, still snickering from whatever he and Doug had been talking about.

"Hi," Boyd said, wondering what it was with people and nicknames today. He glanced between Doug and Emilio as David hovered near them. "So are we training together from now on?"

"When it's convenient," Doug replied shortly before looking at David with a questioning raise of one thick eyebrow.

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As David and Doug walked a short distance away to discuss whatever David wanted to ask about, Emilio gave Boyd an idle once over. "You're lookin' good, boy."

Boyd raised an eyebrow slightly at Emilio and crossed his arms. "Thanks, I suppose."

Emilio smirked, stretching his arms over his head and arching his back until it cracked loudly before standing up straight and bouncing on the balls of his feet. "You were so fucking frail down in Mexico that I thought my boy was gonna snap you in two with all of that ass pounding."

Boyd stared at Emilio blankly, wishing once again that the man had never seen any of that. Especially since Emilio was apparently not the type to just let it drop. "I've been working out a lot more and I've been trying to build more muscle," he said calmly rather than commenting on the rest.

"It suits you." Emilio added with a smirk, "Maybe my son will come begging you to take him back now that you're all hot stud *blanquito*. What do you think? Maybe we should make a bet on it."

"I think I'll pass." Boyd took a few steps back to give himself more room to start stretching so he would be ready when Doug was.

Emilio tsked and watched Boyd, his green eyes narrowed as though he were trying to figure out what ridiculous thing to say next but instead he asked, "So how's my boy?"

"He's alright last I knew," Boyd replied, stretching an arm over his head then holding his elbow and pulling down. "I don't see him much lately. I have training and he's also been spending some time with a new friend." He switched arms to stretch the other side.

Emilio made a skeptical face, one eyebrow arching high as his mouth twisted. "My son? A friend? Surely you jest."

"It's true," Boyd said, standing up straight and stretching his arms straight above his head. He watched Emilio, not knowing why he was even mentioning Ivan except for some reason it seemed like Emilio should know that Sin had changed. "I guess they get along pretty well."

"Who is this alleged friend?" Emilio demanded suspiciously as if he couldn't believe that such a person actually existed.

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Boyd paused and rolled his shoulders, eyeing Emilio somewhat dubiously as something occurred to him and he wondered if maybe he shouldn't have said anything after all. He wasn't quite sure how to predict Emilio yet and if the man had trailed Boyd and Sin in Monterrey to the point of watching them having sex, he wondered what Emilio would do with Ivan.

"You aren't going to interfere, cause trouble, or somehow snoop around where you shouldn't if I tell you, are you?"

Emilio smirked at Boyd, not even trying to hide the fact that he looked a cross between mischievous and devious as his pale green eyes twinkled wickedly. "Who, me? Naw."

"That's what I thought," Boyd said under his breath as he started to stretch his calves. "Just take my word on it for now and let him do his thing. I just thought you may want to know he's not quite as isolated as he was before."

And he realized as he was talking to Emilio that it was the truth.

For some reason, it was easier to think about Ivan when he was in Emilio's presence. Talking to Emilio made him think even more about how important it was for Sin to connect and how good it was that Sin had.

It was as though telling Sin's father about the progression cemented it in Boyd's mind, gave him the chance to look at it as Sin growing comfortable around other people and not as Sin moving on. Although Boyd still couldn't help feeling that way on some level, he just reminded himself of how it was with he and Kassian. And somehow, with Emilio standing there, that thought had even more validity than before. Although even that couldn't quell the feelings that still brewed in the distance.

"Huh." Emilio eyeballed Boyd with a scowl. "Well, I'll find out on my own. I got sources, you know. I don't need the likes of you."

"I know you do." Boyd looked over at Emilio and raised his eyebrows more seriously. "Don't fuck it up for him just to sate your curiosity, though. Even though he's found someone to spend time with it may not mean it's completely easy for him and the last thing he needs is more complications when he's trying to make connections with people."

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Emilio rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Why does everyone always assume the worst about me? I'm a perfectly upstanding but also awesome guy. I just want to check out this new 'friend.'"

Boyd gave Emilio an unimpressed look, although there was no bite in his tone when he spoke. "Maybe if you hadn't been such a freak in Mexico I wouldn't have to worry about you and your 'checking out' of anyone related to Sin. But you were and you told me so now I know to expect you to do odd things."

"Well, you shouldn't call people names," Emilio countered, giving Boyd a mock-disapproving look. "Didn't they teach you anything in level 10 boot camp?"

"What the fuck're ya on about now," Doug drawled, finally returning to them as David nodded at Boyd before leaving the room.

Emilio grinned at Doug wickedly. "I was just telling Boyd what you were just telling me. You know." He wagged his eyebrows dramatically, leering at the Instructor.

Doug just shrugged, uncaring, not knowing that Emilio was lying. "Don't matter to me one way or the other. He wouldn't be interested, anyway. She ain't his type."

Boyd didn't reply to the comment, since he didn't know exactly what they were talking about and he knew Doug would probably just mock him regardless of what he said about it.

"I dunno," Emilio replied, watching as Boyd continued to stretch. "Those pictures are pretty tasty. I didn't know you were creative enough to get such good camera angles, Douglas."

Doug just smirked at Emilio before turning to Boyd. "You ready?"

Boyd nodded and stood up straight, not taking much time to focus on the interaction. He moved closer and focused entirely on the training.

Today, Doug was teaching Boyd new material that he had Boyd try out by sparring with Emilio. Doug explained the moves in detail but each time, Boyd couldn't quite seem to get it right, which didn't help Doug's attitude. This happened a few times before Emilio broke in, explaining it a different way that seemed far less complicated and a lot more understandable to Boyd.

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He didn't know why, but every time Doug explained what he wanted Boyd to do, it was just confusing enough that Boyd couldn't seem to do it right, and every time Emilio drawled his own explanation, it made complete sense and Boyd got it immediately. Doug didn't seem to be doing it on purpose but it did seem like Emilio, surprisingly enough, was better able to connect with the way Boyd thought and could explain it in a way that was easy for Boyd to grasp.

This went on for a while before finally Doug stopped them in exasperation, turning to Emilio with unconcealed irritation.

"Who's the fucking instructor here? Me or you?"

Emilio shrugged his broad shoulders and looked at Doug with a raised eyebrow. "You talk like a fuckin' textbook, bro. Half the terms you're using is shit he don't know."

Doug scoffed and crossed his arms over his blue sleeveless shirt, making a face at Emilio. "It ain't my fault he's clueless. If he can't follow along, he can't follow along. Maybe they shouldn't have promoted some dumb fuck who coasted through 10 levels and lacks a lot of initial training, huh?"

"You're probably right," Emilio said agreeably. "But that wasn't his choice so quit busting his balls over it and be straight up."

Boyd looked over at Emilio, mildly surprised to find the man defending him in any manner.

"Why don't you shut the hell up and mind your business, anyway?" Doug demanded, although there was no real anger in his voice. He seemed relatively unsurprised by Emilio and his behavior. "You're supposed to listen to what I say these days, y'know."

"Ha!" Emilio pointed at Doug and threw his head back with a loud laugh before straightening. "Never. I'm probably the one who should be doing the training, anyways."

This time some indignation made its way into Doug's expression and he demanded, "And what the fuck's that supposed to mean, huh?"

"Well." Emilio smirked, green eyes narrowed slightly as he gave Doug a haughty stare. "I mean not for nothin' but-- I trained the best killer this place has to offer. Your people can't even face off against him in ten to one odds."

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Doug opened his mouth to reply, scowled, hesitated, and glared at Emilio. "Well I trained Kassian and he's the best agent we've got."

"Oh ho ho, you trained Kassian! Big fucking deal, bro. My boy could probably whip his ass with both arms tied behind his back," Emilio retorted stubbornly even though he likely didn't even know Kassian or anything about him.

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly on the sidelines, bemused by how this had become a competition, and how Doug and Emilio had turned to using Sin and Kassian as if they were bullet points on a résumé.

Doug exhaled loudly, his breath stirring the unruly black cowlicks that dominated his head as his ice blue eyes rolled. "Well, that's amazing for you but that don't change the fact that you're retraining and I'm--"

"You're *what*?" Emilio demanded, cutting him off and leaning forward. "What? Training me? Don't make me die fucking laughing. What are you gonna train me about? What?"

"Yo--"

"I'm serious! Tell me!" Emilio demanded, pointing his finger directly in Doug's face now as he repeated the question. "What're you gonna teach me?"

"Em--"

"How to not comb my hair for days? How to smoke cigars and fuck up my pearly whites?"

Doug stared at Emilio blandly, unimpressed by the display. "Just--"

"How to hop like a kangaroo under the hot Australian sun while trying not to get sand in my shoes?" Emilio raised both eyebrows this time. "Well?"

Boyd half expected Doug to get angry but instead Doug's mouth twitched slightly as though he were trying not to laugh, although the exasperated expression stayed firmly intact.

Emilio grinned at Doug, appearing pleased that the man had given up. "Yeah, baby. That's what I thought. Feel the burn of my superior knowledge about everything in the entire world."

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Their interaction seemed strangely casual to Boyd, as if they were old friends. Which very well could be the case, since Doug looked to be about Carhart and Emilio's age and Boyd didn't know anything about Doug's past.

"Why don't I go take an extended smoke break and you train the little pissant, then?" Doug asked, raising his thick black eyebrows at Emilio without care.

Emilio gave him another cocky smirk and shrugged. "Fine by me-- just don't get mad when you come back to a blond killing machine that was trained exclusively by yours truly."

Doug gave him another flat look and turned to walk out of the training room. "I'll be back in an hour, Vega."

Boyd watched Doug disappear into the main training room, then looked back at Emilio and met those intense green eyes, currently watching him expectantly.

"Well--" Boyd started to say, then stopped, drew his eyebrows down slightly and studied Emilio.

He didn't know why Emilio had interfered, although it was entirely possible he'd just felt like it or had wanted to get at Doug. Regardless of the reason, Boyd appreciated that Emilio had stuck up for him, especially since no one else had since Doug had decided to take out his irritation on Boyd. He also had to admit that he thought the training would be much more successful with someone who wasn't so antagonistic toward him the entire time; someone whose teachings Boyd actually understood.

"Thank you, Emilio," Boyd said more sincerely even as a faint, thoughtful frown crossed his features. "He's been pissed at me for months now and I don't think I was getting anywhere with his instructions."

Emilio shrugged casually. "He knew that-- he just didn't care. I'm pretty sure he hopes you die or something."

"Well, I know he does," Boyd said, not bothered by this fact. "He told me that directly. But it doesn't change the fact that he should be taking issue with my mother, not me. I didn't make her give me this promotion; I even told her to take it back when I found out."

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Emilio snorted and rolled his shoulders before stretching his arms over his head and twisting slightly to the side as he likely prepared for a more serious bout of training. "It don't matter to me, blondie. Doug's just taking it out on you 'cause he can't take it out on her. Don't pay him no mind-- he's easily slighted and pissy on a good day."

It wasn't exactly new to Boyd to have someone take something out on him because he was more accessible than the person of their ire, but it didn't make it any less frustrating. He'd known from the moment his mother had made her decision that this would happen; that was the way it worked with her. She did what she wanted regardless of how it affected others, then acted as though he were pathetic or childish to feel anything about it.

Doug wasn't the only one who took issue with the promotion. Other people had made snide comments or had an attitude toward him who hadn't before, but at least with them he could just ignore them or walk away. He couldn't do that with his instructor.

He had no hopes for Doug to ever change his attitude, so all Boyd could do was deal with it, take whatever information he could from Doug, and try to not let it bother him. He still had a little over a month to go in his level 10 training and after that, maybe he'd be lucky and he wouldn't have to be around Doug at all except in passing.

None of it would have mattered anyway if Boyd hadn't felt like it was a waste spending all this time on training that wasn't even getting him anywhere.

Boyd shook his head to himself and took a few steps back, rolling his neck and briefly stretching to release the tension he'd started to gather.

"Should we start where we left off?" The mild bit of attitude Boyd had harbored in his gaze before was missing now as he looked at Emilio curiously; as he took him more seriously.

"It depends on how you want me to train you," Emilio replied evenly and as he said it, all traces of his seemingly typical joker behavior melted away. "Do you want me to train you to be a good agent or a good killer?"

Boyd paused, considering the question seriously as he studied Emilio. He didn't immediately know his answer; by default, he would think he just wanted to be a good agent. But what he really wanted was to be efficient for his body type and size; he just wanted to do what he had to do and be done with it. And he didn't know which that fell into for Emilio.

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"What would be the difference in your focus or the way you taught each?"

"Well, if we want to bare it down to the basics-- do you want me to teach you how to knock someone out and move on or break their neck and move on. To be a good agent, you can get away with either. But if you wanna be a walking weapon-- well, need I say more?"

Despite his almost offhanded and casual way of speaking, Emilio's expression was now completely serious. He was looking at Boyd with those familiar intense eyes and he seemed to be making sure to show Boyd that the question wasn't meant to be taken lightly.

Boyd took the time to really think about his answer, to be certain he knew what he wanted. When he'd first started at the Agency, he hadn't cared either way-- he hadn't cared if he'd died and hadn't cared if he'd killed others in the process. Everything had been completely meaningless to him.

But ever since Alexis and even more since Finley, Boyd had been forced to realize that the people he killed had their own lives, and not all of them deserved to die. Especially since now that he was level 10 he was going to be put in situations where he had to do things he didn't necessarily want to-- he may have to kill people who he didn't want to die-- it made it seem more important to avoid unnecessary killing.

Maybe that was another reason why Sin wanted to protect innocents; another reason he would run back into a building that was about to explode to save a woman he didn't even know. There had been many things Boyd had regretted, including killing Alexis, but he realized he hadn't regretted other things, like leaving Dana alive where she would hopefully get help.

He had no doubts that with Emilio teaching him, it would be possible to become a formidable weapon.

But he didn't need to be that.

He didn't need to leave a wake of bodies on every mission when it worked just as well to incapacitate them. He didn't need to leave orphans for people who were inconsequential to him when he was going to have to be doing that anyway for people who weren't.

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If someone was coming at him with killing intent, he would fight to kill in return. But if he just needed to knock someone out to get past them or if their death wasn't necessary, then he saw no reason to kill.

"Then right now, I just want to be a good agent," Boyd replied, gaze steady on Emilio.

Emilio rolled his eyes but didn't appear too surprised. "Sucker. Let's get on with it then."

Emilio spent the majority of the next hour teaching Boyd a number of moves; it was the first time in a long time that Boyd felt like he was finally catching on more quickly, that he didn't feel like a complete idiot during the training. But although Emilio was far clearer in his explanations than Doug had been, Emilio was a more hardcore trainer.

Whereas Doug would at least tell Boyd what he'd done wrong and show him how to do it again, Emilio wouldn't. When Boyd messed up, Emilio would interrogate Boyd with questions like, "Why do you think that's wrong?" He would make Boyd do the move over and over again until finally Boyd got it right, and even then Emilio made him do it a few more times to burn it into his brain.

At one point, when showing Boyd a new move, Emilio moved right up behind Boyd, their bodies mostly pressed together in what seemed like unnecessary proximity. Boyd ignored it at first until Emilio's hand dropped to Boyd's hip, which seemed completely unrelated to the move. Boyd looked over his shoulder, noting that Emilio's expression was as intensely serious as it had been since they'd started.

Before Boyd could say anything, Emilio suddenly moved and violently threw Boyd to the floor to finish showing him the move. Boyd slammed into the floor with a pained grunt and completely dismissed the brief, odd moment as a fluke.

The training was incredibly intense and even in that short period of time, Boyd could feel his muscles straining in the pleasure-pain of a good workout. Emilio was a ruthless trainer, not giving Boyd a moment to rest, but the repetitiveness combined with the clear explanations was starting to really burn the trainings into his mind.

Emilio taught increasingly complex moves until finally Boyd was able to slam Emilio to the floor in a successful attack. But Emilio grabbed Boyd before he could get away and threw Boyd down next to him, immediately rolling on top of Boyd and pinning him firmly.

Boyd ended up on his back, sweating from exertion, shirt partially riding up his stomach and otherwise caught to his skin the same way long strands of golden hair caught along

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his lips and the side of his face. His eyes were half closed but focused on Emilio as he panted heavily. He couldn't move with the way Emilio held him down and he didn't even bother to try; he knew Emilio was stronger than he was and for the moment he wanted a chance to catch his breath.

Emilio's face was inches from Boyd's, hands that were as firm and callused but not as incredibly strong as his son's holding Boyd's bare arms immobile to the floor. Half their bodies were pressed against each other, Emilio's hips pushing Boyd's to the floor, and at such proximity it was impossible to look away from those intense green eyes.

Emilio stared down at him intently, his lips slightly parted although he wasn't nearly as winded as Boyd was. Emilio's gaze briefly moved from Boyd's eyes to skim the rest of his face, pausing briefly on his lips, before moving up again.

One of Emilio's eyebrows lifted slightly and he smirked with half his mouth. He shifted in a manner that caused his crotch to press down against Boyd's as though he seemed ready to push backwards and stand up, but he didn't move.

"Not bad," he drawled, although it wasn't entirely obvious what he was referring to.

Boyd was caught by Emilio's expression, by that too-familiar face combined with that low drawl and the pressure against his crotch-- Boyd's honey brown eyes briefly intensified and flicked down to what he could see of Emilio's body, shirtless and showing off every powerful muscle, before returning to those incredible green eyes.

He couldn't deny how attractive Emilio was, or that the way their bodies pressed against each other, slick with sweat and body heat caught between them, was something that appealed to Boyd. He even had the very brief, passing thought that with the reputation Emilio had, he was probably incredible in bed.

But he knew he was only attracted to Emilio because he looked so much like Sin and the short moment was acknowledged and dismissed in seconds, leaving him perturbed about the whole thing. His eyes became less intense and more impatient as he jerked against Emilio's hold.

"Get off me," Boyd said, voice low and slightly gruff.

Emilio's expression didn't change but he bit his lower lip, dragging his teeth over it before lifting both eyebrows this time. He gave Boyd another onceover before bounding

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backwards and standing up straight with the same wicked look in his eyes. "Your loss, *blanquito*."

Boyd rolled his eyes and pushed himself up, trying not to groan in the process. His body ached intensely but even so, it felt good to have worked so hard.

Boyd didn't really know how to take that whole interaction; he'd always been under the impression that Emilio was an incredibly flirtatious person and he knew Emilio had probably slept around, he just didn't know if Emilio'd had sex only with women or if he'd been with men too.

He didn't know how much Emilio was serious about and how much he was messing with people. Although it was possible Emilio had just been trying to throw him off, Boyd didn't see why a man who wasn't at least bisexual would have sat there watching his son fuck another man.

It was hard to tell, though, and it didn't matter to Boyd anyway because regardless of Emilio's sexual orientation, it wasn't like Boyd was going to have sex with him.

Rather than comment on the oddity, Boyd took a moment to stretch his arms and wince slightly, looking at Emilio sidelong. "Are we done for the day?"

"Sure, why not," Emilio replied airily, grabbing his shirt from the corner and tossing it over one tattooed shoulder. "Maybe I'll go smoke Douglas out."

Boyd nodded and walked to the side of the room, eyes narrowing slightly in pain as he leaned over to swipe his shirt off the floor. He was too overheated to put it on again right away.

He started to head toward the main room with Emilio when Doug and Captain Morgan Chase entered. Morgan had a displeased expression on her face and Doug appeared mostly indifferent, although his mouth was set in a slight scowl.

"If I wanted a rogue agent to train our new level 10s, I would have assigned him to do such," Morgan was saying in an annoyed tone as she glared at Doug.

"Well, technically he ain't rogue anymore in the first place and in the second, it's not like he ain't qualif--"

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"I don't want to hear your excuses," Morgan cut Doug off coldly. "Next time I hear about something like this, I'll go straight to the Marshal."

"Oh noes," Emilio said in a mock-frightened voice. "Not the Marshal!"

Morgan's eyes slid from Doug to finally focus on Emilio. She stared at him with obvious dislike and her dark-hued lips curled down slightly.

"Nice seeing you again, cowgirl," Emilio drawled, leering at her. "Too bad you're wearing clothes today."

Doug looked away studiously, focusing on some point beyond the wall as Morgan's face went bright red-- her lips thinning. "You are a disrespectful pig."

Emilio just made a kissy face at her in response.

Morgan scoffed in disgust and gave Doug another warning glare. "Heed my warning, Instructor," she snapped and turned around, stalking out of the room.

Boyd watched her go, wondering what that had been about and whether it had anything to do with Doug and Emilio's earlier conversation. He looked over at Doug and Emilio, finding himself hoping that Doug wouldn't entirely listen to Morgan and would let Emilio continue to train him at least sometimes.

"Man, what's with the women in this place these days?" Emilio shook his head, arching an eyebrow at Doug. "Why do bitches think they have to be bitches to get respect from people? I'd take 'em a lot more serious if they didn't walk around with a lead pipe up their asses."

"Or Zachary's cock," Doug muttered. "Although I guess she ain't even getting that these days because of you and now I gotta deal with the attitude."

Emilio just smirked, looking incredibly smug. "What can I say?"

"Don't say nothing," Doug replied, making a face and turning his attention to Boyd. "Same time tomorrow unless a mission comes up. If you want bitch boy here to train ya, do it on your own time."

Doug jerked his head at Emilio and stalked out of the room again.

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Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked over at Emilio. "What happened with Morgan?"

"What?" Emilio asked Boyd distractedly, his gaze caught somewhere through the open doorway and across the main training area. Boyd followed Emilio's gaze and could only assume he was distracted by the attractive woman who was walking past in the hallway beyond the training room.

Emilio dragged his eyes away and looked at Boyd. "Oh, she hates me and dumped Zachary because he's letting me stay at his place. But she's a boring cold-hearted bitch anyway so good riddance, right?"

Boyd quirked an eyebrow. If Carhart and Morgan's relationship had fallen apart in relation to Emilio, Boyd could see why she would be pissed. But then again, if Morgan only dumped Carhart because Emilio was staying at his place, that seemed like an extreme reaction. So Boyd figured there had to be more to it-- especially with Emilio's earlier comment about her wearing clothes. And if that was the case, it was probably something Boyd didn't want to know about anyway.

"Why would you stay at his place?" Boyd asked instead.

Emilio finally looked at Boyd fully and for whatever reason, his expression was serious again. He narrowed his eyes slightly at Boyd and he shrugged his shoulders seemingly casually although the motion wasn't as animated as it'd been mere moments ago. "Because allegedly they ain't got no room for me and I ain't letting them keep another Vega in a cage on the Fourth."

Boyd watched Emilio thoughtfully for a moment.

Emilio wasn't allowed off compound and with the residential complexes still under reconstruction, there weren't any open apartments. He hadn't thought about where Emilio had been staying but he probably had only been given the choice of a cell, which Boyd wouldn't want to stay in either.

Not only that, he found that for some reason he didn't want Emilio to have to-- maybe only because Emilio looked so much like Sin, or maybe because Boyd couldn't help respecting the man a little more after he'd taken the time to talk back to Doug and train Boyd, regardless of his reasons.

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Boyd nodded in understanding. There was a brief silence and Boyd paused, considering Emilio before he asked, "Do you think you would ever train me again, during off time?"

Emilio stared at him in what appeared to be something akin to surprise before he lifted a brow. "Is this an excuse to be all up on me so you can pretend I'm Hsin?"

Boyd raised his eyebrows and gave Emilio a look. "I don't recall being the one initiating anything," he said dryly, then explained before Emilio could find a way to sidetrack the conversation. "It's an excuse to actually learn something during this period and hopefully become more on equal grounds with the other 10s."

Emilio continued to stare at him with slightly narrowed eyes as he absently chewed on his lower lip. "I'm surprised you'd lower yourself to asking one such as myself for help. Before you all acted like you didn't like me."

With a casual shrug, Boyd crossed his arms and met Emilio's eyes evenly, his tone blunt. "I didn't like you because from the stories I'd heard, you were a self-absorbed asshole who had done more psychological damage to your son than you'd ever known or acknowledged. I thought you were a large reason for many of Sin's issues and I thought if you hadn't been in his life quite the way you had been, or if you'd only treated him differently, maybe it would have been better for him. Maybe he could have been happy. You did little to change my opinion with the way you acted when you first showed up, so I saw no reason to act nice around you since I'm always going to side with Sin."

Emilio made a face and a glimmer of irritation flashed in his eyes as his well-formed mouth sank down at the sides. "I'm tired of all you fucking people assuming shit about me. It's getting old real fast."

"I'm talking in past tense," Boyd pointed out, studying Emilio contemplatively. "I can already tell you're far more complex than that and now I think you and Sin are a lot more alike than just your looks. I think you both hide what you don't want others to know about you, probably because if you didn't it wouldn't perpetuate whatever stereotype works best for you. If I didn't take you more seriously, you're right that I wouldn't have asked you to train me-- I would have expected you to be an asshole the whole time, to just mess with me and not take me seriously. It would've been pointless."

Emilio crossed his arms over his chest loosely and the annoyance instantly melted out of his expression but he didn't immediately guard his face as Sin would have done-- he just put on a big smirk, although whether or not it was genuine wasn't entirely obvious.

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"Me? Hide anything? What you see is what you get, baby. I'm more open than a teenage girl's legs on prom night."

"This isn't you," Boyd said without a hint of doubt in his voice, his honey brown gaze steady on Emilio, almost seeming to see through him. He frowned slightly and tilted his head enough for blond hair to brush against the side of his face. "I met the real you down in Mexico, where you had the luxury of being who you really are because everyone who knew you like this thought you were dead."

Boyd raised his eyebrows subtly. "If you ask me, the way you joke around is an act to throw people off, keep them unbalanced. Maybe to make them underestimate you or maybe it's just a defense mechanism. It's because you act like this at the Agency that I heard all those stories, that people assume all these things of you, but once I found out you were Chingón I knew there was more to you than that."

Emilio's gaze flicked over Boyd's face and the side of Emilio's mouth twitched up slightly but then he just shrugged exaggeratedly and said slowly, "Or maybe... you just think I'm cute. Admit it, Boyd. Don't deny your true feelings anymore. It's meant to be-- you, me, my boy... How would you like to be in the middle of a Vega sandwich?"

Boyd stared at Emilio for a long moment before the ridiculousness of the comment made him lose the seriousness in his expression. He shook his head to himself, a faint, bemused smile twitching the edges of his lips. "Are you bi?"

"Why would you ask such a thing?" Emilio asked, expression now full of innocence and confusion.

"Maybe because you like to watch men fuck, you were coming onto me at the end of training, and now you're inviting me to a threesome with your son?" Boyd asked mildly, quirking an eyebrow. "I don't know many straight men who would do all that, even jokingly."

"Not all straight men have access to my arsenal of smart ass retorts; my repertoire is quite impressive," Emilio replied breezily, shifting to put on his shirt, covering the tattoos that sprawled across his muscular chest. "Although..." he trailed off leadingly, green eyes twinkling with amusement as he eyed Boyd.

Boyd waited a moment for Emilio to continue and when he didn't, Boyd could tell it was probably going to be a set up but he decided to take the bait anyway. "Although what?"

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"Although..." Emilio drew out the word, paused, and then tilted his head to the side as he looked at Boyd with a half smirk. "I have a theory about early childhood stimulation leading to more... adventurous sexual behavior in adults."

"Hmm." Boyd tilted his head slightly as he considered Emilio, golden blond hair partially falling across his eyes before he shook his head once briefly to get it out of the way. Sin had told him about what Emilio had said about his own early life. Given the fact that Emilio's childhood had been pretty fucked up, and 'adventurous sexual behavior' could very well mean sleeping with both genders, he felt that pretty much answered his question. "I'll take that as a yes, then."

Emilio scoffed. "I said no such thing. But anyways, you need to do me a favor if you want me to help you."

"What is it?" Boyd asked curiously.

There was a pause before Emilio shrugged again. "You need to tell my boy that this whole ignoring his father thing is about to come to an end. I can't touch my overseas accounts and the Agency gave Hsin all my Agency money and since I doubt he's using it..."

Emilio let the sentence trail off and looked at Boyd pointedly.

The irony of the situation struck Boyd enough to make him feel thoroughly amused. Boyd had completely forgotten about the account until Emilio mentioned it.

Nearly twenty years of the money accruing in Sin's name uselessly and then about a year before Emilio suddenly returned from the dead, Sin finally took an interest. Boyd doubted that Sin would care about giving Emilio back the money that was his but it amused Boyd that it had happened this way.

Especially since it had been due to Boyd's insistence that Sin had looked into it and realized how much money he had and had even started using any of it, and now Emilio was asking Boyd to basically look into having it taken back.

"I'll mention it to him," Boyd promised although he couldn't help a faint smirk pulling at one side of his lips.

"You better if you want my expert help on your training," Emilio replied, jabbing a finger at Boyd's chest.

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"I will," Boyd said a little more sincerely, then quirked an eyebrow. "So does that mean next time after training you'll hang around so we'll do our own? Or are we setting up separate times?"

"I dunno. Whenever. I'm around." Emilio didn't seem too concerned with scheduling.

"Alright," Boyd said with a nod.

Emilio began backing away. "Don't forget what I said," he warned Boyd with a narrow-eyed stare and turned entirely, walking out of the room.

Boyd was about to follow Emilio but then remembered that before he'd started training, he'd left his keys and wallet on the side. He went back and searched for them for a few moments before he swiped them off the floor. He shoved them in his pocket and decided he'd cooled down enough to throw his long-sleeved shirt back on.

The main training room typically had at least a few people in it at any given point of the day so at first when Boyd walked in, he almost didn't pay attention to the people off in the far corner. But one of the voices sounded distantly familiar to him and when he glanced over, he realized he recognized all three men, and that no one else was in the room.

Ivan had apparently been trying to work out and was interrupted by two men who were crowding him near the corner. Although Boyd couldn't hear much of what was being said, he could tell they were harassing Ivan for some reason.

Boyd knew one of the men as Moua, a Hmong man who was powerfully built despite not being particularly tall. The other was a white man with short, dark brown hair and blue eyes, who was called Fritz.

When Boyd had been harassed two years ago, Moua had been one of the people who had taken especial pleasure in joining in on the fun. Moua and Fritz were both field agents, Levels 6 and 4 respectively. Although they both seemed to take issue with Boyd's existence, Moua did far more than Fritz, who tended not to speak much.

When Moua shifted, Boyd could see that Ivan was wearing a tank top that exposed his thin shoulders and arms. The paleness of his skin made a bruise on his shoulder stand out even more vividly-- the telltale bruise was very pronounced, and looked very much like impressions from someone's fingers.

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Boyd felt a jolt go through him as he realized what it was, instantly taking away the relatively good mood he'd been in. It wasn't unlike the bruises he and Sin would often come out with after sex.

Ivan had told Ryan that Sin was intense in every way. Apparently Sin fucked Ivan just as hard as he'd fucked Boyd, and enjoyed himself with Ivan as much as he had with Boyd. That bruise was the sign of Sin losing himself in the moment, of forgetting his own strength as he pounded with abandon into the body beneath him.

Boyd had been on the receiving end of those bruises enough to know what it had probably been like for Ivan and that knowledge speared through him harshly.

It would have been incredibly easy for Boyd to just walk away and pretend he didn't see anything; to let Ivan deal with Moua and Fritz's bullshit on his own. Boyd didn't owe anything to Ivan and he didn't even particularly like the man.

But it wasn't fair to Ivan that Boyd didn't like him simply because he was involved with Sin, and regardless of Boyd's personal issues, that wasn't enough reason to walk away when someone was being harassed.

Two years ago, Boyd hadn't stood up for himself when those same men had joined in with the others to make him feel worthless. He was a different person now and he wasn't going to walk away from them trying to do that to someone else, regardless of if Ivan asked for his help.

"Hey," Boyd said, voice clear and commanding as he approached them and the three looked over. Moua and Fritz seemed mildly surprised by his appearance but that quickly faded as Boyd came closer. "What do you think you're doing?"

Fritz stayed over by Ivan but Moua's features sharpened and he sauntered over to Boyd, getting into his personal space and causing Boyd to stop. The intensity of how much Moua disliked Boyd was crystal clear in the man's dark brown eyes, the same as it had been two years ago. If anything, it seemed to have increased.

"Look who came by," Moua drawled, looking Boyd up and down before he stared hard into his eyes. "Bend over for any new Intel lately?"

Boyd's eyes did not so much as twitch and he didn't look away from Moua's gaze despite the quiet anger that rolled through him. Instead, his expression remained as

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cold and unreadable as it had been when he'd first walked over.

Normally he didn't care what people like Moua had to say, especially since he knew that as a fellow field agent, Moua really wasn't that surprised by the existence of valentine ops. He knew that Moua was saying that just to piss Boyd off. But today it didn't help his mood.

"Just walk away, Moua," Boyd said lowly, his tone firm. "You have no business here."

"And you do?" Moua demanded, stepping even closer until they nearly touched and he crossed his arms as he stared at Boyd. Although Moua was actually shorter than Boyd, the way he eyed Boyd made it seem like he was looking down on him. "This doesn't have anything to do with you."

"I know you have a history of harassing people," Boyd replied evenly, his posture strong and eyes intense. "And if you don't have to own the place to start that, then I don't have to own it to stop it."

Ivan looked at Boyd with interest, raising his eyebrows slightly although he didn't say anything. His expression was the same as it had been before Boyd came over; thoroughly unintimidated and almost bored by the entire situation.

"Why do you even care?" Moua asked Boyd shrewdly, eyes narrowed. "Is it gay pride month and you faggots are sticking together?"

Boyd's eye's narrowed slightly but that was the only indication that his irritation was growing stronger. He wasn't surprised to find that Moua and Fritz were harassing Ivan because of his sexual orientation; he'd expected as much when he'd walked over.

"I care because idiots like you are an embarrassment to the field. You clearly don't have legitimate business with Agent Andel, so back off."

Moua snorted, clearly unimpressed by Boyd's command. "I don't take orders from you. I don't give a shit if you're supposedly a 10 now. You don't deserve it-- everyone knows it. You're only where you're at because your mommy pulled some strings."

Boyd's gaze did not so much as flicker on Moua's face but his expression became a step colder. The reminder of the bullshit he heard even more because of his mother's decision wasn't helping matters and he only felt the irritation growing.

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"I'll only tell you this once, Moua," Boyd said evenly. He wasn't even making a threat when he continued; he was stating a fact. "Leave before I make you leave."

Ivan continued to look on calmly, not contributing to the argument in any particular way.

But Moua wasn't listening; he continued even more harshly, eyes glittering with disgust as he watched Boyd sharply. "I'm surprised you're over here playing hero anyway since this one seems to have taken your place with your... partner."

Moua smirked and lifted his shoulders slightly. "You boys must be pretty hard up if you're taking it from that psychotic fucking fr--"

The anger surged in Boyd, made him want to beat the hell out of Moua-- partially because it was Moua, partially because Moua was the representation of an attitude that pissed Boyd off, and mostly because of what he was saying.

Boyd moved faster than Moua could react, suddenly appearing behind the man and violently twisting Moua's arm up behind his back even as he shoved Moua hard against the wall. Moua let out a startled grunt of pain, eyes widened in surprise as he turned his head to the side, his cheek pressed against the wall.

"I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you," Boyd said warningly into Moua's ear.

Moua started to try to move but although Boyd's body was slighter, Boyd was in a better position and knew how to hold a person immobile. Clearly taken aback and angry, Moua glared as best he could over his shoulder back at Boyd. "What do you care what I say about that--"

Boyd wrenched Moua's arm up harder, causing Moua to cut himself off with a muffled hiss of pain.

"Let me give you some advice," Boyd said, voice low and cold. His mouth was near Moua's ear, strands of Boyd's long blond hair partially falling out of the low ponytail he had it in, a stark contrast against Moua's short, black hair. Tension thrummed in Boyd and it mixed with the spike of adrenaline and the rushing of his blood to make his hand tighten on Moua's arm.

"When someone tells you to walk away, walk away. When you don't know what someone's capable of, don't push them. And when you're in my presence, don't talk shit about Sin." Boyd put more pressure on Moua's arm as emphasis.

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Fritz appeared at Boyd's side, already reaching for Boyd to presumably jerk him away, but Boyd used his free hand to intercept and redirect the motion, slamming one of Fritz's arms away and grabbing Fritz's other wrist. Moua started to push back but Boyd shoved his body against him, holding Moua still even as he tightened his grip painfully on Fritz.

"Don't." Boyd's flat stare and voice were ice cold as he looked over at Fritz, who hesitated when he saw how utterly serious Boyd's expression was. "Regardless of whether you believe I deserved the promotion, I've still had the training. If you want me to break Moua's arm so thoroughly that it may never heal properly again, by all means, continue with what you were doing. I'll just turn on you when I'm done with him."

Fritz glared but a flicker of uncertainty passed across his features and he seemed especially taken aback by the surprising strength of Boyd's grip. When Boyd released Fritz after a moment, Fritz stepped back with crossed arms and watched with heated blue eyes but he didn't make another move to interfere.

Boyd returned his attention to Moua, wrenching Moua's arm up even harder and ignoring Moua's grunt as he continued, "If you think this is only about Sin, you're mistaken. I haven't forgotten any of the shit you did before and I know you could very well be doing the same to Ivan. You think you're so powerful and in control because you know how to talk down to people for who they are, but you're just a pathetic little boy lashing out. I don't care if you're afraid, bigoted, so deeply closeted you're in denial-- your problem is your problem and if I keep seeing you taking it out on others, you'll just be giving me the excuse I need to come down on you."

Boyd waited a few seconds to see if Moua would reply but the man just grimaced. Boyd briefly put even more pressure on Moua's arm; Moua's breath grew harsher as he forced himself to stay silent despite the intense pain he had to be in, then Boyd abruptly let go and stepped back.

He watched Moua without a hint of emotion, his eyes unforgiving. The way he stared at Moua, it was as if Moua was not only completely insignificant to him but he felt the man was a waste of oxygen as well.

"Get out of here." Although Boyd didn't raise his voice, the quiet strength of the words combined with the ice cold way he spoke made it a command reminiscent of his mother.

Moua glared hatefully at Boyd before his gaze shifted toward Ivan briefly, as if he was debating saying something as a parting shot. But then he just absently rubbed his arm

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and turned to stalk away. Fritz followed, giving Ivan and Boyd an annoyed look as he passed.

Boyd watched them leave, his frigid expression intensifying briefly before he looked over at Ivan. The bruise on Ivan's shoulder was stark and vivid; up close, Boyd could see the imprints of Sin's fingers even more clearly and that cut through Boyd all over again.

The hurt feeling was like a knife in Boyd's stomach but he didn't let it get to his gaze or body language, and although the iciness started to fade from his features, his expression was still unreadable. As he met Ivan's grey eyes, Boyd felt even worse for having accidentally left the comm unit on during that mission in Canada. If it could hurt this much to learn details after the fact, to see the evidence firsthand, then how must it have felt for Sin to overhear it?

"Are you alright?" Boyd asked calmly, rolling his shoulders briefly and trying to make the tension in his body loosen even as he couldn't help feeling on edge in Ivan's presence.

Ivan shrugged carelessly and didn't seem too perturbed. "Yes. I'm not afraid of them. You didn't have to go out of your way for me either, but thank you."

Boyd nodded, gaze flicking briefly to where the two had disappeared into the hallway. "How do they know you're gay?"

Ivan bent to pick up a towel, throwing it over the shoulder with the bruise, although whether or not he was intentionally trying to cover it wasn't obvious. "I don't hide it from anyone. I don't care what these retards think. It all started because they can't get over how I'm thin with long hair-- they call me fag and I just shrug and confirm it. I think it actually threw them off guard the first time around."

Although the answer was somewhat surprising, since in Boyd's experience it seemed that most homosexuals and bisexuals in the Agency were deeply closeted, it somehow didn't seem uncharacteristic for Ivan; at least, the little that Boyd knew of him. And it did seem to fall in line with the other R&D agents, who didn't seem to care what anyone thought.

"They would probably assume it anyway even if you denied it," Boyd said with a nod.

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"Oh, they do." Ivan shook his head and pushed blond hair out of his face as he adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. "People can think what they want. I don't care. I have nothing to hide from these morons."

There was a very brief pause as Boyd studied Ivan, keeping his expression completely unreadable as something that had been said earlier bothered him. "Why did Moua know about you and Sin?"

Ivan looked at Boyd blankly for a moment before he just shook his head slightly. "He doesn't know details or anything but apparently some of his buddies saw me and Hsin leaving the compound together a couple of times and they formed their own conclusions. If Hsin gave indication that the rumors bothered him, I would deny it, but he doesn't care and obviously I don't care, so I don't. It's not like I'm ashamed of it or something."

Boyd felt his hackles raise and at first he didn't know why other than it seriously annoyed him that Ivan was already calling Sin by his real name. It didn't bother Boyd when Ryan and Emilio did because it made sense, because Emilio was his father and Ryan had been on Sin's side from the start.

Maybe it was a distinction only in Boyd's mind, but to him the name 'Hsin' shouldn't be taken lightly.

To Boyd, it signified a deeper connection to Sin-- it meant getting past all the bullshit that often seemed to come between them, pushing past all the layers and defenses and misconceptions and dealing on an incredibly personal level with his partner. Because of that, Boyd only called Sin by his real name in moments when he felt especially close to him-- when they were in bed together, when it was one of the few quiet moments they'd had together, if there was a life or death situation...

He felt as though using Sin's real name was something to earn, like earning Sin's trust, and the fact that Ivan thought he could throw it around after a few weeks only pissed Boyd off.

It struck Boyd at the same time that Ivan apparently didn't care about being seen with Sin, that Sin didn't care if anyone knew about them. He couldn't help comparing that to how it had been with he and Sin... They hadn't gone out of their way to hide what they'd been but Boyd also hadn't advertised it, and if anyone had asked him he probably would have changed the subject or lied.

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He couldn't help feeling a combination of annoyed, resentful, and-- worse than the others-- self-conscious in response.

It wasn't that Boyd was ashamed of Sin, it wasn't that Boyd cared what people thought... yet he was protective of Sin, of what people would think of him or say to him, so did that mean Boyd cared after all even when he'd told himself he didn't? Ivan truly didn't seem to care and as much as Boyd didn't for the most part, he felt an uncomfortable shift as he realized his own actions didn't quite match up to Ivan's.

Did Sin like it more that way, did it make him feel better?

Boyd suddenly remembered Kassian's comment, the way he'd been so adamant about no one knowing about them; the way he'd made Boyd feel in the truck and the way Boyd had to come up with cover stories for situations like Kassian's family stopping by. The way Boyd had been willing to sneak out the back door like the shameful secret he represented for Kassian.

Boyd wasn't angry with Kassian over this-- Kassian had the right to choose who knew about his sexual orientation, Boyd had gone into the casual relationship with Kassian knowing full well how closeted the man was, and Kassian was his friend so he wanted to support his decisions.

Still, it was the one part of the current situation with Kassian that didn't make Boyd feel very good and the more times it came up, the more it made Boyd feel uncomfortable. And in this context, it made Boyd stop and rethink his own actions from the outside.

In truth, being the first person to really get close to Sin made him feel a strong sense of happiness, of pride that had bordered on territoriality in the past. But now Boyd wondered if any time he'd avoided doing or saying something in the open Sin had thought he was ashamed. And if Sin hadn't then, would he think that in retrospect after seeing the way Ivan was and had something to compare Boyd to?

Was Ivan once again managing to do something right that Boyd had done wrong?

When it occurred to him that maybe in that regard Ivan did have more of a right to call Sin by his real name-- after all, he was seeing Sin, they were having sex, and Ivan clearly wasn't ashamed of Sin in any regard-- it felt like a stab in the gut again, only this time it was as if someone twisted the blade viciously then pulled it out and stabbed him once more.

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"I see," Boyd said calmly. His honey brown gaze was steady on Ivan and gave absolutely nothing away of what he was thinking or feeling, and he made a point to keep his body language as close to it had been when he'd first walked over.

Even so, some of the tension had returned to his shoulders and when he paused again, he told himself to stop commenting but was unable to do so. "You're calling him Hsin," he observed.

"Yeah." Ivan looked somewhat surprised by the comment. "I asked him if I could and he said yes."

Boyd nodded and looked away, feeling irritated by the answer, by how offhanded and easy Ivan made it sound.

Maybe Boyd was the only one who thought anything deeper about the subject; maybe Sin wouldn't have cared all along if Boyd had called him by his real name. But it would probably always hold special significance to Boyd, who had met Sin at a time when they were both completely closed off from the world, and the progression toward getting closer was represented in his mind by the name Hsin and what it meant to him.

He realized he didn't want to be standing in front of Ivan anymore; he didn't have anything else to say. Now that Moua and Fritz were gone, Boyd felt even less reason to be over there and he just wanted to walk away.

"Well," Ivan said amiably. "I'm going to get out of here. Thank you again, Senior Agent Beaulieu."

"I'm sure you've had to deal with that a lot on your own but it's not a problem; I wasn't going to walk away from that," Boyd said, glad that at least it seemed the conversation was about to end.

He took a step back and tried not to be disturbed once again by the similarities between his and Ivan's appearance; to not feel on some resentful level that maybe some of the effort Sin was putting into Ivan was effort he otherwise would have been putting into Boyd.

But he dismissed it because he knew the thought was egotistical and he also knew it wasn't true. Sin had clicked with Ivan far faster than he ever had with Boyd... and Boyd was certain that Sin wouldn't hang around with someone he didn't like no matter who they resembled.

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"I hope they leave you alone for a while, though," Boyd added, and he did mean it. Regardless of anything about Ivan that put Boyd on edge, Boyd saw no reason to wish harassment on anyone simply because of who they were.

Ivan nodded and a faint smile graced his features. "We'll see. Have a good day, Senior Agent Beaulieu."

The R&D agent lifted his hand in a small wave and walked over to where the locker room was.

Boyd briefly watched Ivan go before he left the training room as well and headed toward his car.

Chronological Disorder

The moon cast the only light on the still, silent streets. The street lights had long ago been destroyed and even if they hadn't, electricity was unavailable in many parts of the city. Garbage and debris were strewn along the sidewalks, the pavement-- the entire place gave the impression of a ghost town.

Sin's footsteps seemed to echo around him in an almost spectral manner. The only sound for miles around was his boots making faint splashing sounds in the puddles-- his jacket rustling as he walked.

But then the silence was ruptured by a screech and a hiss-- Sin turned his head, hand on his gun, but the culprit appeared to be a creature that vaguely resembled a cat. It had whiskers and a tail but its fur was gone and its eyes were nearly white-- the thing's size was unbelievable and he could only assume it was a mutation due to the poisoned and irradiated land.

The cat-creature hissed at him, fangs protruding dangerously, but it scrambled away faster than he could track.

The abandoned apartment building loomed before him. The walk seemed shorter than he remembered.

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The door to the building was rusted and worn, a large hole in the center despite the fact that it was chained shut. He shoved against it and made enough space to squeeze beneath the chain before taking the steps two at a time to the top floor.

It wasn't a safe house so much as a recon point-- from this angle they could see clear across the broken city. They could see the old nuclear plants and the activity that was going on in them now.

The entire building seemed deathly still but when he got to the top floor, a faint sound seemed to echo down the hallway.

He walked faster-- alarms going off in his head, automatically tensing as he prepared for what he would find--

The door opened easily, the lock long ago having been removed. It didn't matter-- no one lived in the city, no one inhabited the building; a heat-seeking satellite had only picked up their own bodies and the rebel group congregating in the nuclear plant.

Sin entered the apartment and walked through the empty living room. Water stains colored the white walls brown, the carpet was torn and dirty and stained with blood--

The sound was louder now, more rhythmic, a slapping sound, harsh breathing and breathless moans--

Sin pushed the bedroom door open slightly, soundlessly.

Boyd was on his hands and knees, completely naked as Kassian crouched behind him and fucked him. Their bodies were soaked with sweat, Boyd's hair damp from it, his face flushed and lips swollen, hanging open as Kassian rode his ass.

"Fuck me," Boyd growled, his eyes squeezed shut as he pushed his hips back. "Harder-- Ah-ahh-- *harder!*"

"You like that?" Kassian's hands were tight on Boyd's waist, a smug smirk on his lips as he snapped his hips forward relentlessly. "You want me to make you fucking scream?"

"Yes-- Yes!" Boyd panted, although it was unclear if he was answering or just lost in the moment.

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Sin's mouth fell open slightly, his eyes narrowed at the sight. His gaze remained fixed on Boyd as he fucked another man as vigorously as he'd once fucked Sin.

Boyd's blond hair was loose and jerked with every jolt of his body, every time Kassian pulled his cock out and slammed it back in. Every muscle in Boyd's sleekly toned body was glimmering with moisture, his back arching and chest heaving as he panted and moaned uncontrollably. Boyd's face was tilted down at first but when Kassian shifted his grip on Boyd's hips and suddenly changed the angle of his thrust, Boyd threw his head back with a desperate, sexy moan that was wrenched out of him and filled the room.

"Oh God-- ohh yesss--"

The husky growl of Boyd's voice went straight to Sin's cock; made him run his eyes along the length of Boyd's body. Boyd's dick was swollen and hard and leaking precome from between his legs, yet he didn't reach down to touch himself; he seemed too lost in the moment of being fucked. Boyd's face was a picture of ecstasy, his pink tongue flicking out to lick his lips as Kassian began moving faster-- His fingers were curled against the crumpled sheets, his arms straight as he shoved back against Kassian's cock with all his strength--

Sin couldn't look away from Boyd's face; from those swollen lips that he knew felt as amazing wrapped around his cock as they did worshipping his mouth when they kissed. Sin's dick stiffened at the sight of it, at the sound of those loud, familiar moans and the way Boyd wordlessly begged for more.

But then Boyd's eyes slid open, the golden brown darkened with lust-- and his gaze fell directly on Sin. A spark of panic flooded his expression.

"Sin--" Whatever sentence he was about to form was broken off by a loud groan when Kassian changed the angle again, fucking Boyd so hard that Boyd partially slid across the bed. The mattress squeaked beneath them, a loud and insistent accompaniment to Boyd's desperate moans.

Boyd's golden brown eyes were intense on Sin's face, Boyd's lips dropped open and his breath quickening faster-- and even as he shook his head back and forth, he kept slamming back on Kassian's dick with all his strength.

"Fuck-- I can't-- I can't-- it feels too good!" he finished in a near wail, mouth trembling and face contorted as he and Kassian began fucking faster, the mattress bouncing

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beneath the two. Sin could feel the rhythm of their movements even through the floorboards; the vibrations traveled up his legs and seemed to go straight to his groin.

Sin's breath caught in his throat, cock hardening almost painfully, and he looked up to meet Kassian's stare. The older man's lips were twisted in a ghost of a self-assured smirk but his eyes appeared to be feasting on Sin's body.

"Come over here, Vega," Kassian rumbled, his voice low and throaty.

Sin's feet moved of their own accord.

"Suck his cock while I fuck you," Kassian murmured to Boyd, running his large hands up and down Boyd's back.

Boyd didn't question the order, although judging by the way his gaze had been intense on Sin since the moment he noticed him, he'd probably already wanted to do that. He supported himself on one hand and yanked at Sin's jeans with the other. He was looking up at Sin with lust-filled, hungry eyes as he panted through his mouth, eyebrows arched and drawn together as Kassian continued to pound his ass.

Those loud gasps and moans surrounded Sin seductively. Boyd's fingers were warm and when they grazed Sin's skin as Boyd jerked his pants down, Sin felt it like an electric jolt straight to his cock.

Boyd's eyes were like black holes that drew Sin in, watching Sin relentlessly even as Boyd slid his mouth open and briefly ran his tongue along the head of Sin's cock. Sin jerked slightly, green eyes darkening and focused intently on that face, before Boyd suddenly and with obvious skill took Sin to the hilt. Boyd's mouth was hot and wet and felt incredible when it encased Sin's cock, and it was even more incredible when that tongue started to move.

"Ahh..." Sin hissed, eyes rolling back in his head as Boyd began deep-throating him vigorously, sliding his mouth up and down the length of Sin's dick as Kassian continued to fuck him hard and fast.

Sin could feel Boyd's mouth rocking with Kassian's movements, could feel the low, ecstatic moans that vibrated through Sin each time Kassian or Sin fucked Boyd especially hard. Boyd's body was arching between the two, sweat glistening along his skin and hair catching against the side of his face. His moans grew louder and more desperate as Kassian did Boyd rough, just the way he liked it.

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"Yeah, baby," Kassian encouraged breathlessly, his eyes focused on Sin's large cock slamming in and out of Boyd's lips faster.

"Fuck his fucking mouth, Vega," Kassian hissed, eyes narrowing and mouth dropping open as he began fucking Boyd harder, his pelvis slamming against Boyd's ass, a continuous slapping sound that picked up in pace. Boyd let out a pleased, muffled moan that went straight through Sin, making him even hotter for Boyd, for this, for finally feeling this again--

Sin felt almost out of control with how turned on he was, with how good that wet, hot mouth felt sliding up and down his dick. Boyd tried to pull away from Sin briefly, probably intending to take a deeper gasp as Kassian slammed into him, but Sin didn't let him.

He gripped the back of Boyd's head, jamming his cock in Boyd's mouth, down his throat, feeling Boyd gag but not caring. Boyd moaned desperately but didn't complain-- His eyes were on Sin the entire time even as saliva slid down the sides of his mouth, as Sin's thick cock shoved through his lips forcefully; even as he groaned around the length of it each time Kassian brushed against his prostate.

"I need to come," Kassian muttered, both of his hands gripping Boyd's waist as he slammed the younger man back on his cock. His movements became more frantic as he watched Sin and Boyd, his need becoming more urgent.

Boyd shook his head back and forth as best he could while Sin fucked his mouth; obviously not wanting Kassian to stop, not wanting to stop being fucked--

Kassian shouted loudly as he came, jerking his hips against Boyd twice before sitting back with a gasp. He watched Boyd and Sin through narrowed eyes as he fought to catch his breath-- watched as Boyd leaned up and grabbed the base of Sin's dick with one hand, bobbing his head up and down faster and faster.

Sin moaned loudly, digging his fingers into Boyd's hair, clutching the back of his head, "Uhh-- oh God..."

"Don't make him come," Kassian uttered, his lips parted and dry as he watched Sin's spit-covered cock move in and out.

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Sin's eyes slid open to glare at Kassian but Boyd actually obeyed, backing off and releasing Sin's dick with a slow slide of his lips, wet with saliva and precome.

"Take your turn, Vega," Kassian said in the same low, gravelly voice, eyes narrowed intently on Sin. "Do him."

"Yes," Boyd breathed, eyes widening slightly, running his tongue over his swollen lips. Sin's gaze was caught on those lips, his cock hardening even further before he looked up to meet Boyd's intense gaze.

Boyd's cock strained between his legs and he idly ran a hand along it a few times.

Sin didn't hesitate to follow through with the suggestion.

Boyd laid back on the bed, starting to lift his legs up even as Sin crawled onto the bed, erection still wet from Boyd's saliva. Boyd adjusted his position, his breath coming fast as he watched Sin with golden brown eyes heavy with lust. He seemed consumed by an almost out of control horniness that made him beg both men to take turns fucking him--

Sin took position, but rather than entering Boyd immediately, he briefly ran his callused hands along Boyd's smooth skin from his thighs up to his knees.

Sin's lips were slightly parted as he stared down at Boyd with eyes like green fire. He gripped Boyd's knees almost painfully and jerked Boyd's legs up further, getting a better angle to shove the tip of his cock in Boyd's hole.

Boyd groaned and panted, "Yes, yes," seemingly without realizing he was talking. Boyd was still slick from Kassian's come and his body didn't resist Sin's straining cock; if anything, that tight, hot hole sucked him in. Sin's mouth dropped open and he let out a low groan, gaze intensifying on Boyd even more before he suddenly shoved all the way in.

Boyd's back arched, his toes curling, and he let out a loud, guttural moan. His hands slid against the mattress, tangling in the sheets, chanting incoherently, "Oh God, oh fuck yes, oh please-- fuck me, please--"

Sin didn't need any further encouragement.

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Boyd's body was tight, hot, and willing beneath him, and Sin started slamming into Boyd without thinking. Boyd practically screamed in pleasure, writhing against the mattress, arching his back and begging for faster, for harder, for more. The bed squeaked loudly beneath them as Sin fucked Boyd hard and fast, pulling his dick out far enough each time to slam it back in as far as he could. They moved together frantically, hungrily, and Sin was only encouraged to go faster each time Boyd pleaded for more.

Sin gripped Boyd's waist, slamming him down as Sin rocked his hips forward, mouth falling open as ragged pants escaped his lips. He could feel another pair of hands on him-- Kassian's hands--caressing his back, rubbing his shoulders, and Sin tensed but didn't stop moving against Boyd, in and out of Boyd.

Kassian's lips brushed against Sin's ear, running his tongue along it and Sin couldn't help a shudder, fucking Boyd even more violently in response.

Boyd's fingers dug into the mattress; he was screaming with ecstasy as Sin's thick cock filled him, rubbing against every nerve and driving him insane as he hissed incoherently, encouraging Sin.

"Pound his ass harder," Kassian said against Sin's ear, his deep voice husky and hands still sliding up Sin's shirt before sliding back down his stomach and further-- absently cupping and lightly squeezing Sin's balls before releasing them.

Sin grunted hoarsely, grabbing Boyd's legs and shoving them apart for a better position. He leaned forward, forcing his dick inside Boyd's tight hole at a different angle, fucking into it harder-- harder--

"Oh God--!" Boyd shouted helplessly, straining against Sin, his chest heaving even as his body arched and jerked.

Sweat soaked Boyd, making Sin's fingers slide against his skin even as he speared into Boyd harder, harder, faster-- more violently and with more strength than ever before. Boyd shuddered along his entire length, near-sobs escaping his wide open mouth, his head thrown back and fingers digging into the sheets even as half-closed eyes watched Sin intensely.

Sin could see how hot Boyd was for this, how much he wanted more, more--

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," Boyd was nearly whimpering, barely able to get voice out between his harsh panting and the wrenching moans. His hands reached up toward Sin, sliding

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along Sin's skin and leaving a fire in their wake that burned into Sin and made him move even faster.

The mattress was bouncing beneath them now, squeaking violently each time Sin's hips snapped forward as he took Boyd as roughly as he could. The slapping sound of skin against skin was overrun by Boyd's loud, pleasure-filled shouts and Sin's harsh grunts and moans.

Sin snapped his hips even faster as Kassian pressed his body against Sin's back, rubbing his once again stiff cock against Sin's ass.

"I wanna fuck you, Vega," Kassian rumbled in his ear.

Sin shook his head, unable to say anything coherent, and Kassian yanked his head to the side-- capturing his mouth in a wet, sloppy kiss. Sin didn't respond at first although he didn't stop Kassian from exploring his mouth thoroughly. But after a moment, he began to kiss back, intoxicated on sex and unable to think clearly as Kassian tangled his fingers in Sin's black hair.

Boyd moaned even louder in the background and started grinding his hips harder against Sin.

Sin could feel Kassian's cock pressing against his ass, sliding between the cheeks and forcing its way insistently in his hole. Sin yanked his mouth away breathlessly, eyebrows drawn together, hands still focused on slamming Boyd against him as Boyd's loud shouts filled the room.

Kassian must have used spit because it didn't hurt quite as much as it should have when his thick cock forced its way inside him. Sin grunted and hips slowed and nearly stopped against Boyd, who twisted beneath him, his face flushed and lips red.

Boyd's eyes were squeezed shut and head thrown back even as he panted with a wide open mouth. "Ah--Ahh--"

Kassian groaned into Sin's ear, his muscular body pressing against Sin's back. "God, you're tight," he muttered appreciatively before he drew his hips back then snapped them forward.

Sin groaned as that hard dick speared into him with enough strength to rock him against Boyd, who moaned in pleasure.

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"Fuck yeah," Kassian growled, one hand sliding up beneath Sin's shirt again while the other dug painfully into Sin's hip. He rocked forward again and started moving faster, faster, until he was fucking Sin hard.

Sin gasped helplessly, too lost in sensation to think coherently as his hips began moving with Kassian even as his own dick slid in and out of Boyd. The double pleasure of fucking while being fucked made Sin nearly crazy with lust and he leaned back, his dick ramming up into Boyd while his back was crushed against Kassian's chest.

"You like that?" Kassian demanded in a low smug voice, pulling his cock out almost entirely before slamming back in so hard Sin cried out. "You like taking my hard dick?"

"Ahh, fuck," Sin groaned in overwhelming pleasure that made sparks shoot behind his eyes. His blood ran hot within him like molten lava that set every nerve on fire in its wake.

"I've always wanted to fuck you," Kassian whispered as he pulled Sin hard against him even as his dick shoved harder and deeper into Sin. "I wanted to ram into you; make you scream." He rode Sin faster. "Make you take this dick so far up in you and fuck your hole so bad I'd tear you apart and make you beg for more."

Sin gasped hoarsely, shaking his head back and forth as Kassian said, "You're mine right now, Vega. Fucking mine."

There was a moment of harsh groaning before Sin managed, "You wish."

Kassian was undeterred by the comment. He jerked Sin's head to the side and they started kissing again; a wet, hot kiss that was almost equally tongue action.

Boyd arched his back and opened his eyes, and he was apparently incredibly turned on by the display because he started vigorously pumping his hips against Sin. "Oh God," he hissed in ecstasy, reaching down to grip Sin's waist with his hands. "Oh-- yes, yes..."

His honey brown gaze was so intense it nearly burned through Sin, who pulled away from Kassian with a wrenching groan when Kassian started spearing him straight in the prostate.

Kassian pushed Sin forward for a better angle and started fucking him harder. Sin panted harshly, his dick slamming even faster into Boyd as he got lost in the sensation.

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"Getting enough, Boyd?" Kassian murmured and Boyd nodded voicelessly, breathing heavily as he stared hard at them and rocked his hips against Sin.

"You like being used like a dirty fucking whore, don't you?" Kassian smirked when Boyd nodded again as he slammed himself harder onto Sin's dick.

"That's right, baby," Kassian growled as he started fucking Sin so hard that the momentum of both their bodies rocked into Boyd, who threw his head back and screamed, his body nearly arching off the bed entirely. "Take his big fucking cock."

Boyd was practically sobbing from pleasure and his dick strained seemingly painfully between his legs. He started jerking himself off frantically even as he rocked his hips faster against Sin.

"Oh God-- oh fuck yeah, oh fuck me..." Boyd whimpered, his voice low and helpless. He moaned long and low as he shook his head desperately. "Make me come, Sin," he begged hotly.

Sin leaned forward and jerked Boyd up, continuing to move his dick in and out of his partner as he crushed their lips together. Boyd moaned loudly and clutched Sin's shoulders, opening his mouth and immediately sliding his tongue into Sin's mouth.

Sin started fucking Boyd harder and each time he snapped his hips back, he speared himself on Kassian's hard dick, and each time he snapped his hips forward he drove deep into Boyd.

He felt almost out of control with the desire to fuck and be fucked so much that it made him shout hoarsely.

Boyd's panting started to increase exponentially. "Yes, yes, make me come," he was chanting, his gaze centered solely on Sin; as hot and intense on him as Boyd's body was around Sin's dick. "Please, baby... I want you, oh God I want you so fucking bad..."

The words, combined with Kassian riding him hard enough to cause a twisted sensation of pleasure mixed with pain made Sin's stomach clench tightly. His body was burning with desire and he felt his orgasm build from the very depths of him-- growing and stretching until it made his mouth drop open, his own panting and moaning rising in speed and volume as he slammed into Boyd and back against Kassian desperately.

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White hot pleasure built almost painfully within him and Sin was groaning, he was begging without words. He could feel the pressure building uncontrollably within him and he hissed harshly-- He knew he was going to come so hard in Boyd, harder than ever before.

It was almost here, just barely out of his reach-- He threw his head back but kept his gaze intense and locked on Boyd.

It was so close, he couldn't stand it. He was going to come--

Sin sat up straight abruptly, eyes opened wide as he stared around him blearily, clothes damp with sweat with an uncomfortably hard erection pressing against his black pants.

"What--"

Sin broke off and shook his head back and forth, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes as he banished the vivid images that danced behind his eyes. The dream hadn't been that bad up until the point where his subconscious had allowed Kassian to fuck him. Sin could still see Boyd sweating beneath him, looking up with darkened golden eyes, his mouth hanging open and begging for it...

Sin shuddered and stood up, forcing the mental image of an incredibly sexy and horny Boyd out of his mind and instead focusing on the horror of dream-Kassian's dick forcing its way into his ass. The effect was like an instant bucket of cold water and Sin scowled, annoyed with his brain for allowing such a pathetic dream to occur, let alone so vividly.

Irritated by the dream and himself for being turned on by the sight of Boyd fucking Kassian, Sin looked around the dank room.

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It was the same location from the dream-- the same recon point in bombed out Hunt's Point and even the same filthy bedroom and stained mattress that the threesome had taken place on. For some reason the knowledge irritated Sin further.

Even knowing it had been a dream, something dredged up from the depths of his obviously disturbed brain, it bothered him. Was this some kind of subconscious desire? Did he secretly think the idea of Boyd and Kassian was hot? Did he secretly want Kassian to fuck him?

Sin could have gagged at the notion.

Maybe not.

Maybe it'd just been a product of way too much time spent with Boyd and Kassian in small safe houses for multiple missions one after the other in the past few weeks. Sin was starting to wonder if Carhart was deliberately sending them out on assignments that had a lot of recon just so they'd be stuck in a room together constantly. Maybe he wanted to see if one of them would kill the other at some point.

Sin slid his hand down and squeezed his erection, wincing at how nearly painfully hard it was. Reluctantly, he pressed his back against the wall and undid his jeans, freeing his swollen cock and grimacing slightly as he reached down to wrap his hand around it.

There was no way he was going to traipse out into the other room with a huge erection but the idea of jerking off was incredibly unappealing given the origins of his arousal.

Licking his lips as his eyebrows drew together, Sin squeezed his eyes shut and started masturbating roughly but flickers of the dream kept coming back and every time he heard Kassian's phantom moans, it was horrifying enough for Sin's arousal to dampen considerably.

The sound of Kassian and Boyd talking floated through the wall and didn't help Sin's concentration on trying to ignore the memory of his nightmare. In the end, he gave up on jerking off, thought about something incredibly unarousing and stood against the wall for several long moments as his cock slowly softened.

The sound of raised voices in the next room broke Sin's reverie and forced him to focus on the hushed conversation he'd been ignoring on the other side of the door.

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Sin shook himself, fixed his pants and wiped himself off. He tried to appear normal and not like he'd just been having a dream/nightmare about wild sex with the two bickering agents in the next room.

If Carhart was testing them to see how they interacted on long missions, Sin was starting to seriously believe that the test was to see if Kassian and Boyd would ever get along.

Although it had started out with Sin and Kassian on the verge of violence with Boyd as the voice of reason, that was no longer the case. Whereas Sin and Kassian had managed to settle on a mostly civilized relationship, still exchanging smart-assed retorts and annoying each other but never very seriously, Kassian and Boyd couldn't seem to agree on anything.

It was the third consecutive mission that the two men had erupted into an argument over differing viewpoints, differing tactics and a tug of war over who should make the decisions-- the official team leader or the person with more experience.

Kassian's easy release of the reins of team leader had come to a halt as the possibility of him becoming an actual part of the team grew more realistic. And Boyd's sometimes deferential attitude toward Kassian was fading fast as he became more confident in his abilities and decisions.

It was actually kind of amusing to behold and Sin found himself feeling slightly smug to be the only person on the mission without an attitude problem.

Sin opened the door and stepped out into the main area of the tiny apartment, looking at Kassian and Boyd as they glared at each other, secretly glad that this was happening now. It would have somehow been more disturbing if he'd woken up from that hideous dream to find them all chummy.

"I'm not going to stand here arguing all day," Boyd was saying with finality, crossing his arms and looking irritated. "We're not getting anywhere and I'm tired of it. My way makes the most sense so that's what we're doing."

Kassian stared at Boyd and an incredulous laugh escaped his mouth even as his light blue eyes narrowed. "You think your way makes the most sense because you're too fucking hardheaded to see my point and the fact that you have the balls to give me orders is pretty astounding."

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"You won't even acknowledge the flaws in your own plan," Boyd retorted in obvious annoyance, straightening his back and meeting Kassian's gaze evenly. "So don't talk to me about being hardheaded. And I'm giving you an order because as the team leader I've looked at the options and this is what works best."

Neither of them glanced at Sin as he observed quietly and Kassian scoffed. "Whatever delusions of grandeur you have at the moment have no basis in reality, Boyd, especially since you refuse to see that key parts of the way you want to go about this mission are completely unnecessary. And if I really thought your idea put this mission at risk instead of just unnecessarily complicating it, I'd knock that team leader hat off your head and do things my way."

Boyd's eyes narrowed and his jaw set. "First of all, I wouldn't put the mission at risk so your scenario isn't going to happen. Secondly-- Just try it. Carhart put me in charge, not you, and if you have a problem with that then take it up with him."

Kassian crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Boyd. "I don't care what Carhart says. He isn't here. I am. And as far as I'm concerned, when it comes down to it, just because someone gave you a title doesn't mean you have the chops to back it up, kid. And you know that, so don't try to throw your weight around and act like it means a goddamn thing to someone with more experience than you. I'm getting sick of tiptoeing around this issue with you and I'm done with it."

Sin's eyebrows rose slightly and he moved across the room to stand near the window, squinting across the river at the plant as all memory of his dream faded in the face of the argument.

There was a brief moment of silence and when Boyd spoke, his voice was low and angry. "Fuck off, Kassian. I know you both have more experience, I know that promotion was bullshit. I know the title means shit. I know in any other circumstances you'd be the one in charge and not me."

Boyd gave Kassian a narrow-eyed glare as he continued stubbornly, "But that doesn't mean I'm going to give into you just because. Maybe it's fucked up that I got this position but I'm still going to take it seriously, I'm still going to try to do my best. Even if the team leader position had nothing to do with this, I wouldn't give this up. I've compromised before and I'd do it again but I'm not convinced this time. And just because you have more years on the job doesn't necessarily mean you're better at everything, that a different way of doing something can't be more efficient. I don't care what my real level should be; my way could still work just as well if not better."

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"I don't need to convince you because you're not my superior," Kassian replied flatly. "And I'm frankly getting tired of playing this game and allowing this charade to go on. You don't have the qualifications or background to give me orders and you *know* that. You know it! But just because you're technically the team leader on paper, you still have the audacity to try to tell me that I don't know how to do a job that I've had a near perfect success rate at for fourteen years. Fourteen years and no failed missions but Team Leader Boyd isn't convinced that I know what I'm doing? Give me a fucking break."

"How the hell am I supposed to learn anything or improve if I always just deferred to you because you're Senior Agent Trovosky and know so much?" Boyd retorted in frustration. "I haven't even lost us a mission, yet you're acting like it's inevitable just because I haven't been at the job as long as you."

Sin's attention, which had been wandering as the initial interest in the argument dwindled, snapped back into place and he looked over his shoulder. "Now, now, children, are time outs in order until everyone is in a better mood?"

Boyd gave Sin a brief, hard look, clearly unamused by the comment. He shifted his gaze to meet Kassian's eyes but addressed Sin when he replied, "I don't think mood even matters anymore. This isn't going to change."

Kassian shrugged and didn't seem in any rush to disagree with the sentiment. "Sorry Vega."

Sin scowled at him. "What?"

Kassian just shook his head and didn't bother to reply verbally.

Boyd sighed, looking highly frustrated and irritated, and turned away from both of them as he ran his hands back through his hair, his shoulders tense and body partially slouched forward.

After a moment he straightened, dropping his hands at his sides as he looked over at Sin with eyebrows drawing down and genuine regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Sin. I can't do this. This whole situation is bullshit and we all know it. We tried but it just isn't going to work."

"Whatever." Sin turned away again and glared out the window again.

"Well since the two of you are getting along again I don't see what the problem is anyway," Kassian said.

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Sin just made a face. "It wasn't really about that anymore. That was just the start of it."

"Then wha-- Oh. Right. I forgot about him." Kassian frowned, actually looked mildly sympathetic but he didn't seem any more inclined to change his mind.

Boyd looked between the two of them and sighed, dropping into one of the chairs by the table and leaning back. The poorly constructed wooden chair creaked quietly in the process and his gaze shifted to focus on Sin. "I know you wanted to get out but you never know; they may decide to cut the unit down to only one or two stationed 10's."

"Just forget it," Sin replied, still scowling. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

He'd had a feeling this was going to happen and even though it was disappointing, it didn't come as a complete surprise. Ever since Kassian had realized that Sin had stopped harboring complete animosity towards he and Boyd over their sexual relationship, there had been indications that Kassian didn't think there was a point in Sin leaving anymore.

"Let's just get this mission over with," Kassian said after a moment, changing the subject. His face was still drawn in an annoyed frown but it seemed as though he was washing his hands of the entire situation as he added to Boyd, "I'm pretty sure I'm done with this so honestly, just do whatever you want."

Boyd nodded and leaned forward, looking at the blueprints again with a frown.

Sift

Although Boyd had been in Sin's apartment a few times in the last several months, it hadn't exactly been in relaxing conditions. Today however, he had the opportunity to just lean back in the couch and take in how familiar the place was. Sin's apartment hadn't changed much in all the years Boyd had known him. The same furniture, the same lack of decent food in the cupboards.

It was sort of like coming home to him, because he and Sin were finally at a point where they were becoming comfortable around each other again.

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When silence fell between them, it wasn't awkward or extended as they tried to figure out what to say next. Things were becoming more like the way it used to be; before all the uncertainty and miscommunication had essentially ripped them apart. When Boyd had first told Sin he wanted to be friends again, this was becoming what he'd meant so he was pleased to know they were still capable of it.

In addition to that, their unit was also shifting closer toward what it had once been. Almost three months had passed since Kassian was on the first mission with them in Canada, and it had become clear over the course of the trial that Boyd and Kassian could not be partners.

Although they got along great as friends and typically had no troubles during the missions, they still got into several disagreements over time about mission planning, execution, and follow-up.

In truth Boyd was glad Kassian had decided not to accept the transfer; it would have been too stressful for both of them and probably would have strained their friendship.

Carhart had informed Boyd and Sin that they were to remain partners which, Boyd had to admit, he was happy about. Despite the different way they operated, Sin was familiar to him and even with everything that had happened between them romantically and emotionally, they still clicked when it came to work.

Boyd watched Sin as he sat on the counter and poured more cereal into the bowl he was already eating from. The cereal seemed to be more marshmallow bits and sugar than anything healthy and Boyd couldn't find it in himself to be surprised. How Sin managed to live his life on junk food all the time was still beyond Boyd, who remained on his high protein diet to maintain the muscle he'd gained.

"Isn't that your third bowl?" Boyd asked in dry amusement.

Sin shrugged, spooning some of the cereal out of the bowl. "I'm hungry."

"I can't help thinking if you'd eaten something with more substance in the first place maybe you wouldn't need so many bowls," Boyd observed.

"This tastes better," Sin replied. "Would taste even better if there was real milk."

Boyd nodded, unable to argue that point about the milk at least. He watched Sin idly for a few moments before he leaned back more fully on the couch, kicking his feet out in

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front of him and resting his arms across the back. The microsuede fabric of the couch felt cool against his bare arms.

The weather was getting much warmer as June came to a close and Boyd had started wearing t-shirts even around the Agency. Although his pants and scuffed boots were still black, his leather trench coat was nestled deep in his closet. He'd even found a deep red t-shirt to wear that hearkened back to the days when Lou had been alive.

"Have you talked to Emilio yet?" Boyd asked curiously after a few moments of mutual silence.

Sin's eyes focused on Boyd as he chewed slowly. "No. I don't want to talk to him."

Boyd wasn't surprised by the answer; Sin was avoiding his father and Emilio complained about it about half the times Boyd saw him. Emilio wasn't even allowed a cellphone yet, which he wasn't happy about. When Boyd had asked why Emilio hadn't just stopped by Sin's apartment if he wanted to talk to him so much, Emilio had mentioned that Carhart had told him to lay off Sin for a while.

As a result, Boyd ended up being the messenger between Sin and Emilio-- relaying information, questions, items... Even when Boyd had told Sin about the money situation, Sin had set up a separate account, transferred the money over to it, and given Boyd the card to give to Emilio.

It didn't bother Boyd to be doing this and he wasn't surprised by Sin's disinterest in being around his father, but it couldn't last forever.

"I don't mind being the go-between but just so you know, it sounds like he's going to be reinstated within the next week or two." Boyd tilted his head slightly, blond hair falling against the side of his face. "And since you're staying in the unit you're going to have to see him sometime." He shrugged, dropping his arms from the back of the couch and slouching forward slightly. "You may want to start preparing yourself."

"I'm aware of the fact that I'll have to see him soon but that doesn't mean I need to speak to him any other time." Sin finished his cereal and dropped the bowl on the counter, sliding off the side of it to stand. "He seems to think I should give him a chance but as far as I'm concerned after twenty years, there is no real reason for him to try to make an attempt at some relationship with me."

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"It's a fair point," Boyd agreed. "I was mostly referring to when you'd have to be around him."

Sin just shrugged and leaned against the counters, crossing his arms over the faded and ripped t-shirt he wore.

Silence briefly fell between them and Boyd watched Sin thoughtfully.

"You know, I've been wondering," Boyd said casually after a moment. "Do you prefer to be called Hsin?"

Sin raised an eyebrow. "What makes you ask that after all this time?"

"I don't know." Boyd shrugged then sat forward further, drawing his legs closer to the couch and resting his forearms on his knees. His honey brown gaze was steady as he met Sin's eyes and his expression remained casual. "Well. I ran into Ivan and he's using it constantly. He said you said it was fine and I guess it surprised me. It made me wonder if you didn't care either way or if you wanted to be called that."

Sin seemed to consider the question as he studied Boyd thoughtfully. After a moment he just shrugged. "It throws me off guard when people call me by my real name since it hasn't been used regularly in nearly sixteen years. I prefer it that way now because I don't wish the people on the compound to address me in such a familiar way anymore but I don't mind for certain people to use it. Ivan seemed offended by the name Sin and asked if he could call me by my real name and since he and I get along very well, I saw no reason to say no."

"Why offended?" Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly. He could understand how the name could have potentially offended Sin a while ago but Ivan barely knew Sin so why would he care?

"Because the name stuck not only due to mispronunciation, but because they were implying that my existence is a sin and therefore it was an ongoing way to put me down. It doesn't bother me anymore but he didn't want to perpetuate something that started based on that, I guess."

Sin pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket but didn't actually take one out.

Boyd nodded, wondering whether it had bothered Sin even when they'd first met. Boyd didn't see the name Sin as an insult or he wouldn't have been using it all along but even

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so, it may have been another example of a time when Boyd didn't think of what Sin wanted.

"Who else don't you mind using it, then?" Boyd asked after a moment.

Sin toyed with the pack of cigarettes idly before he set them on the counter without extracting one. He'd mentioned to Boyd that he was trying to give up the habit but apparently it wasn't coming that easily to him. "I don't know. The only people who ever call me that are you, Ryan, Carhart and my father. And now Ivan."

There was another brief pause before Boyd asked, "So if I ever decided to call you that all the time, you wouldn't care?"

Sin made a face at Boyd. "Why the hell would I care if you called me that when I told Ivan it was okay?"

Boyd shook his head to himself and leaned back against the couch. "I don't know. I was just checking."

"When did you run into him, anyway?" Sin asked, giving up on his decision and finally grabbing a cigarette.

"Earlier this month," Boyd said, gaze briefly caught by Sin's long, olive-toned fingers contrasted against the bright white of the cigarette. He thought about reminding Sin of his decision to quit but decided against it so he wouldn't seem like he was nagging Sin. "He was in the training room."

Sin pulled a book of matches out of a drawer and struck one against the back of the book, inhaling deeply as the tip of the cigarette began to burn red. He exhaled after a moment, watching Boyd through the smoke that drifted in front of him. "Oh. He never mentioned it."

Boyd shrugged, looking up to meet Sin's eyes so he couldn't get distracted by the cigarette, by Sin's lips. "Well, it wasn't exactly a social call so he may not have felt the need. He was being harassed by some assholes I knew from back when it got out that I'm gay. I went over to tell them to leave."

Sin's eyebrows rose slightly and he leaned back against the counter again, taking another drag as he watched Boyd. "Did it have anything to do with me?"

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"I don't think entirely. It sounds like he never denies he's gay if anyone brings it up, and since they assume he is based on how he looks, I'd guess that happens often." Boyd shifted and crossed his arms. "But they did make a comment about you two. He said people have seen you together and he sees no reason to deny anything."

"There is no reason," Sin replied with a shrug. "It's not like people actually know what we do when we're alone but I wouldn't give a shit if they did and he has the same attitude. I think that's part of the reason why we get along so well."

"What do you do?" Boyd asked, watching Sin with the same casual expression he was determined to keep, to hide his thoughts. Even though he knew Sin'd had sex with Ivan at least once, that still didn't account for what they did the rest of the time and part of Boyd was morbidly curious, wondering what Ivan did differently or the same. "When you're alone."

Sin didn't answer immediately and flicked ashes into the sink although he continued to study Boyd. After a moment he brought the cigarette to his lips again and said, "I don't know. Different things."

Boyd was silent a moment, gaze steady on Sin before he said calmly, "I know you've had sex. I'm not asking about that. I was wondering what you do when you just hang around... if you do that." He paused briefly then added, "But if you don't want to tell me, I'll drop the subject."

Sin's green eyes narrowed slightly at Boyd and once again he didn't reply for an extended moment. This time he slowly put the cigarette out on the inside of the sink and put the rest aside. "Yes, we hang around but we don't do any specific activities whenever I see him. We talk, he tells me his conspiracy theories about the Agency, he likes to go out and explore the bombed out suburbs and outer towns so I've gone with him a few times. We also share a lot of the same interests as far as reading and he's started getting me to watch old television shows with him and movies. Just... things."

There was a brief moment of silence as Boyd took that in. "Are you enjoying yourself?" Boyd asked after a brief pause, feeling genuinely curious.

Sin just shrugged and didn't look particularly moved by the question. "I suppose."

"That's good," Boyd said with a nod, actually meaning it.

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Sin continued to stare at him with the same narrow-eyed expression before asking, "How is it that you know anything about my sex life?"

Boyd studied Sin for a moment, almost wanting to break eye contact but not letting himself.

"I probably would have had an idea anyway in the training room. He was wearing a tank top and you leave... distinctive bruises sometimes." Boyd's eyes narrowed only a hint, almost thoughtfully, before he continued. "But I knew even before then because Ivan told Ryan, who told me."

Sin shook his head and pushed himself away from the counter. "Well maybe Ryan should learn to mind his business."

Boyd had to admit that it was true and he nodded. If Sin had wanted Boyd to know, he would have told him. That hadn't really occurred to Boyd when he'd ended up pressing Ryan for more information.

"Maybe. I don't think he meant anything wrong by it," Boyd said with a slight frown after a hesitant pause. His eyes were narrowed in thought. "At first he thought you'd already told me. It's probably the only reason he brought it up."

Sin just made a face in response. "I don't see why either of you would sit there discussing these things, anyway."

Boyd sighed and pushed hair back from his face. "I don't know. I know it's not really any of my business anymore, it's just..." *It's just that sometimes I wonder if you like Ivan more*, he almost wanted to say.

Instead, he trailed off and shook his head. "Forget it. I'm sorry. I should ask you directly if anything ever comes up related to you, so you have the ability to decide what to say or not to say."

There was a brief silence before Sin shrugged dismissively. "It doesn't matter. I wasn't trying to hide anything from you. I would have told you if it ever had reason to come up, but the idea of you and Ryan sitting around chatting about something like that is very irritating to me. But it's done now, so whatever."

Boyd nodded, feeling somewhat relieved that they could get past the subject.

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Sin turned away and ran the water in the sink, rinsing out the dishes that sat there. "Somehow that reminded me of something I meant to tell you," he said after a moment. "There's this bookstore that I've been going to-- they have a stationary store attached to it with a lot of art supplies. I thought you may be interested since you've started drawing again."

"Really?" Boyd asked, sitting up straighter as he looked at Sin, his eyes brightening in interest. "I don't think I've seen it yet. Where is it?"

"It's downtown, called Grover Books." Sin washed the bowls he'd used and set them to the side, wiping his wet hands against his jeans. "I found it accidentally when I was wandering around-- it looks like a hole in the wall judging by the entrance but it's a rather large bookstore. They seem to specialize in hard-to-find literature and periodicals that aren't typically carried by a mainstream bookseller. The art supply shop is inside of it."

"That sounds like a place I'd really like," Boyd mused, finding himself intrigued by the description. He was interested in the bookstore alone but especially with the art store attached, he could imagine himself getting lost in a place like that. He drew his eyebrows down thoughtfully. "I thought I'd found all the great little stores like that but I guess not." He hesitated briefly, glancing at Sin before he casually asked, "Would you want to go sometime?"

"That's why I mentioned it," Sin replied with a shrug although he glanced over at Boyd almost hesitantly. "Well, I figured I could show it to you since it's hard to spot," he added.

A genuine smile grew on Boyd's face. "Yeah, I'd like that."

Sin's mouth twitched up slightly and he opened his mouth to reply but before he could say anything, someone knocked on the door.

Sin's eyebrows drew together and he frowned slightly before going to the front door and looking through the peep hole. He didn't hesitate before moving to unlock the door, swinging it open. "What are you doing here?" he asked in a curious tone, stepping aside as Ivan entered the room.

Ivan raised his eyebrows at Sin, tucking his hands into the pockets of his army green jacket. His blond hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail and his wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. "Obviously you've forgotten but--"

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Ivan broke off when his eyes finally fell on Boyd. A slight frown crossed his face and he glanced at Sin before looking back at Boyd with a slight sigh. "Hello there."

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly, disconcerted by Ivan's sudden appearance and timing. The first time Sin had suggested a place to hang out, the first time it seemed like Boyd would get the chance to do something fun with Sin again-- and Ivan had to appear. Although it was entirely possible they wouldn't have gone today anyway, it still caught him off guard.

"Hello," Boyd greeted Ivan then looked between the two. "Forgotten what?"

"Well," Ivan started, shifting his backpack on his shoulders and giving Sin a mildly exasperated look. "We were supposed to go to Lorde Hill together today, take the train out to Jamesville and stuff."

Sin stared at him blankly before he frowned. "Oh. I did forget."

Boyd looked over at Sin, feeling the uncertainty and discomfort he'd tried so hard to stifle rearing up again. Lorde Hill was an old prison community that had been turned into a museum; it was located just outside the city of Jamesville and was over four hours away.

"All day?" Boyd asked, the slightest hint of doubt in his voice.

Ivan gave him an odd look and raised an eyebrow. "Yes. The plan was to head out around now and either stay the night in Jamesville or try to catch the late train back. They run on an abbreviated schedule these days so if we miss the last one out, we won't have a way of getting back, which is why I'd mentioned it on a few days that I knew we both had downtime."

He turned his gaze back to Sin with a slight frown. "I mean you don't have to go if you changed your mind."

Sin shook his head, frowning slightly. "I didn't change my mind-- I just forgot."

Boyd looked over at Sin again, unable to ignore the changes that had seemed to occur in Sin within the last few months.

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Sin was already willing to spend the night with Ivan. Maybe they already had; maybe they did that often. It made their friendship seem deeper, even more so than the fact that they were having sex. It made it seem like they were moving towards a real relationship, the kind that Boyd and Sin had never had the opportunity to experience.

The facts all added up to something greater than the individual parts; something that was impossible to ignore. It made Boyd feel distinctly uncomfortable and, even though no words had been spoken to the effect, unwelcome.

It was the first time in a long time that Boyd felt alienated in Sin's presence on any level.

Boyd wasn't prepared for how hard that thought hit him. He had to look away from Sin's face, from those so-familiar features now focused on someone else.

He kept his expression neutral and casual, although the happiness that had been there before Ivan's arrival had slid away. He stood up and automatically glanced around to see if he'd brought anything with him.

He could feel Sin's eyes on him once again and there was nearly awkward silence between the two of them before Ivan said in his typically mild tone, "I can go on my own if you're busy now."

Despite the fact that Ivan's voice didn't convey any irritation at the possibility, a slight frown crossed his face but he looked away from Sin quickly as though wanting to hide the flash of disappointment.

Sin's gaze switched from Boyd to Ivan and he absently began to pull on a loose string at the hem of his shirt. He seemed hesitant to speak as he opened his mouth, closed it, and furrowed his brows slightly as if not knowing what to do.

But in the end he shook his head. "No, you planned this over a week ago and I doubt I'll have consecutive days of downtime again for a couple of months. Boyd and I were going to go to the bookstore but we can do that any time."

Ivan nodded and he smiled slightly before glancing at Boyd again.

Boyd couldn't argue with the logic of Sin's decision and he knew it was nothing personal but it still didn't make him feel much better. Moments like the one they'd been having weren't something that could be planned and had been so infrequent in the past year that it didn't matter what the circumstances were.

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Having to leave just hit home even harder that things had changed.

Ivan watched Boyd evenly without much of an expression. Although Boyd couldn't tell what Ivan was thinking, it was most likely Boyd's mild resentfulness toward the other man's presence that made him assume that Ivan probably felt smug on some level. After all, there had been a time when Sin would have chosen Boyd above anyone else and now it was Boyd who had to leave.

Determined not to make it seem like a big deal, Boyd broke eye contact to grab his keys off the table. As he stood up straight, he glanced briefly at Sin to acknowledge him again.

"Well, you're obviously on a schedule so I'll get out of your way," Boyd said calmly to both of them and turned toward the door.

Ivan shrugged noncommittally but Sin's eyes narrowed and his full lips turned down into a slight frown. He once again appeared uncertain about something but in the end just said, "I'll talk to you later."

Boyd nodded and brought his hand up in a brief wave, saying simply, "Sounds good. Have fun." He walked out the door and let it fall shut behind him.

He'd learned his lesson since R2I: not to let his expression so much as twitch after he left Sin's apartment even if he was upset. So he casually glanced toward the guard and nodded then headed down the stairs calmly as if nothing was wrong, as if none of what had just happened bothered him.

As he headed toward his car, he felt the troubled, self-doubtful feeling settle in even deeper.

What did it mean that Ivan and Sin seemed to have more in common each time Boyd was presented with their interaction? What did it mean that Sin was so quickly willing to do things with Ivan that Boyd had struggled to reach and, in some cases, had never really achieved?

He didn't know how to interpret it; whether the fact that Sin seemed so comfortable and close to Ivan after such a short time had more to do with Ivan or if it was more to do with circumstances. He didn't know how much would have been different if he and Ivan had

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switched places-- whether it all would have turned out better and faster if Ivan had been Sin's partner instead, or whether Boyd was being unfair in even wondering that.

After all, it was easy to say Sin was opening up so quickly to Ivan compared to how he had to Boyd, but the circumstances were so different, even including how Boyd had been at the time too. At the time they'd met he hadn't been interested in opening up either.

What it really came down to was Ivan made Boyd self-conscious and uncertain; and, at a time when Boyd was trying harder than ever to improve and to be a good friend to Sin, it made it harder to know what to do.

Yet the fact remained that in other comparisons, there was a significant difference that made Boyd uncomfortable.

Ivan and Sin weren't like it was with Boyd and Kassian. They weren't just using each other for casual sex. This was more like dating, this was Ivan wanting and liking Sin specifically, and Sin...

Sin not telling Boyd what he thought, what he wanted.

Maybe Sin didn't know now but things like this moved slowly with Sin. Even if Sin didn't have strong feelings for Ivan now, who was to say he wouldn't feel it in the future?

Boyd couldn't help comparing himself to Ivan in these circumstances and he realized with a feeling that made his heart clench that he really had no way of fighting back. Ivan and Boyd had enough general similarities in their physical appearances that there was no point comparing and if it was a question of personality...

Boyd was who he was.

He'd tried so hard to change over the past few years, especially since level 10 training and after he'd realized how he'd fucked up with Sin, but there were some parts of himself that were inherent.

And maybe that wasn't good enough.

Maybe Boyd had lost Sin the moment Sin had met Ivan.

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That thought hit Boyd harder than he was expecting. He finally reached his car and unlocked it with the key fob, sliding into the car and shutting the door behind him even though he didn't immediately put the key in the ignition.

Instead, his gaze was briefly caught by Sin's building; by the window that he knew was in Sin's living room, and by wondering what they were doing in there right now. Had Sin already dismissed Boyd's presence? Was he packing for the trip and already talking to Ivan casually; was Ivan already making him laugh?

Pain sharpened in Boyd abruptly, an almost suffocating feeling that he immediately shoved back down-- annoyed with himself, resentful of Ivan, and stupidly hurt that Sin had connected so strongly with someone else so quickly. At the same time he had to acknowledge how stupid it had been of him to have expected Sin to be okay with his relationship with Kassian. Even though what they had was casual, Boyd now understood how much it could hurt.

Back when Boyd had said that he and Sin needed to work on their issues, he realized now that all along in the back of his mind he'd been thinking that they would work on them together or for each other. He'd thought that Sin would see what Boyd had meant about their flaws and if Sin decided to fix his own problems, it would be with Boyd still in his mind-- the way it was for Boyd still thinking of Sin.

He'd thought maybe this would be an opportunity to become stronger on their own so maybe... maybe sometime in the future, maybe if they were both dedicated-- maybe it would make them stronger together. Maybe even enough to mend their otherwise damaged relationship.

Yet he hadn't said anything to Sin, hadn't dared even think about the thought too clearly on his own, because he hadn't wanted to depend on that. He hadn't been certain that either of them had it in them to change enough for anything to be plausible; that they would be willing to even try.

But now he knew he was willing to work on some things and now he knew that Sin was too, that Sin was capable of change-- but that he was changing with or for someone else.

Boyd tilted his head forward briefly, blond hair curtaining his face. His shoulders were tense and his fingers tightened on the steering wheel before he looked up again and made himself loosen his grip. He forced his expression into casual neutrality once more

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before he started the car and looked over his shoulder to start to back out of the parking spot and leave the Agency.

The sadness within him was undeniable, and it was equally undeniable to him that even now he couldn't say any of this to Sin.

Because regardless of what Boyd wanted or thought, the fact remained that Ivan seemed to be doing things faster and better than Boyd. That, as much as it hurt to acknowledge, Ivan may very well be better for Sin overall. That maybe Ivan could make Sin happier.

And especially because of that, Boyd had no right to say anything.

He wouldn't sabotage Ivan and Sin's relationship, especially not for his own gain. If anything, as much as it made him uncomfortable and self-doubtful and it sometimes felt painful, he would stay well out of the way.

Backwards Compatible

It was five o'clock in the morning and Carhart stood in front of his apartment door, staring at it wearily as his keycard hovered just above the electronic lock.

His head was pounding and a heaviness weighed on his shoulders-- not just from exhaustion but also from a night spent working nonstop in his office, falling asleep in his chair; and having the brief bouts of restless sleep interrupted early on by the sound of Morgan's cold, deprecating e-mails chiming in his inbox.

Carhart took a slow deep breath and swiped the card, chastising himself for continuing to even bother making contact with the woman. She'd made it quite clear that she wouldn't be with him as long as he associated with Emilio and he couldn't really blame her, so the attempts at squaring things with the Training Captain were fruitless and nothing more than a headache.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the dim living room, closing the door silently behind him.

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He wasn't entirely surprised to see Emilio sprawled on the pull-out couch, completely naked with only a sheet half-covering his lower body. Carhart was even less surprised by the fact that his ex-partner's body was still mildly glimmering with sweat and that the room smelled like sex.

Carhart sighed inaudibly and moved further into the living room, his eyes falling on the kitchen area where a woman was facing away from him as she stood on her tiptoes to reach a mug from the top of one of his cabinets.

She was naked except for thong underwear and a tiny black tank top that appeared to be ripped or cut in half because it exposed her smooth sand-colored back almost entirely and the tattoo of demonic wings that adorned it. The woman had long, nearly waist-length black hair and the toned, athletic body of a field agent.

"Need some help?" he asked, although his tone was sharp and nothing near helpful or friendly.

The woman cried out in surprise, her hand knocking against the dishes in the cabinet as she jerked around to face him. The dishes came clattering down out of the cabinet loudly, slamming down on the counter and breaking-- shards of glass flying about the room and slashing into the woman violently.

"Shit!" she hissed in a low pained voice, her hands moving to yank a large plate fragment from her arm as she hurriedly backed away from the kitchen, brown eyes on him as she ignored the blood that was gushing out of the wound. "I'm so sorry, General Carhart. I'll pay for everything. I'm really sorry."

Carhart stared at her. "Calm down, Agent Guerrero."

Elaine Guerrero was a level 8 field operative in Terrorism; she was strong, determined, and typically had a good head on her shoulders. Except, it would seem, when it came to sexual partners.

Carhart glanced at Emilio but he continued to sleep or at least pretended to since he didn't show any concern for his injured lover.

"Just stay there," Carhart said wearily, pointing at her.

"N-no, it's okay, I have a briefing in an hour and I was just trying to make some coffee for myself and we only just woke up a bit ago but Emilio went back to sleep so I don't

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know where everything is and he told me last time that--" Elaine broke off, wincing at her own babbling, and crossing her arms awkwardly over her chest, possibly trying to shield the fact that the lower half of her full breasts were exposed by the short length of the tank top as she wilted under her superior's stare.

"I'm really sorry. I'll go."

Carhart made a face and walked further into the kitchen, putting his hand against her shoulder as he pushed her down into a kitchen chair. "You're not leaving my apartment bleeding like that. It's bad enough you're here at all but I don't need excessive questions asked about when and where this happens if you go to the med wing," he said flatly.

Elaine looked up at him, ashen and ashamed, and nodded before dropping her gaze. He stared at her for a moment, unconsciously admiring her features, her full, naturally down-turned lips and heavy-lidded, thick-lashed eyes, before shaking himself and opening a drawer to extract a small first aid kit.

He looked over at Emilio again, not really believing that the man had slept through such a loud ruckus but not doubting that Emilio was capable of almost instantly falling asleep again once he'd determined the sound had not been a threat.

Carhart looked down at Elaine and knelt beside her, narrowing his eyes slightly at the deep gash in her arm. He touched her arm and examined the wound, noting that it likely needed stitches but knowing she would be fine as long as it was patched up tightly for now to stop the bleeding.

She refused to look at him, her eyes downcast, even when he began applying thick, tight bandages to her likely sore arm. Through it all she didn't show even the slightest indication of pain and Carhart couldn't help feeling a vague sense of pride over that fact. When she'd first been initiated as a high-ranking agent, they'd wanted to give her valentine status due to her good looks but she'd adamantly refused and he'd advocated for her until they'd revoked it. They'd argued that they had plenty of other female agents who were valentine designated and it was only due to that fact that Connors had finally agreed.

Carhart dragged his eyes away from her face again and he began removing smaller shards of glass from her arm. He had the mind to let her do it herself but she looked so embarrassed that it was more likely she'd bolt out of the apartment bloody and disheveled, leaving a trail of questions in her wake by the guards who'd likely seen her come in with Emilio.

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He wiped her arm and neck clear of the blood that trickled against her smooth skin and applied smaller bandages to the wounds. Her skin felt good against his fingers and Carhart couldn't deny that the proximity to a half-naked beautiful woman who was still flushed from an undoubtedly wild bout of sex stirred something in him.

His fingers actually stilled against her arm for a moment and his eyes caught on her nipples, hard and protruding through her thin tank top, and he felt his breath catch slightly. It'd been almost four months since he'd had sex and it was difficult to not think about it when he could smell it on Elaine.

The musky scent of female arousal was thick around her, a constant reminder of what she'd been doing likely only a few moments before Carhart had arrived. For a moment, the fleeting thought crossed his mind that it'd be so easy to pull her down to the floor, push her underwear aside and have her-- slide into her body that was still wet from fucking Emilio.

Carhart's fingers tightened slightly. He glanced at her, disturbed by his own thoughts, and he noted that she'd been looking at him. When their eyes met, she jerked her eyes away and bit her lip-- shoulders hunched forward.

He knew she knew what he was thinking.

Women had an uncanny ability to know immediately when a man wanted them, and Carhart was sure that his intense gaze did nothing to rebuff the idea. He also knew by her uncharacteristically submissive posture that she would let him do what he wanted, not because she wanted to fuck him-- but because he was General Carhart and she would do what she was told.

Carhart stood up abruptly, his posture tense as he balled the bloody towel up. "Put some clothes on."

Elaine's eyes rose to him in surprise but she looked almost grateful and stood up, hurrying into the other room.

Carhart exhaled quietly, closing his eyes for a moment, before shaking himself and closing up the first aid kit. The only sound in the living room was the rustling of Elaine's clothing and she returned to the kitchen after barely a full minute, a long black sweater hanging off one shoulder and cinched at the waist by a thick metal belt that turned the oversized shirt into a dress.

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"I'm sorry," she said again, more seriously this time, as she laced her knee-high black boots. She finally hissed in pain, wincing when the movement of her arm likely pulled at the deep wound. "Really, General Carhart, if I'd known you would be returning I would have left last night. Emilio said you weren't coming back until later."

Carhart looked at her expressionlessly. "It is later."

Elaine looked up at him through a curtain of shiny black hair and said nothing, although there was a distinctly troubled look in her eyes. "General, I know this is an awkward situation but I hope you don't... I hope you don't think negatively about me now."

There was a brief silence between them and Carhart was beginning to feel annoyed that she was still in his apartment, still talking to him. Now that the brief haze of sexual attraction had drifted away, Carhart was beginning to feel annoyed by the entire situation.

The fact that she'd agreed to accompany Emilio here knowing full well whose quarters it was, was blatantly disrespectful in his eyes. She should have known better-- she should have taken Emilio to her place instead. The fact that she was still here, still trying to talk it out with him and-- what? Ensure that he still held her in high regard after she'd used her commanding officer's home as a motel?

"I have two bits of advice for you," Carhart said in the curt, emotionless tone he reserved for field operatives who were officially on his shit list. Elaine looked down instantly, obviously familiar enough with his manner to see where it was going.

"First, don't listen to Emilio. He gets away with his behavior because he is a highly talented and rare-to-come-by operative with a wide variety of contacts that we value. You are a level 8 agent who has achieved no such accolades; your behavior will have far more severe consequences than his."

Elaine nodded, still looking at the floor in shame.

"And two," Carhart went on, narrowing his eyes. "Don't try to excuse behavior that is inexcusable. I don't care if you think you're in love with Emilio. I don't care if your apartment was on fire and you thought there was no other place to go. You committed a gross infraction by coming here and you did so for the sake of sex. If that's your main concern in life, I never would have fought so hard to keep you off valentine status."

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She looked up at him quickly, her face drawn and frightened. "Please--"

"Leave," he ordered her and indicated the door.

Elaine nodded quickly and grabbed her bag, hurrying out the door without looking back.

Carhart stared after her for a long moment before shaking himself and moving to the kitchen tiredly, kneeling to start picking up the broken bits of flatware that now littered the floor. His entire body ached due to the night spent hunched over his desk and his already pounding head seemed to be thrumming more intensely.

"Well, you sure told her," Emilio's voice rang out abruptly.

Carhart paused and he looked up to see that Emilio had sat up on the sofa bed. The sheet was pooled in his lap but it was obvious that he was completely naked. His gaze was on Carhart but his expression wasn't readily identifiable.

"She deserved it," Carhart replied curtly, just as annoyed with Emilio as he'd been with Elaine, especially since he suspected that Emilio had begun bringing women back to the apartment for the sole purpose of getting under his skin.

Emilio's eyes followed Carhart as he stood up in the kitchen and when Carhart glanced over again, he saw that Emilio's gaze was hooded, his mouth drawn and expression wrought with the dark moodiness that he lapsed into at varying occasions in the years that they'd known each other.

Carhart often found himself going back to their partnership, their youth, and examining these moments in his mind as he tried to figure out what had been plaguing Emilio in the past.

Had he been thinking of Sin when he'd looked so serious and intense? Or perhaps he'd been worrying about the target that he'd pinned to his own chest the moment he'd found out about Connors' secrets?

It could have been either of the two back then but now Carhart had no idea what could be bothering his phenomenally secretive friend. He didn't believe that Emilio's reinstatement evaluation with Vivienne later that morning would darken Emilio's gaze in that manner, especially when Emilio seemed quite unconcerned with the whole affair.

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So what could it be? What could cause that look of displeasure-- that narrowed-eyed and shadowed expression?

"What?" Carhart asked when Emilio just looked into his eyes.

Emilio shrugged his broad shoulders and his mouth turned down even more, his shoulders tense. "Nothin'."

Carhart shrugged, trying not to become too preoccupied with his former partner's peculiarities but as soon as he looked away he felt Emilio's gaze return.

"You could have her if you want her," Emilio said finally in a dull, flat voice. "I wouldn't care."

The comment startled Carhart so much that he paused before dumping the broken glass into the trash. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Emilio continued to stare at him, his gaze hawk-like and intense just like his son's. "Don't lie to me, Zachary. I was watching y'all. I don't give a shit so just stop frontin'. It gets old."

Carhart dumped the bloody shards into the trash with a clatter. "It was a default male response to having an attractive and half-naked woman in front of me who happened to reek of sex. I'm not trying to infringe on your territory."

Emilio scoffed and got up finally, unashamedly naked and facing Carhart without an ounce of bashfulness in his frame. His body was powerful yet sleek in the dim light of the room, his seemingly naturally tanned skin smoothing over the hard muscles of his body like caramel, the impressive length of his dick hanging between his thighs even as Emilio made no effort to cover himself.

"I don't get territorial over random bitches."

Carhart made a face and looked away. "Then why have you had her here on more than one occasion?"

Emilio shrugged and after a pause, grabbed a pair of boxer briefs that fit snug against his body. "She reminds me of someone I know. A girl from 4FF."

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"Ah." Carhart looked at Emilio and raised an eyebrow. "Someone you actually cared about?"

"Someone I fucked over," Emilio corrected with little inflection, although his eyes narrowed.

"Well that can be a number of people on a long list," Carhart scoffed in a more judgmental tone than was necessary. He didn't know why that was except for the fact that the entire conversation-- the entire situation, was increasingly annoying to him.

Emilio's dead silence spoke volumes and when Carhart looked over again, Emilio was staring at him with a hard and angry expression, his eyes flashing and jaw clenched. "Fuck you, General Carhart."

Carhart said nothing in response and Emilio turned away, stalking into the bathroom angrily. Carhart stared at the door and before he could even turn away, it opened with a slam against the wall and Emilio reappeared, still in his boxers and looking even more pissed off.

"You're a real condescending motherfucker, you know that?" Emilio demanded, stalking towards Carhart as his eyes glittered furiously. "Don't you fucking dare talk down to me about ruining people's lives, you fucking hypocrite. Who are you to judge me?"

Carhart stared at him evenly, not entirely surprised by the reaction. "Well--"

"Well, nothing," Emilio barked, his mouth twisted in a sneer. "You're going to judge me about shit I've done but what about you, huh? What about great fucking General Carhart who slaps collars on men to keep them in control and locks them in a cage when they're bad? What about General Carhart who fucking rats out his allegedly closest friend to Connors and could have gotten me fucking killed?"

Carhart scowled and crossed his arms over his chest defensively. "I didn't rat you out, Emilio."

"You fucking did!" Emilio shouted, shoving Carhart furiously, causing the other man to stumble backwards a step. Carhart grit his teeth and forced himself not to react, although anger began to seep into him slowly.

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"Even after all of your bitching about how I didn't trust you to tell you during all of these years-- when you realized it was me down in Mexico you went fucking running to Connors and Vivienne with the information."

Carhart looked away, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes briefly as frustration started to mix with the anger. "It wasn't intentional. I planned to just look into it myself but when I enlisted an R&D agent to help me investigate, Connors noticed it and demanded why we were looking into information around Monterrey. He had red flags and notifications for any data collected from that area because of that whole fuck up mission of Sin and Boyd's," he explained tightly. "I had no choice but to tell him."

Emilio's breath hissed between his teeth as he made a sound of disgust. "You had no choice. More like you have no fucking backbone. I guess it's a good thing Connors got capped before he could send another hit squad on me," he said coldly.

Carhart's looked at the other man sharply but when Emilio just glared hostilely, Carhart shook his head. "What would you have had me do?"

"I would have had you fucking be a real friend and stop using them as an excuse for the fucked up shit you did to my son and that you fucking almost did to me," Emilio growled, clenching his hands into fists and finally looking away. "And you wonder why my attitude towards you has been so fucking different since I got back? It's because the Zachary I knew is dead and this General-Carhart-so-faithful-to-the-Agency shitbag is in his place."

"That is not true." Carhart combed his fingers through his hair although he had to look away for a moment as he realized that from Emilio's perspective, it probably was true. But from his own point of view, he was just surviving and trying to do the best he could to not be completely consumed by the Agency in the process.

"It is," Emilio replied stonily. "You act like you were never my fucking smoking buddy, my drinking buddy, the only person I ever really fucking trusted-- you're just some by the book Agency bitch now and I can't stand it but I guess I shouldn't be so surprised. I could see glimmers of it even back then," he added bitterly.

Confusion clouded Carhart's expression and he shook his head. "What the hell are you on about now?"

Emilio speared him with a withering glare. "You don't remember the last thing you said to me? The last conversation we had before I disappeared?"

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A distinct feeling of discomfort tightened Carhart's chest, clenched his stomach, and he narrowed his eyes at Emilio but said nothing.

"You said," Emilio started, walking closer to Carhart until he was right in his face. He glared up at Carhart challengingly, as if daring him to dispute it. "You said if I ever mentioned the shit that went down in Brighton, you'd fucking write me off completely, that our friendship was over."

Carhart didn't flinch away but he still said nothing.

"After everything we went through," Emilio went on, his lips turning down in a frown as his eyebrows drew together over his pale green eyes. "You was just gonna give me the big fuck you over an undercover mission that completely fucked with both of our heads. Just 'cause you wanna put on a certain act for the Agency-- just 'cause you want them to think you're a certain way. Because that shit was more important."

"This discussion is over," Carhart said finally, his voice cold and unyielding. He turned away from Emilio, his body tense and movements stiff.

"Our friendship is over," Emilio retorted in a black, hateful tone.

Carhart faltered and he looked at Emilio uncertainly, some of the cold resolution dissipating in the face of such a claim. "You don't mean that."

"I do." Emilio didn't look happy about it, though. There was no sarcasm in his tone, no sense that he was making light of the situation, no sign of his joker persona. His face was etched with disappointment and his pale green eyes actually looked pained. "I fucking hate you for turning out this way."

"What do you want from me!" Carhart demanded with an angry shout, gesturing his hands helplessly. "They wanted to either dump Sin in the incinerator or fucking keep him locked in a box forever. I only suggested the collar so he could live-- so he could be free-- so they'd give him another chance! I know how wrong it is but what the fuck else could I do, Emilio? I know you think he's better off dead but I'm fucking sorry, I value his life more than that and I think in the end, he's turned out okay."

Emilio didn't have a retort to that so he said instead, "That may be true, but you're still a spineless little bitch who has to put on a front so everyone will keep scraping down to great General Carhart who is so fucking respectable and perfect and never went into deep cover at Brighton and--"

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This time it was Carhart who shoved Emilio backwards. "Shut the fuck up, Emilio!"

Emilio laughed at him darkly, his eyes narrowed in distaste. "You can't even stand to hear it, you fucking pussy. You're so pathetic, I seriously just want to fucking kill you and put you out of your stupid pathetic misery for caring so much about what the Agency thinks. I should make a big banner that says General Zachary Carhart modified his cover and--"

Carhart's fist slammed into Emilio's face before he even gave himself the chance to seriously think through the action and before he knew it, they were rolling around in his living room, fighting and effectively wrecking the place.

It wasn't anything that hadn't happened dozens of times in their past-- Emilio had the ability to bring the worst out of Carhart and make him respond more furiously than any person Carhart had ever met. Emilio had an uncanny way of making his temper flare out of control quickly and dangerously but in the past despite any physical confrontation, it was usually just out of frustration and they'd never really tried to hurt each other permanently.

This time didn't appear to be any different.

They hit each other, but not hard enough to seriously injure and even when Emilio chomped down hard on Carhart's ear with his teeth, Carhart slammed his elbow into Emilio's chest instead of his throat which would have been more painful for the other man.

Emilio released Carhart and stumbled back, rubbing his chest with a scowl as Carhart scrambled backwards and glared at his former partner as he breathed heavily from the scuffle.

"You're a dick," Carhart managed finally, narrowing his eyes at Emilio.

"Well, so are you," Emilio retorted, still tense and appearing ready to fight but after a moment of staring at each other, he seemed to deflate and just leaned against the wall, bringing his hands up to cover his face briefly.

Carhart reached up to gingerly touch his ear and noted that it was actually bleeding although at least it was still entirely intact. He glared at Emilio but when the other man

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continued to stand against the wall in a nearly defeated manner, as if he was giving up on the situation, some of Carhart's doubt returned.

Despite everything, despite the fact that Emilio pissed him off and deliberately goaded him into situations like the one that was occurring, Carhart couldn't forget that Emilio had been the one to breathe life back into him when Carhart's entire life had been bleak and empty after the deaths of his wife and child.

He couldn't forget that in his own way, Emilio had been his best friend and Carhart especially couldn't forget that in the very mission that Emilio was talking about, the mission that caused so much distress in Carhart because of the things he'd done and witnessed in Brighton Community Prison during their seven month long undercover operation-- Emilio had saved Carhart's life on more than one occasion.

"I'm sorry for everything," Carhart said finally, when he'd caught his breath again. "But you did what you had to do to survive and I do what I have to do. I may seem like a spineless coward to you but I would never intentionally hurt you and especially not Hsin."

Emilio dropped his hands finally and he looked at Carhart queerly but didn't reply.

"The means... the means I use are harsh, and can be problematic, but in a place like the Agency," Carhart tried to explain, shaking his head and wincing slightly. "In a place like the Agency, after being here for twenty years, the ends always justify the means, even if the means are considered deplorable by society's standards. You should know that, Emilio. You more than anyone."

This time Emilio frowned uncertainly and didn't bother trying to hide that from Carhart. He didn't brush off the comments, or the fact that something akin to regret made its way into his formerly harsh expression. He was being real with Carhart and Carhart appreciated that fact.

"You're right," Emilio said finally, almost dejectedly. "I'm a hypocritical dumb fuck just like you."

Carhart made a face. "Thanks."

They looked at each other silently for a moment and Emilio turned away finally, holding his shoulder which was likely sore from where it'd slammed against the edge of the coffee table when Carhart tackled him. "You're still a poser, though."

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Carhart glared at Emilio and continued glaring even after Emilio once again slammed the bathroom door shut. Carhart could only imagine what the agent who lived below him was thinking about the variety of bangs and shouts that had begun to occur since Emilio's arrival.

===

Vivienne's office was pristine and remained almost completely unchanged from the moment she'd made it hers over a decade ago. The same low-lying desk sat in the same position; spotless, with necessary items perfectly in order. The bookshelves behind her only held a few more books than before but otherwise looked untouched. The floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall remained so clean that they almost seemed invisible; it almost seemed as though the floor simply ended and a gaping hole opened up to the half-destroyed city beyond.

The only difference today was that Aisha had replaced the single chair in front of the desk with two, one each for Carhart and Emilio.

As Vivienne watched them, her back was straight and her fingers were interlaced as her hands rested on her desk. Despite the relatively hot day, she wore a skirt suit as usual. Today, her black jacket drew in at the waist with a thin silver belt, a turquoise blouse peeking out from beneath as she shifted. Her pale blond hair was pulled back in a low-lying bun and she wore the same subdued makeup as usual; just enough to enhance her ice blue eyes and her full lips which were currently tightened slightly, but not enough to be distracting.

Her expression was as utterly unreadable as ever; that same cool mask that sometimes seemed less alive than a statue's. She studied Emilio closely, flicking along the entire length of him dismissively before settling on his face. Not a hint of her thoughts made it to her eyes or body language; she would probably make a phenomenal poker player with how little she gave away.

Emilio just stared back, a smirk twitching at the corners of his well-formed mouth as though he found something incredibly funny about the entire situation or perhaps about Vivienne herself.

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Carhart couldn't help narrowing his eyes at Emilio slightly, willing his former partner to take the situation more seriously and not fuck himself over by being as disrespectful as he'd been on his first meeting with Vivienne.

The General had warned Emilio not to speak unless Vivienne specifically addressed him and not to be sarcastic if that were to happen, not to ogle her just for the sake of being obnoxious and not to, for the love of God, make references to drugs and alcohol.

In essence-- Carhart had told Emilio not to be himself.

He had a strong feeling that Emilio would do the exact opposites just for the sake of being a royal pain in the ass.

"As you can see," Carhart started as he nodded toward the computer monitor. "He passed all of his final training tests with flying colors."

Vivienne's gaze did not so much as flicker toward the screen; she was watching the two of them intently but as soon as Carhart spoke, she focused on him. "He passed the tests but did not pass all the training," she corrected evenly. "He received a poor evaluation in department."

Carhart nodded, having expected her to mention that. "This is true. However I know firsthand that even though he would not comply with department training,--"

"Maybe because I don't need it?" Emilio asked rhetorically, his eyebrows lowering over his pale green eyes as if the mention of the attitude adjustment classes offended him.

"--his personality is adaptable and he can change aspects of it depending on the situation at hand," Carhart continued as if the other man had not spoken.

Although Vivienne's eyes did not narrow, her gaze intensified slightly on Carhart. She seemed to have ignored Emilio entirely. "Is this current information or are you basing it on your interaction or personal opinion from his previous employment with the Agency?"

"I'm basing it on the fact that we were partners for a number of years," the General replied calmly. "And we were assigned to numerous missions that required undercover activity. What you see is what he wants you to see and if he wants us to see a clown, he will act like one. However, his capabilities aren't limited to that."

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"That is fortunate, as we have little need for an insubordinate child who cannot be serious even to his superiors," Vivienne said coolly.

Her ice blue eyes shifted to Emilio and narrowed slightly in distaste; she scrutinized him and paused very briefly, probably taking into consideration what Carhart had said. She addressed Emilio directly when she spoke. "Even if you are capable of being a phenomenal actor, I have no use for you if you cannot be trusted to take orders. Can you?"

Emilio smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. "If you don't think you can trust me, why would you expect me to answer that truthfully?"

She did not break eye contact and did not move, although the brief silence that passed made it unclear whether she was weighing his response or if she was simply unsurprised by the answer. "It is not your place to ask questions; it is your place to answer. I suggest you begin doing so when you are spoken to by your superior or I may yet deem your existence unnecessary."

Emilio scoffed softly. "If that's supposed to scare me into submission, it don't. I don't kiss anyone's ass. If that makes me unnecessary, oh well, go ahead and deem it."

Vivienne watched Emilio for another long moment before she finally looked away, reaching toward the computer's touch screen and selecting a link to the side. She pulled it into the center of the screen and it expanded, revealing a list from Emilio's medical records.

"You have a lengthy history of dissent and a criminal record that exceeds many of the hostiles we deal with on a regular basis," Vivienne said briskly. "In addition, your medical records indicate an extensive history of narcotics and alcohol in your bloodstream."

She pressed her finger on one of the more recent lines, which expanded into notations from a doctor regarding the amount of cocaine in Emilio's system at the time of the report. She did not look at the screen, however; she watched Emilio instead. "Even at the point that you cooperated with your apprehension, knowing full well in advance that you would be returning to the Agency, you had cocaine in your system. I did not locate concrete proof that your addiction affected missions in the past; however, I find it questionable that it would not interfere with anything."

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Carhart didn't say anything but he did look at Emilio, awaiting his response. He was thankful that Emilio just nodded and appeared serious this time.

"It depends on what you count as interference," Emilio said with a shrug, studying what he could see of the computer and his profile. "I smoke pot and I snort coke but I don't do it on missions and I don't have a dependence more than a dirty habit. If I let it be more than that, my reflexes and response time would be shot."

He paused for barely a moment before adding, "I really don't like that picture of me. Can we do it over?"

Vivienne ignored the question, watching Emilio. "You have not been on missions for nearly twenty years," she pointed out. "Your dependence could have changed in the interim without you specifically being aware of it. Are you basing your assertion on the time with your gang as well?"

"It's not a gang," he retorted, making a face. "We didn't exactly get into scuffles over street turf and shit. It's a highly organized smuggling group that dealt with major players internationally. Now how would I run such a group if I was a complete fuck-up? I would have gotten dethroned by my own men or killed by a competitor."

Vivienne seemed to consider the response, her gaze flicking briefly across Emilio's face as if determining whether he was lying. "According to the Intel I have thus far been advised of, your second-in-command has not yet mentioned dissension among the ranks or any issues regarding your cover," she observed after a brief moment. "Do you believe this will remain true and you will be able to retain your position as leader despite your absence?"

Emilio narrowed his eyes slightly and reached up to rub one stubble-covered cheek. The question seemed to irritate him but the irritation didn't seem directed at her and Carhart theorized that the idea of betrayal was what irked the senior Vega. As of now, 4FF believed the agents who'd apprehended Emilio were feds and he was sitting in a prison in America. It was entirely possible, at least to Carhart, that someone else would eventually try to take over.

"My men are loyal," Emilio said finally, looking back at her. "But they're still human. If my cover isn't modified in the next couple of years, loyalties might change and you'd lose your connec' to one of the biggest smuggling groups in the underground if they don't see me on a more frequent basis."

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"You are proposing an extended undercover mission in the future to reconnect with your group? Or is this a proposal for short visits between regular missions?" Vivienne clarified, her tone even and not giving away what she thought either way.

Emilio shrugged, still staring out the window with slightly narrowed eyes as if he were going over different scenarios in his mind. "Short, more frequent visits would make more sense with the occasional prolonged stay. But I'd need a good cover as to why I can't be there all the time no more."

Vivienne leaned back slightly in her chair, an unreadable gaze trained on Emilio as her eyes narrowed slightly in thought. Even so, she seemed to be taking the information in and the cool displeasure she'd shown earlier in the conversation was currently absent. She rested her interlocked hands on her lap. "And you believe the current cover would withstand scrutiny for approximately two years before it must be changed?" She seemed to be verifying the information as she understood it, judging by her tone.

Emilio returned his gaze to Vivienne and shrugged again. "My people fear me but they also respect me and the heart of the crew knew me before the Agency did. It would take time for them to want to fuck up that bond, and they know if I wanted to, I could have them all murdered even from jail with the connections I got. I've left 4FF up to my second before, once for over a year, and the notion of dissent never came up. After two or three years... well, people might start getting ideas if they think I'm never comin' back."

Carhart considered that silently, his mind automatically supplying different alternatives to Emilio's cover but he didn't say any of them out loud. He was hesitant to interrupt the first surprisingly serious dialogue that Emilio had had with Vivienne since he'd arrived at the Agency. Carhart suspected it was mostly because the topic was Emilio's pet project, 4FF. Whatever the case, the General was pleased that Emilio wasn't putting on his joker routine.

"That will be taken into consideration." Vivienne said with a curt nod, then paused briefly. "What of your other contacts? Thus far, your information regarding Di Zhi has been successful but we will not be revealing to them that the Emilio Vega they knew is alive. However, will they continue to supply information to your 4FF identity if they believe you are in federal prison?"

"For sure," he replied without hesitation. "They get 80% of their merch from 4FF. Even if they decided to try goin' to someone else, it'd take them a long ass time to find someone else with the resources and even longer to find someone they'd trust."

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She nodded again and studied Emilio at length, leaned forward and resting her forearms on the desk in front of her once more. "In effect, you speak of loyalty with both groups. One would assume that, with your history of antagonism toward authority and having escaped termination, after returning to a group that you yourself have noted predated your involvement with the Agency, you would have wanted to stay there. Instead, you cooperated and returned to the Agency."

Vivienne raised her eyebrows slightly. "I have read your statements regarding your response; that you wanted to return anyway but did not feel safe until Connors was gone." She trailed off leadingly, clearly waiting for Emilio to respond.

He stared at her. "Point being?"

"Such a statement would imply your primary loyalty is to the Agency, above even previous," she paused very slightly, using Emilio's own term, "bonds."

Carhart couldn't help agreeing with the undertones of the statement; he often wondered who Emilio actually allied himself with, especially since Emilio implied indirectly that he'd really only come back because of Sin. Carhart didn't have problems with that-- in fact he found it admirable that Emilio had grown that much as a person and cared enough about his son even though he tried to pretend he didn't. But for the Agency that wasn't enough because that meant Emilio's loyalty to the Agency didn't exist.

"It does," Emilio said easily and if Carhart didn't know any better, he'd swear the other man was being honest. "With 4FF I'm making money but believe it or not, even if I'm kind of a douche-- I always did have a thing for playing hero and fighting for a greater good and shit."

Vivienne quirked an eyebrow slightly and there was a flash in her ice blue eyes that made it clear that she found that difficult to believe. However, the expression was not overt and she didn't immediately comment on it.

Instead, she asked calmly, "What of Hsin Liu Vega?"

"What of him?" Emilio replied, his tone unimpressed.

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"Clearly, you have had no qualms with leaving your son to the Agency for nearly twenty years," Vivienne observed, watching Emilio steadily. "However, would you lead me to believe you have no loyalty toward your family at all?"

Emilio smirked again, with half his mouth. "You answered your own question, babe."

Carhart kept his expression completely neutral, knowing that Emilio was lying through his perfect teeth and not doing a thing to expose it. What Vivienne would see as a flaw, Carhart saw as one of the best aspects of Emilio's personality that he'd seen in the entire time he'd known the man.

Vivienne's expression turned a hint colder at the usage of the word 'babe.' "You will not use that term with me again," she informed Emilio coldly.

She did not give Emilio a chance to respond before he continued, "So when he is terminated for failing a mission or otherwise becoming a liability, it will not bother you." Vivienne said it as a calm statement of fact but it was clear she expected a response, her ice blue eyes scrutinizing Emilio.

"It will bother me as much as it will bother you when Boyd dies tragically 'cause he ain't level 10 material," Emilio agreed with a wink.

Her eyes narrowed and although her expression didn't specifically change, there was tension in the brief silence that passed, as if she were irritated or otherwise displeased. She leaned back in her chair, her head tilted forward and gaze intense on Emilio.

"And your other son?"

Carhart went cold and his gaze jerked to Emilio automatically as his heart skipped a beat. He'd always wondered if Emilio had ever found out about his other child and judging from the look on Emilio's face, it was safe to say he hadn't.

Emilio's green eyes narrowed and his full lips curled down into a frown, his expression skeptical even as a flicker of something darker glinted in his eyes. "Say again?"

"So you truly were unaware," Vivienne observed, tone cool with a hint of something undefinable; yet her gaze was emotionless as she watched him.

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"What the fuck are you talking about?" Emilio demanded flatly as he shifted in his chair, shoulders tense.

"Gemini Perry had a son," Vivienne said calmly.

Emilio shook his head as if dismissing the claim. "She aborted it. She told me she did."

"Then apparently your wife lied to you."

There was a long silence and Carhart had to look away from Emilio's face for a moment, had to focus on Vivienne instead because her cool countenance helped to ground him unlike the brewing storm behind Emilio's vivid green eyes.

The General couldn't help feeling the nagging burn of guilt over the fact that he'd known this since their youth and had never told Emilio. He'd rationalized it as thinking there was a good reason the Agency had kept it secret all along or telling himself that Emilio wouldn't care anyway but judging by Emilio's obvious anger, he clearly would have appreciated being told.

"Well then she's a cunt," Emilio said finally, loathing for Gemini oozing off his words.

"You seem unusually agitated for someone who claims to not care about his family," Vivienne observed. She shifted in her chair as she crossed one leg over the other, placing her interlocked fingers on her knee.

It was not clear from her voice what she thought about this, but the way her gaze intensified and the way she did not seem overtly displeased seemed telling to Carhart, who had been around her long enough to be able to read some parts of her expressions.

He almost got the feeling that the undefinable emotion from before had been some sense of satisfaction due to how Emilio was so caught off guard. Of course, it was possible he was misinterpreting this and he was reading emotions in her statue-like expression that didn't exist.

"I don't appreciate being lied to," Emilio snapped, glaring at her and then casting a suspicious glare at the silent Carhart. "That doesn't mean I have a desire to go play daddy to some kid I never knew existed before now. For all I know he's a fucking moron just like his cunt mother."

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"You have no desire to see either of them at all, regardless of the current status of their lives, no matter how terrible it may be?" Vivienne's eyebrows raised just slightly. "Even were you to have the chance to, I believe your term was 'play hero,' and save them?"

Emilio rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest again. "If you're waiting for some kind of reaction that will prove I'm more loyal to whoever for whatever rather than the Agency, it's gonna be a long wait so stop wasting my time with these stupid questions."

"Do not presume to tell me what to do," Vivienne said coldly, staring evenly at Emilio. She continued speaking as if her reprimand had been part of normal conversation. "Your marriage to Gemini Perry occurred shortly prior to your recruitment to the Agency. Given her profession and the fact that you married her in Las Vegas, you are saying that it was an unimportant decision on your part and that you feel no particular connection toward this woman or your son. That the reason you never divorced was due to simple laziness." She said it as a statement and paused, waiting for verification.

"It's got nothin' to do with laziness," he replied uncaringly, seeming to have lost interest in the subject now that his initial annoyance had faded. Although for all Carhart knew, Emilio could be feigning disinterest. "I never plan to get remarried so what's the point of getting divorced? Besides, it wasn't legal anyhow since I wasn't legally an adult yet."

Vivienne studied Emilio for a long moment before she looked over at the screen, closing down the list that was on the screen and returning it to the overview of Emilio's file.

"Even if you felt the need to contact them in the future," she informed Emilio calmly, "should any contact compromise the Agency, we would terminate you, the woman and son, and anyone else we deemed necessary."

"I'm so saddened by this decision that I cannot even begin to find the words to express the extent of my despair."

Carhart sighed and shook his head. Sometimes Emilio and Sin's sarcasm seemed to come from some genetically shared repertoire.

Vivienne seemed entirely unimpressed and she watched Emilio as if he were meaningless to her.

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"If he is to be reinstated," Carhart began, deciding that it was finally safe to get to that point, "is he going to be an official part of the unit or a regular field operative who provides a source of Intel?"

Vivienne watched them silently for a long moment, long enough that at first it seemed like she wasn't going to reply. There was no way of reading what she was thinking, not in her expression and not in the perfectly straight way she held herself; the way her fingers did not so much as twitch on her knee. The silence was disturbing in a way because Carhart wasn't certain what it meant and it seemed possible that she was still debating Emilio's fate, that there was still a chance he would be terminated.

But then she finally reached over and minimized the overview of Emilio's file. She met Carhart's gaze and responded to him, although it was clear she was also informing Emilio at the same time. "As of today, Emilio Vega is reinstated as an official level 10 field operative assigned to your unit. He is expected to provide the additional intelligence from the contacts that he has gained in his time away from the Agency and his cover will remain for his smuggling group until he is notified that it has changed. He is immediately available for missions and is no longer confined to the compound."

She speared Emilio with a calm but firm look, "This is predicated upon the assumption that he does not cause problems for the Agency. His location and status will be reconsidered the moment he becomes a liability or causes unnecessary attention to the Agency or its operations."

Emilio gave her the same unimpressed stare he'd already been gracing her with and shifted as though he were impatient to leave the office and be done with the entire meeting. He didn't seem intimidated by her or worried about the stipulation; if anything he just seemed like he wanted her to stop talking.

Carhart nodded briskly. "Understood. Is that all?"

"Yes." Vivienne was already turning to look away from them, her attention focusing on the computer as she reached out to touch the screen and pull up other files. "You are dismissed."

They left her office and Carhart watched Emilio closely as the other man strode past the outer lobby, not even bothering to stop and flirt with Aisha this time. Emilio's back was stiff and he was clenching and unclenching his hands repeatedly.

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Carhart was certain that Emilio was seething at the moment and he had no doubts that as soon as they hit the courtyard and escaped the watchful gaze of the cameras, the anger would once again be unleashed onto him. He spent the next several moments preparing himself for it but to his surprise, the outburst never came.

They left the Tower and Emilio just stuck a cigarette between his lips and sucked on it moodily as they walked across the compound. The silence was tense between them and it left Carhart feeling wary and mildly uncomfortable. Perhaps Emilio didn't realize that Carhart had known but instead of that being a relief, Carhart felt disturbed by the possibility. He wanted Emilio to know -- he didn't want to move on with a charade of playing ignorant.

"I found out about Damian before our mission to Brighton," Carhart said quietly, glancing at Emilio. "Remember that day-- well you probably don't. But it was when I was with Bree."

Emilio didn't react strongly; he lifted his shoulders. "Great."

"I wanted to tell you," Carhart added. "But I didn't know what to do."

Emilio didn't respond immediately and they kept walking. The weather was surprisingly pleasant and for the first time in years the sunshine was strong enough to warm Carhart's face. It was a weird feeling and it almost disturbed him to think of it in terms of the decades that had passed since the bombs, since the war.

He was getting old.

A cloud of smoke fogged out in front of them as Emilio exhaled and finally looked over at Carhart. "I could tell you knew, by the way. Those baby blues don't hide guilt so well."

Carhart frowned slightly and stopped walking. There weren't very many people around them and he wanted the moment to talk candidly without their lips being read and expressions analyzed by whoever would be watching the tapes of their conversation. "You're not angry?"

Emilio frowned slightly and took another drag of his cigarette but this time as Carhart breathed in some of the smoke, he realized that it wasn't solely nicotine in the stick. "Not really. It don't matter. That kid ain't like it was with Hsin. He has a mom-- she was a gogo dancer but still a good lady even if she hated my ass after the first week. He don't need someone like me."

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Carhart nodded slightly and he couldn't help the curiosity that forced its way to the surface about a topic he'd always been intrigued by. "So this Gemini-- she must have been something special for you to marry her."

Smoke poured out from Emilio's lips as he studied the General with slightly narrowed eyes, as if he were analyzing Carhart's expression and tone, trying to figure out if he was speaking frankly or holding anything back. After a short pause, Emilio just looked away but not before a disappointed scowl sunk his mouth.

"Not really. She was hot but nothing special. Typical white girl shit with big breasts and a tramp stamp. I was drunker than usual and she was stoned out of her mind and we decided that gettin' married would be hysterical. 'Course the next morning I let her know the real deal and she didn't like that too much. I gave her my cell phone number but she only used it to let me know she was aborting my kid."

Carhart scratched the back of his head and looked away from Emilio. "Beautiful story. Obviously that was one of the great romances of the century."

Emilio nodded and sucked on his cigarette, speaking around it, "Jane Austen woulda loved that shit."

A chuckle escaped Carhart's mouth and they began walking again. "And you really don't want to see this guy? He's probably another clone of you just like Sin."

Emilio just shrugged noncommittally and changed the subject in his typical abrupt fashion, latching on to Carhart's last word instead. "Why the fuck does everyone call him that?"

"What?" Carhart raised an eyebrow at Emilio. "Sin?"

Emilio just made a face as if he should be obvious what he was talking about.

Carhart shrugged. "I don't know. I guess... he never objected and it just sticks in my mind now."

There was another brief silence between the two before Emilio shrugged and seemed to slip back into carefree, or pretend carefree, mode. "Well Sin sounds cooler, anyhow."

"Obviously his top priority," Carhart replied dryly.

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Emilio scoffed and flicked his cigarette butt away before shoving his hands in the pockets of his black leather jacket. "Well he ain't got shit else going for him these days."

Carhart's eyes flicked down to the ground briefly as his lips turned down into a frown. He couldn't really argue with that.

Forfeit

Boyd paused at the corner of the hallway, holding his breath briefly as he flattened against the wall and listened closely. He didn't dare peek around for fear of alerting anyone to his presence. He waited just long enough to be sure he didn't hear anything before he moved into the cross hallway and, with a quick glance searching for enemies, he swiftly headed toward the next intersection.

He was wary of the armed security guards, especially since there were double the amount that the Agency had expected and Boyd didn't know how long Sin would be able to distract them without backup.

An anonymous tip sent to the local law enforcement alleged that a businessman, Henry Schafer, was laundering money and funding insurgent activities from inside the City. The police had forwarded the claim to a federal agency but the Agency's R&D staff had intercepted the investigation and locked other organizations out. The anonymous tip had been vague and there'd been a chance that it wasn't even credible but the fact that a possible insurgent connection was so close to the Agency's location had prompted them to immediately dig deeper.

With further research, the R&D agents discovered that Schafer was sending funds abroad but at first they couldn't determine where. When consulted, Thierry said that Schafer was known to fund insurgent organizations; he had funded Revolution in its early stages and had been involved in a number of other groups. He was a high profile man, as he had worked in politics in the past and most people were unaware of where his money went.

Thierry also mentioned that there was some tension between Schafer and the leaders of Revolución, who Schafer had been showing increasing dissatisfaction with. Because

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he had funded them in his earlier days, Schafer felt entitled to influence the way the organization was run. He wanted their moves to become more aggressive but the leaders of the Révolution disagreed.

According to Thierry, the issue had become heated and intense and he theorized that it was possible that Schafer's constant, open disagreement with the leaders of Révolution had inspired some of the younger members to eventually break away.

With Thierry's information, R&D discovered that Schafer had turned to funding the *Nouvelle Ligue des Jésuites* after they'd broken off from *Révolution* a year earlier. He was likely one large reason the group had grown stronger in the past few months, to the point that they were becoming more of a serious threat than *Revolución*.

The mission had been fairly straightforward-- retrieve data from the location which would contain information including contacts, account numbers and personal information that were stored regarding NLJ and the variety of other domestic insurgent leaders that Schafer worked with.

The plan had been to head straight toward Schafer's office on the sixteenth floor, which was supposed to have a high security entrance to another wing nearby, and download everything they could on the computers in that area. Along with that, Boyd and Sin were ordered to bring Schafer back to the Agency where he would be interrogated and used as an informant.

There was an echo of gunfire somewhere below him and Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly.

When they'd arrived at the location, they'd gathered relatively quickly that there were more than double the amount of hostiles inside than Intel had anticipated.

A quick change of plans turned Sin into a distraction for the guards as Boyd entered the building undetected. Without a distraction, the guards would be able to flood the high security wing once it was breached and protect both Schafer and the Intel.

The plan seemed to be working so far. Considering the amount of hostiles they'd seen on the lower floors, it was very lightly guarded on the higher floors, probably because most of the guards had rushed down when Sin started attacking.

Cameras were arranged throughout the building and although Boyd slunk through the shadows cautiously, his identity hidden by a mask and gloves, he was still paranoid that someone would be watching. The concern seemed unfounded after a while-- the only

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guards he ran into didn't seem to be specifically looking for him. If anything, they seemed surprised that the intruder on the lower floors had a partner.

Sin was playing his role very well but Boyd had no idea how long he'd be able to keep it up before being forced to retreat.

The thought made Boyd look around quickly and say quietly over the radio, "What's your status?"

There was a pause before Sin replied curtly, "There is heavy resistance."

The answer was unsurprising so Boyd didn't respond; he knew Sin would be able to handle it.

Boyd moved through the hallway silently and paused at another corner. He could hear movement as someone headed toward the intersection; he listened closely and could tell it was only one set of footsteps, not more. He slid the tranquilizer gun out of his back holster and held his breath then waited just until the person cleared the corner before he casually pivoted around the corner and shot the man straight in the neck.

The guard looked startled and didn't have the chance to do anything more than grunt before the high potency drug raced through his system, rendering him unconscious. Boyd caught the guard as he crumpled and then set him carefully on the floor.

Boyd looked around to see if anyone had heard but thankfully the hallway was empty. He searched quickly until he found an unlocked door to an empty room. He dragged the guard into the room, then shut the door behind him as he left.

"How much longer can you hold?" Boyd quietly asked over the radio as he continued down the hallway as if he hadn't been interrupted.

The response was even slower this time and when it finally came, Sin's only words were, "Just do what you have to do."

"Copy," Boyd said and quickened his pace.

He headed down another hallway toward a different stairwell. He had to keep pausing at intersections, waiting with a pounding heart and bated breath each time to see if anyone was coming. As he rose through the floors he had to take out three more guards, each time getting them before they could alert others.

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It took him longer than he wanted to reach Schafer's office. As the decoder diligently worked, he kept glancing up and down the hall, the ski mask scratchy and uncomfortable against his skin each time he turned his head.

When the lock opened on the door, Boyd went into the office immediately. He shut the door behind him and glanced around quickly; the place was empty with a closed door in the back and a desk to the side. Boyd didn't even look at that computer; he knew none of the files he needed would be on it.

There was another pass code Boyd had to break on the second door. It took another few tense seconds but in the end the lock was compromised. An empty hallway and several closed doors appeared before him as he made his way into the secured wing beyond.

He went into the first room to the right and, after checking to be sure there wasn't additional security, he went to the computer. It took him a moment to break the computer's password but after a short time, he was able to reach the desktop.

Boyd wasn't certain exactly which files to save, since it was unlikely Schafer was going to name them anything like 'Rebel Group Contact List,' so he started downloading both hard drives.

"I'm in," Boyd whispered into the comm unit as he watched the window pop up, informing him that it would be twelve minutes. "I've started downloading and will check the other rooms."

The response was so delayed that it gave Boyd pause but just as he started to speak again, Sin said in a slightly strained voice, "You should be clear for egress."

Boyd hesitated briefly, eyes narrowed even though Sin couldn't see him. "What's wrong?"

There was the faint sound of the beginnings of a word on Sin's end before it was cut off by an explosion of gunfire and a clattering sound followed by several seconds of silence.

There was another long pause before Sin finally answered gruffly, "I'm wounded."

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Boyd was mildly surprised that Sin had actually said anything; typically, he tried to hide any such information until later. "How bad?" he asked automatically.

The response came amidst the sound of a door closing quietly on Sin's end as he replied impatiently, "Just do what you're doing."

Although it wasn't good that Sin had been hurt, it didn't worry Boyd too much. Sin had stormed bases while wounded before and it had barely slowed his pace. They had a first aid kit in the van so they could handle any quick patch ups and anything that required more attention could be dealt with at the Agency which was only an hour away.

Boyd left the flash drive downloading and quietly walked across the room, peering out into the hallway briefly to make sure no one was around before he entered the hall to investigate the rest of the wing. He went to the next room, unsurprised to find that it was a nearly identical office that held another computer.

He went down the hall, noting four other computers and a room at the end that had several large filing cabinets that Boyd suspected had information the Agency would find quite useful.

The wing seemed to be built with almost obnoxious symmetry; each office was exactly the same size and set up just like the one across the hall from it. He was just opening one of the filing cabinets when he heard the soft click of a door. He whipped around just in time to see Henry Schafer leaving the room across the hall with an armful of files.

Schafer's expression froze in shock when he saw Boyd.

Even as Boyd started to shift, panic must have taken over for Schafer because he suddenly threw the folders up in a spray of scattered paper and took off running.

Boyd cursed under his breath and ran after him, having to jump over the folders that Schafer dropped. Schafer disappeared through the door to the main office and Boyd had to run into the smaller office long enough to yank the flash drive out before he continued the pursuit.

He made it to the hallway just in time to see Schafer disappearing around a corner and, shoving the flash drive in his pocket, Boyd sprinted after him. Schafer was fast but Boyd had been training hard for months and his speed and stamina had increased

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dramatically. He was slowly gaining on Schafer, who was either trying to shake Boyd by taking sudden and random turns or who was lost in his panic.

Boyd knew it was only a matter of minutes before Schafer notified his guards so he pulled out the tranquilizer gun and tried to train it on the man but each time he got a good line of sight for a shot, Schafer suddenly took another corner.

"I'm in pursuit," Boyd said into the comm unit as he and Schafer entered a longer hallway. "Meet me at the east entrance in ten."

The reply was delayed and when it came, Sin's voice was noticeably lower. "I can't."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down as uneasiness and confusion moved within him. Schafer was slowing down slightly but not enough to make a noticeable difference. "Why not?"

"Egress points are blocked." Sin's sentences came out in short bursts, his breathing labored as he grit out each sentence. "Bleeding out."

Alarm made Boyd's eyes widen and heart beat faster as a chill went through him. He nearly missed a step as the severity of the situation hit him.

Sin was telling him that the wound was fatal. He was saying he wasn't going to make it out.

Fear eclipsed everything else and Boyd immediately slid to a stop, turning and sprinting back in the direction he'd come; there was a stairwell not too far away that he could use.

He didn't care that he hadn't gotten much downloaded, that the files he'd started to retrieve may have been corrupted in the abrupt removal of the flash drive; he didn't care that Schafer had been in his sight and if he'd given himself a few more minutes, he probably would have been able to capture the target. He didn't care that the mission was going to fail.

"Where are you?" Boyd demanded and his gaze flicked around quickly as he passed an intersection; there were no guards in view.

"Just leave, Boyd," Sin grit out, his voice sounding more strained with every response. There were low sounds in the background that Boyd couldn't make out.

"I'm not going to leave you," Boyd said firmly, increasing his speed as he saw the stairwell ahead of him. He slid the tranquilizer gun under his belt and pulled out his

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semi-automatic, checking to make sure the safety was off. "You can tell me where you are or not but either way I'll come looking for you."

He could hear sounds on Sin's end and another man's voice; there were scuffling sounds and a resounding snap before silence fell again. Through it all Boyd could hear Sin's low, slightly labored breathing.

"Fuck," Sin hissed in his ear, frustrated. "The second floor," he bit out as the sound of a gun being reloaded echoed in the background. "The auditorium."

"I'm coming." Boyd began running so fast down the stairs that he was skipping several steps at a time, his gloved hand sliding along the railing as support so he could jump over at the bottom of each flight and land on the next set of stairs. He didn't care how much noise he was making or how visible he was in the process; he didn't have time for stealth.

He was just running past the eighth floor when gunfire suddenly erupted; he narrowly avoided a bullet as he turned a corner and ran down the flight of stairs. He could hear several sets of footsteps clambering down the stairs above him and he narrowed his eyes in annoyance, using the railing to jump even more sets of steps, his legs jarring with the impact each time.

"He's heading down past the seventh floor," one of the guards was saying, presumably into a comm unit. "Northwest stairwell."

"Damn it," Boyd growled under his breath, impatience and worry warring within him and leaving him completely uninterested in dealing with pursuit. It was going to be difficult to avoid, since the guards had seen him and it was more likely someone would be looking for him on the cameras now. There weren't cameras in the stairwell but there were in most of the hallways.

Sin's low voice came into Boyd's ear suddenly, his breathing still labored. "They're focusing on the ground floor and closing in." Sin fell quiet briefly before he continued, almost as if he'd heard Boyd's thoughts, "All exits are blocked on the first few floors. They're watching the cameras for me... they may see you."

"Got it," Boyd said quietly into the comm unit, taking the information into consideration as he tried to figure out how he was going to get down to Sin without getting caught himself.

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He counted the footsteps he could hear behind him as he ran and determined that there were probably three people chasing him, although it was hard to tell with the echoing. He only partially listened to the guards yelling updates into their comm units and as he passed the fifth landing, the door abruptly slammed open and two guards came running in. Boyd spun out of the way, narrowly avoiding a bullet to his chest and ducked down.

He was wearing a hard-plated bulletproof vest but even so, his heartbeat nearly tripped over itself in its speed and he immediately returned fire. The hostile went down but his companion didn't hesitate to aim at Boyd again.

He threw himself forward, slamming the guard back and down to the floor. The gun fired with a resounding echo as the man's hand went flying to the side to support himself, making the bullet go wide. Boyd could hear the others behind him reaching the landing above him, just about to turn the corner.

Boyd grunted in annoyance, having no choice but to sprint across the landing and continue running down the stairs. He couldn't afford to get in a fight with anyone if it was only going to allow the others to catch up.

He could hear curses behind him and he had no doubt that the guard he'd hit was joining the pursuit. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to make it all the way to the second floor, and even if he did they would be too close behind for him to realistically be able to run down a straight hallway without getting shot to death from behind. That was all assuming he wouldn't be killed the moment he stepped onto the heavily-guarded lower floors. He was pushing it even hoping the fourth floor wouldn't have the exits blocked.

Once he reached the next landing, he ran to the door rather than continue downstairs. He only had a brief second to check through the small window in the door to see that no one was there before he burst through. He shut the door as quietly but quickly as he could, hoping the guards' own echoing footsteps would keep them from realizing right away that he wasn't below them still. Without waiting to see if the ruse worked, he ran down a side hallway which would take him out of view of the door's window.

He considered where the auditorium was in relation to where he was now; although it was on the other side of the building, there was another stairwell he could try to utilize. There were also two elevator banks but there was no doubt that the security guards would be watching the elevators.

As he ran through the hall, he noticed dead bodies littered around; evidence of Sin's fight to keep the security guards distracted from the higher levels. As Boyd turned a

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corner, he nearly ran directly into another hostile. Boyd dodged immediately and threw himself into a crouch along the opposite wall, already drawing his weapon and shooting twice in a row.

The man staggered, eyes wide in surprise; he grunted as his back hit the wall and he slid down. Blood slowly dripped down the wall behind the man as his eyes glazed and he fell over.

Boyd grabbed the nearly full magazine from the man's gun as well as the man's comm unit, which he put in his other ear, making sure it was set so he couldn't transmit and would only receive.

In the distance, he could hear a door suddenly slam open followed by what sounded like a number of people running. Most likely, the guards in the stairwell had realized he'd gotten off on one of the floors and were now checking for him.

Boyd started to run again, trying to keep his footsteps as silent as possible in the process. It was difficult, with wide hallways that echoed every noise.

The guard's comm unit was silent in Boyd's ear which was actually good; it meant they didn't know for sure which floor Boyd was on, or they would have reported it to request back up. Even so, he had to get out of view of the cameras. If he'd known it was going to happen like this, he would have disabled them all immediately but they hadn't wanted to arouse any suspicion.

The layout of the floor was fresh in his mind from when he'd studied the blueprints and he headed straight for a wing that he knew was close by. Judging by the number of bodies littering the floor, Sin had taken care of a good portion of the security, which was lucky because Boyd probably wouldn't have made it through the floor on his own.

He couldn't hear the pursuit behind him anymore which probably meant they'd split up to check the different hallways. Boyd slowed once he reached the wing he'd been searching for and he entered, shutting the door silently behind him before he quickly glanced around for the camera. When he found it, he grabbed a chair, dragged it over and climbed onto it.

Initially, he had intended to break the camera but he found that he could turn the whole thing back toward the door he'd entered. If anyone was quickly glancing through all the cameras they'd notice one aimed in the wrong direction less quickly than they would notice one that was black.

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He hopped off the chair, pulling it silently over by the desk so a quick glance through the frosted windows by the door wouldn't show anything obviously out of place, then jogged down the smaller hallway within the wing. Once he reached the office at the end, he shut that door behind him as well and quickly verified there wasn't a camera.

He knew the guards were likely to be watching the stairwells and elevators especially closely so in the interest of getting to Sin as quickly as he could, it really only left one option to Boyd: not to use either.

The office building was an older hi-rise, back when they hadn't used floor-to-ceiling windows; these windows were smaller with screens to keep the insects out. Boyd shut the light off in the office and blinked a few times as his eyes tried to adjust to the change in brightness.

There was a thick, round container with a handle that he pulled from the large cargo pocket along his thigh; it took him a few seconds to be able to remove it, as it was about the size of the pocket. Once it was free, he held down a button near the handle as he fumbled with his other hand to pull on a metal piece that was hidden in the side of the container.

A thin length of rope came out and Boyd's eyes narrowed as he focused on the container. The contraption was a new design that Boyd had grabbed from supplies before he'd left; a thin, braided rope that was supposed to have a breaking strength of 10,000 pounds, rolled up in a durable metal container with a handle on one end to allow easy transport.

He tugged the rope hard once to make sure that the braking mechanism was in place. Satisfied, Boyd quickly walked over to the desk in the empty office, noting that the desk was heavy and large and when he tried to shove it closer toward the window, it barely moved. He tied the end of the rope around the desk securely, making sure to tie it so all the pressure wouldn't be only on the legs.

When he opened the window, warm wind blew in immediately, rushing past Boyd to flutter some of the paper on the desk behind him. He ignored it as he made a quick X in the screen with a small butterfly knife from his other pocket.

He stuck his head out the window briefly and didn't see anyone on the ground several stories below him, so he gripped the handle hard in one hand and crawled out the window, using his free hand to hold onto the window sill even once his entire body was outside.

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Wind buffeted him from every direction and his feet slipped on the old stone building; the ski mask was at least keeping his hair hidden and the full black outfit was going to help him blend into the night, but he had to squint his eyes to see through the wind which seemed to overpower all other sounds.

His fingers tingled and his breathing automatically quickened as adrenaline pumped through him; as he realized how this could be an incredibly stupid idea if the desk or rope didn't hold and he fell four stories to solid cement. His blood rushed through his veins and Boyd didn't give himself the chance to think further-- he simply readjusted his grip on the handle and let go of the window sill.

He started to climb down the side of the building and suddenly dropped several feet. His breath caught and free hand whipped out to try to catch himself as his feet scrabbled against the stone-- the wind slammed against him and nearly threw him away from the building before he was able to steady himself.

He kept falling until he was suddenly jerked to a halt, his arm straining painfully and gloved fingers nearly slipping from the metal handle in the process; he had to snap his other hand up to hold onto the handle as well to keep himself from falling. The desk must have slid across the floor in the room above him, hit the side of the wall and held.

Boyd was left awkwardly crouched against the building, heart ricocheting in his chest as he looked up at the window above him, half expecting the desk to break and wooden shards to come flying down at him.

When nothing happened, Boyd drew in a breath to steady himself and shifted his grip on the handle to access the button, letting his other hand free again to steady himself against the building.

The process of getting down the side of the building was slower than he'd hoped. The rope kept catching and suddenly releasing a little too quickly, making his body drop in jerks that jarred his arm and made him imagine the desk creaking each time. The wind kept pushing at him strongly, occasionally making him slide to the side before he could stop himself, and more than once his body partially lifted away from the building before he was slammed back against it with muffled grunts.

As he passed the first window he had to go slowly to make sure no one was in the office looking out. He was unsurprised to find no one was since the guards were probably too busy searching the interior.

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When Boyd arrived at the second story he slit the screen on the window along two edges to hopefully make it less obvious at a glance that the window had been compromised. Bracing himself with his feet on the building and elbow jammed in the side of the window, he struggled until he could slide the window open as well.

Once he could get inside the empty office, he half balanced inside the room, bracing his legs against the wall while he stretched his upper body outside and, awkwardly but as quickly as possible, he rolled out several more feet of rope then dropped the mechanism down the side of the building, where it hovered a few feet off the ground.

Ideally, hiding the rope would have been better but there wouldn't have been an easy way to do so with the rope attached to the desk and he didn't have time to deal with the details. Instead, he was hoping that if someone came across the rope they would at least think he had escaped and it would draw some of the guards' attention away from the building. He quickly shut the window behind him to continue the ruse.

When he left the wing, he was careful to stay out of the camera's view as long as possible, sliding along the walls until he could quickly move to the door and crouch behind what seemed like a potted indoor tree of some sort. He didn't hear anything of note on the guard's comm unit and Sin hadn't said anything in a while, which was starting to worry Boyd.

The hallway outside the wing was empty and, with so many of the guards focusing on the ground floor and the exits, there were few guards for Boyd to run into as he moved silently and quickly through the halls. Even more bodies littered this floor and Boyd had to jump over several of them until he was finally able to reach the auditorium.

The auditorium was a huge room, presumably used to give presentations to large audiences or for training purposes for the staff. There was a main entrance in front that Boyd saw two guards walking past so Boyd slid around to the back instead; there was a smaller exit off the backstage.

Just as he turned the corner, he noticed movement in the shadows of the back entrance to the auditorium. He instantly pulled out his gun, aiming at the guard he saw before his instincts told him something was off; almost immediately after that he recognized Sin's brilliant green eyes burning behind the man. Boyd's heart pounded as he dropped the gun to his side, his adrenaline spiking as he realized he could have shot his partner.

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Boyd approached silently and as he drew closer he could see that Sin was staggering along, holding a guard hostage in front of him with an arm around the man's throat. The man looked terrified but even as his eyes flicked to Boyd, he didn't make a sound.

Sin's normally olive complexion was bleached nearly white from the blood loss and he was holding his free hand to his side where blood drenched his clothing and stained his fingers. Boyd couldn't see all of Sin but he knew there would be more blood and possibly more wounds; it made the worry sharpen considerably but he didn't let himself dwell on it-- they still needed to get out of there before he could think about any of that.

Once Boyd was at Sin's side, he said so quietly it was nearly under his breath, "There are virtually no guards to the south but I can't vouch for the exits."

Sin didn't answer immediately and instead slammed the guard, who he'd likely been using as a meat shield, into the wall head first. The plaster cracked around the man's head and he slumped to the floor unconscious or even possibly dead considering the force Sin had put into it. Even severely weakened, Sin's strength was nearly unparalleled.

Just as the thought crossed Boyd's mind, Sin began coughing violently, leaning against the wall with a shuddering groan as he closed his eyes. His hands were trembling more visibly now and for the first time in their entire partnership, he didn't try to hide the excruciating pain that he was obviously feeling. His face twisted and he pressed his hand tighter against his side where his black shirt was shiny with the leaking blood.

"Just go," Sin said finally from between grit teeth, looking up at Boyd from beneath a curtain of sweat and blood-dampened black hair. "You can still get the data... Schafer."

"I have partial data and I don't care about Schafer," Boyd said without hesitation, forcing himself to look away from Sin's face. He moved to Sin's side and pulled Sin's arm over his shoulder to help support him, gaze darting around to make sure there were no guards in the vicinity as he started to walk.

He couldn't think about how dire the situation seemed; instead, his mind was firmly on their escape, already trying to figure out how they would get out. "We have to get you to the van right away."

Sin didn't respond verbally and he sagged against Boyd, his eyes slipping nearly shut as another wet cough escaped his mouth. He nodded stiffly, obviously either seeing no

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point in continuing to argue or not having the strength to do so, and staggered alongside Boyd, drops of blood falling to the floor with every step.

Boyd's fingers tightened on Sin but he didn't say anything as he half-dragged Sin along. They paused briefly at the end of the back hallway, each of them drawing a gun in their free hand. Their eyes met for a moment but neither of them spoke before they entered the main hallway together.

They only made it about halfway down the hall before the first hostiles noticed them, yelling out alarm to the others and immediately turning on them. Even severely injured, Sin was a phenomenal shot and took out four guards right after another, one bullet each. Boyd simultaneously shot the other two guards, whose bodies collapsed against their companions'.

Without blinking they continued moving, Boyd glancing at each hallway intersection and keeping in mind the layout of the building and constantly determining the fastest way toward the eastern entrance, which was nearest to the van.

Sin staggered at Boyd's side; his breathing was labored and a trail of blood followed them, his brilliant green eyes were dull with pain. Despite that he seemed alert, gaze darting around and hand surprisingly steady on his gun.

They made it to a large intersection in the hallways when Sin suddenly muttered, "Left corridor... three."

Boyd looked sidelong at Sin; he didn't hear anything and he couldn't imagine how Sin would have been able to, especially in his state. But Boyd didn't question the information; as they came up on the intersection, he already had his gun aimed to the left where he quickly dispatched the three guards he was only mildly surprised to see were actually there.

They kept moving but the bloody trail was to their disadvantage, as was the fact they had to go slower than either of them would have liked. Hostiles appeared from side corridors, from rooms, from behind them-- but even then Boyd could see that their numbers were significantly lowered. Sin had played his role well and now he was dying because of it.

It seemed like an endless journey out of the facility, agonizingly slow and constantly pursued by the remnants of the security force. Most of the guards on the lower levels

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had either retreated or been wiped out but the hostiles from the higher levels were now trickling down to stop the intruders from escaping.

Sin fought well but he was obviously weakened and after a while it was more than obvious that he was starting to lose concentration due to blood loss. At one point Sin staggered just as a quartet of hostiles exploded out of an elevator bank and Boyd threw himself in front of Sin, gritting his teeth when the bullets slammed into his bulletproof vest and one hit him in the upper left arm. Pain erupted violently across his torso but he ignored it, already jerking his gun up with narrowed eyes and shooting two of the men in a row while Sin took out the other two.

When the bodies hit the floor, Sin sagged against the wall briefly as the hallway went silent around them. Boyd was at his side immediately, sliding his bad arm around his partner as he started to drag him along again. It hurt like hell trying to support Sin's weight with an arm he'd been shot in but he didn't hesitate and he didn't concentrate on the pain; he simply grit his teeth, letting out a low breath, and focused on dragging Sin along.

They half ran through the compound, Boyd listening as intently as he could to the occasional chatter on the guard's comm unit. The main information he received was that they were monitoring Boyd and Sin's progress on the cameras so he started shooting out the cameras as they passed, including down side hallways if he could see the camera. He didn't slow as he did so-- his hand was steady and quick, much more accurate than he'd been before his level 10 training.

He knew it wouldn't do much to slow down the pursuit but it may help.

Not long after that, the comm unit fell silent and Boyd surmised that the guards had switched channels or were communicating another way because they realized Boyd and Sin could listen in. Boyd didn't particularly care-- it was clear to him this was going to continue to be an all-out brawl and the guards weren't planning any sort of elaborate trap; they didn't have the time or people to be able to do so anymore.

The next few minutes were a blur of gunfire resounding around them in echoes, of guards appearing suddenly and just as abruptly being killed. Boyd's vest took more than one bullet during their escape and he was glad that he'd worn it even though it did slow him down.

He could tell that Sin had ditched his vest at some point but it wasn't a surprise and not even something Boyd could fault him for. In order to function as a distraction, Sin had

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needed use of his maximum speed and the heavy metal plated vests would have hindered that and likely gotten him wounded far earlier than he'd been. When surrounded by hostiles on all sides, a vest didn't protect him against head shots.

After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the East exit but were once again engaged by hostiles guarding the vicinity.

Boyd shoved Sin down a side hall and scrambled to the far side of the intersection. He had to crouch and move around more than once but one by one, Boyd and Sin worked together to dispatch the hostiles. Boyd's hands shook from adrenaline, blood loss, pain and the constant backlash of the guns but he paid it no heed.

Boyd was just rising to his feet when he heard gunshots resound behind him. He looked over his shoulder to see that Sin had dropped and rolled to the floor, aiming from a lying position as he killed three guards in a row behind them before they could shoot at Boyd's exposed back.

Two more hostiles appeared before Boyd could react to the fact that he'd left himself open and he dodged backwards, skidding down the linoleum as a bullet barely missed his forehead and drilled into the wall behind him.

Boyd rolled around the corner, leaped back out almost instantly and fired several times at one of the hostiles, downing him but getting clipped in the arm in the process. A pained hiss escaped Boyd's teeth and he knew that he'd be a mess of bruises and lacerations in the following days.

Boyd's gaze skimmed across the perimeter and he saw that Sin had jerked the other guard down to the floor with him. Sin snapped the man's neck so violently and with such strength that the man was nearly dismembered. Blood and gore erupted from the large tear that caused the head to drop at an angle completely unnatural to the body.

Disbelief moved through Boyd that even in this state Sin could manage something like that but he didn't dwell on it. Sin's strength was unparalleled by anything but his willpower and it would probably always be that way.

Sin sagged against the floor, his blood mingling with the man he'd just killed; the corpse that had half-collapsed on him. Boyd shoved the body off his partner, listening and darting his gaze around briefly to see if there were any further attackers.

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They didn't exchange words or waste time; Boyd once again grabbed Sin, nearly manhandling him in his haste. Sin assisted as best he could, using what strength he had left to push himself up but once he was standing, almost all his weight was on Boyd and he kept stumbling as he tried to keep up.

Boyd's gloved fingers were slick with Sin's blood as well as some of his own and their enemies'; his hands kept slipping against Sin's clothing and skin and Boyd felt true fear that despite all of this it could be too late-- that maybe Sin was going to die.

That galvanized him to move faster, to put more strength into holding his partner up and dragging him along. As they moved into the small open area near the exit, Boyd was relieved to find only dead bodies littering the floor. It was probably only a matter of time before more backup came but Boyd didn't intend to wait for that.

He yanked Sin along at his side and as they stumbled into the darkness outside the building, Boyd couldn't help feeling relieved. At least out here the night would hide their movements a little easier than the cameras inside.

It was a harrowing trek across the lawn toward the small cluster of trees nearby; Boyd kept half his attention on their surroundings and the other half on Sin, whose clothing was now slick not only from blood but from sweat as well. That wasn't a good sign, nor was the chill to Sin's skin, and Boyd tightened his hold on his partner.

Together they staggered through the rest of the trees, bursting onto the empty street where their uneven footsteps echoed around them eerily. They were in a mostly industrial and commercial area; the few nearby residences were silent and dark, without a soul stirring.

They reached the van without further incident and as Boyd fumbled with the keys, blood making the metal slip in his fingers, Sin leaned against the side of the vehicle, chest rising and falling with labored, harsh breathing. Once the vehicle was open, Boyd had to help Sin into the seat and he shut the door behind him then ran around the front to jump into the driver's seat.

Boyd hastily pulled off his mask and gloves, grabbed the first aid kit from beneath the seat and tossed it on Sin's lap. Without taking more time, he started the van and took off, driving as quickly as he could away from the scene. Even if more hostiles didn't appear, he'd be shocked if law enforcement didn't.

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He looked over at Sin, fear and concern sharpening his features and making his fingers tighten on the steering wheel as he noticed that Sin looked nearly unconscious. Boyd sped down a few more blocks before concern forced him to pull over to better examine his partner.

He leaned over the center console and popped open the first aid kit, ignoring how his arm screamed at the movement and how his fingers shook. He reached for Sin's shirt and pulled it up, professionally running his hands along Sin's body to determine where the wounds were exactly beneath all the blood.

When he found the bullet wounds, he pulled out the gauze and wrapped them as tightly and quickly as he could. Dark red spots almost immediately stained the white gauze, spreading at an alarming rate.

His eyes narrowed. The area needed pressure applied to it but he wouldn't be able to do so while driving. Thinking quickly, he yanked off his outer shirt. The movement caused an agonized cry to escape him before he was able to cut it off with gritted teeth.

He tilted his head forward, blond hair brushing against his cheeks, shoving the pain aside in his mind before he balled up his shirt. He pressed the bloody shirt firmly against Sin's stomach and reached over to pull the seat belt over Sin, tightening the belt over the shirt. It was the best he could do under the circumstances.

Boyd wiped his bloody hands on his pants and immediately put the van in drive again. He sped away, ignoring the reverberating pain in his arm and body to the best of his ability. He knew Sin's only hope was to get back to the Agency as soon as possible; all Boyd could do was drive as fast as the van would allow and hope it would be enough.

The streets weren't empty even at that time of night, which quickly became aggravating for Boyd as he felt like every moment he had to slow down behind another car was a moment too long. He kept glancing over at Sin, anxiety rising as he saw Sin's eyes shut, as Sin slumped forward in the seat.

"Hsin," Boyd said intently, not bothering to hide the fear and concern in his voice.

Sin's eyes slid open and he stared at Boyd for a moment before muttering, "You shouldn't have come back. They'll terminate you..."

Boyd shook his head, wanting to keep his eyes on Sin but having to pay attention to the road.

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He abruptly swerved around a car ahead of them, bringing them into oncoming traffic to speed around the older Chevrolet. He jerked them back into the correct lane just before an oncoming blue truck could hit them. Boyd barely registered the man in the truck laying on the horn and putting his hand out the window to flip them off; the man's loud cursing was muffled by the van's closed windows.

Although what Sin said was entirely possible, Boyd didn't care.

"Just stay with me, okay?" Boyd glanced at Sin, honey brown eyes dark and expression taut. "I'll get you to medical as soon as I can-- they'll be able to help you."

Sin's eyes had already slid closed again and he slumped against the door, although his hand was still gripping his side. His face was bleached of all color-- the striking features made to look unnatural and almost phantom-like in the gloom of the car as the dim blue light from the dash illuminated his skin.

Boyd felt his stomach drop. "Hsin?" His voice was quiet and uncertain.

Sin didn't respond and even though Boyd could still see the faint rise and fall of his chest, it wasn't enough to allay his fears that Sin wouldn't make it to the Agency.

"Don't die," Boyd whispered, his eyes bright as he looked away from Sin and concentrated fully on the road.

He swerved around vehicles, made abrupt turns down side streets when he realized it was going to be too backed up ahead of him, and ran a red light more than once. He didn't care that he was making a spectacle and that it was possible he could be seen by local police. The only precautions he took were to make sure they weren't hit. He had to drive one-handed at one point to input the security code into the GPS screen that was located on the dashboard. The screen changed and its hidden function was made clear after he input another string of code; it was a touch screen computer that allowed him direct contact with the Agency.

He sent a short, coded email to Carhart saying that the mission had failed and they were going to need immediate medical assistance at the unloading point. His fingers left smudges of blood on the screen and streams of it came down his arm from his wounds.

His gaze darted between the faint blue light of his screen and the streets flying by them. He had to abruptly grab the steering wheel with both hands when he almost hit a car

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ahead of him that suddenly screeched to a halt to avoid a woman darting across the street.

A window on the computer flashed and he looked over. He received confirmation that the email had been received and he had no further contact after that.

Even driving like he did, it took nearly forty minutes to navigate the streets and traffic, and every minute made Boyd's heart beat that much faster, made him look toward Sin more often. He couldn't even feel a sense of relief when the Agency finally loomed ahead of them and he headed toward the nearly hidden back entrance; the one that went straight down to the underground unloading point and was typically used for emergencies and bringing in detainees.

He slammed on the brakes when he reached the check point and impatiently opened the window, holding up his identification badge. "Let me in." His voice was a tense command and the guard looked closely at him, the ID, and past him to Sin, before stepping back with a curt nod toward the other guard.

The gates opened and Boyd drove in, having to stop at a second set of doors to give an iris scan. Boyd put his face close to the scanner, keeping his eye open wide for a moment before it recognized him. A green light flashed and the doors automatically opened in front of him; he waited just long enough for clearance for the van before he sped through, pulling to an abrupt stop.

Medical staff was waiting for them; Boyd had barely put the van in park before two men in white medical coats opened the passenger door to extract Sin. Boyd got out of the van and came around the side as the men carefully secured Sin to a stretcher.

Two women approached Boyd; one immediately checked him for injuries, pausing at his arm. He grit his teeth as she prodded the area, trying to determine the extent of the wound.

"What happened?" the other woman, whose badge read Kerry Spiegel, asked briskly as the men were already wheeling Sin away quickly. She had red hair that looked natural but was obviously dyed judging by the faint blond and silver roots that were just showing.

Boyd's gaze tracked Sin briefly before he returned his attention to Kerry. "He received multiple gunshot wounds to the torso approximately an hour ago," he reported, keeping his expression perfectly even. He saw no reason to let everyone know how worried he

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truly was for his partner-- especially not where such information would be recorded on camera. "He fell unconscious forty minutes ago and has not stirred since."

Kerry nodded, gaze dropping to his black clothing shining with blood and his arm sticky with it. "And you?"

Before he could answer, the first woman said, "He's coming with us. He's injured as well."

Boyd didn't respond as he was brought to the medical wing in the Tower. He tried to keep an eye out for Sin or any word on him but he knew it was too early to tell. Kerry brought him into one of the side rooms where he removed his bulletproof vest and undershirt so they could scrutinize him for wounds.

They had to dig the bullet out of his upper left arm, which was unpleasant and not helped by the stitches he had to get for a few of the other wounds afterward. His arm ached even after they'd bandaged it and had given him some painkillers.

Although he tried to ask about Sin, they just told him that they didn't know anything yet and they wouldn't give him any further information.

He felt worried and on edge; his mind kept returning to the sickly pallor of Sin's skin, to all that blood leaking through the clothing, the bandages... He thought about Sin's deep voice, gruff and raspy with pain and weakness, and Boyd imagined waking up tomorrow with Sin no longer in his world.

It was a terrifying thought and one that hit him no less hard than it had the first time he'd truly had to contemplate it after Monterrey.

Tension built in his frame, made him anxious for any word from the doctors-- desperately hoping that he'd made it back in time. That Sin would be okay.

But he couldn't dwell on that even now; there was procedure to follow and he could do nothing useful waiting around the med wing.

His expression was unreadable as he headed toward the main computer room and typed up the report. His arm hurt like hell during the process but he almost welcomed it; the physical pain was a good grounder and gave him something to think about other than Sin.

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He sent the report to Carhart and sat there for a few moments afterward, staring distantly at the screen before he shook his head to himself then logged off and stood.

Only a handful of minutes passed as Boyd left the room and started to head outside before he was summoned to his mother's office. Given the fact that this had been a level 9 classification assignment, that typically she would have nothing to do with this and Boyd would normally only debrief with Carhart... It wasn't a good sign.

He felt strangely blank as he walked back into the Tower and waited for the elevators to arrive.

Although he knew it was entirely possible he was walking to his death sentence, he didn't feel bad about it. They could kill him, they could send him to Shane for eternity, and Boyd still wouldn't change anything. Sin was more important to him than anything or anyone else and he would gladly give up his life for the opportunity to try to protect and save him.

Even if Sin died after all, Boyd would not regret his decision. He would only regret not being faster.

The elevator finally arrived and enough people piled in that it would have been claustrophobic if Boyd were prone to feeling constricted in small spaces. The ride to the seventeenth floor was uneventful and seemed longer than usual, although that could have been because it seemed like someone was getting off or on every floor along the way. Boyd finally reached the administrative level and made it through all the checkpoints, then waited patiently for Aisha to buzz him into his mother's office.

His features were set in the stoic mask that he'd learned over the years. His back was straight, his arms loose at his sides, although he held the injured arm more gingerly and he could tell bruises were going to form across his torso. He walked in with the same professional unreadability that he would have shown for any other mission.

The door had barely shut behind him before he could feel the tension in the room. He didn't have to be a mind reader to know from his mother's frosty, unrelenting stare that she was angry. She held herself stiffly, her fingers tightened as they were laced in front of her, and the glint in her narrowed ice blue eyes was matched by the tightening of her lips.

Carhart's expression was unreadable but his posture was tense as he focused fully on Boyd.

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"Sit down," Vivienne ordered in a clipped tone that made it seem like two separate sentences rather than a single command. Boyd obeyed without question, walking in and taking the seat in front of her desk.

"Your claim is that the Intel was bad?" Carhart asked without delay, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Regarding the security it was, General," Boyd replied, shifting his focus from Vivienne to Carhart. He kept his tone professional and gaze steady. "There was at least double of what we expected."

A frown crossed Carhart's face and he glanced at Vivienne briefly before looking at Boyd again. "Is there reason to believe they were prepared for your infiltration or do you believe that Owen's Intel was simply lacking?"

Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly, taking the time to consider that. "There were a lot of them but they were quite organized. It leads me to believe that something was happening, but whether they were aware of our particular mission or if it was something unrelated, I don't know."

Carhart's eyes narrowed slightly and a glimmer of impatience shone through. "Owen is a valuable agent, Boyd. His mistakes in the past thirteen years have been less than one percent. If his Intel was faulty he would be punished but be in no danger of termination. Your record is nowhere near as spotless so don't try to cover for him. Worry about yourself and the events that led to Schafer escaping and you returning with less than an eighth of the information that should have been on location."

"I'm not covering for Owen." Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly but it was more in thought than anything. "I don't know what happened. All I know is that when we arrived, they seemed more prepared and on guard than we expected. As a result, we had to change our plans. I don't necessarily believe that Owen gave bad information but I can't say with one hundred percent certainty."

Carhart glanced at Vivienne again but the expression seemed more significant somehow, as though they were silently communicating when they exchanged a look. The moment passed quickly and Carhart began questioning Boyd again.

"How did you come to only download a partial file?"

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"While I waited for the hard drives to download, I explored the area and was interrupted by the target." Boyd could feel his mother's even stare burning into the side of his face as he watched Carhart.

Carhart nodded and his lips thinned slightly, eyebrows drawing together. His cerulean eyes flicked to the side for a moment before refocusing on Boyd but this time it was Vivienne who spoke.

"Did you pursue the target?"

Boyd looked over at her and nodded. "Yes."

Her eyes narrowed and she watched him intently. "If that is the case, how were you 'unable to successfully apprehend him?'" The tone in her voice showed she was repeating Boyd's own words from his report.

"I pursued the target at length but between the security and his intimate knowledge of the building's layout, I lost track of him during the chase," Boyd said calmly, giving no indication that he was lying. "I was subsequently advised of Agent Vega's condition and determined that, with the additional security, the best way to complete the mission was to ensure that the amount of data that had been procured was successfully returned to the Agency."

Vivienne's stare only seemed to intensify, scrutinizing him as if he were an insect. "So it was fully your intention to bring the target back to the Agency. You tried everything and it was solely the circumstances that forced you to be unable to." She said it as a statement of fact but it was obvious that she expected him to reply.

"Yes."

Carhart's eyes narrowed slightly and he once again looked to the side but he said nothing.

Vivienne speared Boyd with a hard expression, her lips tightening. "You are aware that it is one of the highest forms of insubordination to lie to the Marshal," she said flatly and Boyd didn't let his expression change.

"Yes, Marshal," Boyd said.

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"Then why would you?" Vivienne demanded in a low, ice cold tone, and Boyd stared at her calmly even as he started to feel uncertain inside. There was active displeasure in her eyes and she didn't seem to be bluffing-- it was as though she knew more about what had happened than Boyd had let on, and it made him nervous.

"I'm not sure what you--" Boyd started to say but Vivienne leaned forward, her face a mask of disdain.

"Even injured, Agent Vega ordered you to finish the mission. You had ample time to download more information or to apprehend Schafer. Agent Vega even encouraged it." There was no doubt or hesitation in her voice, her light blue eyes seeming like they were nearly burning holes through Boyd. "*You* were the one who decided not to."

A chill went through him even as his heart began to beat faster but Boyd didn't let the nervousness make it to his demeanor. "I don't--"

"In fact," Vivienne continued frostily. "I believe your exact words were 'I don't care about Schafer.'"

Boyd's mouth went dry and he kept his expression unreadable, although this time he was completely still because he didn't know how to react. He didn't understand how she could possibly have known that and he tried not to let the 'oh shit' feeling make it to his body language.

When Boyd didn't respond, Vivienne gave him a look of contempt. "We reviewed the audio files of your communication, as we do on any mission that fails. It is entirely clear that you showed blatant disregard for the mission's success and instead foolishly chose to focus on a dying agent, who himself was intelligent enough not to request assistance."

Carhart's expression didn't change but he still did not meet Boyd's eyes or look at Vivienne. It wasn't clear if he agreed with Vivienne or if he was just conflicted and upset by the entire situation. Given his attachment to Sin, the latter was more likely.

Boyd stared at her, uneasiness making him stay silent.

He'd had no idea they did that because no one had ever told him or implied they knew what had happened on failed missions-- not Connors, Carhart, his mother... He didn't know why the Agency hadn't mentioned it after Monterrey, but then, that had been in another country and an extended undercover mission on top of that. Those were

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probably different than the shorter missions so they may not have monitored any communication. And he suspected that Sin didn't know or he would have mentioned it at some point.

He tried to remember everything he'd said but he didn't recall all of it; he'd been focused on Sin, on getting him out of there, and since they'd been away from the glare of the Agency he'd been more free in voicing his thoughts.

He knew that his chances of not being terminated over this had just shrunk until it was much closer to zero. She was right that he'd shown blatant disregard for the mission-- because that was how he really felt.

"I am well aware of your ridiculous infatuation with Agent Vega in the past," Vivienne said coolly when Boyd didn't respond. "As well as your assertion during training that you loved him." She said that with contempt as well. "I was under the impression that you were finished with making irrational decisions based upon emotions when he is involved."

Boyd kept his expression perfectly even and didn't allow a hint of his thoughts to make it to his face. "With all due respect, Marshal," he said neutrally, "it was not an illogical decision based on emotions. There were a number of reasons I returned. I was reprimanded in the past for abandoning Agent Vega, and it was made quite clear to me that it was my duty to protect my partner or see to it that he did not make rash decisions himself."

Before he could continue, Vivienne leaned back in her chair. "That is entirely different. In that case, you had successfully completed the mission and afterward failed to aid Agent Vega due to an emotional reaction on your part. That decision nearly cost us a valuable asset and, you are well aware, caused many more issues on an international scale."

"But Agent Vega remains a valuable asset to the Agency and was important for the mission's success," Boyd countered in a reasonable tone. "I could have continued the pursuit but the moment Agent Vega died, the security would have moved their attention from the distraction he provided toward checking for any other security breaches."

Vivienne scrutinized Boyd but she did not interrupt so Boyd continued.

"If you were able to listen to our exchange, you already know that the guards were focusing their attention on the ground floor and moving up, and it was possible they

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could be monitoring the cameras. Were I to have continued, even if I had been able to catch Schafer, I would not have been able to extract him from the building alone."

Boyd spoke with the same simple, professional tone that he always used when relaying details of a mission. "Not even taking into account the mechanics of dragging or carrying a man who is taller and heavier than I am such a distance and the extent to which it would have slowed me down, I would not have been able to battle my way out alone. It was far more likely that Agent Vega would die, I would be killed or captured, the target would be saved by the additional security, the partial data I recovered would never be returned to the Agency, and the mission would be a complete failure. I opted to salvage the mission as much as possible instead."

There was a long moment of silence after Boyd finished. Vivienne's expression did not change and Boyd couldn't tell if his explanation had helped or hindered. Although he hadn't been thinking any of that at the time, he felt that it was true; it would have been nearly impossible to successfully complete the mission on his own.

"You could have acquired the target and removed him while Agent Vega was still alive," Vivienne said pointedly. "His death could have provided adequate distraction while you ran."

"There were no guarantees that would have worked," Boyd replied evenly. "And if it didn't, it would have resulted in the scenario I've already overviewed. As it is, Agent Vega and I both made it out alive only because we were able to watch each other's backs."

"So you are attempting to argue that, despite what you said on the mission, your primary loyalty remains to the Agency," Vivienne said flatly.

"In a stressful situation with security surrounding us, I didn't think to explain my entire thought process," Boyd said. "If I had been aware that the communication was recorded, I would have made more of an effort to clarify."

Vivienne's eyes narrowed and Boyd knew at that moment that he probably should not have said that; although his tone and expression had been perfectly professional, it had been a somewhat sarcastic thing to say.

Something akin to anger seemed to flash briefly through her eyes. "Stating that you do not care about the target does not require explanation. It is perfectly clear what you meant."

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"Determining that the target is less important than salvaging the mission does not equate to a lack of loyalty toward the Agency," Boyd countered. "We are trained to improvise and make decisions based upon new information at any point in time. If I were to have continued toward the mission goal without the capability of compromise, you would have deemed that a failure on my part. If I had let Agent Vega die and especially if the target provided less useful information than we anticipated, that would have counted against me. When a mission is likely to fail on some level, there is going to be something that the agent will be held accountable for."

"Some agents are more well-versed than others in rectifying the situation and still ending with a success," Vivienne observed coolly.

"I had a short span of time to determine whether to proceed with a course of action that was in line with my original instructions but I did not feel would result positively for the Agency," Boyd said neutrally, straightening his back and holding his head higher. "Or to change the direction and do something that I felt would work better overall. Even if we lost this target this time, by retaining even the small amount of data I retrieved it should ultimately be of use. And if Agent Vega recovers, he is far more useful to the Agency in the long-term than a single target will be."

"Determining the efficacy of any project or person for the Agency is not your prerogative," Vivienne replied, leaning forward with her eyes narrowed and mouth set in an unimpressed, flat line. "You are making excuses for a failure."

"I did fail," Boyd replied bluntly, his eyebrows raising slightly. "I'm not arguing that. I take full responsibility for the outcome of the mission. I'm simply explaining my reasons because you asked."

"Do not test my patience," Vivienne said coldly, seeming displeased with the way Boyd was almost talking back. "I could mark you for termination immediately."

Carhart's eyes focused on Vivienne and a muscle in his cheek ticked but once again, he didn't speak. His lips pressed together tightly as if he was fighting the desire to say something but there wasn't really anything he could say.

Boyd's gaze did not flicker, his voice did not change from the even-tempered tone as he watched her. His hands rested on the chair and his fingers remained perfectly still. "If that is what you deem is best for the Agency, I will not argue against it."

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Vivienne raised her eyebrows, giving him a look that made it clear she did not believe him. "And yet you would for Agent Vega."

"Agent Vega is more valuable to the Agency than I am," Boyd said calmly, shaking his head. "I am easily replaceable. Losing me would mean nothing to you and the Agency; losing him would cause difficulties in finding someone who can do all that he can. Although I'm sure Agent Emilio Vega is closer than anyone else, I imagine even he would be hard pressed to hold his own against an entire floor of security guards and still make it out alive."

Vivienne quirked one perfectly shaped blond eyebrow. "So you went back for him because the Agency would have wanted him back."

"I went back for him because I deemed it to be the best decision at the time," Boyd said firmly, eyes narrowing stubbornly. "If you question my judgment in that, I can't argue against it. You know what is best for the Agency and if you feel that my failure as an agent at this time outweighs my usability, if you terminate me because of this, then I will accept that. But I will not express doubt that I feel what I did was the optimal solution for the circumstances; I would only be lying to you if I did."

There was a long beat of silence as Vivienne watched Boyd as coldly and closely as if she were dissecting him in her mind, taking him apart and weighing the options. Boyd did not fidget or flinch; he met her gaze evenly, his back straight and face emotionless, and waited for the verdict.

At length, she leaned back in her chair and rested her hands on the desk.

"As of this moment, you are on probationary standby; you will not leave the compound until your next assignment and you will keep your cell phone accessible at all times until otherwise instructed. A follow-up mission will be assigned shortly that you will do alone."

Vivienne's eyes narrowed. "You *will* successfully complete this mission, fully and without excuses, or you will be terminated the moment you return. I will see to it that you are brought to the incinerator the second you step on compound."

Her eyebrows rose imperiously. "And if you think to flee, that will simply ensure that your death becomes quite drawn out and painful. Do you understand?"

Boyd couldn't even feel a sense of relief at the knowledge that he wouldn't be killed immediately, although truth be told he was a little surprised that it wasn't happening.

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He nodded, sitting up straighter. "Yes, Marshal. Perfectly."

She watched him for another long, tense moment before she looked away. "Dismissed."

Boyd didn't wait around for her to change her mind; he stood and glanced between her and Carhart before he turned and headed toward the door.

Vivienne waited until he was reaching for the doorknob before she said suddenly, "Agent Beaulieu."

Boyd paused and looked over his shoulder but didn't need to verbally respond before she continued.

"Do not mistake this as acceptance. Your failure will be duly noted in your file and will be taken into account in the future as well. Even with a successful mission, you are close to termination. Your record is far from exemplary."

Boyd watched her, not knowing whether she was telling him that to further emphasize how much she thought he was a failure or if she was trying to warn him of the precariousness of his situation. Considering it was his mother, he suspected it was the former.

He nodded and said calmly, "I understand, Marshal."

When she looked away from him dismissively and Carhart didn't move, Boyd turned toward the door again and left.

He probably should have felt anxiety or fear about the news but he didn't; he felt strangely calm and the only worry he felt was about knowing Sin's condition.

He went straight to the medical wing and learned that Sin was still in surgery but he was expected to be out soon. They didn't tell him anything else and Boyd ended up sitting in the waiting room for an hour, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his knees and hair curtaining his face, feeling uneasiness grow with every second that passed.

It seemed like it took forever for Boyd to finally get the medical staff to give him an update on Sin's condition. Even knowing that he was Sin's partner, the staff was reluctant to give anything away to anyone but the higher ups.

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After a while all he found out was that Sin had made it through surgery and was stable for the moment. The information did little to assuage Boyd's fears but one of the nurses did allow Boyd into the room Sin was temporarily being kept in.

When Boyd walked in, the room was stark and the machines hooked up to Sin made steady background beeps that somehow seemed more alarming than silence would have been.

Boyd quietly shut the door behind him and walked over, standing next to the bed and looking down.

Sin was incredibly pale, his skin tone coming far too close to matching the crisp white sheets. He was unconscious but breathing steadily, his eyes closed and lips just barely parted. When Boyd dragged a chair over to the side of the bed and sat down, Sin didn't make a noise. When Boyd stared at those familiar features, when he raised a hand and gently pushed hair away from Sin's forehead, Sin didn't so much as stir.

Boyd felt his heart clench suddenly and he let out a low breath, lightly threading his fingers in Sin's hair before leaning forward until his forehead rested on Sin's chest. Boyd closed his eyes and wished with all his might that Sin would make it through this safely.

He drew in a short breath and let it out long, slightly shakily, and tried not to let the worry or fear become too strong. After a few seconds of resting that way, he blindly reached down until his fingers brushed against Sin's slack hand, which he intertwined his fingers with and squeezed.

Sin's heartbeat was a reserved tempo for Boyd's thoughts and he turned his head so he could hear it better, so the left side of Sin's chest rested against his ear. Golden blond hair fell messily around Boyd's face, partially covering his features and tickling his cheek.

He concentrated on the quiet *ba-dump, ba-dump* of Sin's heart and kept his eyes closed, kept the darkness surrounding him.

As the worry and fear continued to breed in the background, Boyd was still able to find a sense of peace from Sin's heartbeat, from the feel of that chest rising and falling. Each time it made Boyd feel that much more centered, that much more grounded.

Boyd knew then that he couldn't live without Sin.

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It wasn't a dramatic realization that he would kill himself if Sin died, or even that he would let Sin's death destroy him like he had Lou's. But that wasn't because Sin meant less to him; it was only because Boyd had grown enough to realize that he couldn't just give up, even if the people he loved in his life were ripped away.

Instead, it struck him deeply just how much he loved Sin.

And even as he acknowledged that, he realized he felt the emotion on a deeper, less chaotic level than he had before. He had known he loved Sin for over a year but it had never felt like such a simple statement of fact for his life before; it had never seemed so undeniable and yet at the same time without any negativity.

Whereas there had been times before when the love he'd felt for Sin had seemed almost desperate or painful, now as he hunched over Sin with his fingers grasping Sin's slack hand, Boyd felt at peace with the knowledge. It was as if a weight were lifted from his shoulders and he understood that he could be no other way.

Even without the possibility of Sin dying, even if Sin had never found anyone else, Boyd knew it was inevitable that he would always gravitate back to Sin. Yet the combination of both created an urgency that reinforced Boyd's feelings even as he knew it wasn't the right time to tell Sin.

The right time may never come.

Maybe he would go on the mission and not be able to finish it successfully. Maybe he would adequately complete the mission but he would still be considered too much of a liability. Maybe he would be terminated by the end of the week. Maybe Sin wouldn't make it after all. Maybe he would never get to talk to Sin again.

The thought made his heart ache, made him treasure this quiet moment even more. Sin wasn't awake but his presence grounded Boyd; the warmth of his body beneath Boyd's cheek, the faint and familiar scent of him infiltrating the crispness of the freshly washed linens, the feel of his own fingers curled tightly around that powerful hand.

There were so many maybes in their lives, so many things they couldn't affect whether or not they wanted to, but what he knew with certainty was that his feelings for Sin wouldn't change.

Time passed without him realizing it and he didn't know how long he stayed in the same position, feeling increasingly centered. Sin's even breathing and muffled heartbeat lulled

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Boyd on one level even as he could still feel the worry and doubt prowling in the background.

He was still leaning against Sin when the door opened.

Boyd was so caught off guard that he looked up with slightly widened eyes and an expression that was unusually open for him as he sat up straight.

Ivan looked at him evenly, his expression as neutral as ever although his eyebrows rose slightly as he shut the door behind him. "Hello, Boyd."

"Hello, Ivan," Boyd greeted him calmly after the briefest pause, his expression becoming unreadable even though he still felt thrown off by Ivan's sudden appearance.

He realized he was still holding Sin's hand so he casually released it and rested his hand on the sheets next to Sin instead. The movement was subtle and pointless since Ivan had probably already seen it.

Ivan stared at him silently for a long moment before he shook his head slightly and walked over to Sin's bedside. A frown crossed Ivan's face and his thin lips turned down, slate grey eyes narrowing.

He reached over to run a hand down the side of Sin's face gently and Ivan grimaced afterward, likely because of how clammy Sin still felt. After a brief moment, Ivan looked at Boyd again and his concerned expression turned into a narrow-eyed blank stare.

Ivan stood up straight and crossed his arms over his faded green hoody, lowering his eyebrows. "What exactly is it that you're doing here? Out of curiosity," he added in his typically mild tone.

Boyd watched Ivan neutrally, ignoring the discomfort he felt from seeing Ivan touch Sin.

Not liking having to look up at the other man, Boyd stood, moving away from the bed and keeping his posture straight but without challenge.

"I came to check on his health," Boyd said simply.

"I see." Ivan nodded and studied Boyd thoughtfully before saying in the same tone, "So you were checking his pulse just then?"

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Boyd saw no reason to outright lie but he supposed he *had* been listening to Sin's pulse, even if he wasn't checking it. "More or less," Boyd replied in a tone of agreement.

Ivan nodded and the serious expression didn't leave his face which made it difficult to tell whether or not he believed Boyd. "What happened to him?"

"We encountered heavier resistance than expected on a mission." Boyd said, flicking his gaze briefly to Sin before returning it to Ivan. "He was shot while acting as the distraction."

Ivan didn't look very surprised by this although he did glance at Sin again. There was another slightly awkward pause before Ivan gave Boyd a puzzled look and asked quizzically, "So are you feeling guilty?"

Boyd drew his eyebrows down, confused. "I have no reason to; I didn't do anything wrong."

Ivan shrugged and nodded agreeably. "I don't think you did. But considering the way you looked when I walked in, I figured you either were feeling guilty or feeling... something else. And I assume, Agent Beaulieu, that you're not the type of person to start sending mixed signals to Sin now that he's coincidentally become somewhat involved with someone else so I assumed the former; that you may feel responsible for his condition."

Boyd narrowed his eyes a little and watched Ivan evenly for a moment. Ivan's comment didn't entirely sit well with him, especially since it seemed to imply Boyd was trying to steal Sin back.

"I don't feel responsible for his condition. He was dying and I did everything I could to make sure he stayed alive," Boyd replied neutrally, crossing his arms and raising his eyebrows slightly. "But just because I was worried about my partner and I was in here while he is unconscious does not mean it would have happened the same way had he been awake. I have no intentions of interfering with what he wants to do in his life or what makes him happy."

Ivan watched Boyd calmly for a moment and his eyebrows raised after a brief pause. "I'm not questioning you out of some kind of competitive possessiveness. I'm questioning you because I think it's unfair to Sin to be so inconsistent. You broke up with him, broke his heart and now that he's finally come to terms with that, here you are... holding his hand and looking a lot more like his lover than his partner."

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The R&D agent shrugged easily and gestured to Sin faintly with one thin hand. "In my opinion, you should be more careful with your behavior if you don't want to send a certain message."

Boyd didn't let the mild irritation he felt over the comment make it to his face. Ivan was making it sound like it was all Boyd's fault, like he arbitrarily broke up with Sin for no good reason and was acting like this now because he was bored or selfish. Especially since Boyd had been trying to be careful around Sin, to not interfere with him and Ivan, and he felt like even now Ivan was judging him-- it just frustrated him further.

"I appreciate that you're looking out for him but unless he explained to you the entire situation, I doubt you have all the pertinent information," Boyd said steadily. "And as for the rest... I wouldn't have done that if he'd been awake. That isn't to say I would repeat the gesture if I have the opportunity to visit him again."

Ivan just smiled slightly, studying Boyd through his wire rimmed glasses. His ash blond hair hung around his face but it didn't hide the slight arching of one eyebrow, as though he found something about Boyd's statement to be lacking or incorrect. However he didn't say anything about what he was thinking and nodded instead. "Okay."

Boyd watched Ivan silently then looked toward the door. He didn't know how much longer he had until his mission but there was no point in staying around any longer, not with Ivan there.

"I should go," Boyd said, returning his gaze to Ivan. "I have a mission to prepare for and I'm sure you'd like to be alone anyway."

"It doesn't matter," Ivan replied with a shrug. "I wouldn't mind if you stayed."

Boyd studied Ivan with slightly drawn down eyebrows; he couldn't figure the man out.

Although he did believe that Ivan wouldn't care if he stayed, there was no reason for Boyd to do so. And despite the fact that the situation was awkward and not entirely comfortable for Boyd, he had to admit that he did honestly appreciate that at least Ivan seemed to be looking out for Sin.

If Boyd never returned from his mission, if he was terminated now or in the future, at least Sin had someone around him who seemed to care.

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"It's alright," Boyd replied. "I'll be late if I wait too long."

Ivan nodded again. "Good luck."

"Thank you." Boyd started to turn toward the door then paused with his hand on the doorknob, half tilting his body to look back toward Ivan.

If he was going to be completely honest, Ivan was right that he shouldn't be sending mixed signals, that he shouldn't have been in the room holding Sin's hand. Boyd had to admit that he'd been out of line.

He should have just come in, checked to make sure Sin was breathing and relatively okay, and left. He shouldn't have lingered; he shouldn't have touched him. Sin could have woken up and then what would Boyd have said to explain the situation? He couldn't tell him the truth; what kind of person would he be if he ever took advantage of Sin's vulnerability to push his own desires? Especially since Ivan was right that Sin had finally come to terms with everything.

It was frustrating to realize that once again he'd done something that in the end was selfish when it came to Sin but at least now he knew not to do it again.

He wished he knew how to get it all right the first time but all he could do was recognize when he was wrong and adjust for the next time. Spending time around Sin and making sure he wasn't doing anything he shouldn't was going to be one long trial and error. "You're right about before," Boyd said with a faint, pensive frown. He glanced toward Sin and added, "Take care of him."

Ivan didn't respond and his steady gaze followed Boyd as the senior agent left the room and shut the door behind him.

Entre Nous

Boyd lay discreetly hidden not far from Schafer's château. He kept the binoculars trained on the staff moving about the area like busy insects; constantly trimming, mowing, weeding, cutting... Servants walked in and out of the side doors of the manor, often going out of their way to stay out of view from the grand driveway leading around the front. The compound did not have a fence but the expanse of mostly open grass

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that spread out in all directions would make it nearly impossible for anyone to approach unseen.

The place was immaculate. The greenery looked a shade more intense than Boyd had ever seen in nature before and each window on the three-story château gleamed in the ambient summer light. It was Boyd's third day of reconnaissance and it still struck him how beautiful the place was, from the architectural details to the theme that continued into the landscaping.

There was a large garden area in the back that even included what looked to be a maze created out of hedges, and a white marble fountain was the centerpiece to the courtyard that rested between the garden and the château. Smaller, ancillary buildings in the same style dotted the area around the garden, one of which Boyd knew held garden supplies.

He checked his watch briefly, noting that it was 12:16 pm, and returned his narrow-eyed gaze to the binoculars.

As expected, not long after that Julien wandered across the expansive lawn, heading toward the sculptured shrubbery near the northwest corner of the building. His short brown hair was ruffled and unkempt as usual and just as had happened the two days before, Boyd could see the head gardener, Thibault, gesturing angrily from across the way. Boyd was too far away to hear the exact words but the echo of the voice that made its way to him was irritated and impatient.

One of the several gardeners that worked on the lawn, Julien seemed perpetually late and discombobulated. In a way, the man reminded Boyd of a French gardener version of Owen. As far as Boyd could tell, Julien was relatively new to the staff. No one seemed to pay Julien much heed and when they did, they barely looked at him and only did so long enough to yell at him for doing something wrong.

Boyd wasn't certain why exactly everyone had such an issue with Julien except that he seemed mildly incompetent.

Julien nodded emphatically at Thibault, his head bobbing up and down repeatedly in an almost manic manner, and Thibault scowled and gestured rudely before disappearing around the corner of the house to work on his own projects. Julien waited until Thibault was out of view before he turned his back toward the house and rolled his eyes in an exaggerated, clearly annoyed manner that showed up even behind his thick-framed black glasses.

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That didn't last long before Julien's expression fell back to the lazy disinterest in the world that he seemed to default to and he got to work.

Boyd had spent the first two days determining his plan for the area and he'd finally decided that the best thing to do would be to impersonate one of the staff long enough to set explosives for a distraction and to extract the target.

Of course, he'd had to determine Schafer's schedule, which had been difficult from the outside-- at first Boyd had thought about trying to impersonate a staff member who worked inside but despite the large amount and size of the windows, Boyd could only see so much from his position and the domestic staff were moving around within hidden hallways too often for Boyd to pin down the mannerisms of any of them.

Julien was the closest to Boyd's body type and age among the staff who worked outside and with his tendency to mess up, if Boyd was caught doing anything odd it gave him more of an excuse.

Schafer's schedule within the house was a mystery to Boyd but he did see that the man was punctual to a fault when he moved in and out of the building.

At 3:00 pm every day, he came outside to speak in undertones to the head of his security, a hulking man who had probably come straight from the guards who had nearly killed Boyd and Sin back in the US. The man didn't wear identification like the staff did but Boyd had tried to read lips and was fairly certain his name was Rémy.

The place was under high scrutiny-- a variety of high-tech cameras aimed at every direction of the estate was augmented with enough professional mercenaries patrolling the compound on a tight schedule to make a quick extraction difficult without being caught.

At 3:05 pm, Schafer would briefly patrol the compound with Rémy; it was a quick stroll that took less than ten minutes and Schafer would disappear inside again until the next day.

Boyd knew that period of time was his only chance to be able to capture Schafer successfully so he started planning accordingly.

He zoomed the high-tech binoculars in far enough to see Julien's face and he studied the glasses and Julien's hairstyle once more, committing it to memory along with

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Julien's movements. He studied the man for the next three hours then turned his attention to Schafer once he appeared at 3 pm exactly. Once more, Schafer and Rémy strolled through the compound, and once more Schafer disappeared within the château by 3:15 pm.

Boyd calmly gathered his things and silently left to get supplies.

===

Knowing French and having learned an authentic Parisian accent from his mother worked wonders in blending in. No one looked at him twice or seemed to question his presence as Boyd walked through the streets of Paris.

The fact that Schafer had chosen to build his château in Vallée de la Loire had made the grandiose estate blend in, although as one traveled toward Paris, many places were still destroyed from the war.

Although Schafer's château was much closer to Orléans than Paris, Boyd's flight had brought him into the country through Paris, which had given him the opportunity to visit the large metro area to buy supplies.

More importantly, it meant that some of the staff members commuted, including Julien who had an apartment in Paris. Boyd didn't know why Julien didn't just live in Orléans but it ultimately didn't matter and it gave Boyd the opportunity to operate out of a city he at least knew a little.

In a way, it was strange to be back in Paris-- back in the city that had been where so many things started in Boyd's life. He went past Thierry's old hotel, now redesigned and remodeled under someone else's name, and he realized that it had been two and a half years since he'd been on that street.

A lot had happened in that time and if he'd walked down that block even a few months earlier, it was possible he would have still felt conflicted about how it had all turned out. But the sense of contentment he'd gained listening to Sin's heartbeat still hadn't disappeared and Boyd knew it never really would.

Despite all that had happened, he now truly felt at peace with himself, with his life; it was a sense of stability he'd never known he was missing until he felt it grounding him.

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Now when he looked back, it seemed like he had been unstable his entire life, that he'd never quite had the right footing and each time he'd started to catch his balance, something had thrown him off. Even walking past the hotel where he'd made the mistake that had ultimately given him valentine status, even knowing he was on a mission that could very well end in death, he felt serene.

He'd never felt such a lack of conflict within his mind, of over-analysis or worry; he wasn't confused or regretful or distressed... He didn't feel anything particularly strongly but it was different from the way it had once been, when he'd ignored or cut off emotions that he hadn't wanted to feel or he'd known would hurt him.

He wasn't avoiding anything; he was simply existing.

He couldn't deny the near sense of freedom he felt to be rid of all that self-doubt and confusion-- to instead be okay with where he was at, what he was doing, and to finally know where he stood in life. To finally feel like he understood perfectly what was important to him and to have shifted his priorities accordingly. To feel at peace.

Maybe the feeling wouldn't last forever but what he felt for Sin wouldn't change.

That calm contentment stayed with him even as he worked on locating supplies for the mission.

It took him nearly four hours to find the right wig to match Julien's appearance that was well-made and would appear like true human hair up close. By the time evening set in, Boyd headed toward Julien's apartment building.

The streets were crowded in some areas he had to pass through and more than once he had to avoid a group of people walking around taking up the majority of the sidewalk. He expertly moved through the crowds and finally was at an emptier street when he thought he felt someone watching him. He casually glanced over his shoulder and at first didn't see anything until he noted two younger women standing near each other smiling at him flirtatiously from across the street. He was just starting to look away as he turned the corner when he ran into someone.

An older woman was knocked back a few steps and hit the wall with a startled sound while the worn canvas bag she was carrying fell to the ground heavily. Boyd looked toward her, somewhat startled himself, and saw that she was definitely in her late eighties if not even early nineties. Her skin was wrinkled and pale but her eyes were a

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striking light blue that rivaled his mother's; the color stood out against her silver hair and she seemed to be in surprisingly good shape for her age.

"*Pardon, Madame,*" Boyd said automatically, feeling a little bad for nearly knocking over a woman who seemed impressively close to having lived a century. He crouched to pick up her bag.

"*Ce n'est pas grave,*" she replied amiably, although she seemed a little shaky as she straightened her clothing and glanced around furtively. He wondered if she was making sure no one else was going to appear to run into her as well.

He stood and held out her bag with a smile and eyebrows raised with a mild expression. "*C'est lourd,*" he observed, feeling the heaviness pull at his hand. "*Y a-t-il des poids à l'intérieur?*" He said the second part jokingly, as he knew she wasn't really carrying around a load of weights inside her bag.

She chuckled quietly and shook her head as she held out her hand. She looked Boyd in the face for the first time and she briefly went still, her eyes widening a hint as something enigmatic went through them. But it was there and gone so quickly that in the darkness it was hard to tell whether it had actually existed or whether it had just been the shadows surrounding them.

"*Seulement livres et papiers,*" she said with a smile, taking the canvas bag by the strap and putting it over her shoulder. She held the bag close against her side. "*Merci.*"

He nodded; the weight and shape of the items in the bag did seem more like books and papers than anything else. "*Je vous en prie,*" he said, although really she had nothing to thank him for but he wanted to be polite. He took a step backward, made sure he still had his own bag and everything with him, then smiled at her politely. "*Bonne nuit.*"

"*Bonne nuit,*" she replied, studying him again briefly, eyebrows drawing down again with a slightly odd look before she smiled distractedly and walked away.

Boyd checked to make sure he had all his items just in case she'd been a pickpocket; nothing was missing. He turned back in the direction he'd been walking and continued on his way to Julien's. It took him another twenty minutes to reach the building but he knew, based on his surveillance of Julien for the past few days, that it would be at least another hour before Julien made his way home.

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The apartment building Julien lived in was tall and skinny, looking similar to row houses he'd seen back in America in the general construction although not the architecture, and it was nearly indistinguishable from the identical buildings on either side.

Boyd waited around the corner for few minutes until he saw one of Julien's neighbors walking down the street as she always did at that time, presumably returning home from work. She was looking down at a small date book in her hand, flipping between pages and apparently checking her calendar.

He'd noticed that none of Julien's neighbors seemed to really know each other and didn't seem to interact much aside from the occasional nod.

He walked up to the front of the building and stopped at the main door; the place was securely locked and he didn't have the residential key needed to gain entry. He could have broken in but that would have raised alarms for Julien and the other residents so he went the easier route.

He stood to the side of the door, fumbling with his bag and searching through his pockets. He drew his eyebrows down in a mixture of confusion and distress as he started to dig through his bag roughly.

She approached and gave him only a cursory glance but when he explained that he thought he'd misplaced his keys, she dismissed him as unthreatening. He timed it so that he pulled out a set of keys and was starting to look for the correct key when she put her key in the door and unlocked it. The way he had started to reach for the door with confidence gave no indication that he didn't actually have a way to enter the building; that he wasn't actually supposed to be there.

She absently held the door open for him as she walked in and Boyd smiled at her gratefully. "*Merci.*"

"*De rien,*" she muttered before returning her attention to the date book and jogging up the set of stairs in front of her.

Boyd paused in the entry way and waited just a few seconds to make sure she had a good head start before he walked up the stairs as well, moving at a sedate pace until he heard the distant echo of her keys jangling as she opened her apartment door. Shortly after that, he heard a door shut and he continued up the next flight of stairs more quickly.

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He'd been able to determine from surveillance through the windows that Julien lived alone on the third floor, in the apartment overlooking the main street. Although he didn't know specifically what the apartment number was, it didn't take long to find the place based on the building's set up.

It took very little effort for Boyd to pick the lock and within seconds he was inside the dark apartment. He shut and locked the door behind him, then took a few minutes to move silently through the place, making sure no one was in there and there were no surprises. Satisfied that the apartment was empty, he checked his watch and sat down in a small, comfortable chair to the side of the room to wait for Julien to return.

Nearly thirty-five minutes passed before there was the quiet scrape then jingle of keys on the other side of the door. Boyd silently stood and moved over next to the door, on the side the door would be opening toward so he would initially be blocked from sight.

Julien opened the door and automatically looked in the other direction toward the light switch, which he absently flipped on before he shut the door without looking. He was just turning around when Boyd moved behind him and, with almost laughable ease, swiftly knocked him unconscious in one of the quicker ways Emilio had taught him. He caught Julien as the man fell, holding him carefully against himself as he strained his ears to make sure no one had heard anything. The building was silent around him and he'd caught Julien before he could thump against the floor.

Manhandling Julien up onto his shoulder and ignoring the spike of pain from his bad arm and all the bruises littering his torso, Boyd carried Julien into the bedroom where he set him down on the bed, then went to lock the door and grab his simple plastic bag before he returned. He expertly gave Julien a shot from one of his tranquilizer syringes, using enough that the man should be out for the next day at least. Just in case, he tied Julien up with some belts and put him in the closet, removing Julien's glasses first to make sure they didn't get lost or broken.

Boyd slept in Julien's apartment, staying near the closet so he would hear if the man happened to wake up. He ate some of Julien's food the next morning and stole Julien's uniform and work ID, pleased to see it all fit decently.

When he pulled his blond hair up and out of the way beneath the short brown wig and he put Julien's chunky black glasses on, then loosened his posture until he stood hunched forward, he thought it should be a fair enough approximation that no one would notice in the few hours that he was going to be there.

He checked on Julien again to make sure he was still unconscious and that there weren't any obvious medical issues. After he saw that Julien was fine, he grabbed

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Julien's work bag where he hid his own items beneath Julien's work tools and he headed out.

When he got to the château he came in from the back and was immediately stopped by two guards who checked his identification. He made sure to stay true to Julien's mannerisms and gait, keeping his eyes mostly trained on the grass and his expression bored. The guards looked at Boyd but let him pass without much scrutiny which was a good sign that the disguise should hold up long enough for the mission.

He sauntered his way across the grass, hefting the bag up further on his shoulder and looking around discreetly. There were four guards in his vicinity, including the two from before, and he knew that there would be even more on the other sides of the building as well as those monitoring the camera system and the others patrolling inside.

He casually shifted his gaze across the wall of the château, reacquainting himself with the placement of the landscaping and getting a closer view. Although his binoculars had given him stellar capability of zooming in, it was still good to see the places in person so he could tell if there would be anything obvious that would interfere with planting the explosives. Nothing stood out to him as a major issue so he continued toward the shed.

He turned the corner and nearly ran into Thibault, who looked over with a scowl and angry glare.

"You're late again!" Thibault roared in French as Boyd passed him and Boyd immediately ducked down and hurried faster toward his destination. Thibault threw his hands up, looking seriously pissed off as his face turned red. *"You useless--! If your father hadn't gotten you this job, I would fire you! Get to work!"*

Boyd nodded emphatically, nearly tripping over his own feet as he went to the shed.

Once out of view within the shed, he set the bag down and quickly hid a slim explosive with a timed detonator back in the corner beneath an old pile of tools that it looked like no one had used in years. He gathered a few supplies from the shed and walked out without spending much more time than a person would expect in there.

As he walked toward the main garden area, he realized he knew very little about gardening, especially for expensive areas that included sculptured landscaping. Although he'd researched a little and a certain amount was common sense, that was about the extent of his knowledge. Masquerading as Julien was going to be helpful in case he messed up but he was just hoping it wouldn't become an issue.

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He spent the next few hours out in the surprisingly warm, muted sunlight. After the initial bout of insults and irritation the several times he passed, Thibault became distracted by working on other projects and left Boyd alone. Boyd moved around the perimeter of the château, keeping his head down as he worked.

He started to get a headache from wearing the glasses. Although the prescription was low, his own eyesight was perfect but he hadn't had the luxury to find fake lenses that would fit perfectly in the frames and he hadn't wanted to risk buying glasses that wouldn't match. So he compensated by occasionally taking the glasses off to rub at his face as if to wipe away sweat, although he was really letting his eyes adjust back to normal now and then.

The landscaping gave him the perfect opportunity to plant explosives around the house and to be close enough to windows to see if he could overhear anything, although most of them were closed to keep out the heat of the day. He had to be discreet about placing the bombs, setting the bag down where the cameras and guards wouldn't oversee, pulling the explosive out at the same time as something more innocuous so it would hide the movement.

He worked casually, not once changing his mannerisms or moving too quickly.

By the time 3 pm rolled around, he had maneuvered himself until he was on the side of the château that he planned to use for the escape; straight out from there was the hidden vehicle. He needed a chance to loiter in the area until Schafer would come around the side during his stroll on the property, so Boyd took out a pair of gardening shears and started pretending to trim one of the sculptured bushes near him.

Adrenaline started to build within him in anticipation; he had to get this right, he had to properly pull off this mission or he would be returning to a swift death.

Guards strolled around the property on a regular basis and Boyd watched them out of the corner of his eye, senses on alert as his heartbeat quickened during his wait for Schafer to appear. Not even five minutes had passed before he felt someone's presence approaching quickly from the side. He looked over just in time to see Thibault storming up to him.

Without warning, Thibault hit Boyd hard on the back of the head, causing Boyd to nearly drop the gardening shears even as he automatically crouched down the way he'd seen Julien do.

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He had a heart-stopping moment where he thought Thibault had discovered that he wasn't Julien or that the man would have been able to tell it was a wig when he hit Boyd. But when Boyd looked over with one hand holding the shears loosely at his side, the other against the back of his head as if to protect it although in truth he was making sure the wig was still on properly, he saw Thibault glaring at him furiously.

"Are you trying to destroy that?" Thibault demanded in French, pointing furiously at the bush.

"No..." Boyd mumbled when he realized Thibault was waiting for a response, but even that bit of a reply was enough to make Thibault continue irately.

"Then what the hell were you doing?"

"...Trimming," Boyd said sheepishly, keeping his voice low and indistinct so he wouldn't sound too different from Julien.

"That wasn't trimming, that was shitting on a work of art," Thibault fumed loudly, brown eyes intensifying in the strength of his glare. *"You don't know what you're doing! This job requires far more delicacy than your bumbling hands can manage. If I'd left you alone, you would have caused hours of extra work fixing all your mistakes!"*

"I'm sorry..."

"I don't care if you're sorry! You're always sorry! You're the most pathetic excuse for a topiarist I've seen in my life, and I've had this job for twenty-seven years! If Monsieur Schafer had not been such good friends with your father--"

"Is there a problem here?"

The smooth voice cut in and Boyd looked over, realizing that Schafer and Rémy were approaching with narrowed eyes. Rémy was staring hard at Boyd while Schafer looked between Boyd and Thibault alertly, gaze intent.

Thibault jumped in surprise and immediately shook his head, briefly bowing forward deferentially. *"No, Monsieur Schafer. I was merely reprimanding my employee about a mistake..."*

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"*Who is this?*" Schafer asked keenly, shifting his stare toward Boyd, who was feeling frustrated with Thibault.

Although the man's argument had brought Boyd's target right to him, it was a bit of an issue since he'd had to set all the explosives on a timer. It shouldn't have been a problem, since Schafer was so punctual that Boyd had been able to time it perfectly. He had planned to apprehend the target further away from the building and a few minutes later than now. But now that Schafer was right here...

"*Julien Devereaux,*" Thibault replied.

"*Devereaux?*" Schafer echoed, eyes narrowing and mouth pulling down in a frown as he scrutinized Boyd. "*You're Jean-Michel's boy?*"

"Yes," Boyd said, ducking his head and feeling his thoughts race. He was acutely aware that he was standing only two feet from a bomb that was going to explode in a few minutes and that the last thing he had time for now was someone questioning his cover.

"*You don't look like him,*" Schafer said suspiciously and Rémy reached over, grabbing Boyd's chin and wrenching his face up.

"*He doesn't,*" Rémy agreed with a scowl.

He looked Boyd up and down, eyes narrowing on the gardening shears in Boyd's hand before he reached out and yanked the tool away, throwing it to the side out of Boyd's reach. He kicked Boyd's tool bag to the side as well, so it wasn't as easily accessible. Boyd's eyes flicked down briefly, making sure nothing had been exposed that shouldn't, and looked up again at Rémy with a wide gaze that he made confused and a little fearful.

Rémy turned to Thibault with his thick, dark eyebrows drawn intimidatingly over his eyes. "*Who approved his presence?*"

Thibault was looking between the three of them in growing confusion and alarm. "*Monsieur Schafer did, three weeks ago when Monsieur Devereaux requested it before he passed away...*"

"*Three weeks ago I was not in France,*" Schafer said curtly. "*I approved the boy based on Jean-Michel's recommendation but this boy does not look like him.*"

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"People always say I look more like my mom," Boyd offered, looking between all of them with slightly widened eyes, doing his best to appear innocent, like he didn't understand what was happening.

"Chantal has blue eyes, just as Jean-Michel did," Schafer said flatly as Rémy's fingers tightened on Boyd. Schafer's jaw set and he stared even harder at Boyd. *"Would you care to explain how you ended up with brown?"*

"I don't know," Boyd practically whined, bringing a hand up toward Rémy's wrist where he tried to pull the man's hand away. He didn't put much strength into it so he would continue to appear pathetic. *"Am I going to lose my job? Because I really need it..."*

"You'll lose a lot more than that if you're lying to us," Rémy promised darkly and Boyd stared into the man's eyes before darting his gaze toward Schafer, who was watching him mercilessly.

"I'm not," Boyd protested, twisting his face up. *"Dad asked that too and I don't know... You'd have to ask my mom."*

Schafer's eyes narrowed even further at the implication and Boyd's mind raced furiously. He casually glanced at his watch as he shifted his hand on Rémy's wrist and he felt his heartbeat skyrocket when he saw the time. He realized with alarm that it was less than a minute before the explosions would start and he was nowhere near where he had to be.

"We can go call her now," Boyd added, looking between all of them in apparent desperation. *"Would that help if you checked it all with her? I really don't want to be in trouble... My dad wanted me to have this job so bad and it's all I have left of him. If I can't even make it a month..."*

Boyd trailed off and let his eyes glisten briefly before he added pathetically, *"Please don't fire me, Monsieur Schafer. Please."*

Schafer's gaze flickered between uncertainty and suspicion before he glanced at Rémy. No words needed to pass between the two before Rémy released Boyd's chin, although he didn't step back and he seemed poised to attack if Boyd so much as twitched the wrong way.

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"You have one chance," Schafer warned as he stepped back. *"We'll see what Chantal has to say."*

Boyd let relief overcome his expression and he nodded emphatically. Schafer and Rémy started to turn while Thibault was staring at Boyd oddly and Boyd had to keep his expression completely unknowing of what was about to happen.

The first explosion suddenly rocked the compound from the other side of the château; the sound was deafening and the bushes around them shook from the shockwave through the building. Glass could be heard exploding and a huge plume of smoke and fire raced toward the sky.

Rémy immediately threw himself on Schafer, knocking him to the ground to protect him. Thibault shouted in alarm and looked around wildly while Boyd dropped to the ground and reached into his bag. He pulled out the tranquilizer gun, bringing it up and shooting Thibault in the neck in the same motion. Thibault staggered in surprise and crashed to the ground.

In the background, another explosion ripped through the air while people screamed in shock and fear.

"What the hell--" Schafer demanded furiously even as Rémy started to look over his shoulder to see what was happening.

Rémy just saw Boyd aiming the tranquilizer gun at him before Boyd pulled the trigger, hitting the man square in the back and causing him to drop heavily against Schafer. Boyd's hands were surprisingly steady as he grabbed an extra tranquilizer cartridge from the bag before he stood and kicked Rémy off Schafer, moving as quickly as possible.

Successive explosions went off, just enough lag in between to cause complete havoc. In the back of Boyd's mind he counted them down, knowing each second they were coming that much closer to the one right next to him.

Schafer looked up when Rémy's weight was removed; he only had a second to see Boyd's emotionless stare before Boyd shot him twice with the tranquilizer, just to make sure the man would stay unconscious.

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It was awkward trying to get a handle on Schafer's dead weight and as Boyd's heart thundered in his chest and adrenaline rushed through his system, he knew it was taking longer than it should.

As soon as he had Schafer thrown over his right shoulder, holding the man's legs firmly against his chest and keeping the tranquilizer gun in his hand at his side, Boyd took off sprinting toward the trees that hid his vehicle.

He ran as fast and hard as he could but Schafer was heavier than he'd anticipated and it slowed him down. Although his training had significantly improved his stamina and strength, in this situation it still wasn't enough. He couldn't adequately run while holding the other man, who was heavier and taller than he was, and the wounds he'd sustained on the previous mission didn't help matters.

He heard someone shout behind him, a different sound than the screams of fear, and out of the corner of his eye he saw some of the grass near him kick up. Over the cacophony behind him, he recognized the muffled sound of a gunshot and he looked over his shoulder to see where the guard was.

That was when the two bombs exploded in a row.

The next few seconds were confusing. The side of the château ripped apart from the sheer force of the explosion and a huge plume of flames ate through the landscaping, consuming the man where he stood and moving out through the wind. Almost immediately following that, the tool shed exploded to Boyd's left.

The sudden onslaught of sound deafened Boyd and the shockwave was like a truck hitting him from the side and behind. He was thrown to the ground like a doll tossed aside by a child and the wind was nearly knocked out of him.

Debris and burning pieces of wood and landscaping crashed around him in a shower. His hand ached, feeling crushed between the ground and Schafer's legs, which he hadn't released and his ears rang so loudly he couldn't hear anything else. His body hurt all over and he couldn't even tell exactly where or why. Something heavy abruptly hit his upper left back and the pain that violently ripped through him wrenched a cut off scream out of Boyd, his eyes squeezing shut briefly against the perfectly manicured grass brushing his lips.

He couldn't even understand what had happened; all he knew was that pain was reverberating through him powerfully.

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His mind went into shock and even as his ears rang loudly from the explosion, even as he was half-blinded, he took a few quick breaths then steeled his resolve. He scrambled to his feet and managed to maneuver to keep Schafer on his shoulder, his back and body screaming at him in the movement.

He started running again without giving himself the chance to think. All he knew was that he had to get Schafer to the car; he had to get them to the Agency plane that would be waiting for them. His arm tightened on Schafer's legs and he sprinted as fast as he could.

By the time he reached the vehicle, the pain grew stronger. When he tried to reach with his left hand toward his right pocket to get the keys without having to drop Schafer, his left side hurt enough that he couldn't help a twisted shout.

He grit his teeth and blinked back the pain; but he couldn't see out of his left eye, couldn't even understand if he was just blinded by blood or if something else was happening.

All he knew was something was wrong.

He couldn't move his neck or shoulders without pain ripping through him. He breathed heavily through grit teeth and managed to get the keys out and unlock the door. He tried to ignore everything but completing the mission and he moved around to the passenger side where he dropped Schafer against the seat.

It was the first time he'd seen the man since they'd escaped the fire and Boyd went completely still when he saw Schafer's back. Blood drenched it so thoroughly that the original color of the clothing was lost. A huge piece of twisted metal stuck out and was angled from Schafer's right side-- the same direction that had been on Boyd's left-- accompanied by smaller but still substantial shards of glass.

A portion of his clothing was gone and his skin was dark red, while part of Schafer's hair was singed.

Boyd felt his stomach drop.

His breath quickened and he automatically reached up, pulling Julien's glasses off. Blood shone dully on the frames and his skin felt painfully sensitive to the touch.

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He didn't need to see a mirror; didn't need to feel his back.

He understood why it hurt so much; why he couldn't see properly. He knew that his own back would mirror Schafer's. That he'd also been hit with burning debris.

Even realizing that, he didn't let himself think about it; he arranged Schafer as best he could to avoid injuring him further and shut the door behind him. He'd had to leave his bag behind so the only first aid kit he had was beneath the passenger seat and he knew there was no point. This was beyond the capability of the kit.

He was especially concerned about Schafer because if after everything the man died due to complications from being speared in the back, Boyd was going to be terminated anyway.

It was probably only adrenaline and shock that let him keep moving despite the pain. His hearing was muffled; even the roar of the engine was lost to the ringing in his ears.

He knew he'd been close to the explosion and he couldn't help feeling afraid that maybe he'd been too close-- maybe all the damage would be permanent. Maybe he would never see or hear properly again.

Yet once again, he barely even acknowledged the thought before he concentrated solely on getting to the rendezvous point.

Even so, driving was made more difficult by the situation. His neck spiked in pain whenever he turned his head. He had to keep his upper body away from the seat of the vehicle because when he tried to lean back he could feel glass or metal or something digging into him until it felt like his nerves were being frayed. His left eye was still blinded by blood and his upper left arm and shoulder sent a shard of agony through him each time he moved them.

He felt increasingly shaky and weak, his thoughts becoming scattered, and he distantly wondered if he and Schafer would bleed out before they could even reach help.

Boyd didn't remember much of the drive. He was focused on the route he needed to take but each second made it that much harder to ignore everything, to keep his attention on driving and not on the pain or glancing toward Schafer's increasingly ashen face.

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He looked over briefly and could see that his left upper arm was injured, the sleeve burned away in some places and skin beneath red and bloody, speckled with shards of glass, metal and dirt. When he had to glance in the rear view mirror at one point he could see that blood ran down the left side of his face from multiple wounds.

He didn't even fully realize that his thoughts were becoming less coherent; that his reaction time was slowing. The car started drifting off the road at one point and he almost didn't realize it in time before a sign loomed before them. Alarm fought its way through Boyd's sluggish mind and he jerked the steering wheel, the car swerving back onto the street with squealing tires. The movement rocked Schafer against the door and made Boyd's left side scream at him.

Boyd's eyes widened and adrenaline rushed through him with the pounding of his heart. His gaze darted around frantically and in confusion, his fingers gripping the steering wheel almost painfully. His body shook and he could hardly think properly-- he could hardly even understand that he was losing his ability to concentrate.

Fear crawled through him and he wondered if he'd make it.

Boyd drew in a deep breath and narrowed his eyes, focusing intently on the road and hoping it would be enough.

By the time he reached the destination and put the car in park, Boyd distantly realized he was breathing heavily and the vision in even his good eye was strained and darkening. He slumped forward against the steering wheel, the movement causing his back to spear in agony and he could feel blood slick and hot running down his back, his arm, his face.

A helpless, pained groan escaped him despite himself and he felt overwhelmed for a moment.

He hurt so much, he just wanted it to stop...

He was just gathering the strength to drag himself and Schafer out when the door was suddenly yanked open. He looked over quickly and had to grit his teeth in pain when the abrupt move cut through him. He couldn't see very well but he did feel hands on him, pulling him out of the car even as the other door opened and Schafer was grabbed as well.

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At first, Boyd tensed and planned to fight; the world was moving confusingly around him and he couldn't understand what was happening or who had him.

But when he blinked the blood out of his eyes enough to focus, he recognized a fellow agent.

He couldn't tell if anyone was asking him anything or what was happening; the moment he realized he'd made it to transport and they could handle it from there, he finally acknowledged the pain, the weakness of the blood loss, and what had just happened. The adrenaline that had been thundering through him faded away and he shuddered along the length of his body, his hands shaking and unseeing eyes falling shut.

Boyd didn't even know if anyone was holding him before he passed out.

===

Darkness flashed in and out of his sight. Light was there and gone. Pain reverberated through him and he didn't even know if he was groaning or making noise.

Dull, overwhelming ringing in his ears that denied any voices, any sound.

Limbs that tried to twitch and were held still. Eyes that struggled to open a slit then fell heavily shut, as if the weight of the world were pushing them down.

Thoughts that moved too slowly, too disconnectedly.

Blurred faces appearing and disappearing in glimpses. Hitched then even breathing, a distant feel.

The slow deadening of the ringing, replaced by silence, replaced by the muffled rise and fall of voices.

The knowledge that something was wrong but not the capability of understanding or remembering what.

Time that alternately stretched and stilled.

Quiet beeping of machines and tiredness that dragged him down. Constricted movement and sight. Lights and faces that stared down at him and, eventually, the understanding of what had happened.

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Darkness moving through again.

===

Boyd moved slowly down the hallway, feeling exhausted and sore.

Even nearing two weeks past the day he'd returned from France, his body was still stiff and they'd placed his left arm in a sling to minimize his movements.

His face was still sensitive to air but he'd been lucky, considering the circumstances.

He had what amounted to a bad sunburn on the left side of his face and left arm and a partial thickness burn where he'd been hit on his back near his *Mea Maxima Culpa* tattoo. The sensitive skin was slowly starting to heal where the wound would most likely scar but considering the fact that he was already covered in stitches and small wounds from debris, an extra scar didn't bother him.

The fact that Julien wore glasses ended up helping. As it was, the larger shards of shrapnel had cut him just below his eyebrow and on the upper part of his cheek, while little pieces of glass had shattered across the left side of his face.

He'd managed to get through the mission without permanent damage and his downtime due to injury was not estimated to be terribly long. However, with the paper-thin hospital gown, the sling, the reddened skin and the bandages over the wounds on his face, he looked rather like an invalid. At least he got to wear pants beneath the gown and it wasn't open in the back.

Maybe that was why the nurse originally hadn't wanted him walking around. He was just glad she'd finally relented and had given him Sin's room number, even if no one would really tell him how Sin was doing.

It was late evening by the time he was able to make the trip to Sin's room. He ignored the curious looks he got when he walked the hallways of the medical building; it probably wasn't every day that a level 10 field agent stumbled around in a sling with bandages on his face.

When Boyd finally reached the correct room number, he hesitated only briefly before he knocked on the door.

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There was a long pause before the door swung open and Sin looked out at him. He was shirtless and had a bandage over his abdomen and shoulder but other than that, he looked fine. He was no longer pale and trembling from blood loss and his eyes weren't glazed over with pain. If anything, Sin looked as gorgeous as ever as his pale green eyes narrowed slightly and his expression sharpened as he gave Boyd an intense sweeping once over.

Sin shifted to the side wordlessly, his silky black hair falling to the side of his face with the motion, and he gripped the doorknob as he waited for Boyd to enter.

The relief Boyd felt at seeing Sin's healthiness was intense and he couldn't help looking him over once more, just to make sure he was seeing Sin correctly; to make sure he hadn't missed anything. He didn't entirely hide the relief from his expression but he made sure not to react as strongly as he wanted.

"How are you feeling?" Boyd asked once he was inside the room.

Sin shut the door and hesitated a moment before turning to Boyd entirely once again. His full lips were turned down slightly as he ran a hand through his hair. "Fine. I'll be discharged soon. The wound to my abdomen didn't permanently damage anything."

Sin frowned slightly and shook his head, looking away before his gaze seemed to automatically return to Boyd's face. He reached out hesitantly and brushed the tips of his fingers along the bandage on Boyd's face before he quickly withdrew and turned towards the bed.

"Good," Boyd replied, deciding not to comment on the brief touch. He knew he probably looked pretty ridiculous, wearing a sling and partially bandaged up like he was, but he didn't care. He absently studied Sin's strong back but he made himself shift his gaze away almost immediately.

There was the briefest of pauses before Boyd asked, "Where exactly were you shot? I couldn't tell before where all the blood was coming from."

Sin sat on the bed and shrugged, indicating himself with a faint, nearly lifeless gesture. "Shoulder, abdomen, upper thigh. If it wasn't for all of the blood loss I think I may have been fine. I feel stupid for being injured the way I was, for not being strong enough to keep going."

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Sin scowled and didn't look up as he picked at the thin linen pants he wore. "But that fucking Intel screwed us. That mission was practically suicide. He nearly had an army in there."

"You're right; it was," Boyd agreed. "I still don't know what happened. But about the rest - don't be ridiculous, Hsin."

Boyd watched him more seriously, studying the way Sin fidgeted and the way he hunched forward a little. Boyd's eyebrows drew down as best he could with a bandage over one and he shook his head slightly. "You were a lot stronger than anyone else would have been in your place. Even with severe blood loss and nearly falling unconscious, you were still dispatching almost more people than I was and I was completely fine. If it hadn't been for you, neither of us would have gotten out of there."

"And if it wasn't for you, I'd be dead," Sin replied, looking up finally to meet Boyd's eyes. Sin searched Boyd's expression, running his gaze along the planes of his partner's injured face. "Why did you come back? You could have been killed and after we came back, you almost were-- Carhart told me what happened, that you're on probation now, that your mother practically sent you on a suicide mission."

Boyd was caught by Sin's stare and he had to make himself look away, to make sure he wouldn't accidentally get lost in the vivid green of Sin's eyes. He looked down at the string Sin had been playing with on his pants.

"I wasn't going to let you die," Boyd said resolutely. "I abandoned you before. I'm not going to do that again."

There was a brief, charged silence and this time Sin didn't look away. His lips moved but no sound came out and he frowned slightly before clearing his throat. "I won't put you in that position again. I promise."

Boyd shook his head the slightest bit; just enough for his hair to shift against the sides of his face. "Don't put undue stress on yourself," he said, taking a moment to make sure he wouldn't give away too much when he looked up again. He met Sin's eyes and was unable to look away this time with Sin watching him so intensely; the guilt and shame were clear in his beautiful features and Boyd felt his heart twist in response.

Boyd's voice and expression softened of their own accord. "You're human, Hsin. If something happens, whether you mean it to or not, it's okay. I just want you to tell me again like you did this time. That's all that matters to me."

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Sin shrugged and didn't look entirely convinced that he wasn't responsible for the whole situation but he didn't say anything more on the topic. Instead he focused on Boyd's face, on the bandages, and his eyebrows drew together. "How long will it take you to recover?"

"I have a few more days to a week here, depending on how everything goes," Boyd replied as he shrugged with his good shoulder, not knowing how Sin knew but glad he didn't have to explain everything. Maybe Carhart told Sin about the mission's outcome and Boyd's injury as well.

"I'm basically fine at this point but they're a little worried about where I was hit in the back; I guess they want to keep me under observation. The stitches and skin graft should take care of everything but they want to make sure I have full mobility and there are no complications. But otherwise, once the stitches are removed I'll pretty much be back to normal. There may be a short delay where they have me do some physical therapy to make sure everything's okay but I should be back to active duty soon."

Sin nodded, his frown deepening and he stood up again to move closer to Boyd. This time he didn't hesitate to touch the bandages but he still did so gingerly before trailing his fingers down until they also brushed the unbandaged part of Boyd's face.

Boyd watched Sin, not moving away and not leaning into the touch even though he wanted to. With Sin that close it was difficult not to reach up and touch him too; not to run his fingers through that silky black hair or even to pull Sin down for a kiss. He'd thought Sin was going to die, thought he'd lost him, and knowing he hadn't made the intensity of his feelings skyrocket this close to his former lover.

But Boyd knew he couldn't react to that feeling, especially since Sin was looking at him with intensity and guilt shadowing his features. Instead, he watched Sin calmly, wanting Sin to know he was okay with being touched but also taking care not to show his desire.

"They're going to get rid of the scars?" Sin asked, dropping his hand once again.

"The main ones-- on my face and back when they can," Boyd agreed, a humorless smile pulling at the side of his lips and his right eyebrow quirked. "They don't think I'd make a good valentine otherwise."

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Sin didn't look too surprised by the explanation and he smiled slightly. "Even if their reasoning is for their own purposes, I can't say that I'm going to complain about your face not being disfigured."

"Hey, maybe I'll look dashing with scars," Boyd said lightly with a faint smirk. "No one is even considering this possibility."

Sin just shook his head and gave Boyd a mild half-smile. "You're ridiculous."

Boyd smiled faintly at Sin then sighed, becoming more serious. "Honestly, I'm not surprised. Even if they didn't want me as a valentine, it would be hard to blend in for my normal job if they left all the cuts and scars on my face, and the burn scar on my back would probably be inconvenient too. But I wouldn't care even if they left me as is."

Sin raised his eyebrows slightly at Boyd. "Why? Tired of level 10 field agents being sucked in by your good looks?"

Shaking his head, Boyd didn't hide his brief amusement as he smiled faintly. The expression faded as he looked at Sin more seriously, answering honestly. "It's because it's the first time in my life I don't regret anything."

He watched Sin sincerely, frowning slightly. "Even if they'd terminated me, I would do it all over again. I feel like for once I know without a doubt I did the right thing. And even if it had all been worse-- even if I looked in the mirror and all I saw were scars, even if people stared at me oddly from now on, I wouldn't be ashamed. I would feel more proud than anything, to know I can get it right sometimes."

Sin stared at him silently, his fingers curling into loose fists as he seemed to turn the words over and over in his head. He once again started to speak, stopped himself and said finally, "Well I'm glad that won't be necessary."

Boyd smiled in return. Silence fell between them briefly until Boyd said, "Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Sin's face drifted back into his typically serious expression and he nodded. "Thank you."

"Thank you for trusting me," Boyd returned, studying Sin. His golden brown gaze was intent on Sin and without pretense, and his lips drew down slightly. "When you told me what was happening."

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Sin's broad shoulders rose in a shrug and he frowned slightly. "I nearly didn't but it wasn't because I don't trust you. I had a feeling-- something... something Kassian said to me from Canada, it made me realize that you would likely risk your life trying to come back for me but I never thought you'd actually abort the mission."

Boyd nodded; Kassian must have told Sin how Boyd had tried to chase after him. "Given my past track record, I can see why you hadn't expected that."

Sin nodded and he stared at Boyd with his intense hawk-like gaze. His mouth parted slightly and his eyes narrowed once again as if he were trying to see through Boyd, to figure him out, but then Sin looked away again. "The past doesn't matter anymore."

"Yeah," Boyd agreed, watching Sin thoughtfully. "I think you're right." There was a brief moment of mutual silence before Boyd glanced toward the door. "Anyway, I should probably get back. The nurse didn't really want to let me go in the first place so she's probably waiting for me."

Sin didn't look surprised. "Get better."

"I have to," Boyd said, gaze sparking in mild mischief. "Otherwise I'll never get to see this mythical Grover Books and that would be truly unfortunate."

Sin gave him a half-smile that looked tired but genuine. "You will."

"Good." Boyd smiled again. "I'll see you later then."

He hesitated for only a moment longer before leaving the room.

Circles

"I missed you."

Sin's gaze rose from the television and he looked over at Ivan.

His grey eyes were intense behind his wire framed glasses, expression serious as he studied Sin. Ivan shrugged slightly and unfolded his legs from beneath him, glancing back at the television where an old episode of the show Epicenter was playing quietly. It

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was a post-apocalyptic show that had stopped filming abruptly in 2007 when several of the main cast members were killed in the bombs that had gutted Los Angeles.

"Did you think I would die?" Sin asked, studying Ivan's face. They'd spent enough time together in the past two months for Sin to become accustomed to reading the other man's expressions and now there was something troubled about Ivan's eyes, about the way his thin lips pursed together tightly.

"No. I don't think the Agency would let you die until they decided that they're done with you," Ivan replied honestly as he adjusted the thin, slightly threadbare t-shirt that he wore. The bare remnants of an anarchy emblem were vaguely visible on it.

Sin smirked slightly and shook his head. "They can't exactly fight a bullet in my gut. An eighth of an inch more and I would have bled out or died of sepsis before even returning to the compound."

Ivan nodded in agreement. "But once I knew they had you here..."

He let the sentence trail off and Sin looked at him oddly. "What's really on your mind?"

"Well." Ivan looked at the television again, his eyes trained on the spunky female lead as she miraculously ran past a hail of bullets unscathed. "I'd heard they kept you in the lab building for a week before moving you to the main medical building."

Sin's eyebrows rose and he sat up slightly at this information. "I don't remember that. Who told you that?"

Ivan frowned and idly watched the events unfolding on the television. The female character had somehow managed to make a car explode with a single bullet from her 9mm. "I went to see how you were doing and I was told you'd been transferred. I thought to the recovery building but they said it wasn't so. I asked the nurses in the Tower and one of them mentioned that they hadn't been involved in the transfer, that guards retrieved you and she told me that one of them had mentioned the lab. This was in the first couple of days, though-- right after you became stable."

Sin rubbed his chin thoughtfully, taking in the information but not knowing what to make of it. He had virtually no memory of anything that had happened before he'd woken up in the medical building. He'd wondered if they'd kept him in an induced coma for some reason but no one had explained and unsurprisingly, he'd gotten no answers.

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"Do you buy into all of those conspiracy theories about the lab?" Sin asked finally, shaking his head and deciding not to dwell on it.

Ivan smirked at him slightly. "Look who you're talking to. I'm King Conspiracy Theorist."

"Did you think they were going to terminate me and use my body for some kind of experimental research or something?" Sin inquired curiously, not appearing very disturbed by the idea.

"I don't know what I thought," Ivan replied with a slight air of indignation, as though he thought Sin were mocking his concerns. "But despite my belief that the Agency would keep you alive at all cost-- I started worrying about what the cost would be. And I started worrying about the why-- why do they keep reviving you, why do they keep going through so much trouble for you-- why don't they just terminate you or let you die since you have a tendency to be a liability?"

Sin made a face at that. "Thanks, Ivan."

The R&D agent smiled slightly. "You know that's how they think, Hsin. I just wonder if there's not something more going on sometimes. Between you and them. Some link that we don't know about..."

The question was a valid one but Sin had no idea what such a link could be other than the fact that he was a phenomenally good soldier. But even then, he had his flaws and he fucked up a lot on missions. Each question just led to more questions and Sin highly doubted they would ever figure out the Agency's motives.

"Anyway," Ivan went on when Sin didn't reply. "I got worried during that time. There was no word on you and no one knew anything, not even General Carhart. I'd wondered if you would disappear entirely or even for months like last spring and the possibility made me realize how much I would miss you."

Once again, Sin didn't reply. He didn't know what to say.

When it'd first become obvious that Ivan had feelings for him, it had been startling and confusing. But then that had lapsed into acceptance even if he'd never known whether he would ever be able to feel the same way.

It was difficult for Sin to understand his feelings or what they meant or what they wanted him to do but he'd eventually pushed along and stopped thinking so hard about it all.

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He'd actually started enjoying spending time with Ivan and looking forward to their outings. Sin didn't know if that would have eventually led to him wanting an actual relationship with Ivan but he'd figured it was possible at some point in the future.

Now that possibility was gone.

In the past few weeks he'd realized that there would always be only one person he wanted to be with in that way. One person he would ever have those kinds of intense feelings for.

Unaware of his thoughts, Ivan stared into Sin's pale green eyes and gave him a quiet smile before leaning forward to press their lips together.

Ivan's lips were cool, soft, and when he slid his tongue into Sin's mouth, Sin could taste the artificially sweet pomegranate juice that they'd drank a while ago.

A low exhale escaped Ivan's mouth when Sin's tongue languidly returned the wet caress. Ivan pulled himself up slightly, shifting to gingerly straddle Sin's lap, ever mindful of the still-sensitive wounds even if Sin had all but forgotten that they existed until he saw the fresh scars.

The kiss was like a slow fire that gradually built up until the sensation caused Sin's entire body to start burning. The heat spread through him and centered between his muscular thighs, arousal making itself known by the sudden tightness of his cargo pants. One of his hands unconsciously slid up the back of Ivan's over-sized t-shirt as the other one dipped down into the loose waistband of Ivan's faded jeans, finding that the other man wore no underwear.

Sin's fingers extended and then squeezed Ivan's tight ass, feeling his dick pulse in response to the feel of it.

In some ways Ivan's body was so much like Boyd's. It wasn't as sleekly muscled but they were both so smooth, like the cool surface of a porcelain statue but still so undeniably masculine despite having limbs that were long and slender and graceful.

Sin lost himself in the sensation of slow wet kisses, cool skin and the fall of silky blond hair. He let himself fall backwards slightly on the sofa as his cargo pants were deftly undone, lifting his hips so that they could be slid down and groaning when the feel of material against material was replaced with flesh to burning, aroused flesh.

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His mind went blank, vision darkening as the feel of swollen lips returned and as his cock was simultaneously pressed against another cock, as long slim fingers encircled both erect lengths and jerked them off together.

Sin was only aware of mindlessly thrusting up into the cavern of a firm grip, of his body tensing up as his cock was jerked faster, of that deliciously skilled hand milking his dick in a near massage.

Sin's head fell backwards against the back of the sofa as his lips parted, a jumble of sounds and words escaping as he was touched in a way he hadn't been touched in over a month.

And just as he was feeling himself reach the brink of an orgasm, the hand abruptly stilled and pulled away entirely.

Confused and disoriented, Sin opened his eyes and looked up nearly blindly at first, still half lost in his own chaotic world of pleasure.

Ivan stared at him silently, his face drawn and eyes narrowed before the R&D agent shifted entirely and got off Sin's lap.

"What?" Sin asked, baffled, ignoring the desire to get himself off as his hard dick strained between his legs painfully. "What the hell?"

"You were thinking about Boyd," Ivan said evenly, pulling up his jeans.

"I--" Sin's erection immediately began to die and he automatically lifted his hips to yank up his own pants. "No I wasn't."

Ivan's neutral expression didn't change although he did raise an eyebrow. "Then why did you say his name?"

Sin stood up and turned away slightly, his back stiff as he zipped his cargo pants and fixed the button. Discomfort made him defensive even as he racked his brain for the events from the last several moments. He didn't entirely remember everything that he'd said but he couldn't deny that it was possible.

"I don't remember saying his name," Sin said roughly, his fingers moving stiffly as he fixed his clothes. "I'm sorry if I did."

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Ivan didn't respond for a long moment and he simply stared at Sin's back with a blank expression although his jaw was tense. He turned away and walked to the kitchen area where he leaned against the counter and stared at an empty jug of juice.

"You lied to me, Hsin."

Sin turned around and shook his head, black hair falling into his eyes as he scowled. "I didn't."

"Yes you did," Ivan replied with an edge to his tone, guarded expression giving way to disappointment. "You told me you wouldn't use me as your Boyd substitute and that if that's what it turned into, you would tell me that it's not me you want."

Sin looked away as his eyebrows drew together. Guilt ebbed away at his defensiveness. "I'm not... trying to hurt you."

"I know you're not," Ivan replied evenly although he averted his steel-colored eyes and focused on the jug once again. "But we've only had sex twice, we've fooled around a handful of times. Not much has happened between us physically and if you were thinking about him the first time and thinking about him now, there isn't much left in between for you to have been focused only on me. And that pisses me off. I'm not your fucking Boyd blow up doll, Hsin."

Sin winced and he sat back down on the sagging worn sofa, his shoulders sinking as he leaned forward to put his head in his hands. He dug his fingers in his hair and gripped the strands in frustration as he closed his eyes. "I'm not doing this intentionally, Ivan. I just don't know what the fuck to do. I don't know how to move on and I don't know if I even want to."

This time there was no pause and Ivan demanded in a skeptical tone, "*Why?*"

Sin shrugged woodenly. "Why not?"

"Because he's immature and selfish," Ivan replied bluntly, his thin lips turning down into an annoyed frown. "I know you had your fair share of mistakes but from what I've heard of your relationship, as little as you've told me, it seems to me that he expected things from you, dumped you when he didn't get them, then started screwing someone else and rubbed it in your face despite the fact that he knew you still wanted to be with him. I can't even begin to comprehend what you find desirable about him."

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Sin looked up at Ivan and frowned. "You're just saying that because you're angry. You don't know him well enough to make that claim."

Ivan scoffed and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes with a low groan. "Maybe I'm oversimplifying things but I'm saying it because I'm your friend, just like I'm sure his friends said you were a jackass for sleeping with Annabelle Connors. But because that had just happened, he should have known how it would make you feel to throw his new sex life into your face. All the technicalities, all the, 'well we were broken up at the time,' mean shit. He knew it would hurt you and if he didn't, then he's an idiot."

Sin stood up and walked closer to Ivan, drawing his dark eyebrows low over his vivid green eyes. He took in Ivan's slight frown, the tense way he was holding himself and the overly aggressive way he was cleaning his glasses with the hem of his t-shirt. Sin had no doubts that Ivan was resentful and he had every right to be but even then, Ivan's intense gaze didn't appear spiteful. His words were sharp but his voice was genuine-- he really seemed to believe what he was saying and Sin couldn't necessarily say all of it was untrue.

"I'm very well aware of what happened between me and Boyd, I don't need you to reiterate it. And that situation doesn't define him entirely. If it wasn't for Boyd, I wouldn't have ever come to the point where I'd be sitting here with you at all. He was the first person to ever make an attempt to get to know me and the first person to make me feel like I could really be a normal human and not a freak or a monster. All the shit that happened after that doesn't change that."

Ivan didn't argue the point and Sin continued. "It doesn't change that I still want him, I still want to be with him, I still feel like the fucking air has been sucked out of the room when he walks in and I still think about him all the time." Sin broke off before he could finish the train of thought. All their arguing, all the hurt feelings and bitterness, none of it changed that he still wished that things could be the way they'd been in Monterrey.

He wished he could wake up in the early morning hours and see the beginnings of sunlight streaming through the window and shining on Boyd's smooth skin, on his golden hair. Sin still wished he could see Boyd's sleepy smile when his eyes finally opened and he wished Boyd would look at him that way again.

Sin pushed the thoughts aside. "I can't explain it and I'm sorry if I'm being cruel by saying this to you but you wanted me to be honest." He stopped talking and balled his hands into fists as aggravation built inside him. "I'm sorry for being this way but there's

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something between me and Boyd that I can't ignore and I can't deny that I still want to be with him."

Ivan didn't break eye contact this time and he didn't try to shield his expression from Sin. He just tilted his head to the side, ash blond hair tumbling across his forehead, and stared into Sin's eyes as if he was searching his soul for answers or perhaps for untruths.

The moment stretched for a long time and finally Ivan just shook his head with a low sigh. "I can't even be angry with you. I saw this all coming. I'd have been an idiot not to. I just wished it wouldn't have."

Ivan turned to one of his cabinets, pulling it open and looking inside. His face was hidden from view and when he spoke again, his tone was mild and not accusatory. "I just don't see why you bothered starting anything romantic with me. I'm fine being friends with you even if I want more. I told you that from the start."

"Because..." Sin toyed with the hem of his long sleeved t-shirt, running his thumb along the fraying thread. "Because I get along so well with you. I have more in common with you. And I think you understand me better than Boyd does sometimes."

Ivan removed a box of something and set it on the counter. It was a microwavable meal of some kind. He stared at it and didn't move to do anything else. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he's changed since we first met. When everything went bad between us, some things he said and did made it seem like he didn't understand me at all." Sin frowned as he tried to pinpoint the moment where things had started to change.

"It seemed like at the point where he became more sure of himself and less dependent on our relationship, he began to care only about himself and what he wanted. But regardless of that, I began to accept our new situation and after coming to terms with my own ridiculous dependency, I thought that I'd get over it all. So when I met you and we became friends, I was happy. I enjoy spending time with you. In some ways it's easier to be around you because you're so upfront about things and I always know where you stand. There's no drama even now, when with anyone else there likely would be."

Ivan smirked at that and Sin just shrugged in response.

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"But then he risked his life to save me and any notion of moving on disappeared. It was such a stupid thing for him to do but just the fact that he did it... I don't know. I can't explain it. I don't know how," Sin said roughly, his lips curling down as he tried to find the words.

Ivan began opening the box with an unimpressed arch of his eyebrows. "He's your partner. Why is it so impressive that he saved you?"

Ivan took the meal out of the box; it looked like some kind of dried noodles and sauce. He added water and shoved it in the microwave, hitting a button as he looked at Sin expectantly. The hum of the microwave dominated the room as Sin struggled to figure out a response.

"Because for a while I doubted whether or not I was more important to him than his goals. I'm uncomfortable with his desire to move ahead in the Agency and during his training it seemed to me that those things were more important than me. I began to wonder if his entire personality was changing. He seemed very self-involved and I felt like I didn't know him anymore."

Ivan nodded slightly as the microwave beeped loudly. He opened the door and looked at the steaming bowl of noodles. "And then he botched the mission to save you and changed all of that. Now you know it's the same old Boyd and selfish Boyd was just a kiddy phase as he came out of his shell. Kind of like when a teenager suddenly becomes a cool kid and forgets all of his old friends for a while."

Sin raised his shoulders in another shrug, ignored the sarcasm and pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket. He set it on the counter and pulled one out, caressing the white surface of the cigarette with his index finger as he fixed Ivan with an unflinching but questioning stare. "Do you hate me now?"

Ivan looked at the cigarettes and said instead, "I thought you were quitting?" When Sin just shrugged again, Ivan gave him a half-smile. "You should learn to give up things that are bad for you."

Sin extracted a pack of matches from his pocket and struck one, the flame flaring up as he brought it to the tip of his cigarette. The cherry glowed brightly as Sin inhaled deeply, eyes drifting close for a moment before he exhaled and the smoke drifted out of his mouth, moving between he and Ivan.

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"We're both fucked up in our own way. It's not like it's just him. His little buddies likely believe I'm bad for him too but it doesn't matter. Even if I decide to tell him anything, I don't think he plans on getting back together with me. I just don't think you and I should sleep together while I'm preoccupied with somebody else. I'm not one for casual sex anyway and I don't think you are either."

Ivan didn't say anything in response but he did look at Sin again and resumed his searching analysis of Sin's face and expression.

"I understand if you don't want to see me anymore," Sin said finally, pushing away from the counter.

"No."

Sin paused and looked at Ivan again.

"We can still be friends." Ivan focused on his microwave meal as he tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes as a thoughtful expression crossed his thin face. "But I want to be alone for now."

Sin exhaled another slow explosion of smoke and nodded slightly, meeting Ivan's eyes once more before turning away. As he walked out of the loft, Sin couldn't help feeling a dull sense of self-loathing that he'd yet again severed a connection, and this time with someone who had done nothing wrong at all.

He wanted to turn back and apologize again and again but he didn't. He didn't say anything else and the door shut firmly behind him.

Honey Trap

They sat on opposite sides of the table but Sin still felt like his father's presence was almost suffocatingly close. He tried to keep his almond-shaped green eyes on the holographic image that shimmered between them but he couldn't ignore the way Emilio's gaze burned into him.

Sin wet his lips and shifted in the chair, tapping his fingers against the glass table as he scanned the perimeter of the conference room. Carhart was standing off to the side as

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he spoke to Jacob, a highly ranked R&D agent who was known to possess a nearly perfect photographic memory. He was tall, lithe and had a combination of spiky black hair and complete tattoo sleeves that Sin was hoping his father would take interest in, but he didn't.

Emilio completely ignored Carhart, Jacob and even the holographic image of a raven-haired woman who was yet to be named; instead, he stared at his son without even seeming to blink. It was starting to become unnerving.

Sin spun his chair slowly to the side, watching Carhart impatiently and willing the briefing to start. He had no idea why both he and his father were involved in it or what was going on at all. Boyd wasn't there and neither were Jeffrey, Owen or Ryan which mean that this wasn't unit exclusive.

Sin glanced at Emilio discreetly and his father puckered his lips, quirking his eyebrows.

Sin scoffed and shook his head, looking away again.

"How long do you think you're gonna be able to ignore me?" Emilio asked casually, leaning across the table and arching an eyebrow at Sin.

"I'm not ignoring you," Sin replied flatly. "I'm willing you to go back under your rock."

Emilio's eyes narrowed and his lip curled. The brief motions were Sin's only warning before Emilio shoved his arms through the holographic screen and yanked Sin halfway across the table, gripping his t-shirt in both fists as he glared into his son's face. The holograph shimmered around them, blinking rapidly as they disrupted the signal.

"And how long do you think I'm gonna let you talk to me like that, boy?"

Sin glared at Emilio darkly, his lips pulling back in a sneer. "Get your hands off me."

Emilio smiled at him but it was a cold expression, a dangerous one, which was only emphasized when his black bangs fell into his face, shielding his eyes temporarily. "You think you can take me, boy?"

Sin tensed in Emilio's grip but he didn't move.

"I taught you everything you know, *mijo*. If I wanted to kill you right now, you'd be dead."

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Sin's teeth grit, his eyebrows lowering over the pale green eyes that mirrored Emilio's. "Get. The fuck. Off me."

Emilio just pulled him closer until the tips of their noses were touching, silky black hair intermixing as Emilio murmured, "You're lucky I have a soft spot for you, *mijo*. The last man to disrespect me the way you do on a regular basis drowned in his own blood after I ordered him to cut his own wrists."

Sin stiffened and he jerked back abruptly but Emilio's grip didn't loosen. They stared at each other but this time Sin's gaze fluctuated between fury and uncertainty. "You lie."

The cold smile on Emilio's well-formed mouth widened, the scar through his lip becoming more prominent. "I told you I changed, boy. In more ways than one."

Sin shook his head and Emilio yanked him even closer, brushing their lips together briefly before shoving Sin down into his chair again violently. Sin's back slammed against the hard plastic surface and the chair slid backwards away from the table with the force.

Emilio smirked at Sin but none of the playfulness was in his expression. As he looked down at his son, there wasn't an ounce of good humor to be seen. "Now behave yourself."

Sin stared at his father for a long moment before finally averting his gaze and looking over at Carhart and Jacob again. The General and the R&D agent had stopped talking and were staring at the two Vega men with twin expressions of dismay, although Carhart also looked a touch annoyed as he eyed Emilio in particular.

Sin closed his eyes briefly and took a deep, calming breath despite the fact that his heart was galloping in his chest; despite the fact that the blood was coursing through his veins like molten lava that heated his body and made him want to explode.

He wanted to hurt Emilio. He wanted to leap across the table and pound his face in.

But he couldn't.

In the face of his father's wrath, Sin froze and he couldn't bring himself to react. He couldn't bring himself to keep talking, to keep insulting, to even defend himself. It was as

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though it were something ingrained in him from the past, something that made him act cowed in his father's presence.

"Are we ready, gentlemen?" Emilio asked Carhart coolly.

"Are you?" Carhart countered as he took his place at the head of the table, Jacob sitting nearby as he looked from Emilio to Sin and back again.

"More ready than a fat bitch wanting to lose her virginity."

A low snicker escaped Jacob's mouth but Carhart glared him into silence.

"This mission is not one that I would typically send you on, Sin," Carhart started as he slid mission profiles to both Sin and Emilio. "But the cover is for a father and son team who have a striking resemblance to each other so the use of the two of you couldn't be more of a perfect fit."

Sin made a face and Emilio just shot him a smug smile.

"The target in question is Florence Feliciano." Carhart keyed in something on the touch screen monitor that was embedded into his portion of the desk and the holograph began moving.

It was a video of Florence as she moved through some kind of outdoor market. She appeared to be in her mid-to-late thirties and struck an almost intimidatingly attractive figure. She was tall, nearly the same height as the bodyguards that surrounded her, and was wearing a flowing, nearly see-through dress that had long slits up either side. Her long tanned legs were exposed up to the thigh and it was obvious that she took great pride in her appearance because her tanned body was nearly flawless.

"She's hot," Emilio noted appreciatively.

Carhart nodded in agreement. "Florence is the former mistress of Raphael Boccanegra, an Italian scientist who worked very closely with the Italian government during the war with the intentions of creating a man-made virus that is highly contagious, airborne and capable of killing hundreds of thousands or even millions before it is controlled."

Sin looked at Florence again, wondering why this was relevant to her.

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"So why not just develop a vaccine in advance?" Emilio asked idly, his gaze still on Florence's moving image as she bent over partially to examine some wares. The surveillance camera had a good view of her full breasts that nearly hung out of the low cut dress.

Jacob cleared his throat slightly and sat up straight. "Boccanegra broke off from his government and went rogue with the formula before it could be used. He destroyed all traces of his research and kept only one copy of the formula, so we haven't been able to study the virus to find a vaccine. Various groups have been trying to get the formula for years but Boccanegra committed suicide several months ago and the search ended as most people believe that the formula died with him. A lot of people thought that the only copy of the formula was actually just in his memory."

"So she has the only copy?" Sin asked blandly, wondering why every briefing seemed to slowly get to the point as though they were trying to build suspense.

"Yes," Jacob agreed with a nod. "Florence was used to living a wealthy life as Boccanegra's mistress but when he died, his legal wife received all of his money. Florence is not the type of woman to give up the lifestyle she's become accustomed to so she's been putting feelers out, trying to find a buyer for the formula."

Carhart switched the video to a still image of a well-restored but rustic villa that sat on a hill with a view of a lake stretching out beyond it. The building was large and looked elegant, which was only slightly counteracted by the obvious precautions she was taking. The property was surrounded by walls that, while fitting the design of the villa, still looked very solidly built. Well-armed guards were patrolling the compound and the gate seemed highly fortified with cameras moving about at different angles.

"There has been a recent attempt on Florence's life due to a plot by her own bodyguards," Carhart said with a nod toward the men who dotted the scene. "They wanted to get the formula and sell it themselves but were unable to locate it. During their seizure of the property, the remaining loyal men killed them all. However, this has led to Florence becoming very paranoid and she began seeking out replacements. Very skilled replacements."

Sin flipped the page on his outline and studied the pictures of Johnny and William Donayre. They looked nearly identical, with startling blue eyes and long black hair. They seemed more like models than the mercenaries they actually were.

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"We managed to grab the Donayres and we're sending the two of you in their place," Carhart concluded with a nod. "Their appearances are not known in the underground so Florence will not be able to see through the ruse. Your goal is to infiltrate her property, retrieve the formula and get out."

Jacob made a slight face and spoke up again. "The only thing is, she keeps the formula on her at all times. I don't know if that complicates things..."

"It won't," Emilio said with a wicked smile. He finally looked over at Jacob and his pale green eyes flicked over the R&D agent slowly before returning to Jacob's attractive face. Emilio's eyes narrowed slightly as he focused entirely on the other man.

Jacob seemed mildly caught off guard by the attention but he didn't seem capable of breaking Emilio's unflinching stare. "The code is-- it's, I mean the formula, it's coded," Jacob stammered, wincing at the sound of his own voice and he cleared his throat. Sin rolled his eyes, disgusted by his father's effect on people. "But I don't know exactly where she keeps it."

"Hmm." Emilio gave Jacob one last lingering stare before switching his gaze to the hologram. "What else can you tell us about Miss Florence?"

"She has particular tastes," Carhart interjected, shaking his head at Emilio's antics but not commenting on it. "As you can see she hand picks her security not only for their skills but also for their looks. She is known for her insatiable sexual appetites in the circle that once surrounded she and Boccanegra."

Sin stared at Carhart incredulously. "She's going to expect us to have sex with her?"

Carhart shrugged. "It's likely."

Sin shook his head and Emilio snickered across the table, obviously getting a kick out of Sin's discomfort. "Aw Hsin, are you blushing?"

Ignoring his father, Sin glared at Carhart. "I'm not a valentine agent. I'm not fucking some woman."

"This isn't a valentine assignment," Carhart replied flatly, his tone leaving little room for argument as Sin's glare intensified. "You're not being sent in with the intent to seduce

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someone. You're just expected to do what it takes to maintain your cover until the assignment is complete."

"Fuck your assignment," Sin growled, turning his gaze back to the hologram angrily. He could see his father glaring at him on the other side of the table, shaking his head in an almost disapproving manner.

There was a tense silence and Jacob glanced at the General discreetly, his black eyebrows raised slightly in surprise at the interaction but Carhart just stared at Sin evenly, his mouth pressed into a thin line. After a moment, he dragged his cerulean gaze away and pushed his chair back.

"See Cynthia. Your flight to Italy leaves in two hours."

Sin didn't look up as Carhart left the conference room and he was vaguely aware of Jacob looking between he and Emilio thoughtfully before he left as well. Sin glanced up at Emilio and found the other man staring at him. As usual, his father didn't seem particularly pleased with him.

"Let's just get this over with," Sin grumbled and stood up, striding out of the room and not bothering to wipe the displeased expression from his typically stoic face.

The last thing Sin felt like dealing with was anything to do with sex. For all he knew he'd end up having flashbacks about Ann or calling the target Boyd or some such nonsense. Sometimes he wished he'd never improved his undercover skills; in the past they would have never even considered sending him on a mission like this.

"You don't need to talk to Zachary like that," Emilio said abruptly, his green eyes focused on Sin as they took the elevator down to Unit 16.

Sin gave his father a mildly surprised stare. "How I talk to people is none of your concern."

Emilio rolled his eyes and mouthed something, appearing to silently mimic Sin's words before he pointed at his son with a glare. "He's second in command of this shithole. Don't make him look like an asshole. He don't appreciate it and neither do I."

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Sin stepped out of the elevator and didn't respond. He thought about saying something sarcastic or flippant but there wasn't any reason to since Emilio technically had a point. "Whatever."

Emilio smirked, appearing pleased for some reason and shoved open the frosted glass door to Unit 16.

Two field agents were sitting in the waiting area and they both instantly focused on Emilio and Sin with twin looks of surprise. The receptionist Daniella gave them a discreet smile, her long lashes lowering over deep green eyes as Emilio approached her desk and practically leaned over it to speak to her.

"Hello sweetheart," he drawled, one side of his mouth lifting as his eyes drank her in.

"Agent Vega," Daniella replied politely although her smile widened a bit.

Sin forced himself not to gag.

"Me and my son here are heading out in a couple of hours and he needs some work," Emilio told her in the same low tone that was more suited for the bedroom than a lobby.

Daniella's eyes slowly left Emilio and she focused on Sin, gaze flitting over him quickly. "He doesn't need too much work. The profile I received doesn't require body modification."

"Yeah," Emilio agreed and leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially into her ear as he turned his head slightly to gaze at Sin. "But do you see that shirt he's wearing?"

Daniella nodded briefly, her mouth turning up into a tiny amused grin. "Mmhmm."

Sin glared at them contemptuously, crossing his arms over the faded black, nearly grey, t-shirt that said Hong Kong although the words were peeling and it was barely readable.

"I bought him that shirt when he was eleven," Emilio told Daniella in a stage whisper, casting a disapproving frown at his son.

A surprised laugh escaped Daniella's plump pink lips and the two field agents looked at Sin skeptically at this information.

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"Well," she said, lips twitching as she tried not to laugh anymore although her jade-colored eyes danced with amusement. "At least the tightness shows off his body."

"Can you two shut the hell up?" Sin growled finally, lowering his eyebrows over his eyes in annoyance. He cast a heated glance at the two field agents just in case they decided to make any comments of their own on his attire but they both averted their gazes quickly.

"He's so sensitive," Emilio told Daniella with a mournful shake of his head.

Sin grit his teeth and said nothing in response.

"I'll call Cynthia," Daniella said instead of replying to Emilio's barb, not looking nearly as amused or at ease now that Sin's glare was burning into her.

"You do that," Sin muttered and silently willed this entire stupid mission to be aborted before they even got on the plane.

===

"Don't you have a black jacket?"

Cynthia stared at the racks of clothing thoughtfully, chewing on her lower lip. She pushed hangers aside and tilted her head, auburn hair swaying with the motion and sliding down her shoulders. "I do, but the rust color is a nice contrast to your eyes."

Sin made a face and glanced at his father who was unsurprisingly not changing anything about his own wardrobe. The Donayres were supposed to be modern and fashion conscious, very into their appearances. Since Emilio was that way in general he didn't have much to change.

Sin adjusted the leather jacket and rolled his shoulders, staring at himself in the mirror critically. It was in a pseudo military style with shoulder epaulets and some kind of emblem emblazoned onto the top pocket.

Michelle, one of Cynthia's assistants, was glancing at Sin's worn leather boots and apparently trying to figure out a suitable replacement.

"Besides, I don't want you and your father to look like you match your outfits," Cynthia continued, nodding at Emilio's black bomber jacket.

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"That should be easy. I'd never wear those stupid boots," Sin muttered under his breath, giving his father's knee length leather boots a withering glare.

"They suit him," Cynthia replied, smiling at Emilio and not looking remotely self-conscious as he blatantly undressed her with his eyes.

Emilio winked at her. "You sure you don't want to take a little walk back to my place?" he asked with a half grin.

Cynthia smirked and walked over to him, not stopping until she was standing between his knees as he sat lazily on top of her desk. "Don't you mean General Carhart's place?"

Sin watched as his father leaned forward until his face was less than an inch from Cynthia's. "What difference does it make, baby? A bed's a bed. Or a floor. Or a wall..."

"Just like old times, huh?" Cynthia purred, nuzzling her face against his but evading just as Emilio leaned in for a kiss.

Sin glanced at Michelle who was studiously ignoring the scene. If anything she seemed put off by it for one reason or another. Mollified by that at least, Sin shrugged off the jacket and threw it on a chair as he looked at the racks of clothing to find a shirt. It was mildly satisfying to know that he wasn't the only person not completely enthralled by his father.

"Don't be a tease," Emilio scolded Cynthia, running his finger along her cheek.

"I'm not." Cynthia stepped away and smoothed her top although it was obvious that the contact had affected her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes slightly glassy and she seemed incapable of keeping her fingers from shaking. "But I'm in a relationship."

Emilio made a face and scooted off the desk. "So you're one of those now, huh?"

Cynthia shrugged, actually seeming to regret the fact. "Sickening, isn't it?"

"Damn straight," Emilio replied, giving her an unimpressed stare and turned to Sin. "I think his boots are okay. They match the personality I'm gonna give 'im."

Sin stared at his father. "The personality you're going to give me," he repeated flatly. "Aren't I following the guidelines on the profile?"

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Emilio scoffed at that and knocked Sin's hand away before pulling out a short-sleeved, black button-down shirt with double zippers on either side of the buttons and D-ring straps going over both shoulders. "Fuck the profile. We do things my way."

===

Florence Feliciano was every bit the raven-haired goddess that she'd appeared to be on the recording.

She studied them closely as she sat on the edge of a large bamboo desk, two bodyguards on either side of her as three others stood at varying points around the opulent office. The room was spacious and airy with more open space than not and included a balcony that overlooked a gorgeous view of Lake Varese.

Florence smiled at them, her full red lips twisting upwards, but obvious distrust could be seen in her deep blue eyes. She crossed her arms over the fitted blazer she wore, crossing one bare leg over the other as her pencil skirt rode up slightly with the movement.

Emilio's gaze absently dropped to the bared skin of her toned thigh and a smirk twitched along his full lips.

"I understood that we had already settled a price," Florence said in a displeased tone, her gaze shifting from Emilio to Sin. "If you had implied this kind of extortion on the telephone, I would not have invited you to my home."

Sin said nothing and was somewhat grateful that his father had modified Johnny's personality from being arrogant and obnoxious to silent and moody. Emilio had claimed that no one would know the difference since any information on the Donayres' personalities was hearsay anyway and that they would be worse off if Sin tried to pretend to be a loud mouth.

"That was before I knew you were harboring illicit formulas for deadly infectious man-made diseases," Emilio replied sweetly, all traces of his typically slang-peppered speech gone.

Florence stiffened slightly and sat up straight, glancing at her head bodyguard, Furio, discreetly.

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"That ups the payment, sugar," Emilio continued with a slight shrug. He still wore his knee-high boots and bomber jacket although he'd actually allowed Cynthia to convince him to shave his perpetually stubble-covered jaw. "That means people are looking for the formula and in turn, looking for your sweet ass and that makes our job harder. More work, more cash. You should know the drill."

Florence nodded and pressed one perfectly manicured finger against her lips as she gazed directly into Emilio's eyes. After a while she sighed and slid off the desk, heels clicking against the tiled floor as she did so. "I understand and it is only right but how did you come to know of this alleged formula?"

"People talk," Emilio responded vaguely, his well-formed mouth raising in a smile. "And word in the underground is that a certain Italian hottie is looking for a buyer but chances are, people will be more likely to steal it than pay for it."

Sin looked from his father to Florence but his expression didn't change. Florence appeared to be seriously considering this information and despite the fact that the mission outline had not mentioned haggling for prices or even acknowledgment of the formula, Sin felt like the added nuances to their covers made the entire meeting more believable.

"How do I know you are as good as it is said you are," Florence said finally, raising both dark eyebrows and crossing her slender arms over her chest. "How do I know this is not some overpriced scam? That when it comes down to the danger, you will not be as good as your word?"

Emilio didn't appear concerned with her doubt. "You won't know until you need to."

Florence gave him a derisive look and her indigo eyes flicked briefly over to Furio. She barely had to incline her head before the long-haired bodyguard took a step towards Emilio.

Furio moved to remove his gun and in the half-second it took for his hand to make the motion, Emilio grabbed the other man's wrist, twisted it violently so that a loud cracking sound emanated throughout the room. Emilio used his free hand to spin Furio around and flip him over, slamming the bodyguard's head into the desk hard.

Furio groaned and collapsed onto the marble floor, bringing up his hand to gingerly touch his now tender skull.

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Florence stared down at him with barely concealed disdain before her eyes rose to move up and down Emilio's frame. Her mouth twitched upwards and some of the apprehension left her voluptuous body; It appeared to be replaced by intrigue and the attraction that had been hovering on the surface ever since she'd set eyes on the two Vegas. "I see."

Emilio shrugged, smirk still firmly intact.

Florence dragged her stare from him and finally focused on Sin. "And what of your son?" she asked, her fluid Italian accent making the question sound almost sensual as the words dripped from her full lips. "He is as gorgeous as you, yes, but is he as skilled?"

Sin just stared at her in boredom and didn't bother to reply.

"My son is more bad ass than I am," Emilio admitted easily, a hint of pride in his voice that sounded nearly genuine and temporarily caused Sin's gaze to rest on his father thoughtfully. "We can do a try out if you want but I can't guarantee any of these other guys will come out alive if we unleash Johnnyboy's wrath."

Florence moved closer to Sin, her long eyelashes lowering as her gaze roamed his body. "Interesting..."

She seemed nearly turned on by the idea of someone so deadly.

There was a brief silence and the other bodyguards exchanged looks but none of them appeared surprised or confused about what was happening. If anything they appeared vaguely amused by the entire exchange, as if they knew something that Emilio and Sin didn't.

"Leave us," Florence commanded in her throaty Italian accent. When the men didn't immediately comply, she speared them with a frosty glare and repeated the command in Italian.

Two of the guards grabbed Furio and dragged their commanding officer out of the room, filing out and shutting the door behind them.

Emilio kept his gaze on Florence.

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"And how do I know," the Italian woman said when the three of them were alone. "That the two of you will be obedient to me?"

She sat on the edge of her desk again, crossing one knee over the other and once again causing her tight skirt to ride up and expose curvy tanned thighs. She looked from Emilio to Sin and back again, an overtly seductive expression on her face as she eyed them.

"You're going to have to figure that one on your own, babe," Emilio replied with a shrug, his green eyes narrowing slightly at the woman.

"Mmmm." Florence studied them, a knowing smile on her full red lips. "I suppose that you have investigated me as much as I have investigated you, yes?"

"Yes," Emilio readily agreed, nodding as his eyes feasted on her body.

"So you have become aware, I am sure, of the relationship that I keep with my guards?" Her smile became sly, wicked, and made her appear even more alluring. Her face and her mouth appeared magnetic to Emilio and he seemed incapable of looking away from her body even as he replied in a low tone.

"I'm aware that you're practically a nymphomaniac and use your guards as live dildos whenever it strikes your fancy." Emilio quirked his eyebrows at her, dragging his teeth over his lower lip. "But I tend to think it also has something to do with the fact that 90% of your guards fall in love with you after a few fucks and that ups their loyalty."

Sin looked at Florence in consideration, wondering if that was the case. She just seemed like a horny bitch to him. A female version of Emilio.

"Yes, it is true." Florence flicked her cascading black hair over one shoulder and swung one long leg idly against the desk. "But I do love sex and I am very bored so isolated here in the hills. So I think of creative ways to entertain myself, creative ways to test my men..."

"Mmm." Emilio seemed to be looking forward to whatever she had in mind. "And how will you be testing us?"

Sin had to force himself to keep from grimacing. He was reluctant enough to have sex for an assignment without the addition of his father witnessing and partaking in the act.

Interludes

Emilio had reassured him that he'd 'have Sin's back' when it came down to it but Sin had no idea what that meant.

Florence ran her tongue over her lips and looked between the two of them for a long moment. "Kiss your son."

Sin's eyes narrowing slightly. "What?"

Even Emilio appeared slightly uncertain by the command but it was only seen in the brief hesitation that he allowed before grabbing Sin and pulling him forward. Their lips grazed briefly before Emilio withdrew, cocking an eyebrow at Florence and leaving Sin relieved by the brief exchange.

"Done."

Florence chuckled low in her throat, tapping her full lips with one long fingernail. "No, no, *signor* Donayre. I mean for you to make love to your son with your tongue."

Sin started to cast a warning look at the woman but before he could even process what was happening, Emilio had yanked him forward again, leaving no time for Sin to refuse the command.

Sin froze as his father's tongue slid between his lips and he fought not to recoil visibly as Emilio reached up to hold the back of Sin's head almost violently as he complied with Florence's request to the fullest extent.

He was kissing Sin the way Sin had seen him kiss so many of his lovers in the past and it didn't even seem to faze Emilio that it was his son's mouth that he was currently raping so thoroughly with his probing, talented tongue.

Every muscle in Sin's body was wrought with tension and he dug his fingers violently into Emilio's upper arms. He forced himself to remain lax and allow the violation of his mouth as he told himself repeatedly that his father was just a good actor; that he couldn't actually be getting off on making out with his unresponsive son as Emilio's progressively insistent kisses would suggest.

Sin repeated in his head that aborting the mission and getting terminated because his father was a pervert was very stupid. But when he glanced over at Florence and took in her glassy, barely concealed look of lust, Sin couldn't help shoving Emilio away.

Interludes

Did this crazy bitch actually think he was enjoying her stupid order?

Disgusted, Sin wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glared at Emilio who just smiled innocently in response.

"Very good," Florence murmured, drinking the two men in with her eyes. "I am shocked that you complied and performed so deliciously as well."

Emilio shrugged modestly and winked at Sin. "A little kissing never hurt nobody."

Sin made a face. "Are we done with this bullshit test now or what?" he demanded, speaking for the first time since the meeting had begun.

Florence slid off the desk once again and walked over to him with measured, deliberate steps. Her hips swayed enticingly and she brushed past Emilio to stand directly in front of Sin so close that the tips of her breasts touched his black shirt.

She extended her long arms and rested them on each of his shoulders, leaning forward to brush her lips against his. Sin remained ramrod straight, staring into her eyes impassively as she made a low, considering sound in the back of her throat.

"I have a weakness for gorgeous men but I especially am weak for gorgeous young men with long hair and such exotic features..." She traced Sin's face with her eyes, rubbing the tip of her straight, slightly pointed nose against his cheek. "Tell me William, was his mother Asian?"

Emilio assented with a grunt, watching the woman curiously as she draped her body all over Sin.

"Beautiful," Florence purred and this time it was she who invited herself to Sin's mouth. The kiss was nearly chaste in its simplicity, the pressure of her warm mouth searing against his but with only the barest hint of moisture.

Florence pulled back briefly and smiled against his mouth, her eyes meeting his. "Will you do anything I ask in order to ensure this job?" she asked in the same low voice, the words pouring from her lips and vibrating against Sin's own.

Emilio cocked an eyebrow at Sin from over Florence's shoulder and when Sin hesitated, Emilio waved his hand in a, 'what are you waiting for?' gesture.

Interludes

"Yes," Sin said finally, his deep voice conveying his grudging agreement.

Florence smiled her pleasure and pulled him closer again, massaging her mouth against his without initiating another kiss. Instead she said in a low, dangerous voice, "Then I order you to let your father fuck you."

This time Sin did recoil and he leaned back, eyes narrowing at her. "You're out of your fucking mind, woman."

Florence let out a long throaty laugh and didn't release him. "It is not so bad of a request. I could have ordered you to do something far more degrading, Johnny."

Sin glared at Emilio dangerously from over Florence's shoulder but his father just shook his head and made a face, obviously casting off Sin's concern that he would attempt to comply with this new request. Instead, Emilio came up behind Florence and pressed his body against her back, crushing her lithe form between the two men.

She exhaled slightly, eyes sliding closed at the contact and a low moan escaped her mouth when Emilio rumbled in her ear, "Wouldn't you rather be the one getting fucked?"

"There's time for you to play voyeur later," Emilio said, sliding his hands up Florence's thighs and gliding the skintight skirt up until it was up around her waist. A tiny lace thong did nothing to conceal the full globes of flesh that made up her round ass but the triangle of fabric in the front did create a slight barrier between she and Sin's crotches.

Emilio's hands slid between Florence and Sin, his fingers massaging her slowly through her thong and brushing against Sin's completely limp, denim-clad dick in the process. As Florence cooed against Sin's lips, he wondered idly if there would ever be a scenario that would cause this to be arousing to him but he found it impossible to conjure up any such event.

The only thing that Florence's soft moans were causing was a headache and distinct discomfort. Sin's eyes met his father's and Emilio made a face at Sin, arching his eyebrow and motioning with his head.

Confused, Sin raised his eyebrows in return, having no idea what the hell his father was trying to tell him.

Emilio rolled his eyes in exasperation, still grinding his own crotch against Florence's backside and mouthed, 'don't just stand there, idiot.'

Interludes

Grimacing, Sin glanced down at Florence and tried to ignore how awkward the situation was and focus on how attractive the Italian woman was so his response could be at least somewhat believable. This entire situation would likely be easier if it wasn't Emilio that he was partnered with. They'd barely exchanged two words in months and now he was expected to act like they shared women and had a dandy old time in the process.

"Maybe I want to play voyeur now," Florence said finally, belatedly, sliding her eyes open to stare up into Sin's face as she gyrated her hips against him as Emilio did the same to her ass. Sin unclenched his hands from her shoulders and forced himself to slide them down her arms to settle on her waist. "Just watching you kiss had a certain... effect on me."

"Mmm," Emilio growled in her ear, running his tongue along the ridge and causing Florence to shudder. "But I guarantee my son will be more willing to do whatever the fuck you want him to do if you loosen him up first and he ain't gonna loosen up by fucking around with me, baby."

"Truth?" she asked breathlessly as Emilio pushed her hair aside and yanked her jacket off, exposing nothing more than a lacy bra that emphasized her large breasts.

"Truth," Emilio replied hotly, his mouth humming against her bared neck. "He comes off like a hardass but get him horny enough and my boy turns into a fucking maniac. He'll fuck your brains out and be hard again before your pussy stops throbbing."

Florence groaned in anticipation and Sin wondered if his father enjoyed saying such ridiculously filthy things to people.

"Come," Florence said in the same low voice, sliding out from between them and nodding towards the door behind her desk. She unzipped her skirt and it fell to the floor carelessly. She stepped out of it, still wearing her high heels, and led them through the door and into what appeared to be a large bedroom.

A round bed sat in the back center on an upraised platform and a good sized Jacuzzi was also present in the room. The decor was all yellow and black, with a tall vanity dresser in one corner, a closet in the other, and mirrors covering the ceiling as well as the wall behind the bed.

Emilio shrugged off his jacket, yanking off his shirt and tossing it aside carelessly as he followed Florence up the five steps that led to the bed. He shot Sin an impatient look

Interludes

and Sin followed in his stony silence, unable to make himself speak despite the fact that he allowed Florence to yank him down and take his mouth in a hot, wet kiss.

Sin responded and tried to think about this as strictly another part of the mission, to push aside his discomfort and anger just as he would for an assassination. He forced himself to tangle his fingers in her long thick hair as though he was getting into the kiss and Florence got up onto the round bed, sitting up on her knees and leaning up to tongue him enthusiastically as Emilio crawled onto the bed behind her.

Emilio unhooked her bra, freeing her round, heavy breasts from the garment. He began fondling her unabashedly, rubbing her dark nipples and kissing down the back of her neck to trail wet kisses down part of her tattooed back. He ran his tongue back up her smooth, toned back before sitting up in the same position as her, pressing his body against hers tightly and bucking his hips against her raunchily.

Florence groaned and slid her fingers up Sin's shirt, obviously wanting it off, before changing her mind and yanking instead at the belt on his pants. She simultaneously ground back against Emilio, panting when Emilio's jeans slid down and felt actual bared flesh against her own.

Sin's mouth moved automatically against Florence's even as he watched his father's expression closely, waiting for some sign that his father would do something to end this seemingly progressing threesome but Emilio just looked completely consumed by the feel and smell of Florence's body.

Frustrated and annoyed, Sin felt Florence undoing his pants and starting to slide them down. He was losing any hope that this situation would be avoided when Emilio spun Florence around and pressed her down onto her back. She opened her mouth to protest as Sin backed away from the bed quickly but the words died on her tongue and were replaced by a loud moan when Emilio lifted her lower body off the bed, spreading her thighs, and shoved his large erect cock into her pliant body.

Sin turned away, fixing his pants, and tried to ignore the loud slapping sounds of skin against skin, the wet sloppy sounds of his father's dick moving in and out of Florence and the loud animal-like groans that escaped both of them.

He zipped his pants, redid his belt and automatically began exploring the rest of the room while Florence was occupied.

Interludes

Sin spent the better part of the next forty five minutes exploring her bedroom and her office and the only thing of note he found was a large variety of sexual devices and a collection of mostly homosexual pornography. Her computer proved more interesting--the woman may be a sexual deviant but she had thorough background checks on seemingly every single person in her contact list.

More electronic snooping found him a few lightly encoded e-mails with nothing of real magnitude and password protected folders that he broke into relatively easily. He found interesting information about her and her circle of friends but nothing that would lead them to the formula.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting; Jacob had stated that the woman kept it on her at all times but as far as Sin could see, that wasn't a realistic claim considering the fact that Florence was currently letting his father ride her like an all-star jockey.

Disgusted, Sin pushed away from the desk and debated finding a way to leave the pair of rooms but knew that the back of the house was likely being watched at all angles by the guards. It was too early to cause trouble. That could wait until they had the damned formula.

Sin re-entered the bedroom and stared impassively at the scene playing out on the bed. His father was holding Florence up off the bed, his arms under her knees and ramming into her as she wailed.

Lovely.

Sin sat in one of the plush arm chairs and stared in boredom around the room before his gaze focused on the mirrors on the ceiling. He'd heard references to people using such set ups in the past, mostly on television and in books, but he'd never understood the purpose. Now, however, he could see how it could be erotic and Sin found himself nearly absently wondering what it would be like to fuck Boyd and watch himself doing so in the process.

Sin grimaced slightly and banished the thought. Now wasn't the time or place to start dwelling on his continued sexual fantasies about his former lover.

He started to get up and make another round of the room when something about Florence's reflection caught his eye when Emilio flipped her around yet again.

Interludes

Sin found himself studying the tattoo that went down the length of Florence's spine. As he took the time to really examine it, he saw that it was a block of text that shimmered down her back. At first glance it seemed like the typical generic tribal type design but as Sin tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, he could make out what appeared to be a familiar style of encoding embedded in the mix of letters and symbols.

Intrigued and relieved beyond belief, Sin stood up and glared at Emilio. The older Vega was covered in a sheen of sweat, his eyes closed and his face a complete mask of bliss as he thrust into Florence faster and harder.

The frenzied pace meant nothing to Sin. From his recollection, his father could go all night.

"I think the formula is tattooed on her back," he told Emilio rapidly in Mandarin.

The couple seemed to ignore him, or to Sin's annoyance that's what it first seemed like.

But in the next few moments the screams began to rise and increase in frequency, the bed rocking dangerously and even with his back turned, Sin knew Emilio had finally finished.

Sin glanced over at the bed again and saw Emilio and Florence crushed together, breathing laboriously. Florence began to murmur something but before she could, Emilio sat up, leaned over with nearly cruel nonchalance and extracted a tiny tranq-gun from his fallen pants.

Florence had barely opened her eyes before Emilio injected her neatly. Her body went instantly limp.

"So let's see this tattoo then," Emilio said in a cheerful voice, still slightly winded but acting as though he hadn't spent the last hour banging Florence through the bed.

"Did you need to take that long?" Sin asked, not bothering to keep the irritation out of his voice as he crossed the room and turned Florence onto her stomach. He pushed her cascades of long hair out of the way.

Emilio shrugged and pulled on his underwear and pants in one movement, pulling a slim pinky-sized device out of his pocket. "No but it sure was fun. You shoulda took a turn."

Interludes

Sin didn't bother to reply and waited as Emilio began snapping pictures of the woman's back. In the next few moments they'd uploaded the alleged formula to Jacob and sat around waiting for confirmation that it was what they were looking for once he decoded it. Sin wondered if Jacob was on this specific mission solely because he had some kind of memorized encyclopedia of codes in his brain.

"So are we killing her?" Emilio asked suddenly, poking at his sweat-dampened hair in the mirror of the vanity and looking vastly unconcerned about the possibility of murdering his most recent fuck. He was still shirtless, tattoos shining slightly from the cooling moisture on his powerful upper body. His gun holster was swung over one shoulder; the guards hadn't been adamant about them disarming likely because it would have been a moot point.

Sin glanced over at Florence. She was blissfully unconscious and still sprawled naked on the bed. "Maybe."

Emilio glanced at his son's reflection in the mirror. "At least you haven't gone and become some bleeding heart even if you're a fettered man these days."

Sin didn't even want to ask what that was supposed to mean. "My heart doesn't bleed for people who are willing to put bio weapons into the hands of terrorists so that they can continue to do nothing but sleep, fuck and shop."

Emilio smirked and his gaze didn't shift away from Sin. He appeared approving. "That was my assessment. 'Course it's too bad. She's a great fuck."

Sin said nothing but his lip curled in a sneer before he could stop it and he was unsurprised when his father saw it and commented instantly.

"I can't believe how much of a goddamn prude you are, boy. Don't you ever just wanna let loose? I can name four people off the top of my head who fucked me recently just 'cause I look like you." Emilio smirked and turned away from the mirror, leaning against the vanity with his arms crossed over his chest.

"That's great."

"You don't believe me." Emilio arched a brow. "I don't see why. I ain't in the interest of stroking your ego."

Interludes

Sin scoffed and stood up, moving to the bed to examine Florence. They'd have to get rid of either her body or the tattoo. "I didn't think anything of the kind. The people at the Agency detest me. I highly doubt there are--"

"They don't detest you," Emilio cut him off flatly. "They fear you. And you'd be surprised how many people get off on fear. On wanting to fuck someone who could rip them limb from limb without breaking a sweat. On the idea that you could do whatever you wanted to them... that the same hands that are making them come had killed dozens of people. I bet you my entire bank account that your blond obsession gets off on it."

Sin said nothing and studiously examined the size of the tattoo, trying to determine if it was possible to simply remove the flesh without seriously injuring her and belatedly realizing that he'd unconsciously made the decision to leave her alive. It didn't matter. She was harmless without the formula.

Emilio continued to watch him with the same expression on his face, enjoying talking about Boyd, probably knowing it made Sin uncomfortable. Or maybe he just knew that talking about Boyd would eventually illicit a response from his stubbornly silent offspring.

"Whenever I'd watch y'all having sex--"

Sin shook his head, not feeling surprised.

"--I noticed he got especially riled up whenever you'd pin him down, force him one way or the other even if he said not to." Emilio's eyes remained trained on Sin. "He totally gets off on the fact that you could fucking kill him if you really wanted to. That even if he says no, you don't got to stop. He likes the danger of fucking you."

"You should see my psychiatrist," Sin said blandly, slipping his hand into the hidden pocket along the inside of his pant leg and removing a pencil-sized torch. It was meant to melt through surfaces to aid in breaking into places but it was possible to adjust the temperature to burn the tattoo beyond recognition. It wouldn't even have to be more than a first-degree burn. "There'd be great interest in your obsession with sex."

"If it was still Annie, I might've considered. She was always a good fuck."

Discomfort flicked in Sin's expression before he could hide it and Emilio noticed it instantly, moving forward, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully.

Interludes

"So it's true then, that you had her?" Emilio asked curiously.

Sin finished with Florence and didn't answer the question, not letting the smell of her burning flesh affect him. The black ink of the tattoo melted and shifted into bubbled disfigurement but Florence didn't so much as stir. Agency tranquilizers were incredibly good.

"And here I thought it was just a theory of Zachary's, not that he really said it outright so much as alluded to a connection or whatever the fuck. But still." Emilio was starting to look impressed now. "I figured you were all about Boyd, considering even after you're all broke up you found a new fuck who looks like him. Transparent, much?"

"Can you shut up already?" Sin asked tiredly, moving to the adjoined bathroom. His movements were stiff and tense as he found some bandages in a cupboard. He didn't know why he was even considering bandaging Florence except that it gave him something to do other than stare at his father and wait for Jacob to contact them and confirm that they could leave.

In retrospect, it'd probably been stupid to burn the bitch's back before getting confirmation. Whatever. It wasn't his fault his father was distracting him and making him ruin the mission.

"I'm just trying to understand you, boy," Emilio said in a near genuine tone as he watched Sin patch up Florence's back. He either didn't care that they'd potentially fucked the mission or he was too preoccupied with Sin's sexual habits and he didn't even realize it. "Why Ann but not Florence? Why not any of the people I could push your way? Why hold out waiting for some kid who might not even want you no more? Doesn't make sense to me. Didn't I teach you nothing about enjoying life?"

"No," Sin replied with crisp iciness. "You didn't."

"I di--" The beginnings of a casual rebuff died abruptly and Emilio actually looked uncomfortable or irritated or both, and he shut up.

The next few moments were awkwardly silent and Sin didn't look at Emilio. The offhand comment had pissed him off and the anger was more directed at himself than at his father. Why had he even started replying to the man? Emilio's unrepentant sociopathic personality was as bad as it'd always been but still, Sin had allowed himself to engage in dialogue when silence was preferable.

Interludes

Even if Sin could admit that Emilio had a point when it came to his cold assessment of Sin's character, even if Sin could now admit that Emilio had been wise to avoid the Agency until Connors died, it still didn't change the fact that Emilio refused to take any responsibility in the way Sin's life had turned out.

He didn't expect or even want an apology but it would have been nice to know his father felt...

Felt what?

Sin scowled and slapped tape on the bandages with more force than was necessary. What the fuck did he care what Emilio felt?

"You know," Emilio began in a conversational tone. "You probably should have waited to do that until Jake got back to us."

"Jake? Are you fucking him already?" Sin ignored the comment. Emilio didn't even seem to be accusing him or angry about it. It'd been his fuck up too-- he hadn't been paying attention.

"Nah." Emilio made a face. "He ain't interested which is odd because he definitely thinks I'm hot. I think he may want to bone Ryan but that shouldn't stop him," he sniffed, appearing nearly offended. "Stupid moral paragons. Can't stand them."

Sin once again said nothing.

Another silence and finally Jacob's voice filled Sin's comm. "Sorry it took a while-- I had to run up to Jeffrey and confirm a few things."

"And?" Sin asked impatiently.

"You're both good to go. Who'd ever think he had it tattooed on her?" Jacob queried idly in their ears, sounding genuinely puzzled.

"Who cares?" Sin cut off his comm and threw Emilio's jacket at him. "Let's go."

"Should we kill the guards?" Emilio pulled on his shirt and shrugged into the jacket.

Sin stopped and turned to stare at his father incredulously. "Why do you keep asking me what we should do?"

Interludes

"Oh." Emilio stared at him, seeming to consider that. "I dunno. I guess workin' with you reminds me of workin' with Zachary and I always defer important decisions to him."

Sin stared at him before shaking his head and pulling out his gun. "And you say I'm the one with a blond obsession."

Emilio's expression morphed into a glare and he cocked his own weapon. "Shut the fuck up."

Sin hesitated for only a moment more before following Emilio out into the office. Sin couldn't help the small, self-satisfied smirk from ghosting across his features.

One point for Vega junior.

Cause/Effect

Part I

"How would you describe your job here at the Agency?"

Investigator Bridget Monaghan looked up, examining Boyd closely as she waited for a response. Her lips rose briefly in a seemingly polite smile but her thick eyelashes lowered over her sepia-colored eyes as she twisted a letter opener idly between her fingers, the sharp point glinting beneath the light of her temporary office.

Stacks of papers and files were neatly piled on her desk and on the floor behind her. Unfortunately for Bridget, a deadly virus and worm program had infected the Agency's network on the day that the European Division had sent her to begin agent evaluations. The virus had spread throughout every computer on the network which put the Agency on a temporary standstill.

With no anti-virus capable of getting rid of the previously unknown virus, no uninfected computers and no surveillance footage for Bridget to analyze later due to the hard drives being currently unavailable, the end result was a massive amount of paper files on the field agents, R&D agents and support staff that she was intending to interview.

"I function in a role that fights terrorism and insurgency on a domestic and international level to protect national security and ensure the stability of the United States government," Boyd replied calmly, more or less quoting the propaganda job description he'd been given before.

She had already asked him a few questions and he'd straight-faced replied with the answers he knew she would want to hear; the ones the Agency had taught him. He knew she would be well aware of what he was doing but he didn't see the point in saying what he really thought.

He'd already been close to termination enough times in the past year; there was no point in giving them a glaring reason to sign his death warrant. Especially since that was basically her function; weed out the agents ahead of time who would not meet the European Division's standards when the new Marshal came over in the next several months.

Interludes

"You do realize, Agent Beaulieu," Bridget said with the same pleasant smile as she shook her head, jet black bangs moving with the motion. "That parroting Agency rhetoric does not make you appear more genuine?"

"Whether I use my own words or theirs doesn't change the truth of it," Boyd said with a shrug.

"Mmm." Bridget leaned back in her chair, crossing one knee over the other. "And how would you describe your performance?"

Boyd thought about that. "Acceptable with room for improvement."

Bridget raised one black eyebrow. "In detail, describe your performance or I'll just mark your response as unanswered."

There was a moment in which Boyd actually considered the question before he tilted his head slightly, blond hair falling against the side of his face. His honey brown gaze was steady as he met her eyes. "I would say the strengths of my performance have been related to improvisation, negotiation and undercover technique. In general, those areas have been acceptable in my missions due to the fact that on average, I succeed in missions that have that as the focus. Where my performance is lacking is primarily in strength and endurance, both of which can continue to be improved with additional training. I've also had the occasional issue with making a poor decision when I was unfocused or thinking too far ahead and not considering immediate ramifications to changed plans."

In truth, his greatest weakness was probably his sensitivity to Sin.

When he thought back to all the times he'd majorly botched missions, he could pretty much draw a line back that somehow related to Sin, whether directly due to something Sin did or said or whether Sin was the most influential of several contributors. But Boyd wasn't going to say that aloud because it would just be reinforcing whatever she probably already saw in his file. And the last thing Boyd wanted to do was in any way potentially implicate Sin as someone needing additional scrutiny. It was going to be hard enough for Sin on his own with his history.

Bridget nodded seemingly in agreement although he didn't know if that was actually the case. "Do you consider a 12% failure rate in 1.5 years of continuous engagement to be acceptable?"

Interludes

"Yes," Boyd said after a moment of thinking about it.

This time Bridget stared at him and she didn't bother to appear agreeable. "That is interesting considering the typical agent is terminated for far less."

"You asked if I believe it is acceptable, not exemplary," Boyd replied calmly. "This is all predicated upon the assumption that the failure rate continues to shrink with time. But considering I didn't have any background at all in anything related to this field of expertise prior to my arrival at the Agency, it's not as terrible as it could be. I can't say at which level the Agency typically terminates because I'm not privy to that information and I wouldn't say I did the best I could. Like I said, there is room for improvement."

"Excuses are meaningless to this evaluation." Bridget gave him another intrusive stare but the corners of her lips remained raised slightly. "Your assumption that most field agents have prior background in fighting terrorism is false. The assumption that most field agents have a military background is false. Lacking the ability to recognize your failure as an operative is inexcusable. You are here to protect the lives of innocent civilians and democratic values. Failing 12% of the time is unacceptable."

Boyd watched her evenly but didn't respond. She was right; he did know other agents who didn't have a background that naturally lent itself toward being a field agent. And as far as the Agency was concerned, he wouldn't be surprised if their typical tolerance level for failure was closer to 5%, not the 12% he had.

Bridget nodded briefly when he didn't argue further and continued. "Your success rate would likely be 3-5% higher if you were not sexually involved with your partner. Is this a true or false statement?"

"It's a trick question," Boyd said, quirking an eyebrow slightly. "But on the face of it, I would say false. I'm not sexually involved with my partner."

"This is not a trick question," Bridget replied in a blithe tone, smiling once again. "There is no need for games. Your entire file is laid out before me. You did not admit to having vigorous and often violent intercourse with Hsin Liu Vega throughout the course of the past year and a half?"

"I had sex with him in the past," Boyd agreed, mildly put off by the woman's choice of words and tone. "But I'm not now and haven't for months. As the failure rate you're determining for me must be based on missions that did not succeed, I only failed one when sexually involved with him."

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"How many have you failed due to your feelings for him?" she queried shrewdly, leaning forward with slightly narrowed eyes as her mouth curled up further in a knowing smile. "Two for certain. How can we be certain there aren't more? Your answer is obviously meaningless as you are given to falsehoods and word games. Your tendency to lie about your connection to Agent Vega is fruitless and further pockmarks your record as there are many ways to tell when an agent is lying."

"If you don't believe anything I'm telling you then I don't know what to say," Boyd said, watching her without his expression changing or giving away the fact that she was right.

"For your own best interests, you should cease your petty attempts at avoiding the truth and be straightforward," Bridget said bluntly. "This is not a game. This evaluation will decide whether or not you will be terminated when Marshal Seong arrives next year. If she sees that you are blind to your flaws and willing to boldly lie in the face of an individual who is very well aware of the truth, she will see no need for your presence."

Boyd considered Bridget for a long moment before his eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, his expression turning serious. "I know you know the truth. I don't see why you feel the need to ask me about it when you have it in the file in front of you. I've already told the Agency that not only did I have sex with Hsin Liu Vega, that I had also loved him. I've fucked up before because of what I felt for him. I realized how detrimental the feelings were for everyone and I stopped it. I haven't been with him for nearly a year."

"And yet you still failed a mission due to your attachment to him." Bridget raised her eyebrows slightly. "Is this a false statement?"

"I did go back for him because he is my partner and because I felt it was better in the long run for the Agency," Boyd said, gaze even as he met her eyes. "I've already been informed that it is not my place to make such judgment calls. But the failure of that mission was not because of reasons I had failed other missions in the past. So if you consider attachment to be the professional relationship of having worked with someone for years, I suppose it's not a false statement, no."

Bridget tapped the letter opener against the desk and sat back briefly as she stared at him. "I think you are lying and I will include that fact in my review. I find it doubtful that an agent would risk his own termination for another agent unless there is emotional attachment. Emotional attachment of that kind is unnecessary and unwanted in a field agent. Your claim that you were thinking about the good of the Agency is so far-fetched

Interludes

that I will not dignify it with a response. If you cared about the good of the Agency you would not have claimed that you didn't care about the mission or the Agency."

She shifted in the chair and crossed one knee over the other as she set the letter opener down on the desk in front of her. "Do not further attempt to insult my intelligence. While it may work on the Acting Marshal of this Agency, Marshal Seong will not play such games."

Boyd didn't respond to Bridget at first because he didn't know what to say. Even if she was aware that he was lying, he still couldn't bring himself to confirm exactly how much. He wouldn't outright tell her that he loved Sin more than anyone, that he would choose Sin over the Agency any day; that he would die for Sin.

Even if Bridget believed that there was an emotional connection, even if it gave him a poorer grade on his assessment, he didn't want to let them know how much he was omitting, precisely for the reason she gave: the Agency would not see his love for Sin as something desirable.

Still, if he remained completely silent it lent weight to words she'd put in his mouth.

"I never said I didn't care about the Agency," Boyd pointed out, quirking his eyebrows as he shifted back in the chair. "I said I didn't care about a target. That could put into question my views on that particular mission, it's true, and maybe my opinion of what the Agency expects of us, but if I truly didn't care about the Agency I wouldn't have done a lot of the things I have. I wouldn't have tried for level 10, I wouldn't have had sex with Thierry without being ordered to because I wouldn't have believed it was for the greater good. So I don't think it's accurate to make the leap from a decision on one of many missions to make judgments about my overarching views of the entire organization."

Boyd crossed his arms, honey brown eyes trained on her. "If you've read my file, you know I basically had nothing before I came to the Agency. You know I'd failed attempts at suicide and you know that in effect, my life was meaningless. If it hadn't been for the Agency, I would still be in that state of mind; it's possible I even would have succeeded in killing myself by now. The Agency changed a lot of things for me. It gave me a reason to live again; it gave me a sense of purpose."

His tone was forthright and honest and on its own; there didn't need to be word games because it was the truth. The Agency really had given him his life back in a lot of ways and without it, Boyd truly didn't know whether he would still be alive today.

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In a way, in that alternate reality, he hoped he wouldn't have been. The way he'd been existing had been no life at all yet he couldn't imagine anything powerful enough to have snapped him out of it short of basically the shock value of the Agency and the connections he'd gained. He simply failed to mention that over time, the greater connection had become about Sin.

Bridget studied him for a moment as if considering this response. She seemed to be turning the statement over in her mind and taking her time to reply. The silence between them was extended but it didn't feel heavy or intimidating. It was only broken by the tapping of one of her shoes against the floor and a low beeping sound that emanated briefly from somewhere in the room.

Bridget's lips pursed briefly and she once again shifted her position, uncrossing her knees and sitting up straight in the chair as she picked up a silver fountain pen and held it poised against a blank pad of paper. "If you were ordered to develop an ongoing sexual relationship with Thierry Beauvais for the purpose of getting close to him and keeping tabs on him now that he has been instated as an agent with unrestricted access to the city, what would be your response?"

The information caught Boyd off guard and he didn't hide his surprise. "He's an agent now?"

"Yes. Homosexual valentine field operative, level 7. Answer the question."

That took a moment to sink in but when Boyd replied, he was truthful. "I would do it."

Although his last sexual encounter with Thierry had been anything but satisfying for either of them, he still liked Thierry. The idea of being ordered to be around Thierry for extended periods of time, to have sex with him, was less unnerving a concept than it would have been for pretty much any other agent. He wouldn't like the idea of leading Thierry on, but then, Boyd doubted Thierry would be fooled.

Bridget stared at him for another moment and scribbled something on the pad before she asked, "If at the end of such an assignment you were ordered to terminate Agent Beauvais, what would be your response?"

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied her, silence falling between them briefly. Despite the fact that he was uncertain what he would actually do in that situation, he wasn't going to be truthful about that. His valentine status and the lengths he'd go for the Agency were probably the only things that would keep him alive.

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"I would do it."

She watched him with the same enigmatic smile on her face as she wrote something else. "Do you feel as though in your current position, under the current administration, you are able to pick and choose assignments according to how agreeable you find them?"

"No. I haven't turned down any missions presented to me," Boyd said truthfully. "As far as I understand it, even under the former administration agents had the ability to turn down an assignment, especially longer lasting ones like you're referencing. It just doesn't mean the agent will necessarily live long if that becomes a typical response."

Bridget studied Boyd closely, her eyes slightly narrowed and expression intrigued by this response. It seemed as though she wasn't just judging Boyd at the moment; she was judging the Agency standards under Connors and Vivienne as well.

The Investigator's lips quirked up into a small, tight smile and her fingers moved across the pad of paper slowly. "Standard procedure in the European division is that after one infraction, and refusing an assignment is guaranteed to be an infraction, an agent is placed on probation. After a second infraction, it is determined how long he will be of use to us and after said time has passed, he is terminated unless something extraordinary occurred. I guarantee that this policy will find its way here after Marshal Seong has replaced the current... Marshal."

"I see," Boyd said neutrally. The more he heard about this new administration, the less he was looking forward to it. "Is Marshal Seong a Marshal over there currently?"

Bridget leaned back in her chair and crossed one knee over the other. "Marshal Seong is a former General in charge of field operative activity and was chosen to replace the deceased Marshal Connors due to her outstanding record, her extensive history of the Agency and her knowledge of field operatives."

She smiled at Boyd quietly and tilted her head to the side once again, black eyelashes lowering over her eyes. "Don't misunderstand, Agent Beaulieu. Marshal Seong is by the book and does not leave room for error. However, due to her former position she knows how to accommodate valuable agents when they have certain needs, certain desires. If I were you, I would keep that in mind. You are still young but you have potential for great things and that would put you greatly in Marshal Seong's favor. However, the moment you become a liability, you will no longer be considered of use."

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Boyd considered her, eyes narrowing slightly in thought. "If she holds the same position as General Carhart, who also would qualify under the accolades you listed, then why is he not getting the position instead?"

The smile remained on Bridget's face but something about it turned colder. "Because while Marshal Seong understands field operatives, General Carhart has the distinct flaw of empathizing with them. In the past his judgment has been clouded due to his emotions and under the standards of our division," she said coolly, her tone making it clear that she considered the European division to be vastly superior to the American one, "he would not even have maintained the position that he currently holds."

"Was the European Division founded prior to the American?" Boyd asked after a moment, drawing his eyebrows down.

"No," she replied simply. "In the beginning they worked in tandem as different offices of the same entity. Now we are two entities with the same causes who don't always work in tandem."

"I see. Then what gives your division jurisdiction over ours?" Boyd watched her closely, his tone mostly mild. "Since our main focus is anti-government entities related to the US, I find it curious that European Division, who I imagine has their own goals, would determine who is best for over here."

Bridget shook her head and dusted over her blouse although there didn't appear to be anything there. "It was the powers that be, the people who control both Agencies, who made that decision. And the decision was made to send someone from Europe to America because this place has been sloppy for quite some time."

She smirked and seemed to particularly enjoy talking about the American Division's failings. "From the failure to protect this city against the bombings at the beginning of World War Three, to the fact that Janus has been allowed to mobilize globally and focus on European governments as well as American, to the fact that this place is so lax that it allowed itself to be raided."

Boyd considered that. If that was the case-- that there was someone out there who controlled both Agencies-- then he supposed that when it was laid out like that, it did make sense provided the European Division didn't have a similar track record. Even so, Boyd wished Carhart could have become the Marshal instead. The Agency would have been a much better place if that had been the case.

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It did make him wonder who was really in charge but he knew she wasn't going to tell him.

He nodded, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms. His gaze was steady and more contemplative than anything as he studied her. "Will we be advised of the new standards of procedure when Marshal Seong arrives? Such as, you mentioned the change in our ability to turn down assignments. If we don't know the new rules, we may unwittingly cross lines we didn't mean to cross."

Bridget shrugged her slender shoulders. "That is up to the new Marshal. I have not been advised on how new regulations will be dispensed. However if you have any other questions about your expectations, I will be very happy to share them with you."

Boyd sat up straighter. "I do, actually."

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The wind gusted, causing Boyd's hair to fly into his eyes rather irritatingly. He tilted his head toward the ground as he walked, pulling hair behind his ear and digging in his pocket for his keys. His mind was on everything Bridget had told him-- on the changes that were coming and the fact that very few of them seemed like they boded well.

If he was already in danger of termination when his mother was in charge, he doubted he would last long at all once Marshal Seong arrived. Bridget's comment that he had great potential gave him a little bit of hope that he wouldn't be marked for termination under the new regime, at least not immediately.

Yet he felt uncertain about that, given the fact that not only did he apparently have a 12% failure rate but also that, in all honesty, some of those had been some very serious mistakes. Monterrey alone probably would have gotten him killed if Marshal Seong had been around. As far as that went, if his mother hadn't been there he probably would have been terminated by Connors.

It made him wonder how he'd done on his interview and whether they would decide that his shift away from default loyalty to the Agency would make him too much of a liability in the end.

"Boyd."

Boyd stopped and looked over to see Sin standing a few feet away. He was wearing his seemingly customary scuffed boots and black hoody with the hood pulled down low.

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"Hey," Boyd greeted as he walked closer. He slid his hands in his pockets and smiled slightly. "What are you up to?"

Sin shrugged, eyes flicking over to the parking lot briefly before he focused on Boyd again. The hood shadowed most of his face but Boyd could still see his vivid green eyes. "Nothing, really. Feeling restless. Carhart gave me the evaluation pep talk a while ago so I suppose I'm feeling impatient to get it done with but it isn't until tomorrow."

"Ahh, you got a pep talk? Lucky you," Boyd drawled, the small smile widening on his lips. "I'm just coming back from my evaluation, actually. So I guess I won't be getting one."

"I doubt he thought you needed one. It was the typical, 'this is a very serious matter Sin, it isn't a time for your sarcasm and bad attitude,' spiel." Sin made a face and crossed his arms over his chest as he observed Boyd from beneath his hood. "How did it go?"

"I don't know," Boyd said with a shrug. "Okay, I guess. She thinks I'm untrustworthy in some regards but if I'm a good little boy, Marshal Seong will like me and everything will turn out fine." He raised an eyebrow. "By the way, Carhart needn't have bothered since she'll give you the same spiel if you don't take it seriously. She likes to inform you about how it will be when Euro's in charge."

Sin shrugged and looked away briefly, his full lips turning down. There was a brief pause before he said finally, "Well I don't have much hope for passing this evaluation anyway but I don't really want to dwell on it now."

Boyd watched Sin more seriously. The concept was one he didn't even want to fully consider.

"I guess we'll see," Boyd said, almost continuing before he stopped himself; he didn't want to press the issue.

Another burst of wind threw hair into Boyd's face; his eyes narrowed and he frowned as he reached up to pull long blond strands behind his ear. "What I don't understand is why the European Division feels so superior to the American. If Bridget is anything to judge. She spent half the evaluation telling me why they're better than we are. Even if they think our administration has become sloppy here and there, they do the same job as we do..."

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"Hmm." Sin uncrossed his arms and shoved one hand in the pocket of his frayed jeans before frowning and taking it out again as if he'd been looking for something that wasn't there anymore; most likely his cigarettes since he'd been trying to quit. "I think it has less to do with them thinking the American division is really terrible in reality and more to do with the fact that there has been tension between us and them since the war."

Boyd considered that, then nodded. "That's true... Even with the truce, people don't forget grudges that easily."

"Yeah." Sin shook his head slightly as if tossing the topic out of his mind and focused on Boyd more intently. "What are you doing now?"

"I was just heading home," Boyd said, glancing toward the parking lot and raising one shoulder in an idle shrug.

He found it more difficult to meet Sin's eyes when Sin was watching him so intensely. Those vivid green eyes were too familiar and it made him want to stare at Sin; to run his gaze along the planes of Sin's face showing through the shadows of his hood.

"Ah." Sin stepped forward and asked slowly, almost hesitantly, "If you aren't very busy, would you like to spend the afternoon together?"

Boyd snapped his gaze over to Sin, surprised by the question. Sin's wording almost made it sound like he was asking Boyd out on a date and at first Boyd didn't know how to respond; didn't know how to interpret it.

"Uh..." Boyd started to reply and he was cut off by another strong burst of wind that threw his hair into his face. Before he could do anything, Sin's strong hand reached out, brushing callused fingers against Boyd's cheek as he pushed Boyd's hair out of the way.

Boyd's eyes widened and his hand hovered where he'd started to hold it up; he stared into Sin's green gaze and he was struck silent briefly, caught off guard and feeling flustered.

He couldn't remember how long it'd been since Sin had touched him in that manner, his strong fingers moving almost gently along the surface of Boyd's face. It was bittersweet for Boyd, who felt like each day he spent around Sin he was reminded even further of how much he missed him.

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That touch, combined with Sin's invitation... It seemed like more than the platonic way they'd been behaving together in the past few months. Yet, Boyd didn't know if that was truly the case or if he was reading too much into the interaction; seeing things the way he wanted to see them.

"Um," Boyd stumbled slightly with his words, not knowing what to say. "I-- maybe another time?"

Sin blinked at him silently for a moment and he shoved his hands into his pockets. "Oh. Okay."

The moment was awkward and Boyd didn't know what to say or do. Sin was staring at him blankly and Boyd felt for a moment like he'd done the wrong thing.

"Hsin..." He stopped himself when he realized he was subconsciously using Sin's real name. His eyes narrowed slightly and he took a step back automatically. He couldn't think properly with Sin that close to him.

"I should go..." Boyd said more quietly, feeling troubled and confused.

Sin shrugged and looked away but not before Boyd caught a glimpse of narrowed eyes and a frown. "I'll see you around."

With that being said, Sin turned around and strode off in the direction of his building.

Boyd watched Sin leave and after a moment of hesitation, he headed toward his car. His eyes were narrowed and by the time he shut the driver's side door behind him, he felt conflicted and regretful. He realized it may have seemed like he blew Sin off and although that was the last thing he wanted to do, he still didn't know how to rectify the situation.

He didn't know if he would be able to keep himself purely platonic if he chased after Sin. He was worried that something would show through and he would end up doing exactly what Ivan had pointed out that he shouldn't be doing; sending mixed signals while Sin was involved with someone else.

Yet as Boyd drove out of the parking lot, the memory of Sin's blank stare still bothered him and he decided that he would return to the Agency tomorrow to make it up to Sin. By then, he should have had the chance to be more reasonable and he would be able to ignore how good it had felt to have Sin touch him even that briefly.

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There was the air of something tense and unspoken the next day when Boyd returned to the Agency compound. Although no one seemed to be particularly on high alert, implying that it probably wasn't a matter of security, there were still groups of people milling around who seemed to be discussing something in low undertones. A small crowd was in front of the Tower and as Boyd started to head toward Sin's building, he felt something shift uneasily inside him.

He saw Toby hovering alone near a group of people and Boyd automatically headed over to him, his eyebrows drawing down slightly once he came within speaking distance.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Hey Boyd," Toby greeted and a brief smile crossed his thin, beaky face as he glanced at Boyd. He nodded at the Tower, his perfectly styled black hair barely moving with the motion. "I'm not exactly sure, to be honest. Something happened in the Tower but I don't know what. They cleared the lower three levels."

"That's odd," Boyd said, looking over at the Tower with narrowed eyes. "So people are still inside?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I was heading over there for a meeting when Lt. Gerant and a swarm of guards came charging up the stairs and stopped letting people in."

"They didn't say why?"

The other man shook his head. "I'm sure someone will find out soon though."

Boyd nodded, gaze tracking the black monolith of the Tower and the shining, tinted windows that couldn't be seen through from the outside. "It can't be anything structural or they would have evacuated everyone. Unless something happened on Fourth that's somehow trickled down." He tilted his head and said doubtfully, "Maybe even someone got loose?"

"Maybe that Jane Doe girl," Toby suggested although he looked skeptical of his own suggestion.

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"Maybe..." Boyd shrugged. "Otherwise it could have to do with the conference rooms on the lower levels but I doubt many people other than Bridget are using them right now." He smirked lightly. "Maybe she suddenly decided she needed a slew of armed guards to protect her notes."

Toby smirked at that and adjusted his green button-down shirt. "I still can't believe these incompetents allowed someone to hack the network so badly. I haven't seen the Agency at a standstill like this ever. Even after the raid we still had missions going out-- It's inconceivable that so much valuable data could have been tampered with or lost."

"It must have been a damn good hacker, though, to get through the system," Boyd observed, sliding his hands in his pockets and turning his attention fully back to Toby. "And how did they even know to target us in the first place unless it's related to the raid? That may be part of what's causing the standstill; trying to figure out where exactly our weakness is."

"There's all sorts of theories floating about this place," Toby said as he nodded in agreement. The wind blew stronger and Toby ducked his head slightly, lifting one hand to hover above his hair. "People are saying it's the insurgents from the raid trying to get us electronically, other people have been saying maybe it's someone on the inside with a beef against the admin. And more ridiculous people have been saying that it's all a ploy to get us through the evaluations quicker."

Boyd laughed shortly, pulling some hair behind his ear to stop it from clouding his vision. "Yeah... I doubt it's the last one. But if it's the insurgents, why didn't they just take the information when they were here? Or attack us sooner? We were probably vulnerable enough right after the raid to be able to do it. Especially with the change in administration."

"Speaking of changes in admin..." Toby turned slightly and studied Boyd closer, raising an eyebrow. "How did your evaluation go? I heard you had it yesterday."

"I don't know," Boyd said, shrugging and subconsciously looking toward the Tower again, as if he could see Bridget inside. "I think it went alright but it sounds like the European Division operates on much higher standards than our admins have. I'm a little worried that my failure rate is going to make the new Marshal pretty much give up on me from the start."

"Hmm." Toby's gaze slid away and he said with only a bit of his former haughty attitude, "Mine went well although that's likely because I have a slew of talents under my belt. I

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wouldn't be too worried, though. You'll be fine. You wouldn't have been promoted if you don't have some redeeming qualities."

"I guess," Boyd said, not wanting to get into why he was promoted. Considering the fact that Toby had gone through training with him, he didn't think it would be appropriate to say anything. "What was your failure rate?" he asked curiously instead.

"I don't know. She didn't mention it." Toby shrugged and didn't seem concerned.

"Oh." Boyd assumed that meant they only brought it up when the rate was too high.

That didn't help much with his mild concern about what his future would really be at the Agency, but at the same time he didn't feel the need to worry about it. If they'd already made their decision then there was nothing he could do about it. And in the missions that would occur in the interim before Marshal Seong arrived, as long as he remained successful then maybe it would work out fine in the end.

"Well," Boyd continued after a brief pause. "It sounds like as long as we perform our jobs well and don't question them too much, they'll ultimately be okay with us."

That made him wonder how well Sin would do in his evaluation today or what the new regime would think of Emilio. Boyd hoped both Vegas were valuable enough to the Agency that the attitudes they sometimes portrayed wouldn't cause too many problems for them.

Although his first and foremost concern was for Sin, Boyd found that he didn't relish the idea of Emilio being terminated. He still didn't know exactly what he thought of Emilio but he didn't intensely dislike him the way he had before he'd known him; before Emilio had helped him out and had shown that there was more to the man than the ridiculous facade others seemed to believe so easily. Still, that didn't stop him from being a complete asshole sometimes, although Boyd tended to ignore any comments Emilio made during those times.

Toby opened his mouth to reply but a tall woman with brown hair caught his eye and he waved her over. "Hey Soniya, come here for a second!"

The woman, Soniya apparently, walked over slowly. She glanced at Toby before eyeballing Boyd oddly. She had a peculiar look on her face but Boyd didn't know what to make of it. "What?"

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Toby gestured to the Tower. "You were in there, right? What happened?"

Soniya crossed her arms over her green sweater and flicked a look at Boyd. Her bushy eyebrows drew together and she frowned deeply. "Uh."

"What?" Boyd asked, looking at her strangely.

"Well..." The woman looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I'm not sure exactly why but I saw them dragging your partner to the elevator all covered in blood."

"What?" Boyd nearly snapped in surprise, his heartbeat stumbling over itself, and he looked at the Tower again, as if it would tell him anything. His eyes had widened and he went still; worry and fear surged within him even as he tried to guess what happened. "Was he attacked? Did he look conscious?"

Toby looked from Soniya to Boyd, his eyes widened slightly with surprise.

"I'm not sure but I don't think it was his blood," the woman said hesitantly. She shook her head, mumbled something to Toby and walked quickly away.

"What the f..." Boyd's mind was racing and he couldn't understand what the hell had happened. His concern only heightened at Soniya's words and his eyes narrowed, expression growing taut. He barely glanced distractedly at Toby. "I have to go," he said distantly even as he turned toward the Tower.

"Let me know what the hell happened!" Toby called after him and he sounded genuinely concerned on Boyd's behalf.

Boyd nodded but it was more of an automatic response than anything. As he moved through the sporadic crowds toward the front line, he saw that the entrance was still blocked. He didn't bother trying to gain entry; they had no reason to let him in and he wasn't going to try to pull strings when it was doubtful he would be successful anyway.

Instead, he stood to the side, waiting anxiously for the chance to get inside; to find out what was going on. He couldn't believe that Sin would suddenly attack someone. Although it was possible, it just didn't make sense. Sin had been on his medication, he'd been stable and seemingly relatively content. He'd been perfectly fine yesterday.

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So unless something triggered an episode, he didn't understand why Sin would be covered in someone else's blood. And even if he'd had an episode, what the hell could possibly have been bad enough to start it?

The questions and doubts strengthened with each second that passed and Boyd could feel the tension growing in his shoulders while his stomach clenched with anxiety and his heartbeat sped. Thankfully, it wasn't long before the guards seemed to be having a conversation over their comm units and then, briefly looking toward the crowd, they stepped inside and let the doors open.

Boyd didn't waste time; he was one of the first people inside and he ignored the sidelong glances he got from the guards. Instead, he strode straight to the elevators. It wasn't long until the first one arrived and Boyd stepped in along with a handful of other people who had walked into the building once they'd had the chance.

The group was talking in undertones to each other, speculating about what had happened, but Boyd barely paid attention. He got off at Carhart's floor and headed straight for the General's office, where he knocked on the closed door.

The door opened and Carhart stared down at him, moving to the side so that he could enter, although he was holding a slim grey cordless phone to his ear. His handsome face was drawn and his cerulean blue eyes darkened but he just shook his head at Boyd and moved back to the desk.

"Good," he said curtly into the phone. "I'll be there soon."

Carhart hung up and put the phone onto its cradle with more force than was necessary.

"What happened?" Boyd asked as soon as Carhart was free.

Carhart gave Boyd a distracted look and stood up straight, pushing his shirt sleeves up to his elbows as he once again headed in the direction of the door. "I don't have time to explain," he said curtly, his expression foreboding. "I don't have all the details and I need to get downstairs."

"Can I come with?" Boyd asked, moving out of Carhart's way.

"No," Carhart snapped but then paused with his fingers wrapped around the doorknob and looked over at Boyd wearily.

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The General just looked at him for a moment and seemed very tired. "Investigator Monaghan was murdered and Sin was there, covered in blood."

Boyd's eyes widened and he paled, at once realizing the magnitude of the situation even as he felt like he couldn't have heard that correctly. He shook his head slightly. "What-- That doesn't... How could that be? He wouldn't..."

Carhart didn't respond to Boyd's statements directly. "I don't know what happened, Boyd, and I haven't spoken to Sin yet. I'll contact you when I learn more."

With that being said, the General strode out of the office to leave a stunned Boyd behind.

Boyd stared at the empty doorway then blankly walked over to one of Carhart's guest seats where he dropped down. He felt like he was in a state of shock and no matter how he went over the words in his mind, it made less sense each time. He couldn't believe that Sin would kill Bridget.

Everything seemed surreal and Boyd leaned forward, dropping his face into his hands, his elbows resting on his knees.

He felt more afraid of losing Sin than he ever had.

The European Division seemed harsh enough on its own; he couldn't imagine that they wouldn't demand that Sin be terminated immediately if they suspected that he was responsible. And if Sin was found covered in her blood...

He squeezed his eyes shut, his heart thundering in his chest even as he felt almost nauseated. He knew there was the terrifyingly real chance that he would never see Sin again. That the last time they interacted, he seemingly blew Sin off. That the last memory he would ever have would be of Sin's blank stare and his slouched back as he strode away.

Tears gathered in Boyd's eyes but he viciously fought them back because it would do no good.

All he could do right now was trust Carhart to do damage control; to fight to keep Sin alive for the moment. All he could do was wait for Carhart's call. And once he had more information, he would be able to figure out what he could do.

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He didn't know how long he sat there, feeling sick with worry, but when his phone finally rang he pulled it out immediately and flipped it open. His throat felt tight and he almost couldn't get words to come out at first. He cleared his throat and said his code name, confirmation of his identity. "Terrence Grey speaking."

"You have a ten minute window to see Sin," Carhart's voice said, lower and gruffer than it'd been before. "He's being kept in the holding wing for the time being. Go now while Lt. Gerant is there or you won't get another chance."

"Thank you," Boyd said, already standing and heading toward the door. Carhart's tone and words didn't do much to allay Boyd's fears but he didn't dwell on it. The phone had already gone dead before he flipped it closed and put it away.

He didn't waste any time getting down to the fourth floor. When he stopped by Gerant to verify his clearance to be there, Gerant's expression was unreadable and he wouldn't quite meet Boyd's eyes. It wasn't long before Boyd was led to a solid door with a number painted next to it in blocky, plain white letters. Gerant unlocked the door for him and let him inside, closing the door behind Boyd.

The room was set up quite similarly to the cell Boyd had been placed in for isolation. The stark white of the walls and floor made the blood smeared across Sin and the places he'd touched seem that much more vivid and disturbing.

The dark colors of Sin's clothing was almost completely overrun by the deep red blood covering him. He was sitting in the far corner facing the wall with his head in his hands and his shoulders hunched forward.

Boyd hesitated very briefly, struck by the sight and feeling his heart twist. He walked over by Sin and crouched down next to him, reaching a hand out to rest on his shoulder comfortingly.

"Hsin," he said quietly.

Sin's body tensed but he didn't look at Boyd and he didn't say anything.

"Hsin, please talk to me," Boyd said a little louder, lightly squeezing Sin's shoulder. "Do you remember anything?"

There was another extended silence. It was nearly overwhelming in the empty, stark white room but then Sin's rough voice uttered, "No."

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Boyd nodded even though Sin couldn't see. "Will you look at me please?"

Sin didn't move at first but then he slowly unfolded himself and turned slightly, looking over at Boyd with reddened almond-shaped eyes and blanched features. "Why?" he asked in the same hoarse voice, eyebrows drawing together. "Why would you want to look at me right now?"

Boyd reached out and gently pushed Sin's hair out of the way, then almost absently rested his hand against Sin's cheek comfortingly, although it was partially to make sure Sin wouldn't look away again. Boyd's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, ignoring the blood as he searched Sin's face briefly then stared into that familiar vivid green gaze.

He didn't see even a hint of insanity, of anything that he would typically expect around an episode. Although it was possible Sin had experienced an episode earlier and had already recovered, it just didn't seem right to Boyd.

"I wanted to see your eyes," Boyd answered after a moment, his own gaze steady and sincere.

Sin almost immediately shifted his eyes away from Boyd's, staring at the floor.

"What happened?" Boyd asked, undeterred. "What do you remember?"

Sin's eyes flicked up briefly to Boyd and he shook his head. "I don't remember anything," he replied in an empty, toneless voice. "She was questioning me about my crimes, my mental health. She was making it clear that she considers me a liability who should be replaced and everything after that is a void."

Boyd shifted back slightly, eyebrows drawn down as he took in that information, trying to figure out what could have happened. "There wasn't anyone else there with you?"

Sin shook his head slightly and hunched forward again, threading his bloodstained fingers into his hair. He clenched the silky black strands and he released a low, shuddering sigh. "I don't understand. I just don't fucking understand why this would have happened, Boyd. I swear to God I don't remember even feeling... feeling like anything was happening."

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Boyd's expression twisted slightly and he reached out, resting his palm against one of Sin's hands. He kept it there for a moment and finally Sin released the violent grip on his hair, his hands brushing against Boyd's as they dropped to his lap.

"What were you talking about specifically when you blacked out?" Boyd's voice was almost gentle, although his tone remained nonjudgmental. He dropped his hands away from Sin. "Was it something that would have especially upset you? Was she asking you about your family?"

Sin just shook his head again, looking up to meet Boyd's eyes directly. "No. She was more focused on my crimes. On what happens when I have an episode. It was clear that she considered me a liability but even then... I wasn't surprised by this. I wasn't lashing out at her and she wasn't overtly disrespectful to me."

Obviously troubled, Sin looked down at his hands and stared at the crusted blood on them. "I don't understand," he said again but this time his voice was quieter.

Boyd slid one hand around Sin's, squeezing briefly in a comforting gesture to remind Sin that he wasn't alone. Boyd's eyebrows drew together as he searched Sin's expression, brown eyes determined even though he was disturbed by the entire situation. "I'm sorry to ask so many questions at once but I only have so much time. Are you still taking your medication?"

Sin nodded his head in assent although he made a scornful sound in the back of his throat as if denouncing the medication as useless.

"Has it been working for you still?" Boyd's thumb absently ran along Sin's hand once before he caught himself. "Have you noticed any hallucinations lately, have you been feeling depressed?"

"No," Sin replied in the same low tone. His eyes remained on his hands, long black lashes nearly blocking the vivid green of them.

Boyd reached out with his free hand and, with gentle but firm pressure on Sin's chin, he forced Sin to look up at him. "And nothing happened before the interview? You didn't witness or do anything that upset you?"

"No." Sin's voice was becoming wearier, more dismal. His shoulders slumped further and he once again wrenched his gaze from Boyd's as he tilted his head down, black hair hanging around the sides of his face.

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"Hsin." When Sin didn't immediately respond, Boyd pushed Sin's hair out of the way and behind his ear, trying to see his face. Some of the silky black strands fell down almost immediately, partially obscuring Sin's expression. "What happened when you woke up?"

Sin's body tensed further, every muscle coiling tight as his eyes closed briefly. "I woke slumped over her desk. Blood was everywhere. Her body was nearby, carved up... I guess with the letter opener. It was on the desk, next to my hand. She reminded me..."

Sin frowned. "She reminded me of Lydia. Her body did."

Boyd's fingers twitched against Sin's hand and he drew his eyebrows down. "How? Did it look really similar?"

This time his only response was a silent nod.

That was certainly interesting. "Hmm." Boyd frowned thoughtfully, his fingers slackening on Sin's hand as he considered the information. "What did you use on Lydia?"

"Boyd..." Sin looked up with narrowed eyes, shaking his head. "Just stop. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter," Boyd insisted, narrowing his eyes in return and releasing Sin's hand. He shifted so he was more fully facing Sin and met his eyes clearly. Without a hint of uncertainty or hesitation he continued, "I think someone set you up. I just don't know yet how or why."

Sin sat back and frowned slightly, confusion clouding his expression as though the possibility had never entered his mind. "Even if that were true, there's no proof. They're going to terminate me after they figure that out and I..."

He looked away again, a pained look clouding over his features. "I'm not even sure I didn't do it."

"Listen to me," Boyd said firmly, reaching out and placing his palm against Sin's cheek to bring Sin back to him, to make Sin look at him.

"Don't doubt yourself over this." Boyd's eyebrows drew down and his expression saddened even as his features set resolutely. He genuinely believed in Sin and didn't hide it in his eyes even as his fingers twitched against Sin's skin intently. "You didn't kill

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her. And I'm not saying this without thinking it through. I know you're physically capable of it; I know you don't always know what you're doing when you have an episode. But it doesn't matter. I don't have a doubt in my mind that you were framed and I'm going to find out how. I promise you I'll prove your innocence. Just hold on until I can."

Sin stared into Boyd's face and a flicker of something unidentifiable crossed his expression but he closed his eyes briefly, blocking it away. He briefly leaned into Boyd's touch, lips parting as a shuddering sigh escaped them, before he pulled away reluctantly and looked at Boyd again.

"But what if it was me?" he asked, his voice practically a whisper. Sin shook his head and wet his lips, eyebrows drawing together and raising. "What if it's just that... now I don't even need a trigger to have an episode? What if I'm just getting worse?"

"You aren't," Boyd said confidently, dropping his hand over Sin's again and squeezing. "I've been beside you for years. Maybe I missed what was happening when you really were getting worse, but now I know to pay more attention. Lately, you've been more stable than I've ever seen you."

Boyd narrowed his eyes, his eyebrows drawing down again. He tilted his head a little and blond hair shifted against the side of his face. "If Emilio coming back from the dead after you thought you'd killed him didn't trigger something for you, why would Bridget? I met her. She wasn't aggressive; she wasn't overly intrusive. She wasn't like anyone who would hurt you-- if anything, she was the sort of person you would protect. And if you've gone your whole life with your illness affecting you one way, why would it suddenly and without cause change?"

Sin shrugged his shoulders listlessly, obviously not having an answer for that.

Boyd continued insistently when Sin didn't say anything. "It took years of childhood abuse to build the illness in you-- now that you're on medication, you've been going through therapy, you've seemed relatively content with your life... I don't believe that you suddenly worsened and will kill people without warning. I think it's far more likely that someone wanted to make it seem like you'd snapped; maybe to get you killed. And that person fashioned the murder after Lydia, because they could've seen the video or photos, and they'd know most people would automatically believe you did it."

"Even if that's true," Sin said with a frown, his eyes searching Boyd's as he spoke. "No one is going to believe it. I have trouble believing it. Security is at the highest level since the network was hacked and there's only a small handful of people on this compound

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who could get the drop on me, one of them being my father and another probably being you. It's just-- I just--"

Sin broke off and wrapped his hands around Boyd's forearms, pulling him closer as he said quietly, "I just don't want you getting yourself in trouble for me. Not when I can't even guarantee... that I don't deserve whatever they give me."

"They'll kill you, Hsin," Boyd said equally quietly, his mouth turning down and gaze troubled as he searched Sin's green eyes. He tilted his head forward, blond strands barely brushing against Sin's dark hair. "I won't just stand to the side while you take the fall for something you didn't even do. Maybe you've done things in the past you felt bad about but that's over; you've more than paid for any crimes you've committed. Even if you're afraid you deserve it, I know you don't."

Boyd shook his head firmly. "And you don't need to worry about me. There has to be evidence somewhere; I'll just find it and present it to them. It'll be fine."

He made it sound simple, even though he knew there would be more going into it. The amount of time he was going to need to prove Sin's innocence was almost positively going to exceed the amount of time the Agency would keep Sin alive.

Sin didn't respond verbally but his eyes narrowed and he speared Boyd with a piercing gaze as his fingers tightened around Boyd's arms slightly.

Boyd was caught by the intensity in Sin's pale green eyes; he was unable to look away and in truth, he didn't particularly want to. Sin's fingers curled against the bare skin of his arms was distracting and seeing Sin covered in someone else's blood-- a framed murder he may die for-- was disturbing and made his stomach clench in worry.

He was acutely aware that, even trying as hard as he could, it was entirely possible that he wouldn't be able to succeed. That whatever evidence was out there had already been destroyed. That this would be the last time he would ever see Sin.

Boyd couldn't read Sin's expression and he kept his fears to himself, although he couldn't stop the strength of his own gaze. And although part of him thought he should say something, his throat felt closed up.

Someone banged twice on the cell door, shattering the moment. Boyd wrenched his eyes from Sin to glance at the door quickly although Sin never looked away.

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Boyd was reluctant to leave but he knew that the sooner he left here, the sooner he could help clear Sin's name. He started to pull away, looking over at Sin again although this time he met Sin's eyes for a shorter period of time. It was difficult looking at Sin and not being pulled in.

"I have to go," Boyd said with a distracted frown.

Sin's fingers slid along the skin of Boyd's arms as he slowly let go. "Thank you, Boyd," he said quietly, his voice low and thicker than usual.

Boyd smiled and he rested his hand briefly over Sin's. He squeezed his fingers in tacit support, then shifted back on his heels and stood. He looked down at Sin again for another second, committing to memory every detail he could of his partner.

"I'll see you later," Boyd said with quiet assurance and, with one more glance behind him, he walked out of the cell.

Gerant glanced over when Boyd emerged into the hallway; after the door shut behind him, Boyd looked over at the lieutenant and said sincerely, "Thank you."

There was a brief pause and Gerant replied, "I hope he didn't do it, Agent Beaulieu. Or I'll be sorry that I did this for him."

"He didn't," Boyd said without doubt and nodded briefly at Gerant in acknowledgment, then left.

He headed straight for the next most important person to see, his expression unreadable as he strode through the compound. Once he reached Carhart's apartment, he paused at the door and knocked loudly, hoping his timing would be right.

It took several moments for the door to open but when it did, Emilio appeared in low riding black leather pants, barefoot and shirtless. His hair was disheveled and his jaw covered with stubble. He gave the impression of just having rolled out of bed, although his eyes were narrowed slightly and his expression alert.

"Yeah?"

Boyd's gaze flicked behind Emilio briefly. "Are you alone?"

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Emilio lifted one tattooed shoulder in a shrug. "Yep. Why? Finally decided to try out vintage Vega?"

Ignoring the question, Boyd met Emilio's eyes seriously. "Can I come in?"

"Sure, why not." Emilio stepped aside so that Boyd could enter the apartment and shut the door behind him.

It was the first time Boyd had ever been in Carhart's apartment and he automatically glanced around. The door opened into the living room, with a comfortable-looking couch, wooden coffee and end tables, and a rug that sat beneath. Everything was in earth tones and the overall impression was rather masculine. An opening in the wall to the side led into what appeared to be the kitchen.

Boyd couldn't see the bedroom from here so he couldn't tell where Emilio may have been sleeping but he assumed he'd been on the couch.

Returning his gaze to Emilio, Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly. "Did you hear about Hsin yet?"

"Uh huh." Emilio sat on the arm of the couch and picked up a black box of cigarettes. He extracted one and popped it between his lips.

"I don't think he did it and I want to prove it, but I won't have time before they terminate him," Boyd replied bluntly, crossing his arms and watching Emilio closely. He couldn't tell what Emilio was thinking but he didn't hesitate to continue. "I want to break him out and hide him in the meantime."

Emilio inhaled from his newly lit cigarette, eyeing Boyd thoughtfully as he exhaled slowly. "I'd already planned on it."

"Good," Boyd said, not hiding the relief he felt that he wouldn't have to convince Emilio, although his eyes were still narrowed seriously. "Will you let me work with you on it?"

The other man shrugged and continued to leisurely suck on his cigarette, not appearing to be in a hurry. "If I go through with what I'd planned, he'd go into hiding for good. Your plan is to prove his innocence and I'm not even sure if he is innocent. I just don't really care either way."

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"He *is* innocent," Boyd said without hesitation. "I know he is. I just need time to show it." He drew his eyebrows down thoughtfully. "I have an idea for where to hide him in the short term but if something happens or I can't find the evidence-- or if they don't care and intend to terminate him anyway-- is it possible to transition to your plan at that point?"

"Sure." Emilio cocked an eyebrow at Boyd. "But you wouldn't see him again."

The very idea was incredibly painful and Boyd looked away briefly with slightly darkened eyes. Yet the information didn't come as too much of a surprise, since if Emilio knew a way to hide Sin more permanently, Sin would have to disappear completely. If Sin was gone-- if Sin was out of Boyd's life and Boyd was stuck here never able to see him again--

Boyd cut the thought off. If they had to default to that plan, it meant that they would have been unable to save Sin anyway. And if that was the case then the only solution was to get Sin as far away from the Agency as possible.

The determination remained strong within him; he shook his head, returning a somber stare to Emilio. Part of him wanted to ask what Emilio had in mind but he also knew that it was probably best if he didn't have details-- that way, no matter what happened, he would never be able to betray Sin's location.

"Would he be safe?" Boyd asked instead, eyebrows furrowing and a frown pulling at the edges of his lips. "Maybe have a chance to build a new life or be happy?"

Emilio shrugged and hopped down from the sofa's arm, bare feet landing lightly on the wooden floor. "He'd be alive. Whatever he does after that is on him. I doubt I'd see him again unless he came back like a stupid ass."

"How would you ensure the Agency wouldn't go after him?" Boyd asked slightly dubiously. "Would you fake his death?"

"Don't worry about what I'd do," Emilio replied as he took another drag off his cigarette. He padded across the room and ashed the cigarette in an ashtray that sat on a nearby bookshelf.

Boyd studied Emilio for a long moment then shook his head and dropped his arms at his sides. His eyes narrowed and he was intensely serious in a way he rarely got except in the midst of mission planning. "It doesn't matter, anyway. His life is most important,

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regardless of if I ever see him again. I really think that should be Plan B. But would you be able to put it in motion even if you aren't free? Because once Sin disappears, we'll be the first people my mother will suspect."

"She won't keep me locked up forever unless she can prove I'm involved unless she's a fucking idiot and doesn't want missions getting done." Emilio looked over at Boyd. "But I'm not doing nothing until I talk to Zachary first."

Boyd watched Emilio for a moment then glanced away. In a way, he thought it would be good to bring Carhart in on it; to let him know what they planned. But he didn't know what Carhart would do. There was no question that Carhart cared about Sin and would want to be on their side, but Boyd still remembered Carhart's uncomfortable silence during the debriefing with his mother.

Carhart would do everything he could legitimately to help out, but Boyd and Emilio were contemplating going against the Agency and Boyd didn't know what to predict Carhart would do with that. He didn't think Carhart would stop them and yet... he just didn't know anymore.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? He'll probably be implicated as it is and the less he knows or is involved, the less of a problem it would be for him. He's probably already pulled what weight he could just to keep Sin alive. Not to mention," Boyd added, watching Emilio, "the fewer people who are involved, the better."

Emilio waved the concern off and put out his cigarette, grabbing a white t-shirt that was laying crumpled on an armchair. "For someone who came in here asking me for help, you sure seem to be questioning my decisions a shitload."

Boyd sighed and ran a hand through his hair, forcing as much tension as he could out of his body. Blond strands fell messily back down when he dropped his arm at his side and he nodded almost distractedly. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm just worried and I feel like the more it's all delayed, the more likely something will happen to him before we can get him to safety." His eyes narrowed and a troubled expression crossed his face. "I don't want him to be killed before we even get him off Fourth."

"Then we got to get moving, blondie." Emilio raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "My connec' on the seventeenth floor tells me that we have a twenty hour window before my boy is incinerated but as soon as head guard Gerant is off duty, his boys are gonna be in charge and as we all know, they ain't especially fond of Hsin. I'm gonna have to wait

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until after dark to make a move and he'll likely be tranq'd by then so you need to figure out if the place you're thinkin' of is actually gonna be a good place to stash him."

Boyd nodded, although he gave Emilio a mildly odd yet curious look. "Who's your contact?"

A somewhat smug expression crossed Emilio's handsome face and he sat down to pull on a pair of socks and sneakers. "Someone who works for the top people in charge. You should know him. He helped you out last time you busted Sin out the fourth."

It took a moment for Boyd to think back; not many people had been involved in that. Yet when he thought of it in terms of someone on the seventeenth floor, there really was only one person it could be-- Samuel.

Boyd had wondered why exactly Samuel had shown him Connors' schedule, which had given Boyd the chance to know when to break Sin out. Although it could have been coincidence, that option didn't make sense anymore. Especially since Samuel had remained as the Marshal's aide; Aisha was his mother's personal assistant for the Inspector duties, and Samuel was for the more highly classified work.

Still, it was surprising, especially since Emilio had been gone for nearly twenty years. Boyd raised his eyebrows, impressed. "How long has he been your contact?"

"Since he came to the Agency," Emilio replied easily. "Money talks."

"Apparently," Boyd agreed mildly.

Emilio didn't look up from lacing his sneakers and he finished quickly, standing up straight. He ran a hand through his short hair and moved toward the door. "I'll contact you within the hour. Stay here and make what calls you need from the land line."

Emilio opened the door and stepped out without another word.

Part II

Carhart looked up when his door opened and wasn't surprised to see Emilio slipping inside and shutting it firmly behind him.

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The senior Vega leaned against the door and stared at the General for a long silent moment. Emilio's back was pressed against the door and a wrinkled white t-shirt rode up slightly and tangled in his black pants. He looked a cross between sleepy and hungover, his short black hair half spiky and half straight, like he'd just rolled out of bed and hadn't bothered to look in a mirror to make it go one way or the other. His tanned skin was paler than usual and there were shadows under his heavy-lidded green eyes.

"Who told you?" Carhart asked, looking away finally to stare blankly at the laptop in front of him. It wasn't connected with the apparently still unsafe network and his PC hard drive was still down for the count due to the virus. His alternative was a fast replacement and a very tiny laptop that had keys more suitable for elves than a grown man.

Emilio stared at Carhart and his expression was one of moody darkness that never boded well for the ensuing conversation. "Obviously not you, General," he drawled.

Carhart winced and dragged his finger along the touch pad, staring down at the files that swung off and on the screen as he thumbed between them. It was a skeletal version of everything he had on his desktop but it was the best he could do for now.

Sin's picture stared out of the laptop screen sullenly as Carhart went over Sin's mental history for the fifteenth time in the past couple of hours. "I knew you would find out. I know you have sources."

Emilio released a sound that could only be described as a low feral growl and stalked across the room, grabbing the laptop and hurling it off the desk without even a brief hesitation. "Maybe you should have been the one to fucking tell me my son is about to be executed."

Carhart didn't react and for a brief moment his fingers remained hovered above the desk as if the laptop was still in front of him and not crushed against the wall. He sat back and looked up at his friend wearily. "Emilio, I'm trying to find a way but it's not going as well as I'd hoped."

"You ain't trying to do shit!" Emilio exploded furiously, green eyes glittering dangerously as his anger began to boil over. His teeth ground together and he leaned across Carhart's desk, grabbing the other man's shirt and pulling him forward until their faces were only inches apart.

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Carhart just stared at Emilio impassively, not reacting to the proximity. "I'm trying to find a way to get Vivienne to put a hold on the termination-- to get her to realize that he probably did not do this, that it doesn't make sense for him to have done this, but everything I have is circumstantial and since even his doctors don't fully understand his illness, we can't--"

"Fuck the fucking illness!" Emilio roared in Carhart's face and backhanded the General so carelessly that the disrespect of the simple but painless strike left Carhart momentarily stunned. It wasn't the first time Emilio had bitch smacked him in the time they'd known each other and Carhart was pretty sure that Emilio remembered how badly it rankled him.

Carhart pulled away from Emilio and stood up so quickly that his chair flipped backwards. "What the hell do you want from me, Vega?" he snapped. "I'm doing what I can but there's only so many fucking miracles I can pull out of a bag for Sin and I think I've used them all up in the past seventeen fucking years while you were down in Mexico doing coke and having sex with prostitutes!"

Emilio glowered at Carhart, walking around the desk rigidly and once again getting right up in Carhart's face. Anger and impatience radiated off his powerful body and mixed with the scent of cigarette smoke, coffee and the slight musk of sweat.

"Believe it or not," Emilio said at length, glaring daggers into his former partner's cerulean blue eyes, "I came back for my son. I came back because I realized that this fucking place was gonna kill him."

Carhart searched Emilio's face and found nothing in his expression but genuine determination, anger and the uncertainty of an emotion that could possibly even be fear. Fear for his son. It moved Carhart to such an extent that all his defensive anger melted away and he sagged in defeat as Emilio's tirade continued.

"And I could care less if he fucked that chick with a butcher knife before slicing her into ribbons. It's a sad story but I give more of a shit about my son, not the bitch who was likely gonna sentence him to death when Marshal Chink from Euro Division arrives."

"I don't even think he did it," Carhart said again. "It doesn't add u--"

"I could give a shit if he did it or not," Emilio cut the General off coldly. "My point is that you're either gonna man up and help me get him out of this fucking mess or you're going to keep hiding behind your desk and your Agency protocol."

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Carhart faltered and stared at Emilio uncertainly even if he didn't feel entirely surprised by what Emilio was implying. "What?"

"I have a plan," the other man said impatiently, finally stepping back out of Carhart's personal space to run a hand through his unruly black hair. "And I need some codes to pull it off. I can get them without you but it will be faster if I don't got to hit up Ryan."

"Wait, *what!*" Carhart brought his hands up to cover his face as he shook his head incredulously. "You think you're going to break him out of the Fourth? Emilio, he isn't fucking accused of snapping a rapist's neck this time-- he's accused of killing an Investigator who like you said, was going to undoubtedly sentence him for termination in the coming months. Vivienne isn't going to let him walk away like she and Connors did last time. You and everyone involved will get terminated too!"

Emilio stared at Carhart with an unimpressed glare. His eyes narrowed into green slits, his lip raising in a snarl. "If you knew what I had to do to get back here, you'd fucking know that the possibility of termination doesn't scare me."

They looked at each other at length and finally Carhart's gaze cut away as discomfort swelled inside him, as an epiphany that had been trying to creep to the forefront shouldered its way to the surface. But he pushed it down again, not wanting to deal with it just yet.

"Emilio, I love Sin--"

Emilio's expression shifted slightly and a glimmer of something unidentifiable crossed his face before he just raised his brows. "That so?"

"Yes, that is so," Carhart bit out, irritated by constantly being unable to get his words out. "But I do things my own way and it's worked for me so far. I've kept Sin alive despite everything for nearly two decades without breaking down the entire system."

Emilio scoffed at that. "Your sense of duty and responsibility can swallow my load. We don't have time for delicate fucking sensibilities, General. We got less than twenty hours before the bogus investigation comes to a close and as we speak, your faggot ass guards are locked in that cell with my boy taking turns beating on him because they're all up in arms about miss hot to trot Investigator being gutted."

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The hair on the back of Carhart's neck rose and he felt stupid for not having taken that into consideration sooner. He'd posted Gerant there specifically but the man had field agent training as well and wouldn't have been able to stay for long.

"Damn it all."

Emilio jabbed a finger at Carhart. "I'm gonna contact you in an hour, babe. And if you're not with me on this, I'll know who you're loyal to."

They stared at each other for another tense moment before Emilio turned away with a disgusted sigh and marched out of the office, slamming the door so violently behind him that a framed picture crashed to the floor and shattered into pieces.

===

"I would like to request more time before Agent Hsin Liu Vega's fate is decided," Boyd said, standing at attention in front of Vivienne's desk. His back was straight, his arms loose at his side; his expression and tone remained purely professional as he watched her.

Vivienne narrowed her eyes, looking thoroughly unmoved. "That is not your place to ask."

"I am aware of this fact, Marshal, and I appreciate that you gave me the chance to meet with you on such short notice. But even if it's not my prerogative, I would like to suggest it nonetheless. I truly don't believe that he did it--"

"Of course not," Vivienne said coolly, cutting him off. She leaned back in her chair, eyeing him in what seemed to be a mixture of irritation and distaste. "You are unintelligent when it comes to Hsin Liu Vega. Your opinion, however, is meaningless."

"Wait," Boyd said urgently before she could turn her attention back to the papers in front of her. She looked up at him in displeasure but he continued stubbornly. "Please, give me a moment of your time. I've been his partner for three years and I can tell you I really don't think he did it."

"Are you forgetting Lydia Connors?" Vivienne asked impatiently. "This is hardly the first time the man has been accused of such acts."

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"Lydia had him on a cocktail of drugs she had administered, then decided to molest him while asking about topics she knew he would be most unstable about," Boyd said dismissively. "Bridget wouldn't have been doing the same thing. And he's been much more stable since treatment--"

"I am well aware of the reports and do not need you to rehash information," Vivienne said curtly. Her expression didn't change as her ice blue eyes scrutinized him. "Your argument is based solely on your opinion, which has been well-established as being colored by your past relationship with him. The fact that you are incapable of seeing his faults does not change reality. I have given that man more than enough chances and he clearly is incapable of acting rationally." Vivienne turned her attention back to the papers.

But Boyd didn't leave, even though she could have easily meant that to be a dismissal. "With all due respect, Marshal, this isn't about my past relationship with him. The facts simply don't add up. He's on medication and has stabilized. If even the father he thought he'd murdered reappearing from the dead didn't trigger an episode, why would an interview with a non-aggressive woman do it?"

"He is perfectly capable of killing in cold blood," Vivienne replied disinterestedly, her gaze flicking along the reports in front of her while she held a pen poised over the paper.

"But *why*?" Boyd pressed. "Why would he do that? Even if we assumed she was going to recommend his termination, what would he possibly gain from killing her then hanging around to be found with the murder weapon?"

Vivienne's eyes narrowed slightly and she didn't immediately respond or look up.

"He's a skilled assassin-- probably the best the Agency has right now. He wouldn't be sloppy like that," Boyd said firmly.

"The evidence at the scene only points toward Agent Vega," Vivienne said resolutely. She set the pen down after a second and crossed her arms. She was expressionless as she leaned back in her chair, watching Boyd. "He was alone in the room with her, he is known to be unstable, even with the medication we clearly cannot fully trust him. And we do not know exactly what transpired within the room. Regardless of your blind belief that he did not have an episode or kill her, there is no reason to believe otherwise."

"What if--" Boyd started to say but he cut himself off when the lights abruptly went out.

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No backup generators kicked in and the office fell into total darkness, aside from the muted light through the full-length windows. Through the darkness, he could just barely see his mother's head snap up.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded as she stood abruptly; he could hear her chair roll backward and bump into the bookcase behind her.

Boyd looked around, keeping his voice purely surprised. "I don't know. Are we having another raid?"

There was a moment of cold silence before he heard buttons being pressed. "Aisha," Vivienne said shortly and when she didn't hear a response, she made a soft sound of impatience. "Open the door," she commanded Boyd.

Boyd made his way a little slowly to the door, feeling along planes and edges until he felt the doorknob. He tugged the door open and saw that the reception area was also completely black, as was what they could see of the rest of the seventeenth floor through the glass walls. He felt his mother's presence striding toward him; she moved past him decisively, actually putting a hand on his upper arm and pushing him out of her way so she could move through the doorway.

"Aisha," Vivienne said again firmly and Boyd could hear Aisha nearly knock over something on the desk. "What is happening?"

"Marshal," Aisha said breathlessly in the dark, her voice tight and a little frightened, although there was also a hint of relief. "I-- I don't know. I was just working on your schedule and suddenly everything went black."

Vivienne hissed quietly and strode to the full-length windows that showed a phenomenal view of the city. With it so dark inside, it was even easier to see the city laid out before them; the lights shining from streets and homes and cars. Boyd could make out her outline as she stood right in front of the windows and peered down to the best of her ability.

"The electricity appears to be out in the entire compound but not the surrounding blocks." Vivienne's voice was curt and utterly displeased. "Get me a comm unit. I want a status check with the guards immediately."

He could hear Aisha fumbling with some of the drawers.

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"Boyd." Vivienne's voice was a firm command and he looked over at her, not needing to say anything before she continued. "You will stay with me. If this is indeed another raid, you will protect me until the guards arrive."

"Of course," Boyd said in agreement.

His eyes were slowly starting to become accustomed to the darkness; enough that he could see his mother's stare burning into him, her arms crossed beneath her breasts.

"I found one, Marshal," Aisha said after a few moments of digging around.

"Good." Vivienne walked over to the desk and held her hand out. When Aisha handed over the comm unit, Vivienne attached it to her ear and turned it on swiftly.

"Lt. Gerant, what is the status," Vivienne's cool voice rang out, although they couldn't hear the answer.

"Is it related to the virus?" Vivienne demanded. She paused briefly, probably listening to his reply, before she continued curtly, "Have there been any attacks reported? Is there intelligence to indicate that this is another raid?"

She paused again while he presumably responded before she said, "Alert me when you have finished."

Several minutes passed of pure darkness, peppered with Vivienne's cool voice checking in with various people. Several guards arrived at her office just in case but no good information was gained. They were in the midst of determining whether they should move to the bunker when the lights suddenly flickered and turned back on.

Boyd blinked in the sudden brightness, squinting his eyes and tilting his head toward the floor briefly. When he looked up again, he saw wary relief scattered across the faces of those in the room, mixed with confusion on others.

Boyd's heartbeat quickened but it wasn't for the same reason everyone else's probably would be and he forced himself not to glance out the window. He felt worried and suspenseful, half listening to Vivienne demanding answers over the comm.

At one point, Vivienne said sharply, "Yes?"

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Whatever Gerant responded, it was apparently not what she wanted to hear. Vivienne went completely still and her eyes narrowed until only the barest hint of ice blue could be seen. Her jaw set and her straightened back turned tense. Her intense stare centered on Boyd even as she repeated flatly, "Missing."

Boyd watched her as if he had no idea what was being discussed, all the while feeling a wave of intense relief roll over him. *Thank God*, he thought almost desperately, knowing from her expression that the plan had been successful.

Vivienne was briefly silent as Gerant presumably responded and whatever he was saying, it clearly was not making her happy.

"And how exactly did this happen." The way she spoke, it was not a question. Her ice blue gaze had not so much as twitched as she scrutinized Boyd, who stared at her with slightly drawn down eyebrows and a questioning look, as if he had no idea what was going on.

"Yes," Vivienne said lowly into the comm after a few seconds. "You will." Her jaw set before she dropped the comm to her side.

"Where is he?" she demanded, this time to Boyd.

"Where is who?" Boyd asked blankly.

"Hsin Liu Vega went missing from his cell," Vivienne said coldly and the room suddenly went very still and silent. Many of the guards exchanged looks and a few narrowed their eyes, watching Boyd suspiciously once they saw her questioning him. Boyd ignored their reactions and raised his eyebrows instead. "How is that possible?"

"Do not insult my intelligence," Vivienne said shortly, her fingers tightening against the comm unit until her nails pressed into her palm, her knuckles starting to whiten. Her gaze was an icy slit through blond eyelashes, her lips a tight line that didn't hide her impatience. "Where is he?"

Boyd shook his head. "How would I know? I've been standing right here with you."

Vivienne's expression shifted and for once, the anger was clear in her eyes. She didn't look away from Boyd as she ordered the guards, "Bring him to the Detainment Center."

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Her eyes narrowed and her voice turned cold. "See to it that we receive answers immediately. Tell them that they are to use whatever methods they deem necessary."

"Yes, Marshal," one of the guards said smartly while he and another guard detached themselves from the others to approach Boyd.

Boyd didn't bother to resist when they grabbed his arms. "I can't tell you something I don't know," he said, eyes narrowed as he frowned.

"You know and you will tell me," Vivienne said confidently, then finally shifted her glare to the guards. "Inform them that they are to send me a report as soon as they have gathered any information of note."

The guards nodded curtly and started to lead Boyd out of the room. As they walked into the hallway, he could just hear her snapping, "Find Emilio Vega. Bring him to Detainment as well. I want answers from both of them."

===

"Where is Hsin Liu Vega?"

Boyd sat in the chair, his hands secured behind his back. The room was purely white and mostly empty except for the interrogation table and chairs to the side. The way it was arranged mirrored the place he'd interrogated Jane Doe during training.

"I don't know," Boyd said, looking over at the man in near boredom.

His interrogator was a person he hadn't seen before. Dark-skinned and nondescript aside from his shaved head, the man's dark eyes nonetheless had a calculating quality to them when he watched Boyd. It would have been unnerving had Boyd felt anything other than complete determination to see this through.

"That's interesting," the man observed, pushing the chair back and standing. In the otherwise silent room, the scraping noise of the chair legs against the floor was especially loud. He calmly walked around the table, stopping at Boyd's side and staring down at him. "Because whenever Vega disappears, you seem to somehow be involved."

"I wasn't aware that he had a tendency to go missing so often that such a statement could be made," Boyd said idly, raising his eyebrows.

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"You've broken him out of Fourth before," the man said rather than reply to the comment, expression passive as he reached out and threaded his fingers into Boyd's hair above his left temple.

Boyd stayed perfectly still, looking up at the man sidelong, his gaze steady as he didn't answer.

The man's fingers tightened just enough to be painful and he leaned down so he could say mildly into Boyd's ear, "I think it would be in your best interest to cooperate. We know that there is little question you are involved. After all, you excel in escape strategies and you've done it before, correct?"

"It'd be a little hard to be involved when I was standing right there in front of my mother," Boyd said blandly. "And if you're basing your entire argument on the one time I did break Sin out, then you should be aware that I tried to go the legit route first. I had a formal meeting with Marshal Connors the same as I requested one with Marshal Beaulieu. There would be no reason for me to break him out right away."

"Unless you wanted us to think that." The man's stare was dark, uninviting, and seemed to burn through Boyd. "Obviously your previous strategy didn't work, and mentioning the first incident would be a convenient excuse."

"I would be pretty stupid to do something so obvious and then provide you with the excuse right away if that were the case," Boyd said plainly, giving the man a sidelong look. "I know I have a lot to work on but I'm not an idiot. When I tell you I don't know, I don't know."

"Hmm."

The man stood, releasing his hold on Boyd's hair. Boyd started to look to the side when the man abruptly hit Boyd so violently on his left cheek that his head snapped to the right. The momentum threw him from the chair and, unable to move his arms, he hit the floor hard. He squeezed his eyes shut and grit his teeth as pain spread across him.

"What's the matter?" the man asked calmly, walking over to Boyd's side and staring down at him. "I barely even hit you."

Boyd didn't answer, gathering energy to push himself up. Before he could, the man suddenly slammed his heel down on Boyd's left shoulder right where the skin graft was

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still sensitive. A strangled shout escaped Boyd, who cut the sound off immediately and panted as he tried to ignore the way the pain reverberated through him.

"Oh, that's right," the man continued, his tone making it obvious he'd never forgotten. "You were hurt recently, weren't you?"

He kicked Boyd hard in his upper arm, where the gunshot and debris scars were. Boyd grit his teeth and tried not to make another noise, although he wasn't entirely successful.

"Does it hurt?" the man asked in mild curiosity. He kicked Boyd even harder, enough that Boyd's body lifted briefly off the floor before he crumpled against it again.

"Maybe the wounds haven't fully healed yet." He stomped down on Boyd's upper back with more strength than before and Boyd couldn't help a short, twisted scream.

"Maybe it hurts a little more than normal when I do this." He steadily put more and more pressure until Boyd felt like he couldn't breathe properly due to the pain and the weight.

Boyd's mouth dropped open and he panted against the floor, moisture puffing out against the pure white and darkening it. He groaned lowly, then slit his eyes open and looked over as best he could from his position. He had to breathe heavily to gain the energy before he hissed, "What's your name?"

The man watched him with a non-expression. "Joseph."

"Well, Joseph," Boyd muttered, eyes turning dark and almost cold as he stared up. "You wouldn't make a good masseuse. You missed a spot."

There was a long moment in which Joseph stared at him evenly before he removed his foot and Boyd breathed a little easier, although the pain didn't immediately dissipate.

"You seem to have become more defiant with time," Joseph observed as he started to walk around Boyd.

"Thank you," Boyd muttered.

"That wasn't a compliment." Joseph paused at Boyd's right side and studied him briefly. Almost as if mirroring Boyd's position, his hands were clasped lightly behind his back. "Although it is a quality we seek when you're dealing with the enemy, you shouldn't be doing this to your employers."

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"I'm not tr--"

Joseph casually kicked Boyd in the ribs hard and quick, cutting off anything Boyd was going to say. Boyd let out a strangled grunt. "I think you've been exposed to bad influences."

"I think you're reading into this too much," Boyd mumbled, breath harsh and caught against the floor.

"If it were my choice, I would terminate you," Joseph continued as if Boyd hadn't spoken. He watched Boyd without emotion and added, "I would like to, in fact."

Boyd didn't answer and Joseph kicked him again, swiftly and violently. There was nothing malicious in Joseph's face as he did so; he simply delivered the kicks with a violent snap of his leg that wrenched the breath from Boyd and made him cough roughly.

"Where is Hsin Liu Vega?" Joseph asked firmly.

"I don't know," Boyd hissed and Joseph kicked him even harder. Boyd's eyes widened in pain and he couldn't help crying out; he collapsed against the floor again and wished his arms were free so he could protect himself in some form.

"Where is Hsin Liu Vega?" Joseph repeated.

"I don't know!"

Joseph leaned down and grabbed Boyd by the hair, hauling him up roughly until he was half standing and half dragged to the table. Joseph slammed Boyd's forehead against the edge of the table with a resounding crack and Boyd's vision briefly darkened even as he gasped.

"Where is he?" Joseph demanded and Boyd nearly shouted in pained anger, "I don't fucking know!"

Joseph made a noise in the back of his throat and dropped Boyd, who couldn't stop himself from crashing against the floor again.

"Very well," Joseph said peaceably, as if he hadn't just been throwing Boyd around.

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Joseph strode to the door and knocked on it twice; the door opened just wide enough for him to have a quiet, brief conversation with someone on the other side. After a moment, the door shut firmly and Joseph walked over to Boyd's side.

"You seem to have forgotten that we know all about you."

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut against the aches in his body and set his jaw.

"We know your greatest fears; your greatest weaknesses," Joseph said sedately when Boyd didn't respond. "We know you're afraid to be held down. We know you're afraid of drowning. We know how you operate."

"That's great for you," Boyd muttered.

"We know how you feel about Hsin Liu Vega," Joseph continued as if Boyd hadn't spoken. "We know how irrational you become about him. We know you are involved in this."

"Are you people deaf?" Boyd demanded, pushing himself onto his back where he glared up at Joseph. His entire body ached furiously and he could already feel nasty bruises spreading across his chest, making his ribs ache each time he breathed. "I told you I wasn't. You're making me wish I was, though; just so I'd have something to tell you to make you shut up."

"We know everything about you." Joseph raised his eyebrows slightly. "We even know how often you had sex with him thanks to your enlightening information during training."

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he looked away, angry with himself once again for having given any of that information away.

"You said you loved him and thought you still did." Joseph paused then crouched next to Boyd, his arms resting over his knees, his hands hanging loosely. His dark gaze that seemed to see too much bore through Boyd like a knife. "If you weren't lying, which I don't think you were, then I find it very difficult to believe that you would not do everything within your power to save him if you perceived his life to be in danger."

Joseph reached out, once again sliding his fingers through Boyd's hair. Boyd started to jerk away but Joseph clenched his fist and yanked Boyd's head back, forcing his face

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up so it was more clearly visible. Boyd watched him with a narrow-eyed glare, expression doggedly unreadable.

"After all, isn't that what you did on your latest failed mission?" Joseph's voice was quiet and almost intimate-- as if they were close friends; as if he were remembering secrets Boyd had whispered to him in confidence.

"I have nothing to say to you," Boyd said lowly.

"Maybe not now," Joseph allowed, tilting his head thoughtfully. "But you will."

He didn't wait for a response before he stood, yanking Boyd up by the hair again and dragging him this time toward the door. Boyd struggled to get away at first but that quickly changed to struggling to move along with him; the stinging from his scalp was burning even down his neck and he desperately wanted to alleviate some of the pressure.

Joseph didn't notice or, more likely, didn't care about Boyd's discomfort. Guards opened the door and hands were suddenly at Boyd's sides, jerking him up by the arms and dragging him down the hall. Boyd couldn't see much except the floor, and the position made it that much harder to ignore the way his body hurt. It wasn't long before he was pulled into another room. He barely got the chance to look up before he was picked up off the floor and tossed onto a table.

He knew what was about to happen and his heartbeat skyrocketed despite himself. Even with the tips he'd learned from Emilio, even with the extra level 10 training, waterboarding still terrified him. Even if he logically knew he wasn't really drowning every time he was subjected to it, the years of phobias and horrific experiences came back and it hit him just as hard to feel that vulnerable-- To be that powerless at the same time as he felt like he was being drowned.

He tried to control his breathing, tried to keep the flash of fear out of his eyes. He'd known this was going to happen the moment he'd decided to save Sin. He'd known they were going to blame Emilio and him, and he'd known that it was an incredibly high possibility that the Agency would go straight for the torture that they knew would hit them the hardest.

Yet even knowing ahead of time, it didn't stop the anxiety that rushed through him as his arms were released from behind his back; as he was shoved down and his wrists were secured at his sides again. It didn't stop his breath from quickening as they pushed his

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head down and he felt that terrifyingly familiar, slight downward angle and the tightening of the straps across his body.

It didn't stop him from gritting his teeth and his body from tensing as they reached for the cloth.

"Such fear from someone who has nothing to hide," Joseph observed lightly, running an almost gentle hand down Boyd's cheek.

Boyd jerked his face away, teeth gritting further. "Don't fuck with me," he growled. "You know it doesn't mean anything except I'm afraid of this."

"Maybe." Joseph's fingers slid away. "Or maybe you're afraid of the information you're going to give away. A man can only be so strong in the face of his greatest fear, isn't that right?"

"Maybe you're incapable of understanding English when I tell you I don't have any information," Boyd hissed and before he could draw another breath, the cloth was shoved down over his face. He jerked despite himself but he didn't make a sound.

"You will tell us everything we want to know," Joseph said idly, no doubt or hesitation in his voice. "If you don't, we simply won't stop."

Boyd could feel his breath quicken as he heard a small table get wheeled over; as the distinct sound of water sloshing in a jug seemed entirely too loud to him. He squeezed his eyes shut against the black cloth and tried not to relive all the horrible moments he'd been subjected to in that same position. His heart was pounding so hard in his chest it literally hurt and he couldn't stop the fearful thrill of panic that shuddered through him.

"Where is Hsin Liu Vega?" Joseph's low voice asked even as the water began to descend.

Part III

The sponge was a neon green color but as it glided over the planes of Sin's body, it quickly darkened with dried blood, leaving his olive-toned skin wet and clean. The blood was splattered on his neck, across his chest, soaked into the crevices of his fingers, and Kassian suspected that only fifty percent of it was actually Sin's. The other fifty percent

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belonged to Investigator Monaghan and the thought bothered him more than he would have expected.

He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, watching as Harriet leaned over Sin's prone form, as she gave him a thorough and surprisingly gentle sponge bath despite the fact that her pseudo patient was a shockingly beautiful suspected murderer. She never once flinched when it came time to scrub at his blood-caked fingernails and didn't even blink at the sight of Sin's completely nude and spectacularly fit body. She was completely professional about the whole thing and once he was clean, she set about stitching his wounds calmly.

Kassian didn't even know why he'd called her. He didn't know why he'd dragged her into the whole thing except that when he'd told Boyd that they could stash Sin at his place for a few days, he hadn't expected Sin to be in such poor shape. He hadn't expected the gashes and disturbingly blackened bruises that reminded him a bit too much of Sin's head wounds in Monterrey that had resulted in the man being comatose for six months.

Kassian wasn't at all sure of his own medical abilities and the idea of Sin dying in his house didn't bode well. Sure he knew how to stitch up a cut and treat a bullet wound but when it came to gauging head injuries, concussions, internal damage-- it wasn't his specialty and he'd called the only person he knew who had made a point to seriously pay attention during medical training who also happened to be someone he could trust.

"This isn't right," Harriet said out of the blue, her low voice toneless although he detected tension in her shoulders as she leaned over Sin and stitched a gash in his side. It wasn't a serious wound but it was nasty enough to get infected if left untreated.

Kassian stared at her, not understanding. "Helping him?"

Harriet looked at him briefly over her shoulder, large brown eyes narrowing slightly, impatiently, and she frowned at him.

"No," she snapped, clearly annoyed by the question. It was the first time she'd seemed openly irritated with him and Kassian found himself more than a little intrigued by the fire in her expression now that it was directed at him.

"It isn't right how they treat him. They weren't interrogating him. They just wanted to torture him before he dies."

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Kassian nodded in agreement but he still couldn't keep the surprise from his expression that she was so up in arms over it. "So, you think he's innocent?"

A pause. "Do you?"

Kassian looked at her seriously for a moment, debating how to answer. "I trust Boyd's judgment."

One of her black eyebrows rose slightly at that and she turned back to Sin, leaning over him again. A gold necklace swayed against her neck as she worked. "So if not for Boyd's judgment, you would think he did it?"

There was something off about her tone but Kassian didn't care to analyze it at the moment. It would have been a lie to say that he hadn't been drinking throughout the day.

The effects were starting to show in his slightly slow thought processes and the confused mixture of feelings that were washing over him regularly as he considered the predicament he found himself in-- Helping someone who typically hated him, the possibility of termination for doing so, and memories of Russia that burst forward every time he looked at Sin even if Kassian didn't really want to know why they were coming up now.

"Not necessarily. But..." *But I've seen him become homicidal over nothing, I've seen him toss Boyd across the room like a ragdoll, I know what he can do.* Kassian cleared his throat and ached for another drink. "I think I would not jump to the conclusion that he's a cold-blooded murderer. I'd never believed it in the past and I don't believe it now."

"But you think it's possible he could have had a psychotic meltdown and done it?"

Kassian shrugged. "That's where me trusting Boyd's judgment comes in. I know he seemed irrational about Vega down in Mexico but when it comes to understanding Vega's mental stuff, Boyd has it down pat. He's seen it, he's dealt with it first hand and on his own. If he doesn't think Vega had an episode, I'd take his word for it."

Harriet nodded thoughtfully and sat back on her haunches, wiping an arm across her forehead as she surveyed Sin's body before she moved to examine a dark bruise across his torso. "That's what I'd been thinking. That he should know better than anyone about the likeliness of that. About the triggers, the reactions, etc."

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Kassian waited for an answer to his original question and when she seemed content to continue her examination of Sin, he arched a brow. "And?"

She shrugged one well-toned shoulder, running her fingers along Sin's body without hesitation. Kassian wondered if she'd be so calm about touching him if he wasn't so heavily sedated. At the back of Kassian's mind he wondered what it would feel like to have those long, confident fingers sliding across his own chest.

"And if I take Boyd's judgment into consideration, I'd say I think Sin didn't do it." Harriet frowned slightly and turned Sin's head from side to side, now running her fingers gingerly through his long black hair and seemingly searching for hidden injuries. "Because unless he was insane at the time, I don't see him killing in cold blood. Not someone who stood no chance against him."

Kassian didn't disagree but he was curious as to Harriet's reasoning. As far as he knew, her only interaction with Sin had been the one time at the level 10 orientation. "What makes you so sure?"

Harriet stood and looked down at Sin for a moment, her brown eyes thoughtful before she pulled a sheet over his nude form. "The training, the final test. He came off as his typical self but when we faced off, when he focused on me, he gave me this look. A silent question or maybe a warning, that he was going to make a move so I'd better be ready. I stood no chance against him but when he attacked it was probably with a quarter of his true strength. Douglas wanted him to be completely ruthless and he didn't do it. He didn't see the point in completely destroying someone so... inferior."

Kassian watched her for a moment, wondering if she'd been resentful of it at the time and deciding that she'd likely been. "I see."

Harriet shrugged and turned, brushing past him to leave the room. After a moment he trailed after her with one last glance over his shoulder at Sin. He wasn't sure when the drugs would wear off but he hoped it was sometime before Harriet left. The idea of having Sin solely in his care was disturbing and he had no idea how the man would react to the knowledge upon waking up. It was possible that Sin would leave the house and if they got into an argument, Kassian knew his own self-control and level-headedness would abandon as it typically did.

With Harriet there, she could be the voice of reason.

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She went into the bathroom but left the door open so he took it as an invitation and followed, standing in the doorway and watching as she stripped off her damp and blood-stained t-shirt.

She wore only a bra beneath but he knew better than to think Harriet was showing off for him. She was cleaning up and that was it; she wasn't the type to pull seduction games and if her attitude toward him lately was any indication, her romantic interest in him had dwindled in the past several months. In fact, since training.

Kassian found his eyes moving over her smooth chestnut-colored skin that flowed over her lithely muscled body like silk. His eyes skimmed over her back and down to the shape of her tight round ass beneath the black jeans she wore before he allowed his gaze to quickly flick to the mirror, to the reflection of her breasts within the turquoise bra she wore.

Something in him stirred and he shifted, trying to force himself to look away but it was difficult. Kassian let his eyes focus on an economy-sized bottle of mouthwash but didn't leave his position by the door. The alcohol was making him stupid and allowing his hornball tendencies to become way too obvious.

"This is a nice house," Harriet commented as she bent over the sink to wash her face. "Not what I expected."

Kassian smirked. "That's what most people say."

Harriet pushed her shoulder-length black hair over one shoulder to keep it from getting wet and grabbed a cloth from a small rack by the wall to soap up. She didn't ask permission and he was glad of it. He was glad that her demeanor towards him had changed even if her attraction had apparently went with it. The fact that she'd looked up to him, that she'd acted as though he walked on water before, it had been a large part of the reason why he'd never returned the affection.

But now...

Kassian's eyes drifted back to her body, bent over the sink, her ass looking amazing in the straight-legged jeans she wore.

Now he wondered how he could have missed how hot her athletic body was. How gorgeous those high cheekbones were and how tempting those wide, full lips looked...

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"So am I the only one of our unofficial team that has never been invited here?" she asked wryly, standing up straight and turning to him. She raised one arched brow again and gave him a sardonic smile.

"No. I can count the amount of Agency people who've visited my home on one hand," he replied with a shrug. "I just meant in general. My civilian friends. They expect some crazy bachelor pad, some loft downtown or whatever, but I've never gotten around to selling this place."

"Oh."

Kassian stared at her and she gave him a slightly impatient look. "Can I get by?" she asked finally.

He stood up straight and moved out of the way with a muttered apology but when she brushed past, she merely stood in the hallway and looked back at him as if he were dense.

"Aren't you going to offer me a shirt or should I prance around with my tits out for the remainder of the time I'm here?"

Kassian's mouth quirked up into a mischievous grin that he couldn't quite help with a few drinks in his system and he raised his eyebrows at her suggestively. "Should I answer that honestly?"

Harriet didn't look amused. "Just give me a fucking shirt, Kassian."

He shrugged, unfazed and somehow feeling intrigued by her usage of his first name. He couldn't remember if she ever had before, at least to his face. It was odd and not for the first time he wondered why her attitude toward him had changed so much in the past few months.

Maybe it was her own promotion. She wasn't level 10 but she'd basically been given a portion of Kassian's former duties. It was possible that being an equal on some regard had taken away her automatic deferment and overly respectful attitude. Whatever the hell it was he was glad for it, although it brought up a new dilemma of him being undeniably attracted to her, bitchy personality and all.

If anything, her attitude made him like her more. Most people were intimidated by it but the annoyed spark in her eyes actually looked pretty hot.

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Harriet shot him odd looks as he walked silently to his own bedroom and he looked around, rubbing a hand through his short blond hair. It would have been so easy just to give her a tank top or something that would reveal some flesh but as horny as he was, playing games and manipulating situations wasn't really his thing, even when half drunk.

In the end he threw her a black Fear Factory t-shirt with a skull on it. "Might not be clean," he commented with a shrug. "Most of my clothes aren't freshly washed until I have nothing left."

"That's fine," she replied and pulled it on.

The bagginess was disappointing and he cursed himself for being a gentleman in behavior if not in thought. "Well, hopefully it doesn't smell like sweat or--"

Shit, hopefully he hadn't given her a post-masturbation clean up shirt. He'd been jerking off a lot more lately since his semi-regular fuck, Boyd, had decided that sex wasn't on the menu anymore and an influx of missions had made seeking out casual partners more difficult than usual.

"Or?" Harriet stared at him, eyebrows lowering over her eyes as suspicion began to creep up onto her face. She lifted the collar of the shirt and sniffed it, still eyeballing him before giving a shrug. "It just smells like you."

"Oh."

Harriet crossed her arms over her chest and gave him another penetrating look although it was softened by a slight smile. "Relieved?"

Kassian raised one shoulder casually and looked around. His room was a mess and it occurred to him that she hadn't even commented or seemed put off by it. She'd said very little about the state of his house ever since showing up. "Why would I be?"

She started to say something, seemed to think better of it and then shook her head. "Never mind."

"Right, well, do you want anything to eat?" Kassian slid out of the room and waited in the hallway for her to follow, suddenly feeling awkward about her being in there. He wished he could read her the way he typically could read most people but her

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expression was completely impenetrable at times and he'd never spent enough time with her on a one-on-one basis to figure her out entirely.

"Sure," she replied. "Illegally harboring criminals and getting involved in possibly suicidal plots always makes me hungry."

Kassian looked at her again before going down the stairs and he saw that her face was as stoic as usual despite the cynical comment. He almost asked why the hell she was getting involved if she felt that way but decided against it.

"Well, all I have for the occasion is beer, vodka and some frozen pizza. We could order in but I'd rather not have any random strangers showing up at the door just in case Vega wakes up and isn't... together yet."

"You mean just in case he's still out of it from the drugs and confuses us with his tormentors?"

"Actually, no." They entered the kitchen and Kassian opened the freezer door, staring inside blankly and feeling annoyingly embarrassed by his lack of real food. "According to Emilio, Vega wasn't even fighting back."

Harriet looked at him with interest as Kassian turned and held up a box of frozen pizza and a frozen meal that was allegedly healthy. She gestured at the pizza as her choice. "Was it odd speaking to Emilio?"

Kassian considered the question as he turned on the oven. Considering the fact that his only interaction with Sin's father had been down in Mexico when he'd been in his Chingón disguise and the night before when Kassian had driven into the heart of the Industrial District to pick up an unconscious and very battered Sin, the answer was... yes.

"The circumstances made it inevitably odd. He had his unconscious son in a shipping container so you can't really get much more bizarre than that. Other than that and the night in the tunnel, I've never spoken to him." He glanced over at Harriet. "Have you?"

She inclined her head automatically, perching on one of the stools and leaning against the counter lazily. His gaze hung on her for a moment too long and he forced himself to look away.

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When had Harriet become so distracting? The ridiculous thing was, she wasn't even trying. In his experience, even if a woman wasn't interested in him for some reason they still wanted him to find them attractive. Harriet seemed to be the exception.

"A couple of times. He found me in the gym one day and couldn't help but come over to harass me. I expected to dislike him on principle of him being an arrogant pig but it was difficult to not be amused. He actually..."

Harriet hesitated once again and Kassian gave her a questioning stare. She cleared her throat and continued, "He actually reminded me of you."

Kassian stared at her, his face a study of incomprehension and she actually snickered.

"I don't see how that's possible," he replied slowly, unsure of how to take such an unexpected comment.

Harriet studied him evenly for a moment. Her eyes flicked away to focus on the window behind the kitchen table and the pool that lay beyond in the backyard before she looked at Kassian again. Her lips pursed and when she spoke it was with an overly casual air.

"Do you still go to Jake & Janet's?"

Kassian's eyebrows shot up. "What? Yeah I go--" *When I want to pick up a one-night fuck.* "I go there not infrequently. Why?"

"I've seen you there."

His mouth fell open and he only closed it after realizing how stupid he must look. Jake & Janet's was a club on the fringe of what had once been the Theater District that was visited by people from virtually all walks of life and who generally were just looking to get laid. It was pretty well known that if a person walked in and was even slightly attractive, he or she wouldn't be walking out alone.

"What? *Why?* That place is a meat market, Harry."

She rolled her eyes at his appalled tone. "I wasn't there scouring the place for men if that's what you're thinking. I went there once for a bachelorette party in the basement, once for a birthday get together and the third time..."

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Harriet stopped for a moment and looked at him fully. "Anyway, I saw you there every single time."

Understanding dawned on Kassian and he felt equal parts annoyed with having been watched and uncomfortable with the idea of what she could have witnessed. But her expression was merely thoughtful and curious with no condemnation for whatever she'd seen.

"And?" he asked impatiently, not even knowing if he wanted her to go on. Jake & Janet's wasn't exclusively a heterosexual club and if she'd been there one of the times when... He cut the thought off quickly and grabbed a glass, pouring himself a drink which was likely an incredibly stupid idea considering the fact that he was already feeling off his game.

"And... your ability to pick someone up within the span of fifteen minutes for a one night stand would probably leave you with a valentine status if the Marshal ever got wind of it," she said with a half-smile.

Pick someone up, not specifying gender...

"From what I've seen of Emilio he has the same talent, although your technique is considerably less obvious than his."

Kassian turned away and busied himself with putting the frozen pizza on a flat pan and shoving it into the oven. The discomfort was steadily growing within him but the nagging curiosity wouldn't go away. "Why'd you go there the third time?"

"To see if you'd be there."

Kassian froze slightly before shaking it off and looking at her over his shoulder. She was staring at him steadily, obviously waiting for a reaction. "Why?"

"Because over the past several years I'd convinced myself that I was in love with you and at that point, it'd reached its most pathetic and embarrassing pique." The disgust at her own actions was clear in her tone. "I'm sure you noticed at some point, Kassian. You're not oblivious or stupid and even if I wasn't exactly putting it out there for you on a platter, it was no secret from just about anyone in the division that I treated you different than everyone else."

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Kassian turned slowly and stared at her, repeating the words in his head. He wasn't surprised by the information but her use of the past tense stung when it shouldn't have bothered him at all. "So, what changed?"

Stupid question. He was making himself look overly interested. Stupid alcohol made him talk too much.

Harriet threaded her fingers together and dropped her gaze to the glass door of the oven, watching the pizza cook. "Mostly it was during the level 10 training. It had a lot to do with Boyd."

"*What?*" How many disturbed exclamations did that make now? Two? Three? "I mean-- why?"

"I'd watch how he interacted with you and how you responded. He was always so casual, never seemed to take your status seriously or show you what was, in my view, proper respect. It pissed me the hell off at first and irritated me a lot because you were never that at ease hanging around me. But after awhile I just realized that you were more comfortable around someone who didn't see you as Senior Agent Trovosky and Perfect Agent Trovosky."

Harriet shrugged, shifting again to look him in the eye as she arched an eyebrow. "And then I realized how uncomfortable it probably makes you to have people always expecting the very best from you and how unlikely it was that you'd ever hook up with someone who perpetuated that expectation in every way." She gestured to herself. "So I gave up."

"Just like that?" The question was out of his mouth before he could stop it and he hoped the disappointment wasn't as obvious to her as it was to him. What the hell was his problem? He hadn't even realized how hot she was until today.

"Well, Jon helped some too," she replied with a smirk. "Him relentlessly asking me out made me appreciate how it felt to be wanted again. Made me realize I was wasting my time running after someone with no interest in me."

"Jon?" Kassian stared at her incredulously. "You're fucking Logan?"

Her expression switched from good-natured to irritated within the blink of an eye. "I'm *seeing* Jon."

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He gave her an unimpressed look. "Like I said."

The irritation began to slide into a narrow-eyed, pissed off, take-no-shit Stevens glare. "He wants it to turn into a serious thing."

"A regular fuck?" He was antagonizing her on purpose but he couldn't help himself. The combination of her obvious disgust over her past alleged love for him and her apparently more serious thing with Logan irked Kassian.

Harriet's full lips curled down into a scowl. "Some people are actually emotionally mature enough to want something other than an endless stream of one night stands and don't want to settle for a lonely, pointless existence that revolves around the nearest warm body's open legs."

Kassian opened his mouth to reply, found himself at a loss, and then found himself getting defensive and pissed off at the same time. The comment stung more than he would have expected and his hands closed into fists as his eyes narrowed. He fought the urge to lash out, to say something cruel and hateful, something that he knew would turn her self-righteous attitude into a puddle of self-conscious insecurity.

He swallowed the anger, turned around, and threw back the drink he'd poured, immediately refilling the glass. The silence between them was heavy and more than a little uncomfortable.

He could feel her eyes boring into his back and as his body warmed from the alcohol and his thoughts got more incoherent, he found himself replaying the final fight with Kelly in his mind. He'd told her that he wanted a divorce and she'd told him that he was emotionally stunted and incapable of accepting anyone's love; that he would be alone because of it, forever.

"Kassian..."

The hand on his shoulder was unexpected and he tensed up, muscles coiling as he jerked his head to the side and stared at her with what he hoped was a neutral expression. "What?" It came out sharp, venomous, and likely ruined any chance of her not seeing through the stoic front.

Harriet looked at him hesitantly, her eyes dropping to the glass in his clenched hand. For the first time since she'd arrived, she looked at a genuine loss and it reminded him

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of the way she used to act in his presence before. Unsure of what to say, unsure of how to act, not knowing what was out of bounds.

"Maybe you should lay off the vodka."

"Maybe you should mind your business," he replied darkly, clenching his teeth and forcing himself to look away even as he released the glass with more force than was necessary. The sound of it bouncing against the counter echoed in the otherwise silent room.

Anger, betrayal, humiliation-- so many negative feelings were filling him at the moment but no matter how stupid he felt for letting someone from the Agency, Harriet of all people, see him in this state-- he couldn't make himself seem to stop running her words in his mind. The words that had been so like Kelly's, the summation of his character in a single sentence that still fucking hurt, that still nagged at him, years later.

"I didn't mean it that way," Harriet was saying quietly. "I didn't mean to judge you or the way you live. It was a defensive response and you know how I am when I get pissed. You should know that I think more of you than anyone at the Agency."

Kassian shook his head, willing her to shut up, not wanting to hear her singing his praises in some lame attempt to take back a comment that had cut like a knife.

"More people think like you than me, anyway. I just can't do casual. And what I said before... it was cunt-worthy. I'm a bitch."

"Just stop," he said tightly. "I don't need your pity."

"Pity?" She sounded surprised now, confused. "Why the hell would I pity you?"

Because it's true, his mind seethed. Because no loves me the way Vega and Boyd love each other. Because you gave up on the idea of loving me without ever even trying. Because no one wants to be bothered with a drunk who has an anxiety attack at the idea of anything permanent.

"Listen," Harriet said more insistently although she was starting to sound uneasy as well. "Just forget whatever I said. Please. I wouldn't have spent eight years trying to fool myself into thinking something could work out if I didn't think you were a great guy."

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"Well I'm not a great guy," Kassian growled, looking at her coldly, the alcohol making his tongue loose, his temper worse and the unyielding desire to say something to make her fucking doubt herself stronger. "If you knew half the things that I did in Russia, people would think I was the fucking monster. Not Vega."

Harriet froze, dark eyes narrowing slightly, staring at him but she shook her head slightly as if brushing off the comment. That only angered him further and suddenly the real source of his anxiety-- of his ridiculous desire to drink the day away despite the high risk situation, despite the fact that he should be fully on top of his game now of all times-- came rushing to the surface.

Vega and Monaghan and Russia and Polya, murder, knives, Siberia, a fresh grave by the cabins-- if only Boyd had known what Kassian had been doing the last time he'd been out there and why he remembered the location so specifically...

"Vega's fucking innocent and he gets his side split open by a steel-toed boot while you fucking stand here telling me what a great guy I am when I've actually done what the fuck they're accusing him of doing," he hissed, his words jumbling together as they spilled out of his lips.

"I should be the one waiting for an execution. I should be the one people fucking hate. I'm the one who fucking watched a teenage girl get gang-raped and stabbed and fucking cut to pieces and then offered to dispose of the bod--"

"Shut up, Kassian!" Harriet barked, her face ashen as she took a step back.

The rest of the sentence died on his lips and Kassian froze, realizing what he'd said and he took a step back. It was the first time he'd said it out loud and now that he had, the memories came back clearer than any nightmare ever had.

Polina's writhing body, her tormented face, the betrayal in her glassy blue eyes. The excited grunts of the men, the expectations, the sense of watching himself do things that should have been impossible for him-- for Kassian-- but not for Konstantin. The cold frozen earth as he dug the holes, spread out through the forest, different body parts in different locations. Collapsing in the cabin afterward, vomiting, sobbing, and the first time he'd done heroin-- the beginning of an addiction that had lasted throughout his mission and only ended after he'd come back to the Agency and they detoxed him.

Kassian shuddered violently and suddenly realized that somehow Harriet had come forward again and she was putting a hesitant hand on his arm, was saying words in a

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very un-Harriet like soothing tone, reassuring him that it'd been his cover, something about identity separation. He pulled away abruptly, finally coming back to his senses even if the room swam around him as the full effect of half a bottle of vodka on an empty stomach finally caught up to him.

He lurched forward and retched violently in the sink, acid and alcohol coming up and burning his throat as Harriet rubbed his back. She probably would have fucking held his hair if he had any. It went on for several moments until there was nothing left and he turned again, sagging against the wall and staring at her pathetically.

"Fuck."

She nodded in agreement and although she didn't seem disgusted by him, by his admissions, he couldn't bear to see the pity and the sadness in her face. Feeling sorry for him. Finally seeing him for what he was, which was nothing close to the put-together and professional person he played at being on the compound.

"Fuck me," he muttered to himself, closing his eyes briefly and wiping his arm across his mouth. "This is embarrassing."

"Kassian it's-- it's okay, I'm not--"

"Don't," he said harshly, avoiding her eyes. "Just don't say anything."

Harriet nodded and released him, backing away but her eyes burned into him and he couldn't bring himself to look up. The moment stretched for what seemed like an eternity and just when he'd decided to say fuck everything, leave Sin in her care and get the hell out of the house, a voice rang out from the doorway.

"Where the hell are my pants?"

Kassian and Harriet looked up quickly to see a very naked and a very disoriented-looking Sin standing in the doorway, staring at them in obvious confusion. His body was a motley of bruises and cuts, his pale green eyes glazed and slightly unfocused.

"Agent Vega!" Harriet turned away from Kassian and hurried to Sin's side before he could collapse on the tile floor.

"What's going on?" Sin demanded, still somehow managing to sound menacing even as drugged as he was with his voice more slurred than Kassian's.

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"I'll explain everything," Harriet replied firmly, grabbing his arm. She'd once again defaulted into professional pseudo-medical role. "But I'm taking you back upstairs."

"Wha--" Sin staggered and slumped against her, his eyes sliding closed again. It was a wonder he'd actually made it down the stairs in one piece with the amount of shit that was still in his system.

"Kassian, help me," Harriet snapped, looking over her shoulder at the other senior agent.

Yanked out of his self-pitying reverie and thankful for the distraction, Kassian jumped up and followed her, wiping an arm across his mouth with a grimace.

They got Sin back upstairs without too much difficulty and Harriet eased the nearly unconscious man back onto the bed. Sin stared up at her through his long eyelashes, the glint of green flicking between her and Kassian as Sin's eyebrows drew together.

"What the fuck is going on?" he asked, voice gruff but still thick with exhaustion.

Harriet looked at Kassian, appearing at a loss, and stepped back as if content to let him handle the situation.

"Your father and Boyd busted you out," Kassian said bluntly, shrugging. "I don't know the details but--"

Sin immediately sat up and began another attempt to get out of the bed but his movements were sluggish. It was a miracle he was even conscious at the moment but the drugs were apparently heavy enough to seriously disable him.

"Calm down, Vega. It's done." Kassian sat on the edge of the bed and pressed his open palm against Sin's bare chest. It was cool and hairless, his skin surprisingly soft, and Kassian could feel the powerful muscles tensing and roiling beneath.

"He's going to get himself killed," Sin ground out, a sweat breaking out on his forehead as his eyes slid almost entirely shut. An exhalation escaped his mouth and for a moment Kassian thought the other man had fallen asleep but not even a few seconds passed before Sin's eyes snapped entirely open again and he made another vain attempt to rise.

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"He's went through a lot of trouble for you, Senior Agent Vega, so has your father," Harriet said stonily, looking down at him with disapproval. "Going back and turning yourself in won't spare them. Don't make their efforts be a complete waste."

Sin growled quietly and went slack against the bed again, squeezing his eyes shut briefly.

"I know he's out of control with this shit," Kassian said reasonably, finally moving his hand away from Sin's body. "But it's already been done. You're already here. There's no talking sense into him now."

"And why the fuck are the two of you in on this?" Sin's voice was low and controlled, although aggravation was evident in his tone.

"Boyd asked me to help him."

"And Kassian asked me to help," Harriet added.

Sin shook his head from side to side and dug his long fingers into the damp sheets. His entire body was like a coiled spring ready to pop and Kassian couldn't deny that even bruised and lacerated, Sin was quite a sight to behold.

As if on cue, Harriet took a step forward and threw the sheet back over Sin's lower body.

Not even daring to look at the woman, Kassian instead focused on Sin. "I know I'm not your favorite person and you're not mine either, Vega. But neither I nor Harriet believes that you did what they're accusing you of. I trust Boyd's instincts and my own. Sometimes it's not so bad to fight for something you believe in. Even if it is phenomenally stupid and reckless."

Sin didn't respond and Harriet cleared her throat quietly. "Wouldn't you do the same for Boyd?" she asked pointedly.

"That's different," Sin uttered. He had pressed a hand against his face, turning his head to the side. His voice was hoarse and thick with emotion, something that left both Kassian and Harriet momentarily stunned.

Kassian recovered more quickly. It probably would have come as a shock to him before, seeing Sin so obviously in distress over someone else, someone he obviously cared a

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great deal about, but that had been before their mission in Canada. Before he'd seen the pain in Sin's vivid green eyes when the subject of Kassian's trysts with Boyd had come up.

"Why?" Kassian asked, genuinely confused. "Because you think his life is worth more than yours?"

"Yes," Sin answered almost immediately, sounding miserable, still not moving his hand.

Kassian shook his head, frowning in disapproval. "You should know by now, Vega. Not everyone feels that way and Boyd certainly doesn't. That kid is loyal to you to a fault but obviously he isn't the only one. Stop with the self-hatred and be grateful--"

"Be grateful that he's going to get himself terminated?" Sin tried to demand but his voice was too weak, his breathing growing heavier as the drugs began to overwhelm his weakened body once again. "I'd rather die."

Another pause.

Harriet's eyes rose and she looked at Kassian just as Sin's breath became long and even, signifying that he'd fallen back asleep.

"He really loves him," she said softly, sounding surprised.

Kassian shrugged and turned away. "Yeah."

He walked out of the room when she just looked at him and he headed down the hallway, forcing himself not to pause in front of the bedroom he'd once shared with Kelly, forcing himself not think about the things that had occurred before Sin's abrupt arrival in the kitchen.

But he couldn't stop himself from thinking that being loved that intensely must be nice.

Part IV

Boyd coughed and slumped against the wall once the guards moved away; the restraints on his wrists clanked in the movement. Joseph stood a few feet in front of

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him, his arms behind his back, his gaze intense on Boyd in an almost contemplative manner.

Nothing happened initially and Boyd wondered what they would do now that he'd refused to give them any information. Although he didn't know how long they'd waterboarded him-- even a few seconds could feel like forever-- and he didn't know how long the cycle of being waterboarded then held down had lasted, or how often Joseph or someone else had appeared and hit him violently, he still knew it had to have been a few days. His temporal sense was messed up but he thought it had dragged on too long for it to be any shorter.

He didn't know what to expect them to do when it became clear he either honestly didn't know anything or was determined not to tell.

In the end, he hadn't told them a thing that they could use against Sin.

He hadn't been able to keep from saying anything at all-- waterboarding would probably always terrify him-- but he hadn't released any information at all about Sin. When it had become too much, when he'd had to say something just to feel like he was releasing some of the tension, he'd shouted out unrelated or inconsequential things.

He remembered the last time they'd held him and he'd given information about his relationship with Sin. Back then, he never would've released anything that he thought could hurt Sin-- during the first time being tortured like that, verifying something the Agency already knew didn't seem that terrible-- but this time he knew that any information at all would result in Sin's death. His resolve couldn't have been stronger to keep silent.

He looked up through his hair when the silence stretched, the blond strands damp and straggly from the water that had spilled down. He felt shaky and off-center; it had taken so much of his strength to resist the waterboarding that he didn't have much left for anything else, and the restraints on his wrists and ankles were magnifying what he already felt.

He was sure that some of the exhaustion and harrowed fear were visible in his eyes but he otherwise stubbornly did his best to keep his expression blank.

Joseph's eyes narrowed slightly in thought and, after a few seconds, he took measured steps forward.

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"What do you find most fearful about being chained up?"

Boyd continued to meet Joseph's eyes and didn't answer.

"Is it the vulnerability?" Joseph stopped in front of Boyd, looking him up and down thoughtfully before he met Boyd's gaze with dark eyes that may as well have been black holes for all that Boyd could look away. "Or is it the loss of control? The fact that you are absolutely helpless; subject to another's whims."

When Boyd didn't reply, Joseph continued idly. "Do you remember when your phobia was cemented?"

Boyd's eyes narrowed and unease moved through him; he still felt weak from the waterboarding and if they were going to bring this up now too--

"How long did she leave you? Tied down and screaming." Joseph's voice was idle and calm.

Boyd's eyes twitched and he didn't answer. Dismal disappointment settled deep in his stomach and he dropped his head forward, blond hair sheltering his face. He'd known since Monterrey that his mother had told the Agency about what would terrify him the most but somehow he'd hoped she'd kept at least something private. Something secret.

Especially since the entire reason she hadn't let him get the help he'd needed after Lou's death was because she hadn't wanted anyone to know how messed up he was.

He couldn't feel surprised, though. When he'd been released from the hospital after Lou's death, when she'd seen that he was going to keep trying to kill himself if she left him alone, she'd strapped him to his bed and ignored the way he pleaded for her to let him go-- ignored the terror in his voice as being held down made the nightmares even worse.

"Do you have any recollection? Was it hours? Weeks? Months?" Joseph walked around to Boyd's other side. "Did you check a calendar later to find out?"

"This is pointless," Boyd said hoarsely.

"What was going through your mind at the time?" Joseph continued in mild curiosity. "Did you beg her to let you go?"

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Boyd dropped his head further toward the floor and squeezed his eyes shut, the motion shifting his wrists against the restraints. He could feel the same cloying fear and panic from years ago rising within him every second he was reminded that he couldn't move; that he was utterly vulnerable. He shoved that feeling away and he tried not to remember that time--

The pain of the stitches straining against his chest and stomach as he'd thrown himself against the restraints, the way his throat had gone raw and tasted of blood from screaming. The way he'd cried so hard it had felt like there had been nothing left within him and the oppressive silence and shadows of the room that had drowned out his despair.

"Your file says that you thought you briefly lost your sense of sanity," Joseph noted. "Why did you think that? Did you see things? Hear things?"

Boyd shivered and tried to studiously ignore the memories, but it was difficult.

He *had* seen things; heard things.

He'd been tortured by the dreams of Lou's death, by phantoms he'd imagined of his dead lover stopping by the side of the bed. Tormenting Boyd with a body that showed all the gaping wounds that had killed him-- asking softly, "*Why didn't you save me?*"

There had been more-- so many more moments and emotions and horrifying visions and confusing memories... He had never known how much had been real, how much had been dreams, and how much had been imaginings caused by a break from reality.

"And then when you came to the Agency, she told them precisely what to do, didn't she?" Joseph stopped in front of Boyd, who stayed resolutely silent.

"She could do it again, you realize. She could leave you chained down for months, for years, in a room where no one would hear you scream. She could keep you alive just to punish you for your transgressions."

Boyd shuddered despite himself.

"You understand that she is serious and she has taken such actions with you before. Why don't you make it easier on everyone and just tell us the truth?"

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"The truth is I have nothing to tell you," Boyd said gruffly, eyes narrowing further despite the shaky imbalance he felt inside. "You can do what you want to me and that isn't going to change."

"Those are strong words," Joseph observed. "You could be considered a liability."

"Then terminate me," Boyd snapped in a low, impatient growl. He was feeling jittery and on edge and he wanted Joseph to leave. "At least I wouldn't have to hear your voice anymore."

There was a long moment as Joseph considered him, his hands still behind his back until he shifted. His clothing wrinkled in the movement and his arms dropped to his sides.

"If that's the way you feel," Joseph said, uncaring, and there was a soft click.

Boyd looked up and saw Joseph watching him, a gun aimed steadily at Boyd's forehead. Boyd met Joseph's eyes; Joseph stared at him evenly, without a flicker of emotion, and Boyd mimicked the expression in return.

"You don't have clearance," Boyd said, honey brown eyes narrowing.

"How do you know?" Joseph asked idly, checking that the gun's clearance.

"She didn't give you permission before."

"We were attempting to get information you did not provide," Joseph answered, then raised his eyebrows. "Is it so strange? She did just send you on a suicide mission. Your life is hers to use or discard as she sees fit." Joseph studied Boyd's face almost idly. "It seems you've proven yourself no longer useful."

Joseph's finger moved to the trigger and Boyd felt a spike of uncertainty that made his heart jolt. He could feel the blood tingling within him, making him light-headed.

All that time shuddering and twisting against their hold; all those lifetime-lasting moments of squeezing his eyes shut and begging them in his mind to stop-- the choking and spluttering and coughing, the screams he forced himself to cut off and the pain of abused muscles tensed against a solid surface, the tears that stained his cheeks-- It all rushed through him, made him realize it was possible it had all been for nothing. And it made the anxiety and instability rise dramatically.

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It was entirely too possible that his mother actually had deemed him no longer necessary. He hadn't accounted for that in his plan-- he'd expected to be released after he didn't give the information, to probably be tailed. But with the European Division likely breathing heavily down Vivienne's neck and Boyd's questionable performance lately...

Maybe she really was writing him off for dead.

But even if Emilio was released and was able to smuggle Sin to safety, the Agency would chase Sin his entire life. Boyd couldn't let that happen-- not if he had even the slightest ability to stop it. And if they killed him here, who would find the evidence to clear Sin's name?

"Goodbye," Joseph said calmly.

"Wait," Boyd said urgently.

Joseph jerked the gun to the side at the last second.

The bullet ricocheted off the wall to the left of Boyd, whose eyes had widened as he realized that Joseph may not have been bluffing. He couldn't tell whether Joseph had intended to move it to the side all along but when he met Joseph's serene gaze, he felt increasing doubt. The silencer on the gun muffled the sound of the shot and made everything feel that much more surreal.

"Yes?"

"My mother," Boyd said steadily despite his heart jackhammering in his chest. He could feel his entire body shaking with adrenaline and the realization that he may have just been a second away from death. "I need to see her."

"Whatever information you have--"

"My mother," Boyd said more firmly, eyes narrowing and fingers curling into fists. "I will only talk to her."

Joseph stared at him for a long moment before he stepped back. "We will see." He didn't say anything further as he turned and left the room.

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Boyd slumped down as soon as he was alone again. The restraints dug painfully into his wrists, reminding him all too horrifically of his training and everything he'd been through in rooms like these. He squeezed his eyes shut as his hair fell down, covering the vulnerability he couldn't help twisting his expression.

His body was shaking, his fingers digging into his palms, and a frantic voice hissed inside his head, *I don't know how long I can do this...*

He'd tried to anticipate as much as he could before he'd put the plan in motion but there hadn't been much time. He would die before he betrayed Sin again to the Agency but that was the problem-- he didn't have much to give the Agency except his loyalty; his cooperation. And he couldn't give them either in this instance without ultimately getting Sin killed.

Since Boyd wasn't going to give the Agency anything that would lead them to Sin, it meant there was very little he could bargain with. It meant his life was even cheaper than he'd realized, and it meant there was a very real possibility that he would lose the chance he needed to prove Sin's innocence.

He didn't want to die; everything no longer felt meaningless. Now, he found enjoyment in life-- he'd found things he wanted to wake up for.

But he would never forgive himself if he hadn't done absolutely everything he possibly could to save Sin; even if that ultimately meant stalling long enough for Emilio to send Sin away.

He didn't know how long he waited there until the door opened again but it was enough for him to stubbornly gather his strength as he prepared for what was to come. Still, when the door finally opened and he saw his mother striding in, he couldn't deny the resounding sense of relief. The guards stayed outside the room; when the door shut with what seemed like a disturbing sense of finality, he and his mother were the only two within the white cell.

Vivienne stared evenly at Boyd for a long moment, her ice blue eyes unreadable, her lips thinned in distinct displeasure. Boyd's slightly uneven breath seemed especially loud to his ears and he only watched her in silence at first. After a few seconds of studying him, she walked forward with calm, measured steps, her high heels clicking against the floor and echoing in the mostly empty room until she stopped in front of him.

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Boyd glanced toward the door, making sure it was shut, before he looked at her again. He highly doubted anyone was listening in; his mother would feel confident that she could handle the situation alone.

"What are you doing, child?" she asked, eyes narrowing. "Do you wish to die?"

"I think there's evidence that he's innocent," Boyd said intently rather than respond to the question. Vivienne's eyes narrowed even further but he continued before she could speak. "Please, just listen. The situation didn't fit what would trigger an episode for him. Look back at your notes from Ann Connors-- maybe even ask her opinion. He's still on medication, he's been stable; even Emilio's reappearance didn't cause an episode for him, so why would Bridget?"

Vivienne raised her eyebrows. "That is hardly proper evidence and you are simply repeating what you said before. You called me here for this?"

Boyd shook his head. "I know on its own it isn't enough, but it should give reasonable doubt. I want to study the crime scene to find the actual evidence."

"This is ridiculous," Vivienne said flatly. "You are merely attempting to negotiate your freedom."

"I think someone set him up," Boyd insisted. "The facts don't add up. Sin suddenly having an episode with someone who he's more likely to feel protective toward, during a time when we conveniently don't have surveillance and there was no proof of what happened, with a woman representing the European Division and who was supposed to be analyzing all the employees, and having her body resemble Lydia's attack which could easily be replicated by watching the video or visiting her... That's a lot of coincidences and especially since there are people out there with a vendetta against Sin, it seems more plausible to believe he was framed."

She studied him coolly. "Even if that were the case, it hardly changes the fact that he is beginning to cause more trouble than he is worth."

"But what if it's more than that?" Boyd was so intent on getting the idea across that he was almost able to completely ignore the vulnerable position he was in; the bite of the restraints against his wrists and the strain of his body having been held in an uncomfortable position for too long.

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"I'm starting to think something strange may be happening. You know how you and Carhart were questioning me about Owen's Intel?" Boyd frowned. "Something sort of similar happened with Ryan. And then we had this virus that on its own is suspect and now Sin's being blamed for a murder that I find incredibly doubtful he committed. What if... what if something bigger's going on?"

"You believe this is all related?" There was no indication whether she thought he was being paranoid or if she thought the idea had merit.

"I don't know," Boyd admitted, shaking his head again. Blond hair brushed the sides of his face, catching against bruises and drying blood. "But I got the impression from Bridget that even you could be in trouble with your bosses; that they may think this Agency is run sloppily."

Vivienne's eyes turned cold, flashing a warning. "Do not question my ability to lead the Agency and do not waste my time speculating about my position. It is hardly your place."

"I'm not questioning anything," Boyd said urgently, jerking forward when it looked like she was about to turn. The restraints cut into his wrists and clanked against the wall, the sound loud in the room and a disturbing reminder of the lack of control he had over the entire situation.

"Please," Boyd continued more reasonably when Vivienne did not leave. "I'm not oblivious. Maybe the European Division would find Sin to be too much of a liability in the first place. Maybe terminating him even if he was innocent wouldn't bother them. Maybe they wouldn't look down on you for the decision."

He kept his tone even despite the fact that such an idea made his stomach twist. "But what if I'm right?"

She watched him with a steady, unreadable gaze.

He narrowed his eyes. "What if Sin was framed-- what if whoever did it gets away with murder? We wouldn't know what their intentions would be; whether it was an isolated incident with someone specifically attacking Sin... or something else. And regardless, that means there's someone with access to the Agency who's good enough to get the drop on Sin and frame him. What if you terminate Sin and that only galvanizes the killer, shows them they can get away with this? What if you kill Sin and tell your bosses you fixed the problem only for something to happen afterward? What if later this is all

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discovered and your bosses determine it to be your failure to read the signs? What if they hold you accountable and what if it escalates even more?"

He gave her an intense stare. "It's already bad enough you let their Investigator die on your watch; if you can't even catch her murderer, what good are you to them? Isn't it better to be certain-- absolutely certain that you have the true killer? Especially since your bosses will probably be watching you closely?"

There was a moment of silence and Boyd was hopeful it meant she was listening to him; that he'd put enough doubt in her mind for her own future at least that she would agree.

"And if I just release you, you won't run away," she said flatly, her ice blue eyes narrowed and unconvinced.

"I won't," Boyd said, putting every ounce of sincerity he could into it so she would understand that he wasn't lying. His eyebrows twisted up and he searched her eyes. "I swear to God, all I want to do is view the crime scene. Forty-eight hours, twenty-four hours... I'll take whatever you'll give me. You can have a guard with me the entire time if you want."

"And at the end of that time frame, regardless of whether you locate this alleged evidence?" Vivienne asked, quirking an eyebrow and crossing her arms.

"I'll come back to you and report," Boyd promised, his eyes intense and expression honest. He absolutely meant every word and he did his best to show her-- to make it obvious that he wasn't trying to deceive her. "I'll walk right back into this cell if that's what you want."

Vivienne's gaze was even and gave away nothing of what she was thinking, until her eyebrows rose slightly. "There is another way to view this."

Uneasiness stirred in Boyd's stomach and he couldn't help his fingers twitching. He'd been planning on that convincing her-- on her pride and thoroughness in her career to not allow her to live with any uncertainty, and on Boyd's assurance that she would still control the situation. That he would still follow her rules.

"How?" Boyd asked warily after a moment.

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"I have two level 10 agents who are skilled in their respective talents, yet have been the cause of a number of issues," Vivienne said, tapping one finger against her upper arm, her lips thinned in displeasure.

"Hsin Liu Vega may be the most efficient assassin this Agency has seen in my years but he lacks discipline and stability. Regardless of his guilt, he has been a liability from the beginning. Even with the chances he was given, the issue of his mental instability is a recurring theme that is fast making him undesirable. He is entirely capable of what he is accused of and it would not be the first time he has committed such extreme acts of violence."

Her eyes narrowed and her back stiffened slightly. "Although in some regards he has become more malleable lately, in others he continues to be a threat to the Agency's stability. And as you are fully aware, we do not allow such threats to exist."

Boyd's throat closed up and he couldn't look away from his mother as she continued calmly.

"As for you, I did not have issues of disloyalty or disobedience until you became so attached to Hsin Liu Vega. You were predictable and trustworthy before then and I did not have nearly as many issues with you even in relation to the Krauszer boy." Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Yet, I seem to recall you informing me that when it comes to Hsin Liu Vega, you will have to defy me."

Boyd stared at her, remembering the first time he'd told her no to her face, when she'd come to collect Sin after the first time Boyd had broken him off the fourth floor.

"The question with you," she continued, scrutinizing him, "is whether this is solely related to Hsin Liu Vega. Whether the skills you possess are desirable enough for the Agency to overlook the issues." Her fingers quit moving, resting against the deep red of her blouse. "You have proven yourself useful more than once, yet when you have failed you have done so spectacularly."

Her ice blue eyes nearly seemed to drill through Boyd. "As a matter of fact, each of the times you have failed, your relationship with Hsin Liu Vega has somehow been involved. This is a known fact for most and an easily deduced fact for the others. This shows that you are unwilling to expend as much energy for the Agency with Hsin Liu Vega around."

Boyd's throat went dry and he didn't speak.

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She stepped forward more, her gaze intense; he couldn't look away from her and he could easily see the displeasure mixed with disappointment. "However, it is clear that despite your continual issues regarding Hsin Liu Vega, it is not simply about him. It is an undeniable fault of yours that you allow your emotions to blind you and you have proven that you will put people you are close to ahead of the mission, ahead even of the Agency."

Her lips tightened. "If anything, your latest antics have only proven others right; that it was a mistake to promote you. Your faults remain consistent; your emotional attachments cause you to become rash and unreliable. You seem to believe you can do whatever you want and in the process you question authority. I cannot even claim to be certain you are first and foremost loyal to the Agency anymore."

Boyd's heart thundered in his chest and he shook his head, feeling the enormity of the situation start to rise against him. He couldn't argue any of the points because they both knew they were true. "I tried to tell you I wasn't ready--"

Her hand snapped out, gripping his chin tightly as she leaned forward with ice cold, narrowed eyes. "Take responsibility for your actions, Boyd," she said coldly. "I will not allow you to be a child, acting as though you had no control over the situation. You have had more than enough chances to improve and you have squandered them. For what? For this?"

She jerked her chin briefly to indicate the rest of the room. "What do you gain by this? Do you so enjoy making a mockery of everything I have taught you?"

"I don't know what you want from me," Boyd burst out, expression twisting as fear rose within him. His wrists pulled against the restraints. "I'm not passing on the blame-- I've fucked up a lot, I have a lot of flaws. I'm trying to improve but I can't be perfect and some parts will always be the same no matter how hard I try. I can't completely make myself into a new person. You *knew* that and you still promoted me." His eyes brightened in frustrated, unshed tears. "I'm not trying to piss you off, I just don't know what you--"

"I want you to act like a professional," Vivienne snapped, and anger actually seemed to darken her eyes.

"I'm trying--"

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"You are not," Vivienne cut him off firmly, then released his chin as if he disgusted her. "You are simply doing whatsoever you choose, expecting me to be there to pick up the pieces."

Boyd shook his head helplessly but he couldn't fully argue against that. "I know I've done a lot of things wrong, I know--" His voice caught. "I know I've really fucked up before and I've made it hard for you." His eyebrows twisted up and he met her eyes sincerely. "These are my faults and I know I have to pay for them. I'll do that, I'll comply with whatever you want of me-- all I ask is to have this chance first."

"The very fact that you are still requesting that proves my point." Vivienne crossed her arms once more and said with finality, "If this is all you wanted to say to me, then this conversation is finished. You have proven yourself untrustworthy when it comes to your emotional attachments and I must question whether either of you are worth it to keep around. And believe me when I say that at this point, Hsin Liu Vega is almost a more viable option than you despite the accusation against him."

Boyd's breath became a little uneven as he stared at her in trepidation.

He had truly thought he could convince his mother but the longer he was kept on Fourth, the longer his mother stared at him with that unmoving expression-- the more likely it seemed that in the end he was going to fail. And that thought heightened his anxiety considerably; made it that much more difficult to ignore his vulnerability when he didn't even have control over his freedom let alone his future or Sin's.

"That won't--" he started to say helplessly, his words tumbling over each other. "I'll change--"

"I find that doubtful," Vivienne cut him off almost impatiently. "If anything, this has all become more pronounced. You have become so accustomed to defiance that you now lie straight to my face because of him. And I am not deluding myself into believing that you would not do the same for any other attachments. Your tendency to attempt to protect those you care about is futile and stains your record at the Agency."

Boyd could feel hopelessness starting to rise. His eyes brightened with tears and he shook his head, knowing not to lie to her right now; not to try to bend the truth.

All the confidence he'd felt before, that he'd been feeling since the moment he saw Sin crouched in the corner and he'd promised to prove his innocence, started to dwindle and collapse in on itself.

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He wished he had something he could say-- something that would fix the situation, make it better, but they both knew she was right.

Vivienne watched him coldly and then turned and headed straight for the door.

Panic made Boyd throw himself at his restraints, his body jolting when he was caught. "Wait!"

She didn't slow her steady stride, her high heels clicking powerfully against the floor and intermingling with the echoing rattles of the restraints.

"Wait-- Give me a chance, please!" Boyd yelled desperately. "You can't-- The Agency needs--"

She seemed to ignore him as she calmly approached the door. Boyd felt his heart literally ache as she neared the door and fear overcame all else. He struggled violently against the restraints, as if he would be able to break himself free, as if he would be able to fix everything.

Each step she took away from him made the horror grow stronger and his vision blurred as helpless tears filled his eyes.

"No-- No, please, I won't--"

Her fingers curled into a fist and raised with the intent to rap on the door and Boyd threw himself desperately and ineffectively toward her.

"Mom, *please!*"

Boyd's voice was raw with emotion.

Vivienne paused, her knuckles hovering inches from the door, and she looked over her shoulder with an expression that was completely unreadable.

Tears streaked Boyd's cheeks as he openly cried, his honey brown eyes red and watching her with naked vulnerability. His eyebrows were drawn up and he jerked his arms at the restraints again, a helpless gesture more than anything.

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It was the first time he had ever called her 'mom' and the first time in a long time that he was so broken in front of her.

"I need him," he amended, his voice cracking, and he slumped against the wall. He couldn't stop crying, his breath catching and releasing unevenly, the white room brighter and details lost as tears poured down his cheeks and burned in his eyes. He couldn't stop the fear and uncertainty from making his limbs tremble.

There was a long, tense moment as she watched him, her eyes narrowed slightly. Yet ultimately she turned and walked back in front of him, stopping where she'd been standing before and observing him without speaking.

"Please give me this chance," he pleaded brokenly, not caring if he seemed pathetic, not caring that he was showing her exactly how much this affected him.

There was no point in trying to hide or deny it-- if anything, the less honest and sincere he was now, the worse he was going to make it for himself in the long run. He knew how perfectly capable she was of walking out of that room; of keeping him chained up until she needed him. He knew how capable she was of signing Sin's death warrant and he knew that even with Emilio's help, it was entirely possible Sin would still get hunted down and killed for something Boyd knew in the deepest part of him that he didn't do.

He shook his head, his expression twisting; his eyebrows drew up and his lips trembled; his nose was stuffed up and made his voice thicken. "I can work harder-- I can keep improving. I can be who you need me to be. And Hsin-- if he's innocent, if he's mentally stable, then there aren't any immediate issues with him. You don't need to terminate either of us. Just give me this chance, *please*."

"Why are you so desperate for this man?" Vivienne asked without inflection, a frown pulling at her full lips. Although those were her words, it was almost as if she was asking instead how Boyd could care so much for Sin.

Boyd shook his head at first, not even knowing how to answer. He felt chaotic and vulnerable and terrified that after everything he wouldn't be able to help; that he would be stuck here chained to a wall while Sin was killed.

He didn't know why she'd paused; why she was talking to him now when it wouldn't be surprising if she simply left. He wanted her to see-- to truly understand why it had to be like this for him, yet it took him a few seconds to even think of a response.

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"If you'd known Dad was going to die and you had the chance to do something to stop it... Wouldn't you have done everything you could?" Boyd returned, looking up with red-rimmed eyes that burned into her.

Her eyes twitched; he couldn't tell what she was thinking so he didn't dare try to interpret the action. All he knew was that he felt almost nauseated by the strength of the emotions churning inside him.

When she shifted her weight and it seemed like maybe she was going to leave after all, Boyd jerked at his restraints and felt the hopelessness nearly overwhelm him.

"Please," he implored, feeling utterly powerless. "I'll do anything you want, I swear to God I will. Anything. I won't question you, I won't hesitate. Whatever you ask of me, I'll do it over and over again if you want. I'll be in your debt, I'll--" His voice cracked and failed him and the tears coursed harder down his cheeks. He didn't hide anything as he stared into her eyes. "Please let me do this. Twenty-four hours, that's all I'm asking for. *Please.*"

Another long, incredibly tense moment dragged between them, making Boyd's hitched breathing and attempts to regain composure seem that much louder in the otherwise relative silence. Vivienne studied him so closely it was almost clinical and he knew she was weighing the options; he knew that if she still said no here then that was the end of it.

He couldn't help feeling terrified that it hadn't worked-- that after everything she was still going to deny him. The silence was almost unbearable until she abruptly broke it.

"Ten hours under constant supervision." Her expression was hard and calm and her tone brooked no argument even as she agreed to his proposal. "You will return to my office at the end of it and I will determine what to do then."

The wave of relief Boyd felt was staggering and he dropped his head forward, nodding weakly as he slumped against the restraints. "Thank you," he whispered gratefully.

She reached out and grabbed him by the chin, her fingers cool and clinical as she forced his face up to meet her eyes. Her gaze was completely unreadable yet her lips thinned and pulled down at the edges slightly in a serious expression.

Her fingers tightened against him as she warned coldly, "Do not mistake me. Regardless of the outcome now, I will not allow you to defy me to my face, especially

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over another agent. You are useless if you are not loyal to the Agency and your feelings for him create an unacceptable distraction. If you cannot be loyal to the Agency or successfully complete missions due to how you feel then you will quickly find yourself with dire consequences. I will no longer look the other way."

"I understand," Boyd said immediately, not wanting her to change her mind.

"You have had more than enough chances. If you still prove yourself unworthy of the Agency's time and energy, I will personally see to it that you are terminated," she continued in the same tone.

Boyd nodded as best he could.

The stubborn willpower he'd been relying on to get him through the time they'd been holding him on the fourth floor was slowly crumbling and breaking down as exhaustion was starting to suck away his strength. The pent up fear and uncertainty was probably what had been keeping him going and the knowledge that he had a chance to help Sin meant the relief was starting to replace it, although he still had a daunting task in front of him.

Almost as if she knew what was going through his mind, Vivienne tightened her grip even further and she said sharply, "Boyd."

Boyd blinked, completely refocusing on her, and he was caught by the severity of the look in her eyes. He stared at her, his honey brown eyes showing relief but still vulnerability; dark circles under his eyes from sleeplessness and his pale skin stained by bruises and dried blood. His fingers were lax and wrists hanging against the restraints, his body sagging and blond hair messy and matted, and falling loosely against the sides of his face.

He felt weak in body and in spirit but his determination hadn't faded, and he didn't bother to hide any of that from her.

As he stared into her ice blue eyes, her expression stern and unmoved, there was a moment when something unspoken passed between them. They both knew without having to say it aloud that she didn't have to allow this; that even if she believed Boyd was right she could have had someone else study the crime scene again instead.

They both knew that especially between Monterrey and the Schafer mission, Boyd had not been a good enough agent by the Agency's standards for her to give him this

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chance. That, in a way, she was putting herself on the line by letting him go. If he didn't follow through like he promised it would seem even worse to her superiors, who likely wouldn't take lightly to nepotism in these already tense circumstances.

They both knew he was highly in her debt and Boyd knew it wasn't something he would easily be able to repay.

What he didn't understand was why she was helping him. Yet he didn't want to ask-- didn't want to push it, to do anything that could make her reconsider.

Instead, he said seriously, "I won't let you down and I won't forget my promise. I'll do anything you want."

Her eyes narrowed further and something indefinable passed through them as her jaw clenched slightly. After a moment, she released his chin and she turned on her heel, striding away.

"If indeed you are correct, I want to know who killed her," she ordered without looking over her shoulder. "I will not tolerate such impudence within these walls."

She knocked on the door and it was opened quickly. Without glancing back, she walked out and he could already hear her having a conversation in an undertone with one of the guards before the door slammed shut again.

Boyd felt his heart nearly skip a beat as he sagged completely, ignoring the way the metal dug into his wrists. He closed his eyes, face tilting toward the floor, and breathed a shaky, tearful sigh of relief.

===

Officer Amos stood along the far wall, his dark gaze idle as he watched Boyd move into the room. Despite that, he seemed alert and ready to react at a moment's notice if Boyd made a wrong move.

Boyd looked around the room Bridget had been using as her office and for a moment he felt overwhelmed by despair.

The Agency had already cleaned up.

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Although Bridget's files and other effects were still on the desk and dotted around, any traces of blood or signs of a struggle were gone. He'd asked if he could have access to the information the Agency had compiled and he'd been given part of it, although not the entire in-depth report.

He was able to see that the ruling for her cause of death was blood loss due to multiple stab wounds, that there had been a struggle, and that Sin's prints were on the murder weapon-- the letter opener. The only other prints had been Bridget's.

He found out that Sin had been the one to call the guards and that he hadn't denied killing her when they'd arrived, although he'd seemed panicked. Sin had been alone in the room and no one had seen anyone else in the vicinity.

No one heard or witnessed the murder and it was noted that Bridget's body had been reminiscent of Lydia's wounds-- frenzied slicing and cutting. She could have been lucky enough to have lived like Lydia had, except Bridget's carotid artery had been severed at some point, making it inevitable that she had bled out.

In short, all the evidence pointed toward Sin, who himself expressed doubt that he hadn't done it. Even Emilio thought it was possible Sin had and Boyd could see why anyone who had any doubt in Sin at all would look at the scene and determine that he was guilty.

But after everything that had happened between them, Boyd trusted Sin implicitly. He believed in him without a hint of hesitation and he didn't question that Sin was innocent. Although the crime scene was damning for Sin, the murder itself was incongruous with Sin's current state of mind and there were too many questions for Boyd to accept Sin's alleged guilt.

Still...

How the hell was he going to find this evidence when he didn't even know what to look for? When the crime scene had already been tidied up so any signs he may have been able to see in the blood or aftermath were long gone?

He checked his watch and saw that he'd already lost an hour to getting out of Fourth, receiving and reviewing the report, and getting access to the crime scene.

Nine hours until Boyd was potentially returned to the fourth floor and Sin's fate was sealed...

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Boyd's eyes narrowed in determination and, ignoring the aches and pains from the last few days, he started a thorough search of the room.

He didn't find anything of note in the first few hours, although he checked through everything he could find. He ended up locating folders for each of the agents who had so far been interviewed.

Sin's folder had short bullet points that he read through, eyebrows drawing down as he searched for anything that could give him a clue. Bridget had noted in her elegant cursive that Sin was uncooperative; that he was aware he was likely going to be terminated at some point, yet he wasn't afraid. She'd written that he didn't seem as though he felt the need to rebel, so she thought he would continue in his role despite even knowing that. She didn't think he would pose a problem until the point the Agency decided to terminate him.

Boyd shook his head to himself, lips pulling down in a frown.

Her comments about Sin made it even less likely to Boyd that Sin had been the killer. It sounded as though Sin had been rational and his usual self during the interview; Sin himself had said he couldn't think of anything that had happened that had triggered him. There was absolutely nothing in there about instability or irrationality, the sorts of things Boyd would expect before Sin would have such a violent episode.

It just didn't make any *sense*.

Boyd tossed the folder down more firmly than he needed to, feeling increasingly frustrated. He was about to close the drawer when he noticed that one of the folders was thicker than the others. When he pulled it out, he saw his name written on the tab.

"What the hell," he muttered under his breath, his eyebrows drawing down in confusion as he flipped the folder open. It didn't make sense to him that he would be the only one of all the agents to have an especially large file.

Several pages of paper were neatly stacked inside, as opposed to the one or two sheets for everyone else.

He skimmed what she'd had to say about him. The notes started out the same as Sin's and the other agents' folders he'd glanced at as comparison. The quick analysis of what he was saying was sprawled across the crisp white paper.

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She'd thought Boyd showed promise, but only if his failure rate dropped and if he stopped doing things based on emotions. As he flipped forward, he saw that she'd started to write out full phrases of what Boyd had said, apparently on topics that were of interest for her.

Around Boyd's words were more notations. She'd picked up on Boyd's resentment over his promotion but surprisingly she'd thought this was good; it showed he was dedicated enough to want a promotion based on merit.

Boyd scanned through the rest, seeing that she'd continued to write out his comments of interest until the very end of the interview. But when he went to the front again, he saw that she hadn't done that the whole time.

That was odd, since she hadn't written out any of Sin's phrases.

He pulled other folders out and flipped through those quickly, not really reading who the files were for and rather seeing if it was only notations for everyone else. Even after he checked all the notes for the other agents, he saw that his was the only file with phrases actually written out in their entirety.

Folders littered the area around him in a haphazard manner and he ignored it, his gaze intent and movements a little quicker as he concentrated solely on the discrepancy. There was no reason he could think of that Bridget would find him to be intriguing enough to change her notation style; not when she hadn't repeated it even for Sin. Although it was possible that she'd planned to do the same with Sin sometime later in the interview, he doubted it.

There had to be a reason-- a simple, logical reason.

Boyd leaned back and pulled his folder closer, opening it again and scouring through the area where it transitioned. She appeared to have started writing more down when Boyd's valentine status had come up and whether he would seduce Thierry.

At first Boyd thought it was possible that she had done so because of the fact that he was one of only a few homosexual-designated valentine operatives, so perhaps the information was especially pertinent. But because she'd continued in that form until the end...

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Boyd dropped his head back against the desk, closing his eyes and drawing his eyebrows down with a frown as he tried to remember what had happened during the interview during that time. His mind worked a little more slowly than he wanted and he was having a hard time completely ignoring how utterly exhausted he was, how much his body hurt and how lightheaded he felt.

It took him a second but then he recalled that there had been a beeping noise; that it was after that when she'd picked up the pen.

A thrill of hope passed through him and his eyes snapped open.

He hadn't paid much heed to it at the time, since he'd just assumed it had been her phone or something. But maybe...

He looked through his file one more time, verifying that it made sense, trying to think about Bridget's personality from what he'd seen of her.

She hadn't been the sort of person not to document everything. There was no way that she'd let every other interview go without recording phrases or comments that the Agency or Marshal Seong would find of interest. The fact that she'd only written down Boyd's, and that it had coincided with the beeping--

Maybe she *had* been recording everyone else; but maybe she hadn't needed pen and paper for it. Maybe there was a camera or audio device or... or something in the room. Maybe the battery had run low or the memory had become full, and she'd been forced to write out Boyd's answers because she otherwise wouldn't have been able to document what he'd said.

And maybe the real killer hadn't known about any of this.

Boyd jumped up so quickly that Amos reached for his gun, but Boyd barely paid him any heed. His mind was working furiously as he considered this new possibility, as his gaze darted intently around the area.

He was analyzing the room for an entirely different reason now; not as a crime scene but rather where he would place a recording device if he hadn't wanted anyone to know.

Having at least an idea of what he was looking for made his next, painstakingly thorough search of the room more bearable. He ran his hands along and under every

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surface he could find, peeked around corners, practically tore apart the desk, pulled out books from the bookshelf...

"What the hell are you doing?" Amos finally asked after Boyd dropped another book carelessly to the floor and moved on to the next shelf; he didn't have time to be careful.

"Looking for something," Boyd said absently as he looked up at the bookshelf, which was taller than he was. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced around for a chair.

"Obviously," Amos said dryly, then straightened and crossed his arms, watching Boyd oddly. "But what?"

"Something I'm pretty sure I'll find," Boyd replied, dragging a chair over and climbing onto it so he could see on top of the bookcase. There was nothing but dust on that or the other bookshelves.

"That's real helpful," Amos muttered and Boyd shook his head to himself as he dropped back to the floor.

Boyd stumbled as his legs almost gave out on him but he snapped his hand out to catch himself on the back of the chair, then he doggedly straightened and shoved the tiredness to the back of his mind. After a second, he frowned and headed toward a small closet in the back corner.

He'd been through the closet in his first search; all it held was storage for extra supplies. But it was a prime location for watching the desk unnoticed so maybe...

Boyd started pulling items off the shelves in the back of the closet and dumping them to the floor in his haste, the bruises on his body pulling especially painfully in the movement. He didn't care that he was making a complete mess; the hours were ticking by entirely too quickly for his peace of mind and he had to find the recorder before his time was up.

Apparently galvanized by the short exchange, Amos let a long beat of silence pass between them before he asked dubiously, "You really think he didn't do it?"

"Positive," Boyd said firmly as he shoved a bottle of window cleaner to the side and flipped on a flashlight he'd found; he aimed the beam of light around the darker corners. Nothing, once again.

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Silence descended briefly again before Amos asked, confused frown evident in his voice, "*Why?*"

Boyd pushed the mop and broom to the side and paused, looking over at Amos seriously. "Because I know him better than most people do. And I know he wouldn't have done that to her; not like that, not now. It doesn't make sense."

"But he didn't even deny--"

"Not denying something and confessing to a murder are two different things," Boyd said strongly and returned his attention to the closet. "I think in this case, he was as likely to believe ill of himself as anyone else was because he didn't know what had happened."

"Considering he's fucked in the head, that still doesn't mean anything," Amos said pointedly, although there was no bite in his tone. He seemed more perplexed than anything.

"I don't really care if you or anyone else believes me now," Boyd said with a shrug, stepping away from the closet with a frown darkening his features. There wasn't anything in the closet, which was frustrating. Although, if he was right and someone had framed Sin, that was a place where they could have hidden.

He spent another hour scouring the place, each time feeling a thrill of hope when he discovered somewhere it could have been, and each time feeling increasingly frustrated when it wasn't there.

He knew he was right, yet the longer it took to find the proof, the more nervous he got... Doubt was starting to worm its way into him-- not that Sin had committed the crime, but that he wouldn't be able to prove he hadn't.

It didn't help that he hadn't slept or eaten well in the last few days; that his body ached from being held captive on Fourth and that he could feel exhaustion growing heavier by the second. He kept glancing at his watch, an almost manic pressure that bore down on him every minute that passed.

By the time over six hours had passed, Boyd had torn the place apart and he still hadn't found anything. A wave of despair pressed down on him and he dropped into Bridget's chair, leaning forward against the desk and placing his head in his hands, his shoulders slumping.

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He felt nauseated; from exhaustion, sleep deprivation, hunger, and the constant stress of trying to find something he couldn't even prove existed. His head was starting to pound, his vision was spotty and darkened on the corners, and the adrenaline that had been driving him was fast running out. Even so, his determination hadn't budged and he didn't dare take a break.

Another guard had come to relieve Amos and the new man, Krueger according to his tag, stood like a silent sentinel in the corner of the room. Boyd could feel that constant stare burning into him but he was too tired to care about what the man thought.

His fingers shook as he ran them through his hair and he let out a long, low breath. His eyeballs practically throbbed and he thought to himself that if he could-- when he found the recorder and if his mother let him go-- he was going to sleep for a day.

He tried to go over everything in his mind again.

Bridget had seemed meticulous; she'd taken her job very seriously from what he could tell in the notes. She had to have recorded the interviews yet he doubted she would have wanted anyone to easily find it. Otherwise, the information could have been compromised or lost. He'd thought about all the possibilities, taking that into account.

She could have hidden it incredibly well-- he'd tried checking within and under every drawer, every chair, bookcase... She could have hidden it in plain view-- he'd even tried checking the current cameras to see if she would have placed it on there.

For several long minutes, he ran over every place he'd checked and where she may have put a recorder, then sighed heavily and opened his eyes. He looked up, gaze automatically falling on the large clock displayed high on the wall, slowly counting down the time.

After a few seconds of staring at it blankly, feeling so tired he could hardly think, he suddenly frowned and straightened.

He stood up and dragged the chair over to the wall, then climbed up again to reach the clock. Maybe he needed to think about the items that were so commonplace that he'd automatically been looking past them. He pulled the clock off the wall and scrutinized it but couldn't find anything strange.

That didn't discourage him, though. He dropped back to the floor, stumbling in the process and very nearly falling over this time, and stared around the room so intently

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that it was practically a glare. After a few minutes of checking out different items, he ended up by the thermostat. The small box stuck out of the wall, a dial available to adjust the temperature.

He scrutinized it, then noticed that one of the screws on the faceplate was missing. That distant spark of hope that had been thoroughly dashed so many times stirred once again, and he went over to the closet and dug around until he found the small toolbox he remembered seeing before.

When he walked back to the thermostat, the guard's heavy gaze on him the entire time, he pulled the faceplate off and felt his heart jolt, literally skipping a beat when he saw a tiny black device hidden within. He pulled it out and turned it over, his stomach clenching in anticipation and fingers shaking when he realized that it was a recorder. When he popped it open, he found a small memory card inside.

It was the second time that week he felt such a sense of relief that it was staggering.

He looked toward the guard and narrowed his eyes. "I need an uncorrupted computer."

It was the first thing he'd said to Krueger, who watched Boyd evenly for a moment before he made the request into his comm.

Boyd sat down at the desk again, feeling jittery and nervous and hoping to God that this was going to say what he thought it would.

It seemed like forever before the door finally opened and another guard walked in with a small, slim laptop under his arm. Boyd took it immediately and shoved items off the desk, not caring when items crashed to the floor or that the new guard hovered there in mild intrigue rather than leaving.

After getting the laptop booted up and the memory card ready, he felt tension pounding through him along with his heartbeat as he slid the card into the slot in the computer. A few harrowing seconds passed as a window popped up informing him of the external device and he was finally able to open the audio file.

He could see that it was a long file but when he went to the end, it quickly became clear that the device had still been recording even as people moved in and out of the crime scene. He quickly skipped back bit by bit until Bridget's voice caught his attention.

"--injured due to your decision not to wear body armor?"

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"Correct," Sin replied, his tone unsurprisingly uninterested and indifferent, not even pretending to be respectful.

"I see." Boyd could practically see Bridget's controlled smile and the thoughtful tilt of her head. "I see that you consider speed to be paramount over your own safety precautions? The mission's success over your own survival?"

There was a low sound of Sin scoffing. "If I agreed with that, you'd know I was full of shit. I'd have gotten shot even faster if I'd worn the armor and it's as simple as that. Protecting my torso doesn't matter when two dozen guards are chasing me and aiming for my head. It had nothing to do with the mission's success."

"I admire your brutal honesty."

"I'll sleep soundly knowing that," Sin replied in boredom.

A brief moment of silence passed between the two.

"You're not concerned with impressing me." It sounded like an observation more than a question. "You're aware of the likely outcome of your evaluation."

Another silence.

"You're an interesting man, Agent Vega. It's a pity that your mental stability is so precarious."

Once again Sin did not respond but this time the silence was broken by the disturbingly abrupt sound of something falling over-- a chair, a body, something. Whatever it was made a loud clattering sound and Bridget's voice rang out in alarm.

"What are you doing!" Bridget shouted, her voice twisting between anger and fear.

There was a mixture of noise-- scuffling, muffled shouts, and then real terror entered Bridget's voice as she began screaming for Sin to wake up, to help her. But she never once said her killer's name and the recording picked up the wet sucking noise of continued stabs even though the killer never made a single sound.

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The nearly debilitating relief Boyd felt was jumbled with anxiety as he knew he had to get the information to his mother immediately. He looked up, just catching the guards' surprised expressions.

He stopped the recording and stood, honey brown gaze satisfied and determined despite how exhausted he looked.

"Bring me to the Marshal."

Part V

Boyd poured himself some water, watching the ice cubes dance around and clink quietly against the sides of the glass. Opening the fridge door, he put the water pitcher back inside.

It had been over two weeks since Vivienne had ordered the cancellation of Sin's termination and Boyd still felt a sense of relieved disbelief. Although he'd felt like the stress he'd accrued during the whole ordeal would take a long time to dissipate, he was finding that the mini pool party Kassian had thrown at his house was actually going a long way toward aiding in his relaxation.

The only problem now was avoiding looking at Sin, wearing only cargo shorts, the bruises faded from the incident weeks ago and leaving his body just as flawless as it always was...

Boyd pushed some hair out of his eyes and automatically looked out the window, where he could see Sin and Harriet sitting next to each other. In fact, they seemed to be in a conversation; something he hadn't seen before today. Given Sin and Harriet's natural tendencies to be quiet or standoffish to people they didn't know, it was at once somewhat surprising and intriguing. It made him wonder how Sin's time at Kassian's house had been.

He half turned toward Kassian, who was sitting at a kitchen stool drinking a bottle of Guinness, gaze idly focused out the window as well. Boyd took a drink of water, the liquid ice cold and feeling wonderful as it slid down his throat, then he tilted his head toward the window as he held the glass at his side.

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"How'd that go, anyway?"

Kassian didn't answer for an unusually long stretch before he gave Boyd a distracted look. "Huh?"

Boyd quirked an eyebrow; he'd noticed that Kassian had been somewhat moody despite the fact he'd been the one who had thrown the party. Even more strange, while Kassian typically seemed to be quite friendly toward Harriet he hadn't spoken to her much so far. And Harriet was unusually keeping her distance as well.

Obviously, something had happened.

"Harriet. Sin. Waiting for the termination," Boyd clarified. He watched Kassian a little more closely, a hint of a question in his gaze. "How'd it go?"

"Ah." Kassian took a swig of his beer, made a face and dumped it in the sink as if it was suddenly unacceptable. He opened the fridge again and pulled out a large, chilled bottle of vodka. It was half full. "Okay, I guess. Vega turns out to be more tolerable in near-death, illegal, termination-worthy plots. And it turns out Harriet likes him. Not sexually, though. That's all for Jonny."

Boyd watched Kassian and took another drink of water. "So she finally hooked up with Jon?" he asked idly, keeping his thoughts out of his voice at first.

"Guess so," Kassian replied sourly as he poured a generous amount of alcohol into a glass. He lifted it to his lips, drinking it straight up and added, "Seems like it might get serious. She doesn't do casual."

"Hmm." Boyd leaned against the counter with his elbows, holding the glass loosely in one hand, and a little smile played on his lips. "You're jealous," he observed.

Kassian grunted and poured himself another shot, or three shots in one. "Apparently the attraction kicked in when she stopped idolizing me and started treating me like shit."

"Ahh." Boyd tilted his head. "What made her change her mind?"

"She said she realized that it was unfair to hold me to such high standards all the time and also, she just got over it. Apparently Scarface helped out with that. Apparently, and what were her exact words?" Kassian stewed over it for a moment, chugging his drink

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quickly as his eyes narrowed in thought. "She said that having someone pursue her for a change opened her eyes or something. Made her realize she was wasting her time wanting to be with me."

"Hmm." Boyd's gaze dropped to the shot glass before it flicked back up to Kassian a little more seriously. "Do you really like her or is it just the challenge of someone who isn't falling for your charm anymore?" He asked the question not unkindly; he was honestly curious.

"Dunno," Kassian muttered, his words only slightly slurred, blue eyes still narrowed in thought. "But the tension during those couple of days made me act like a fucking moron. A drunk moron. I don't know what the hell made me-- scratch that, I do know what it was," he said darkly. "But I let myself drink way too much in front of her."

Boyd winced; he couldn't imagine that had gone over well. "What happened?"

Kassian started to pour himself another healthy drink-- what would amount to another three shots for a normal person, but froze slightly and stared at the bottle before setting it down. "I said some things. She said some things. I don't think there's a doubt in her mind about my alcoholism now."

Boyd pushed away from the counter and walked over, sitting next to Kassian and sliding the bottle away. There was nothing judgmental in the movement; he was simply removing immediate temptation for a friend.

"Did she say anything?" Boyd asked, his tone calm and almost gentle. "About your place or lifestyle-- The sorts of things you wanted to avoid anyone seeing?"

"No. She just mentioned... the drinking. But she wasn't even condescending or disappointed, she just seemed sad for me or something. It's my own fault. I acted stupid and then I went off on a rant and thank fucking God Vega woke up before I could continue on with my behavior." Kassian looked away, obviously troubled by the memory. "Anyway, she doesn't want to fuck me anymore. That's pretty much the summation of events."

"Well, she obviously hasn't completely changed her mind about you in general or she wouldn't have come here to hang out," Boyd said reasonably, watching Kassian. He leaned his chin against one palm and studied his friend. "So regardless of if she wants to fuck you, maybe you'll have a better chance of becoming friends now that you see each other a little more for who you are."

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"I guess." Kassian didn't look too thrilled with that but he didn't say anything more on the topic either.

"There may still be a chance for something more in the future if she and Jon ever break up," Boyd continued with a shrug as he reached for his glass and then took another drink. "If you're still interested in her later."

"It doesn't matter to me anymore. She doesn't do casual and I don't do relationships." Kassian reached down to grab his glass by reflex and scowled, shifting to cross his arms over his chest and turn away from the counter and window. "I wonder if Ryan got lost."

"He should be back soon," Boyd said, glancing at the clock. Ryan had been charged with picking up some food they'd ordered.

When he turned to look toward Kassian again his gaze automatically went past the window, and centered briefly on Sin. Sin was watching Harriet intently and nodding as she appeared to explain something using gestures to indicate the size or shape of something.

Boyd felt another wave of nearly overwhelming, satisfying relief to know that Sin was actually here and that for the moment, everything was okay. Okay enough for them to have the chance to spend time with their peers and forget about the past few weeks of hell.

Still, as much as he appreciated the chance for them all to unwind, it was a little surprising that Kassian had thrown a party like this.

Boyd tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "What made you decide to do this anyway?"

Kassian glanced at him and considered the question seriously before answering. "Honestly? It's because of what happened with Harriet. She saw me at a pretty low point and after that she still acted normally when I sobered up, she still treated me like she'd been treating me before it happened. I would have thought she'd have turned her back and shunned me out of disappointment but..."

He trailed off and his eyes drifted out the window and focused on Harriet. "Anyway, in light of the incident, I decided to try to get out of the double life thing. I'm sick of it.

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Letting work friend type people come over seemed like a step in that direction and I guess Vega not being thrown in an incinerator is something to celebrate so why not?"

"True," Boyd said with a small smile. "Not just him, even. Maybe we should've told Ryan to get a cake while he's out. It could say, 'Yay, we're alive' and have happy little stick figures around a pool with a fire crossed out in the background."

Kassian smirked. "He probably would have baked it himself."

The smile grew and Boyd nodded, idly looking out the window again as he sipped the water. He almost absently watched the play of light off Sin's silky hair and the way it shifted with his movements; the casual yet serious set of his expression, the lines of those full lips and the way those gorgeous green eyes flicked around.

There was a brief lull in the conversation and Kassian glanced at Boyd questioningly. "Should I have invited Ivan?"

The question drew Boyd out of his reverie. "I don't know," he replied honestly with a faint frown, glancing away from Sin in mild distraction; he ended up focusing on his cup. His fingers were loosely curled around the clear glass, the condensation cool against his fingertips. "Maybe." He looked up at Kassian again. "If there's a next time, he probably should be. You'd have to see what Sin wants."

"You make it sound like we're friends or something now."

"Hey, you're the one who voluntarily invited him to a pool party," Boyd said lightly with a smirk and raised eyebrows, then shrugged. "But I can ask him too in the future if it ever comes up. We should probably just assume yes, otherwise."

Kassian's eyebrows drew together slightly. "Well, if that's the case, it'd better be a public outing. Harriet, Ryan and Vega are one thing but I don't know Ivan well enough to want him here, honestly. That's why I didn't think too hard about it sooner. Nothing against him or anything but I barely speak to the guy and Vega doesn't seem to mind."

Boyd nodded in understanding. "We can always go to my house sometime too."

Boyd didn't really know Ivan either but he realized that for him, it didn't matter anymore. If they ever had another gathering and Sin indicated that he wanted Ivan there for any reason, Boyd wouldn't hesitate to invite the R&D agent even if it was at Boyd's house. But he understood why Kassian wouldn't feel the same, since he'd been secretive about

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his home life for so long that even the exceptions he was already making were change enough.

Before Kassian could reply, the doorbell chimed loudly over the rock music that was playing. "That better be Ryan with the Chinese food," the senior agent mumbled and walked out of the kitchen, not even seeming like he'd just finished off a quarter of the remainder of the bottle of vodka.

After drinking the rest of the water, Boyd left the glass on the counter and hopped off the stool, trailing behind Kassian.

"I got more beer for you," Ryan was saying to Kassian when Boyd entered the living room. Several bags of Chinese takeout covered the coffee table, the smells overwhelming the room. "And I got more chips and shit for Hsin. Oh and coffee. I hope this is the right kind-- Harriet made a big deal about the brand but I got them mixed up."

Kassian smiled at that and opened the bag from the grocery store. "Nah, that's it. Ridiculously overpriced but strong, the way she likes it. It's imported if you can believe that."

Ryan snorted and began taking cartons of food out of the bags. "Who'd think Harriet would be high maintenance?"

Kassian just shrugged and didn't respond directly to the comment, glancing toward Boyd. "You wanna grab those two from out there? They've been deep in discussion for thirty minutes now about God knows what but my microwave is busted so good luck to them if this stuff gets cold."

Ryan snickered quietly, unloading a smaller bag filled with condiments and plastic spoons. "So you can afford to heat your pool but not get a new microwave?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ryan," Boyd said in dry sarcasm. "The pool's far more important. It's not like the microwave's year-round or anything."

Kassian flipped Boyd off and Ryan laughed out loud at that.

Boyd grinned then turned and headed toward the back door. When he stepped into the backyard, he saw that Harriet and Sin were still sitting near each other by the pool. Sin was wearing a pair of cargo pants and Harriet had on a swimsuit with a tank top over it.

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Neither of them looked like they'd been in the pool yet although Harriet was allowing her feet to dangle in it.

Boyd walked over by them, sliding his hands in the pockets of his loose shorts and keeping his expression completely casual. Ever since their failed mission with Schafer, he'd found it increasingly less easy to hide his desire for Sin and after the most recent events, it'd become even more difficult.

Even after weeks of distance between them, Boyd didn't find it any easier to hide his feelings. Nearly losing Sin yet again had only made the feelings stronger and so he'd tried to avoid being alone in Sin's presence since then, tried to avoiding meeting his gaze for long. After years of practice Boyd knew how to mold his expression, but he didn't quite trust his ability yet to mask everything from his eyes-- not from Sin, who would be able to see through it.

He kept telling himself he needed more time and then he'd find the balance he needed. But in the meantime, although he stayed friendly and casual, he had to be careful.

"Ryan's here with the food," Boyd said once he stopped near Harriet.

"Did he get my coffee?" she asked, standing up and raising her dark eyebrows inquisitively. "Without the caffeine I doubt I'll be staying long."

Sin stood as well, his green eyes focusing instantly on Boyd although he didn't say anything or move to go inside.

Boyd smiled at Harriet and nodded rather than immediately glancing toward Sin. "Yeah, it sounds like he even got the right brand."

Harriet looked relieved by this and up close, Boyd could see that dark circles lined her deep brown eyes and that she did look very worn out. It was possibly due to her new position combined with regular duties, and also very possible it had something to do with the stress of wondering if Vivienne and the admin ever found out about her role in Sin's escape.

Even if she and Kassian were somewhat at odds at the moment, she didn't seem in any rush to leave the relatively relaxing evening. It was likely one of the few she got anymore.

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"Great," she said and walked off towards the house but not before saying to Sin, "Feel free to ask me about anything else you think of."

Sin nodded but he continued to look at Boyd.

Boyd glanced at Sin, too quickly to meet Sin's eyes, then turned toward the house. "We'd better hurry or it'll get cold," he said idly as he started to follow Harriet.

Sin's hand shot out and grabbed Boyd's upper arm before he could take another step. Long fingers closed around his bare skin before sliding down and pulling him back.

Boyd's heartbeat thundered in his chest and he froze, caught off guard by the touch. He turned his head slightly but not enough to look over his shoulder.

Sin tugged him back until his chest was nearly flush against Boyd's back and he leaned forward slightly. "I want to talk to you."

Boyd's breath caught but he didn't make it obvious; slight tension built in his frame and he was just glad his t-shirt was a layer of fabric between them.

"Later," Boyd agreed calmly without looking behind him. He pulled his arm out of Sin's light grip and stepped away from him. "I'm hungry right now."

Sin didn't respond but frustration practically radiated off his body.

Although Boyd knew he wouldn't be able to keep this up indefinitely, that eventually he'd have to turn and face Sin when there was nothing around to distract him, he still couldn't bring himself to do it now. Without waiting for Sin to respond, Boyd headed toward the house with Sin not far behind him.

He found the others in the living room, the food ready for eating. He sat down on the floor near the coffee table and pulled a box of takeout near him.

"I didn't know what you wanted," Ryan said to Sin, setting down a plate of noodles and nudging a container full of what looked like General Tso's chicken toward Sin. "But I suggest you try that, it's really good."

Sin shrugged silently and looked at the group for a moment before sitting on the floor next to Ryan. He grabbed the container and a pair of chopsticks, poking at the sauce-covered meat.

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"I'm glad you suggested this," Ryan said to Kassian after a moment, taking an eggroll out of the wax wrapping it'd come in. "Your backyard is so awesome. Sometimes I forget people even have backyards."

Harriet snorted quietly. "I'm sure it's easy in the concrete jungle. In Texas everyone had a backyard and more people than not had a pool."

Boyd idly watched the others as he started to eat the Kung Pao chicken Ryan had picked up for him. He found it a little easier to be casual around Sin when in the presence of others. Maybe because his feelings seemed especially intense when he was alone with Sin-- when it was only the two of them, the memories, and the wish that they could make more together.

Ryan looked intrigued by the idea, his wide indigo eyes focusing on her as he took a bite of crunchy eggroll. "That's so cool. I guess my parents never really got into the domestic family life scene, though..."

"Trovosky obviously did," Sin muttered.

Kassian rolled his eyes. "Will there ever be a point in time when you can resist a shot at me?"

"No."

Harriet's mouth lifted in a ghost of a smile but when Kassian looked at her it quickly faded and she dug her spoon into the mound of rice on her plate.

"You two are so cute together," Ryan said with a large grin. "Like brothers or something."

Kassian and Sin shot him twin looks of incredulous annoyance and Ryan just shrugged in response. "Well, it's true."

Boyd had to chuckle quietly at their reactions then hid his small smile behind a piece of chicken. "It's much better than it used to be," he agreed lightly.

Kassian and Sin looked at each other and it almost seemed like they were mutually deciding whether or not to get into some kind of brawl just to prove Ryan and Boyd wrong. In the end Kassian just rolled his eyes and Sin smirked, as though he'd won some unspoken argument.

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"I see what you mean," Harriet told Ryan, her reserved smile returning once again.

Ryan gave the two senior agents a triumphant smile and Kassian waved a fork, perhaps more expressively than was necessary. It was probably a good thing that he'd given up the vodka when he had.

"Subject change," he ordered in his Senior Agent Trovosky tone.

"Okay," Ryan readily agreed and he looked at each of them in turn, his expression serious all of a sudden. "I know this is still a touchy subject but, can you guys tell me exactly what happened in the end of that whole... thing? It's just so odd that even with the evidence, the Marshal didn't decapitate anyone."

Boyd glanced at the others briefly, chewing a bite of chicken then swallowing. No one else would know the answer to that since he hadn't told anyone much at all about the incident so he set the chopsticks inside the container and responded.

"With the evidence of Sin's innocence, there was no reason to terminate him. And she couldn't prove who all had been involved, so..." Boyd shrugged after trailing off.

"And that's it?" Harriet asked slightly doubtfully. "It's as simple as that? The subject is just dropped?"

Boyd made a slight face and leaned back. "Not exactly. But it's nothing any of you should need to worry about." He glanced between Harriet and Kassian. "I don't think she knows either of you were involved, so you should be fine."

"I don't regret helping," Harriet said with a glance at Sin.

He just shrugged. "You don't need to reassure me."

Harriet gave him a pointed look. "I wasn't trying to reassure you, I was just making a statement in case my concern was misinterpreted." She paused for a moment, seeming to consider her stern tone and added, "Besides, if you'd been terminated I never would have found someone to talk about engineering with."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, somewhat relieved to find no one was pressing the subject; he didn't really want to talk about anything that had happened with his mother. "So that's what you were talking about?" he asked in interest.

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Sin glanced at Boyd in consideration but it was Harriet who replied. "We were talking about preferred guns for marksmanship and I mentioned my past interest in weapons development. Sin was decidedly interested in the topic of engineering."

"Really." Kassian gave Sin a doubtful look. "Why?"

"Why not?" Harriet asked defensively. "It's not a boring topic if you understand the concepts."

"And Vega does?" Kassian looked even more doubtful.

"Well," Sin started in his typically bland I'm About To Shred You With My Retort tone. "Some field agents actually spend their free time reading and not being lazy fat asses playing video games and chugging beer."

There was a brief silence and Ryan looked on the verge of pissing himself with laughter although he managed to keep it in.

"I'm not a fat ass," Kassian said icily.

"Not yet," Sin replied in the same toneless voice, picking up another piece of chicken with his perfectly held chopsticks. "But you're getting old and your metabolism will stop processing all of the extra calories and carbohydra--"

"You eat fucking donuts for dinner on missions!" Kassian practically shouted incredulously.

"I work out most days of the week," Sin replied, unconcerned.

"Whatever." Kassian shook his head in exasperation.

"See?" Ryan asked no one in particular although he avoided looking Kassian or Sin directly in the eye. "They act like brothers."

Harriet nodded in agreement but didn't verbally say anything more on the subject.

The casual conversation continued as they finished eating. Boyd found that he was enjoying himself and was glad to see that it seemed like on some level, everyone else was too.

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After dinner, they milled around talking and generally hanging out. Peaches eventually showed up, apparently deciding that the noisy humans were worth being around after all. There was enough going on that for a while it was easy to get involved with the conversations and not pay attention to anything else.

Yet, Boyd found his gaze occasionally sliding over to Sin when no one was looking, especially when Sin removed himself from the others. Every time Boyd realized he was doing it, he casually looked away and pretended he'd been focusing on something else.

It was one of those times when Boyd noticed Sin sitting in the living room while everyone else was in the kitchen. Peaches had crawled up next to Sin, her fluffy front paws on his thigh as she laid in an awkward position, her tail sedately twitching behind her and bright green eyes turned up toward Sin. Boyd could practically hear her purring as Sin looked down at her with a discreet smile, his long fingers idly running through her fur.

Boyd felt something twist inside him and for a moment, he couldn't look away. The scene was so endearing to him that he didn't even realize how his expression softened. He remembered the animal book he had once bought Sin as a joke; the way Sin had flipped through it and had actually seemed interested.

It was impossible not to think about that time, about the way it once had been; about the nights he'd lain next to Sin and felt those same powerful hands touching him gently, or when that slight, genuine smile had been aimed at him.

Movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention and he realized with a start that Kassian was watching him with a knowing look. A flash of guilt passed across Boyd's face and he realized he was being too obvious in his attraction.

Boyd frowned slightly, more troubled than anything, then glanced to make sure that neither Harriet or Ryan had noticed. Thankfully, they were engaged in a conversation. Boyd looked distractedly at Kassian then turned his head toward the floor, hands sliding into his pockets as he silently slipped out the back door.

He stood still once he was outside, his head tilting back as his somber gaze took in the evening.

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The sky was dark and silent above him, the clouds tinged a deep blue-black that somehow didn't seem oppressive. Pale light dotted the backyard, leaving some areas obscured by shadows but lighting up the area immediately surrounding the pool.

Boyd paused by the edge of the pool, looking down at the clear water, and although he felt mildly disturbed to be near a body of water it really wasn't that bad. He didn't especially mind being beside even the ocean as far as that went; although there had been a time even the sight of a large body of water was enough to disturb him, by now it was just the idea of being stuck underwater and drowning that frightened him.

After a few seconds, he pulled off his shirt and the loose shorts, leaving him in his swim trunks. He walked over to the shallow area then used the steps to gingerly walk in. The water was warm and pleasant, thanks to Kassian's heater, so he couldn't blame the temperature for the few goosebumps that traveled up his arms. The summer air was warm and still. He walked further into the pool, the water level steadily rising, and he felt at once troubled and calm.

He wished he had a way of just turning off his feelings when it came to Sin; he didn't know how long he would be able to be in Sin's presence before his feelings became obvious to Sin as well. He didn't want to mess anything up like he always seemed to do and Ivan's words still echoed in his mind.

Boyd had been trying so hard to no longer be selfish when it came to Sin, so it was frustrating to know that after everything he could still screw up simply by virtue of being unable to properly hide his feelings.

Knowing he was facing away from the house and no one would see him, Boyd grimaced and allowed some of the tension to gather in his shoulders.

It used to be so easy for him to feel no emotions; to deny anything that was inconvenient for him. It used to be so easy to cut off connections, to not care about the world around him.

He sighed lowly then moved to the edge of the pool, keeping one hand safely on the cement patio while he inched further into the deep end.

The water made his body buoyant but as he moved further in and the water rose to his neck, he started to feel that familiar panic claw at the edges of his awareness. Even though it was probably all in his mind, the water felt especially thick around his chest and throat-- like the pressure was making it harder to breathe.

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Yet Boyd didn't let the feeling overwhelm him.

Ironically, he'd become a little bit better at dealing with the fear of drowning due to the waterboarding-- but that had mostly worked because he'd always known that he wasn't actually being drowned. It was different in actual water, which could easily slide down his throat and clog his lungs.

He shivered despite himself but his mind remained surprisingly calm, probably because he knew he was in charge of the situation. He felt a morbid sense of curiosity, wondering whether he would be able to condition himself to get over his phobia by training in Kassian's pool.

If he could stop himself from the automatic, desperate panic at the prospect of drowning, then maybe he could become even stronger and there could be less that the Agency could do to control him. Even though he hadn't given them any information about Sin, that didn't mean he would always be able to stop himself from saying anything important about other topics.

Fingers tight against the cement edge, Boyd drew in an overly deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut before dunking under.

The water was warm and his hair fanned out as he concentrated on counting seconds. His heart thundered almost painfully in his chest and even though he felt fear, it didn't overwhelm him the way it usually would because this was, for once, his own experiment. He had complete control and could stop whenever he wanted.

Even so, he didn't make it many seconds before he burst above the surface again, gasping loudly for air in a manner that was a little extreme for the circumstances. His fingers automatically tightened painfully against the ground and he screwed his face up, eyes still shut as he used his free hand to push wet hair out of the way.

His feet kicked beneath him, an absent reaction to stay afloat even with his hand anchoring him to the side. After a few seconds he pulled himself closer to the shallow side so that if he let himself drop down, the water would go to his upper chest. Even though the panic wasn't overwhelming him, it still made him feel safer to be where he could touch the floor.

He dunked under again, counting the time and feeling vaguely satisfied when he made it an extra two seconds, then burst above water, ending up facing the edge of the pool.

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His eyes remained shut as he ran his hands back over his hair, getting all the messy strands out of his face. He was breathing only a hint heavier than normal when the hair on the back of his neck stood up and he realized someone was behind him.

Boyd's heartbeat jolted and he twirled around immediately, the movement made slower and more awkward due to the water. His eyes widened and he was completely caught off guard to realize Sin was in the pool with him, enough that the surprise even made it to his face.

Sin was disturbingly close to him and for a moment Boyd was struck by Sin's ability to sneak up on him so thoroughly. The thought drifted away as he realized that Sin had stripped out of his clothing and was wearing nothing more than snug black underwear or boxer briefs-- Boyd couldn't be sure which they were.

Sin's hard muscular body was wet, his tattoos shimmering beneath the water and his pale green eyes piercing in the faint lights that shone into the pool in the darkness. "We're going to talk," he said quietly, his gaze burning into Boyd.

Boyd's mouth went dry and he had to look away, turning his face toward the house. He could see shadows of movement through the lit window but no one else was in the backyard or in view. "Is this really the best time?" he asked even as he started to move toward the steps.

Sin blocked him immediately, pushing Boyd back against the wall of the pool forcefully, his hands curling around Boyd's shoulders as he pinned him there. "Do you think I care what they think?"

The wall of the pool was rough against Boyd's back and he drew in a short, startled breath. There was a slight edge to Sin's tone and Boyd automatically looked toward Sin, seeing those vivid green eyes staring at him heatedly. Sin's fingers were strong against Boyd's bare skin and it was so hard not to concentrate on how good that felt, so difficult to not let himself focus on the proximity of Sin's mostly naked, wet body.

"I didn't--" Boyd started with a small stumble of his words. His eyes were slightly widened and he looked a little trapped, although there was no fear in him. He wanted to look away but he couldn't now that he'd made eye contact with Sin. "I didn't mean that, just... someone may interrupt..."

Sin's grip loosened slightly but he didn't remove his hands from Boyd's shoulders. His fingers pressed down slightly in a nearly unconscious kneading manner and for a

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moment all Sin did was stare down at Boyd, his face half shadowed and his full lips slightly parted.

Desire could be seen in Sin's eyes and it struck Boyd silent, his mouth dropping open slightly. He searched Sin's expression, wondering if he was seeing it wrong-- but he wasn't. That, combined with the closeness of their bodies and the light movement of Sin's hands, made it impossible to ignore how much he ached for Sin. How much he wanted to pull Sin forward and crush their bodies together.

Boyd licked his lips almost unconsciously but didn't jerk forward like he wanted to, although he found one of his hands had started to rise as if to touch Sin. He almost did before he made himself redirect the movement to push hair out of his face. He was confused and for once he just wanted to understand what was happening as he was going into a situation rather than misinterpreting later.

He glanced away briefly but wasn't actively avoiding eye contact. "What... did you want to talk about?" he asked after a moment, his voice quiet.

"Why have you been avoiding me?"

Boyd shook his head to himself. He wasn't going to lie but he didn't know if he should really say the truth either. "Is that all you wanted to talk about?" he asked lightly, looking over at Sin.

A flash of impatience crossed Sin's face and his hands tightened on Boyd again, his powerful fingers digging in hard enough to draw pain. Sin shifted closer until their bodies were nearly touching and trapped Boyd against the wall as if he was making sure Boyd had no possibility of escaping. His eyes narrowed, jaw clenching.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Boyd's breath caught and the position made it impossible to look away from Sin's eyes.

"No," Boyd said sincerely, eyebrows drawing down as he searched Sin's expression. His hands automatically rose and he almost rested them on Sin's waist before he redirected them to Sin's upper arms. He had to stop himself from running his thumb along those hard muscles; from pulling himself even closer.

"You didn't do anything wrong. I was just... for a while..." Boyd frowned slightly and shook his head, continuing honestly, "I wasn't going to forever."

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The tension in Sin's frame relaxed somewhat but the intensity didn't leave his expression and this time his eyes skimmed over Boyd's face, what he could see of Boyd's wet body. Sin opened his mouth to reply and it seemed as though more centimeters closed between their bodies in the process.

"I wanted to tell you something," Sin said finally, his voice low and deep. "I needed to ask you something."

Boyd kept his gaze steady on Sin, although his breath quickened at Sin's proximity. That close, there was barely a layer of water between them and he could feel Sin's body heat radiating onto him. He had to force himself not to look down to see what Sin's crotch would look like encased only in wet underwear. The thought made his dick twitch and his fingers briefly tightened on Sin's arms. He leaned back to give himself some space, although his eyes darkened despite himself.

If it continued like this, there was no way he was going to be able to control himself...

"What is it?" Boyd's voice came out huskier than he'd intended and Sin's gaze caught on Boyd's mouth as the words slid out.

A low exhalation escaped Sin and his grip strengthened, drawing Boyd toward him and closing the already minuscule space between their bodies. Whatever Sin had been about to say was lost as their bodies connected and Boyd felt an unmistakable erection press against his own.

Boyd's fingers tightened powerfully against Sin's arms and his lips parted as he drew in a shaky breath, his gaze intensifying. He couldn't help responding, his own erection growing harder as he felt Sin's body against him, as their breath intermingled and Sin's gaze was so intense.

It felt so incredibly good to be near Sin, to feel that wet, hard body against him and Sin's large erection pressing against his own. Sin's skin, his scent, his intense stare-- it was nearly overwhelming after almost a year of being apart and it was impossible for Boyd to fully muffle the quiet sound that escaped him on his exhale.

He'd wanted this so much that it almost felt surreal for a moment, like he was actually dreaming this or it was all in his imagination. His honey brown eyes darkened in unmistakable desire and his quickened breath could be felt in the way their chests pressed against each other. He wondered if Sin could even feel his pounding heart.

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His gaze unconsciously slid from Sin's gorgeous eyes down to those full lips, and all Boyd could think about was how much he wanted to kiss him. The thought was intensified by Sin's hard body pressing against him and Boyd couldn't think properly. He was just starting to shift forward when his cell phone suddenly rang, the tone piercing in the night

Boyd jerked his head to the side, thoroughly startled and feeling his heart jolt, and he automatically looked over at the shorts he'd left crumpled on the patio.

He glanced at Sin quickly then pulled away so he could reach over and drag the shorts closer, briefly drying his hands on his discarded shirt so he could pull out his phone. He felt a strange sense of gratitude for the interruption.

If it hadn't been for the call, he would have kissed Sin and after that he probably wouldn't have been able to stop it from escalating. Which would have been bad not only because it would have been awkward if Harriet or someone walked outside, but also because Boyd still didn't really know where they stood or what exactly was going on with Sin.

Obviously, they were both still attracted to each other. On one level that relieved him yet on another level, the knowledge did little to explain anything.

He didn't understand when exactly that shift had taken place for Sin, why Sin would be doing that when he was still involved with Ivan.

And regardless-- whatever was going on between them in that pool, Boyd didn't want it to be about just the physical attraction. He loved Sin and he didn't want to start fucking him again like before; he didn't want anything between them to ever just be about sex again. He'd tried to avoid Sin so something like this wouldn't accidentally happen on his part but now he didn't know what to do or think, since Sin had been the one initiating it.

It left Boyd feeling imbalanced and confused, while at the same time the aching he'd felt for Sin had only intensified dramatically after feeling him so close-- after having a chance to remember what it had felt like to feel that hard body against him, those strong hands holding him tightly.

Boyd's shoulders tensed slightly and his eyes narrowed. He flipped open his phone just as it went into the third ring, surprised to see that it was his mother. The conversation was short and quick and Boyd nodded as he verbally acknowledged his understanding.

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He flipped the phone closed and only then did he look over his shoulder at Sin again.

"I have a mission."

Tacos, Raggaeton and Paranoia

A Week Before The Final Scene of Cause/Effect

The smell of cooked meat wafted through the apartment and Carhart's eyelids flickered slightly as his still half-asleep brain tried to figure out why that would be. He could hear the muffled sound of raggaeton through the door and a faint, sleepy smile crossed his lips as he realized that he not only recognized the beat of the particular song but also that the sound of it was actually growing on him.

His cerulean blue eyes slid open and for a moment Carhart just stared into space, his gaze automatically resting on the window. Streams of sunlight shone through the slanted blinds and warmth accompanied the golden rays.

The sight struck him and for a moment the General of Field Agent Activity allowed himself a rare moment of simply lying in bed and enjoying the feel of the mattress beneath him, the cool sheets that were strewn against his muscular back and the foreign sight of real summer sunlight.

After nearly two decades of nuclear winter, summer was starting to feel familiar again.

Carhart's eyes slid closed and he allowed the warmth of the sun to wash over him as the bass of the music thrummed against the walls and mixed with the sound of something sizzling on the stovetop.

It was easy to temporarily forget where he was.

It was easy to forget that he was in an Agency-issued apartment in a concrete compound full of assassins. It was easy to forget that he was waking up at four in the afternoon because he'd spent the entire night and early morning in his office, playing catch up on Intel that had gone unattended in two weeks of network downtime. It was

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easy to forget that a couple of weeks ago he'd taken part in a dangerous plot to protect Sin from termination, that he'd arranged for a skeleton staff on the Fourth when it all went down to ensure minimal resistance when Emilio broke in to rescue his son.

It was easy to forget how close to termination Carhart would be if the Marshal or anyone from the European division ever found out.

For a moment it was easy to just lay there and soak in the fact that this felt familiar. Scarily familiar.

It felt like home.

It felt like Saturday mornings on a normal day back before his life had become something else entirely. It reminded him of a night full of sex with his beautiful wife and then the morning afterglow and leisure that made him stay in bed and bask in it.

But then Carhart opened his eyes again, he heard his phone beeping, and reality came crashing back.

While he was lounging in bed and daydreaming, a killer was somewhere on the loose. A killer who'd tried to frame Sin and had nearly gotten him terminated. A killer who knew the compound well enough to sneak in and out undetected and who had likely coordinated the virus attack that had shut down surveillance well before the murder had been carried out.

Or, more disturbing, a killer who was still on the compound now.

Carhart threw off the sheets and sat up. He rested his feet on the carpet, rolling his broad shoulders and standing after another lingering moment. His grey boxer briefs were twisted slightly around his thighs and he adjusted them unconsciously as he retrieved his phone from the dresser.

A message from Aisha. Vivienne wanted him in her office first thing in the morning.

Carhart allowed a wan smile to cross his lips. An entire day of downtime. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

He walked across the bedroom and grabbed a t-shirt on his way out, pulling it on as he walked down the hallway and into the living room. The music got louder but not

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overpoweringly so and he stopped just inside the arched doorway to watch his 'temporary' flat mate.

Emilio was standing at the junction where the kitchen and the living room met, wearing jeans that were so shredded they looked like they'd been caught in a trash compactor. He was shirtless, his hair unstyled and unruly. He was holding a large wooden spoon in one hand and the television remote control in the other as his green eyes focused intently on the large flat screen.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh!" Emilio hissed, dark eyebrows drawing together and well-formed mouth curling down into an annoyed frown. He gestured the sauce-covered spoon at Carhart vaguely and the General watched in dismay as splatters landed on the carpet.

"If you're trying to watch television, it might help if you turned down the music," Carhart said dryly, moving to turn down the volume of the music and grabbing a paper towel from the bar to clean up the mess.

"I'm not trying to listen, I'm trying to pay attention," Emilio muttered but then made a face, pressed a button on the controller, and returned to the kitchen with a grumble.

"What are you watching, anyway?" Carhart looked up at the TV, half expecting to find porn. Instead, to his horror, he saw a stilled image of what appeared to be a copy of a video recording of a mission, specifically some kind of storm. Two dead bodies lay on the screen down a hallway and Emilio had frozen the video as the person carrying the recording device, likely himself, fought with a hostile.

"Emilio, what the fuck?"

"Not right now, sweetheart; maybe after I finish preparing my meat."

Carhart stared at the wall in confusion before he made a face and walked around to the kitchen. Emilio grinned at him innocently and put a lid back on a large pan that presumably was full of said meat. He instead turned to the counter and began expertly dicing onions. A plate of corn tortillas sat nearby as well as a bowl full of diced tomatoes, shredded lettuce, grated cheese and green salsa.

Tacos.

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Carhart almost forgot his alarm and irritation in the face of such a treat. He hadn't had homemade tacos since, well, since before Emilio had 'died.'

"What-- no." Carhart shook his head, resisting the urge to take the lid off the pan and inhale the scent of cooking meat and spices. "I said what. the. fuck. Not 'want to fuck,' you idiot."

"Your loss."

"Where did you get that video?" Carhart demanded, ignoring the comment.

Emilio shrugged, dumping the onions off the chopping block and into another small bowl. "Your woman is making me take a recording device on solo missions until she's absolutely positively for sure that I'm not doing something odd. Don't think she trusts me."

"First of all, she's not my woman," Carhart said acidly. "Second of all, I'm well aware of why the video exists and it's not because she thinks you're untrustworthy-- if that were the case you wouldn't have been reinstated. It's because she wants to ensure you're following Agency protocol. And thirdly-- that video is confidential and only accessed by upper level admin and if you--"

Carhart stopped short and stared at the other man in alarm. "You didn't use my access code, did you?"

Emilio blinked at him innocently, which was canceled out by the fact that he was standing half naked in all of his tattooed glory, holding a knife that was larger than absolutely necessary to chop vegetables. "I don't know your access code, Zachary."

"Oh, so my door just opens for you all on its own?"

Emilio shrugged and placed the knife on the counter, turning to the stove again and flicking off the burner under the meat. He turned on another burner and waved his hand over it to ensure warmth before grabbing the plate of tortillas. "It's not my fault you're fucking predictable. Ever since I've known you your passcode is always the same shit. Your wife's birthday, your son's birthday, their birthdays backwards, the day they were killed."

"That doesn't answer the question," Carhart snapped, although he realized it was true.

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Emilio began heating the tortillas on the heated electric coils of the stove and made a face. "I miss gas ovens."

"Emilio, answer my goddamn question!"

Pale green eyes slid over to him and Emilio sighed in exasperation. "Get your panties out of your ass crack, General. The kid in data retrieval made a copy of it for me."

Carhart relaxed somewhat now that he was no way attached to the breach of confidentiality. "And why in the hell would he break protocol to do that?"

Emilio's lips lifted slightly at the side and he gave another one shouldered shrug. "I asked nicely."

"Yeah, I bet," Carhart muttered, rolling his eyes and grabbing a plate to place on the counter for the heated tortillas. Emilio stacked them on the plate and Carhart dropped the topic, instead going to move the bowls to the kitchen table.

"I wanna eat in the living room."

Carhart grimaced but didn't argue the point. It'd become an ongoing debate between the two of them. He didn't like eating full meals on the sofa, especially potentially messy ones that involved eating with one's hands, and Emilio liked it so that he could watch television or listen to music or do whatever the hell else he felt could only be done in the living room.

Since the other man had actually gone out of his way to cook, Carhart figured it was only fair to let him have his way. This time.

They set up the bowls and plates along the coffee table and Carhart settled in with a plate packed full of homemade tacos with his other hand holding a nice, cold beer.

Emilio turned the video on again and they watched silently as the mission played out. To Carhart's eye it was a flawlessly executed storm and seizure but Emilio replayed the video in multiple sections to critique his own performance.

"I hate working with a team now," Emilio said at one point as the audio captured him issuing hushed commands on his comm. "It fucking sucks. I don't know any of these new kids and they're all obnoxious as hell."

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"Wasn't Archer there?" Carhart hunched over the couch to reach for more taco fixings, throwing together two more. The meat was delicious and not for the first time did Carhart marvel at the fact that Emilio could actually cook, even better than the General, who considered it a favored hobby.

"Yeah. I wouldn't trust any of these random new people with covering my ass. He's had a fucking hawk eye and a way with a rifle since we were kids." Emilio took a gulp of his beer and shook his head, narrowing his eyes at the screen.

"They're not new, you've just been gone."

"Yeah, well, whatever."

Carhart glanced at Emilio, surprised by the resentful tone of his voice. Emilio just looked back, not hiding his frown or the obvious aggravation in his expression.

"Does it really bother you? Having missed out on so much?"

Emilio shrugged and twisted the neck of his beer bottle between his hands. "I guess. I didn't think it would piss me off as much as it does but a lot of shit pisses me off. It pisses me off that I need a team at all."

"Emilio, your team consisted of three other people," Carhart said dryly. "And one of those people stayed in the van to do tactical. You outperformed field agents who have been steadily active for a decade and you're still nitpicking. You're too damned paranoid."

Emilio looked at the screen again, full lips downturned. "I'm not as fast as I used to be. It took me thirty-seven seconds to take down two fucking guys."

"Well-trained armored security personnel," Carhart corrected around a mouthful of taco.

"What the fuck ever, bro, I would have had those guys down in like ten seconds in the past."

Carhart made a face at that, feeling salsa sliding down the side of his mouth as he responded. "I think you're remembering a fantasy of superhero-like proportions."

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"Hsin doe--" Emilio looked at his former partner again and stopped in midsentence. He stared at Carhart, blinked twice, and started speaking again. "Hsin doesn't need some stupid team."

Carhart wiped his mouth with a napkin and rested his plate on the coffee table before sitting back on the sofa. The cushion felt wonderful against his stiff back and he closed his eyes, letting his head rest against it. The combination of a warm breeze, a full stomach and just being able to sit still for several moments at a time had an incredibly soothing effect on him.

"Comparing yourself to Sin is pointless," Carhart said finally, blond eyelashes resting against his face, not opening his eyes. "He's in a class of his own."

This time the silence stretched and even though Carhart could feel Emilio's gaze burning into him, he didn't open his eyes. He felt too comfortable at the moment to be bothered spending the entire conversation trying to analyze Emilio's expressions.

"Are you like in fucking love with my son or something?"

Carhart's eyes snapped open and his mouth actually dropped open as he stared at Emilio incredulously. "*What?*"

Emilio didn't look amused as his pale green eyes burned into Carhart intently, well-formed mouth sculpted into a scowl. "You heard me, fucker. Are you having some kind of secretly gay homo infatuation with my boy or what?"

"Wha-- H--" Carhart shook his head in disbelief. "Are you an idiot?"

"I'm getting real fucking tired of you calling me an idiot," Emilio practically growled, irritation coming off him in waves.

Carhart stared at him for a moment longer and switched tactics. "Why would you say something so odd?"

Emilio eyeballed Carhart for a moment longer, taking in his half horrified and half incredulous expression and visibly relaxed, seeming to abandon the idea altogether. "I dunno. You're always talking about him like you worship him and shit."

The General made a face and grabbed his beer from the table. The bottle was sweating and small beads of water slid down onto his fingers. "I don't talk about him like I worship

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him. He's just an incredibly... unparalleled soldier. I haven't met anyone who could defeat him or do the things he can."

Emilio opened his mouth to protest but Carhart continued before he could say anything. "I'm not saying his actual fighting skills are superior to yours; after all, you taught him everything he knows since he certainly hasn't taken up with any trainers here. But the way he uses his strength and speed is unfuckingcanny."

Emilio seemed to take this into consideration and apparently decided it was acceptable because he didn't argue the point.

"Also, I do love him but like a son."

"Well, he ain't your son; he's mine. Don't get it twisted, Zachary."

Carhart finished his beer and studied his friend closely. The resentful expression had made another appearance on Emilio's handsome face.

"Do you regret going underground for so many years?"

Emilio shrugged. "I didn't have a choice. Connors would have had a hit squad on my ass the first time he heard my name on the wire and since I had contacts who are also Agency contacts, he would have found out."

"Yes, but does it piss you off that you had to do it? Would you have preferred to come back to the Agency?" Carhart shook his head skeptically at his own question but added. "I mean, you've been behaving like you're angry that you haven't been here all along. Like you wish you would have never had to leave."

"Cause it's true, that's why I've been acting like that," Emilio said bluntly. He frowned again and flicked off the TV. "And don't give me that shocked look-- I've never been down on the Agency. I've never regretted getting involved with this place. I just fucking hated Connors with a passion but now he's dead and he was the one behind most of the shit they did to Hsin so that's a bonus too. Vivienne is an annoying cunt but at least she doesn't torture my kid unnecessarily. She didn't even put him in the box whenever that Investigator chick got sliced and diced."

Carhart inclined his head slightly and didn't mention the fact that he suspected the new Marshal would be a combination of Vivienne's cold efficiency and Connors' heartless cruelty. In other words, a perfect blend of everything by the Agency's standards. Carhart

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knew deep down in his core that changes would be coming to the compound at the start of the new year but it was nothing he could change and he constantly pushed the anxiety to the back of his mind.

"I thought you were living the good life down in Mexico," Carhart said instead. "I never would have suspected you missed being a field agent."

Emilio sighed long and loud and stretched on the couch, sliding backwards and down until his knees bumped into the coffee table. He extended his arms backwards, causing muscles to ripple and flex, before threading them behind his head as he gazed into space. "It was awesome at first. At first it was all about challenges and fun and spontaneous shit and the fact that I never knew where things were headed. It was about short term goals-- disappear from the Agency's view-- check. Meet up with my buddies down in Mexico and get a little crew going--check. Then it was get established, get money, take over this dude's route and this dude's territory."

Carhart nodded but didn't interrupt. It was the first time Emilio had really explained his thought processes since coming back to the Agency.

Emilio tilted his head back against the sofa and looked at the darkened TV screen as he continued, his deep voice surprisingly subdued as he recounted the events from his eighteen-year-long criminal career. "It only took about five years to take over, dude. After that it was pretty much just us in control of shit. And believe it or not, Zach, I don't really get off on having everyone and their second cousin kiss my ass just 'cause I'm top dog. It got old real fast. I mean it was fun for another few years but after a decade, what was there left to do? Bump any up and coming groups off the radar for the fuck of it? Keep dealing guns and shit to people and making money when I'm already pretty filthy rich?"

"How rich?" Carhart asked automatically, his curiosity piqued.

Emilio shrugged, not even looking enthused enough about the entire thing to brag. "I dunno. I'm probably richer than that Thierry fag."

Carhart's eyebrows shot up and he had to stop himself from gaping.

"But what the fuck am I gonna do with all of that money?" Emilio demanded rhetorically. "It was pointless to even keep doing business with 4FF-- I'd already made it big and after nearly twenty years, the shit wasn't even exciting anymore. I just felt stuck in this

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fucking situation that was getting really boring really fast and it made me fucking hate everyone and everything. I became such a dickhead, bro."

"You even have commitment issues with criminal activities," Carhart observed mildly.

"Shut up, Zach, I'm serious," Emilio snapped, scowling at the other man.

"Sorry, go on."

Mollified, Emilio shrugged. "All I pretty much did after a while was snort coke and fuck whores. Which is fun for a while but then I started thinking like-- shit, I'm probably going to die in some really stupid embarrassing fucked up way like OD on some shit or get some STD from some dirty skank and that sucks, man. And it's all because fucking 4FF and being *Chingón* was boring as shit."

"I... see." Carhart didn't see how running a massive smuggling organization could be boring but then again he wasn't a sociopathic action junkie who didn't plan farther than the next few days.

"When I die," Emilio said firmly, dark eyebrows drawing together over his brilliant green eyes. "I wanna die like a man. Like a bad ass motherfucker in a hail of bullets and shit, not like some chump who's all strung out on drugs."

"Then... don't do drugs?"

Emilio threw him an exasperated look. "Then I'd be in my right frame of mind and a fucking insufferable jackass because of how bored and resentful I got to be over the whole situation. I'd get in the kind of fucked up mood that would make me order two dudes to beat the shit out of each other just because I was in the mood to watch someone bleed."

"Charming."

There was a brief silence and Carhart studied Emilio closely, wishing for once in his life that he could understand the other man. For someone who could be so intelligent and so rational, there were times when Carhart saw how truly fucked up Emilio was in the head. He may not be as chemically unbalanced as his son but there was definitely not something right with the way Emilio thought.

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"So you missed the Agency. The missions at three in the morning, the storms, the uncertainty, the authority figures that watched you from under a microscope and could end your life whenever you push the wrong buttons." Carhart narrowed his eyes slightly. "So does this mean your whole diatribe about coming back for Sin was bullshit and you just allowed us to track you down so your life could be exciting again?"

"No," Emilio snapped, glaring. "I'd never decided to come back. I'd gotten myself all set up to be a pissed off little bitch for the rest of my life. But seeing my boy again made me want to come back. Not just for some mushy reasons, that shit came later. But it made me remember how it was to be an agent and to be sent to all of these different places, getting to make up covers and stuff. It was fun."

"Fun..."

"But even then I wasn't about to come running back or whatever, not with Connors' bitch ass still around. But when I saw Hsin all fucked up like that, nearly dead, obviously tortured and probably about to die..."

Emilio paused and he seemed to be uncertain of what he wanted to say so in the end he just shook his head. "Anyway, I guess that just hammered it home that I wanted to come back in. I missed the excitement for sure but I guess seeing my boy all grown up... I kind of wanted to see him too. Out of curiosity, I mean."

"Of course. Curiosity." Carhart smirked at Emilio knowingly. The man couldn't even bring himself to admit caring about his own child. It was amazing but Emilio tended to be so blatantly transparent that Carhart couldn't fault him for it. One thing Emilio had never mastered the art of was hiding his thoughts even though he could put on an act and shift the attention to something else at the drop of a hat.

Emilio looked at him sharply, eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion before the expression faded away into a faint half smile. He kept his gaze trained on Carhart for a long moment before he finally cleared his throat and sat up.

"These tacos are amazing. Maybe I shoulda gone to culinary school."

"The fresh produce and meat help. The Service people are very good about acquiring the good stuff. The Expense Department must have a fit when the food bills come in. Or else the Agency has a secret cache of farm animals beneath the Tower."

Emilio smirked. "I thought that's where they keep the bodies of failed fieldies."

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Carhart shrugged. "Maybe they feed them to the animals. Or else they're feeding us the field agents and telling us it's cow."

"Interesting." Emilio's eyebrows rose and his grin turned wicked. "So if that had all gone to shit last week, we'd be sitting here eating Hsin right now."

"An unpleasant thought and I highly doubt I'd be sitting here calmly eating tacos if Sin had been killed," Carhart replied dryly, sitting up to prepare himself another one.

Emilio's grin turned into an outright leer. "Oh, come on, Zachary. You can't deny that Vega meat is the tastiest kind."

Carhart prepared an incredibly overstuffed tortilla and didn't bother to reply.

A Matter of Time

Part I

Boyd stepped out of the car and briefly looked around. It was odd being back in Luoyang, where he and Emma had been paired up to scour the city for a fake bomb during training. Although Doug had told them that they'd been brought to areas of the world that they could potentially be sent to on missions, Boyd was still surprised to find himself there again less than a year later.

When he'd been in the city before, he'd never guessed that it housed Di Zhi's headquarters.

He glanced at Sin, who had been growing slightly tenser as they'd approached China. Yet he hadn't said anything and Boyd didn't speak as their Di Zhi escorts led them toward the building.

The building was not very impressive to behold. It was squat, four stories and had a stained grey color but it was nondescript and blended completely into the rest of the block. In fact, Boyd thought he may have even passed it by during training and hadn't looked twice. There was nothing about it that stood out as intriguing. It certainly didn't appear as though it was the chosen meeting place, and apparently unofficial safe house, for Di Zhi's leader and core members.

The two men with Boyd and Sin led them inside without any fanfare, probably to keep up the cover from the outside. The main door led to an open lobby area that looked old and worse for the wear. The official cover for the building was that it was a storage facility of some sort.

A woman stood near a reception area with an intrigued look on her face as she watched Boyd and Sin enter the space. The men who had escorted them from the airport did a thorough frisk and removed Boyd and Sin's weapons. The woman whisked the items away in a black lock box with promises in heavily-accented English that they would take care of them.

From there they passed through a plain grey door that required a code to enter. A series of hallways awaited them, leading to another password-protected door that led to yet another open space. This one looked well-used and gave the appearance of some kind

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of sitting area. There were tables and chairs and several doors that led into unknown areas but the guards bypassed the space and led the two agents to the staircase.

They walked past the second and third floor, going directly to the fourth which required another security checkpoint before entering the door. This one required an iris scan.

From the outside Boyd would have never expected such a complex maze of hallways and entrances, let alone the high security. Boyd suspected that Di Zhi had either purposefully looked for a place that was misleading inside so a layperson wouldn't be able to stumble onto their main rooms, or Di Zhi had renovated the inside of the building so it would fit their needs.

When they finally entered the fourth floor, it immediately led into yet another hallway with closed doors lining it. A few more turns and another sitting area later, the guards finally reached what appeared to be the destination point.

The room they entered appeared to be a large office. There were file cabinets, multiple computers, maps on bulletin boards, and a wall that consisted entirely of security screens.

There were nearly a dozen people in the room performing a variety of tasks. Two men were looking diligently at the screens and discussing something in undertones while other Di Zhi operatives sat near the computers, obviously working on something of import although quite a few were huddled to the side and looked more overtly dangerous. Boyd figured out why when he spotted Ton, the bodyguard from their mission in Hong Kong, standing in the midst of the group.

He'd thought Ton had been one of Jianjuo's men but apparently not.

Ton immediately zeroed in on Sin and his eyes narrowed slightly as he barked something at one of their escorts in Mandarin.

The man replied calmly and jerked his head towards a door in the back.

Boyd watched the exchange and kept an expectant eye on the back door as Ton said something in a far more polite tone into his comm unit.

The door opened and a woman and man filed into the main room. They both approached although the woman was speaking loudly into a cell phone in fluent Mandarin. At their sudden appearance, the Di Zhi agents in the room stopped what they

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were doing and stood up, turning to face the newcomers as if their leader's appearance officially started the correspondence with the Agency representatives.

Boyd recognized Xu Xiaolian instantly despite the fact that the Agency's most recent photograph of her was obviously a good ten years out of date. Her black hair now fell nearly below her waist in a long pony tail and a considerable amount of silver could be seen throughout the mane despite the fact that she was only in her mid to early thirties.

She had an attractive face with a dainty nose and high cheekbones, but years of stress could also be seen in the faint lines around her mouth. One of her eyes was greyish, milky, and obviously at least half blind; a jagged scar near the outer corner of it implied a knife wound was the reason for the damage.

She was dressed casually in tan pants and a black long-sleeved shirt. She leaned heavily on a mahogany cane and had a severe limp.

Xiaolian seemed to ignore them at first and continued her conversation as the man at her side looked on silently, clearly waiting for the phone call to end, but Xiaolian's almond-shaped eyes slid over to Sin and focused on him even as she continued to speak. A tight smile lifted the corners of her thin lips but Sin just stared back impassively.

When the cell phone finally snapped shut, Xiaolian tossed it onto a desk across the room. "I see our representatives from America have arrived," she said in English, her eyes still on Sin.

"Thank you for allowing us a portion of your time and entrance to your headquarters," Boyd said smoothly, starting with the usual pleasantries for negotiation.

Xiaolian looked at Boyd finally and observed him for a moment, her gaze intent as she took in everything from his body language to his clothing. "I hope it is understood that I have never needed help from the Americans," she said plainly, her low pitched voice strong and direct, carrying over the large room. "Your invitation was extended out of curiosity more than anything else."

Boyd nodded easily. "We understand. Still, even if Di Zhi does not require our assistance, we may have skills or use you desire. We simply hope to explore that possibility for mutual gain."

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"It's possible you may prove useful," she said mildly although from her tone and expression she didn't seem very convinced of the idea. "I have known this for a time. That an alliance with your agency could be beneficial since we have a very common enemy."

She flashed a mouth full of straight teeth that looked stained from either incessant smoking or coffee drinking. "But I probably wouldn't have extended the invitation if you hadn't dropped Hsin's name."

Her eyes returned to Sin again, mouth tightening as she tapped the skin near her bad eye. "Thanks for the souvenir."

Sin shrugged uncaringly. "Be glad I left you with one eye."

Xiaolian's expression didn't change but the side of her mouth lifted slightly. "Be glad I didn't slice your throat open."

In barely a blink, her arm had extended and she was abruptly reaching for the collar of Sin's jacket, likely to expose the thick scar tissue that lined his throat. Before her fingers even brushed him, Sin knocked her hand aside and narrowed his eyes.

"If you want to avoid turning this into a bloodbath, I'd keep my fucking hands to myself."

Xiaolian stared at Sin evenly, her expression unchanged, and she said nothing.

Boyd looked at Sin sidelong before returning his steady gaze to Xiaolian. He wasn't particularly pleased to see the interaction and wondered if Sin's typical responses, combined with his history with Xiaolian, would make this even more difficult than it otherwise would be. Xiaolian looked unsurprised by Sin's reaction but negotiations could be touch and go at best and if interrupted pleasantries led to her dismissing or killing them then that would be a rather obvious problem.

"If there's anything you would like from us during our stay, please let us know," Boyd said in the same calm, smooth tone, as if the exchange with Sin hadn't just occurred.

Xiaolian's eyebrows rose slightly. "There is something that I would require before allowing you to go any further into my base."

She looked around at her men and spoke in a clear, loud voice. "This man you see before me is Hsin Vega. He is very dangerous and should be watched at all times. He

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has betrayed me once before, betrayed this organization once before, and cannot be trusted. The only reason he has not been killed in the first moment of his arrival is because if I deem his current motives to be truthful, he is a formidable ally."

Sin raised an eyebrow at her and Xiaolian smiled before adding. "But the first time he is cast under suspicion, he is to be executed on the spot and without delay."

"Oh dear," Sin said dryly. "How intimidated I am."

Xiaolian ignored him and glared at her men once again as if to ensure they were paying attention. "He is to have no weapons at any time."

Two of the guards who'd escorted them upstairs stepped forward and Xiaolian nodded at them before grinning at Sin. "I would like you to strip now, please. So that a full and more thorough search can occur."

"You've got to be kidding." Sin didn't look amused anymore. His eyes narrowed at the Di Zhi leader and she smiled back serenely as he continued, "Your scanners would have picked up any weapons or did you forget what their purposes are?"

She shrugged, unconcerned, and seemed thoroughly pleased by his irritation. "No further negotiation will occur until you comply."

Sin scoffed but unzipped his black jacket. "I thought perhaps your childish sense of humor would have changed with all of your new responsibilities but apparently not."

Xiaolian's eyes twinkled in amusement and as she watched Sin yank off his shirt, she nodded towards Boyd. "Agent Beaulieu, Hsin, meet my husband. Tan Bo-Qin."

The man who stood at her side nodded shortly at Boyd before going back to glaring darkly at Sin. His otherwise calm expression had shifted to one of hostility as soon as Xiaolian had mentioned Sin's past betrayal.

Bo-Qin was tall and lithely muscular with such a short buzz-cut that he looked nearly bald. He had a long hooked nose and beady black eyes that gave him a constant look of suspicion. "Good to meet you," he said gruffly to Boyd.

"Pleased to meet you as well," Boyd replied, taking in the man's demeanor before he returned his attention to Xiaolian.

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He could see Sin continuing to undress from the corner of his eye and he didn't look over, not wanting to get distracted by Sin's naked body.

He wasn't surprised by the way Xiaolian was dealing with Sin, yet it did make Boyd a little nervous. If Sin couldn't have weapons, if the Di Zhi agents were going to be watching Sin like a hawk, then Sin would have to be especially careful.

Although Boyd had no doubts that Sin could handle the situation without a problem even if it blew up in their faces, it still worried Boyd a little to wonder whether anyone would take issue with Sin and claim he'd done something wrong when he hadn't. He couldn't help wondering whether this invitation was a trap for Sin in a way, and whether Xiaolian planned to take her revenge under the guise of Sin attacking first.

Once he was completely naked, Sin threaded his fingers loosely behind his head as the guards clinically inspected every part of his body.

Xiaolian ogled him in an obviously exaggerated fashion and smirked as she indicated his crotch. She said something in rapid Mandarin to Sin, who rolled his eyes at her.

Bo-Qin just stiffened slightly and his expression was distinctly uncomfortable, although his gaze strayed to Sin anyway.

Boyd looked toward Sin but forced himself not to allow his eyes to drop to Sin's cock; instead, he kept his eyes at head level as he focused on the guards. Unsurprisingly they didn't find anything and when that much was evident, Boyd turned his attention to Xiaolian again.

"Do you require the same of me?" he asked her.

"No." She shrugged and adopted a business-like expression again now that she'd finished with her display of power over Sin. Her black eyes swept across the room briskly and focused on a thin man with bleached blond spiky hair and enough piercings in his face to likely set off any civilian metal detector. "Shaoqing!"

The man, Shaoqing, quickly hurried over to them and up close it was obvious that he was in his mid to late twenties. He answered Xiaolian in Mandarin and she gave him a disparaging look.

"You will be their guide and this one speaks no Chinese. Use your head."

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"Oh." Shaoqing looked at Boyd and gave him an apologetic smile. "I apologize."

"Not a problem," Boyd replied with a small smile in return.

Xiaolian stared at Shaoqing flatly before moving her onyx eyes over to the two agents again. "Shaoqing will serve as the liaison between you and me during your stay. I operate out of this building but I do not reside here and I will not always be here. I have business tonight that will lead into tomorrow."

Boyd nodded and saw in his peripheral vision that Sin had finished putting on the rest of his clothing and was just adjusting his shirt. "When should we ensure we're available to speak with you further?"

Xiaolian exchanged a brief look with Bo-Qin before shrugging her lean shoulders. "We will meet for dinner tomorrow night to begin initial talk. Shaoqing will contact you with the location when the time comes. For now, please allow him to show you to your room and explain how this location operates. He will serve as your guide to the city as well. Since you will be with us for some weeks, it is only sensible to introduce you to Luoyang."

"You are guests here," Bo-Qin added, although his gaze hadn't warmed any since the exchange between Xiaolian and Sin. "So feel free to explore the city at your leisure. But be aware of our security protocol and know that if you draw attention to this location, you will be killed decisively."

"Of course," Boyd said seriously with a nod, looking over at Bo-Qin. "We understand that completely and will be certain that we use as much, if not more, caution in your city as we would use in ours. It's the least we can do to return your hospitality."

Bo-Qin nodded curtly and abruptly headed for the door. Xiaolian lingered behind, her steady gaze flicking between Sin, Boyd and Shaoqing in a thoughtful but unreadable manner. After a moment she stepped to the side and limped to the door saying nothing more than, "Tomorrow."

Shaoqing watched Xiaolian leave before he turned to the two field agents and smiled. "Come; let me show you around." He gestured for them to follow and headed toward a back door.

Boyd fell in line behind Shaoqing and briefly looked sidelong at Sin, who had a bland expression and looked almost bored with his hands in his pockets. Boyd wondered if

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Sin had ever been in the safe house before but he didn't spend much time thinking about it because Shaoqing started talking.

"Most of this floor is reserved for Xiaolian and her operations," Shaoqing was saying as he held the door open for them; Boyd placed his hand on the door and held it open for Sin as they passed through, letting it fall shut behind them. "But as guests you are welcome up here as long as you do not interfere."

Boyd nodded again and Shaoqing led them down a set of stairs. "What you're probably wondering is where are your things."

"It's not my major concern but the thought had occurred to me," Boyd allowed with a faint nod.

"In your room," Shaoqing explained, turning down a hallway and walking deeper into the building. The safe house wasn't terribly large, squished as it was rather like a row house with all the other buildings that looked just like it on either side.

"We don't have many rooms, as you see," Shaoqing said, gesturing briefly to the hallway before he stopped at the last door on the left and looked between them. "So you will have to share. I hope that's okay?"

"It's fine," Sin said tonelessly although he glanced at Boyd briefly.

Boyd casually glanced over at Sin but didn't meet his eyes for long. That arrangement may end up becoming a little awkward but there was nothing to do about it and he wasn't about to say they should have separate rooms. He nodded at Shaoqing. "That's not a problem."

"Good," Shaoqing said, satisfied, and then opened the door so they could look in. Boyd glanced past Shaoqing's shoulder and saw a room that wasn't particularly large, with two twin-sized beds and very little furniture. Their bags were visible, one on each bed. "Your bags are in here. There aren't locks on the doors but you should not need to worry about anything stolen. Few people in Di Zhi even know of this location and all of them can be trusted."

"Is that because of Xiaolian's presence?" Boyd asked curiously, returning his attention to Shaoqing.

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"Yes," Shaoqing said, glancing between the two agents and then shutting the door when he saw that neither of them seemed particularly interested in checking out the room. Shaoqing tilted his head down the hallway, gesturing for them to follow again.

"She is the leader and there's always the possibility there will be attempts on the leader's life." Shaoqing's gaze drifted briefly toward Sin before he looked at Boyd. "Not just from other groups. From the government too."

Boyd nodded. "So these core people would stop in here to update Xiaolian?"

"Sometimes," Shaoqing agreed with an idle shrug, glancing distractedly into an open room where two men seemed to be in the midst of a quiet argument. His deep brown eyes slid back over to Boyd thoughtfully. "Anyone who knows of this safe house can stop in here to stay as long as they need. Many times they're here on business, they want to speak with Xiaolian, and they need updates on what is happening... But sometimes they are simply in the area and need a place to sleep."

Shaoqing opened a door at the end of the hall and jogged down a flight of stairs with Boyd and Sin following behind. Once they reached the second floor, Shaoqing once again held the door open for them before he started walking through the maze of hallways. The area he led them through was designed very similarly to what they'd seen before.

"Because they may stay here for a while, we have a kitchen." Shaoqing led them to an open doorway where they could see a decent-sized kitchen. "You're welcome to use it during your stay."

Boyd nodded and Shaoqing looked between the two of them. "Is there anything else in the building you want to see?"

"If there's nothing else of import, I think that's everything we need to know," Boyd replied with a shrug.

"Good." Shaoqing moved past Sin and started walking more quickly back in the direction they'd come. "Then we can get to the more interesting tour." He made a slight face, his piercings glinting in the light as he looked back at them. "The building is boring."

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They had to follow the same winding path to get through the building and once they stepped outside, Shaoqing turned to look between them. "What do you want? General tour or something specific?"

Boyd looked over at Sin questioningly. "General?"

"I don't care either way."

Boyd just shrugged at Shaoqing, who nodded.

"Alright. We will go to the most important areas first," Shaoqing said, frowning before he started walking again.

Shaoqing spent more than an hour showing them the city.

He explained to them the basic layout of the city, advised them of which areas were best to avoid and which they should keep in mind for various uses. The public transportation was impressive in the city and he showed them where the rail stations were, where to catch the public buses, where was the best place to flag down a taxi, and advised them to haggle with the taxi drivers especially if they were going to be leaving the city.

He told them where they could find different black market items for the best prices and pointed out a few locations of citizens who were rumored to be low key protestors of the communist government and had beliefs aligned with that of Di Zhi. If there was ever a raid by the police, apparently the dissidents could be relied on for a quick hiding place if Di Zhi agents were ever desperate.

Shaoqing casually pointed out the areas that had higher enforcement by local police and even where the government occasionally sent in factions of the People's Liberation Army. The People's Armed Police and People's Liberation Army Ground Force had each been deployed to Luoyang and other major cities in the past, especially after larger Di Zhi attacks. But, Shaoqing assured Boyd and Sin, the government didn't know where Di Zhi was headquartered and they wanted to keep it that way.

As they walked along, Shaoqing pointed out other, less dire aspects of the city as well. He brought them to streets that were off the beaten path that he thought may interest them, and pointed out what was in some of the skyscrapers they could see towering against the sky.

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He threw in other tidbits, mentioning local attractions that, he admitted, they may not have the chance to see but he recommended anyway.

He briefly talked about the White Horse Temple, the Museum of Ancient Tombs, the Guanlin Temple... But Boyd's favorite simply from the description was the Longmen Grottoes, a collection of caves and ancient sculptures dating all the way back to 316 AD that had managed to escape the ravages of the war.

It sounded fascinating to Boyd and he found he actually wanted to see it-- he even asked several questions about it and didn't bother to hide the genuine intrigue in his expression. But although it was only about eight miles away, their primary function really wasn't for sightseeing so he doubted they would end up going there.

They had fallen into mutual silence as Shaoqing led them through an area that apparently had nothing of note.

"You know," Shaoqing said as they crossed a wide open crosswalk, his hands in his pockets as he looked over at Sin with his eyebrows raised. "We never knew what happened to Xiaolian's eye except that the injury occurred in a fight." He frowned, but it was more thoughtful than anything and he looked at Sin as if assessing him. "It was you?"

"Yes," Sin replied, his green eyes moving over the surrounding buildings and streets. "She was trying to kill me."

"Hmm." Shaoqing studied Sin in contemplation. "You must be very strong. Xiaolian is a formidable opponent."

"Apparently, considering she fought me and survived."

Shaoqing nodded casually and was quiet a moment, his gaze straying along the buildings around them. "Your interaction was interesting," he said mildly, something akin to intrigue passing across his face before it returned to his customary indifference. "Most men are too afraid to push her."

Sin's eyes slid back to Shaoqing and he observed the other man briefly. "I'm not most men. If she pushes her luck I'll kill her just as quickly as any other insurgent I've dealt with."

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Shaoqing raised his eyebrows slightly, his dark gaze strengthening on Sin before he shrugged and looked away. "You may think that would be the outcome but one never knows," he said with an idle shrug. He searched the buildings, eyes narrowing thoughtfully, and then led them across the street.

"Ah. Here is what I want you to see." Shaoqing gestured subtly to a red store stuck in amidst other similar stores, bright flags angled up along the side. "You can get any weapon you want for very cheap there. They do not ask questions and they are fast. They get the weapons within a day, no matter what you want."

Boyd nodded, watching Shaoqing briefly and raising his eyebrows slightly. "That could be very convenient," he said in interest.

Shaoqing nodded but his attention appeared to be caught on something else. He was looking down the street with slightly narrowed eyes, but it was difficult to tell what or who exactly he was looking at because the street was crowded with people roaming around. Shaoqing glanced toward Sin and Boyd distractedly then smiled.

"That's the end of the tour," Shaoqing said, already taking a few steps backward. "You should walk around while you have the chance. You remember the way back?"

Boyd nodded and before they could say more, Shaoqing turned and headed down the street. Boyd watched until Shaoqing disappeared into the crowd before he turned to Sin with a significant look, making sure he was facing away from the direction Shaoqing went just in case their guide looked back.

"That was interesting," Boyd said in an undertone.

"I thought all Di Zhi worshiped their leader," Sin commented idly as they started walking in an aimless direction. His eyes returned to the weapons shop as they passed but he didn't suggest they go in.

Boyd shrugged in agreement. "Me too but apparently not." He casually glanced down the street, gaze passing by where Shaoqing had disappeared to but he still couldn't see where the man had gone or what he'd seen that had caused him to leave so abruptly.

"An interesting choice for our guide," Sin continued, "but then again anyone else in that room likely would have been hostile towards me the entire time and made the process difficult."

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Boyd nodded then narrowed his eyes slightly and frowned. He didn't look entirely pleased when he studied Sin. "Why did you antagonize her like that when we're trying to negotiate, especially in her territory and in front of her people?"

"How should I have behaved?" Sin asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"I don't know exactly but you could have been more neutral or polite, especially in front of everyone where her pride would feel challenged," Boyd replied, a shadow crossing his face as he drew his eyebrows down. "Honestly, I'm not even certain we'll be able to pull this off even if she isn't in a bad mood from the start and if we fail this you know they won't be pleased back home."

He looked at Sin pointedly, because Sin of anyone knew how harsh the Agency's measures could be for failure. He didn't want to say the Agency's name aloud even though no one around them was likely to overhear or even know what it meant if they did.

"You don't know Xiaolian. I do."

Boyd studied Sin for a long moment, his eyes narrowing further although it was more contemplative than anything. It was true that Sin knew Xiaolian and as such, it was possible Sin was doing that on purpose rather than just reacting his default way. "You think it will help more in the end by acting that way than not?"

Sin stopped walking and stepped to the side, out of the throng of pedestrians and into the corner of the street. His eyes skimmed their surroundings briefly before he focused on Boyd again. "She isn't the type of person to work with someone just because they kiss her ass. She's more inclined to trust someone who is genuine. If I behaved any other way than how I would normally treat her, she'd know I was putting on an act and think I was hiding something."

Boyd watched Sin thoughtfully then frowned to himself, looking away.

His attention was briefly caught by a woman struggling to carry five overfilled bags of what looked like fresh food and other items. She was looking around furtively and for a second he wondered if there was something more to her presence. He tracked her absently until her expression suddenly brightened and she said something in rapid Mandarin to a man who was heading toward her with a grin; when they met, he took three of the bags and the two of them walked off smiling and chatting.

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Boyd felt completely out of his element in China. He didn't understand the language; he couldn't read any of the signs; with everything written in characters, he couldn't even sound anything out. He had to rely on what he could tell from body language and what was said or written in English. Even then, they could be saying one thing in English to him then something else entirely in Mandarin to each other, and if they didn't let it get to their faces or tones Boyd would never know.

That alone would have been reason enough for Boyd to follow Sin's lead despite it being a negotiation mission but Sin's history with Xiaolian, his understanding of how she really worked, made it make even more sense.

"Alright," Boyd said finally with a decisive nod as he looked at Sin seriously. "I can handle the negotiation but given your knowledge of all this, you'll know better than anyone what needs to be done. So I can follow your lead and if you think something would work better with her than I've been doing, let me know."

Sin just shrugged, although a flicker of surprise crossed his expression briefly. "Just don't be especially phony with her. If you think something is bullshit, tell her it's bullshit. If you think her husband is a dick, treat him like you think he's a dick. If you're upfront, she'll know you're not trying to put on an act. She won't trust you if she thinks you're holding back your true thoughts. As far as I remember, the big deal with her is whether or not she can trust someone and whether they're being real with her."

Boyd took that into consideration and nodded again. Each mission was different and he'd worked with some other people like Xiaolian who preferred that type of interaction before. "Okay."

Mutual silence fell between them as they began to walk again, looking at the shops and people. As they passed onto another street, Boyd slid his hands into his pockets and asked Sin idly, "So... what do you want to do now? We may as well stay in the city for a while since there won't be anything happening back there."

"Not for our eyes to see," Sin agreed. "By the way, I'm sure our movements will be monitored and reported in some way. Xiaolian is too distrustful for her not to have someone watching and she likely has eyes and ears all over the city."

"I suspected as much," Boyd said with a casual shrug. "If I were her, I'd do the same. We shouldn't do anything suspicious because of that, so..." He looked over at Sin curiously. "I guess we can just wander?"

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"That's fine." Sin sidestepped a young woman who was sitting on a bicycle and talking animatedly to a woman in the doorway of a nearby building. "There isn't anything else to do since she brushed us off for the night."

They walked for a while, idly looking around and in general just passing the time. Some of the streets were dingy, with crowded sidewalks and shops that were colorful and old but looked like they were falling apart in some places. Boyd didn't know how much of that was due to the wars and how much was simply the city itself. Other streets were well-kept and had what seemed like more modern buildings.

They passed several gardens of flowers and other landscaping as well as a structure that at first glance from the corner of Boyd's eye vaguely resembled a small version of the Eiffel Tower and, he learned, was an old, broken down television tower.

They ended up taking Mudan Bridge across the Yi River and Boyd was temporarily distracted by old art installations or sculptures of some sort he could see. They were rundown and covered in graffiti in some areas but he could see that someone had recently been trying to restore them. Boyd saw a recurring theme of shrines and older architecture that seemed to be mixed in with the new.

It was very interesting to him and he enjoyed the idea of how much history the city had, even though it seemed in many places the true extent of history had been wiped away in all the times the city had been rebuilt.

More than once, Boyd found himself wishing he had his sketchbook with him; wishing he had the time to just wander around for days.

They were there on business so unfortunately there was a lot he didn't feel comfortable doing, but he did have to admit that he was enjoying the chance to be around Sin without anything major interrupting the relatively relaxing time. Although he knew they were being watched by Di Zhi, it didn't bother Boyd in the least; it was less intrusive than the way the Agency watched anyone on compound and sometimes within the city proper as well.

Several vendors were selling food from stalls and carts along the street and Boyd looked over distractedly then glanced at Sin. They hadn't really been saying much but the silence had been comfortable and mutual. It had lulled Boyd into a relaxed state and without thinking he put a hand out toward Sin's lower arm, grabbing him to get his attention so he wouldn't keep walking.

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"Are you hungry?" Boyd asked as he tilted his head toward the vendors, casually dropping his hand and trying to ignore the way he'd wanted to slide his fingers along Sin's skin.

"I could eat," Sin said with a nod and they stopped in front of one of the food carts.

Sin spoke to the vendor in Mandarin, the words moving fluidly in his low, deep voice. The vendor looked faintly surprised by the fluency, likely because of Sin's appearance, but said very little as he handed over whatever Sin had ordered.

He exchanged yuan for the waxen packages of food and Sin handed one over to Boyd with a raised eyebrow. "I suppose I should have asked what you wanted."

Boyd couldn't help an amused smile as he accepted the package and started to open it. "It's fine," he said lightly, quirked an eyebrow as a flash of teasing passed through his eyes. "I think three years is enough time for me to trust you with my food choices. Any earlier and we may have been pushing it, though."

"Well I didn't get you the fried cicadas so I suppose that's right." Sin smirked and unwrapped his food as well. He'd gotten them some kind of biscuit-like pastry stuffed with potatoes and herbs.

"Good thing, too," Boyd said idly as he took a bite. The pastry was delicious, whatever it was. "If you had, I may've had to tie you up and ship you back home out of protest."

"I wouldn't complain. I don't really want to be here." Sin glanced over at Boyd and added as he started walking, "With them."

Boyd smiled faintly and then took another bite of the pastry, chewing as he looked around. "It's actually pretty nice here," he said thoughtfully, holding the package loosely in his hands as he looked over at Sin again. "When I was here before, I was too stressed to look at the city. But some of the areas have interesting architecture."

They ended up heading down Guanlin Avenue, idly turning eastbound away from the river. They walked more or less leisurely, not in a hurry because they didn't have anywhere they particularly needed to be.

A warm breeze blew and Sin's hair rustled against his face, longer than it had been since they first met. "You should do some drawing while you're here."

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A large expanse of water, apparently some sort of long fountain, dominated the area ahead of them as they walked. Boyd glanced at the fountain and the slowly gathering crowd, wondering briefly what it was about before he realized this must be the musical fountain Shaoqing had mentioned earlier. Without having to speak aloud, the two of them ended up heading toward an area where there weren't many people but they could still see the fountain.

"I don't think we'll have time and I didn't bring any sketchbooks." Boyd pulled some hair behind his ear as he sat down on a small wall and leaned back with his free hand, his fingers curling over the edge while his other hand held his food. He looked over at Sin with a small frown as he admitted regretfully, "I wish we did, though. I really wanted to see the grottoes..."

"I doubt we'll have time to go after tonight but we could always come back on downtime."

Boyd was caught off-guard by the casualness of the comment and he watched Sin before he turned toward the fountain. He couldn't help a warm wave of happiness at the idea that Sin would actually consider taking time to go halfway across the world just to spend time with him.

All the doubts and uncertainties Boyd had been harboring about whether Sin was interested in hanging around with him vanished in the face of that. He couldn't stop a genuine smile that grew across his lips and softened his features.

"We could." Boyd leaned back and tilted his head toward the sky. "We could go to the grottoes and wherever you want to go. There are a lot of interesting places in this country..."

Sin nodded and finished eating, crumbling the wax paper in his hands and set it beside him on the short wall. "It will be easier to request simultaneous downtime since my father is around now."

"Yeah," Boyd agreed almost wistfully. "Maybe they'll even say yes."

Sin nodded slightly and his eyes drifted off to focus on the fountain.

Silence briefly fell between them as Boyd finished eating the pastry and then balled up the wax paper. He was quiet a moment as he watched the fountain, wondering how exactly a musical fountain even worked. It reminded him about how there were a lot of

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little things about Sin he didn't know; stupid things that didn't really matter yet Boyd found he wondered about.

He kicked his feet idly against the wall, the soles of his shoes scuffing the ground, and Boyd tilted his head curiously as he watched Sin, taking in those beautiful features. He would probably never get over how gorgeous Sin was and he had to admit that he did like the length of that silky black hair. Although he'd joked to Ryan about it, watching the wind shift through it now made Boyd's fingers twitch against the edge of the wall; made him want to reach out and run his hands through it.

Instead, he asked curiously, "What sort of music do you like?"

Sin looked at him, surprised, and drew his dark eyebrows together slightly. "I've never really thought about it before. The only music I've ever really listened to is when someone else is playing it."

"Hmm." Boyd watched Sin thoughtfully. "Are you ever interested in finding out?"

"I don't know. I've just never really been interested in it. I tend to like silence. But I suppose it couldn't hurt. Why do you ask?"

Boyd shrugged and tilted his head. The wind lightly blew hair into his eyes and he pushed the blond strands out of the way, pulling some behind his ear. "I didn't have any grand plans in mind. It just occurred to me that I still have Lou's old CDs and he had a wide range of music. So I guess I thought if you wanted to know, maybe we could listen to different kinds and see what appeals to you. It could be fun."

Boyd hesitated and then added, "Once you know that, if it ever comes up, maybe if there's ever a band playing you might like we could check it out. If you want."

"It could be interesting. Although, I know in advance that I won't enjoy loud screaming music."

Boyd nodded easily and a slight smile pulled at one edge of his lips. "We just won't try those then. I have a lot that isn't like that."

The commotion seemed to increase as a crowd gathered. Boyd glanced at his watch and saw that it was time for the fountain spectacle to start. The government buildings were lit up impressively in the background, making them white-blue against the black backdrop of the sky, and the lights reflected in the larger, flat area of the fountain.

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The speakers weren't fantastic but they were very loud and a man's voice came across, talking swiftly in Mandarin. The fountain was so large and expansive that Boyd couldn't see the man across the way; he wasn't even certain that the man was standing anywhere in sight.

Boyd stared blankly at the fountain and when he asked Sin what was happening, it turned out the man was basically saying that history and progression had taken a lot of the original structure of the city away, and the wars and subsequent issues had taken a lot of peoples' happiness, but some things remained beautiful and for enjoyment. He called the fountain a modern tribute to the culture, history, and accomplishments of their proud country.

Boyd raised his eyebrows, curiosity piqued about what exactly this was going to be like.

There was a moment of stillness as people whispered and moved around nearby, and suddenly music blasted across the speakers, nearly making Boyd jump.

A woman's reedy voice trilled in Mandarin with intense vibrato that almost made her sound like she was singing underwater. At the same time, water sprayed up from jets while hidden lights of varying colors shone brightly against the streams. The jets and lights seemed to span the entire length of the fountain in several layers, far enough back from where they were all sitting that the spectators didn't get wet.

The water streams and lights changed with the music, some streams short and others long, some thick and some thin, some straight into the air and some angled. The lights shifted between blues and purples to blinding white, coinciding with the rise and fall of the song.

In a way, the sight was somewhat impressive but Boyd couldn't get over the woman's voice, which sounded piercing to his ears. And the amount of things happening at once-- lights, water, blasting music-- was almost overwhelming to him, perhaps also because it was on such a grand scale that he couldn't really look away. He found himself leaning back slightly as if to distance himself from the fountain and the sensory overload.

"This is horrifying," Sin commented idly, staring blankly at the lights and water. "You can leave this out of the list of potential music genres."

Boyd looked over and burst out laughing. "I don't have anything like this anyway."

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Sin smirked and shook his head. "Well, your mother could have one secreted away somewhere on the property. Who knows what her idea of relaxation is."

That just made Boyd chuckle more and he shook his head with a grin. "Unless her idea of relaxation is torture, which I guess you never know with her, I think I'm probably safe."

Sin nodded slightly and his eyes drifted away as he stared seemingly blankly into the colorful display before them. The lights danced across his face, highlighting his eyes and the bridge of his straight nose before gliding over his mouth. He narrowed his eyes against the strobes and shifted slightly before saying seemingly randomly, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

Boyd's smile faded and he became more serious, although his expression remained casual. He looked at Sin thoughtfully, wondering if this was a continuation of whatever Sin had wanted to say when they were cut off in the pool. "Alright."

There was a long pause as Sin's eyes followed children running along beside the fountain. After a moment he sat up straighter and turned to Boyd entirely, raising his eyebrows. "I'm not stupid enough to believe that your actions regarding me in the past couple of months have left you unscathed. If your mother hasn't already punished you, I'm sure she will soon and I'm sure it won't be pleasant."

He stopped talking for a moment as if waiting to see if Boyd would deny it.

Boyd's shoulders tensed slightly and he looked away, staying silent. Following that night in the pool with Sin he'd been sent on a mission that had been difficult to complete. It seemed to Boyd that the Marshal had purposefully chosen the mission for him, knowing it would test his morals, and that through it she was making it clear she expected him to stay in line. That she would not give him easy outs anymore.

But what was slightly worrisome was she hadn't mentioned again his promise not to question anything, and Vivienne Beaulieu did not forget promises extracted. What he didn't know was whether she considered him having fulfilled that promise or whether there was still something else waiting for him in the future.

Sin didn't seem surprised by the unspoken admission and he went on. "Even if your mother won't terminate you, when the new Marshal comes I have no doubts that she would have. She would have terminated me, you, and everyone involved with what

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happened after the Investigator was killed. It wouldn't even have mattered that I was innocent."

He shrugged slightly, shaking his head. "It's just-- I just want you to try to accept the fact that when it comes to me and the Agency and what they want to do with me, it's not in your control and when they come in, you trying to involve yourself will be nothing but suicide. And there's no point in you throwing your life away if they make a decision regarding me. It won't change it."

Boyd studied the dancing lights in the water for a moment, his eyes narrowed and expression pensive, before he sighed and ran a hand back through his hair. "Honestly, it's not even about it being in my control." He looked over at Sin. "I know that if they make a decision, most likely it won't matter what I or anyone else thinks, and I know that Marshal Seong is going to be even stricter. But..."

He drew his eyebrows down and he frowned, gaze tracking Sin's face. "It's not really about winning; it's about doing what's right. So many times in my life I didn't really fight for something I should have. I don't intend to be obvious about anything or unnecessarily endanger anyone but if a situation comes up where I think I could affect it, I'm going to do it. I'm not trying to be suicidal but I don't see the point in playing it safe just to prolong my life. And if I try and fail and even if I live beyond that, at least I won't have to second-guess and regret."

"Boyd, this is not--" Sin broke off, frustrated and he grabbed Boyd's sleeve, jerking him closer. "There's no 'right' there. There's what they want and what they don't want. You can't change what they decide. It doesn't matter how much you try or fight. Maybe that has worked in the past and I'm not saying I'm not grateful but things are going to change and disobedience means termination, especially when it comes to serious shit like we've been pulling off in the past couple of years. I need you to accept that and understand that. If they decide to kill me-- you can't change that."

Boyd met Sin's eyes evenly. "I know. If it's something where they issue a termination notice, if it's something completely inevitable--"

Boyd's eyes narrowed and his hand twitched into a loose fist but he didn't look away. "You're probably right; if it happens it'll just happen and I won't be able to do anything or even have enough warning to try. I won't do anything stupid. But if it's a case where the decision isn't finalized and there's somehow, realistically a chance of affecting the outcome, I'm not going to lie to you and tell you I'll let that pass me by."

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Sin looked back to the fountain and released Boyd's arm. The tension bled out of his shoulders as he nodded. "I hope you remember that if the time comes."

Boyd drew his feet in closer and leaned forward with his fingers curling over the edge of the wall as he looked away pensively. "Well, I hope it doesn't. Because even if it happens and it's inevitable, I'm still going to have a hard time not getting involved."

Sin released a low breath and leaned forward slightly to put his head in his hands. He stayed that way for a moment before turning his head to the side and looking at Boyd through his fingers. "Just forget it for now, Boyd."

There was a moment of silence before Boyd sighed. His eyes darkened and he looked down at his hands. "I'm not trying to be difficult," he said with a faint frown, his voice subdued.

He looked over at Sin again, honey brown eyes intense and serious as he studied his partner. "I just want you to know that it wouldn't be an easy decision for me. I wouldn't stop caring about helping you just because it'd be inconvenient for me. The consequences wouldn't matter if I truly thought I could help-- I promised I'd be there for you and I meant it. It's hard for me to even try to be realistic about that, to realize in some cases I have to accept the way things are. Even knowing I should and may have to make myself, it doesn't mean I want to. That's all."

"I understand and I'm not saying I wouldn't try to take down the entire Tower full of guards if I thought they were going to terminate you but it's just more... likely, that this scenario will come up in my near future." Sin gazed into Boyd's eyes silently for a stretch and he added, "And I don't want that to happen knowing you're going to be killed because of me."

Boyd searched Sin's expression, wishing not for the first time that things could be different. He wished he could be with Sin and he wished they weren't beholden to the Agency, that they had some measure of choice or control in their own lives. He wished it wasn't such a real possibility that one day Sin would just suddenly be dead.

A sad look crossed Boyd's face and he shook his head. "I won't do anything that'll make you have to worry."

There was a brief, strained silence between them before Sin cleared his throat. "I'm sorry I brought this up. I've ruined the evening."

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"No you didn't," Boyd replied, shaking his head and watching Sin sincerely. "It's not a pleasant topic but it's still something we needed to talk about. And anyway, it's not like the evening's over." He smirked faintly and tilted his head toward the fountain, where the music was still blasting. "I'm pretty sure they have a few more songs to grace us with."

Sin made a face and pushed himself off the wall. "How about we just go elsewhere? This is the first time we've spent a substantial amount of time together in several months and I don't feel like having a fountain sing at me the entire time."

Boyd smiled, undeniably pleased by the implication of Sin's words. "I won't argue with that," he said in agreement, standing up and grabbing their crumpled wrappers.

They walked away from the fountain to continue idly exploring Luoyang together.

Part II

From the outside, the restaurant had been unremarkable. It seemed like just another storefront that was clustered with the other shops in the center of Luoyang's old city. The interior was just as unassuming and it could only be assumed that this was Xiaolian's 'most loved restaurant,' according to Shaoqing, because of the dim lights, private corners and the wait staff's discretion.

As Sin and Boyd sat opposite Bo-Qin and Xiaolian, they shared a meal that apparently would consist of twenty-four courses. Xiaolian gave a lazy background of the banquet, saying it was a millennia-old tradition in Luoyang and had something to do with an emperor in the Tang Dynasty. The story didn't go much further because she seemed more interested in the food than the history, at least as far as the impression she gave.

They ate the initial eight cold appetizers in silence and it wasn't until the waitresses began serving the first trio of courses that the American agents and Chinese insurgents began to speak. At that time the wait staff disappeared from the restaurant floor entirely, although they seemed to miraculously sense when something needed to be replenished or when it was time to replace the empty bowls with the next set of dishes.

The wait staff wouldn't get any points for politeness amongst tourists but their silence and quick departures was obviously preferred by their current clientele.

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Xiaolian held a wide ceramic spoon in her hand as she scooped a generous amount of the main dish of the first trio, a soup of shredded meat and turnips.

"I know what you have told Jianjuo but I want to hear it from your mouth. Why do the Americans want an alliance?"

Ton, who was standing behind Xiaolian at a respectful distance, turned his head slightly towards the table although Boyd couldn't tell who he was looking at through the black opaque lenses of the man's sunglasses.

"We have mutual enemies that have caused issues and loss for both our organizations," Boyd said calmly. "And the Intel we could share between us could be beneficial on both our parts."

Bo-Qin, who was staring at the two of them coldly rather than eating his soup, gave Boyd a skeptical look. "Why should we need your intelligence? Xiaolian has led our organization for many years without needing the help of any other group let alone another nation."

Xiaolian raised one slim eyebrow and chewed a mouthful of shredded pork as her eyes flicked from Boyd to Sin and back again.

"True," Boyd allowed, tilting his head forward in acknowledgment and taking a sip of soup. He watched Bo-Qin for a moment before shifting his gaze to Xiaolian. "But if your intelligence was flawless, you would not have lost five people outside Shashi two months ago and the seven civilians caught in the crossfire would most likely still be alive. We received word of *Nouvelle Ligue's* involvement a day before the attack and, had we been allies, we would have been happy to share it with you."

Bo-Qin frowned but Xiaolian's mouth just turned upwards as she twirled an empty teacup in one hand. One of the waiters, a diminutive young man with long black hair and delicate features, appeared instantly to refill her cup.

His hair slid forward slightly and his dark eyes remained downcast as though he knew better than to look too closely at the people who surrounded the table. After refilling Xiaolian and Boyd's cups, the waiter slid backwards to disappear into the depths of the dim restaurant. Bo-Qin's narrowed eyes tracked him for a moment before returning to his wife.

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"Your agency is not as invisible as it would like to believe," she said with a humorless smile. "We know who you watch and I know you likely have intelligence on a number of our enemies due to the fact that you are technically a part of the government of the USA even if that secret is a dirty and hidden one."

She set the cup down. "However even if your information could have saved the lives of my countrymen and my comrades, I do not know if it is worth it to risk the safety of scores more by inviting such an untrustworthy organization into my bed."

"Untrustworthy?" Boyd repeated lightly, curling one hand around his cup and raising his eyebrows. "What leads you to say that?"

"Americans are notoriously untrustworthy," Bo-Qin replied with an edge in his tone. "How is it that you believe the war started?"

Sin rolled his eyes and Xiaolian patted her husband's hand lightly as if she were hushing a child. "While Bo-Qin is quite right about governments, yours especially, being capable of betrayal-- your organization in particular has stuck its nose in my affairs on more than one occasion."

Xiaolian's eyes briefly met Sin's and she smiled grimly. "But Hsin's intrusion upon our bases wasn't the only attempt. We know your agency has made others."

Boyd watched Xiaolian and Bo-Qin. "The only times the Agency has infiltrated Di Zhi bases have been to gather intelligence," he said, dipping the spoon into the soup before he rested it against the side; the spoon made a muffled noise as it touched the bowl. He shifted his hand toward his cup. "We were determining whose side Di Zhi was on and it is based on the information we gathered, that the location was in part to keep a closer eye on Janus and to break up their stronghold, that we determined your organization could be a powerful ally."

Boyd raised the cup to his lips and paused, adding mildly, "Unless there was another reason Di Zhi chose to create several bases on American soil when the Agency has yet to return the favor in China?"

Xiaolian stared at him for a moment before looking at Sin directly. She asked him something in Mandarin to which he replied with a shrug and a brief response of his own.

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Xiaolian's eyes returned to Boyd and she pushed her empty bowl away. "If you have a suspicion about Di Zhi I recommend you ask directly. Clever word play and sarcasm makes you appear smug. A very unattractive attribute."

"I have no suspicion," Boyd replied, shaking his head minutely and setting the cup down.

He watched her seriously, taking into account her reproach and adjusting his plans accordingly. "Everything we have so far seen of Di Zhi shows that your organization does not waver from its professed goals, that although Di Zhi is a formidable group it has not fallen to the ruthless ploys, empty propaganda and scare tactics as have many other groups, Janus especially. It has thus far seemed that Di Zhi does not need to do any of this in order to grow its numbers or fight its battles and that is one reason Di Zhi is of interest to the Agency."

Xiaolian studied him for a long moment before inclining her head. The effeminate waiter reappeared with two waitresses and they quickly removed the first group of meals before replacing it with a main course of braised meats with accompanying side dishes.

She picked up her chopsticks and it was Bo-Qin who said, "Because you say you never had hostile intention towards us does not mean you can be trusted. You could use us to help rid Asia and Eastern Europe of the spread of Janus and decide to dispose of us afterward. What guarantee do we have that we will not be betrayed?"

"I have no guarantee but our word," Boyd said honestly, looking over at Bo-Qin. "There is no way to prove it short of that not happening in the future so it ultimately comes down to trust."

Bo-Qin scoffed and Xiaolian arched an eyebrow. "I think quite more will be required than your word. Loyalty is something that must be proven."

Sin finally dragged his bored looking green-eyed gaze from the idle staring match he'd been having with Ton. "I'm sure you'll find plenty of ways to test our loyalty while we're here. Won't you?"

Sarcasm oozed from his voice as he likely recalled her forcing him to disrobe in front of her men and Xiaolian smiled at him prettily. "Of course."

Sin shook his head and went back to keeping an eye on their surroundings. It was unlikely that they would be attacked there in the middle of a bustling part of the old city

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but they'd decided early on to try to figure out who Xiaolian had shadowing them. They'd been tailed by an unknown person on the entire commute to the restaurant but they could never spot the person or pinpoint who it was.

Xiaolian leaned half across the table and picked a piece of chicken off one of the serving plates that held the side dishes. "You say you have information on our French enemies but what of Janus? If it turns out that we share intelligence, collaboration would be a pointless expenditure of my valuable energy."

Boyd nodded as he put some braised meat and vegetables from the main dish onto his plate and took a bite, chewing while he considered how to answer that.

Although the Agency had a lot of intelligence gathered on Janus, much of it was related to American soil or Janus' efforts worldwide, but Di Zhi was likely only interested in information related to China and maybe Asia. He had to give Xiaolian pertinent information but even the Agency didn't know Janus' goals in Asia yet or where exactly they were stationed in China.

However, he did have some information that he'd been cleared to share.

Boyd studied Xiaolian as he rested his chopsticks against the side of his plate. "Two weeks ago, a Janus spy was intercepted by agents stationed in Mongolia. He was brought back to our facility where, after extensive interrogation, it was determined that he had discovered the location of Di Zhi's Beijing base. We caught him before the information he had could be transmitted to Janus and, according to him, he was a solitary scout. However, we think it's quite likely that more of Janus' feelers will be sent into China, primarily centered on the major metropolitan areas and spreading outward from there."

One of Xiaolian's eyebrows twitched upwards but her husband leaned forward abruptly, slamming his fist down on the table. "That is not possible," he hissed coldly, suspiciously. "If you have a spy it is probably the same man who acted as your informant. No one knows the location of our bases. None of our people would betray us."

"Maybe you're just not quite as invisible as you think you are," Sin suggested blandly.

"You have no idea what you are talking about," Bo-Qin growled at Sin, looking highly insulted by the claim.

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"Oh?" Sin looked at the other man skeptically, his dark eyebrows drawing down. "Just because no one has come busting down your door doesn't mean other people don't notice things. People who live in the city, around the surrounding blocks-- civilians are not quite as oblivious as you would think. They're usually so bored with their lives that any possibility of intrigue gets their interest sparked and their tongues wagging. And talk goes a long way."

Xiaolian gave Sin a skeptical look of her own. "You are suggesting to me that a civilian alerted a Janus spy--"

Sin rolled his eyes. "No. I'm saying Janus thinks the way my employers think and if a tidbit of gossip, urban legends, rumors-- if it's prevalent enough and interesting enough, they'd send an operative to check it out. And if that operative hears enough of the same story-- about certain people exiting and entering some certain place in Beijing that people think is shady or not what it seems-- he'd go investigate. It's not rocket science but most people think civilians are blind and stupid and couldn't possibly pose a threat even in such an accidental way."

Bo-Qin and Xiaolian stared at Sin, and Boyd wondered if they were marveling at the fact that he'd spoken so much at one time or if they were actually considering the truth behind his words-- wondering if he was giving them criticism or advice.

"You have experience with unexpectedly clever civilians, I gather," Xiaolian said knowingly, her lips twisting up into a strange smile.

Sin glanced at Boyd briefly and shrugged his broad shoulders.

Xiaolian stared at him curiously for a moment longer before focusing on Boyd again. "Who is this spy and what else did he say?"

"Joseph Huang," Boyd replied, leaning back in his chair. "Twenty-seven years old, a member of Janus for ten years. As is typical of Janus insurgents, much of what he had to say centered around why Janus was the answer to the world's dilemma and how Janus was going to take down all competitors, including Di Zhi."

Xiaolian studied Boyd, chopsticks held loosely in one hand. "I am sure there is a great deal more that could be acquired from the man."

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Boyd tilted his head down in agreement. "Perhaps there are topics you would prefer to ask him about yourself." He picked up a piece of mushroom with his chopsticks, gaze flicking down briefly before returning to her. "Transferring his custody can be arranged."

"As it should be," she replied, not giving away any of her thoughts in her tone or expression.

"You believe using this man as a bargaining chip will gain Xiaolian's favor?" Bo-Qin looked at them with barely concealed irritation. "She is not so easily bought."

"It must be nice having someone to defend your honor so vehemently," Sin commented dryly, not looking at either Bo-Qin or Xiaolian.

She smirked and said nothing.

Boyd shrugged idly, chewing the mushroom and watching Bo-Qin with an unaffected expression. "Joseph is not a bargaining chip," he replied. "Whether Xiaolian decides to work with us is irrelevant to whether Joseph will be turned over to Di Zhi's custody. Of course, we would greatly prefer if the gesture was understood to be one of good will between our organizations. But such a simple bargaining tactic as you mentioned wouldn't work with Di Zhi. If Di Zhi were to be interested in joining us in further endeavors, we understand that it would be for larger, more over-arching reasons than the promise of speaking with a single, insignificant man."

Bo-Qin just shook his head, not appearing mollified by this explanation and Xiaolian twirled her chopsticks in her hands and she watched the two American agents in front of her. Something about her expression seemed calculating, intense, but then her lips curled up and she raised her eyebrows slightly.

"I wonder-- how is it that your partnership is arranged?"

Boyd watched Xiaolian, resting the chopsticks against his plate and tilting his head slightly. "It's basically as you see. Typically, I would function in the role of negotiator while Agent Vega excels in combat conditions. That isn't to say either of us is incapable of the other's function but simply that the partnership is arranged according to our individual fortes."

"I see." Xiaolian turned her gaze to Sin and stared at him although he looked uninterested in returning the gaze. "And do you associate outside of missions?"

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Boyd shrugged, unconcerned. "Occasionally."

"Are you friends?" Xiaolian pressed, arching a slim black eyebrow. This time her husband gave her a curious look but he didn't comment.

Boyd glanced idly toward Sin, wondering what this was about although he didn't let it get to his face. He couldn't read anything from Sin's expression and since the two of them had been tailed around the city and the comfortable interaction between them had probably been reported back, he saw no reason to lie and make himself seem untrustworthy.

He looked at Xiaolian again. "Yes, I guess we are."

"Interesting," Xiaolian observed. "Hsin had always told me that he saw no need for friendship and that requiring interpersonal relations was a weakness."

Sin smirked. "I could see myself saying that."

"Are you saying you have changed?" Xiaolian seemed skeptical of this possibility. "You seem very much the same in all other regards. Cold, a tendency towards sarcasm, lacking in empathy or compassion..."

Sin finally looked at the woman and gave her a flat stare. "You seem to be holding more of a grudge about me not being your friend than me partially blinding you."

Xiaolian laughed at that, a loud and rich sound that attracted the discreet stares of a few other patrons before they quickly looked away. The Di Zhi leader smiled and shook her head, a wicked gleam sparkling in her uninjured eye. "Perhaps I lament the fact that you followed in your father's footsteps and never joined us."

"Because I'd be such a good asset to your cause," Sin said doubtfully.

She shrugged, still smirking. "Or maybe your cock size made an impression on me and now I lament that we never got the chance to become teenaged lovers."

Bo-Qin didn't even blink at the comment although he shifted and turned his attention elsewhere.

Sin just shook his head and Xiaolian turned to Boyd. "Which do you think it is? My reasoning for bitterness towards your partner."

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Boyd shrugged. "I don't know you well enough to say. Maybe it's a bit of both. But feelings of betrayal can go a long way regardless of the origin so I would suspect it's that more than anything."

"Perhaps," Xiaolian said agreeably. She leaned back in her chair and swept her gaze over the restaurant. "But perhaps I am honestly curious about Hsin and also the way the personnel in your organization work together. In Di Zhi we are allies but there is also closeness, a bond that is accompanied with loyalty."

"We are family," Bo-Qin added.

She nodded. "Yes. We are not like Janus, who recruits and brainwashes vast numbers of young people to join their cause. I know every one of my soldiers. I wonder if your agency is similar or if it is more like Janus. A machine that recruits cogs and wheels to keep it running but considers the pieces replaceable if they fail."

Boyd's gaze turned a little more serious. "Due to our situation, we do recruit but our agents are chosen specifically for who they are and what they can do. As such, they are individually important to the organization."

Boyd leaned back in his chair as he continued, "As for the rest, I know many of the people in our agency, whether they are my direct colleagues or not. I care about the other people I work with and would be upset if something happened to them. There are people there who I consider to be good friends and others who I feel are closer to siblings."

"And which are the two of you?" Xiaolian asked with seemingly genuine interest, leaning forward slightly.

"More like friends," Boyd answered with a small shrug. He glanced down to pick up his glass and took a drink.

"What makes the difference? You do not care for him as much as you do the agents you consider a sibling?"

Boyd glanced toward Sin, who was giving Xiaolian an odd look. At least Boyd wasn't the only one wondering why she was taking such interest in this. "I don't know if I would say that," Boyd said with another shrug. "Hsin is my partner so it's different."

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"Why?" she asked shrewdly. "If you work with a man it is impossible to feel familial towards him?"

Boyd shook his head. "No, I wouldn't say that. I feel very strong friendship toward him that rivals a brotherly relationship but isn't. This is why I don't exactly consider him to be a sibling."

Xiaolian chortled. "That answer sounds like a load of shit," she said crudely.

Boyd didn't reply.

She slid her hand into her pocket to extract her phone and pushed away from the table. "I must depart."

Bo-Qin stood as well, not showing whether or not he was surprised by the abrupt change.

Boyd nodded, standing as well out of courtesy. He couldn't tell whether Xiaolian was cutting it short because of his reply or if something had come up on her phone. Given the timing, he suspected it was the latter but he wasn't going to push it immediately.

"Thank you for your time," he said calmly. "Let us know if you need anything further from us in the coming days and I will start the process for Joseph Huang to be transferred to one of your bases here if you so wish."

"I hope it will not be a timely process," she replied coolly, her demeanor more detached than it had been before. "Please finish your meal-- I will pay the bill on our way out."

Xiaolian gave Boyd a long, appraising stare before turning around. Bo-Qin looked from Boyd to Sin with slightly narrowed eyes and followed his wife.

Boyd watched Xiaolian and Bo-Qin leave with Ton right behind them before he sat down and looked over at Sin.

"That went nowhere," Sin commented blandly.

Boyd sighed and nodded, pushing hair out of his face as he looked down at the spread of food before them. "It was pretty unlikely we'd get very far in the first talk anyway."

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"I think she knew you were holding something back about our relationship," Sin said, looking over at Boyd.

Boyd frowned to himself and reached out to pick up some seasoned beef with his chopsticks. "I think you're right." He paused with the food in front of his lips then glanced over at Sin. "I don't really see why it's any of her business or what it has to do with Di Zhi but obviously avoiding mentioning it didn't go over very well."

"She's testing you to see how truthful you will be. She thinks along the lines of, if you'll lie or withhold something minor, you will do the same for something big."

Boyd sighed in mild annoyance and dropped the chopsticks onto his plate. He looked over at Sin, his eyebrows drawing down seriously. "Is this the sort of thing where she won't trust me until I tell her that specific answer or will she no longer care about that topic and I just need to make especially sure I'm entirely honest with anything else from now on?"

"Can't be sure." Sin crossed his arms over his chest and raised his dark eyebrows. "Just follow her lead, I guess. But I suggest just telling her if she starts hinting at it again. It's ridiculous, I know, but this is the same woman who had me strip just for her amusement and talks about my dick over dinner. Are you really surprised that she is using your sex life or former sex life as a test?"

"I'm not really surprised; it's just annoying," Boyd said, looking away and absently tracking the movements of one of the waiters. His eyes narrowed briefly before he glanced at Sin. "But I'll listen to your advice."

Sin looked around briefly and sat up. "You're not really planning to stay here and eat the next eight thousand courses, are you?"

"No," Boyd replied, a faint smile pulling at his lips despite himself. He pushed away from the table and stood, sliding his hands into his pockets and tilting his head toward the door. "We may as well head back."

Sin stood and they left the restaurant together, the waiters' eyes following them curiously as they disappeared out the door.

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Nothing significant happened for the next several days.

Interludes

Although Shaoqing remained easily accessible and they were able to compare notes on Janus and discuss minor issues, Xiaolian did not have any contact with them at all. Boyd didn't see her in passing and she didn't send further notices to meet with them, not even after he received confirmation from the Agency that Huang had been successfully delivered to Di Zhi's custody.

They weren't getting kicked out, which was promising in a way, but the lack of any other progress was starting to make Boyd nervous. He began wondering if perhaps Xiaolian wasn't planning to give them another chance.

Boyd wasn't about to wait around indefinitely for contact that may or may not happen and since he basically knew what had caused the stall in negotiation, it was a simple solution to try to fix that. He headed up to the top floor one night and paused at the door.

Two guards stared at him impassively and Boyd realized that it may have been stupid to run off without either of his two Mandarin-speaking companions. He'd only learned the odd word here or there and he was still fairly certain he wasn't pronouncing any of it correctly; the nuances of the exact rise and fall of the Chinese language were difficult for him to mimic.

"I would like to see Xiaolian," he said, looking between them and hoping at least the fact they would recognize her name would get across his intent. Although some of the people in Di Zhi spoke English, others did not and he didn't know whether these guards did.

The two guards exchanged a look and spoke briefly between each other in Mandarin. One of them gestured then looked toward Boyd in assessment. He opened the door but the other guard stood resolutely in front of it, obviously not allowing Boyd to gain entrance.

The first guard disappeared inside the room and Boyd stood there for several minutes with only the unimpressed silence of the guard for company.

Finally, the door opened and Boyd was mildly surprised to see that Xiaolian had come out. Boyd stepped back to give her more room and nodded at her in greeting.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything imperative."

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"What do you need?" Xiaolian asked, crossing her muscular arms over her chest. She wore a sleeveless shirt that showcased powerfully cut arms and strong shoulders.

"I'm wondering why we're getting nowhere," he said bluntly, meeting her eyes evenly. "You have Huang so you know I didn't lie about that and as busy as I'm sure you are, each day we spend messing around doing nothing and not even connecting seems like wasted time for all of us."

Her eyebrows shot up and Xiaolian appraised him silently for a moment before speaking. "It was never guaranteed that this process would be brief. I believe you said you were given a three week completion window for this assignment, were you not?"

Boyd nodded. "Yes, I did. I never expected this to be over with within a handful of days. But even slow negotiation has more happening than this and given the way our last meeting ended, it makes me wonder if the only reason for the delay is because you felt my answer regarding Hsin was less than satisfactory. And because of that, you don't trust me enough to meet to continue the discussions."

Xiaolian shrugged casually and turned to the guard at the door. She said something to him curtly in Mandarin, turned, and jogged down the stairs without saying anything more to Boyd. He followed her and she took the hallway on the fourth floor to a room with a narrow door. They entered the door and Boyd saw that it led to a decent-sized room that was completely empty of everything but a set of double doors and a balcony.

Xiaolian glanced at him and arched a brow before inputting a long series of codes into the balcony doors and nudging them open. "I do not talk negotiation in front of my guards, Agent."

Boyd nodded in understanding. "I won't bring up issues of business in front of the guards again."

She leaned against the wall near the open doors and a muggy breeze billowed in. She pulled a red pack of cigarettes from her pocket and extracted one, saying as she lit it, "You are correct, though. We are wasting time. But you must know that no negotiation will begin until I have full understanding of the organization I am negotiating with. You and your partner represent them and it is your duty to ensure that this commences. However, I will speak no more of those specifics until Bo-Qin arrives."

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Xiaolian took a drag of her cigarette and pulled out her palm computer, typing something into it dexterously. The window blew again and her long black hair flew backwards against the off white wall.

Boyd walked over to lean against the wall on the other side of the open doors, crossing his arms and watching her thoughtfully. He was silent for a moment until he asked curiously, "Why do you or anyone in Di Zhi hate Janus? What caused them to be your enemy rather than an ally?"

Xiaolian looked at him, seeming surprised by the question, and exhaled a puff of smoke. "Why do you ask this now?"

"It's something I've wondered about for a while," he said honestly with a shrug. "Di Zhi and Janus have more in common as far as being against your native governments. Janus has even been spreading worldwide, inciting people to question their own governments." He tilted his head. "Yet even though I represent an organization tied to the American government, I stand here and a representative from Janus does not. It made me curious."

She smirked, showing off her yellowed teeth, and walked out onto the balcony while Boyd followed her. She sat on the edge of the short wall, blowing smoke out into the darkness of the humid night.

"Just because two organizations are anti-government does not mean that we have the same goal. My government was against the Americans during the war while my father and Di Zhi supported the American's alleged intentions because they are the same as ours, although our intent is much more pure. To end the oppression of my country."

Boyd nodded, looking out at what they could see of Luoyang spread out before them in lights and muffled sound. The buildings crowded on either side meant there were other balconies within view and, in some cases, easily within speaking distance. But all the other buildings seemed empty or at least no one was outside on their balconies, and Boyd knew Di Zhi had to have taken precautions to make sure any conversations out here would not be overheard.

"Janus' ruthless tactics disguised by claims of truth and freedom probably don't help your like of them either," he observed.

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"I will not say that I cannot be ruthless," Xiaolian said calmly, flicking her cigarette and looking out into the darkness. "But I do not claim to be anything else. I believe at one time Janus had similar ideals to my father. To reform the American government so that it no longer harmed its own citizens for its own power gain. However, Janus became nothing more than a clone of the American government as it gained power and if they succeed they will be doing nothing more than replacing one despot with another."

She tilted her head to the side; her features softer in the gloom of the night, the lack of severity making her appear quite pretty. "But Janus is dangerous. They have strongholds in many nations in every continent. If their coup succeeds in the future, they will control much of the world. I believe they have not struck yet because they have not finished gathering resources. They are wise to do this. They will be most strong when they have an army in each country that played a major role in the war. They will then have the advantage and a collective force of nations whose governments will not be able to withstand the attack because they will not help each other."

Boyd watched her for a moment and then sat on the short wall of the balcony as well, resting his hands on the edge. "It's true," he said, searching her face and finding that he liked her more like this, when she seemed more serious and less caustic. "That's one large reason our agency is so interested in seeing them finished, although perhaps there's also a sense of responsibility since they started in our country. But I think aside from their obvious talent at strategy, the most dangerous part of them is the way they get people to believe."

His eyes narrowed and he shook his head, his honey brown eyes darkening slightly in pensiveness. "If they were honest about who they are and what they represent, many people wouldn't join. But they twist the desperation and fear people have, especially those still feeling loss from the war or who feel overlooked by the current state of affairs. They promise all these things and turn terrified people into true believers, who will do anything to further the cause; who may not even be capable anymore of understanding that Janus stole their aspirations and replaced them with their own. And an army of people who are blinded by a promised future they don't realize they'll never receive can be far more dangerous than even an army of trained soldiers."

"Fanatics typically are the most dangerous," she agreed. "Especially when they're actually intelligent."

Xiaolian pulled one leg up to the wall and continued to stare out over the city. Her thin lips pursed together, hair continuously whipping back, and she shook her head. "To answer your question, I am at war with Janus because they are a threat. They will ally

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themselves with the China Reform Society because they know they will not find an alliance with me. They will attempt to wipe Di Zhi off the map or weaken us and proceed to perform an international coup that will leave them in control of the United States, Western Europe and much of Asia. They have the power to do this. Their numbers are astounding and their reach is far. When everything goes down, the former enemies of the war will be too hesitant to ally with each other in order to fend Janus off and Janus will control everything."

Boyd nodded. "It's fortunate there are strong groups out there like yours that recognize that fact and aren't taken in by Janus' propaganda."

Xiaolian smiled bitterly. "There should be more. When the time comes, the people will side with Janus and their numbers will build. They are good at brainwashing and as your partner said, people in power often underestimate the importance of the civilian response but Janus does not. If there were more civilian-led groups like Di Zhi in other nations, perhaps the people would have more options as to which side to choose."

"Have you ever considered expanding like Janus?" Boyd asked curiously. "Or at least spreading the idea to other countries or civilian-led groups that are not tied to Janus?"

"Hmm." Xiaolian looked at him finally. "At times. But my interest lies with my country first. Until things are resolved here I cannot dream of dividing my attention."

Boyd inclined his head. "Understandable. You wouldn't want to spread too thin here and get set back on all your hard work."

He paused and a thoughtful frown crossed his face. "Are there any other groups you can ally yourself with who are civilian-led? Many I've run into seem to be sympathetic to Janus but especially some of the smaller groups who are just being formed may be more open to advice from a well-established group such as Di Zhi."

Xiaolian shrugged her well-built shoulders and finished her cigarette. "The only other civilian-led group here that holds weight is the China Reform Society and they are a hostile force. They share my father's ideals but their methods are like that of Janus. They want to be the sole rebellious force in China and want Di Zhi gone. It will not happen, of course. At the present time, they are far too young and weak, but in time Janus will get hold of them."

Boyd considered that. She was right and when that happened, it was going to probably become a serious threat for Di Zhi, which was one more reason for Di Zhi to form an

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alliance with the Agency to gain additional support. Still, it made him wonder about some of the surrounding countries and whether any of them had small groups.

For some reason, that reminded him of something Jorge had once told him about the Snakes; that they had no official alliance with any country or group but that they worked with who they were interested in. He knew that Tayla and Liani traveled for much of their time and they had quite a few contacts from around the world.

He had the feeling from his dealings so far with Xiaolian as well as the Snakes that it was possible they may find mutual interest in each other's goals and the way they conducted business. He wondered if Tayla and Liani knew of Xiaolian or if they stayed away from Di Zhi because of their alliance with 4FF. It also made him wonder if Tayla or Liani knew of other, smaller groups or if they would be interested in connecting with Xiaolian on any of her goals.

Warm wind blew past them, pushing some of Boyd's hair into his face. He pulled it behind his ear and tilted his head slightly as he studied Xiaolian. "Not to talk business without Bo-Qin present, but I was wondering if you've heard of the Snakes."

"I have heard the name." Xiaolian looked at him once again in the same thoughtful manner. "Smugglers doubling as pirates. Very private, very secretive, but I have not done business with them. I do business in black market goods with a particular group."

Boyd nodded; he knew she was referring to 4FF but he had to pretend he didn't know since Chingón wasn't supposed to have dealings with the Agency. "As far as I understand, they don't have any particular alliance and they don't deal in mass quantities of anything. But if you ever need harder to get items and depending on what your current resource can get you, it's possible they could help."

He leaned back a little, his hands resting over the back of the small wall as the wind ruffled their clothing and the sounds of Luoyang echoed from the streets below. "I wasn't bringing them up for black market connections, though; they've helped me before with acquiring items but that's as far as I can vouch for them. I mentioned them mostly because I believe they are well connected internationally and I wonder if they would be of use on more of a revolutionary movement level, perhaps knowing of other people Di Zhi may be able to align themselves with in the future. Especially as Janus grows stronger, the stronger the opposition is the better."

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He shrugged. "I don't have a strong connection with them and I don't know if there's interest on either side but if you'd like for whatever reason, I could try to put you in contact sometime."

Xiaolian seemed to consider the offer and shrugged slightly. "I will think on it if our own alliance proves successful." She glanced at her watch briefly. "Your partner and my husband should be arriving momentarily."

Boyd nodded and looked out at Luoyang as he waited.

She observed him silently for a moment. "Bo-Qin does not like me to come out here. He thinks it is dangerous. He thinks the city is dangerous. That I am constantly at threat and should be surrounded at all times by guards."

"The city doesn't seem as dangerous to me as others I've been to, honestly," Boyd replied, looking over at her. "And as far as having guards with you everywhere, I would think that would just draw more attention to you. I'm sure the government already knows you're the leader since your father founded Di Zhi but I can only assume they haven't figured out yet exactly where you are. If you start walking around with guards all the time that could change; unless they're very well-versed in remaining covert while still accessible."

He shrugged. "Of course, that doesn't mean you couldn't be under threat by anyone or shouldn't be on alert."

Xiaolian gave him a small, private smile. "So very true."

The door to the empty room opened and Bo-Qin and Sin walked in. Bo-Qin looked irritated by something which seemed to be the usual state of affairs and Sin appeared relatively unaffected by the other man's bad temperament.

Bo-Qin said something harshly to Xiaolian in Mandarin and she chortled quietly, winking at Boyd and giving him an 'I told you so' look.

"I had wondered where my second American agent had got off to," she commented, her eyes sweeping over Sin's snug-fitting black t-shirt and worn jeans. "I thought perhaps you were off wooing some of my female operatives with those intoxicating green eyes, Hsin."

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Sin scoffed and Bo-Qin looked even more irritated by the idea of Di Zhi agents falling for what he seemed to consider the American spies. "He was with Shaoqing."

"Ahh." Xiaolian smiled again. "And I had thought the only man you had eyes for was your partner."

Sin said nothing this time and his expression didn't change, although Bo-Qin's face reddened and he looked from Sin to Boyd sharply.

Boyd looked over at Xiaolian, unsurprised. "Well, I see you've already deduced what I was going to tell you."

"That the two of you are fucking?"

Bo-Qin stared at his wife incredulously. "Xiao--"

"We aren't anymore," Sin corrected her flatly. "And have not been for some time. I'd appreciate it if you'd mind your fucking business about it from here on out. Our personal lives have nothing to do with the business we do here and I'm tired of your silly games."

Xiaolian stared at Sin serenely while her husband looked distinctly disturbed by the entire conversation. His eyes were slightly wide and his gaze switched between the two agents but he didn't seem revolted by the idea of their homosexuality. He just appeared startled and almost intrigued.

Boyd let his gaze pass by Bo-Qin before he focused on Xiaolian. "If there's nothing else, I'm wondering if we could get back to the main reason for Hsin's and my stay here."

"In due time," Xiaolian said calmly. "But I do not think you understand what is meant to happen here. There is nothing more you can say about your resources and power that will convince me to ally with your agency. There is nothing more to discuss. Your commanders knew this-- they gave you three weeks to be here, to prove yourself to me, to make yourself impressive. You cannot do this with words."

She raised her eyebrows at Boyd. "Live as a member of Di Zhi for these remaining days and in the end I will decide whether or not I will truly consider your offer."

Boyd met her eyes and nodded. He was not surprised by the comment; he'd known from the start that he wouldn't be able to convince her with words alone. "We can do that."

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"Of course, there will be restrictions," Bo-Qin added, his tone once again curt and face unfriendly. "You may be required to go out on assignment with members of our organization. But while on this base, you will be accompanied by Shaoqing or another operative at all times if access is granted to the top level. You will continue to be monitored at all times."

"Speaking of Shaoqing," Xiaolian said, her voice curious. "How do you find your liaison?"

Sin shrugged, saying nothing, his expression implying that he didn't find Shaoqing to be very interesting.

"He's been amenable," Boyd said. And a little odd, but he didn't mention that aloud because he didn't have specific reasons to explain. It was mostly a feeling at this point.

"Very good." The Di Zhi leader stared at the two of them for a stretch before turning away. "I will see you both when it becomes necessary."

She walked out of the room without further comment and after another odd stare at Sin and Boyd, Bo-Qin followed her.

Sin looked at Boyd. "Anything yet?"

Boyd watched the door briefly before turning to Sin with a shrug. "I'm not sure. She did take better to a blunter attitude but it's hard to say. We'll still end up nowhere if she doesn't think we pass her tests."

Sin looked at the balcony briefly before starting toward the door. "We need to talk. I think our quarters may be better than here."

Boyd nodded and followed Sin through the building back to their room. Once the door shut behind them, Boyd glanced briefly around the room.

Nothing appeared to have changed since he'd last been in it and although it was possible they were being monitored, they had yet to find anything in the sweeps they'd been doing for monitoring devices. Even if any existed, neither of them cared. Xiaolian was not the type to let someone else monitor any such devices if they existed and neither Boyd nor Sin had anything to hide while on the mission.

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Walking over to the far bed which he'd ended up claiming as his own, Boyd sat down on the edge and looked over at Sin. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing big." Sin crossed his arms over his chest and continued to stand in the middle of the room. The lamp in the corner was the only light in the room and it cast a dim golden glow throughout the space. "But Shaoqing behaves increasingly oddly."

Boyd quirked an eyebrow and leaned back on his hands. "What did he do?"

"He found me in the common room after you went to talk to Xiaolian. I was conversing with another Di Zhi operative about the police presence in the city when Shaoqing arrived. He ordered the woman to leave and began questioning me about your meeting with Xiaolian."

"What was he saying?" Boyd asked, mildly intrigued.

Sin paused and frowned slightly, green eyes narrowed. After a moment he shook his head and let his arms drop to his sides. "I can't explain it. He didn't say anything overt. It's just his tone-- he appeared worried about you and Xiaolian being alone. It was odd and falls in line with the fact that he didn't appear quite as enthralled with her as the others but I can't figure out if it's because he knows something we don't about her or if there's something we don't know about him."

"Hmm." Boyd considered that. "I don't know but something about him just seems off to me. You know Xiaolian better than I do but she seems to be pretty upfront and I don't get the feeling that she's hiding anything from us per se. But Shaoqing... even though he never really says it in so many words, he's been unusually interested in you from the start, especially your history with her and your strength. It's as if he's trying to determine whether you'd still be able to win in a fight against her and sometimes it seems like he's trying to feel out whether it's something you'd even be interested in."

Sin nodded in agreement and turned towards his own side of the room, picking up his duffel bag and sorting through it. He took out a fresh shirt, dropped it on the bed and stripped off the one he was wearing as he said finally, "Maybe I'll arrange to spend some time with Shaoqing on my own."

"Good idea," Boyd said a hint distractedly. He unconsciously dropped his gaze along Sin's strong back, admiring the lines of his body while Sin was turned away.

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Sin tossed the shirt to the end of the bed and began undoing his jeans. "I don't believe that she's unaware of his attitude. He's not exactly brilliant at hiding it."

"You're probably right," Boyd said, trying to keep his mind on the conversation. Even though he knew he should look away, his gaze was fixed on the way those jeans lowered slightly on Sin's waist, on the skin that showed. It had been too long since he'd had the chance to look at Sin like this and his feelings for his partner had become too intense and undeniable in the past few months.

"She mentioned how Bo-Qin thinks she's constantly at threat..." Boyd intended to say more but Sin let his jeans fall to the floor, making it obvious that as usual he wore no underwear, and Boyd was struck silent as he found himself staring.

Even turned away, Sin's body was as sculpted and gorgeous as he remembered. Even the distant voice saying he should look away wasn't loud enough. He couldn't help running his eyes along those hard muscles, couldn't help admiring Sin's ass. Boyd's fingers twitched briefly as he remembered what it was like to run his hands along that smooth skin, what those muscles had felt like against him.

Boyd tried to look away but his gaze only shifted a little before it was drawn back of its own accord. He distantly felt himself start to respond as he stared at Sin's ass and his mind was overrun with the desire to pound into it.

"Threat from Shaoqing, though?" Sin sounded mildly skeptical as he kicked the jeans to the side, apparently abandoning his near obsessive neatness for the time being as he grabbed a towel that was sitting on the nightstand.

He turned to face Boyd as he spoke. "He seems more like a pawn than someone who would be singularly dangerous."

Boyd wasn't expecting Sin to turn and as a result, his gaze was still centered right where he suddenly got a great view of Sin's cock. Thought briefly left Boyd's mind and he could feel himself hardening even more from the sight. His lips parted unconsciously; he wanted to drop to his knees and suck Sin off so thoroughly that Sin's body would shudder from pleasure, or maybe more than that he just wanted to fuck Sin so hard they both screamed.

A slightly shaky breath left Boyd and for a moment he couldn't even think to look away; the memories and desire were too strong and even his stubborn self-control wasn't enough to convince his body to listen.

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Whatever Sin had been about to say died on his lips as he caught sight of Boyd's expression. His eyes narrowed, long lashes lowering over them, and he didn't move an inch as his gaze zeroed in on Boyd's face before straying along the length of his body and briefly focusing on the crotch of Boyd's straight-legged pants.

Sin's fingers clenched slightly and he abruptly turned away, tying the towel around his waist.

With Sin's body partially covered, Boyd's mind started working again and he was able to wrench his gaze away. He narrowed his eyes and stared at the floor, realizing belatedly how incredibly obvious he'd just been.

What the hell was wrong with him? Sin hadn't even been doing anything purposeful; he'd just been getting undressed. Boyd had been so careful lately too. But then, this was one reason he'd been trying to avoid Sin. Between Xiaolian bringing up their past, Sin stripping down to nothing, and how much Boyd missed and wanted Sin--

None of those excuses mattered. He was doing exactly what Ivan had pointed out not to do and it was his own lack of self-control that was allowing it to happen.

Frustration with himself flared up and he pressed his hands against his face, thinking intently about something unpleasant to make his obvious erection go away. Still, that didn't make it any easier to deny his feelings for Sin, even if he could ignore the desire.

The silence between them was thick with tension, the only sound in the room was fabric against itself as Sin began folding the discarded clothing with near obsessive precision. His movements were stiff and he stacked the shirt and jeans on the table before standing there for a long stretch of time.

After a moment he asked without turning back to Boyd, "Do you ever think about Monterrey?"

Boyd was silent at first, not knowing which part of the Monterrey mission Sin was referring to-- although given the fact Boyd had just been caught with a hard on, he automatically wondered if Sin meant the sex. Regardless, Boyd had thought about that time more than once-- the freedom, how comfortable it had been in so many ways, how close he'd been with Sin, and the amazing sex they'd had.

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He dropped his hands to the bed, his head tilted toward the floor with his hair falling around his face. He nodded even though Sin couldn't see. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I do."

Sin remained facing his bed but after a moment he said, his voice low and deep and slightly strained, "Me too."

He turned and walked out of the room before Boyd could say anything more, and shut the door quietly behind him.

Boyd stared after him, wondering what exactly that meant.

Part III

"You are alone."

Sin looked up from the stream of water that flowed below the bridge. He was unsurprised to see Shaoqing. He'd heard the Di Zhi agent approaching moments ago.

"Your observation skills are amazing," Sin replied dryly.

Shaoqing shrugged, unfazed, and stopped near Sin. He looked out at the water before allowing his gaze to focus on the temple that stood not too far away. "Your partner is alone with Xiaolian?"

"Yes."

Shaoqing nodded, his eyes narrowing slightly in thought. "She wants to see how you interact when apart."

Sin stood up straight and took a drag from the cigarette that had been dangling from his fingers. He gave Shaoqing a narrow-eyed stare and didn't comment on the fact that he'd already deduced that fairly obvious fact.

"Why are you here, Shaoqing?"

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Shaoqing shrugged and crossed his arms over the black suit jacket he wore. "I was searching for you and I remembered that you frequent this spot. Do you enjoy the view of the temple?"

Sin didn't stop his scrutiny of Shaoqing. "Yes. It's peaceful here."

Shaoqing nodded in agreement, his bleached blond hair looking nearly white in the dim moonlight. "Yes. This is a very old temple. In the past, many tourists would come here but there is no longer so much tourism and the temple has returned to the people." He looked at Sin, brown eyes contemplative. "Are you Buddhist?"

Sin scoffed at that. "Not likely."

The other man recoiled, frowning. "I see. Christian, then."

Sin exhaled smoke and tried not to lose his patience with the completely pointless line of discussion. If he did that he'd be abandoning his own plan to catch Shaoqing for one on one conversation. "I was never taught to follow or understand the beliefs of a religion and there is little chance I'll do it on my own as an adult."

"Oh." Shaoqing smiled slightly, appearing relieved. "You are half Chinese, I was told. I thought you were perhaps South Asian."

Sin couldn't help a slight smirk as he took another drag and pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bridge. Very few people could identify his ethnicity or nationality. "I'm half Chinese and parts Mexican and South American. I was born in Hong Kong but my mother was originally from Shanghai as far as I know which is why I speak Mandarin and hardly any Cantonese."

"Ahh, I see." Shaoqing nodded and continued to stand ramrod straight, his piercings glinting beneath the night sky. "Do you feel at home here in the mainland?"

"I don't feel at home anywhere," Sin replied with a humorless laugh, smoke bursting out of his mouth in a cloud. "I don't belong anywhere. No matter where I am, people make sure I'm aware of that."

Shaoqing's dark eyes finally flicked away and he looked past Sin and at the temple even as he replied. "That is not true for everyone. Some people do not care about things like that."

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"Oh please," Sin scoffed, making a face. "Your Di Zhi boys look at me like I'm just another Western outsider. Even if I wasn't from America they'd probably still disregard me as a halfie. As far as I know, Di Zhi is all about the Chinese heritage and roots."

"Well perhaps I wasn't speaking about Di Zhi," Shaoqing said quietly.

Sin raised his eyebrows and flicked the cigarette away. "Who are you speaking about?"

Shaoqing didn't respond directly and he narrowed his eyes at the temple, his thin fingers curling around the stone wall of the bridge. Indecision warred visibly on his face and as Sin watched him closely, he couldn't help thinking that Shaoqing was probably the worst choice for a double agent that anyone could have chosen.

"There are other groups in China that are not as obsessed with national purity," Shaoqing replied carefully after a stretch. "Other groups," he continued, looking up at Sin. "Who do not humiliate their liaisons for fun."

Sin's eyebrows shot up and he tried to adopt a look of surprise but probably failed miserably. In truth, he wasn't shocked at all. Shaoqing hadn't seemed like a Xiaolian fan from the start. "What are you trying to say, Shaoqing?"

Shaoqing grimaced and shook his head slightly. "I am saying merely that there are other groups in China--"

Like China Reform Society, Sin filled in silently. The CRS was the only other organization in China's mainland that had enough skill and power to pose as possible competition to Di Zhi.

"--who may better suit the needs of your Agency. Di Zhi looks at Xiaolian as though she is a deity. They believe she will lead China to greatness but to me, she is like a child with power and does not know how to use it. She holds Di Zhi back. Proof of that," Shaoqing paused to look at Sin pointedly, "is her alienation of such a formidable possible ally."

Sin stared at Shaoqing hard and pushed himself off the bridge. "If I were you," he said coolly. "I wouldn't repeat that to anyone else."

Shaoqing shrugged, although he was beginning to look anxious now that he'd pretty much let the cat out of the bag that he was a CRS spy. "Your partner wants this

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alliance. He will not listen to me but perhaps, if you think closely, you can convince him to listen to you."

Sin put his hands in the pockets of his jacket and began walking away from the bridge. "We'll see."

He could feel Shaoqing's eyes burning into his back as he left the area and started a meandering and roundabout way back to the base. He knew someone was shading him but he'd grown accustomed to the feeling.

It took thirty minutes of leisurely walking to get to the base and by the time Sin made it through the security checkpoints he found that Boyd had returned from his outing with Xiaolian and a few other Di Zhi operatives. Sin had no idea what they'd been doing, didn't particularly care, and shut the door to their room casually before turning to look at the younger man.

"I had an interesting conversation with our tour guide."

Boyd had been in the middle of doing something with his duffel bag, which he had sitting on his bed. At Sin's comment he glanced over his shoulder and paused before turning around to face Sin. He raised an eyebrow, looking intrigued. "Did you get him to say anything outright?"

"He was recommending an unnamed organization, claiming it may be a better fit with me and the Agency than Di Zhi. It seemed obvious that he's a spy, likely from the China Reform Society."

Boyd didn't look surprised by the information but he did sit down on the side of the bed. He drew his eyebrows down thoughtfully as he watched Sin. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I left it open ended, implying I'd think about what he said." Sin shrugged. "We should probably contact the Agency and see if they actually have any interest in an angle like that before going to Xiaolian."

Boyd nodded. "I agree. They may even want us to go that route since we don't seem to be getting anywhere with Xiaolian at the moment, although I doubt it. The Marshal seems very interested in a connection with Di Zhi."

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Sin shrugged. "I was thinking more along the lines of do they want us to string him along and bleed information out of him on CRS or just tell Xiaolian and get him killed right away."

"Yeah, but if Xiaolian found out I doubt she would be appreciative is all I meant," Boyd replied. "If it turns out she's at all aware of his duplicity, which is likely, then it's possible it's part of a test. We should contact the Agency tonight. Xiaolian wanted to meet with both of us tomorrow so if we can know which way they would like to proceed, that would be best."

Sin shrugged, uncaring.

It made no difference to him what they did; he would just be glad when the assignment was over. Things were odd enough between him and Boyd without being stuck in the same room together, especially when someone was most likely watching and even possibly listening in. The scanners routinely came up negative for bugs in the room but it was also possible that Xiaolian had access to technology that could evade the scan.

He sat on his bed; legs sprawled out in front of him, and slid his palm computer out of one pocket. Within a few minutes he'd sent off an encoded message to the Agency. "What did she have you doing today?" he asked more out of boredom than curiosity.

"Nothing terribly exciting," Boyd said with a shrug, looking down at his duffel bag again. "I accompanied her on some lower level training she was overseeing but I mostly observed." He dug around in the bag a little more, almost absently. "We visited some areas of the city and she and some of the others were probably testing me on skills or whether I'd give them away in a public setting. She introduced me to a man off Zhujiang Road."

Boyd frowned slightly to himself then zipped the bag up and tossed it to the side of the bed, then looked over at Sin again. "I wish I could understand Mandarin. I know they're saying one thing to me and something else to each other. But I think that's one thing she's testing me on, too; whether I'm savvy enough to function even when I don't know what the hell's going on."

"I wouldn't be surprised. She won't be satisfied until she thinks she knows us inside and out." Sin laid his head against the flat pillow and slid his eyes closed, finding that he actually missed his own bed in his own apartment back at the Agency.

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Sin could feel Boyd's gaze on him but at first Boyd didn't reply other than a slightly absent, "Yeah." After a moment, there was the sound of fabric against fabric as it sounded like Boyd shifted on his own bed.

Sin tilted his head to the side, black hair falling over his forehead and shadowing his face as he tried to force himself to relax against the stiff twin bed. His legs were far too long for it and they hung off at the end if he stretched out completely and the mattress felt a lot like a slab of wood beneath his back.

He wondered if he was starting to get spoiled by his comfortable Agency quarters and along with that thought, he couldn't help thinking that Ivan had made a good point months ago when they'd talked about the compound's design and function. If Sin ignored everything else, it would be entirely possible to think of the Agency and the compound as his home just because of how accustomed he was to the relative luxury they provided there.

"I was wondering something," Boyd said after several moments of silence.

"What?"

There was a pause before Boyd asked, sounding mostly thoughtful although also a hint hesitant, "That night we had the party... Why did that happen in Kassian's pool?"

Sin opened his eyes into slits, peering at Boyd through his long eyelashes. "Why did what happen?" he asked slightly hesitantly.

Boyd quirked an eyebrow briefly as if to say he didn't think he should need to clarify. But then he shook his head, his gaze clouded with confusion more than anything, and his mouth pulled down at the edges in thought. "Why were you coming on to me?"

Sin stared at Boyd, taking in the stray strands of blond hair that had escaped his loose ponytail, his brown eyes that looked golden in the lamplight and the beginnings of a tan on his otherwise pale skin. Sin almost had the automatic reaction of, 'Why not?' but just shrugged one shoulder instead. "I was very emotional at the time. I let it dictate my actions."

Boyd's gaze seemed to intensify as he studied Sin. "Emotional how?"

"After everything that happened, it was difficult not to be. Once again I thought I'd lost control, once again I was locked up on the Fourth, I thought I'd never see you again but

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then you found a way to get me out of it." Sin sat up partially, looking across the room at Boyd evenly.

Leaning back against the wall that his bed was pushed up against, Boyd simply watched Sin for a long moment. It was hard to tell exactly what he was thinking but his intense gaze tracked across Sin's face and his fingers curled at his sides seemingly absently.

"What does thinking you'd never see me again have to do with coming on to me?" Boyd asked with only the slightest bit of hesitation. "I understand feeling emotionally charged and reacting to anything in front of you but was it only that?"

Sin gestured vaguely, holding Boyd's gaze. "Well, I've never stopped being attracted to you but that should be obvious and we all know how I have a tendency to express myself physically when I don't know how to deal with what's going on in my head."

Boyd's gaze was unreadable but his eyebrows drew down briefly, a faint frown on his lips. After a long moment he nodded and broke eye contact, the questioning hesitation disappearing as he seemed to come to a conclusion.

"Makes sense," Boyd said simply, shifting and pulling his knees in to sit cross-legged. He didn't speak again immediately and seemed content with letting the topic drop.

There was silence between them for a few minutes and Sin idly glanced at his palm computer, running his thumb along the screen as he considered the conversation.

He realized that his response wasn't exactly the entire truth but at this point, he didn't really think it was a good time to tell Boyd that he'd reacted that way in the pool because he still wanted Boyd in every possible way and it was getting more difficult to ignore by the day.

Sin had idly wondered over the past few days if it would really be so bad to make an overt pass at his partner, if it would really be so out of line to ask if he wanted to fuck around. But by now Sin knew himself enough to know that he wasn't really capable of no-strings-attached fucking with Boyd and any attempt at it would likely just end in miserable failure on his own part. This wasn't really the time or place to get into an awkward and messy situation.

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Aside from that, he didn't even know if Boyd would agree. He'd stated awhile back that he wouldn't do anything casual with Sin and even though Boyd still seemed attracted to him, Sin had no idea if he'd actually act on it.

Even so, Sin couldn't stop himself from saying idly, "You didn't exactly seem repulsed yourself."

A mildly uncomfortable look crossed Boyd's face and he shrugged but when he met Sin's eyes again, his expression was honest. "I'm still attracted to you, too. And sometimes I guess that comes out whether I intend it to or not."

Sin nodded absently and shifted on the bed, resting his head against the flat pillow again. "If I was more comfortable with casual sex, I'd probably have tried something more in the pool."

Eyebrows twitching down as he studied Sin, Boyd's lips pulled down slightly in contemplation. He dropped his hands to his calves and was silent a moment.

It was unclear what was going through his mind, yet he ultimately shook his head. "I was caught off-guard by your proximity so honestly, I almost did something myself."

Boyd's frown increased briefly and he hesitated, his fingers playing with the folds of his black jeans. When he continued, he spoke a little more carefully, "But I don't... intend to interfere with anything and I don't want meaningless sex to mess anything up. It's just... It's not worth it."

"I agree." The panel beeped quietly and Sin looked at it, thumbing his finger across the touch screen and quickly going over the message. "They said to find out who he works for and whatever we can about the other group before he dies but not to let him impede our relations with Di Zhi."

Boyd nodded and dropped his head back against the wall, watching Sin through half closed eyes. "So I guess that means we do some recon and later tell Xiaolian. Maybe he'll give you more info if you don't seem immediately opposed to the idea."

"Any information I obtain, we can present to Xiaolian in the guise of us digging deeper to verify the truth before telling her."

Nodding again, Boyd closed his eyes completely. "I agree. I can see if I can find any information from other sources as well, although I doubt I'll be as successful because of

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the language barrier. The Agency has to have some sort of a file on them so I'll check with Owen too."

As it turned out, CRS was a rebel organization not very unlike Di Zhi. They had the same goals, the same desires and the only major difference was the way they wanted to go about accomplishing them.

They were a smaller and younger group, not as ethnocentric as Di Zhi, and were interested in quick results which meant they aligned with foreign organizations in order to gain more power and support. That tendency made them susceptible to Janus, which would likely swallow them up sometime in the near future to gain a foothold in China. It was this same desire for power and insurgent networking that drove them to become interested in the Agency.

It didn't take long for Shaoqing to seek Sin out again. The CRS spy appeared to have severe anxiety issues and by the time he approached Sin the next morning, Shaoqing was practically wringing his hands with worry, likely paranoid that he'd made a mistake.

They walked a few blocks away from the base before Shaoqing spoke. "Did you think about what I said?"

Sin raised a derisive eyebrow as they stopped in front of a small food cart where he pointed out a fig pastry to the man behind it. "How could I? You didn't exactly give me any information other than some alleged group was out there somewhere."

Shaoqing grimaced and likely didn't relish the idea of saying the name of his group out loud so Sin made a face, paid for his pastry and did Shaoqing the favor.

"I assume you're talking about CRS but if you are, I don't really see why you'd want to hook up with us. It's well known that CRS will do business with whoever has the most numbers and the most power and while we're a number one contender for their attention, so is Janus." Sin took a bite of his pastry as they walked down the road.

Shaoqing reached up to idly run a hand lightly over his spiked up blond hair as if checking to see if it was still in place. It seemed like a nervous gesture. "There is nothing in stone with CRS and Janus yet," he said evenly. "If you ally with us, there would be no need. America and Janus both want to end the corruption here."

"They also want to take over the American administration," Sin added dryly.

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"Well yes, but that was never our interest," Shaoqing quickly replied, shooting him a worried look. "Their separate goals are their own business. An alliance with the Americans would be preferred by us. We know that your Agency would not suck us in to your other troubles. Janus would."

Sin nodded, appearing to mull this over although he was canceling out the idea of any such union.

He was glad that they'd kept any overt talk of a joint attack on Janus out of discussions until now. If Shaoqing had found that out, he'd likely have never made the offer. CRS seemed content to use bigger organizations for their own political battles without reciprocating. A union with them would be pointless since the entire point of collaboration was to get an ally in Asia that would be strong enough to feasibly help in the war against Janus.

The good news at least was that CRS and Janus hadn't officially gotten into talks yet. If Xiaolian played nice, Di Zhi and the Agency could join together and wipe CRS off the map which would ruin any notions of Janus gaining a foothold in the mainland any time in the next few years.

"Have you always been a spy?" he asked abruptly, looking at Shaoqing inquisitively. "I was under the impression you'd been in Di Zhi for some time."

Shaoqing shrugged his thin shoulders as he checked his watch. He knew Sin and Boyd were meant to meet Xiaolian as soon as she arrived at the base that morning. "Not always. In the beginning I was as passionate for Di Zhi as the others. But Xiaolian is single-minded, she does not listen to others and she has isolated us from the world. I became a part of Di Zhi to see change and I do not believe that in her lifetime, she will accomplish those changes."

Sin stopped himself from making a snide comment, feeling randomly defensive of Xiaolian. It seemed to be a trend among idealistic young rebels to think they had all the answers to change the state of things and to do it more quickly than the people who'd been toiling for years. Change happened slowly-- change that was permanent anyway. Sometimes it took decades for things to change; anyone who paid attention to world history should be aware of that.

"So what exactly do you gain by staying on the inside?" he asked, unable to keep skepticism out of his tone. Shaoqing was so transparent that Xiaolian would have had to

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be an idiot not to sniff him out months ago. It was unlikely that the man had reported anything of use in a very long time.

"Knowing her next moves and staying one place ahead on the chess board," Shaoqing said confidently and possibly even smugly. "But my time here is drawing short."

Sin almost wanted to ask where exactly he was returning to but he highly doubted that Shaoqing would say. "Then I'll be talking to my partner as soon as possible," Sin said with a grim half-smile that was likely nowhere near as reassuring as he'd meant it to be.

As they returned to the base, Sin couldn't help thinking about Gregory Wick, the last foolishly trusting person he'd betrayed on a mission.

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Xiaolian was standing in their bedroom when Sin returned. Bo-Qin and two bodyguards accompanied her.

For a moment Sin had the fleeting thought that something serious was going on and tension spread through him until Xiaolian turned in his direction and graced him with her customary sideways smirk.

"So I'm allowed to come on today's field trip?" Sin asked dryly, crossing his arms over his chest and looking from Bo-Qin to Xiaolian to Boyd. His eyes lingered for a moment on Boyd's face and he nodded discreetly after catching the blond's eye.

Sin was aware of Bo-Qin carefully watching him and Boyd's interaction but it didn't concern him. Ever since the whole gay confession the man stared at them with increasing intensity as if he was wondering if they would suddenly start mauling each other while whistling show tunes.

"Yes," Xiaolian replied. "This one is more educational."

Sin glanced at Boyd again.

Boyd met Sin's gaze in passing before he focused on Xiaolian. "There's something we wanted to tell you first." He glanced at the guards briefly then tilted his head. "And you probably wouldn't want them here for it."

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Xiaolian gave him a considering look and Bo-Qin's eyes narrowed with suspicion. The guards glanced at Xiaolian and she raised one eyebrow in a silent dismissal. They trooped out of the room without delay, shutting the door behind them.

"Yes?"

"Shaoqing is a spy for China Reform Society," Boyd said bluntly and without delay.

Bo-Qin's eyes nearly popped out of his head and he spluttered something in Mandarin before shaking his head as if in denial, outrage clear across his features either at the idea of such a betrayal or because he didn't believe the claim.

Xiaolian, however, just gave a demure shrug. "And how long did it take him to try to lure you to his side?"

"He overtly tried to recruit Hsin yesterday," Boyd replied, glancing toward Sin. "But there were signs before then. We just wanted to be certain first."

Bo-Qin put his hand on Xiaolian's shoulder and once again began talking in low, curt tones in Mandarin, demanding if this was true, how long she'd known, why she hadn't told him.

"Because not everything must be shared," she replied evenly in English, narrowing her eyes at her spouse and pulling her shoulder away in a movement that was firm and subtle at the same time. "I had my suspicions of Shaoqing for some time but it was only that, suspicions. His mannerisms changed but he was very careful in every other regard and I never confirmed it."

"*You should have told me,*" Bo-Qin repeated coldly, still speaking in his native tongue. He stared hard at his wife for a long, charged moment before looking away.

Sin arched an eyebrow at Xiaolian. "I think you hurt his feelings."

"You, shut up," she barked at him and gave him a dark look. For a moment, the Xiaolian that inspired devotion and fear in the hundreds of Di Zhi agents was right in front of them and not the joking sarcastic woman who had strung them along for a week.

Sin raised his eyebrows appreciatively. "Are you done playing games now?"

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She just stared at him with the same expression before relaxing and crossing her arms over her chest. "What else did the two of you learn?"

"Since the beginning, Shaoqing seemed especially interested in your history with Hsin and whether Hsin would be able to beat you in a fight, which was likely because he wanted a strong ally but it's possible there's something more to it." Boyd shook his head slightly. "Regardless, he ended up approaching Sin mostly, especially when I wasn't around." He looked over at Sin.

Bo-Qin glared at Sin as if the entire situation was his fault.

Sin smirked at him. "He defected long before I came along. He apparently became disillusioned with Di Zhi's ethnocentrism. The CRS apparently branches out more in their recruitment and likes to pick up stronger allies."

"Like Janus," Xiaolian said coldly, displeasure crossing her face. Despite the fact that she'd had an idea of Shaoqing's betrayal, the confirmation caused anger to radiate from her voice.

"And us, apparently," Sin said blandly. "He thought he could get me to switch sides. He doesn't know that we're only bothering to waste time with you people because we want you as an ally against Janus in this area of the world. He made it clear that they wouldn't get involved in our or Janus' external issues but was apparently too oblivious to realize that that's what the Agency wants."

"How long ago did he defect?" Bo-Qin demanded; his voice low and furious as his face contorted with unconcealed contempt. "How was he approached?"

Sin shrugged. "Seems like he's been a spy for quite a while but I don't know who reeled him in or how they knew to go for him." He looked at Xiaolian and arched an eyebrow. "You might have other traitors in your gang, for all I know. Or perhaps even a mole that infiltrated for that purpose from the start."

Bo-Qin's head looked like it was about to explode but Xiaolian just gave Sin and then Boyd a cool look. "If that is the case, we will find out."

There was a brief pause and her eyes continued to drift between the two agents before resting on Boyd. "You will detain and interrogate him."

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A brief flicker of surprise passed through Boyd's eyes before he nodded; gaze steady on Xiaolian and expression calm. "I can get started on that today if you prefer. Do you have a timeline that you would like answers by?"

"Take as long as is necessary and use any means necessary," she said in the same dark tone. "But you will acquire him now."

Boyd nodded again and stepped back. "Alright."

As Boyd was turning and his head was angled away from Xiaolian and Bo-Qin, he briefly met Sin's gaze. Despite Boyd's calm expression and voice, there was apprehension in his eyes that Sin knew Boyd wouldn't have shown the two Di Zhi agents. But it was gone almost immediately and Boyd looked away as he headed toward the door.

Sin speared Xiaolian with a dark look and followed but there wasn't any time to speak with Boyd before things began occurring one after the other.

Within the next few minutes a group of guards were accompanying he and Boyd to Shaoqing's quarters and the failed spy was in their custody. Sin tried to ignore how the betrayed look Shaoqing shot him actually stung and he was quickly distracted by the fact that Boyd was being forced to become a torturer.

Even though Boyd would put on a strong front and keep it together, Sin had no doubts that it would affect him. Shaoqing was treacherous in Di Zhi's eyes but to Sin, he hadn't really done anything more than agree to a stupid plot because his loyalty had switched. It wasn't something Sin thought anyone deserved to die for; it wasn't something that Boyd should have to torture and potentially kill someone in cold blood for.

None of it seemed worth it and Sin grew resentful of Xiaolian and Bo-Qin as the hours passed.

Sin found himself pacing the small sitting area outside the room he and Boyd shared. He felt more than a little restless as anxiety gnawed at him and he wished not for the first time that they'd told him to do it.

He pictured Boyd down in the basement, using tools and devices on Shaoqing, putting on his cold, unreadable mask and behaving like Shane.

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The picture was disturbing not only because Boyd had to endure it but because Sin feared deep down that at some point in Boyd's career, he would become accustomed to cruelty.

"You are worried for your friend."

Sin looked over and scowled at Bo-Qin. "Am I?"

Bo-Qin walked further into the area and out of the doorway, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest as he studied Sin. "I believe it is so."

"Why didn't she have me do it?" Sin demanded instead of addressing the comment but even as the question left his mouth, he knew the answer. Xiaolian would have expected Boyd to have a harder time with it; she didn't know him very well and judging by his appearance alone, even after a few years of being an agent he still looked very young and people always underestimated that.

"It would not have bothered you?" Bo-Qin asked, eyes narrowing as if he were analyzing everything Sin said and thought.

"That's irrelevant. I've done worse in my time," Sin replied acidly.

Bo-Qin seemed to consider that and shrugged after a moment as if dismissing the topic but he continued to survey Sin. "You do not seem like a homosexual."

Sin stared at him.

"Your partner does," Bo-Qin continued neutrally but Sin detected definite remnants of curiosity in the other man's tone. "I do not understand why men do such things."

Growing irritated by the pointless discussion, Sin sneered. "Maybe you should try it sometime and then decide. You might enjoy having your cock stuffed in a tight ass."

Bo-Qin's thoughtful expression slid into a dark glare and he turned away, leaving the room as abruptly as he'd entered.

Sin glared after him for a moment before sitting down on one of the worn sofas and tried to rid himself of the tension that was filling him. It didn't work and after a while he went into their shared room and looked around wearily.

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The entire situation aggravated him to an extent that was nearly surprising, especially because part of it had to do with guilt toward Shaoqing. He was young, idealistic and obviously in over his head. Xiaolian had likely suspected him for a while and any headway Shaoqing had believed he was making in his mission had been false. He was an inexperienced soldier and an even worse spy and likely only being used by CRS to gather any scraps of information he could find before being discarded.

If there was one thing Sin had learned after years of dealing with insurgent groups, they considered loyalty to be one of the most important aspects of a soldier and he highly doubted a group like CRS would ever seriously consider taking in a turncoat. Once a traitor, always a traitor, and Shaoqing was obviously prone to flip-flopping.

Sin felt bad for the poor idiot but he supposed that the saving grace for the entire situation was that it was very unlikely that Shaoqing would last too long under interrogation. He'd spilled his entire treacherous history with Sin after one brief conversation.

The day turned into night and the hours dragged by painfully slowly.

Sin lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering when Boyd would return. He knew that Boyd would never leave until Shaoqing released something of use; one of the first things the Agency taught in torture training was that prisoners would crack faster if their interrogation was relentless, without giving them the opportunity to regain strength and regroup mentally to withstand another bout of torture.

As selfish and heartless as it was, Sin also found himself wondering if the entire situation would change Boyd's demeanor. He wondered if their brief and nearly accidental flirtations would come to an abrupt end.

Frustrated and irritated with his own preoccupation, Sin got out of bed and began doing pushups. He worked out until his body grew weary and sore and when he stopped he realized over two hours had passed.

The morning sun was already lightening the sky and Sin scowled, mentally willing Shaoqing to just cut the shit and give up what he knew. It was inevitable anyway, as far as Sin was concerned.

This was proven a few hours later when Boyd finally emerged from the depths of the basement. He went straight to Xiaolian, who notified Sin and Bo-Qin. By the time Sin got up to the top floor and into a side room, Boyd was sitting in a chair looking tired and

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strained, his expression studiously blank although Sin could see the disquiet in his golden brown eyes.

Xiaolian seemed oblivious to this fact and a smug smile curved across her lips as she looked at her husband.

"The boy succeeded so far. We know where their main base is located."

Bo-Qin's eyes narrowed and he stepped forward. "*Does the information check out?*" he demanded in Mandarin.

Xiaolian's smile turned cold, her teeth bared. "I believe it is the truth but it is currently being examined. I would like you to monitor the progress, ensure that it is done quickly. I want this cleaned up soon."

Bo-Qin stared at her for a moment before giving a curt nod and striding out of the room.

Xiaolian stared at Boyd and Sin for a brief moment before turning her back to them and picking up her phone. Apparently she was done talking to them for now.

Boyd stood and for the second time in two days, Sin followed him out of Xiaolian's small office. He shadowed the younger man quietly down the stairs and shut the door gently when Boyd entered their room ahead of him.

As soon as they were alone, the stubborn surety of Boyd's body language faded; his shoulders slumped and his fingers twitched, his head tilted toward the floor and even if he'd been turned toward Sin, his blond hair would have hidden his features. He hesitated, glancing around almost distractedly, and ended up heading across the room.

He didn't even bother taking his shoes off before he crawled into his bed, yanking the sheets and blankets up over his shoulder as he curled on his side facing the wall. Golden blond hair fell messily against the pillow behind him and it was only when Boyd shifted that Sin could see blood staining the ends of his hair in one area.

Boyd didn't speak or move although he seemed to be breathing unevenly judging by the muffled sound of his breath and the rise and fall of the blankets.

Sin watched him for a moment before walking closer. He stood at the side of the bed and frowned slightly before crouching down and resting a hand on Boyd's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

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Sin could feel the tension in Boyd's shoulder but Boyd didn't pull away; at Sin's touch, a shiver went through him even as he let out a shaky breath. "Yeah."

His voice was heavier and thicker than usual and after a second, he turned onto his back and looked over at Sin. His eyes were dark and reddened, seemingly from lack of sleep more than anything else. Yet as he met Sin's gaze there was no question that he was upset.

"I--" Boyd stopped and his eyebrows twitched, the disquiet in his eyes intensifying. He shook his head, the faintest of movement against the pillow beneath him. "I just really don't like this part of the job."

Sin lifted his hand and smoothed hair back from Boyd's face, his fingers damp when he pulled them away. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, not really knowing what else to say. Being comforting wasn't Sin's strong suit. He could never find the right words, the right gestures, even though seeing Boyd so distraught made his eyes narrow with concern and anger.

At the moment he wanted nothing more than to drag Xiaolian into a fucking torture room for a few hours.

Boyd's eyebrows drew together and he let out a shaky breath, his hair shifting as he shook his head again. After a moment he abruptly covered his face with his hands, his fingers digging into his skin.

"It's my fault," Boyd said, voice strained and muffled. "I shouldn't-- I shouldn't care about this; I should be stronger..."

"That's stupid," Sin said bluntly, eyes narrowing as he stared at his former lover. "I've met many of the Agency's torturers. They're all like Shane. Cold, empty, completely lacking of empathy. Sociopaths. That's not strength."

Boyd let out a half laugh that was completely humorless. "It is to the Agency."

"Why do you care so much about what the Agency wants you to be?" Sin demanded, frustration clear in his voice. He dropped his hand entirely and stared hard at Boyd. "Are you really getting that sucked into their world?"

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"No." Boyd dropped his hands, his wet eyes red-rimmed and somber as he looked at Sin. He pushed himself up finally, untangling himself from the sheets and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He leaned forward, fingers curled around the edge of the mattress, shoulders slightly slumped.

He looked down at the floor, his hair partially falling forward to cover his face as he continued soberly, "But I can't screw up; she's not protecting me anymore and she'll have me killed or worse. She--" He flicked his gaze toward Sin almost guiltily. "I think she almost terminated me already for," he shrugged a little uncomfortably. "For everything. And Bridget told me my failure rate is well above what they usually terminate agents for and that they're stricter, so..."

He looked up at Sin fully, his eyes less openly distraught even though he still didn't seem his usual self. There was uncertainty in him. "There's nothing special about me to keep me around if my worth is questioned. If I'm not a good enough agent in their eyes, if they still see only my flaws, then once the shift happens I'm dead."

"Well you haven't failed at anything here," Sin said evenly, unable to stop from once again reaching out to brush hair out of Boyd's face so that he could see it entirely. "You're doing what you have to do. The way you feel about it has nothing to do with the Agency. Your feelings and thoughts are your own and fuck them if they think they can control them."

He sat back slightly, eyes narrowed. The recurring fear he'd had for months ran through him again; that Boyd was changing to suit the Agency, to become their idea of a model agent.

It would be so easy for Boyd to go back to blocking off his emotions. He was accustomed to it after years of living that way and Sin had no doubts that if Boyd put his mind to it, he could become the unaffected killer that the Agency would want him to be. And even if he didn't do it out of the desire to please them, he could do it out of fear and that was even more dangerous.

"Don't let them turn you into something you're not, Boyd. I've been on the chopping block for years and even though I follow orders, I've never changed who I am."

"I won't," Boyd said thickly as his eyebrows twitched down. Faint determination passed through his face even though his shoulders were still slumped. "I don't want to become someone else; I'd rather be terminated than become Shane. It's just..."

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He dropped his gaze to the floor and he crossed his arms loosely at his stomach. He shook his head, his tone becoming troubled. "Even if I follow their orders, if I keep feeling this way and can't do anything about it because they're watching me especially for that, then eventually something has to give. I've always dealt with it before by acting on it or cutting my emotions off. And I'm afraid this'll force me to think that not feeling anything in the first place is the only way to keep going. And--"

He looked up at Sin and seemed at a loss. "I know you hate your job but somehow you keep going and even if you rescue civilians, you don't end up fucking up the mission. I don't know what to do-- I don't know if I can handle feeling like this indefinitely."

Sin shook his head, his face drawn as he shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what to say. I know I've told you not to interfere with something to do with me if it means your own death but I also know how hypocritical it is for me to say that because I'd never stand aside while your life is in danger. Some things matter more than the mission, even if it's a risk, even if it puts me on the list for termination."

He frowned slightly, trying to find the right words and struggling. "Despite everything I've done and what everyone has said about me, I've realized lately that somehow I've stayed more human inside than a lot of other people on the compound and I won't compromise that for anyone when it comes to fighting for something I believe is right. I know you're the same way and that's why--"

Boyd was silent, waiting for Sin to continue. When he didn't, Boyd drew his eyebrows down, searching Sin's eyes as if he could find the answer to all his dilemmas there. "That's why what?"

Sin faltered, inwardly cursing himself for being ridiculous enough to nearly blurt out a very awkwardly timed confession of affection to his partner. When had he gotten so soft and mushy?

"That's why I think you should pick your battles carefully," he finished after a brief pause. "It's hard to choose. It was hard for me to kill McCall while I chose to save that girl in Canada. Sometimes I don't even know what the deciding factor was-- maybe because she really was a complete innocent or maybe because I felt especially strong about it at that moment. But whatever the case-- half of it is enduring and doing what you have to do and deciding when it's important enough for you to take a chance."

Boyd studied Sin closely, seeming as though he was running the words over in his mind. His eyebrows drew down and after a moment he nodded, some of the tension

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releasing from his shoulders even as the vulnerability started to fade from his expression.

"I think I can do that," Boyd said mostly to himself, sounding grateful and almost relieved.

Sin stood up and put distance between the two of them, no longer able to handle being so close to Boyd without being able to physically comfort him. "All we can do is try."

Boyd nodded and was silent at first. After a moment, he drew in a deep breath and rubbed at his face briefly, then pushed his hair back and exhaled slowly. He stood as well, looking at Sin in distraction. "I think I should go down there again."

Sin nodded, watching him. "Do what you have to do."

Boyd nodded again and slid his gaze away, eyes narrowing and already becoming distant as he seemed to be preparing himself.

He turned toward the door and by the time he left the room, his expression was so calm and unreadable that there was no indication he'd ever been upset.

Part IV

"What do you mean he's dead?" Boyd asked blankly, staring at the guard.

"We were told to execute him," the guard replied, barely glancing at Boyd before looking past him to watch the hallway beyond, as if someone would appear to attack.

Blond eyebrows drew down while a mixture of confusion, frustration and almost guilty relief made Boyd shake his head. "Who gave the order?"

"Bo-Qin," the guard answered.

"Did he finish the interrogation?" Boyd asked with a frown.

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"No one spoke to the prisoner but you," the guard said flatly, looking over at Boyd briefly and seeming irritated by his presence. "Bo-Qin gave the order but did not come down here."

Boyd had to stop himself from expressing his frustration and instead he turned and headed straight for Xiaolian's office. It couldn't have even been half an hour from the moment Bo-Qin had left the room to the moment Boyd had arrived to interrogate Shaoqing further. Boyd was too tired to even want to try to process what the hell was going on.

He quickly navigated his way to the top floor and it wasn't long before the guards let him into Xiaolian's office, where he shut the door behind him. She was just finishing a phone call and he stood to the side waiting for her to finish, the words washing past him as she spoke in Mandarin.

When she finally hung up and looked up at him expectantly, Boyd asked bluntly, "Why did Bo-Qin have Shaoqing killed already?"

Xiaolian stared at him silently as if processing the question and immediately touched her comm, saying something curtly into it in her native language. He didn't know what she said but he did hear Bo-Qin's name.

"If you will be patient for one moment, I will have an answer to that question," she said quietly.

Boyd nodded and stood silently to the side of the room, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall.

Not even three minutes passed before Bo-Qin entered the room, arching an eyebrow at his wife in a manner that almost seemed impertinent.

"Why is Shaoqing dead?" she asked in a flat tone, her eyes narrowed at him and expression steely.

Bo-Qin's eyebrows drew together and he gave her a confused, albeit resentful look, as if he didn't appreciate being questioned, likely in front of an outsider. "He was a traitor; he deserved nothing less."

"Was the interrogation complete?" she demanded to Boyd, her voice harsh and impatient.

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"Not if you wanted more information than where the base was," Boyd replied, shaking his head.

Bo-Qin glared at him hatefully. "You did not say it was incomplete."

"You did not ask," Xiaolian shouted at him, slamming a hand down on her desk. Her eyes were like daggers that speared into her husband furiously.

He stared back, his face twisted in indignation despite the fact that he had to know he'd made a grave error. Still, he didn't respond.

She scoffed and snarled something in Mandarin. Bo-Qin nodded shortly and left the room.

Xiaolian stared at the door for an extended moment before finally allowing her gaze to settle on Boyd again. "Obviously, I was unaware of this idiotic lapse in judgment," she said coldly. "We will be forced to make do with the information you have already obtained."

Boyd nodded, his expression calm and unaffected by the argument. "At least we got the base. We may be able to find pertinent information there as well."

She nodded shortly in agreement and straightened. "The location is being confirmed as we speak. Prepare to accompany us on the assault within the next couple of hours."

Boyd shifted away from the wall and nodded again, recognizing that as a dismissal. "I'll alert Hsin as well." She was already looking away and Boyd left without further comment.

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The room was small and cramped, and only seemed more so when Boyd entered. Xiaolian, Bo-Qin, and Sin were already there and Boyd flicked his gaze across them briefly before he shut the door behind him.

"The last captain is secured," he reported.

Xiaolian nodded shortly, her eyes narrowed as she sat at the metal desk in the officer's quarters of CRS's encampment. Her eyebrows were drawn together, sweat sliding down

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the sides of her pale face, and Boyd saw blood splattered across her white wifebeater. She definitely was not the type of leader to stay in the safety of her base while her men fought on the frontlines.

Bo-Qin stood by her side, his eyes on the window as he surveyed the darkness outside the small building vigilantly. He didn't speak up but it wasn't too surprising-- he'd been less vocal ever since his argument with Xiaolian in Luoyang.

Xiaolian shifted finally, dragging her eyes away from the laptop computer that had been hooked into the wall and she stared at Boyd and Sin. There was definite displeasure in her expression, a harshness that hadn't been there in the first week of their mission.

"This base is now under Di Zhi control. The two of you will mind it."

Boyd glanced briefly at Bo-Qin, wondering if Xiaolian had planned it this way all along or if she changed her mind after the incident with Shaoqing. He nodded curtly at Xiaolian and didn't let his thoughts make it to his face. "Do you have any specific instructions?"

"The leaders who were present have already been separated and my people have begun interrogating them as we speak. They will be executed once every drop of information has been wrung from their bodies," she said, casting a long look at her husband who avoided her eyes.

"Bo-Qin and I will retire from this encampment within the night and after that time it will be under the control of yourself and Hsin."

Sin's eyebrows rose. "Under our control?"

"Yes. It will be your task to sort out the remaining men in CRS. Decide who can be turned and who will be eliminated. This must be complete within the next week. Hsin, you will be in command and Boyd will serve as your captain."

Boyd glanced at Sin, noting that his eyebrows were raised. "Are you taking any of your men with you?"

"I have men within Hong Kong and my personal guards will go into the city with me with the exception of Ton, who will stay here and serve as your guard."

Sin and Ton looked at each other and Sin's lips rose in a smirk. Ton, still wearing his sunglasses, gave no indication of what he thought although his mouth twitched slightly.

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"The remaining men will be here, at your disposal. Utilize them wisely and do not forget that we are in hostile territory even if the remaining members of CRS are locked up. They know this area better than you. Do not become foolishly careless."

"We won't," Boyd replied, his gaze steady on Xiaolian. "We're accustomed to working in hostile territory and taking the necessary precautions."

"Good."

Xiaolian stood and began unhooking the laptop and the various wires plugged into it. "I recommend you use this area--" she gestured to the room around her which was located in a one story, three-room building within the encampment. "--as your quarters as it is the most secure. Everything else is as you desire it to be."

"Will you be checking in?" Sin asked.

Bo-Qin turned to them finally. "I will. For her own protection and anonymity, Xiaolian will remain within the city."

Xiaolian didn't even look at her husband, keeping her gaze focused entirely on the two American agents. "I am sure that you have figured out this performance will be judged harshly. Do not disappoint me or further talk of negotiation will not occur and you will have to explain to your superiors why you have wasted so much time here."

She narrowed her eyes slightly, picked up the laptop and swept out of the small room. Bo-Qin studied the two of them for a long lingering moment before doing the same.

Boyd watched the closed door for a moment, his gaze unreadable but unsurprised before he met Sin's eyes. He raised his eyebrows. "So," he said mildly. "What are your orders, boss?"

Sin arched one dark eyebrow. "I have no opinion on any of this."

In the corner, Ton scoffed quietly but when they glanced over, his face was completely expressionless.

"Do you have something to add?" Sin asked blandly, crossing his arms over his bulletproof vest.

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Ton didn't respond.

"Like I thought." Sin looked at Boyd again, an expression of irritation on his face. "I think it would be best if we leave the leftovers in the bunker overnight. Tell the men to sort out this mess and clear out the bodies while we go through the remaining documents and the database on the other computer to see if we can find anything resembling a list of who the fuck is actually down there. Things will go a lot smoother if we have the illusion of knowing what is going on."

Boyd nodded, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "When we can, I think we should also inventory everything in the bunker-- maybe if there are enough men that can be assigned as well. And when we're searching through the lists, I think we should check if they had access to anything of interest. If we don't get the word out immediately that CRS was taken down, maybe there are even meetings or exchanges already set up with other groups that we could compromise if we wanted."

"I thought Xiaolian put Hsin in charge," Ton's voice rang out suddenly. It was the first time he'd spoken in their presence and his accent was distinctly American.

Sin's eyes snapped over to Ton. "So you can speak after all."

"I speak when I have something to say," the guard replied in a flat, emotionless voice. "And it is highly doubtful that either the men in CRS or Di Zhi will take orders from or want to work with some little white boy who looks like he should be skimming over a pool of water with wings on."

Boyd quirked his eyebrows, looking over at Ton mildly. "They'll take orders from who they have to take orders from." He shrugged and then crossed his arms. "But it's true that Hsin's in charge so it's up to him; I'll do whatever he tells me to do. He speaks Mandarin and I don't so he's better equipped to give orders anyway."

"You're missing the point," Ton replied in the same toneless way. "She put him in charge for a reason."

Boyd watched Ton for a long moment, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Although Ton's initial comment made it seem more like a combination of Boyd's feminine looks as well as his nationality that would be the problem, what it really came down to was that Boyd was obviously an outsider and that wasn't going to help them at all in this case.

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He looked over at Sin. "He has a point. I'm an obvious westerner getting in the middle of Chinese-specific goals. It may be bad enough even with you but at least you blend in more-- They aren't likely to listen to me at all and my presence may just make it more difficult to convert anyone from CRS. I'll follow through with any assignment I'm given but he may be right that I should stay in the background."

Sin shrugged uncaringly, having watched the exchange with a curious look on his face that had been directed at Ton. They'd had some kind of unspoken rivalry between them since the first mission in Hong Kong and some of it seemed to have dissipated as soon as Ton actually spoke.

"There would be no reason for both of us to interview CRS anyway since you can't communicate with most of them," he replied. "I'll start that tomorrow while you see what you can find in their databases and inventory and together we will decide who is most likely to turn and who will be terminated."

Boyd nodded.

The next several days were long and arduous.

Despite the fact that Boyd and Sin shared a room, they hardly saw each other for more than a few minutes a day. Sin interviewed all the CRS rebels one by one, and since there were more than forty of them that was quite an undertaking.

Boyd's task kept him in front of computer screens for hours on end. There were five computers that he had to search through and each of them had several hard drives. Trying to track down the identities of all the rebels was unsurprisingly difficult since CRS didn't seem to have any sort of centralized database with the information.

Still, a concentrated effort between the two of them worked well.

Sin kept Boyd updated on who he had terminated, providing digital photographs of them to check against any potential pictures in the computers, and Boyd continued to piece together information he found scattered across the computers to determine the identities of the people who remained. For several of the rebels, the CRS captains appeared to have done some sort of background check which ended up being helpful once Boyd was able to access the information.

Once Boyd scoured through everything on the hard drives and reported all the information to Sin, he turned his attention to cataloging everything in the bunker. The

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building was expansive and not particularly well organized, so after a day he ended up having to enlist the help of one of the English-speaking Di Zhi guards, a man named Qiang, while Ton stayed in the background like a silent sentinel.

Boyd could tell from the start that Qiang wasn't thrilled to be there and at first it was unclear whether he just didn't want to work in the bunker or if it was Boyd's presence that was causing the issue.

Sometimes Qiang wouldn't immediately respond when Boyd spoke to him and sometimes Qiang ignored him altogether only to later claim he couldn't hear him. But given the echoing noise of crates being moved and contents shifted through, it didn't bother Boyd much until into the second day of the job.

The heat of late summer had only grown more prominent during the week. The bunker, with no windows, no ventilation and no way for cool air to get in or hot air to get out, ended up feeling like a sauna inside. Even with a short sleeved shirt, lightweight shorts, and his hair pulled back and off his neck, Boyd was sweating from exertion and the heat.

Boyd was tired from working overtime in uncomfortable conditions since the beginning of the week. His eyes still burned from staring at the computer screen for dozens of hours at a time and now his muscles were starting to burn from the physical workout in the bunker.

He'd pulled several crates off the shelves already without any problems so when he saw one on a shelf that was taller than he was, he tried to pull it down without thinking. He had a pretty good grip but as he slid the crate off the side, he realized it was heavier than he'd anticipated and, as it started to tip, he saw that it was also missing a lid.

"Qiang, help," Boyd called sharply as the crate started to tip and he struggled to hold it upright.

Qiang looked over and met Boyd's eyes but he didn't move toward Boyd. If anything, he seemed content to sit there and watch.

"Qiang--"

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The crate nearly tipped upside down and Boyd had to turn his head down as several assault rifles fell on him and clattered to the floor at his sides. Although it hurt, Boyd didn't have time to think about it as he snapped his arms out and almost fell over trying to catch the crate. His arms yanked forward painfully in the movement and the awkwardly sized crate almost hit his feet as he was able to drop it to the floor.

Boyd leaned forward for a moment, his heartbeat thundering in his chest as adrenaline woke him up, and he straightened with a narrow-eyed stare toward Qiang.

"What the hell," Boyd snapped, his voice tight. When Qiang just watched Boyd with a shrug and looked away, Boyd demanded, "What was that? Why didn't you help me?"

"I do not take orders from you," Qiang said unconcernedly, returning to idly poking through the crate in front of him.

"This isn't about orders," Boyd returned coolly, crossing his arms. "That was dangerous and--"

"Then maybe you should not do it," Qiang cut him off blandly and Boyd fell silent briefly, narrowing his eyes.

"I shouldn't have," Boyd agreed with a frown. "But that's not the point. We're working on this project together for the betterment of Di Zhi. If you'd been in that position, I would have helped you. There was no reason for you to completely ignore me."

"You are not Di Zhi." Qiang ran a contemptuous gaze along Boyd and shook his head. "You are not even Chinese."

Boyd crouched and started putting the rifles back into the crate. "So?" He impatiently pushed some hair off his face that had fallen out of the ponytail. "I'm here because Xiaolian wants me here and it's the same for you. Who cares if we're not both Chinese?"

"Xiaolian does not want you; Xiaolian tolerates you," Qiang said acidly, abandoning all pretense of counting the grenades in his crate. He nearly glared at Boyd, his eyebrows drawing down. "You westerners think you own the world but we are fighting for our freedom; we are not your experiment or weekend charity work."

"I don't think I own anything but what I've bought with my own money," Boyd said firmly, tossing two more rifles into the crate. "I'm not here to cause problems; I'm here to help."

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"Help?" Qiang scoffed. "What help can you give? You are too stupid to know when not to pull a box down."

"Don't bullshit me," Boyd said strongly, dropping another rifle into the crate and twisting to face Qiang more fully. "This has nothing to do with that. You just don't like me because I'm American but you aren't even giving me a chance. I've been here for half a month living under the same roof as all of you and I'm spending more time and energy working on getting this ready for Xiaolian than most of you, so don't act like I'm unable to help."

"Yes, you spend that energy," Qiang agreed, his lip lifting in a sneer. "You do it because you want something."

"Is that so terrible?" Boyd asked, lifting his eyebrows and eyeing Qiang. "Everyone has a reason for what they do; it doesn't automatically mean it's something horrible."

"It means you are here for a reason. I do not trust your motives." Qiang slid his glare away from Boyd and looked down to shift the grenades carefully in the packaging. "You will rip us apart."

Boyd didn't look away from Qiang; if anything, his stare only intensified. "We're here to help Di Zhi, to see it grow stronger. We're willing to risk our lives for that or we would not have helped in the raid. And if you question any of that, then bring it up with Xiaolian. We're following her orders and I should hope you trust her at least."

"I trust her, not you," Qiang said bluntly, arching an eyebrow. "But you can still lie to her."

"So can any of you," Boyd said pointedly, starting to get frustrated by Qiang's replies. "Shaoqing did and he was one of you. Just because--"

Qiang stood up abruptly and tossed the last grenade into the crate. He looked over at Boyd with narrowed eyes. "Finish yourself." Without waiting for a reply, he stalked out of the bunker.

Boyd watched Qiang leave, his expression turning cool and anger making his shoulders tense, but he didn't bother to yell after the man. After a moment, he looked down at the crate and crouched, throwing one of the assault rifles in with more force than necessary.

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"Don't take it personally."

Boyd looked at Ton sidelong and dropped another rifle into the box. He tried to make himself loosen his shoulders but he wasn't entirely successful. "I'm not, I'm just--" He narrowed his eyes and paused, staring into the crate. "Frustrated."

Ton stared at him through the darkened sunglasses he always wore. "They don't trust any outsider. I was born in China and they still took a long time to accept me because I grew up in America."

Boyd looked over at Ton more fully, studying him thoughtfully. After a moment, he sat down on the floor and decided to take a break. He crossed his legs and slouched forward, pushing hair out of his eyes. "Your family moved to America?"

"My mother is American. She took me back shortly after I was born," Ton said calmly, taking off his sunglasses and slowly cleaning the lenses on the hem of his black t-shirt.

"Why did you end up back in China, then?" Boyd asked, watching Ton curiously; partially for the answer and partially because it was the first time he'd seen the man remove the sunglasses.

Ton shrugged, glancing up at Boyd briefly, brown eyes unreadable. "My father brought me back. He wanted his only son to be in Di Zhi."

"He was in Di Zhi?" Boyd asked, drawing his eyebrows down.

Now that he could see all of Ton's face and Ton was actually engaging in conversation rather than standing silently in the background, it was apparent to Boyd how attractive the man really was. He was about as tall as Sin, appeared to be in his late twenties, his hair was short and spiky and his build was athletic. Now Boyd could also see that Ton's eyes were a pleasant dark brown that made his features stand out even more.

"Xiaolian's my half-sister," Ton replied casually.

Boyd's eyebrows shot up and he didn't bother to hide the surprise that crossed his face. "I had no idea... Do the two of you have other siblings in Di Zhi as well?"

Ton put his glasses back on, his face as blank as usual. "Not that I'm aware. My mother spirited me away when I was a newborn and she changed my name. It took my father

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some time to track us down and when he did, he died not too long after. I'm not too knowledgeable about what other bastards he has floating around."

Boyd nodded and leaned back on his hands, watching Ton thoughtfully for a moment. That explained several things about Ton and although the information had been surprising, he could see similarities in their personality between Xiaolian and Ton. If anything, it actually made him trust Ton more. "You still go by the name she gave you even after you returned here?"

An eyebrow arched although that was the only hint of expression on Ton's face. "Of course. Why should I change my name? To be more accepted? It's bad enough that Xiaolian calls me by my last name only."

"What's your first name?" Boyd asked curiously.

Ton smirked. "Jimmy."

Boyd couldn't help a small grin. He straightened his legs to stretch them out and quirked an eyebrow. "Well. This puts me in a dilemma, then. Do you want me to call you Jimmy or Ton?"

"You can call me Jimmy," Ton replied with a shrug. "Xiaolian may be startled, though. She wishes I would go by Xu Feng."

Boyd shrugged. "I'm less concerned with startling Xiaolian than I am with calling you by what you want to be called," he said offhandedly. "If you're Jimmy then you're Jimmy, regardless of what others prefer."

Ton shrugged silently but the comment seemed to please him judging by the way his body language appeared to slightly relax.

Silence fell between them and Boyd picked up one of the rifles, inspecting it before he set it back down on the floor and it occurred to him to count everything in the crate before he completely filled it again. He should have done that from the beginning but the fact that he hadn't thought of it probably just underscored how frustrated and tired he'd felt.

He pulled himself closer to the crate then looked over at Ton thoughtfully. "Do you not like Hsin much because of what happened with Xiaolian?"

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Ton's blank expression didn't change. "Who says I don't like him?"

Boyd shrugged idly, then leaned his forearm against the edge of the crate and tilted his head. "Just the way you interact; you don't seem especially fond of him."

"I don't have problems with him personally. But my job is security and I can tell that if he chose to become a threat to one of the people I am guarding, he would be deadly."

Boyd nodded in understanding and turned his attention back to the crate as he dug through it. Ton didn't reply and silence fell between the two of them again.

Although Boyd could have tried to track someone else down to help him, he decided against it because it would take too much time and probably end similarly. So he spent the next several hours working his way through the bunker alone. The sun set and after a while Ton disappeared, presumably to check on Sin.

He was just starting to work on a new row when he heard a scuffing sound. Boyd paused, looking over his shoulder and seeing Bo-Qin walking in on one of his checkups.

"Hello," Boyd said, dropping his arms to his sides and turning around completely.

Bo-Qin stopped a short distance away and nodded in greeting. He looked a great deal less hostile without Xiaolian glowering at him nearby. "Have you prepared a report of all that has been accomplished?"

Boyd rolled his shoulders absently, trying to work out some of the kinks. "I planned to have it by tomorrow; if I work for another few hours I should be finished in here so I can provide a complete report on this rather than a partial."

"We are more interested in the detainees," he replied in his typically curt tone, a frown pulling at the sides of his mouth. "You mean to say you have not gathered any information?"

Boyd shook his head. "I've already looked through all the computers and have that information compiled. Hsin is almost finished with sorting through the detainees last I heard but I haven't spoken with him today yet."

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Bo-Qin nodded, watching Boyd work with a serious expression on his face. His lips thinned slightly, dark eyes following Boyd's movements before he asked, "And what of Wei Jianli? Has it been confirmed that he was at this base during the raid?"

Red flags rose for Boyd at the comment. Shaoqing had told Boyd where the encampment was and had listed a number of the people they would find there. When Boyd had reported the information to Xiaolian, he hadn't mentioned everyone Shaoqing had told him about because he hadn't known who had been important. Wei Jianli hadn't been one of them he'd reported.

Boyd didn't let the suspicion get to his expression. He simply shrugged casually, pushing hair off his face that had fallen from his ponytail. "We don't know yet. So far, not everyone Shaoqing mentioned has been here but we should know by tomorrow."

Bo-Qin nodded and if Boyd hadn't been watching closely, he would have missed the discreet way tension seemed to ease out of Bo-Qin's posture.

"I will be staying on the encampment until the report has been complete."

Boyd nodded easily. "Are you staying in the officer's building?"

There was a brief hesitation before Bo-Qin replied. "Are you and Hsin sharing accommodations?"

"Yes," Boyd said calmly, leaning against the shelving unit behind him.

Bo-Qin stared at him, pursing his mouth slightly. "It is possible that I will."

"You should consider it," Boyd replied agreeably, taking in every nuance of Bo-Qin's behavior without showing that he was paying any special attention. More hair started to fall out of the ponytail and he tilted his head forward to pull the band out.

"There's more space," he continued absently without looking away from Bo-Qin despite the blond hair that fell around his face and partially shadowed his expression. He slid the hair band around his pointer and middle finger to hold it as he pulled his hair back into a tighter ponytail and secured it. "And it's quieter."

Bo-Qin continued to watch him, his narrow-eyed gaze following the motions of Boyd's hands before he focused on a point over Boyd's shoulder. "If I do, I will not be there until very late as is. I must check into various things on the encampment and get reports

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from the men. In the case of my arrival, it would be preferable if one of the men readies accommodations for me."

"I can see to that." Boyd tilted his head and rested his hands on the edge of a shelf behind him. "Do you have any preferences you would like me to convey?"

Bo-Qin shook his head and started to turn away. "No. But perhaps I will speak with you later."

Boyd nodded. "I'm sure we will," he agreed and Bo-Qin left without responding.

Boyd waited until Bo-Qin was gone before he walked to the door and casually checked to see if anyone was within view. Several guards were in the area and he didn't trust the security of the bunker for what he would have to do so he decided to finish for the day. He shoved the doors to the bunker closed and secured them, stepping back and wiping a hand across his forehead. He didn't hide how tired he was in order to make it seem as though he was simply too weary to finish tonight.

He could feel a few suspicious stares drilling into him as he headed toward the officers' building but he ignored them. He stopped one of the guards to instruct him to ready a room for Bo-Qin; Boyd knew the guard was going to follow through simply because it was for the husband of Di Zhi's leader.

Once Boyd made it to his shared room with Sin, which he was unsurprised to find empty, he shut the door firmly behind him and moved to the corner of the room where he dropped onto his bed and leaned his back against the wall. He pulled a handheld computer out of his pocket and sent a quick, encrypted email to the Agency asking for information on Wei Jianli.

Almost twenty minutes passed before he received a reply, stating that Wei Jianli was a very influential man in CRS and giving the details they had. Boyd knew Wei Jianli was not present at the raid. Boyd's eyebrows twitched up slightly and he erased all evidence of having sent the message before he slid the computer back into his pocket and immediately left the room.

Sin was exactly where he expected him to be: sequestered in a room as he compiled information from the interviews.

"I have some data from the bunker," Boyd reported, careful to not seem too casual with two men aside from Ton in the room.

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Sin glanced up at him. "Anything imperative?"

Boyd met Sin's eyes and kept his face casually turned away from the guards as a significant look passed through his eyes. "Not about the data; however, I have some questions about how to finish the project." He tilted his head and glanced at Sin's workload. "I can speak to you about it later when you aren't as busy."

Sin watched him for a moment before turning back to the desk. "I was just finishing up the most recent updates. We can speak privately now if you would like."

"I need to finish a few things so I can meet you in the room when you're done if that works for you," Boyd replied in agreement. He didn't trust the security of any room on the compound but their own.

"That's fine," Sin replied and turned back to the array of images and words that were scrolling across the touch screen of his laptop.

Boyd nodded and turned around, glancing past the guards. The two guards he didn't know were studiously ignoring him and although Boyd couldn't see Ton's eyes because of the dark sunglasses, he thought it was possible the man had briefly looked at him in silent acknowledgment, judging by the slight shift of his head. With a subtle nod in return, Boyd left.

He returned to the officers' building, checking first to see if Bo-Qin's room was readied, which it was. Bo-Qin's room shared a wall with Boyd and Sin's so he was hoping Sin would return before Bo-Qin to better ensure the man wouldn't overhear them, even if they were quiet. He suspected it would be hours until Bo-Qin returned, though, and minutes before Sin did.

When he entered their room, he did an immediate scan to check for any audio or visual devices planted in there since he'd last left. Unsurprisingly he didn't find anything so he sat down on his bed and waited for Sin.

It didn't take long and when Sin arrived he was scowling slightly as he shut the door behind him. "I'm sick of this fucking mission."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "Problems with the interviews or just tired of it all in general?"

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"In general," Sin snapped, ripping off his over-shirt and tossing it in the corner. He'd been wearing the same clothes for the past few days. "I don't really give a shit about Di Zhi or teaming up with them to stop Janus or any of this nonsense."

"Well, if we can get them on our side then maybe we can more quickly finish with Janus," Boyd said reasonably, kicking his legs out in front of him and stretching his arms. "We're getting pretty close to this mission being over, anyway."

"I don't even want this mission to be successful," Sin said flatly as he took off his undershirt and sat down on the threadbare sofa to unlace his boots. "I don't want to work with this bitch for an extended period of time."

"Why are you so mad at her?" Boyd asked, mildly perplexed while he watched Sin.

Sin gave Boyd a flat look and tossed his boot against the wall. "Oh, I don't know, maybe because she's having me order executions of dozens of people?"

Boyd studied Sin more somberly and after a moment he nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty shitty," he agreed. "Especially since for some of them, the only thing they have going against them is their loyalty to a group that isn't hers."

"So then why are you shocked that I don't want to work with her?"

Boyd shook his head. "Your attitude toward her has just changed quite a bit since her name had last come up. Before, you didn't seem to care much about anything and I haven't had the chance to talk to you lately. I didn't know the interviews were bothering you so much."

Sin said nothing and stretched out on the sofa, putting his hands behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling. "I can't concentrate anymore."

Boyd was silent a moment, his eyebrows drawn down slightly as he ran his gaze along Sin in mild concern. Sin seemed especially tense and although it was possible it was due solely to the interviews, it seemed like maybe there was something more. He drew his knees in and loosely looped his arms around his shins, tilting his head as he watched his partner.

"Is something else bothering you?" Boyd asked cautiously.

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Sin shrugged, his pale green eyes still on the ceiling. "When I'm in Hong Kong, I think a lot about my childhood. Some of the younger people I have interviewed reminded me of that even more."

"How so?" Boyd asked. "Do they remind you of yourself when you were younger?"

"Not necessarily." There was a brief pause and Sin drew down one of his arms to cross against his bare chest as his stony expression grew more contemplative. "But some of the soldiers are not much older than I was when I came to the Agency. It is mostly the idea of not having a choice in the direction your life has turned, of being born into violence and pain."

Boyd watched Sin before nodding. "It's true. There are a lot of people who end up forced into a life they otherwise may have avoided."

"Sometimes I wonder," Sin said slowly, his eyes narrowed. "What would have happened if my father hadn't been abandoned by his father, if he hadn't seen his mother and sisters slaughtered in front of him. Or... what would have happened had my mother not been sent here by her family."

"I think things would have been very different for you," Boyd said.

"I probably wouldn't have existed," Sin replied with a shrug. "If they had led normal lives, the events leading up to my conception wouldn't have occurred. He wouldn't have been a gun runner and she wouldn't have been a psychotic whore."

Boyd was silent a moment. For all the horrible things Sin had been through in his life, he couldn't help selfishly preferring that Sin still existed despite that rather than Sin never having been born in the first place.

"Probably," Boyd had to admit. "But the circumstances still could have happened without quite so much trauma. They could have each been in Hong Kong or somewhere else on their own and met by happenstance like my parents did."

"Do you know how they met?" he asked, looking over at Boyd finally.

Boyd watched Sin, taken in by that pale green gaze. "I know they met at the brothel when they were both young. And Emilio had some connections to the place."

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Sin nodded, his eyes still on Boyd. "Yes. The circumstances of them being in Hong Kong are directly related to the dysfunction of their lives but I don't know much more than that. He did not like to speak of her with me. I think it disturbed him."

"Why?"

There was only the briefest of hesitations before Sin said, matter of fact, "Because I was responsible for her death."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly, his gaze caught by Sin's. He knew what Sin was referring to but at the same time, he didn't think it would go over well to tell Sin. And he didn't know the story from Sin's side; he only knew what Emilio had told him. "What do you mean?"

"Remember what I told you?" Sin asked, his voice even despite the tension that had visibly wound its way into his body and face. "About what happened to me shortly before she died?"

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly as he recalled Sin talking about being raped and thrown in the cellar as a child. "Yes," he replied with a nod.

Sin studied him and raised his dark eyebrows slightly. "I knew that from that point my life would be a continuous cycle of johns and being beaten and locked in the cellar if I did not perform in a satisfactory manner. I knew I would not live long under those conditions so I decided to kill her."

A slight feeling of discomfort passed through Boyd, and he didn't know if it was more for the idea of Sin being stuck in that sort of lifestyle or if it was the fact that Sin really had been that calculating at that age. He didn't let it get to his expression, although his fingers twitched against his wrist and he couldn't help drawing his eyebrows down.

"How?" Boyd asked quietly.

"I poisoned her over a period of time," Sin replied emotionlessly, his eyes boring into Boyd's.

Part of Boyd wanted to look away from Sin's eyes but he couldn't make himself. "How long?"

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"Does it matter?" Sin asked, his eyebrows rising slightly. "Will the amount of planning make it less difficult for you to hear?"

"I don't know," Boyd said honestly, shaking his head. "I just... don't entirely understand." His eyes were intense with mild disquiet yet at the same time something like sadness as he studied Sin. "You were so young, Hsin... Why did you think to poison her rather than anything else? Why didn't you just run away?"

"Because I didn't want the chance of her following me or making them find me. She was obsessed with my father and in turn, obsessed with me because I look like him. She couldn't have him but I was hers."

Boyd studied Sin intently, his eyes narrowing slightly as he ran the words through his mind. He wasn't really surprised by Sin's answer. Although the idea of Sin committing premeditated matricide, especially at such a young age, had been disturbing the first time Boyd had learned of it from Emilio, he'd since had time to think about it more.

He'd always known Sin had to have had a good reason for doing it; even with Sin's violent upbringing, Boyd knew that at his heart Sin was not a cruel person, that he wasn't prone to unnecessarily harming others. Although it was possible Sin had been completely different as a child, Boyd hadn't thought that was the case.

What had been difficult for Boyd to fully understand had been the distinction between Sin violently responding one day and killing her versus being intelligent and coldly logical enough to know to poison her over time; to watch her deteriorate and continue regardless.

There was a huge difference between snapping one day and killing someone in a few heated moments, and planning someone's death and not stopping even if there was still time during the course of it. One way could happen to anyone; the other way required a far more cunning mind.

He had begun to wonder why exactly Sin had poisoned her. Had it been one of many choices he'd gone through and he'd decided it was best or least detectable? Or had he simply run across poison one day and tried to poison her without thinking, and when she remained alive he continued to poison her in an act of desperation to get out of that life?

He'd been wondering since talking to Emilio what role everyone had ended up playing in Sin's mother's death. He'd wondered how far Sin had felt pushed and how he hadn't felt

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there were any other options. And especially after Sin mentioned his mother's obsession with Emilio, Boyd could see what had been going through Sin's mind.

Even in the few months Emilio had been back, Boyd had seen how people behaved around the older man. People somehow seemed very taken with him and more than one person acted in a way that seemed out of character once lust for Emilio became involved.

Boyd knew that Sin's mother had been deranged and he could only imagine those reactions had been even worse with her. He also knew that because Sin and Emilio looked so similar, someone could use one in fantasies about the other such as Lydia had.

So the sad truth was Sin was right; she probably would have chased him down. And Sin had been so young and unique... Most likely, he either would have met a worse fate on the streets or they would have tracked him down and dragged him back, making it even more traumatizing for him once he was back in their control.

For as disturbing and sad as it was, killing his mother had probably seemed like the safest and best solution to Sin.

After a moment of silence, Boyd's eyebrows twitched down as he continued to meet Sin's eyes. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I was thinking about it," Sin said as he shifted into an upright position. "And I'm tired of being afraid of what you'll think of me. Either you'll accept me or you won't."

Boyd shook his head. "It doesn't change anything." He searched Sin's expression and didn't hide his sincerity. "It doesn't make me happy for various reasons, including what you were going through and what would've happened otherwise. But you're still the same person to me."

Sin nodded, his gaze intense as he stared at Boyd and after a long moment he turned away. "I'm going to wash up while I have the chance. What did you have to tell me?"

"Oh." Boyd had nearly forgotten about that after Sin's confession. "I think Bo-Qin's a traitor."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "Okay?"

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"I think he has ties to CRS," Boyd explained, his eyebrows drawing down as a frown shadowed his features. "He was asking me earlier about Wei Jianli, whether he was here during the raid."

Boyd quirked his eyebrows and continued before Sin had to ask, "Turns out Wei Jianli is one of the highest officers in CRS. I can tell you after scouring through every hard drive that his name is not mentioned anywhere even once, and he's one of the people Shaoqing told me about but who I never mentioned to Xiaolian. The guards told me I was the only one who spoke to Shaoqing so there's no way he'd know that name short of one of the CRS prisoners telling him or him knowing ahead of time. He also seemed relieved when I said we hadn't found him here yet. Not to mention, I found it very suspect that he had Shaoqing killed before I was done with him."

"I found that odd as well. Even as overzealous and overprotective as he tries to appear, he has had enough experience with Di Zhi to understand the concept of a thorough investigation," Sin said calmly. "But we need real proof or confirmation before taking this to Xiaolian. She'll just get offended that we're claiming she married a double agent without having anything to back it up."

Boyd nodded, leaning back on his hands and stretching his legs out in front of him as he considered that. "It's possible we could try to get him on recording admitting something."

Sin leaned his bare back against the wall and studied Boyd for a moment. "The only plausible way to do that is to let him know that you know Xiaolian is just stringing us along and to express frustration and disgust with the scenario. If he's in CRS, he won't take long to jump on that. Even if Shaoqing was a sorry excuse for a double agent, his and Bo-Qin's goals are still the same: make powerful allies."

Boyd nodded again. "He'll be in late tonight so I'll try to catch him tomorrow."

Sin narrowed his eyes slightly, opened his mouth to say something before shrugging and looking at Boyd more directly. "You could try tonight. He'll be tired and less on guard. And also, it may help to imply that you are on a more... familiar level with him."

Boyd quirked his eyebrows, mildly surprised because it was one of the few times Sin referred to Boyd's valentine status even that directly and the first time it didn't seem to be some source of contention between them. It was also the first time he could recall Sin suggesting he use it. It was good to know his status wasn't coming between them anymore.

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Although he didn't relish the idea of this turning into anything like a valentine, it wasn't a bad suggestion based on the way Bo-Qin had seemed distracted or curious at times, and the subtle way his gaze had lingered on either of them.

"You want me to seduce him?"

Sin snorted discreetly. "I'd be surprised if you made it that far but implying that it's a possibility wouldn't be a bad idea. His responses to our alleged relationship have caught me on more than one occasion and even before this conversation I'd wondered if he was curious about the dynamics of a homosexual relationship because he was trying to picture himself in one."

Sin shrugged in an offhand way, tone matter-of-fact. "But on the other hand Bo-Qin doesn't strike me as the type of man to exchange information for sex, so any indication of you having interest in him shouldn't seem like a bribe so much as another factor that would get him to start talking to you in a less formal way."

Boyd leaned against the wall behind him and nodded, watching Sin thoughtfully. He couldn't deny the mild relief that Sin wasn't asking him to go very far.

"I can do that." Boyd tilted his head slightly and after a second a small, lightly teasing smirk played at his lips. "You know, he's been eyeing you as much as me. Am I getting this assignment because I'm the valentine or is it just that you don't want to do it?"

"It has nothing with wanting to do it. The last time I spoke to him I wasn't on very friendly terms and in addition to that, it wouldn't be believable if I tried."

"Why not?" Boyd asked curiously. "You don't think you could seduce someone?"

"Not at all," Sin replied with a shrug.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "What about Ivan? It didn't seem to take you terribly long to get involved with him."

"That was different." Sin made a face, looking disturbed. "We were friends, he implied he would like to be more, and that is all that occurred. There was no grand seduction on either side."

"Oh." Boyd shifted his gaze away casually, almost absently studying the door to the room as if he could see the rest of the building through it.

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Sin's explanation made sense yet at the same time, it didn't help the twinge that moved through him. He had to grow used to Ivan and Sin being together and it was really his own fault for bringing it up.

Still, he couldn't help thinking that it wouldn't be hard for Sin to seduce Boyd if it weren't for the circumstances. Sin had been doing a damn good job in the pool, even if he hadn't meant to.

"Anyway, I think he's going to be back late so I'll stay up for that," Boyd said with a shrug after a moment.

Sin watched Boyd for an extended moment, his eyes slightly narrowed before turning away fully. "There's no need to push it too far. If he is a traitor or mole, he's been isolated and closeted for many years. A mere indication of a future connection should be enough to spark his interest."

Boyd nodded and shrugged. "It's not like I want to fuck him anyway so I don't plan to try anything major. Like you said, an indication is probably enough. Even without the closeted aspect, I doubt he'd think it believable if I suddenly tried to sleep with him now since we've barely spoken the entirety of my time here."

Sin continued to stare at him before finally saying, "Good."

Boyd watched as Sin left the room. After the door shut behind him, Boyd let out a low breath and closed his eyes as he dropped his head back against the wall.

Part V

Even after Boyd had settled in the main room, hours passed before Bo-Qin arrived. Boyd had pulled out his palm computer and was passing the time with it when he finally heard the door open and he looked up to see Bo-Qin walking in. The potential Di Zhi traitor didn't look particularly tired despite the early hour.

Pausing with his thumb on the touch screen, Boyd lowered the palm computer toward his lap and nodded in casual greeting to Bo-Qin. "Hey."

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"What are you doing here at this time?" Bo-Qin asked with a frown.

Boyd made a face and tilted his head toward the closed door to his shared room. "I couldn't sleep so I thought playing mindless games might bore me enough to get tired." He gestured with the handheld computer.

"You could have finished your work instead," Bo-Qin replied flatly, standing by the door and not moving closer.

"I probably should have," Boyd agreed, a frown crossing his face. He set the computer in his lap and leaned back against the wall he was sitting against. "But I still have a few hours of work and I didn't want to risk waking myself up further. Plus, technically I'm supposed to be guarded and it seemed like a waste of the guards' time at night, when I would think they would want to worry more about escapes or attacks."

"Perhaps," Bo-Qin said gruffly, finally coming into the area and absently rolling his sleeves up both sinewy forearms as his eyes swept the room.

Boyd watched him a moment and then pulled his legs in, resting his arms casually on his knees. "How did the reports go?"

"Acceptable," Bo-Qin replied in the same tone as he moved further into the room, black eyes moving between the two shut doorways that led to what should have been the officer's quarters of CRS before he approached one of the small metal desks instead.

Boyd nodded and then said idly, "The men have seemed especially attentive this week. I'm sure they want to impress Xiaolian with the progress."

"I'm sure," Bo-Qin said in his typically clipped way but his eyes narrowed slightly as he sat down at the desk and pulled a portable computer from the bag he'd been carrying. He spent a couple of moments hooking the two computers up together before he began typing.

Despite the long day, he showed no signs of fatigue or interest in discontinuing his task.

Boyd was silent at first, casually returning his gaze to his palm computer as he flipped through a few screens. "That reminds me," he said, looking up again as he spoke. "Would you like my report on the computers now and the bunker report tomorrow? Or would you prefer if I provided them to you as one cohesive report?"

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"Have them both ready before I leave tomorrow."

"Alright. When will you be gone by?"

Bo-Qin didn't look up. "I am unsure as of now."

"I should be done by one at the latest tomorrow regardless," Boyd replied. "I hope that's okay."

Bo-Qin didn't respond and Boyd stretched his legs out in front of him, watching Bo-Qin and trying to determine what he could say to get Bo-Qin to engage in conversation long enough to get anywhere.

"Do you know if Xiaolian plans to stop by again?"

A muscle visibly ticked in Bo-Qin's cheek but his typing did not slow. It was the second time he'd had a reaction to her name and it made Boyd wonder if she was still railing against her husband for Shaoqing's early execution.

"I think she is taking this time to conduct business within Hong Kong. As you know, there are Di Zhi operations here and it is not always necessary for me to accompany her while she is attending to them."

"Xiaolian said you're really worried about her sometimes," Boyd said, setting the palm computer down next to him on the floor and tilting his head slightly. "Is it safe for her to go alone?"

Bo-Qin's dark eyes rose from the computer and he stared at Boyd for a long moment before giving a very decisive, "No. It is not. But despite the near life threatening injuries my wife has sustained through the years, she has not realized yet that she is quite mortal."

Boyd nodded and drew his eyebrows down. "Did she ignore your recommendation for guards like she's done back at the base?"

"I am unsure of that but I gave orders for them to not leave her unattended especially now that potentially hostile forces may be flooding the city when the news of CRS collapse gets out," he replied flatly.

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Boyd nodded again. "It's very possible. I would order the same were I you." He shifted and pulled some hair behind his ear, a faint frown crossing his face. His tone was nonjudgmental, more an observation than anything, when he continued. "It must be frustrating the times she does go against them when you only have her best interest in mind."

"It is frustrating any time a relative ignores advice," Bo-Qin agreed without looking up. "She at least will be taking a small convoy with her on her brief return trip to Luoyang tomorrow. I was surprised that she permitted that much. I am well aware that Xiaolian is a master of her own destiny and will not allow even a loved one to control her decisions."

"Has she been like that the whole time you've known her?" Boyd asked curiously.

"Yes. She has always been very independent. When her father was killed, she became even more so."

"Considering how independent she is, I'm a little surprised she got married," Boyd said, watching Bo-Qin thoughtfully.

Bo-Qin looked at Boyd in consideration. "I appreciate your honesty about that and I admit that I was also surprised. She did not agree right away, however. It took time for her to adjust to the idea and I am still unsure if she has fully accepted it years later."

"How did you two meet?" Boyd asked.

"I was a young student," Bi replied with a contemplative frown, as if mentally going back to that time. There was a shift in his demeanor as Boyd inquired more about him as a person instead of him as a soldier of Di Zhi. If he was indeed a traitor it made sense since someone was showing interest in him specifically when he was typically surrounded by people who only saw him as a tool of an organization he wasn't truly a part of.

"I was disillusioned of our government and I met Xiaolian at a rally. My family disappeared at this same rally when the police force began to make arrests. I never spoke to them again and Xiaolian supported me. We became close and I joined her father's organization. He approved of my dedication but not our love for each other."

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"Why not?" Boyd asked, actually finding himself mildly intrigued. Even not taking into account Bo-Qin being a traitor, the interaction between Xiaolian and Bo-Qin was interesting to him and it made him wonder what their story was.

"He did not have a son and so he raised Xiaolian as if she were his son. He did not approve of her having romances and thought a connection or marriage would weaken her position and authority if she were to take control."

Boyd drew his legs in to sit cross-legged, his wrists resting on his knees and a faint frown crossing his face. It was unsurprising that Xiaolian, being a woman, had been held to higher standards.

If she'd been a man, being married probably wouldn't be as big of a deal as a woman, because no doubt some people would think she was influenced by her husband. Not to mention the possibility of pregnancy, which would probably compromise her in their eyes. It made Boyd wonder briefly what it would have been like if Ton had stayed.

"How did you two manage to stay together, then?"

"Her father died," Bo-Qin replied bluntly.

Boyd nodded. "So you proposed to her sometime after that?"

Bo-Qin stared at him for a moment before responding. "Why are you interested in these details?"

"I'm just curious." Boyd shrugged, dropping his head back against the wall and watching Bo-Qin with a seemingly open expression, doing his best to make it seem like he wasn't hiding anything. The fact that there was some truth to his words helped. "I've been around all of you for almost a month now and I realized I don't know much about either of you. And while Hsin's or my sex life is apparently open for discussion, I didn't even know much at all about anything to do with your marriage. Xiaolian's independence combined with your protective concern is intriguing so it just made me wonder how you got together."

Bo-Qin looked at him for a long moment before sitting back in the chair and threading his fingers together. "If you are very interested, to be blunt, her interest was merely sexual gratification at first but we grew close after the death of her father and that is when we decided to marry."

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Boyd considered Bo-Qin for a moment. "If you don't mind me asking, did you love her? Or was it similar reasons for you?"

"My feelings for her have always been the same," Bo-Qin replied tonelessly, although he gave Boyd a long, considering look. "Why are you so intrigued by relationships and love? It is as though I am talking to a school girl."

Boyd chuckled and he shook his head. "No real reason," he said offhandedly. "Maybe I just find long-term relationships to be interesting because I've never been in one or seen one that works well without getting fucked up in the end. Sometimes it seems like people are incapable of normal relationships anymore."

In truth, he was curious about Bo-Qin's feelings for Xiaolian and why he would potentially be willing to betray her. Because of that, Bo-Qin's answer was interesting in that he didn't actually express any affection for her.

There was a brief stretch of silence before Bo-Qin briefly looked away. His tone was overly casual when he asked, "And what is your arrangement with Hsin?"

Boyd shrugged. He was pleased to see Bo-Qin show some interest because that could help lead into the implication later, and he doubted Sin would care if their past relationship was used as a segue. "We were sleeping together for several months about a year ago."

"I see." Another pause. "Why did it cease?"

Boyd made a face even though Bo-Qin wasn't looking. "Shit happened, like it always does. We had a fall out and we basically decided to end it because it was too distracting."

"That does not sound like you were merely sleeping together," Bo-Qin observed as he looked over at Boyd again out of the corner of his eye.

"I had a thing for him for a bit," Boyd agreed with a one-shouldered shrug. "It went away with time."

"He does not seem gay to me."

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"He's not," Boyd said in idle agreement. "He's mostly interested in women, although sometimes he gets with men. We fucked around mostly because we were around each other so much and I'm gay, so it was a natural step for me."

Bo-Qin looked up from his calm appraisal of whatever he was working on and stared at Boyd outright this time. "That does not seem natural to me at all."

Boyd shrugged. "It is for me," he said honestly. "I'm not attracted to women and have no desire to force myself to be with them. I didn't think about what I was for a long time, even though I'd only been with another man, but in the last few years I realized I like men and that's it."

"I see."

Bo-Qin did not say more and Boyd let a pause briefly fall between them. "Does it bother you that I'm gay?"

"No. I am just unfamiliar with such a bold attitude on the subject."

Boyd made a thoughtful noise deep in his throat. "I imagine groups like yours are pretty similar to where I work. Not many people are openly gay so there aren't a lot of people who will talk about it."

"Or maybe many people are simply not gay," Bo-Qin replied with a frown, focusing his attention solely on Boyd. "It is not so normal as you make it sound."

"Well, I would agree that most people aren't gay," Boyd said easily. "I just meant that of the ones who are, some may not be comfortable being open about it. I know several gay men where I work, some of whom are very adept at keeping it hidden. So there may be more than you think even in Di Zhi."

"Maybe," Bo-Qin said shortly, looking back down at his computer studiously as his eyebrows drew together. He looked agitated by the direction the conversation was going, his face appearing slightly flushed, but when he spoke again his tone was sarcastic. "What concern is it of yours even if there were? Is your sexual drive so strong that you seek lovers on extended missions?"

"Sure, I'd take a lover on a long mission," Boyd replied casually with a shrug. "Why not?"

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Bo-Qin shrugged stiffly, although he said, "I suppose there is nothing to stop you."

"That's the way I figure it," Boyd agreed mildly, then grabbed his palm computer off the floor and flipped between screens, although he discreetly kept Bo-Qin in his peripheral vision. He paused as if a thought had just occurred to him, then continued idly, "Actually, come to think of it, I think one of the prisoners is gay. Not that I plan to go after him, of course. But did you meet Li Jiang?"

Bo-Qin continued to stare pointedly at the screen although it was becoming clear that he couldn't concentrate by the way his gaze kept flicking back to Boyd, black eyes observing him carefully. He answered very belatedly. "No."

"Oh. Well, he is."

Boyd was quiet a moment as he played hangman on the screen, choosing letters and watching the word spread across the right side while a little stick figure was drawn a body part at a time when he guessed incorrectly. He continued to pay close attention to Bo-Qin but pretended he wasn't. He tilted his head subtly so his hair would fall forward, giving him the chance to pull it back again, pursing his lips faintly in the process as if he was thinking hard for the game or mildly exasperated by how his hair continued to fall into his eyes.

"From what I can tell of the records and Hsin's notes, he seems like he's pretty well-connected here," he continued in a slightly absent tone without looking up. "He was probably on his way to captain position in the next year or so."

Bo-Qin didn't say anything and didn't even seem to be really paying attention to the words now that they'd turned back to the topics of Di Zhi and CRS. His eyebrows were drawn together and he had a distracted frown on his face as he glared at the screen of his computer.

"But I think of all of them, Zhang Longwei was next in line," Boyd said, watching the game reset when he correctly guessed the word.

Bo-Qin grew very still and his fingers froze over the keyboard.

His face remained down turned, although his eyes rose to stare directly at Boyd for a very long moment before he shifted and schooled his expression back into forced neutrality. But it didn't work entirely because irritation shone in his onyx-colored eyes. Boyd didn't know if the other man was angry that the name had been mentioned at all or

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about the fact that Bo-Qin had allowed himself to become distracted enough to have such a genuine response to it.

"He is here?" he asked after a moment, his words stilted. "I mean, I did not know we had captured such high-ranking members."

"Yeah," Boyd replied off-handedly, choosing a letter for the next game and then finally flicking his eyes up to Bo-Qin. He rose his eyebrows slightly, his expression mild as he acted as though he hadn't noticed the oddity. "I guess we have a few but he's the highest."

Bo-Qin nodded sharply, the distracted expression completely gone from his face now and replaced with careful indifference. "I see."

It almost seemed as though Bo-Qin wanted to say something more and his jaw twitched oddly as though he were physically forcing himself not to speak. After a moment he began unhooking the computers.

Boyd paused, his thumb hovering over the keyboard on the touch screen. He tilted his head, his honey brown gaze idly running over Bo-Qin's movements before rising to his face. "Going to sleep?"

"Yes." Bo-Qin picked up his bag and computer and then stared hard at Boyd for a long moment before turning resolutely to disappear into the empty room. The room that had once belonged to Zhang Longwei.

Boyd watched Bo-Qin leave and waited until a few moments after the door shut behind the other man before he silently turned his palm computer off and left the building.

For the second time that night he walked into the main building where Sin had been spending the majority of the week interrogating and compiling interviews. When he didn't find Sin in the office, he headed toward the main interrogation room and found Ton standing at attention outside. He paused near Ton and then glanced toward the closed door.

"Hey Jimmy," Boyd greeted Ton calmly. "Is Hsin in there?"

"Yes. I think he's almost done," Ton replied, jerking his head towards the door. He had his customary dark sunglasses on despite the fact that he was in a relatively dimly lit hallway.

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Boyd nodded. "How long has he been in there?"

"Maybe half an hour. He's pretty quick about getting through them. It's impressive," Ton noted. Despite the fact that it was a compliment, his voice was typically bland.

The comment made Boyd automatically glance at the small window in the door but from his angle, he didn't see Sin.

He couldn't help wondering how often Sin had interrogated people in the past to be that efficient. He didn't remember Sin mentioning having had to do so; it was almost strange to think about because Sin didn't often interact directly with the people they had to deal with on assignments.

It had taken hours for Boyd to get past the initial bout of semi-useful information and move on to the first major piece from Shaoqing, which wasn't really a fair comparison to what Sin was doing since he mostly needed to assess the prisoners for usefulness and background. Even so, the speed with which he could do that was impressive and just showed that, once again, there was something that Sin could excel at to the point of making everyone around him seem slow.

In the past, the consistency of Sin outperforming everyone sometimes made Boyd feel resentful, because a job that would exceed standards around anyone else could seem incompetent next to Sin, but in this case he felt a strange sense of intrigue and almost pride in his partner. Not because Sin was excelling as an interrogator but rather because Sin was just that good at everything he did.

He looked over at Ton again. "How many does he have left; do you know?"

"Maybe less than a dozen."

Boyd nodded and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms loosely as he waited. "I guess I'll keep you company until he comes out, then."

"I'm sure it'll be exhilarating for you."

An amused smile pulled at Boyd's lips. "I'm sure I'll find plenty of ways to entertain myself if you fail to deliver."

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"I'll definitely fail. Mostly because I won't even try," Ton deadpanned, eyebrows rising slightly over his sunglasses.

"Oh, I'm sure I can thwart you with that," Boyd returned mildly, his smile turning into a smirk. "Maybe I'll entertain myself by staring at you looking for minute changes. You'll have to succeed, then; if you do nothing, I win, and if you do something, I win. I don't know about you, but I like those odds."

Ton shrugged uncaringly although his mouth quirked.

There was a beat of silence before Boyd tilted his head toward the dim hallway. "What's with those dark sunglasses all the time, by the way?"

"They look cool," Ton said, matter of fact.

Boyd stared at Ton for a portion of a second, maybe waiting to see if it was a joke. But it quickly became apparent Ton was serious, and Boyd burst out laughing. "That's your only reason?"

Ton shrugged calmly although a definite smirk ghosted around his mouth. "Yes. What did you think my reasoning was?"

"I don't know," Boyd said, grinning and still chuckling as he shook his head. "Something deeper or more practical. I didn't peg you as a fashionista."

The door to the interview room opened and Sin stepped out just as Ton cracked a full smile. Sin stared at him before looking over at Boyd and making a face. "Fast friends all of a sudden, are we?"

Boyd smiled briefly at Sin and pushed away from the wall, the amusement fading as he became more serious. "I was just waiting for you."

Ton straightened and seemed to sense that the conversation was about to become business again as he studiously looked in the opposite direction.

Sin studied Boyd for a moment before walking a few steps away from Ton as the door to the interview room opened and a tired-looking middle-aged man was led away by another member of Di Zhi.

"What's up?" Sin asked, not looking at the man.

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"Have you done Zhang Longwei yet?" Boyd asked quietly so his voice wouldn't carry.

"No, I was hoping to get through all of the lower ranked people first. It would make more of an impression if his entire base is either dead or a turncoat," Sin replied.

Boyd nodded, glancing briefly at Ton before returning to Sin. He spoke in an undertone that only Sin would be able to hear. "When you deal with him, you should interrogate him about Bo-Qin. I think they know each other."

Sin raised his eyebrows slightly. "Do you have anything substantial?"

"He reacted strongly to his name when I mentioned it," Boyd replied, tilting his head. "He didn't do anything overt or say anything specific but it was the first real rise I got out of him."

Sin looked over at Ton and said shortly, "Have them bring in Zhang."

Ton nodded and began issuing orders into his comm unit as Sin turned back to Boyd with an inquiring stare. "How did the rest of it go?"

"Fine," Boyd said with a shrug. He shifted closer to Sin to continue the quiet conversation with Ton's voice in the background down the hallway. "It was difficult to get him engaged in a conversation at first but he became distracted around the time the topic of my sexuality came up."

"Did he seem interested?"

"I think so," Boyd said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "He seemed a little flustered by the end of the conversation."

"I see." Sin stared at him silently for a stretch and during that time, two Di Zhi agents led the man Boyd presumed to be Zhang down the hallway and to the room.

Boyd glanced over and watched Zhang disappear, the door shutting firmly behind him, before he looked at his partner. "Anyway, you were right; I didn't have to do anything. I just implied. I never even came within reaching distance."

Another pause and then Sin said, "Good."

Interludes

With that, he turned and followed Zhang inside.

Boyd watched Sin disappear into the room. That was the second time Sin had said 'good' in relation to Boyd not intending to have any sexual relations with Bo-Qin but he didn't really know how to interpret it, especially in context of Sin's earlier reply when Boyd had briefly wondered whether something more was going on. It wasn't important at the moment so he dismissed it.

He moved closer to the door and watched through the window from a better angle this time so he could see Sin.

He could only faintly hear voices inside and he couldn't make out anything that was said; all he could discern was tone, and even that was by concentrating on it. He watched as Sin began questioning Zhang Longwei, who at first seemed dead set on remaining silent.

Sin didn't specifically change his mannerisms as far as Boyd could tell, yet somehow it seemed more intense seeing it in terms of an interrogation. It was obvious that Sin was a dangerous man; the power in his frame could be seen without him having to be overt because it was in the way he held himself, in his confidence.

Boyd knew Sin well enough to be able to see when he was making a threat or otherwise being especially serious, and even during those times Sin's faintly-heard voice sounded calm, quiet. He didn't need to bluster or yell; he didn't need to do anything overt. There was no question when looking at him that this was a man who could and would follow through.

As Boyd watched, he couldn't help running his gaze briefly along Sin's strong back, the hard lines of his broad shoulders and the sleekness of his muscles when he moved. When Sin's face was turned to the side and his calm, undeniably dangerous green eyes flicked along Zhang, Boyd was captivated.

As morbid as it was, watching Sin in such a role just reminded Boyd even more of how attracted he was to Sin. He liked the danger of Sin; the knowledge that there was no question he was so powerful that he could do anything he wanted.

Sin's strength was almost understated yet so inherent in him that it made Boyd remember even more what it had been like to be with him; how intense and sometimes nearly out of control it had felt-- How Sin could overwhelm Boyd and spark a passion, a lust within him that he never felt as powerfully as he did with his partner.

Interludes

It wasn't only a lust for physical pleasure. As much as he missed the incredible sex with Sin, what it ultimately came down to was that in all aspects, Sin had truly made Boyd feel alive in a way he knew no one else would ever be able to match.

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he looked away from the interrogation room, glancing past a straight-faced Ton. Boyd shifted so he could lean against the wall next to the door, crossing his arms and moving his feet out partially in front of him as his gaze rested blankly on the wall across the hallway. His expression settled into calm indifference. He saw no reason to obsess about what he missed about Sin or why. It ultimately served no purpose and was liable to just make it that much more difficult to interact.

He waited patiently for Sin to finish, wondering what exactly was being said in there and how Sin was doing. He felt bad about asking Sin to interrogate this man regarding Bo-Qin, yet from the mostly quiet conversation he could hear occurring he suspected that nothing particularly traumatizing was occurring on Sin's end. Zhang, on the other hand, was likely going to end up so intimidated he would hopefully spill everything.

Nearly an hour passed until the door finally opened and Sin reappeared in the hallway. Boyd pushed himself away from the wall and looked at Sin expectantly.

Sin stared at him, his mouth set and eyes narrowed. "We have a problem."

Boyd dropped his arms to his sides. "What's wrong?"

"Zhang was something of a mentor to Bo-Qin before Bo-Qin was sent off to infiltrate Di Zhi. In the past few hours Bo-Qin visited Zhang and advised him to agree to join with Di Zhi instead of an immediate execution because, as far as Bo-Qin alluded to in the discussion with him, Xiaolian will never be returning to Luoyang. He is planning something in the near future; a takeover of Di Zhi now that he is firmly in place as her husband and second in command."

Boyd's eyebrows rose. He wasn't particularly surprised by the verification that Bo-Qin had something planned but that meant they had to act quickly. "We have to tell her tonight."

Sin nodded shortly and started to turn towards the direction of the exit.

Boyd caught Sin by the forearm, his hand briefly sliding along Sin's bare skin. "Hsin," he said quietly.

Interludes

Sin paused and looked back at Boyd questioningly.

"Are you okay?" Boyd tilted his head subtly toward the interrogation room, not hiding his mild concern as he met Sin's eyes. "You've been at this for hours and I know some aspects were upsetting to you. You could go back to the room. I can tell her alone..."

Sin gave him a faint smile that quickly ghosted away from his face. "It's better to get this over with and we likely will be making moves very soon against Bo-Qin and whatever other people he has nearby."

Boyd nodded and let his hand drop away. "Okay." He followed Sin as he headed toward the exit.

===

The space they were led to in Hong Kong was as nondescript as the building that served as the Di Zhi base in Luoyang. Boyd didn't know if the place was an actual base or just an apartment that Xiaolian temporarily inhabited and the escort of Di Zhi agents did not tell them one way or the other.

The apartment was above a store and they took a narrow staircase up before stopping in front of a battered metal doorway. One of the men in their escort knocked briefly on the door, said something in Mandarin and the door opened from the inside.

They were led toward the main room where they saw that Xiaolian was already waiting for them.

She was wearing black cotton pants and a white t-shirt, looking very casual and not at all like a woman who was currently orchestrating the hostile takeover of a rival organization.

"So, my life is in danger?" she asked curiously, not looking very concerned.

"Probably tomorrow," Boyd agreed, crossing his arms and watching her seriously. "We have proof that you're being betrayed."

She raised an eyebrow but some of the nonchalance left her expression as her eyes hardened. "Do you."

Interludes

Sin pulled a small device out of the pocket of his black jacket and set it on the table in front of Xiaolian. "Listen to it."

She stared at them for an extended stretch of time before leaning forward and turning on the small digital recorder. She picked it up and an image appeared on the small screen; an image of Sin and Zhang.

The next forty-five minutes passed with complete silence between the trio as they listened to the interrogation play out. Boyd watched Xiaolian's face the entire time, taking in the way her eyes narrowed into slits when the initial line of questioning about Bo-Qin began.

They listened to Sin's low deadly voice as he lied to Zhang, informing him that Bo-Qin had been caught in the act of assassination and claiming that Zhang had been implicated in the plot. Zhang responded harshly, informing Sin that he would rather die than tell him anything but after ten minutes of Sin detailing in a cold, empty voice what exactly would be done to Zhang, Zhang's clearly terrified voice began singing the whole tale.

Xiaolian's hands tightened into white-knuckled fists as Zhang informed Sin that Bo-Qin had always been a mole. A CRS source had spotted Xiaolian at the demonstration so many years ago and sent Bo-Qin in to attract her attention, knowing that the Di Zhi heir had a fondness for attractive young activists.

Her nose flared and she sat up straight but when Zhang confessed that it had been Bo-Qin that killed Xiaolian's father, she clutched the panel so hard that Boyd thought it might crack in half. When the interview was complete, her eyes rose and bore into the two of them like bolts of fire.

"I must admit," she said in a dark tone. "I began to have my own suspicions after Shaoqing's untimely execution, although it was faint and at the back of my mind, something I did not truly want to believe. But it seemed odd. Bo-Qin has always been overprotective but to make such an error, he would have had to have been extremely stupid."

Xiaolian stood and turned away, walking calmly to the window and looking out with her eyes narrowed. "But I would have never expected the depth of his treachery."

Interludes

Boyd was silent a moment and then shook his head. "I'm sorry it turned out this way but we had our own doubts. And when he made comments to me that seemed especially suspicious, we had to follow through."

"Such as?" she asked with an edge, obviously impatient to hear the details.

"He asked me whether Wei Jianli had been at the base at the time of the raid," Boyd explained, watching her closely. "That was a name Shaoqing had given me in connection to CRS, but I hadn't relayed the name to you. And the guard told me no one spoke to Shaoqing before he was executed so there was no way he would know."

Xiaolian turned and stared at Boyd again.

"Between that and the way he'd dealt with Shaoqing, we suspected he was a traitor," Boyd continued frankly. "So I engaged him in conversation later to see if I could get any information from him. He didn't give much away but when he became distracted and I mentioned Zhang's name, intending to try some of the higher-level names to see what he did, he reacted. He went still, then seemed irritated with himself, and tried to cover it by saying he hadn't realized such high-ranking officers were in custody. I suspected they somehow knew each other so I asked Sin to talk to Zhang about Bo-Qin."

Xiaolian's appraising gaze turned to Sin. "Quite the efficient interrogator, Hsin," she said in a clipped voice.

Sin just looked at her and she turned away again, looking out the window again. "Who else have you told?" she asked coldly.

"No one," Boyd replied, glancing briefly toward Sin before returning his gaze to Xiaolian. "We came to you first."

She nodded and crossed her arms loosely over her chest. "Do you understand that this must not get out?"

"Of course," Sin piped up flatly. "If your men found out you've been fucking a mole for over a decade, I don't think they'll be so quick to worship you anymore, would they?"

Once again Xiaolian turned around and stared hard at Sin. He just arched his eyebrows at her with a smirk.

"You will not tell them," she said in a dangerous voice, eyes narrowing.

Interludes

Sin shrugged. "Maybe we won't. It depends a lot on you, doesn't it?"

Xiaolian looked at Boyd before her eyes slid back to Sin. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you've been stringing us along for weeks and I know you never had any intentions of working with the Agency," Sin replied matter-of-fact.

Boyd looked over at Sin but his expression remained calm despite the fact that he hadn't known Sin was going to say that. He wasn't surprised by Sin's reaction and he also didn't doubt that Sin was right to some extent, so he stayed silent.

"I could have both of you killed now," she responded in the same low, deadly voice.

"And would, in effect, be declaring war on the Agency," Sin replied, unconcerned. "If you could succeed, anyway. Which is doubtful. I could wipe this entire building of your people and likely come out "

Xiaolian didn't seem surprised by the response and she tilted her head in consideration. "We find ourselves in a conundrum, do we not?"

"You do," Sin agreed. "For me, the options are quite clear."

There was another tense silence and once again Xiaolian observed them both. "I will contact your Agency and agree to negotiations, but nothing more for now. You cannot possibly expect me to agree to full cooperation without discussing the terms in detail with your superiors."

"And in return," Sin replied. "We don't inform your men or anyone else that I wasn't the only one to have you blinded."

"It is done," Xiaolian said flatly.

"Good," Boyd said smoothly, raising his eyebrows slightly as he tilted his head. "Then we will alert the Agency to begin transport for us to return home."

She nodded briskly and a flash of relief flitted across her face, likely glad to be rid of them and happy to have the individuals with the knowledge of Bo-Qin's betrayal to be half a world away.

Interludes

Xiaolian touched the ear unit she wore, her eyes never leaving them.

"Ton," she said quietly. "It seems my husband is a traitor."

There was a brief moment of silence and Xiaolian didn't look away as she said, "I want him executed and disposed of at once."

Executive Decision

Carhart waited impatiently as Henry hunched over his computer and input a variety of passwords that would lead him to the file that Carhart was trying to access.

"It's just that it was *just* finished uploading," Henry muttered with a slight frown, shaking his head. "Or maybe not. It's probably still streaming since it's a mission in progress."

"The mission is over," Carhart barked at the younger man, glaring down at him impatiently as anxiety and irritation overwhelmed him. "He's en route back to the Agency as we speak. Now stop moaning and get me a copy of that fucking file. The Marshal wants answers now."

Henry looked up at him with widened grey eyes and nodded quickly. "Yes, Sir."

The process took another twenty minutes before Carhart was exiting Data Retrieval with a small disc in one clenched hand. In his opinion it had been twenty minutes too long. He would have expected one of Emilio's admirers to move faster for something regarding him but it was also possible that Henry had stalled thinking he was doing the senior agent a favor.

Carhart sneered. People were so annoying and stupid when it came to Emilio.

He ignored everyone as he took the stairs up to his office.

Victoria, his new admin, sat up straight as he stormed past. She tried to get his attention but Carhart didn't acknowledge the girl and slammed his door shut without a backward glance. If she knew what was good for her, she'd pick up on his mood and leave him alone but Victoria wasn't nearly as well-versed in reading him as Amy had been. Not for

Interludes

the first time Carhart gritted his teeth in frustration as he thought about the death of his former administrative assistant.

Completely and utterly pointless. A waste.

Her accidental suicide didn't make any sense to him. Suicides rarely did. But Annabelle had tried to explain to him that Amy had suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder following the raid and that Amy's intense paranoia had led to her mixing a dangerous cocktail of anxiety and sleep medication. The fact that she'd apparently washed it down with vodka hadn't helped.

Irritated by the thoughts, Carhart backtracked across his office and locked the door. That would keep Victoria away and if she started paging him, he couldn't be held responsible for his actions. He didn't even know why she was here this early, or this late, but then again admins for higher-tiered officers did almost as much work if not more than their bosses.

It was four in the morning and he hadn't slept for nearly two days but exhaustion was the farthest thing from his mind as he popped the disc into his computer and began going over the recording of a mission that had left two field agents dead in combat and a sole survivor who was charged with killing the third.

Carhart wondered if he'd feel the same sense of anxious urgency if that survivor had been someone other than Emilio.

Angelo Morales, Elaine Guerrero and Katarina Jones were all dead and Vivienne had demanded that Carhart find out how and why it had happened. General Hughes was demanding that Emilio be thrown in a cell on the Fourth as soon as he returned, because of the unauthorized execution of a fellow field agent.

A field agent who Hughes had been pushing to be promoted to level 9.

The mission should have been straightforward, or at least that was what Carhart had surmised from a quick once over of the mission outline and details. A storm at an alleged terrorist facility. They were to retrieve information that would hopefully lead them to Red Dawn's main base of operations and destroy the facility which appeared to be a test lab of various biological weapons.

The mission had been given a twenty minute estimated completion window and Carhart was awed that so much could go wrong within such a short amount of time.

Interludes

Emilio had been running the team and had remained in the van at the start of it all.

Carhart started the mix of audio and video recording and listened as Emilio's deep voice issued curt orders to the three level 8 field ops he'd been assigned for the storm.

Carhart ignored the undertones of Elaine's responses to Emilio and the fact that she'd been apparently trying to speak to him on a hidden channel during the first six minutes of the mission.

Irritation spiked in Carhart at that; annoyed that he'd been so wrong about Elaine's character and professionalism from the start. He'd been hoping that she'd learned her lesson after that unfortunate morning in his apartment but apparently not.

But he supposed it didn't matter anymore. She was dead.

Emilio's voice had sounded impatient from the start, irritated and obviously doubting the capability of his team. It wasn't surprising; he didn't trust a lot of the younger field agents and had likely been displeased by having to run a storm with no level 9's whatsoever. Especially with terrorist and insurgent activity spiking up like wildfire around the globe and the Agency currently spread thin.

Everything appeared to be going smoothly for the first eight minutes of the mission and Carhart listened carefully to everything that happened as anxiety gnawed at his stomach. The critical moment in the mission was quickly arriving.

"Kat," Emilio's voice barked harshly, cutting through the silence of the recording abruptly. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Kat didn't respond and after ten seconds, Emilio demanded, "Angelo-- is Katarina in your line of sight?"

"No," Angelo answered automatically. The sounds of footsteps running echoed over his voice as he spoke. "But I'll turn back."

Carhart's eyes narrowed.

"I'm hearing a lot of activity all of a sudden," Elaine's voice interrupted abruptly. "Emilio, what's going on?"

Interludes

"The idiot is in an unprotected channel," Emilio's voice growled over the comm.

Carhart brought his head to his hands, massaging his forehead wearily. He closed his eyes and imagined what Emilio had seen on the screen as he monitored his team's locations from the van. He imagined watching the blip that signified Katarina's position moving about as she unwittingly transmitted a signal that would put the protective zone of the facility on high alert. She may as well have raised a giant red flag and waved it around to show where they were.

"Abort," Emilio commanded suddenly.

"Katarina's going to be surrounded!" Elaine shouted over nearby gunshots. "They swarmed in on her!"

"Don't assist."

"I can get her," Elaine insisted.

"I said fucking abort!"

Elaine's comm briefly transmitted but all that could be heard over it was labored breathing, a frenzy of gunshots and then abrupt static.

Silence.

Carhart threaded his fingers through his hair. He listened as Emilio exchanged curt words with Angelo and Carhart didn't open his eyes again until he knew that the video recording of Emilio's movements would be on the screen. For a moment Carhart felt the anxiety move through him violently as he watched, wondering what he would see.

For the first time, he worried that Vivienne's decision to monitor Emilio's active missions throughout his entire probationary period would prove her suspicions correct: That Emilio was too spontaneous and too wild to remain a stable field agent for long. That his personality would always drive him to abandon protocol.

Carhart watched as the night blurred around Emilio as he ran out of the van and through the woods toward Red Dawn's facility. The General knew what his friend was doing-- he knew that he'd already written his entire team off for dead and now he was using them as a distraction to accomplish the mission.

Interludes

The entire outline had emphasized the element of surprise, of setting the explosives before engaging with hostiles because of their large presence on the base. Katarina's idiotic actions had made that impossible and now all Emilio could do was completely abort or use them all as bait.

As Carhart watched Emilio scale the side of the wall and cut the throat of one of the guard's stationed there, he had no delusions that Emilio was following through with the mission out of a sense of duty. As team leader he would be blamed for the massacre even if it wasn't his fault but if he completed the goal, there would be no real loss.

Three level 8 field agents were a small price to pay for information on Red Dawn. As Morgan had said months ago, field agents had a tendency to be expendable in the eyes of the Agency.

"Angelo's down. Heading for egress rou--" Katarina's voice was digitized and cut up before going out once again.

Carhart shook his head incredulously and watched as Emilio silently and efficiently killed seven hostiles, planting explosives on the way up to the lab. He was moving quickly and abandoning the original pattern of placing the bombs in his effort to retrieve the data before the guards caught up to Katarina and focused their attention elsewhere.

The General watched as Emilio's long, slim fingers moved dexterously over a keyboard, as he downloaded three large files, removed the disc and headed to the sole window in the empty lab. It'd likely been evacuated as soon as Red Dawn had set off their alert.

Emilio extracted a small matte black grappling hook from his belt and positioned it onto the now open window before jumping out and sliding down the side of the building stealthily. There was a thud as Emilio's boots touched the ground and a soft whooshing sound as he retracted the rope.

And just like that, Emilio had saved the mission.

Carhart had no idea why he did what he did next.

He watched as Emilio gunned down six more hostiles on his way out of the facility, running faster now that Red Dawn knew there was a fourth intruder. His feet pounded along the pavement before he scaled the wall athletically and disappeared into the cover of the trees.

Interludes

For several long moments Carhart could hear nothing but the rustling of leaves and Emilio's low breathing. He imagined that his former partner was leading his pursuers in a confusing zigzag pattern that would undoubtedly allow him to lose them and make it back to the van.

It worked.

The black van appeared in view and so did Katarina. She was bloody and her face was drawn but she was alive, unlike Angelo and Elaine.

"Senior Agent Veg--"

Emilio shot her in the head before she could finish the question and Carhart stared at the screen in dismay.

Emilio didn't make a sound as he yanked Katarina's comm unit out of her ear, got into the van and jumped into the driver's seat. As Emilio started the vehicle and left Katarina's corpse behind, Carhart shut the recording off abruptly and stared into space.

He tried to ignore the chill that slid down his spine at having to once again see Emilio kill someone in cold blood and focused instead on the facts.

Katarina had cost them the lives of two field agents and nearly cost them the mission entirely. If Emilio had been less skilled, she would have also cost them a valuable level 10. It was possible that her comm had been faulty but her failure to realize that the long stretches of silence amongst her teammates and team leader were abnormal wasn't anything more than careless stupidity. She should have realized it after the first full minute of not receiving orders or updates and switched back to the right channel or completely shut her comm off.

Carhart looked out the window, his bloodshot eyes focusing on the dim light of the rising sun.

He had no doubts that Vivienne would have had Katarina terminated had she made it back to the Agency alive. It was even likely they would have had her interrogated first to ensure that the slip hadn't been a deliberate act of a double agent which Carhart felt was unlikely but Vivienne would pursue because of her tendency for unrelenting thoroughness.

So where did that leave them?

Interludes

General Hughes was obviously fond of Katarina. The Spec Ops General had sung her praises on dozens of occasions to Carhart, citing her keen knowledge of explosives, her hacking abilities and solid success record as more than enough reason to promote her to level 9.

Carhart had always hesitated, thinking the girl was too immature mentally, too sensitive, too naive, but none of that mattered now. Hughes wouldn't be hounding him about the promotion anymore. The girl was dead and now Hughes would be hounding him for Emilio's blood.

Unauthorized execution of a fellow field agent indeed. Nevertheless, her execution would have occurred regardless and Emilio had likely saved her a lengthy torture by doing it himself, although Carhart sincerely doubted that Emilio had been thinking anything so generous when he'd pulled the trigger.

If anything his thoughts had probably been more along the lines of, 'You stupid bitch you nearly got me killed.'

Carhart shook his head, uploaded the file to Vivienne and turned away from his computer. He had no doubts that all Emilio would receive was a warning if he even got that. He'd accomplished the mission and that would be all Vivienne cared about. Hughes would just have to deal with it.

Carhart was just reaching for the phone to order the guards at Check-In to inform him as soon as Emilio arrived but before he could, a light tap sounded at the door.

The corners of his mouth sank down and he stood, striding across the room and swinging the door open to stare down at Victoria heatedly. He opened his mouth to yell at her but found that he couldn't do it. There was something about her cascades of silken blond hair, smoky cobalt eyes and plump red mouth that stopped him from coming down too hard on her.

She was ridiculously gorgeous, walking sex, and could probably get away with whatever she wanted if she really tried.

"What are you still doing here?" he demanded gruffly.

Victoria tilted her head to the side, adopting a confused look, and raised her arched eyebrows slightly. "General, I only got here an hour ago."

Interludes

He glared at her. "What the hell for?"

She smiled and brushed past him, breezing into the office with a small covered tray and setting it on his desk. She was wearing a black sleeveless one piece outfit that was adorned with metallic accents and studs. It looked to be something resembling a jumpsuit although the pants, or shorts, ended very high on her upper thighs. When she bent over to set down the tray, Carhart's eyes tracked down her body and watched as the backs of the shorts rose dangerously high, exposing the barest hint of her ass cheeks.

He couldn't decide if she looked ridiculous or ridiculously fuckable but it was apparent that she was taking full advantage of the late summer's surprising warmth. The climate had gradually warmed over the past couple years but it was the first time in nearly two decades that the northeast had hit a temperature of high 70s.

"I got in at three," she explained, taking the lid off the tray and pressing a button on it to activate the heating chip. There was a coffee pot and two mugs sitting on the tray although she removed the mugs and carefully placed them on coasters on his desk. "You have a video conference with Prince Khalid in an hour. Remember? You complained about high-maintenance Saudi royalty having no regard for time zones even though it's for their own political intrigue? You even debated blowing him off and leaving him to deal with his own plotting."

Carhart grimaced but didn't comment on the prince. Instead he pointed to the second mug. "I'm not in the mood for chit-chat."

Victoria rolled her large blue eyes, long lashes framing them as she flicked a piece of lint off her jumpsuit. "Why would I invite myself to coffee when you've never taken me up on my offer to take you out for drinks? I know when I'm not wanted."

Carhart ignored her little pout and the obviously suggestive tone and made a face. "I'm not in the mood for this, Victoria."

She sighed tragically. "It's for Agent Vega. I informed Ingrid in Check-In to ring you when Agent Vega arrived. I assumed you would bring him back up here and I know how phenomenally cranky you both can be when sleep deprived so..."

Maybe she wasn't as uselessly oblivious to his moods as he'd thought. "And how did you know that Agent Vega was involved?"

Interludes

Victoria shrugged modestly and held up a small handheld panel computer. "I was attempting to give you the notes I prepped for you for the conference with Khalid--"

"You prepped notes for me?" He stared at her.

"I just jotted down some of the things you'd said to ensure that you didn't forget with it being so early and all. You've only gotten about sixteen hours of sleep in the past two weeks, General Carhart. And I *know* you've been popping those caffeine pills. Eric in Medical sent you a memo pretty much cutting you off--"

Carhart snatched the panel and thumbed through the document on the touch screen, ignoring the irritation that coursed through him. If he decided to down an entire bottle of energy pills it wouldn't matter to anyone as long as he got the job done so Eric needed to mind his own goddamn business.

"Anyway," Victoria went on, watching him curiously as she continued her story. She looked pleased when he nodded in approval at her bullet-pointed notes. "You looked so pissed off that I figured something must have happened. I went into the system and scanned a few of the active missions and saw that Agent Vega's was red-flagged so I made my assumptions from there."

"Clever." He put the panel down onto the desk and despite the fact that he felt overwhelmingly grateful for her thoughtfulness, he couldn't stop himself from making the next comment. "You're certainly smarter than you look."

She just smiled at him. "Us hot blondes are typically underestimated, aren't we?"

Carhart didn't bother to comment and was saved from any more of Victoria's wit when his intercom chimed.

"Agent Vega has arrived, General Carhart," Ingrid's low voice rang out in its typical monotone.

Carhart was walking out of the door before Victoria could comment. He took the elevator directly down to the Tower's sub level, gaining access with an iris scan. It took less than three full minutes to get to the gates but the waiting seemed like an eternity and Carhart strode purposefully into the garage.

He was unsurprised by the scene.

Interludes

The van Emilio had taken out for the mission was parked to the side and General Hughes currently had Emilio pinned against it as two guards and the two agents who manned the Check-In stood uncertainly in the background, obviously uncomfortable with the scene but unsure of what to do in the face of a general's wrath.

Hughes was a large man-- easily 6'5", built like a body builder and the most intimidating General out of all of them. He typically spoke coldly, dispassionately and no one knew much about his personal life. Carhart had worked with the man ever since joining the Agency and all he knew about Hughes was that he was known for being a genius rather than the killing machine he looked like.

"Hughes!" Carhart's mouth sank downwards and the guards looked over at him with varying degrees of relief.

Hughes didn't even turn his head. He continued to hold Emilio against the van, his large fists white-knuckled as he gripped Emilio's black jacket. Hughes was glowering ferociously, his eyes bloodshot and his mouth set in an ugly grimace. He looked frightening to say the least but Emilio just stared down at him with irritation more than fear, even as his boots dangled off the floor.

"Hughes, put him down," Carhart ordered as he came to a stop near them.

"He. Is. Done. Here." Hughes spoke through grit teeth, his voice rough. It was odd to see him so obviously emotional about the death of a field agent.

Carhart stared at him with a frown and looked away for a moment. There had to have been something more between Hughes and Katarina. Or maybe Hughes had wanted there to be.

"Put me the fuck down, *General*," Emilio drawled darkly, green eyes narrowing at Hughes. Sarcasm oozed from his tone in the typical way it did when he spoke to a superior who hadn't been a superior before he'd disappeared so many years ago. Even now, months after being reinstated, Emilio had trouble coming to terms with the changes that had swept through the Agency in his absence.

"I'm recommending Level 10 Field Agent Emilio Vega for immediate termination," Hughes said curtly, still not looking at Carhart.

Interludes

Carhart just sighed wearily. "That's not going to happen, Ken. I've already reviewed the mission."

Hughes' head snapped over at he gave Carhart a glare so black that for a moment Carhart thought the other man was going to attack him. But then Hughes released Emilio abruptly, causing Emilio to land on his feet with a thud.

"So then you know he murdered Agent Jones," Hughes snarled.

"That bitch would have been terminated anyway, you idiot," Emilio snapped with obvious disgust.

Hughes spun around and slammed one meaty fist into Emilio's jaw. Emilio didn't block, allowing himself to be hit, and slammed backwards against the van due to the force of the punch. Blood erupted from his mouth and he brought his arm up to it as his eyes froze into chips of emerald ice.

His eyes slid over to Carhart briefly before going back to Hughes and even though the guards rushed forward as if to stop an impending brawl that *would* land Emilio on the Fourth for assaulting a commanding officer, Emilio did nothing.

He wasn't stupid. He had a lot of pride but his sense of self-preservation was stronger than his ego. In a lot of ways, he wasn't as reckless as his son who would have likely had Hughes on his back before the punch had landed.

"Pussy," Emilio commented instead of retaliating physically. "All strung out over some sorry ass bitch who couldn't tell her comm unit from her clit."

"Emilio, shut your fucking mouth before I send you to solitary confinement," Carhart growled at him impatiently.

Emilio wiped the blood from his face, smearing it in the process, and said nothing.

Hughes spun on Carhart, seething. "It was not his place to execute her," he said in a cold, flat voice as he took a step closer. "Put him on the list."

"No." Carhart raised his eyebrows at Hughes, not backing away as the man took another step forward. "I already told you, Kenneth. I reviewed the mission and I sent the Marshal the files. Agent Vega may receive disciplinary action for acting without instruction regarding the issue of Agent Jones but he will not be terminated. He

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completed the mission when the other three operatives failed. Agent Jones put all of their lives and the mission at risk, getting two solid operatives killed in the process."

Hughes' face contorted dangerously, his thick lips curling back as he took another step forward until he was well in Carhart's personal space. "He will pay, Zachary. And you will make sure of it. I don't care how well you knew him in the past. You will not let him get away with this."

He said each word with a steely quality and behind each word emanated a threat. An unspoken 'or else.'

Anger swelled inside Carhart and his cerulean eyes narrowed. "I made the decision already, General Hughes. The Marshal will support me. Your feelings have no effect on that. Accept what occurred and move on, for your own sake. If Vega hadn't done it, she would have been tortured and incinerated here regardless. Get over it."

For such a large man, Hughes moved surprisingly quickly.

In the space of a blink, his gun was out and trained on Carhart who didn't so much as twitch in response to the barrel pressing against his forehead. There was no fear in his eyes as he looked directly into Hughes' brown glare.

The guards surged forward in alarm but didn't come closer, not with Hughes' finger resting on the trigger.

"You're being a fool, Kenneth," Carhart said evenly. "Despite your insistence, she was a substandard operative who got two people killed. Accept it. And move on."

"He had no right to make that decision and neither do you," Hughes returned darkly, his eyes glittering.

"You--"

"Put the fucking gun down before I blow your brains out like I did your little girlfriend's," Emilio said flatly, slipping behind Hughes and pressing his own gun against the back of Hughes' head.

Carhart's eyes flicked to Emilio with a hint of uncertainty and anger. "Emi--"

Hughes' hand twitched and his mouth tightened.

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"I'll give you a few seconds," Emilio continued conversationally, leaning forward to press his mouth against Hughes' ear. Hughes recoiled but his hand didn't waver. "And you should know by now, I won't fucking hesitate to kill you. Just ask your girlfriend whenever you meet the silly bitch in hell."

Something in Carhart's chest twisted and for a moment he couldn't decide if he was angrier at Hughes or Emilio.

Hughes stared into Carhart's eyes and his fury slowly crumbled as a brief glimmer of disbelief flashed in his typically unreadable eyes. Carhart shook his head slightly, unable to stop himself from pitying the man and the near suicidal stunt he'd just pulled in the heat of a very tense moment.

Hughes lowered his gun and dropped it to the ground, closing his eyes briefly. "Fuck it all," he whispered gruffly.

The guards immediately soared forward and restrained the General but he no longer seemed interested in resisting or fighting. He just stared at the floor vacantly, not even responding when Emilio scoffed and backed away.

"Should we bring him to the Fourth, General Carhart?" Officer Travis Randazzo demanded quickly. The man was next in line to make lieutenant if Luke Gerant's transition to field agent went smoothly and Randazzo was taking the possibility seriously.

Agents Lowe and Williams flanked Randazzo although unlike the guard, they didn't look as enthused about the idea of dragging a well-respected General up to the Fourth Floor Detainment Center. Sometimes the dynamic between guards and agents and the different degrees of loyalty between them was intriguing to behold.

Carhart had no doubts that Lowe and Williams respected him as the head General but at the same time, there wasn't an agent on the compound who didn't hold Hughes in high regard. Whereas the guards' only concern was keeping order on the compound and ensuring that the chain of command was respected no matter who was in charge. This was likely why Randazzo and the second guard, Keepes, looked on the verge of tranquilizing Hughes and dragging him upstairs without delay.

"No."

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Emilio stared at Carhart incredulously.

"Take him to psych. Tell them that I've ordered a 72-hour evaluation due to the extreme nature of Hughes' grief regarding the death of a..." Carhart trailed off and stared at Hughes. Hughes just stared back. "A friend," Carhart finished flatly.

"Yes, Sir," Randazzo replied, almost seeming disappointed. Then again he'd always had a soft spot for Carhart ever since Carhart had promoted Luke Gerant who was said to be a good friend of the guard. It wasn't surprising that Randazzo was feeling overly protective.

Randazzo and Keepes started to hustle the subdued Spec Ops general out of the space but as Hughes passed Emilio, he came to an abrupt stop and leaned forward, hissing something into the other man's ear.

Carhart couldn't hear what he said but Emilio's expression went from cruelly amused to studiously blank and Carhart's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

When Hughes and the guards disappeared into one of the elevators, Carhart turned his glare onto Lowe and Williams. "What are you waiting for? Take the material upstairs."

Lowe jumped to attention and she nodded quickly, grabbing the disc from Emilio's lax fingers and moving away from the scene.

"You. Come with me," Carhart growled and grabbed Emilio's arm violently, dragging him toward the elevator bank and feeling surprised when the other man didn't resist. The muscles in Emilio's arm were tense and he felt like a coiled spring that was ready to snap at any moment. His handsome face had slipped into one of the dark expressions that took over whenever his mood turned black but at the moment Carhart didn't care enough to try to figure out why.

The silence between them was thick as they returned to his office and Carhart shoved Emilio inside forcibly, not looking at Victoria as they passed her, and he slammed the door behind him.

Emilio stood in the middle of the office for a moment, a muscle in his jaw ticking as he stared out the window before he shook his head, as if trying to brush something off, and sat down in one of the chairs. He licked his full lips, ran a hand through his short black hair and rolled his shoulders as if trying to get rid of some of the tension.

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Carhart stood by the desk, staring down at his former partner and temporary roommate with barely concealed irritation. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

Emilio shrugged. "Is that a trick question?"

Carhart's lips thinned into a tight line and his eyebrows drew together. "I won't repeat the question, Agent Vega."

Emilio's well-formed mouth twisted into a humorless smile and his wide green eyes rose to gaze at the General. "We on official terms now, Zachary? Is this an Agency inquisition?"

"I want answers."

"What if you don't like my answers?" Emilio asked with a slight lift of his dark eyebrows. "Gonna terminate me?"

"Maybe." The word was out of Carhart's mouth before he could stop it and although he knew it was a complete lie, he didn't give any indications that he didn't mean it. Instead, he continued to stare down at his friend without emotion.

Emilio's smile melted away and his eyebrows drew together entirely. His eyes flicked over Carhart's face as if searching for any indication that he wasn't being serious. After a moment, Emilio jerked his gaze away and swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat visibly, but the strange expression on his face didn't look like anything remotely resembling fear.

"Do what you have to do," he said in a dead tone.

Carhart rolled his eyes and walked around the desk, leaning against the front of it. He hated to admit that on some level it gave him a smug, self-satisfied thrill that he had the ability to hurt Emilio's feelings but at the moment he didn't feel like dealing with the fallout that would result from it. "Don't be ridiculous."

Emilio just shrugged, frowning, refusing to look up.

"Why did you kill her?"

"I dunno."

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Carhart scowled. "You're going to have to do better than that, Emilio. Maybe I won't recommend you to be terminated but the Marshal is going to want answers. You know she doesn't trust you not to be completely reckless and you're giving her ammunition right now."

Emilio looked up finally and tilted his head to the side, studying Carhart intently. "So you're pissed off because... of that?"

"Yes," Carhart replied without delay. "I am. You and your son have a really good knack for getting yourselves into phenomenally fucked up messes and even if I can't comprehend what would possess you to shoot that poor stupid girl in cold blood, I know she would have died regardless. I don't want to see you dead for taking the matter into your own hands."

Some of the darkness left Emilio's expression and after a stretch of silence he said, "I didn't know what her deal was. I didn't know if that shit was deliberate or if she really was that fucking idiotic. I decided I'd rather be safe than sorry. With all of the weird shit that's been happening on missions lately, I got paranoid that she botched it on purpose and if that was the case, I'm not gonna be a dumb fuck and ride with the bitch all the way back to the Agency if she'd just tried to set me up to be killed."

Carhart regarded the other man thoughtfully. It made sense and Emilio sounded like he was being honest but he was such a good actor sometimes that it was difficult to tell.

"Satisfied?" Emilio demanded impatiently.

"No. But Vivienne will be."

Emilio sighed disgustedly and rubbed his hands over his face. "What do you want from me, Zachary? To say I feel fucking sad? To cry? To look like I give a damn?"

Yes, Carhart thought with a frown, turning his eyes away. *I want you to show that you are capable of empathy, of human emotions, to show me that you're not a cold-blooded sociopath like you claim to be.*

Emilio dropped his hands and stared at the General. His lip curled slightly and he said stonily, "If it makes you feel better, if I'd have known then what I know now, I probably wouldn't've done it."

"And what do you know now?"

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Emilio shrugged. "Ask Hughes."

Carhart had no delusions that Emilio was going to say anything beyond that and the General turned away from the conversation, moving to stand by the floor-to-ceiling window and stare out at the lightening sky glumly.

He felt exhausted from lack of sleep, sore from excessive working out in the past few weeks, sick from his poor diet and unequivocally disturbed by the entire situation that he'd found himself in. The weariness weighed on his shoulders and not for the first time in the past few weeks, Carhart had the fleeting thought that his life would be so much easier if the new Marshal decided to just fucking demote him or purge him entirely.

He'd never considered himself capable of making the kinds of decisions and judgment calls that he found himself responsible for and after so many years of doing it, for some reason this felt like the straw that broke the camel's back.

What would he have done if he was Hughes? How would he have felt if Agent Trovosky or Agent Logan had deemed Sin or Boyd too big of a risk to allow them to return to the compound without even the chance of an investigation that could have possibly resulted in high-level probation and the chance to redeem themselves instead of termination? How would he have felt if someone had blown their brains out and left them in a remote forest for their bodies to rot?

Carhart knew exactly how he would have felt. He would have reacted the same way Hughes had. He'd reacted in a similar manner when Connors had made the call to give up on Sin's survival in Mexico and ordered for the team not to even retrieve his corpse.

Carhart grimaced, swallowing and stiffly shrugging off the sport jacket he'd thrown on over his too-casual, black short-sleeved shirt.

He was so lost in his own self-deprecating thoughts that he jumped slightly when Emilio's fingers suddenly slid over his bicep and squeezed his shoulder. Carhart turned immediately, disturbed by Emilio's ability to completely sneak up on him, and saw that the other man was standing very close to him and looking at him with an intense expression.

"What?" Carhart asked gruffly, tensing up when Emilio didn't move his hand.

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Emilio just lifted his eyebrows briefly, flexing his fingers against Carhart's strong shoulder. His gaze was magnetic, searching, and Carhart found himself staring back without the ability to look away.

"I'm sorry," Emilio said finally, evenly, his deep voice low.

Carhart shook his head slightly, not comprehending.

Emilio squeezed Carhart's shoulder one final time before allowing his hand to drop away, gliding along the other man's muscular arm faintly before letting it drop to his side. "I'm sorry that you're upset because of what I did. It's not your fault."

"Who said I'm upset?" Carhart asked almost defensively, his guard raising.

Emilio's lips lifted slightly at the sides and his gaze raked over Carhart slowly, deliberately. "I know you, Zachary."

"Do you?"

"Hmm." Emilio's eyes lifted to Carhart's cerulean ones. "I'd think so. But one question."

Carhart raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

"If it was someone else that did what I did. Would you have let Randazzo take them to the Fourth until at least an investigation was through?"

Carhart barely had to consider the question. "Yes."

Emilio stared at Carhart and his fingers once again flexed absently at his sides as if he wanted to do something with them and was having trouble stopping himself. His jaw clenched and unclenched and his long black eyelashes lowered over his impossibly vivid green eyes that once again traveled along the length of Carhart.

Carhart finally took a step back although he didn't look away from Emilio. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

Carhart frowned and hesitated only briefly. The impending topic was one he'd avoided since Emilio's return. It was one that he'd avoided thinking about for the past several years. But as much as he would have liked to bury the issue completely and forget what

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it made him remember and the confusing thoughts that infested him whenever it came up, it was obvious that Emilio wasn't going to let it die on his own.

"Stop looking at me like you want to fuck me."

Emilio's expression didn't change but once again he swallowed thickly, shifting and absently curling his hands into fists. "But I do want to fuck you."

Carhart's face shifted into a full glare and irritation swept through him. "It's not going to happen so you may as well take your adrenaline-laced need to get laid somewhere else."

Emilio frowned and took another step closer to the General. "I'm not the only one who likes to fuck after a near death experience, baby. Or did you forget?"

Carhart felt his face burning slightly but he forced himself not to show the discomfort that raged through him. "I try very hard to forget, actually. Maybe you should try it sometime."

This time Emilio scoffed, a look of irritation taking over his face. "You should know by now that I ain't trying to push Brighton out of my mind. In fact that was one of my favorite missions of all time."

The General stared at him incredulously. "Do you remember how horrible that mission was, Emilio? It's not a fucking joke. Do you remember what we went through? What we had to do to get by for all of those months?"

Emilio shrugged. "I remember us fucking more times than my I can count on my fingers and toes."

Carhart exhaled slowly and crossed his arms over his chest. Emilio was obviously waiting for a reaction and Carhart wasn't sure he wanted to give the other man what he wanted. So instead he just said blandly, "Yes. For the mission. Or did you forget that our cover was that we were lovers? That my cover was blindly and pathetically infatuated with you?"

"Oh I remember," Emilio said softly, wetting his lips unconsciously and flexing his fingers again. "I remember you fucking me at that orgy and loving every minute of it."

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This time Carhart couldn't stop himself from recoiling from the statement and the blood rushed to his face. "If I'd refused, my cover would have been blown. You just took advantage of the situation and it didn't help that we were both hopped up on drugs."

"But you're the one who modified our covers, sweetheart," Emilio drawled, gaze once again sliding over Carhart's body.

"Because our cover was fucking stupid!" Carhart shouted in frustration, still angry over this debate, over these insinuations after years. "They didn't buy our cover. Why the fuck would they? Who would believe that the unrepentant murderer that you supposedly were would suddenly have some completely platonic best friend who tagged along even though my cover barely had a rap sheet? They thought it was bogus. Us being gay lovers made a lot more sense considering you were supposed to be bouncing from one maximum security all male prison to a fucking community all male prison, serving life. More than two thirds of the guys in there had male lovers, even the straight ones."

"Maybe," Emilio agreed, his gaze focused squarely and quite obviously on Carhart's mouth. "But you sure did enjoy railing me, didn't you?"

Carhart stood up straight, staring down his nose at Emilio. "Temporary disassociation due to abnormal immersion with a cover identity."

Emilio's eyes narrowed and snapped up to meet Carhart's hard gaze. The field agent stepped back finally, frustration obvious in his face. "Is that still what you're telling yourself, Zachary?"

"Yes. That's what happened." Carhart leaned forward, his face less than an inch from Emilio's, cruelly enjoying the way Emilio's eyes seemingly helplessly drew to his lips as if he couldn't help himself, as if he was really suffering because he wasn't being allowed to do what he wanted.

"Accept that I don't want you. And get over it," Carhart said coldly.

The pained look that crossed Emilio's face was too prominent for him to sufficiently cover and once again Carhart felt the same oddly self-satisfied feeling at seeing Emilio so obviously in a state of uncertainty.

"Fine," Emilio snapped finally, his voice thick with anger and something less identifiable. "Fuck you, then."

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"No thanks. That's the point."

Emilio gave Carhart a hateful look that rivaled the one Hughes had given him earlier and stormed out of the office without another word.

Carhart stared at the door after Emilio slammed it so violently, for the second time in weeks, that a picture fell off the wall. The sound of shattering glass didn't even faze Carhart and he couldn't help the tiny smile that wanted to cross his mouth.

It felt good to be the one in control.

Rhapsody

Sin's boots pounded up the narrow winding staircase, legs aching and thigh muscles straining as he sprinted and skipped several steps at a time. The sounds of his footsteps and the footsteps of his target echoed against the walls, bouncing around until it sounded like a gang of people instead of two.

"In pursuit," he grunted hoarsely into his comm unit.

Boyd acknowledged his comment curtly and Sin could hear gunfire loudly in the earpiece which matched the shots he'd been hearing all along, emanating down from the roof.

The beginnings of what Sin recognized as fatigue were radiating through his body and he wondered how Boyd was faring. They'd gotten on an Agency plane out of Hong Kong the previous morning but en route back to the States they'd been informed that a mission had come up and they were instead headed to what had once been a national park in Washington state.

Rather than being allowed to return to their respective homes, they were instructed to find and take out a small group led by Martin Kemp, an agent who had gone rogue three months ago. Or, Sin amended with a dark scowl, they could have returned to one of their homes to figure out exactly what was going on between them once and for all.

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Frustration had erupted from both of them as weariness took over but they couldn't exactly refuse and their transport team had seemed very unimpressed with the complaints.

Kemp burst through the metal door at the top of the former police watch tower and Sin was right behind him in hot pursuit. Kemp threw a wild-eyed look over his shoulder and scrambled frantically away, his tennis shoes slipping on the damp tarmac.

"Fuck you, Vega!" Kemp shouted loudly and it finally occurred to Sin that Kemp was likely freaked out and running like a madman because he remembered Sin's reputation from the compound.

Sin glanced quickly to the other side of the roof and saw that the helicopter on the small helipad was smoking quite nicely. Boyd had obviously completed his task and was finishing off the last remaining hostile other than Kemp; the man who was presumably the pilot.

Just as Boyd cracked the pilot's neck, Kemp narrowed his eyes at Boyd and shouted in frustrated fury. He threw himself to the side as he extracted something from the backpack he held. Sin's eyes returned to Kemp just as the man hurled what was unmistakably a grenade in the direction of Boyd and the damaged helicopter.

"Boyd!" Sin shouted as he completely abandoned the 'bring him in alive if possible' note on the mission outline and shot Kemp in the back of his head.

Adrenaline shot through Sin like fire and he was moving before he even processed whether he had a plan. His feet pounded against the tarmac of the roof, moving so quickly he was nearly a blur. Boyd turned around just as Sin slammed into him, soaring off the side of the roof and careening downwards to the river that was rushing five stories below the tower.

In the midst of the fall, there was a loud explosion from above with a shockwave snapping out across the tarmac. Chunks of metal, glass and bits of the ledge from the roof rained down around them. They were just able to orient themselves for minimal damage when they landed in the water with a nearly painful smack.

The river was wide and deep, the water clouded as pieces of debris careened into the depths around them. Despite the relatively warm weather, the water was cold and harsh against their skin. Their clothing and weapons weighed them down. The currents

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yanked at them like children tossing toys; throwing them around as the gasp of air Sin had managed before they were submerged slowly started to burn in his chest.

Sin could feel Boyd's fingers wrapped in his clothing and digging into his skin beneath; Boyd clung to Sin practically with a death grip, making it more difficult for Sin to swim. When he looked over, he could see Boyd's eyes were wide open and darting around, his expression strained as blood clouded the water around them.

Sin struggled to regain his bearings and headed toward the surface.

They burst above water and Boyd especially drew in a great gasp of air, blond hair plastering his face in a way that partially covered his expression. It seemed as though Boyd went to say something but he choked on water and started coughing instead, his grip on Sin only tightening. Sin immediately swam toward the riverbank with Boyd inconsistently helping at his side.

When they made it to shore they stumbled to a stand, half supporting each other. Sin could feel tension thrumming in Boyd's body; his fingers were trembling against Sin as Boyd hadn't released his hold yet and wet blond hair hung around his downturned face.

Sin grabbed Boyd's arm and tugged him to the forest that loomed a few yards ahead of them. They ran through the forest quickly, moonlight streaking through the canopy of trees and illuminating their wet bodies as Sin took them on a haphazard and frantic sprint to a safe enough distance from the tower. The trees whooshed quietly and quickly around them, pale sentinels flashing by in the dark, the occasional crunching of the underbrush the only sound to give away their otherwise silent but hasty retreat.

The night was still but their speed made it feel like lukewarm wind where his skin was bared. Sin paid it no heed. His heart was pounding as concern rushed through him and they finally came to a stop a third of the way from the pickup point.

Sin ignored the blood that was oozing down his arm and turned to Boyd, immediately moving toward him. He smoothed both large hands over Boyd's face and brushed the soaked strands of hair back. There was blood on Boyd's neck and some in his hair.

"Are you okay?" Sin demanded.

Boyd released a breath that wasn't entirely steady and he nodded, his eyes lowered. His lips were parted as he panted to catch his breath and Sin could see that Boyd

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looked pale but his cheeks were flushed. The tension seemed to increase in him even as he remained hunched over and Sin could feel that he was shaking slightly.

"Yeah," Boyd said thickly, sounding strained. "Nothing major."

Sin ignored the comment, dark eyebrows drawing together, and he pushed Boyd against the large trunk of a tree. Boyd's back pressed against the rough bark and he drew in an aborted, low breath. Sin's hands slid down Boyd's neck, eyes narrowing at the laceration he found there before deciding that it wasn't even serious enough to require stitches.

Boyd made a faint noise, his head tilting back and eyebrows drawing down as his eyes squeezed shut. Tension made his body taut and he shook his head once. He raised a hand toward Sin's arm but although he seemed as though he intended to push Sin away, he hesitated once his fingers touched his partner.

Moving his attention elsewhere, Sin ignored the wet hair that was hanging wildly around his face now that it had half dried in their dash through the forest. He moved his fingers expertly down Boyd's chest, ripping open the jacket roughly and moving his hands up beneath the fabric of Boyd's shirt as he continued the search for injuries. His callused fingertips ran along Boyd's bare skin, catching lightly along his scars.

A low, helpless groan wrenched out of Boyd and he shuddered along the length of his body. His fingers spasmed as something in him appeared to snap. Honey brown eyes shot open, nearly wild with burning desire that scoured through Sin relentlessly.

Sin barely had a chance to register that before Boyd yanked him forward forcefully and kissed him with desperate hunger.

An exclamation of surprise escaped Sin's mouth and he pulled away partially, eyes widened and eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "What--"

Boyd made an impatient noise and dug his fingers into Sin's hair nearly painfully, jerking Sin closer so Boyd could slide his tongue into Sin's mouth.

There was a brief moment where Sin froze, temporarily unsure of what was going on or what he was supposed to do. His thoughts were like a whirlwind that moved faster than his heartbeat, but then Boyd abruptly switched their positions in near violent impatience, slamming Sin's back against the tree before claiming his mouth once again in a fiercely aggressive kiss.

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Boyd shoved himself at Sin, low growls escaping his throat as his fingers dug into Sin's hair and held him still as Boyd practically devoured his mouth. Pressing their bodies together, Boyd rocked against him frantically. Sin could feel Boyd's erection through their wet clothing and it sent an electric shock through Sin's body that settled in his stomach.

The taste and feel of Boyd overwhelmed him and all initial hesitation and surprise was gone as they exchanged desperate, sloppy kisses that left both of them moaning and grinding against each other under the shade of the expansive tree.

Boyd wrenched Sin's head to the side abruptly, breaking the heady contact of their lips. Sin shuddered violently as Boyd's hot, wet mouth brushed against his ear. Sin swore, his voice hoarse and strained, as teeth sank into his earlobe before Boyd's full lips drew it into his mouth to suck on it.

Low, unintelligible sounds escaped Sin's mouth as all coherent thought left his brain. Boyd's mouth moved down his face, across his jaw and finally went to his neck where he bit down once, hard. The feel of it caused Sin to arch his back and his eyes to widen as his cock strained against the black cargo pants that constrained it. A groan shuddered out of Sin, and his stomach warmed with desire that burned through him.

Desperate half-moans, half-gasps escaped Boyd and he pulled back enough to look down almost wild-eyed at Sin's crotch. Boyd's fingers were shaking and he fumbled as he impatiently ripped open Sin's pants, groaning when Sin's large erection was freed.

He jerked Sin's pants down hurriedly, his hands trembling violently in the process. Boyd's movements were fast, intense and before Sin had even processed the fact that his cargo pants were around his ankles and kicked to the side, Boyd had shoved his own pants down halfway.

The next few seconds passed in a blur of motion, of needy moans and harsh pants, of things happening so quickly that it lent even more urgency to the heated moment. Boyd covered his own cock in saliva and bodily lifted Sin against the tree, using his weight and strength to hold Sin up with one arm while he stood between Sin's legs and reached down to position himself with the other. Sin could barely register the feeling of Boyd's hard body against his, of those toned muscles straining beneath clothing still partially wet from the river.

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Boyd shoved inside Sin immediately. Sin grunted as pain mixed with pleasure and overwhelmed his senses, causing him to throw his head back. A loud shout escaped Boyd, his voice thick with pleasure and arousal. His eyes widened but almost seemed unseeing and his mouth dropped open.

Sin's fingers tightened on Boyd's shoulders and he was consumed by that hot pressure against his sensitive nerves. His body felt like it was on fire and his breathing only grew heavier as his eyes slid closed once again.

The moment passed in a blink. Boyd's movements were fast and intense, his fingers leaving wakes of heat across Sin's body everywhere he touched. Boyd leaned forward, his arms going beneath Sin's knees to lift his legs as Sin reached up blindly to grab a low-hanging branch to support himself. With Sin's legs spread and toes curling, Boyd's cock began to thrust into him with abandon.

Boyd fucked him fiercely, frenziedly, his hands painfully tight as his hips slammed against Sin. They were like wild animals on the scent of blood, Boyd's fingers digging into Sin while Sin's grip made the branch above him creak ominously. The tree barely moved despite the hard pounding Boyd was giving Sin; the increasingly fast slapping of skin against skin.

For the next few moments the still forest was filled with the sounds of desperate moans and labored breathing as Boyd took Sin's ass with a carnal intensity that made Sin's blood race in his veins. His attention zeroed in on that hot, hard cock, leaving Sin growling incoherently for more.

Explosions of light were going off behind Sin's shut eyes and he couldn't help swearing loudly, chanting coarse words harshly as their motions became even more visceral.

Boyd's moans became quicker, more urgent, and his fingers spasmed against Sin as he came hard inside him.

Boyd threw his head back with a helpless shout, his eyes glazed, unbridled pleasure completely overtaking his features. His reddened lips parted and he rocked his hips against Sin. Boyd's fingers were like vices against Sin's legs and he gasped for air, crushing their bodies together as his arms seemed to unconsciously jerk Sin closer.

Sin's mind was still racing, his heart galloping in his chest, and before he could even consider the throbbing erection that remained trapped between his legs, the comm unit exploded with sound in his ear.

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"What's your position?" Reece's voice asked curtly.

Boyd suddenly went very still, his eyes focusing from the ecstatic haze they'd been in and snapping over to Sin's face with a look that was almost akin to horror. His eyes widened, flushed skin turning ashen.

Boyd dropped Sin's feet to the ground and he stumbled backward, gaze flicking over Sin frantically before he abruptly turned his back. He hunched forward and began to fumble with his clothes.

Sin automatically pulled up his cargo pants, his hands unsteady as he zipped them over his already softening erection. His body was still alive with sensation and unreleased desire, the feel of even his clothing seeming almost unbearable against his sensitized skin.

He grit his teeth in frustration, eyes boring into Boyd's back before he growled into the comm unit, "Less than a mile from the designated pick-up."

Reece grunted in acknowledgment. "We'll be there in five."

Sin didn't bother to respond as he concentrated on evening his breathing, on willing his erection to disappear, all the while staring at Boyd's back. Sin wanted to say something, to demand what that had been about, to ask why the hell Boyd was looking so regretful now, but the words caught in his throat.

Boyd finished adjusting his clothing and glanced at Sin briefly over his shoulder but turned his face away quickly. His head was tilted down, his shoulders hunched forward, and damp blond hair hid his face.

"Copy," Boyd said into the comm unit after a moment, his voice hoarse but otherwise calm and giving no indication of what they'd just been doing. He glanced at Sin again but once more didn't allow Sin the chance to see his expression. He turned in the direction of the designation point, saying to Sin hesitantly, "We should go."

Sin's eyes narrowed dangerously and all traces of desire disappeared. "No kidding," he said flatly, and adjusted his belt before walking past Boyd.

Despite the fact that Boyd had suggested it, he didn't immediately follow. It wasn't until Sin continued to stride away that he heard Boyd's steps trailing behind. The sounds of

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their boots crunching through the underbrush sounded especially loud in the tense silence, until Boyd broke it with a quiet, "Hsin..?"

But Sin didn't look over and didn't acknowledge Boyd. He was simmering with annoyance and at the moment he had a very violent urge to turn around and beat the shit out of his partner.

He wanted to demand what the hell Boyd was playing at, why he played hard to get all the time before practically sexually assaulting him against a fucking tree in the middle of the forest on a mission with transport not even five minutes away. Sin wanted to demand why Boyd would do that, why he would cause such intense burning physical pleasure and pathetic hopefulness to abound before dropping into awkward silence.

Every spiteful and bitter thing that Sin had wanted to say ever since they broke up, ever since the Kassian fiasco, bubbled to the surface. He willed it down forcefully and clenched his hands into fists as he told himself that this really wasn't the time-- that he would just say a bunch of shit he really didn't mean anyway and make the entire situation worse.

He could interrogate Boyd later when Reece and whatever other idiot transport agent wasn't hurtling towards them in a van. He could demand answers later when he wasn't suffering from exhaustion, extreme sexual frustration and a mean case of blue balls that made him wish Kemp was still around to serve as a punching bag.

They made it to the main road that cut the forest in half and the headlights of the van came racing down the road almost instantly before pulling to a stop beside them.

Sin slid the door open and got inside, sitting down and glaring out the window in stony silence.

Agent Rachel Lowe was sitting in the passenger seat and she looked over her shoulder, evenly taking in Sin's expression before her eyes slid to Boyd, whose features had settled into his default unreadable mask as he climbed in behind Sin. She looked away dismissively from them and turned forward in her seat.

Boyd was quiet as he shut the door behind him and subtly paused before he sat in the seat next to Sin. He tilted his head forward so his hair covered his face, and his hands rested in his lap with his fingers curled up and twitching once.

Reece started driving again almost as soon as Boyd had settled into the seat.

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The ride to the private airport passed silently and quickly. Within the hour they were boarding an Agency jet, en route back to the City and to a double debriefing of the Di Zhi and Kemp missions individually. Just the idea of having to sit in what would likely be an hour to two hour-long debriefing with the unit before having to sit in Vivienne's office was enough to cause Sin's already throbbing headache to start pounding violently.

He anticipated hours of being stuck working out mission reports and explaining details of the China assignment and all of it made him feel vaguely homicidal. He hadn't slept for more than a couple of hours a night in China, even less after the raid, and he hadn't closed his eyes at all ever since that mission had come to a close.

His eyes felt dry and painful as he looked out the window darkly but his body wouldn't relax enough to fall asleep when he was in the presence of the other Agency operatives on board the plane.

Sin was vaguely aware of Boyd working on a portable computer a few seats away but he didn't look over. He didn't trust himself to behave rationally when his fuse was already dangerously short and his body was starting to rebel against him in frustration.

Not for the first time he wished he had the ability to sleep like a normal human. He could have slept on the twenty hour flight back into the United States but he'd spent half the time feeling tense and the other half watching Boyd sleep.

Ironically, he'd been reflecting on how much he missed being intimate with Boyd mere hours before they'd ended up fucking again. Too bad it wasn't exactly what Sin had had in mind.

He tried to figure it out but what it ended up coming down to was it being a fluke. An adrenaline high born out of a near-death experience and fatigue; emotions running wild and out of control.

As gratifying as it'd been at the time to have Boyd fucking his brains out for the first time in over a year, Sin couldn't get the bitter taste out of his mouth when he came to the conclusion that if that had really been all it was about-- it likely wouldn't be happening again. One of the first things Boyd had said to him after they'd rekindled their strained friendship was that it couldn't be casual between them.

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The tension on the small jet was thick enough to cut and the other agents on board, transport and a small team that had been picked up from Northern California, seemed to pick up on it without much trouble.

They looked between the two senior agents curiously but none of them dared say anything aloud.

The plane arrived in the City shortly after six in the morning and the relief that Sin previously thought he would feel at finally returning to the familiar place was gone. His mood was sour and it was very visible on his face. As he strode through the Tower he could feel Boyd's gaze burning into his back but once against Sin didn't look over or acknowledge it.

By the time they were patched up by the medics and seated in the conference room with the rest of the unit, Ryan looked almost too disturbed by the look on Sin's face to actually address him directly. The R&D agent also shot furtive glances at Emilio whose expression wasn't any more pleasant than his son's, before Ryan darted a confused glance at Boyd and dropped his gaze.

The words were garbled and uninteresting to Sin and he didn't bother to pay attention to anything anyone was saying. Thankfully his father didn't seem interested in doing anything other than pointedly ignoring the conversation and alternately staring out the window and at his watch. Sin didn't know if he'd be up to Emilio's antics today without a bloodbath ensuing.

Boyd did the talking and Sin stared at him in his peripheral vision from time to time, mentally willing Boyd to stop talking about Di Zhi and say something more pertinent; say, perhaps about the frantic fucking that had taken place a few hours ago.

"Sin?"

Sin glared at Carhart. "What?"

Carhart stared at him impatiently, looking just as tired as Sin felt. "I asked you a question."

"I don't know," Sin snapped, not really knowing if the response made sense and not caring. Emilio looked at him finally, arching a dark eyebrow as his green-eyed gaze moved between Sin and Boyd silently.

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"You don't know what Zhang told you?" Carhart demanded, impatience and disgust ebbing into his tone.

Sin shrugged uncaringly, glaring around the table. "I gave Williams the material. I'm sure you have the recording."

Carhart stared at Sin blankly for an extended moment before turning his irritated gaze on Boyd. "Is there a problem I should be aware of?"

Owen was watching them with a sleepy frown, seeming at once mildly intrigued and mildly paranoid. He rocked on the back legs of his chair, arms crossed and eyebrows drawn down.

Jeffrey raised his eyebrows, his dark gaze settled primarily on Sin.

Boyd shook his head, looking weary, although when he glanced toward Sin there was a flash of well-hidden guilt that it was likely only Sin could decipher. "We're both very tired. Hsin especially hasn't had the chance to sleep in days. I can summarize the information if you'd like."

"Or he could just listen to the recording," Emilio added snidely. "But I guess that's too easy."

Sin silently cheered his father for being a dick right along with him and ignored the heated glares that they were both receiving.

"Fine," Carhart said curtly. "Go ahead, Boyd."

Boyd started talking and Sin went back to tuning everyone out. His head felt especially heavy and the symptoms of sleep deprivation were starting to feel very real again. He was vaguely reminded of a time well over a year ago when the intense fatigue had left him out of control and prone to outbursts and episodes.

One good thing was that at least, it seemed, those reactions were under control now.

The debriefing lasted another forty-five minutes and a very perturbed-looking Carhart left the conference room quickly but not before giving Sin and Emilio another glare. Emilio watched him depart with a heavy scowl and scoffed something under his breath before following, not seeming very interested in hanging back with the rest of the unit.

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Ryan glanced at Owen and Jeffrey before shooting Boyd a sympathetic smile. "I can't believe they gave you a back-to-back after China."

Boyd rubbed at his face and nodded. He dropped his hands with a sigh. "I guess we shouldn't be surprised. But there are other things I'd much rather be doing than going to another debriefing right after this." His gaze flicked briefly toward Sin but there was nothing in his expression to tell what he was thinking.

Sin rubbed the back of his hand against his face and pushed his chair back, not looking over. The idea of sitting in Vivienne's office for another hour or so was too much to bear.

"I'm going to my apartment," he said flatly, standing.

Boyd's gaze snapped over, his eyes widening slightly. He automatically reached for Sin but he stopped short of touching Sin and, after a very brief hesitation he dropped his hand. Even so, he didn't look away from Sin.

"Hsin, wait," he said in a worried undertone. "You should go. I doubt it'll take long and she might be angry or hold it against you if you don't show."

"And that has always been a major concern of mine."

Boyd shook his head, not looking away from Sin. Concern was clear in his eyes, although his head was tilted away from the others in the room. "But what if you get in trouble?"

"Then I'll get in trouble," Sin snapped. "I'm going to sleep. If she doesn't like it, that's not my problem."

The other three in the room were silent as they watched the two senior agents with varying degrees of confusion and intrigue. Owen had an expression that was mildly vacant as usual but his dark eyes seemed abnormally alert as he looked between them. Jeffrey had paused with his fingers curled around the handle of his briefcase, probably ready to leave before he became distracted by their interaction.

Boyd searched Sin's face and then dropped his eyes with a subdued nod. "Okay. I'll deliver our report."

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Sin didn't bother to say anything in response and strode out of the room, his head pounding even more violently. He walked down the corridor and to the elevator bank, bypassing them entirely to take the stairs.

"--is a personal problem that has no place in a debriefing."

Sin didn't even stop and stare at Carhart and Emilio, who were standing in the stairway glaring at each other and obviously having some kind of confrontation. Carhart looked at him distractedly with a frown but Emilio replied as if Sin wasn't there.

"Why the fuck was I there, anyway? It wasn't even my fucking mission, you idiot."

Carhart reddened and Sin pushed past them uncaringly, not interested. He could hear Carhart gearing up for a full rant and their voices dimly carried down the stairs as he made his way further down.

Everything was making Sin incredibly angry and impatient and he couldn't stand to be near people at the moment. He was tired of Carhart and his father bickering like an old married couple and ignoring something that had been obvious to Sin since childhood. He was tired of having to run around on empty and having people expect more than he could give when he already gave more than most people ever had at the Agency. If he wanted to go to sleep after nearly a week of having none, the briefing could go fuck itself and they could wait.

But most of all Sin was sick of the entire situation with Boyd. He was sick of games and confusion, he was sick of things going unsaid. He was sick of being led to believe one thing only to be treated an entirely different way. He was sick of Boyd not being upfront about things and fucking with his brain in the process.

If all it had been was a random fuck, why couldn't Boyd have just said that? If it was more than that, why behave so oddly and confuse him even more when he didn't know which way to turn as it was?

By the time he reached his apartment he was simmering with anger and frustration at everything but as soon as he stripped his clothes off and allowed his body to touch the mattress, he nearly instantly fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes again it was to the sound of someone knocking on his door.

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Sin looked around wearily and realized that it was well into the night even though he'd fallen asleep in the early part of the morning.

He sat up, running a hand through his hair and closed his eyes briefly, enjoying the feeling of finally being well rested. The near painful tension had melted out of his body and so had the blinding rage that had encompassed him ever since the mission in Washington. Everything that had happened hours ago seemed like a distant dream, as if it that had happened to another person, and Sin marveled at the fact that he'd lasted as long as he had before completely flipping out on someone in the state he'd been in.

The person knocked again and Sin got up, padding out into the main space before absently grabbing a pair of jeans and sliding into them so that he wouldn't be completely nude when he opened the door.

Not bothering to look into the vid screen to see who it was, Sin opened the door and stared at Boyd wearily. "Yes?"

Boyd searched Sin's face, his eyes slightly hesitant, although his expression was determined. "Can we talk?"

Sin shrugged and stepped aside, holding the door open for Boyd to come in and closing it behind him.

Boyd's gaze darted briefly around Sin's apartment before he turned to Sin. "I'm sorry," he said almost immediately, his tone completely sincere. His eyebrows drew up and his honey brown eyes were troubled.

"You should be," Sin replied bluntly, walking over to the living area and crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at his partner. "I'm getting tired of all of this bullshit."

Boyd's eyes flashed with guilt and he drew his eyebrows down, glancing away. "I didn't--" He started to say quietly before he cut himself off with a grimace and ran a hand through his hair, dragging his eyes back over to Sin. "I didn't plan to do that. I just... with the adrenaline high and then your hands touching me..."

"I figured that part out on my own." The words came out unimpressed. Despite the way the words being spoken out loud by Boyd temporarily made Sin's chest tighten and his body briefly warm, it didn't replace the frustration of the situation.

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Dismay darkened Boyd's eyes at Sin's tone. He took a step forward with one hand raised, almost as if he planned to stop Sin before he could turn his back completely or kick Boyd out.

"Hsin, I'm so sorry," Boyd said, his expression twisting slightly as he looked genuinely upset. "I didn't want to talk about it there because I was afraid of the conversation being used against us-- but I swear to God I won't tell Ivan. I'll make sure I keep my distance; I won't do anything like that again. I promise. I don't--"

He stopped and finished more uncertainly, his hand dropping at his side. "I really hope this doesn't mess everything up between us."

Sin stared at Boyd. "Why would I care if you told Ivan anything? What does he have to do with anything that happened?"

Boyd hesitated, eyebrows drawing down and his fingers flexing. A hint of confusion entered his eyes but it was drowned out by the fact that he was obviously still troubled.

"Because-- Because you're involved and I don't know where you're at right now but he obviously cares about you and you get along so well... I don't want to fuck anything up between you."

Sin scoffed and turned away entirely, the conversation making him more exasperated somehow. "Ivan and I are just friends. If he's the reason you've been so on and off, why didn't you just ask if I was involved with him?"

"What?" Boyd asked, his eyebrows rising in surprise as he stared at Sin blankly. It seemed to take him a second to understand what Sin had just said. "Why would-- Since when?"

"Since July. Even before then, we were more friends than anything else. We only had sex together twice as it was so it wasn't exactly difficult to switch to a strictly platonic relationship."

Boyd shook his head, the surprise replaced by a flash of frustration at Sin's tone. He crossed his arms and drew his eyebrows down. "Everything implied you were together so why would I go out of my way to ask? You connected with him immediately, got closer to him faster than you ever did with me, and every time I saw you together you seemed to get along better. I thought you liked him more than you liked me. I knew you

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were fucking, it was obvious he cared about you, and then he told me you two were involved and not to give you mixed signals..."

"So despite the fact that there has been obvious tension between you and I lately, you decided that you should form your own conclusions about a make believe relationship that never even existed because you seem to talk to everyone about it except for me," Sin replied blandly.

"It's not like I brought it up to him," Boyd said in irritation, eyes narrowing. "He found me by your bedside after the Schafer mission and basically told me to back off. And I did wonder what the hell was going on-- why do you think I asked what the pool was about in China? You're the one who made it sound like it was nothing, like it was just some physical reaction. I thought that meant I'd been misreading things."

"Because I never had any indication that you had interest in me again!" Sin practically shouted, turning around to glare at Boyd. "And if that wasn't the case, why do you have to keep it a fucking secret and not say anything to me? Who gives a shit about Ivan or the possibility of rejection? If you really want to be more than friends, you should have just fucking told me."

"Because you fucking seemed happy!" Boyd snapped with an indefinable emotion that may not have entirely been anger. "I wasn't afraid of rejection-- I was afraid of being a selfish fuck with you like I always am. You'd finally moved on, you'd found stability-- what the hell was I supposed to say? 'By the way, Hsin, now that you've found someone better, I just wanted to let you know I fucking love you more than ever before. So PS, drop everything and get back with me.'" It came out as an upset, sarcastic demand.

"Yes!" Sin yelled at him angrily, slamming a hand against the wall so hard that indentations could be seen from his fingers. "You knew from the start that I never wanted things to end. Why didn't you just ask me if things with Ivan were serious before you decided they were on your own?"

"Because I thought Ivan was better than me," Boyd shouted, fingers clenching into fists and his expression twisting in frustration. He took a step forward, eyebrows drawing down and eyes narrowed. "Because you laughed with him faster, smiled with him sooner, hung out with him way earlier than you did with me-- Because we were always so fucked up and you'd only really been with me-- You finally had the chance to be with someone who you got along with right away without having to be forced together."

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Boyd shook his head with a frown. "I thought you'd ultimately be happier with him and I cared more about that than anything else. And I was afraid if I asked you about it I'd fuck something up, I'd give the wrong signals or somehow influence you."

When Sin didn't immediately respond, Boyd crossed his arms and gave Sin an obstinate look as he continued bluntly, "If despite all that you were still interested in me, you could have said something to me too so don't just blame me for not asking. I had every reason to believe you were involved but you knew I wasn't. We both could have made this easier."

Sin stared at him and shook his head, black hair falling into his eyes even as he raked his hand through it to push it back in aggravation. He didn't know what to say. The fact that Boyd was interested in him was everything he'd been wanting to hear for months but it still didn't completely replace the aggravation over all the wasted time.

"This needs to stop," Sin said finally. "This thing that happens with everything going unspoken, nobody ever being upfront and honest, the assuming and the analyzing-- it just has to stop."

"I agree." Boyd took a step back and rolled his shoulders, the tension slowly starting to bleed away. He studied Sin seriously with furrowed eyebrows.

"So I'm just going to tell you how it is for me," Boyd continued frankly. His gaze was intense and sincere as he didn't look away from Sin's eyes. "I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. I think about you all the time. It's been hell trying to keep myself away-- every time you're close I just want to touch you. I would do anything for you. And if I could have anything in the world right now, I would be in a relationship with you."

Sin looked away and let his back press against the wall. He closed his eyes briefly as he let the words absorb into him. He tried to ignore the undeniable elation that made his heart skip a beat as he forced out the next question, "What changed, then? Before you said we were bad together."

"That's because we were." Boyd shook his head with a frown. "I didn't even know if either of us was capable of becoming stable enough to be together. But then we both started growing on our own. You began to trust me again and you stopped caring what I thought to the detriment of your own health. And I realized I didn't want to become better just for me. That I would and will do anything for you and it didn't even matter if I got anything in return."

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Sin raised his eyebrows slightly and watched Boyd, not interrupting.

Boyd's shoulders loosened entirely as he pushed hair back from his face. The strands fell back into his eyes, partially shadowing his honey brown gaze. "I realized I was wrong and selfish about some things and I finally got over being that way. You'll always be more important to me than anything else and I realized that not only was there nothing I could do to change that, I didn't even want to try."

There was a brief silence between the two of them and Sin tilted his head back against the wall. The relief and happiness was undeniable but it would be a lie to say there wasn't some wariness as well. That was the only thing that kept Sin from closing the distance between them.

"I want to be with you too. I've never stopped wanting to be with you. Even after the Kassian shit." Sin's eyes flicked over to Boyd again uncertainly. "But I just don't want to believe something and then everything gets screwed up again."

Boyd's expression twisted slightly and he leaned back against the wall near Sin's kitchen. He shook his head, not dropping eye contact. "Neither of us knows the future. I wish I could promise you everything would be perfect this time but I can't. We don't have control of much of anything and I have no idea what could happen that could mess it all up again."

Despite his words, Boyd's gaze remained earnest and unhesitating. His eyebrows drew down slightly and he shook his head again once, briefly. "All I know is that I want to put the effort into this; I want the chance to try. And if we actually talk about all the shit that messed us up before, maybe this time we'll do better."

"Maybe," Sin said and it came out sounding a lot more hesitant than he actually felt. But after months of dying hope, now that the moment was here, now that Boyd was saying the words that Sin had dreamed he would say again someday-- Sin couldn't help feeling nervous and it left him at a loss for words.

He didn't know how to express what he was feeling-- how to explain that even though he wanted Boyd more than he'd ever wanted anyone else in his life, he was afraid of things going downhill and not having any more second or third chances. He was afraid of finding out that whatever problems the two of them always seemed to have would be inevitable and that even though they loved each other, they didn't need to be together.

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Sin flexed his hands and looked away briefly. "I don't know what to say. I want this but I can't help but be pessimistic about what we are both capable of. And I want to be with you despite that but it makes me wonder what will happen the next time something bad occurs."

"That's why I said it wouldn't work before," Boyd said, shaking his head again. "Because I knew I at least wasn't ready. But I really think it's different this time. I think..."

Boyd trailed off briefly, his eyes narrowing almost pensively as he ran a hand back through his hair. "I think we were both desperate before; terrified of losing the only connection we had. And because of that we both did and said a lot of stupid things. What we had was never really on a solid foundation in the first place, not to mention we both have our issues that made it even worse. But despite everything, I feel a lot more stable now and I think you do too."

Sin didn't deny that and Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly before he pushed himself away from the counter. He walked a few steps closer to search Sin's expression sincerely, although he stopped a few feet from Sin. "That's why I think this time we could actually manage it. Right now I'm not worried about something getting fucked up because I feel different about the prospect; this time I want to go through it with you. I feel like as long as we're both willing to put in effort and neither of us gives up, it doesn't matter what happens; we can get through it."

Sin looked at Boyd for a long moment before he pushed himself away from the wall and sat down on the couch, running his palms over his jeans and looking at the carpet from beneath his hair. "How long have you felt this way?"

Boyd watched Sin and after a pause he walked over, sitting on the couch and leaning forward, his forearms resting on his knees. His hands curled and he shook his head. "I guess a few months. After I started to notice the changes in myself, in you." He tilted his head, blond hair falling in a curtain as he studied Sin thoughtfully. "Honestly, if I hadn't thought you were with Ivan I probably would've said something earlier. But maybe it's better there was a lag anyway."

Sin arched an eyebrow. "Why is that better? I feel like we just wasted time."

"We probably did in ways," Boyd allowed with a faint frown. "But..."

Boyd paused, seeming to be trying to collect his thoughts before he shrugged. "I guess we have proof now that we can both feel something about each other but it doesn't have to affect missions or fuck up the rest of our lives somehow. At least for me, it was never

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the actions that messed things up, it was the emotions I felt in the process. And now I don't have to doubt that I can still be as good of a work partner as you need without compromising my feelings for you."

Thinking back on the end of the Monterrey mission, Sin nodded with a slight frown and studied the other man closely. He traced Boyd's features with his eyes and had to drag his gaze away before he became distracted and focused on what he was now free to do physically. "I suppose that's a good point."

Sin could feel Boyd's gaze still burning into him, moving along the contours of his face. Boyd's expression was shadowed and he paused before his fingers twitched and he shook his head. "One thing I want to be clear about is I won't just have sex with you. I can't be casual with you. If we get involved, I want it to be about more than that."

"I don't do casual sex with anyone, let alone someone I actually want something more from," Sin replied faintly. If he wanted this to be about sex, he would have had Boyd on his back and screaming by now.

Boyd nodded, looking unsurprised by the answer. "I think this goes without saying too but I don't want even the slightest possibility of miscommunication. I think that unless one of us has to for work," his eyes narrowed subtly but his tone was unchanged, "then neither of us should fuck around with anyone else."

"Even if Kassian starts coming on to you again?" Sin asked, trying to keep his voice neutral as he thought about that.

Kassian had made it clear during the days that Sin had been holed up at his house that he and Boyd had stopped fucking and that it likely wouldn't happen again anytime soon. But who was to say it wouldn't happen again ever?

Boyd grimaced and sat up straighter, turning his gaze on Sin. "What happened with Kassian absolutely won't happen again," he said without a hint of hesitation. "Even if he tried, which he won't, I wouldn't mess around with him if I was with you. The same goes for anyone else. You're the only one I want."

Sin couldn't help the trace of a smile that ghosted across his full lips and he leaned his head back against the back of the sofa, turning slightly to face Boyd. "Good to know."

A faint smile crossed Boyd's lips in return and he fell silent, his honey brown gaze lingering briefly on Sin's mouth before dragging up to meet his eyes.

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This time Sin didn't stop himself from reaching out and extending his hand, brushing his fingers lightly along the side of Boyd's face until they dragged across his lips. Boyd's gaze was captivating and he subtly leaned into the touch. Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and he had to force himself to look away and drop his hand.

Boyd reached over, curling his fingers over Sin's hand, his thumb brushing against his skin. "Hsin," he said, not looking away from Sin's face.

Sin's pale green eyes rose and he looked directly into Boyd's.

"What about you? Would you still choose me over someone else even if more options came up in the future? You haven't been saying much and I want to be sure I know where you stand."

Sin shrugged, not breaking Boyd's gaze. "I don't want anyone else. I never did. What happened with Ann was an anomaly, not anything to do with attraction or desire."

Boyd's fingers strengthened against Sin's and he smiled. "So, does that mean you want to try?"

"I never meant to say that I didn't, just that I have reservations about what will be expected," Sin replied with a slight frown. "I just want it to be like it was when we were in Mexico."

"That's what I want too."

Sin nodded and shifted slightly, not knowing exactly what he was supposed to do or say in this situation. When they'd first gotten together there hadn't been any conversation making it official or about what they expected from the situation. It'd been sex and heat and passion.

Judging from the previous night, they still had the heat but the current conversation was making him more awkward than horny. Even though he'd assumed this conversation would end with one of them getting fucked into the back of the sofa, that didn't seem likely when he could barely tolerate sitting still while having the conversation because he had no idea what to say.

Sin ran a hand through his hair and looked at Boyd blankly for a long moment. He tried to work out the proper thing to say but was drawing a blank. "What now?"

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Boyd's fingers slid away from Sin's hand and he shrugged. "I don't know. I guess we just... go from here and see where it takes us now that neither of us has to hold back."

"Ah." Sin nodded and crossed his arms over his chest again, shifting slightly. "Well, be warned that I have no idea what to do in this situation. It is different now than it was before. Now I feel as though there are ways to go about this relationship and I don't know what those ways are."

"I don't think there are rules per se," Boyd replied slightly dubiously, his eyebrows drawing down. "Other than what we already agreed on. I'm not an expert on any of this, either. I plan to figure it out as we go."

There was another short silence as Sin let those words absorb into him. He felt his shoulders relax and some of the tension seep out of his body. The fact that Boyd was in somewhat of the same boat as him made the situation less intimidating.

He released a low breath and unfolded his arms, still watching his partner and feeling unsure of what to do or say in response.

Boyd's eyes moved along Sin's face. Preoccupation shadowed Boyd's features briefly as his eyebrows furrowed. "You know, I've been wondering... Given how everything went with Ivan, it seemed inevitable you would stay together."

He met Sin's eyes questioningly. "So... why did it end?"

Sin looked at Boyd sidelong before shrugging simply. "Because he wasn't you."

Pandora

The thrum of bass vibrated along the walls and shook the club like a miniature earthquake. After nearly an hour of the DJ playing an ongoing rotation of top twenty pop hits, the mellow groove of a series of trance songs appeared to be a welcome respite. The melodic beat slithered through the dimly lit room and little by little, the previously stationary patrons were beginning to move.

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Women clothed in swaths of metallic fabric swayed to the beat, their eyes sliding shut and lips turning upwards. Heads were tilted back and cascades of shining hair tumbled over bare shoulders. The male patrons could only look on in awe as the combination of hypnotic music and drugs turned their female counterparts into living manifestations of temptation. Slowly the men joined the women and the dance floor became a thriving mass of moving limbs.

Absent were the vulgar gyrations of typical night club dance floors. Instead, the patrons of Pathos moved as though they were in a trance. They moved as though the music was absorbing into their flesh, as if every sensation was magnified to the fullest extent and they were trying to ride it out as long as possible. They moved as though they were in slow motion, not wanting to wake up from a dream.

And in a way, it was true. At least 85% of the patrons were high on Pandora, the newest drug of choice. It was what Pathos was known for; that and the dark corners that enticed the more risqué of the crowd. The patrons were a mix of socialites and politicians; the 5% elite of the city. There were also a few rare individuals who were beautiful enough to get in on looks alone. Their presence suited the more connected patrons just fine; there was always a use for fresh meat.

Sin had no desire to be groped or ogled. He was unmoved by the attention he and his father were receiving and hadn't derived any pleasure from the fact that the doorman had actually picked them out of the crowd from the back of the line and ushered them inside.

He'd thought they were brothers and Sin had trouble keeping a straight face when Emilio's face had lit up like a spotlight at the comment.

Sin navigated the crowd easily, slipping in and out in a way that was familiar to him from his time in Monterrey. His eyes flit over the patrons in their expensive designer clothes, the men wearing five figure suits and the women decked out in anything from nearly translucent fabrics to leather.

Nearly everyone was beautiful with an aura about them that exuded pure sexuality. It was almost overwhelming and Sin had no delusions that his father was already losing himself in the environment.

Sin looked over his shoulder briefly and wasn't surprised to see that his father wasn't even bothering to look for the target. He was leaning against a wall and smirking

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indulgently at a dark-haired woman with a pixie haircut, short shorts and heels that looked like needles.

With a shake of his head, Sin went back to his search. His eyes skimmed the perimeter and paused only when they reached the bar.

Apparently his lover had had no trouble getting in either.

It was hard not to stare at Boyd and Sin actually stopped walking in the middle of the dance floor to do just that.

Boyd was clad in close-fitting black pants that were tight enough for the shape of his ass to be clearly visible as he leaned over the bar. He wore a fitted indigo shirt that had the top two buttons undone. His toned arms, which Sin hadn't seen for the first year of their partnership, showed the lean muscles he'd developed in the last several months of training. His hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, some of it coming loose and brushing the sides of his face. His hair shone under the lights of the bar and Sin's fingers itched with the desire to touch it.

Sin wet his lips and jerked his eyes away, stepping around a loosely embracing couple and moving deeper into the depths of the club.

"Anything yet?" he muttered into his comm.

"Nothing," Boyd's voice murmured.

Emilio apparently didn't see the point in replying.

Sin moved past a trio of androgynous women and ignored it when one of them gave him a lingering smile. She was striking, with high cheekbones and large, intense eyes but Sin didn't even feel a spark of interest.

His eyes roved back to the bar and he saw Boyd talking to a woman with long black hair. Sin wondered if Boyd was flirting with her and couldn't help wondering if he should do the same. He wondered if it made him stand out that he showed no interest in anyone but at the same time, most of the patrons were so stoned on PD he doubted they'd notice.

It would be handy if their target was also stoned but somehow Sin doubted it. Even if Rhys Penway was the type to get wasted in a public setting, his handlers likely wouldn't

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allow him to become a complete mess. And by handlers, the mission outline had referenced the iron inner circle of Rhys' father's organization, who routinely went out heavily armed.

Sin stopped his idle walk around the club and stood against the burgundy wall, crossing his arms over the too tight grey t-shirt he wore. "I don't think he's here yet."

Across the room, Boyd turned away from the woman under the guise of reaching for a drink. His voice came across quietly, "There's time."

Sin said nothing in response and debated approaching the other bar for a drink. He hadn't had a whiskey sour since Monterrey and it would at least give him something to do.

"Hello."

His gaze shifted from the side bar to his left. The androgynous girl with the soulful brown eyes was standing near him, her wide mouth twitched in a half smile.

"Hi," Sin said flatly, staring at her.

"You're beautiful," she replied, eyes practically caressing his features and the lines of his torso.

Sin snorted and leaned his back against the wall as he observed her face. Her eyes were dilated and her skin flushed, glimmering slightly with moisture. "And you're high."

Her grin widened slightly and she leaned against the wall next to him. She was rail thin and nearly completely flat chested. She could have passed for a teenage boy if it wasn't for the makeup. She reached out a hand and slid it along his muscular arm, massaging it with the tips of her fingers.

"Want to find a corner and fuck?" she asked bluntly.

Sin didn't react. The mission profile had stated that the regular patrons of Pathos were incredibly sexually outgoing.

"Yes," he replied flatly. "But not you."

Her face colored and Sin pushed himself away from the wall, turning away.

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His mind supplied images of the person he did want to fuck. He couldn't help remembering the previous night.

Boyd on the couch, faced away and bouncing on Sin's cock. His blond hair had been loose; catching against his smooth back, slick with sweat. Boyd had been bent over as his long, pale fingers clutched the coffee table in front of him, the husky timbre of his moans growing louder as they'd fucked faster. Sin had gotten off hard on the ability to watch his cock ram in and out of Boyd's ass. He couldn't remember ever coming that violently.

Sin licked his lips and glanced at Boyd again from across the club. His skin looked flawless beneath the lights, his hair golden and silky; perfect. He was saying something to the woman and even though Sin could read Boyd well enough to know his eyes were void of interest, his full lips were lifted in the ghost of a smile.

Sin pictured himself fucking that mouth and had to force himself to look away. Apparently having regular sex turned him into a completely hormone driven teenager. Sin vaguely remembered having the same thought in Monterrey.

It wasn't long before Sin could feel a gaze burning into him and he looked over. The woman was gone and although Boyd hadn't left the bar, he had easily found Sin in the slowly writhing crowd. The disinterest in Boyd's eyes was absent, replaced by a smoldering brown gaze that flicked the length of Sin's body.

When their eyes met across the room, Sin knew Boyd was thinking about the same thing.

Sin ripped his eyes away but they moved back almost instantly of their own accord. Before he could even comprehend what he was doing, Sin tilted his head towards the dark hallway that led to the restrooms. He headed in that direction without waiting to see if Boyd would actually follow.

There was a tight ball of desire inside him that wanted, needed, to explode. In the week since they'd gotten back together, they'd only seen each other twice and it felt like it hadn't been enough. Even last night when he'd spent the night at Boyd's house for the first time in over a year-- it still hadn't been enough. It just left him wanting more.

There were no lights in the hallway or, if there were any, they'd long ago purposefully been left off for situations like this. Still, in the reflected light from the main floor Sin

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could see the glint off glass on what appeared to be the occasional picture hung up. His eyesight cut through the gloom and he could make out artistic close-ups of what appeared to be Pandora pills. It was unsurprising, since Pathos made no attempt to hide what happened inside. It did however make him wonder what the place looked like in the light of day without all the darkness and intrigue.

The restrooms were at the end and around a corner. When he pushed open the door to the men's room, the flickering, pale light inside showed darkly painted walls, black urinals, and empty stalls. Words had been scrawled on some of the walls; graffiti and advertisements for free sex from patrons in the past, written with pale silver ink. The words were almost ghostly in the dim light, a faint afterimage against walls that looked so dark they were probably painted black. The ambiance it gave could have been why it was never washed off or maybe that much graffiti had been written in the space of one night.

His gaze was caught on a particularly vulgar excerpt near the furthest stall, the description automatically making him think of Boyd's pale, sweat-soaked body and those lips reddened and parted. The yearning inside him grew strong and he heard the door swing open behind him. He looked over his shoulder and was pleased to see Boyd, eyes burning with desire so strongly it nearly cut a hole through Sin.

Boyd barely paused at the door before he strode over, his fingers sliding into Sin's hair at the back of his head and tugging him down. He didn't wait for Sin to say anything before he captured Sin's lips in a salacious kiss.

The taste of Boyd's mouth fanned the flames that had been growing ever since they'd stepped out of Unit 16 in their undercover garb. Sin slid his hands down and squeezed Boyd's ass, yanking him closer until there was not even a centimeter of space between their bodies. The tight jeans Sin wore felt nearly painful as his hardening cock strained against the stiff, previously unworn fabric. He could feel Boyd's erection pressing against his own.

Sin growled lowly before tearing his mouth away.

"I could fuck you right here," he said against Boyd's lips, unable to stop himself from flicking his tongue out to taste them again.

Boyd dropped his hands to Sin's hips and squeezed, his fingers slipping beneath the waistband of Sin's jeans. The desire to get rid of the layer of clothing between them strengthened.

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"Then fuck me," Boyd muttered, voice thick with desire.

Sin captured Boyd's mouth in another burning kiss. It was wet, sloppy and almost ferociously needy. He reached one hand up to tangle in the hair at the nape of Boyd's neck, still clutching Boyd's ass with the other.

His heart was pounding in his chest and the excitement was building. He remembered the fevered kisses they'd shared in the darkened alcoves in Lunar. He remembered Boyd always backing away before they could go too far.

Sin pulled away abruptly and shoved Boyd backwards as his pale green eyes narrowed. Boyd stumbled slightly, unprepared for the motion, and Sin repeated it, backing his partner into one of the cramped stalls.

He crowded Boyd inside, mere inches on either side of them, and he kicked the door shut behind him. There wasn't even a pause before they were on each other again.

Sin forced Boyd against the wall of the stall, causing Boyd's back to thump against it. The sound echoed in the empty tiled room and was quickly joined with the mingling of their heavy panting and harsh groans. Boyd seemed especially turned on by the way Sin was pushing him around.

They kissed fiercely and Sin wound his fingers in Boyd's hair, yanking out the tie and freeing the golden strands. He yanked Boyd's head backward and fastened his lips on the other man's neck, licking, sucking and grazing his teeth along the heated flesh of it.

"Oh fuck," Boyd hissed, arching his back and throwing his head back further.

His feet slipped against the floor, one leg going between Sin's while his other booted foot braced against the opposite wall of the stall. His fingers tangled in Sin's hair and his other hand slid across Sin's back as if he couldn't decide what he wanted to touch most.

Sin could feel Boyd's body straining against his own, his hips rocking against him. There was desperation in the motions of his body even though they'd had sex the night before. Ever since they'd gotten back together they fucked like every time it would be the last.

"Mighty convenient how the both of y'all disappeared at the same time," a low voice drawled in Sin's ear through the comm.

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He ignored it and began ripping his belt open as Boyd leaned his back against the stall and anxiously shoved his own pants down. They tangled around one ankle and Boyd lifted the other foot around Sin's side and pressed it up against the opposite wall once again.

Sin shifted in front of Boyd and lubed his cock with saliva as Boyd watched with unconcealed desire. His lips were parted and wet, his eyes heavy lidded and smoldering. Sin could vaguely hear his father's voice making another wan observation about their performance but he ignored it. He could barely even hear it over the sound of his heart pounding when he shifted down slightly and slammed his cock deep into Boyd's hole.

He was sure it hurt but Boyd didn't complain. He just threw his head back with a muffled groan and braced his foot against the wall. He gripped one of Sin's shoulders and when Sin's hips started to snap, Boyd moved in time with each thrust.

Boyd's voice echoed through the silent bathroom, his groans and pleas to be fucked harder growing louder and more desperate as Sin fucked him.

Twice the door opened and someone entered. Neither patron appeared very put off by the sight of three feet beneath the stall, by one of Sin's hands gripping the stall wall with a white-knuckled grip. They didn't seem fazed by the sound of Sin and Boyd's frantic sex.

Lewd comments were made and one plea to be invited to the party was extended but that was the extent of the interruptions.

Sin's fingers dug so hard into the top of the stall that he could feel it bending beneath his hand. He paid it no heed and slammed up against Boyd harder. His mouth hung open slightly as he stared into Boyd's golden eyes. They didn't break eye contact and hadn't since they'd started fucking. There was something about that fact that made the flood of pleasure that was building in Sin's gut want to release even faster.

"Fuck me deeper, baby," Boyd said low in his throat, sweat trickling down the sides of his face. His honey brown eyes were ablaze with lust and pleasure that sucked Sin in.

Sin bit down on his lip and slammed deeper, muffled grunts escaping his clamped mouth when Boyd's muscles contracted around him.

"Ahh, yes-- Harder!" Boyd growled, digging his fingers into Sin's shoulder.

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Sin slid his free hand down to grip Boyd's ass as he moved even more violently, giving Boyd every inch of his barely lubed cock that would fit.

"Yess," Boyd groaned, breaking eye contact finally when his eyes rolled back in his head.

Boyd's mouth was open as he panted harshly, his expression the picture of ecstasy. Their bodies pounded against each other in desperate desire, Boyd's fingers like a vice through Sin's thin t-shirt while Sin was nearly getting lost in the feel of that tight, hot body encasing him. Boyd's hair jerked around his face each time Sin slammed into him, each time his back was pressed against the wall.

An especially loud moan echoed around them and Boyd started moving faster. Words spilled from his mouth in a rise and fall of breathy murmurs and echoing moans.

"Yeah, baby-- ohh fuck, just like that-- Oh-- oh, Hsin--"

"Target in sight, assholes," Emilio's voice growled impatiently.

Sin's hand spasmed against the top of the stall and despite his thundering heart and the desire running rampant through him, his motions stilled.

Boyd's body tensed, his hands tightening powerfully against Sin. His eyes snapped open into a glare, glittering from behind a curtain of disorderly blond hair.

"Stop and I'll fucking kill you," he hissed dangerously.

"But--"

Boyd squeezed the tight ring of muscles that surrounded Sin's dick and Sin choked out a low groan. He started fucking Boyd more intensely and they moved against each other so violently that the stall rocked. The slapping sound of skin against skin surrounded them along with their increasing gasps and groans.

Boyd reached between his legs and started to frantically jerk his own cock just as Sin exploded inside him. The high of his orgasm was only slightly tempered by the knowledge that they were in the middle of a mission. He came so hard that for a moment all he could feel was ecstasy pounding through him to the rushing beat of his heart.

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"Shit," Sin uttered hoarsely and pulled out, staggering slightly even as Boyd shouted desperately and ejaculated onto the floor.

Just as they both stilled there was the distinct sound of someone screaming that was quickly followed by shots being fired.

Boyd's eyes narrowed and snapped toward the door. His face was still flushed with pleasure but his expression became more serious despite the fact that his eyes were still glittering from the encounter with Sin.

"Shit," Sin muttered more fiercely this time, fixing his pants quickly and hurrying out of the stall. Just as he stepped foot out of the bathroom, he heard Boyd following close behind.

The club was in a state of chaos.

The tranquil scene had been shattered and people were running, cowering behind furniture or foolishly screaming hysterically. Sin's lip curled in disgust and he wondered how civilians ever got anywhere in life if they acted this ridiculous over a couple of gunshots.

As if on cue, another series of them rang out and Sin's eyes narrowed as he ducked to the side and into the shadows of one of the alcoves as he surveyed the situation. He immediately spotted his father crouched behind the bar by himself as he exchanged gunfire with Rhys and six of his bodyguards, who had set up shop behind an overturned table.

Sin's eyes narrowed. His father was an idiot. "What the hell did you do?" he hissed into his comm, ducking down and out of sight as Boyd did the same on the opposite side.

"I told you I spotted the damn target," Emilio replied coolly. "Maybe if you didn't have your dick in Boyd's ass or mouth or whatever, you'd have heard."

"I'm sure you've never done that," Boyd said dryly into the comm, darting around the corner of the table to shoot at the bodyguards. His eyes were narrowed as he fell into the disaffected expression he defaulted to on missions. His gun hand was steady as he dispatched several bullets in a row.

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"I'll have to tell Zachary what you think of our former partnership," Emilio replied calmly as if he wasn't in the middle of a gunfight that he had likely initiated.

Sin made a face and ducked down, scurrying over to where his father was casually leaned up against the back of the bar. Just as Sin sank down entirely, glass bottles exploded around him from bullets fired in his direction.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded.

Emilio shrugged casually. "We was supposed to regroup whenever the guy got here but you and blondie was nowhere to be found so I did shit my way."

"Walked up and started waving your gun around?"

"Some shit like that."

Sin scoffed, unsurprised.

Both of them began firing over the counter at the same time. There were eight guards with Rhys, who was nowhere to be seen.

"Boyd, is Rhys in your line of sight?" Emilio demanded over the comm.

"No," Boyd replied over the comm. "But he hasn't left. He's still behind the bar."

"Fucking cake walk," Emilio muttered, shoving a new clip into his gun.

Sin peered around the side of the bar and arched a brow. "You think?"

Emilio's pale green eyes flicked over to him questioningly before he also looked around and saw several more guards flooding into the night club. Obviously Rhys hadn't just been praying behind that counter; he'd called backup as well.

"*Coño*," Emilio muttered, making a face.

"Boyd, get cover," Sin grunted into his comm as the group began unloading on them. Glass flew everywhere, spraying against his face and arms. Chips of wood were blasted off nearby pieces of furniture and even the counter-top was soon riddled.

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Sin could hear bullets slamming into the thick barrier that the lower bar created for he and his father. He wondered how long it would hold and shifted position, peering around the side again. Boyd had snaked his way closer to the opposite bar but the barrage of gunfire had forced him into one of the alcoves, not giving him the opportunity to do so much as shoot around the corner every so often.

"We need a plan," Boyd's voice observed calmly.

"Yeah this shit will go on all night and next thing you know, the fucking cops are gonna be here and I can't deal with no shit like that," Emilio agreed as a bullet whizzed past one of his ears. He yelped and brought his hand up, touching the flesh gingerly. It'd been grazed but at least it was still intact. "Why can't these dumb fucks just give up and know what's good for them?"

"Says the guy who's outnumbered 3 to 1," Sin muttered, making a face. His father never ceased to amaze him.

"Well then do something, super agent," Emilio drawled, glancing at his son. "And stop bitching."

Sin glared at him for a brief moment and just then, Boyd shouted that Rhys was on the move.

"Pursue!"

"Don't fucking pursue!" Sin shouted over the gunfire, violently smacking Emilio on the head.

There was no way for Boyd to move without becoming instantly riddled with bullets. He was barely even getting cover from the indentation in the wall.

"If this fucking mission fails I'll shoot both of you homos," Emilio growled impatiently, leaping to his booted feet and taking out two of the men who were focused solely on Boyd. He got a bullet in his vest for the effort but it barely made him flinch.

Boyd used the distraction to roll out of the alcove and skitter beneath a table but just as he overturned it, half the gunfire once again shifted in his direction and Sin saw Rhys scrambling to the exit.

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Irritation swelled inside Sin. He really didn't feel like dealing with a failed mission just because Rhys couldn't go to a club without half an army at hand to wipe his ass. What kind of person traveled with this much security? A faggot ass daddy's boy who liked to throw his weight around, Sin answered himself with a scoff.

On that note, he decided that Rhys was not going to get away. There was no way some skinny pathetic kid who was spoiled off blood money and liked to bully every little person who got in his way was going to get them put on probation.

It just wasn't going to happen.

Sin threw himself sideways and out of the side of the bar, rolling into a stand nearly instantly. He gripped the side of the bar and grit his teeth, bracing his foot against it.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Emilio shouted incredulously.

Boyd made a sound of surprise over the comm and shifted behind the table, focusing his aim solely on the guards who otherwise could have shot at Sin.

Sin didn't respond to Emilio and grunted, exerting all his strength to rip off the top half of the counter. There was a loud grinding sound that was accompanied by the whine of metal twisting. He growled low under his breath, eyebrows drawing together as his fingers dug into the jagged sides before it wrenched free.

He didn't pause or look at his partners before he flipped the rectangular slab. He reared it backwards seemingly effortlessly, swung it forward and released it.

There was a pause in gunfire as the jagged construct soared through the air and knocked violently into three of the guards. The others dodged out of the way and there was an extended scramble of confusion as blood and gore splattered on the floor.

Sin took off running and exited the club. He could hear Boyd and his father finishing off the remaining guards now that their cohesive organization had been shattered.

Sin's eyes scanned the perimeter of the night club for Rhys. He spotted the man frantically trying to unlock a dark colored town car. Just as Sin's feet began to pound against the rain dampened pavement, Rhys gained access and the car roared to life.

"Boyd, let him finish that shit!" Sin shouted, throwing himself forward just as the car began to glide away from the curb.

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"On it," Boyd's voice came across evenly.

Sin grabbed the top of the car and dug his fingers in, biting back a swear as his body slammed against it violently. He didn't entirely know what his plan was as far as riding the top of the car as Rhys swerved through the leanly trafficked streets of the downtown area. All he knew was that if for some reason Boyd didn't catch up with them in time, he was going to have to try not to slip on the rain-slicked roof. He could easily break his neck in an effort to get inside.

He ignored the alarmed honks of other cars and the sound of police sirens in the distance as he tried to keep his grip on the car. Rhys was swerving and driving as fast as he could without crashing and Sin's hand lost purchase on more than one occasion, although each time he was able to catch himself.

Just as Rhys took a sharp turn and Sin's entire body flipped over the side of the roof and slammed against the passenger's side, the Agency van appeared.

Relief sang through Sin and he hoisted himself up, trying to scramble upwards before he was dashed to the street. He could see the black van speeding past them in his peripheral vision before it took a sharp U-turn and screeched to a stop in the one-lane road that Rhys had turned onto.

Rhys shouted and slammed on the breaks. The car squealed loudly and Sin could smell burning rubber as it briefly spun out of control.

His hands slipped and he completely lost his grip, flying off the vehicle and tumbling a short ways away. He covered his head with his hands instinctively, thankful that at least he'd been able to hold on until the vehicle had slowed down to a near stop.

Even so, his head smacked against the pavement more than once and his cheek rubbed against the burning street.

Sin opened one eye as he lay sprawled on the wet road and looked up. Emilio and Boyd had already exited the vehicle and were dragging a kicking and screaming Rhys out of his car. Sin allowed both eyes to shut and his face to rest against the street with a sigh.

At least Emilio had let Boyd drive. In the near twenty years since his father's absence, the man still drove like a drunk teenager trying to win a drag race.

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Sin lay there for a moment, hearing footsteps approach. He opened his eyes in time to see Boyd leaning over him, visually searching Sin in concern.

"Are you okay?" Boyd asked, holding his hand out.

Sin grasped Boyd's hand and allowed himself to be hoisted up. "Yeah."

Boyd didn't immediately let go of Sin's hand. His fingers curled against Sin's as he did another brief once-over of Sin, something troubled about the look in his honey brown eyes. It didn't leave even when his eyebrows drew down and he turned toward the van with a nod. "We have to get out of here."

Sin didn't argue with that. They moved quickly while police sirens drew steadily closer. Emilio was just finishing securing Rhys in back of the van when they drew near. The van was still running and Boyd automatically jumped in the driver's seat. Emilio and Sin got in and Boyd was already taking off before they had fully shut the doors.

Boyd drove sedately as soon as they turned onto a busy street and he dutifully pulled to the side along with all the other cars when the squads came blaring past them. His eyes were narrowed as he checked in the rear view mirror, presumably to make sure the squads hadn't paused. When he saw they were in the clear, he pulled back onto the street and started driving again, fast enough to get them back to the Agency quickly but not fast enough to draw attention.

Sin ran his fingers along his cheek. There was a streak of flesh missing where it had been rubbed off but it wasn't anything dire. He was pretty sure he had a mild concussion and possibly a sprained ankle but no injuries that would slow him down significantly.

He glanced to the back of the van and saw that Rhys was unconscious and hanging awkwardly from where Emilio had cuffed him to the bar along the wall. He looked skinny and pathetic dangling there and Sin's lip curled as he stared at the young man.

The Agency was after Rhys because his father ran Black Op, an up-and-coming rebel group that was making an attempt to rival Janus. Sin didn't care about that; what he did care about was Rhys's profile. He'd used his money and power to intimidate innocent civilians, cover up the rapes of women who had rejected him at clubs like the one they'd just left and the mysterious disappearances of anyone who rubbed him the wrong way.

Sin shook his head and turned in his seat. He wouldn't mind if Rhys got handed over to Shane for a few weeks.

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"So," Emilio's drawling voice broke the silence abruptly.

Sin looked up and met his father's intense green eyes. He raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

Emilio shrugged, sitting back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest. He surveyed his son. "So that was some move, boy."

Nonplussed, Sin stared at him blankly. "Okay?"

Boyd's eyes flicked to the rear view mirror and then over to Sin, although he didn't say anything.

"Okay and what the fuck, kid? What are you, Superman now?"

Sin's eyebrows rose slightly. His father looked completely serious, almost disturbed, but Sin was still waiting for the punch line. "I don't get it."

"Hsin," Boyd said quietly, looking over at Sin with that same serious, troubled quality in his eyes. "You ripped up that bar with your bare hands and threw it. That shouldn't be humanly possible."

There was a brief silence and Sin's gaze went from Boyd to his father as they looked at him with varying degrees of concern and intrigue. "Well, I don't know what to tell you. It was just adrenaline."

Boyd shook his head, his tone reluctant. "I don't think it is, Hsin." He watched Sin intently before returning his eyes to the road. "In the years I've known you, there have been so many times you've done something that seemed impossible and I always wrote it off as adrenaline or just being you. But after a point, I don't think that makes sense anymore. And I wonder--"

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel and his eyes narrowed. "What if Owen's right?" He looked over at Sin. "What if they're doing something to you?"

Sin focused on his father and waited for him to say something sarcastic, something to mock Boyd's concerns, but the other man just nodded in agreement. A surge of irritation swept through Sin and he couldn't entirely explain why. But the idea that they thought something was wrong with him made him angry in an irrational way.

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"I don't want to talk about this."

Emilio scowled. "Why? I noticed something was off as soon as I saw you, boy. When you chucked me across the fucking room like I was a stuffed animal."

Sin looked out the window and said nothing. He didn't know how to respond to the comment and he couldn't deny that it was true. A flicker of a memory overcame him for a moment and he saw himself opening his eyes in a stark white room. He saw himself ripping his arms free of the cuffs that restrained him and the odd way his body had felt. He remembered the confusion that had come with him being inconceivably repaired and not understanding how that could be after the massive trauma his body had endured in Mexico.

But even then, he banished the thought and shook his head silently.

Boyd's gaze was intense on the rain-slicked streets palely lit by the streetlights. He stopped at a red light and looked over, studying Sin's expression intently.

"Hsin, listen to me," Boyd said reasonably, his tone almost gentle. "You know I love you and I wouldn't think anything different of you even if this is true. But you know what you were like after Mexico. It never should have been possible for you to be fully recovered after that. And when you said you woke up in that building..."

He shook his head. "The Agency will do anything it wants to whoever it wants. You're been an exceptional agent since you joined but it seems like since Monterrey, you've been even more so. And if you weren't like that since a child..." He trailed off briefly and glanced questioningly at Emilio in the rear view mirror.

"He was always a freak but not this much of one," Emilio interjected, still gazing at Sin steadily.

Boyd gave Emilio an unimpressed look at the wording and then turned to Sin with a sigh. "It just makes me worry about you, about what it may mean. What if this is more far-reaching? I always thought the trauma of Monterrey is what ultimately triggered your episodes but since that's when you woke up in that lab, how can we say for sure? I don't want to get too far into conspiracy but at the same time, the implications are worrisome."

"Does it matter?" Sin asked stubbornly, still staring out the window.

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Boyd watched Sin for a long moment and then looked away. He was clearly worried, his eyebrows drawn down. The traffic light turned green and the van started to move again, the city passing by outside the windows in ghostly shapes briefly lit by haloed lights.

"I don't know," Boyd said quietly.

"Fuck that," Emilio scoffed. "I think you ought to know if they're using you as a guinea pig for some super soldier project they're cooking up. It don't even have to be some crazy conspiracy theory shit like blondie is saying-- it could be something like instead of anti-crazy drugs they're actually pumping you full of steroids when you get your injections."

"That sounds ridiculous," Sin replied flatly. "I'm not going to sit around worrying about a foolish theory unless something happens to make me worry."

"What would make you worry, though, if you aren't already?" Boyd asked as he turned onto a three lane one-way that headed toward the Agency.

Sin grit his teeth and glared out the window, frustration growing. Why did they have to insist? Why did they have to go on? Why did everyone always have to find some kind of issue with the way he was?

"I'll worry whenever whatever you think they've done starts to malfunction," he said coldly. "Until then, I'm not going to wonder about something that might have been done to me when I'm the most fucking normal that I've ever been. There is nothing wrong with me."

Emilio stared at his son and scoffed quietly. "Alright boy, whatever you say."

"Right. It is whatever I say. And I say this conversation is over." Sin's eyes flicked from Emilio to Boyd. His eyes narrowed when he focused on Boyd. "Got it?"

Sin could tell that Boyd wanted to say something more. Concern was still strong in his eyes, in his slightly parted lips and the furrow of his eyebrows. But after a moment of meeting Sin's eyes, Boyd's expression defaulted back to neutrality. He nodded and turned an even stare on the street. "Understood."

Sin shook his head slightly and averted his gaze once again. His eyes narrowed into pale green slits and for the rest of the ride he remained broodingly silent.

Pulling the Strings

Carhart sat across from Vivienne, a deep scowl on his handsome face as he stared down at a panel computer and thumbed through the data. His cerulean blue eyes were narrowed and his typically youthful features were twisted into a tense and very frustrated expression, the sides of his mouth drawn down tightly.

"This is incomprehensible," he said out loud, shifting in the chair and glancing up at Vivienne. She was staring at him with the same unreadable expression on her coldly beautiful face, the only indication of displeasure the slight narrowing of her ice blue eyes.

"We just became privy to the information on Aidric. Agent McAvoy acquired it last night for fuc-- for goodness sake."

Carhart shook his head and stared down at the panel, forcing himself to stop bitching out loud. She didn't want to hear his whining-- she wanted answers and he honestly had none.

Aidric Eide was a terrorist who was well known for carrying out massive attacks that focused on major cities and areas within those cities which would cripple them for quite a bit of time. He'd arranged numerous bombings of metros across the country and there were even signs of his work in Europe. The death toll for his crimes were reaching the thousands by now and he was quickly becoming one of the most dangerous men on the Agency's agenda.

The most interesting thing about Eide and the most frustrating, was that he seemingly worked alone. He didn't have a group or an affiliation and he didn't even seem to be aligned with any political faction. If anything he appeared to thrive on the chaos he caused, targeting places at random without any message to explain why he did it like so many other terrorists did when they wanted to garner attention and be heard.

The fact that he operated solo made it difficult to find information on him and zeroing in on a location had proved equally impossible. However, the previous night Toby McAvoy had followed up on a random tip while on an unrelated undercover assignment in Berlin.

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His cover as a reporter had allowed him to overhear an account of a raven-haired man stalking a particular metro station for days in a row. Toby lurked at the station for an entire night and came face to face with Eide himself. He'd shadowed the man and had gotten a location but within a few hours of Toby reporting in-- Eide had cleared out entirely.

Every belonging had disappeared, along with Eide.

"This is the fourth time this has happened," Vivienne said, tone coolly displeased. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Agent Finch in Peru, Agent Kelly in Greece, Agent Finnegan in Rochester, and now Agent McAvoy in Germany." Her eyes narrowed. "The only connection between the missions was the Agency's involvement."

"And that's only the most obvious anomalies," Carhart replied wearily, rubbing a hand across his face. "There's been minor, more subtle problems since the start of the year. So far they've been charged as Intel discrepancies or given fault to the agent in charge of the mission but now..."

He trailed off and looked at her squarely. "Now I think we have a problem and I think it got overlooked for months."

Vivienne nodded curtly, seeming unsurprised by the conclusion; she had probably already reached it herself. Her jaw tightened and she leaned forward, the look in her eyes making her appear especially vexed. "The original theory that perhaps it was based on information received during the raid is no longer viable. It has become undeniable that we have a serious breach of security that I can only conclude is due to a traitor within these walls."

Carhart hesitated, loathe to bring up the incident and the gross misconduct that had followed, but said it anyway: "The consensus among the data analysts has been that Hsin's framing was a personal attack by one of his many enemies. But the timing-- the coincidental and highly convenient network virus that occurred only days before, it makes me believe otherwise. I think it was a choreographed stunt, not something pulled off by someone with a simple grudge. It may be paranoia but I'm starting to believe these things are connected. After the virus, these anomalies have grown more frequent and more obvious."

Vivienne watched Carhart intensely and at first she did not respond. At length, she set her hands on the desk in front of her, clasped tightly. "Unfortunately, I believe you are

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correct. The question we must ask ourselves is whether this is a single person acting alone or if there is a group of dissenters causing trouble from within."

Carhart didn't break eye contact and didn't try to hide how much the possibility disturbed him. If there was truly a traitor within the compound, who knew what level of clearance they had, what talents they possessed and most of all, what exactly they were after. Judging from the events so far it seemed as though the individual or individuals were leaking information, ruining missions but even then...

Even then, it didn't entirely make sense. None of the missions had been related. They'd involved different groups, different people, different countries. It would be next to impossible to narrow the perpetrator down based on allegiance to another party. Unless...

"Do you think this may be a ploy by the European Division to decrease our efficiency levels?" He asked, eyes narrowing at the idea. "To cause a complete white out of our administration and replace us all?"

Vivienne's expression twitched, her lips curling down and eyes turning a hint colder. "It is possible," she admitted, studying Carhart intently before she shook her head once. "But I have my doubts unless it is not orchestrated by the administration. From my conversations with her, Seong Jae-Hwa does not appear to be the type to play games. Were she to have done so and should our superiors discover that she was involved, it would compromise her reliability as potential Marshal. That does not, however, rule out the possibility of the traitors having a similar mindset regardless of where they originate. Even within our compound, there are agents who are displeased with what is expected of them or who may dislike the current administration."

"It's true," Carhart said with a low sigh. He shook his head again and his eyebrows drew together. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want a detailed list of every mission that may have failed due to this as well as every time intelligence may have been leaked," Vivienne said without hesitation. "I want to know when it happened, where it happened, who was involved, who gathered the Intel, who had access to the plans. I want this information to go back to the point when we first started noticing these issues. Do not worry about vetting the information; if it is simply intuition, doubt, or rumor, I want that listed as well."

She narrowed her eyes, spearing Carhart with a firm look. "And I want you to do it alone; I do not want anyone else to have access to your list or to even be aware you are

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gathering the information. This includes your support staff, Emilio Vega, your unit..." She leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed and a grave look making her naturally cold expression seem more serious than usual. "As it stands, we cannot trust anyone else until we can determine who exactly is involved."

Carhart nodded. "Anything else?"

Vivienne shook her head. "Finish it as soon as possible and report back to me. And keep me advised of any new incidents as they develop. We must start gathering information sooner; whoever is doing this is adept and likely is removing any traces of activity. We must find a way of predicting what will come next if we are unable to apprehend them immediately. If you can find the information without tipping this person off, that is the best course of action."

Once again, Carhart nodded sharply and stood. He started to turn towards the door, knowing a dismissal when he heard one, but cautiousness made him hesitate.

He looked at her sidelong and couldn't ignore the worry that nagged at him. Despite how cold she could be and how hard she was, he couldn't deny that over the years he had maintained a certain protectiveness of her even if she likely didn't want it. Despite that, he couldn't help it. In many ways she was alone; she had no loved ones, no friends, and nobody aside from him and possibly Boyd truly gave a damn about her.

It was something that derived from his own personality in a lot of ways; his instinct to always try to protect the people who had no one else to protect them. In the past there had also been something in him that had gone slightly beyond admiration. He'd squashed that over time but the protectiveness had increased dramatically since the raid.

Even more so now that there was a traitor on the compound.

"If you don't mind me saying, Vivienne; perhaps you should heighten your own personal security for the present time."

Vivienne looked up at Carhart and for a moment he could see past the cold mask and glimpse some of the weariness she was hiding. She studied him, and he didn't know if she was caught off guard by the comment or if it was for another reason, but a rare, faint half smile curved her lips.

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Even that small of an expression softened her features and made her seem more her age-- a few years younger than Carhart himself. Her beauty seemed less harsh and she almost appeared approachable. But it was there and gone within a blink of the eye and Carhart wasn't entirely certain he hadn't imagined it.

"I will," she said calmly.

He returned the brief smile with one of his own. "Good. Take care of yourself."

Carhart turned away and left, not able to stop the nagging thought that it was late for her to be leaving the compound alone but even if she stayed in-- who knew if the Tower was even safe anymore?

He felt troubled and distracted as he made his way back to his office, eyebrows drawn together and face a stone mask as thoughts stampeded through his head. His mind was focused entirely on the possibility of a mole within the compound. A traitor with high-security clearance, which narrowed it down to a few dozen people.

It was a group made up of officers and the highest-ranking field and R&D agents. It was a group that he had always believed he could trust implicitly.

The possibility of one of them being a traitor angered him, not only because they had turned against the Agency's goals but because they were actually getting people killed in the process, civilians and agents alike. And for what? To cause the Agency to fail? To start a massive takeover of power whenever the new admin came in?

Did they really think that would change or improve anything? And where the hell did framing Sin fit into any of it? Why was he included in the puzzle if it was just about Agency efficiency dropping? Unless the mole thought that having an Investigator killed on the compound was a bigger blow than failed missions.

Carhart nearly stopped in mid-step and realized that it was true.

Not only had she been killed on their property but her killer was still at large. It showed definite weakness on their part; weakness of their network security staff, weakness of their physical security if the murderer had escaped the compound and a lack of awareness if the murderer was one of their own. Even more damning was the fact that the investigation had focused entirely on Sin for the first couple of days-- Carhart didn't even think the compound had been locked down to prevent the murderer from

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escaping. Then again, due to the surveillance blackout, they hadn't even been aware of the murder for quite some time.

No matter which way anyone looked at it, the Investigator's murder was a damning blemish on an already tarnished record.

The tension in Carhart's shoulders was nearly painful by the time he entered his office. He wanted nothing more than to temporarily put everything out of his mind. He would start on the entire inquisition tomorrow morning. He foresaw a long, tedious process that would likely amount to nothing but clues that ran in circles.

It could wait for the time being and he was too tired to think straight at the moment anyway.

"Good evening, General," Victoria greeted him with a wan smile.

She was sitting at his desk and typing on his computer. Her top had the first several buttons undone and she'd ditched her high heels at some point in favor of a pair of flip flops. She looked visibly weary and the fact that her long blond hair was tied back in a messy ponytail was only a testament to her tiredness. The woman was typically nearly obsessed with the state of her hair.

"Why don't you go home?" he asked her, shrugging off his jacket and tossing it on a chair.

She gave him a skeptical look. "I have stuff to finish. My computer is acting gross, by the way. That's why I'm on yours."

"IT didn't come up yet?" He sat in the chair across from his desk and slumped down, resting his arm on the armrest with his face against his hand as he watched her.

"No. I guess they're busy." She glanced up at him distractedly before focusing on the computer screen again.

Carhart frowned slightly. "Whatever they're working on can wait. You need your computer. Tell them if they don't--"

"No!" Victoria stopped typing and gave him a pleading look. "I don't want to get anyone in trouble, General Carhart. Please."

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He glared at her, wondering how he'd gotten such a bleeding heart admin. Amy would have stormed down to IT herself and personally dragged the offending tech down to the incinerator. "Fine. Then I'll get Ryan to handle it."

"Oh! Good! I love Ryan," she enthused, looking very pleased. "He's such a cutie. Too bad he's gay."

Carhart raised an eyebrow at that. "Somehow I can't picture you with Ryan Freedman even if he wasn't."

"Why?" she asked with a laugh, going back to typing even as she held his gaze. "Because a tall bombshell like me needs a big manly man?"

He shrugged.

Victoria shook her head, clearly amused by this. "Well I'm not so superficial, I'll have you know. It's about the person, not what they look like. And me and Ryan actually have stuff in common."

"Is that so?" Carhart asked doubtfully, still sitting in the same slumped position.

"Yes," she replied arching one eyebrow at him. "We both like to travel, or at least to dream about traveling, for one. We both like to bake and also, we both suffer from the same affliction."

For a moment Carhart stared at her blankly but then it dawned on him. "You have the lung disease," he said flatly.

"Yup," she replied, clearly unaffected by the topic. She actually met his eyes and smiled. "They give me a couple of years. So just think-- in a very short amount of time, this tall bombshell will be a withered set of bones six feet under."

Carhart blinked at her. "I see you're taking the news well."

Victoria's full lips lifted in another smile and she tilted her head to the side, a fall of golden blond bangs tumbling over her forehead. "C'est la vie, right?"

He shook his head and shifted in the chair, suddenly uncomfortable with what she was saying.

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Although she'd annoyed him at first, he'd realized after a while that the annoyance had stemmed more from him having to get accustomed to someone new than her actually doing something wrong.

Now he was used to her-- more than used to her, he actually found himself fond of her. In the past few stressful weeks he'd begun to lean on her more than he'd typically be comfortable with but work had been so overwhelming he'd had no choice and she'd been there every step of the way.

From digging up old files, to going over mission reports with a fine-toothed comb and even bringing him food when he hadn't even realized he was starving until it was in front of him. She even appeared with pain killers when she'd notice the crease between his eyebrows that almost always meant a migraine.

Carhart glanced at Victoria again, watching as she peered into the screen in concentration.

He'd become very attracted to her too. It was difficult not to be; she was gorgeous. But when they began having actual conversations, when she stayed at the office with him well into the wee hours of the morning, he'd realized that he actually liked her as a person as well. And he wasn't going to deny that he'd included her in more than one masturbatory fantasy. He hadn't had sex in months so those were more frequent than not.

"Why don't you stop doing whatever you're doing and we go have that drink?" he asked her abruptly.

Before she had the opportunity to reply, there was a sharp rapping at the office door. Both he and Victoria glanced up before he called out for the person to enter in a tone that wasn't entirely welcoming.

Sin appeared in the doorway and stepped inside. Victoria jumped to her feet almost immediately, probably because she was sitting behind the top general's desk but also because Sin made her nervous.

She edged away from the desk until she was in front of it and hovering awkwardly at the side, self-consciously poking at her hair.

Sin didn't even look at her but that was the typical case. He didn't acknowledge anyone on the compound unless he had a specific reason to and she was no exception. It was

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almost amusing to behold the two of them and Carhart smiled wryly behind the hand that was cupping his face.

Victoria looked completely diminutive beside Sin's tall, strapping form. The fact that she was staring pointedly at the carpet even though he appeared to not even register her existence made it even more amusing.

"What now?" Carhart asked him, eyebrows rising and expecting some kind of trouble as was the typical case with his unit.

"I need to discuss something with you," Sin said vaguely.

There was a beat of silence and Carhart gave him a pointed glare. "So discuss it."

"It's about downtime."

Carhart didn't have his computer in his line of vision and he flitted a quick, questioning glance at Victoria. She kept track of every high-ranking agent and officer schedules for him, especially people in his unit.

"Agent Vega has several weeks of accrued downtime, sir."

Sin finally shifted his stare to her but he didn't speak and she fidgeted with the collar of her shirt under the hawk like gaze.

"Shouldn't it be longer?" Carhart asked skeptically. "I don't believe he's ever taken much time in his entire career."

Victoria nodded and glanced at Sin almost guiltily. "Yes but it seems HR detracted time from when he was in the coma."

"What!" Carhart sat up, scandalized. "That's ridiculous. Get them on the--"

"Forget it," Sin snapped, looking impatient at the course the conversation was taking. "I don't need extra time. I only want to request two weeks."

Carhart settled back against his chair, still simmering with irritation and indignation. He was convinced that the people in HR were just as subhuman as the torturers on the Fourth. "When?"

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"As soon as possible."

There was another moment of silence as Carhart rubbed his chin thoughtfully, studying Sin. It was conceivable considering there was still a lull in Janus-oriented activity. Anything else, Emilio could easily take over. "I'll look into a date for you."

Sin nodded and Carhart averted his gaze, thinking the discussion was over. However, Sin didn't move an inch. He continued to stand there, staring at the General. Except now he was idly fingering the sleeve of his hoody.

"Yes?" Carhart asked, impatience creeping into his tone.

"I wasn't just asking about me," Sin said flatly.

Carhart stared at him blankly for a moment before it dawned on him. His eyebrows drew together and he shook his head wearily. "You can't both go on downtime for two weeks, Sin. It's not going to happen."

"Why?" Sin demanded, eyes narrowing. "There has been one and two week-long lulls of activity for the last several months. Why is it a problem if we take an official leave?"

"Because," Carhart retorted sharply but hesitated after saying the word. He frowned deeper. "Because getting it approved for two level 10 field agents in the same unit will be a bitch."

"You're second in command. Make it happen."

Victoria snickered off to the side and Carhart shot her a warning glare. She clammed up and busied herself at his bookcase. He had a filing machine for all of his electronic data sitting on it and she compulsively organized it.

"I can't show such obvious favoritism."

Sin gave him a scathing look. "Why not? Everyone knows you do shit for us anyway."

Carhart's lips thinned into a tight line and he fought the urge to throw something at the agent's head. "Sin, it's not a good idea. And besides, you know my stance on your relati-- on the--"

Sin raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

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Carhart stumbled over the words, not wanting to cement any rumors in front of a third party. "You know what I think about this situation."

Thunderclouds seemed to gather over Sin's head and his expression went from impatient to stormy. His eyes narrowed further and his full lips curled as he took a step forward. "I don't care what you think about the *situation*. He has the time and so do I. There isn't anything to do anyway. You have Jon, Trovosky and my father to cover any assignments. If it were anyone else, you wouldn't be questioning them this thoroughly."

"Because they wouldn't be going off together."

"So? They'd still be gone at the same fucking time."

As their voices rose, Victoria's brief amusement faded and she continuously shot glances at the door. But going to the door meant getting close to Sin and the waves of irritation that were pouring off him likely warded her off.

Carhart crossed his arms over his chest and stared up at Sin. He couldn't deny that a part of his hesitance to even look into the idea was because he had reservations about their continued relationship. As much as he favored the two of them when it came to taking chances, he also was biased against the danger of their feelings for each other.

But he also knew that wasn't fair to either of them and when he took into consideration everything that had gone on lately, they deserved time to relax. Especially away from the Agency.

Sin sighed and looked away briefly, his posture rigid. "Please."

The word came out stiff, unnatural sounding and resentful. But the fact that Sin had actually allowed the word to cross his lips was practically a miracle.

Carhart caved almost instantly with a long-suffering sigh. "I'll look into it but no promises. Especially for a full two weeks."

Sin nodded shortly, his expression unchanged. "Good."

He walked out without a goodbye or an expression of gratitude.

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Victoria stared after him long after the door had been shut and she smiled slightly. "I like watching you two interact. You're like a father and son."

Carhart didn't respond and instead returned to the previous matter as she slid back into the chair at his desk. "So, how about that drink?"

Victoria didn't look up as she focused on the computer. "I didn't tell you about my illness so you could pity me, General."

Carhart made a face. "It has nothing to do with pity," he said irritably. "But I'm in one of the worst moods I've been in for a while and I'd like to attempt to relax, preferably with company so I don't just end up stewing about the situation and downing a bottle of Jack."

She looked up, concern written all over her pretty face. "What situation? What's happened now?"

He shook his head. "It's something I'm going to be dealing with on my own."

Victoria nibbled on her lower lip and watched him from under her sleepy, heavy-lidded cobalt blue eyes. "I have a confession-- I don't really drink all that much. I take a lot of medication and I tend to get drunk really fast. I mean I still drink socially or when I'm upset but I don't think having to pick up after me would help you relax because I can get pretty out of control," she said apologetically.

"Okay," he said, unconcerned. "Coffee then."

Her eyebrows drew together and she actually looked confused. "What's going on?"

Carhart nearly laughed at her worried tone. "Something has to be going on for me to ask about spending time with my assistant?"

She shrugged. "Well I'd been kind of hinting around, flirting for a couple of months before finally deciding that you seriously weren't interested and now you're acting like you're asking me on a pre-date. Drinks, coffee..."

"So what if I am?" he asked, arching an eyebrow, encouraged by her bluntness. "I barely knew you before."

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Victoria watched him suspiciously for a long moment before she shrugged her slender shoulders and began shutting applications. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Well okay, then."

Pleased, he rolled his shoulders and watched as she got herself together. "Would you like to go off compound or just go to my quarters and spend time there?"

Her mouth practically fell open from surprise. "You'd let me go to your place? I heard you were really funny about that."

Carhart didn't want to know where she'd heard that and he didn't ask even though it was true. Before Emilio had started using his apartment as a motel, he'd been very selective about bringing anyone to his home but now it didn't matter anymore. "It's fine."

"Okay, then I'd rather stay in if you don't mind. I don't want to have to put on my face and change and stuff," she replied, standing finally and following him out the door. She grabbed her tote bag from her desk and paused briefly. "But what about..."

"He's on a mission," Carhart said dryly.

"Oh. Good." Victoria looked visibly relieved.

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For the first time in the past few months, Carhart saw the point in eating in the living room.

They'd had the Service staff deliver crab linguini from the cafe and after Victoria assured him that a glass of wine wouldn't turn her into a completely sloppy drunk, they'd finished the last of the Chianti that was left over from the days of Morgan regularly visiting him. Now Victoria lay stretched out on the sofa with her hair loose and falling messily around her face, feet in Carhart's lap as he idly rubbed them.

She chattered lazily about different topics-- Agency gossip, work, even her family. Although for the first couple of hours Carhart did more listening than speaking, he found the sound of her low, feminine voice to be soothing. And her ability to carry on a conversation nearly solo while still sounding thoughtful and interesting was endearing.

His mouth rose in a slight smile as he worked his thumbs down the arch of her foot, watching as she shivered in appreciation.

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He had no idea why he was massaging her feet. She hadn't asked him to, but it'd given him an excuse to touch her and watch as she melted in a puddle of bliss.

"I don't get why you're single, General Carhart."

"You can call me Zach, you know," Carhart said with a raised brow. "This isn't exactly a formal setting."

Victoria gave him a slow smile, her full lips twisting upwards as she looked at him from beneath her eyelashes. "It seems weird, though."

He just shrugged and ran his fingers along the delicate skin of her ankle, enjoying the feel. Everything about Victoria was soft and feminine and he couldn't stop running his eyes over her now that she was laid out before him. He couldn't take his eyes off her long shapely legs or the way her full breasts pressed against the button-down shirt she wore.

He even realized that he liked the way she dressed. He liked that she didn't take herself too seriously the way Morgan used to. He liked that unlike Morgan, Victoria didn't seem to equate self-care and pride in her appearance with a lack of intelligence.

And he realized quite belatedly that he was comparing the two of them and that probably meant he was more intrigued with Victoria than he'd previously thought.

"It's up to you," he said finally. "But you don't need to address me by title."

"Okay," she said with a hint of a teasing smile. "But you still didn't answer my question."

"It seemed like more of a statement than a question."

Victoria gave a long-suffering sigh and stretched, arching her back and causing her shirt to rise up and expose her flat stomach. "Okay, why are you still single, Zach?"

He tilted his head back against the sofa and watched her seriously, debating the question. It was one he was accustomed to hearing in one form or another and he never really knew how to answer. "Is it surprising that I don't need continuous companionship?" he asked instead.

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"It's not surprising that you don't need it. Nobody *needs* it," Victoria said with a one-shouldered shrug, smiling at him coquettishly. "But most people want someone for one reason or another whether it's just for company or for sex."

"So then what's your reason?" Carhart asked, studying her. "Why are you single? Don't you need those things?"

Her smile turned sly. "I get them. I'm just not as in the spotlight as you, Gen--Zach, so not very many people notice my business. You don't even notice and you're my boss."

"Really." He leaned forward slightly, intrigued. "Who is it?"

Victoria hesitated only briefly before saying casually, "Chester. I stopped hanging out with him a couple of months ago, though."

Carhart stared at her blankly for a moment and went through a mental list of staff members named Chester. The only person who sprang to mind was Agent Chester Merdak, a level 7 field operative who'd been recruited out of a military prison four years ago. He'd been serving a life sentence for shooting three people in cold blood after they'd already surrendered. The Agency found the combination of his training and ability to perform executions appealing. He was in his mid-twenties and athletic, a couple inches below six feet tall, and typically wore his ash blond hair in a mohawk.

"Isn't he a little young for you?" Carhart asked.

She gave him a dirty look, mouth drawing down. "I'm not that old."

"You're 32, he's 25, and he has the maturity level of someone far younger," he replied with a raised eyebrow.

Victoria smiled again. "So you think I need an older man, eh?"

Carhart gave her an unimpressed stare and pushed her feet off his lap. "If I was trying to use this information for my own gain, I would be a lot more direct."

She sat up slightly and leaned her arm against the back of the sofa, resting her head against it and watching him with a small smile. "I know, General. I'm being silly. I'm just not entirely sure how to flirt with you."

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He raised his blond eyebrows slightly. "And why is it necessary for you to flirt with me at all?"

"To show interest."

"Well, I'm aware of your interest so what is the point of flirting?"

Victoria shrugged slightly, her lips twitching. "So then what do I do to get you interested in return?"

"If I wasn't attracted to you I highly doubt I'd be rubbing your feet."

She nodded slightly, her deep blue eyes focused on him as she seemed to consider her next few words carefully. "I'll be blunt, General. Do you just want to sleep with me?"

Carhart nearly said yes but realized it wasn't entirely the case. He wanted to have sex with her but he also wouldn't mind entirely if that didn't occur at all. She was relaxing to be around and he genuinely liked her personality.

"I'm sexually attracted to you but very rarely do I act on that unless I have interest in other areas as well. I'm not one for random casual sex partners. I never have been."

"That, I believe," Victoria said with a nod, shifting closer slightly. "Do you have any idea how many women on the compound are completely in love with you?"

Carhart rolled his eyes. "So I've been told."

"You sound skeptical but you shouldn't be," she chastised softly, reaching out to touch his arm gently. "You're a great catch. Handsome, smart, powerful but not a douche--"

He laughed out loud at that.

"--and you're just so... I don't know." Victoria paused, frowning as she tried to gather her thoughts. "I've met most of the top people on the compound and all of them have that coldly superior air but you're second in command right now and you're never like that. You're so... real. So straight up. Everyone knows it and that's why everyone respects you so much. I can't begin to tell you how jealous a lot of my friends were when they found out I got the post as your assistant."

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"And why is it," Carhart asked, raising his eyebrows, "that you wanted the post again? You don't get paid any more than you did in Data Retrieval and you do five times more work."

Victoria smirked, raising one perfectly arched blond brow and curving her full red lips into a smile. "For one, DR is incredibly dull. For twelve hours out of the day, my only interaction was with a keyboard and a computer. Secondly, I also applied for a spot in Unit 16 but Rebecca from Payroll landed it. I think it's because she has nicer hair."

Carhart stared at her blankly and Victoria laughed.

"Thirdly, it's because I honestly did want the honors of working for you and no, I'm not saying that just to kiss your rear end. Like I said, you're one of the most powerful people on this compound and you're a good person from what I can see."

"And what is so good about me?" he asked skeptically, leaning over to pick up his half full glass of wine from the coffee table. "Just because I don't throw my weight around and act like an insufferable jackass does not automatically categorize me as a good person."

She just grinned. "You're a nice guy, just admit it."

"I'm nothing of the kind. You're fooling yourself in an attempt to satiate your need to rationalize getting into some kind of non-platonic relationship with your boss."

Victoria laughed, throwing her head back and looking incredibly gorgeous in the process as her entire face lit up. "Oh, please. I don't need to rationalize that. It's not like I'll be canned from the Agency even if *you* decide to fire me. They'd have to expend resources having me shadowed forever unless they decide to just terminate me, but since I have living family they'd have to then expend time to come up with a cover story. In the end, they'd just transfer me to another position."

"Clever."

She gave him an arch look. "I am. And getting back on topic, if you're not a nice guy then why on Earth would you have granted simultaneous downtime to two level 10 agents who also happen to both be in your unit? That's a serious favor, Zach, and one I'm sure you granted just because you wanted to be... nice."

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An expression of discomfort crossed Carhart's youthful features and he swallowed the last of his wine, setting the empty glass back down onto the coffee table. "They've had a rough few months," he replied evenly.

"I don't doubt that but it isn't your job to care," she replied.

Carhart didn't respond and he stood up, grabbing the empty plates and glasses and taking them to the kitchen. Her eyes followed him the entire time, her expression thoughtful and slightly hesitant.

The conversation was beginning to irk him. He knew Connors, Vivienne and the other generals felt the same way about him-- he was compassionate, the nice one. Although he couldn't honestly deny that in some cases he was, it wasn't something that he wanted to be so well known.

People often took kindness for weakness.

"I didn't mean to annoy you," Victoria said after a moment, following him to the kitchen area and leaning against the archway. "I was mostly just teasing."

Carhart let water run on the sauce-covered plates for a moment before turning to Victoria and giving her a narrow-eyed stare. "If I invite you over for non-work-related reasons, I would prefer it if you didn't discuss work-related issues or I'll be forced to return to my work-related frame of mind."

"I'm sorry," she said again, seeming genuinely apologetic.

He shrugged and said nothing.

They stared at each other for a moment and he couldn't help noticing that she was beginning to look uncomfortable under his no longer casual scrutiny.

"Maybe I should go," she muttered.

"If that's what you'd prefer."

Victoria gave him a frustrated look, eyebrows drawing together. "You're so confusing."

Carhart raised his eyebrows in surprise. "What did I do that was confusing?"

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"You--" She broke off, frowning deeply. "I don't know what's going on, that's what's confusing. You're obviously attracted to me but that isn't exactly earth-shattering news. I thought you didn't want to become involved with your admin so I left you alone, then you invite me out on a date pretty much and now you're back to acting like it wouldn't bother you if I'd never come over at all."

He sighed and leaned against the counter, wondering why women had a tendency to jump to conclusions and assume things just because they didn't hear precisely what they'd expected to hear. "We enjoyed dinner and a drink, for the most part had pleasant conversation-- at what point did I give that impression?"

Victoria's frown deepened, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. "Well you didn't exactly look disappointed when I said I was going..."

Carhart arched a brow again. "Should I beg you to stay when you obviously are feeling uncomfortable?"

She made a face. "I don't think you'd beg for anything, ever. Probably not even for your life if someone had a gun to your head."

He smirked. "So then what's the problem, Victoria?"

"Do not use that... that I'm-older-and-wiser-than-you, you-silly-child voice."

"Well, I am."

Victoria scowled and he couldn't help a low chuckle at the expression on her pretty face.

"Did you expect me to make a pass at you?"

When she didn't respond, Carhart knew he'd hit the mark. It was always the case, all the time. Even if they had no intentions of sleeping with him, for some reason an absence of the invitation seemed to strike some of the women on the compound as an insult.

"Would you even go along with it if I had?" he asked instead, giving her a pointed stare.

Victoria surprised him by giving an almost automatic, "Yes."

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This time it was Carhart who wasn't sure how to respond and she smiled at him, walking closer. "The way I figure it, General Carhart, if I only have a short time left to live I may as well live for every moment I have."

He nodded, resting his elbows on the counter as she stopped directly in front of him, placing her hands on either side of his arms. "That's pretty heavy for a first pre-date," he observed idly, eyes skimming over her face and focusing briefly on her full, bee-stung lips.

"It is," she agreed. "But apparently girlish subtlety doesn't work with the General of Field Operative Activity so I've decided to switch to extremely forward, confident woman who borders on creepy."

Carhart laughed and she leaned forward in the midst of it, kissing him full on the mouth.

He didn't respond at first, didn't even react, and she reached up to place her hands on his shoulders, pressing against him slightly as she slipped her tongue into his mouth. It was then, when the taste of her invaded his mouth, that he responded.

It had been months since he'd had any kind of intimate contact, since he'd felt a soft, warm body beneath his hands. Since he'd felt the heavy fall of a woman's hair against his face as they shared breath. And although there had been frequent twinges of desire, Carhart hadn't realized how much he'd missed it.

His arms wound around her, one hand sliding down to cup her ass as the other clenched the back of her shirt. All his pent up sexual frustration released itself in an explosive and fiery kiss that left Victoria panting against his lips as soft moans escaped her own.

Her hands moved up to slide into his short blond hair before moving down to cling to his back. She didn't seem startled by the ferocity of his response; if anything it seemed to turn her on and it wasn't long before her lips were swollen and red from their hungry kisses.

Carhart pushed her forward slightly, backing her against the kitchen table, and lifted her up effortlessly to sit her on top of it. She wrapped her thighs around him as she captured his mouth again, reaching for his belt buckle. He undid her shirt, pushing it off her shoulders and down her long, tanned arms.

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The next few seconds blurred in the rustling sound of her skirt being pushed up around her waist and his belt buckle clanking against the side of the table as it was pushed hastily aside.

All thought of standard protocol and consequences and the Agency was gone from his head, replaced by an undeniable desire to just be inside her.

But just before that moment could occur, just when her underwear was being yanked down, inexplicably her body stiffened and all lust-filled, frenzied motion stopped.

Carhart frowned and looked at her face. Her expression was frozen in a mask of something that was closer to fear than embarrassment and when he followed her gaze, it wasn't difficult to figure out why.

For all Emilio managed to fool mostly everyone else on the compound into believing he was a charismatic and misunderstood guy, Victoria had been present for one too many blunt conversations between the General and the Senior Agent to buy that. She knew how spiteful he could be-- she knew how he could cut like a knife with his words alone. She knew all about his interference with Morgan.

"What the hell are you doing back here already?" Carhart demanded irritably, glaring at Emilio.

But Emilio didn't answer right away. His eyes were on Victoria, watching coldly as she slowly slid off the table and began straightening her clothes. Emilio took in how nervous she was, noting the lack of embarrassment and the way she put a hand on Carhart's arm.

Pale green eyes shifted to Carhart and they narrowed as Emilio's well-formed mouth twisted. Emilio's nostrils flared slightly and his fingers flexed seemingly of their own accord.

"Zach--" Victoria started but Carhart cut her off with a look.

"You don't have to leave."

Carhart expected Emilio to say something then-- to begin peeling off quick retorts and insults that would likely leave Victoria simmering with humiliation and rage.

But he didn't.

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Emilio simply turned around and disappeared into the small office that they'd eventually converted into a makeshift bedroom for him, closing the door behind him.

"No," Victoria said firmly. "I'm going to go."

Carhart released a long, low breath and shook his head. "This is my home. Not his."

"I know, Zach," she said and looked genuinely sympathetic, almost even guilty for making the decision to leave. "But I know my limits and I can't take on a pissed off Emilio Vega. I don't know what that was all about just now but he clearly doesn't want me around at the moment and I'm not about to wait until he decides to tell me why."

Carhart nodded after a moment. "Okay."

Victoria smiled and planted a soft kiss on his jaw. "Maybe next time we should take a break at the office. It may be safer and more private there."

He arched an eyebrow, intrigued by the idea of having her spread open and willing on his desk. "Maybe."

She was gone from the apartment within minutes, leaving only the faintest scent of perfume and the sting of pent up desire.

Carhart stood in the middle of the living room for a long stretch of time, glaring at the door to Emilio's temporary bedroom and wondering what the other man's problem was. It occurred to him that the mission may have gone South, that Emilio may not have been in the mood for company. That he possibly even wanted to vent to Carhart and was thrown off by the presence of Victoria.

Carhart started to move forward and knock on Emilio's door, to inquire what was wrong, but he stopped just outside.

He was too pissed off to care at the moment. Emilio could come talk when he was ready.

With that thought in mind, Carhart went to his own bedroom and closed the door behind him, stripping off his clothing and lying face down on the bed. He turned his head to the side, staring out what he could see of the glass panes of the window through the dark curtains that surrounded them.

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He couldn't remember the last time the sky had looked so clear and he stared in silent amazement for a while. His cerulean eyes traced the midnight blue of the sky, actually able to pinpoint tiny, faint specks of light that signified stars-- stars that had been shrouded in layers of smog and debris for years.

But even as the sky was clearing, it seemed his life was getting foggier and more confusing.

It seemed that he'd come to a point in his life and career where nothing would ever be simple again.

Every decision he made at the Agency had so many consequences and every incident had a million probability lines stemming from it. It was difficult to focus on the greater good when the people he cared about were constantly involved. Sometimes he didn't know which way to turn, what the best thing to do was and when to get involved at all.

But the confusion and aggravation didn't only stem from work. It was just as ingrained in his personal life as well.

The stress of being the head general had left him wanting, no, needing an outlet and it was that desire that had allowed him to finally move on with his life after mourning his dead wife for years. He'd had casual flings, a number of them, for a couple of years and had found himself involved with field agents both rookie and ranked, civilian employees, captains...

Carhart had never racked up the impressive number of some of the more determined players on the compound but it had been widely known that he was available and willing.

And with that knowledge came the attention seekers, the women who wanted to have sex with him just to be able to say they had sex with the head general, who thought they would gain something from getting entrenched in his life-- thinking he would help them move forward in their career or help them weasel out of something they didn't want to do.

He'd tried not to care but over time he'd become distrustful of any woman who showed interest in him, thinking surely she must have some ulterior motive. Morgan had been the exception to that but her personality had conflicted too much with his.

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Victoria was the kind of woman he could see himself spending time with on a longer term basis but with her, there was more of a possibility that she was using him for notoriety or for some other personal gain. He knew it was likely his own paranoia but still, it wouldn't stop him from turning over her words in his head, analyzing the things she said as he tried to figure out if she had something else in mind.

Carhart closed his eyes and tried to push the thoughts away.

He had a busy day tomorrow-- a day of inquisitions and suspicion, of looking into the people he should be able to trust; yet another day of tough calls and hard decisions and complications that hadn't existed back in the days when he'd been nothing more than a field agent.

He dozed off with the faintest of memories of missions and living life for the moment with nothing more to worry about than his next assignment and the next phone call.

He didn't know how long he slept, how long the cool October breeze blew over the planes of his bare muscular back, before sudden pressure on the bed and the feel of hands on his naked skin caused Carhart's eyes to snap open.

Every muscle in his body tensed and his hand shot to the bedside table to grab the gun he always kept stashed between the frame and the side of the mattress. Before he could make contact, a strong hand caught his wrist and wrenched it around violently.

Carhart strained backwards on the bed, attempting to buck his attacker off but his other hand was wrenched up and before he could even comprehend what was happening, powerful hands were keeping his trapped behind his back.

Carhart took a long deep breath, his mind racing and heart galloping as he tried to figure out how someone had gotten into his apartment. Before the thought could complete itself, the person leaned heavily forward. Carhart inhaled the scent of tequila, cigarette smoke and very familiar cologne.

"Emilio, get the fuck off of me," he snarled.

"Shut up," Emilio growled low in his throat, his voice slurred and thick as he shifted position and knelt up. "Just shut the fuck up."

Carhart exhaled slowly, closing his eyes and trying to rein in the fury that was coursing through him. "Emilio, if you don't get off me now I'll break every bone in your body."

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"You could try," came the slightly slurred response.

"Get. Off. Me."

Emilio mimicked the words in a low dangerous voice, his tone angry and resentful. His body was stiff and unyielding as he trapped Carhart against the bed. "Do you know what I could do to you right now, Zachary?" he whispered in Carhart's ear, nuzzling the side of the other man's face as he did so.

Carhart growled and turned his face away from Emilio's lips.

"I could flexicuff you to the headboard and fuck you whether you liked it or not," Emilio murmured in his other ear, pressing his mouth hard against it.

The general grew very still at the words and a flash of apprehension shot through his body. "You wouldn't do that."

"Think so?" Emilio demanded, jerking Carhart's arms violently and painfully. "I should. I should fucking take your ass raw and fuck you until you fucking bleed, baby. I should shove my cock up your tight ass and give it to you nice and hard like you liked it back in the day, right? Not that you would ever really let me give it to you. Nah, you liked riding me too much. Liked feeling like the big man--"

Carhart shifted and his mind began to try to figure out a strategy for how he would get out of this. He would like to delude himself into thinking that Emilio wasn't capable of raping him but it would be a lie. The first time they fucked in Brighton had practically been rape. And Emilio had trouble seeing the wrongness of something if he wanted it bad enough.

"--always wanted to be the one thinking you was controlling the situation, pulling the fucking strings. And now you got to be the one fucking with my mind, leading me around like a fucking dog trying to get a bone, knowing goddamn well that-- that I'm not fucking-- that you--"

Emilio's voice was starting to sound thick, emotional; frustrated and angry. The alcohol was making his tongue loose and making him say things he'd never say sober. All he ever said sober was that Carhart was hot and that they should fuck. It never went beyond that.

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"That I, *what?*" Carhart demanded against the mattress. "What have I done to you? How have I messed with your mind?"

"Don't fucking bullshit me, Zach!" Emilio growled in his ear, twisting his arms again until Carhart actually cried out in pain. "I *know* you get off on it. You know I want you, you know-- you fucking know it."

"I know you want to have sex with me just to prove that you can," Carhart replied darkly, gritting his teeth together in frustration. "And you want to play the victim because for a change you can't get what you want."

"And then you brought some fucking bitch over here," Emilio went on, his voice taking on an even sharper edge.

"You always have 'some bitch' over here," Carhart retorted.

"But that's different. They don't mean anything to *me*," Emilio said from between grit teeth, digging his fingers into Carhart's arms.

"And what business is it of yours if Victoria means something to me?" Carhart demanded, voice rising in indignation as he began to once again strain against the grip his former partner had on him. He could break it if he wanted to but at the risk that Emilio would break his arms in the process.

Emilio didn't respond immediately but he kept his face pressed against the side of Carhart's. Carhart could feel his lips moving as if he wanted to respond, could feel him trembling slightly as he tried to work out his own reasons and whether or not he'd own up to them.

But in the end, Emilio just released Carhart and climbed off the bed. Carhart got up almost immediately, turning to face his friend and staring at him with barely concealed anger. He stood there for several long, furious minutes before speaking in a coldly angry voice.

"If you ever do that to me again, I'll tear you apart, Vega. Or die trying. You have no right to put your hands on me. You have no right to threaten me. I don't care what connection you imagined we had after Brighton. None of it gives you the fucking right and if you pull any shit like that again, you will be dead to me."

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Emilio didn't respond. His face was turned down, his arms hanging loosely at his sides and his hair shadowing his face. He was still wearing the same clothes he'd worn when he'd arrived back at the apartment.

"Do you fucking understand?" Carhart shouted, his voice echoing in the silent room. "Or do you need a goddamn Spanish translation, you little bastard?"

Emilio flinched away from the words and he looked up briefly. His lips were parted slightly, his round eyes wide and slightly unfocused. He looked distraught, confused, and slightly frightened. Carhart didn't think he'd ever seen so much raw emotion on the other man's face. The other man's mood swings were going faster and more dramatically than ever.

"I'm sorry," Emilio said finally, his voice so low it was nearly a whisper. "I'm-- I'm fucking-- fuck."

Carhart didn't say anything. He had nothing to say. The resentment and anger he felt was too strong to crack even in the face of such obvious drunken confusion. He couldn't tell if Emilio was really sorry and Carhart didn't truly believe that there wouldn't be a repeat performance of this the next time his former partner got angry and drunk.

They stared at each other and finally, without another word, Emilio turned and left the room. He shut the door quietly behind him and silence swept the apartment once again.

Every trace of exhaustion seemed to have vanished from Carhart's body. After what had just happened, he knew he wouldn't be sleeping any time soon.

Sub Rosa

Boyd thumped a 20 ounce cup of coffee on the desk and dropped into a nearby chair. Owen looked up, his eyebrows quirking in surprise as his gaze moved from the take away cup to Boyd's even expression.

"Tell me about the Reapers," Boyd said seriously.

Owen glanced around briefly but no one else was nearby, although a few people looked over curiously to see Boyd in the R&D department again. "Awesome, I'd love to," Owen enthused, pushing his laptop away and leaning back in his chair until the front legs were

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in the air. His wild red curls barely moved when he tilted his head. "Maybe we can even go super stealth style on a field trip except I doubt--"

Boyd held his hand up before Owen could go further. "Owen. I know you're capable of a normal conversation without it becoming purely tangential. I'll compensate you for this but I just want the information."

Owen paused, his dark eyes assessing Boyd before sliding toward his coworkers again. The typical vacant blandness of his expression shifted, replaced by something much more serious than usual. Owen shrugged and dropped the chair to all four legs again.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything you know," Boyd said intently. "How legit the claims are. How likely you think it really is that they exist."

"I'm positive they exist," Owen said, deadly serious as he stared into Boyd's eyes. "I'm pretty much 98% certain shit goes down in there like I've heard, too. I think they're doing experiments."

Boyd's eyebrows twitched down and he shook his head, leaning forward. "What kind of experiments?"

Owen shrugged. "Whatever the Agency wants. But considering it's up to The Powers That Be, it can't be anything good."

Boyd shook his head impatiently. "Rumors tend to be elaborated the more they're told. There has to be something people are saying about the experimentation specifically."

There was a long moment in which Owen stared alertly. The way he studied Boyd was intense and his lips pulled down in a small frown. He took a long drink of the triple shot espresso macchiato Boyd had bought him. He made a face the way he always did when he tasted coffee, especially espresso, but when he set the cup down he kept one hand loosely curled around it.

"This is about Sin, isn't it?"

Boyd simply watched him. He knew that Sin wanted him to drop this topic but he couldn't. Sin obviously wasn't taking it seriously but Boyd was less certain that it was untrue.

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There was the chance that the Agency was messing with Sin-- slipping him steroids or some other drug which could enhance him during times of adrenaline. As far as that went, Boyd hadn't said anything in the van but he'd started to wonder about other possibilities too-- maybe something to do with the box.

If it turned out any of this was true, then Boyd agreed with Emilio. They should know. If they didn't, how were they going to counteract it? How could Boyd help Sin if everything fell apart the way it usually did, if Boyd had no idea what the hell he was even working with?

He knew Sin wouldn't look into this and he could understand why. Even if Sin believed him, it was probably frustrating and off-putting to imagine himself being different in yet another way; that something else was wrong with him when things finally seemed stable. But for Boyd, that didn't matter. He would still love Sin regardless of what they found out. What mattered to him was gathering all the evidence he could and gaining an understanding of what was going on and what he could realistically do to help.

There was no point in lying about it. Owen had been the one to bring up the Reapers in the first place and he'd been there when Sin had mentioned being in the building. Owen would see right through it so Boyd stayed silent.

When he didn't answer, Owen grimaced and leaned closer.

"Listen," Owen said, dropping his voice so no one could overhear. "I wanna know as much as the next guy what kinda twisted shit they've got going on down there, but straight up? You need to lay off this." His expression was completely serious and he raised his eyebrows. "The walls have got more eyes on you than a spider-infested potato. The last thing you need right now is to Scooby Doo it onto the trail and become the meddlesome kid they've gotta off."

"What makes you say that?"

Owen gave Boyd an incredulous look. "Dude, you're high profile and you always will be. And after the stunt I heard you pulled with the Inspector's investigation, I'm surprised you're still running around free as a bird. They're super paranoid with the new admin rolling in sometime and I'm sure they're expecting some shit to go down related to you or Sin as per us." He said the last word as an abbreviation of usual.

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"I'm well aware of the Marshal's concerns but I fail to see how they're yours," Boyd said evenly.

That same sharp, assessing look passed through Owen's eyes. "Look, dude, don't get me wrong. I know you're fully capable of a lot of shit but some of us in R&D, we've been doing our checking on the new Marshal--"

Boyd kept part of his attention on the rest of the room, to be sure no one would approach unnoticed, but he otherwise zeroed in on Owen. "What do you have on her?"

"Nothing awesome," Owen said with a grimace. He shoved some papers out of the way so he could slide his coffee cup nearer to him. "Seong Jae-Hwa, South Korean but born in London. Hardcore with a capital H and liable to be an insufferable prat. She rose through the ranks pretty quickly over there on account of the fact she lays the smack down on anyone who so much as looks sidelong at bending the rules. She was the head of their Internal Affairs for a while and got her former supervisor terminated over some breach of protocol. And we're talking supervisor as in mentor, as in person she supposedly trusted. As in, guy who thought she'd have his back."

He raised his eyebrows pointedly. "Unsurprisingly, she gained a rep as the sort of person everyone hoped would get taken out by a random nuclear warhead. Pretty sure they're gonna throw a Europe-wide party the second that woman steps foot on American soil."

Boyd nodded. That sounded in line with what he'd heard so far. What he didn't know was how that was going to work with what he suspected was going on with Sin.

"Regardless, that has nothing to do with this," Boyd said. "She's not here yet and I don't care how many eyes are on me. I don't intend to be obvious about any of this but I want to know about the Reapers."

"What's it going to do even if you find everything out?" Owen pressed. "Those files are restricted like hell and the lab is even worse. Trust me. I made it my own personal mission for a while to look into it and I even recruited Jacob."

He tilted his head toward the tattooed man Boyd remembered Ryan having a crush on. "We got nowhere real fast and despite the fact we were super secretive about it and erased all our tracks, we still got a talking to from Bree and Connors, wondering why we were looking into it. The protection is ridiculous on big name secrets like that. I bet even Ivan doesn't know what really goes down."

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Boyd's eyes narrowed stubbornly. "Don't worry about what I'll do with the information. They won't come down on you even if they find out you helped; you have a nearly perfect record. I just want to know the rumors. If you won't tell me, I'll ask someone else."

Owen stared at Boyd for a long moment and finally sighed dramatically. He shook his head and took another long drink of the macchiato. "You two are ridiculous," he declared when he set the cup down. "I pity the fool who ever tries to come between you."

"The Reapers, Owen," Boyd said patiently.

Making a face, Owen tapped his foot briefly against the floor. He glanced around again in the process and shrugged. "Okay, look. Most of this? Pure conjecture and sometimes high craziness. But I still think there's some truth to it."

Boyd watched Owen expectantly.

"Rumor has it, this group wasn't formed at the same time as the Agency. Supposedly, that lab building originally was something else. A bunker, who knows what. But a few years into the Agency's existence, weird shit started happening. But," Owen said, his eyes brightening as he got into the topic, "there's another origin theory-- that the Reapers were around *before* the Agency."

"Before?" Boyd echoed, his eyebrows arching. "It was formed by Johnson's?"

"Yeah. The real Johnson's. According to that theory, which by the way is my favorite because it's all conspiracy action all night long, the whole reason our fair gov decided to ever move the Agency to Johnson's as a cover was because of the Intel they had on the dudes. They knew about some sort of drug experimentation going down and thus figured that, number one, they could use it as leverage. You know--"

Owen straightened his back and lowered his eyebrows ominously as he affected what he apparently believed to be the look of a harsh government agent. "'Let us use your facilities for our secret government agency or we'll shut you down for what you've been doing,'" he wiggled his fingers, "intimidation, intimidation."

Owen relaxed back into his typical slump. "And two, Johnson's already had facilities set up that would work well for the government. Some people say the Agency was initially

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formed for the sole purpose of secret government experiments and only over time did it become what it is today."

Boyd stared at Owen, finding himself honestly intrigued by the information. He tried to remember what he'd been told about the Agency; its formation and goals. Everything had been propaganda but he did wonder whether there was any truth to the assertion that this place had been built for experiments.

If that was the case, then it was likely that more people than Sin had potentially been experimented on. But that also sounded a bit too much like an extreme conspiracy theory. Boyd didn't doubt that the Agency had a lot more secrets to it than it had truths, yet the fact that there weren't more people running around like Sin even after decades of operation was telling. Although it was possible other experiments were occurring, there wasn't anything else that stood out to him as terribly suspicious.

It led Boyd to believe that the Agency's existence wasn't solely about experiments. At least not anymore. He didn't know what it had been like initially.

"What kind of drug experiments?"

"No one knows what Johnson's was doing but by now, the stories about the Reapers are pretty varied," Owen said with a shrug. "Sleeper soldier programs, super soldier programs. Medical experimentation, human experimentation. Tests to see how to get people to live through another nuclear attack. There are theories they're working on how to resurrect people from the dead. Some of it's pretty fringe- or pseudoscience."

"What's the super soldier program?" Boyd asked intently.

"I don't know, really," Owen said with a frown. He absently tapped his fingers against the coffee cup. "People just make up names for shit they like to think goes down in there. I mean, seriously? I've heard of the Cyclops Project, the Unicorn Project, and even Operation Santa. So I'm pretty sure some of this is purely bogus."

"There's no proof of any of this?" Boyd pressed. "Even the less ludicrous ideas?"

Owen snorted. "Not a chance. If there was any, it's long gone. Sin's the only one I know of whoever admitted to being inside there. Honestly, if there really was a super soldier program I'm pretty sure he'd be the poster boy. But at the same time, with how secretive they are why would they experiment on such a high profile person?"

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"Because everyone already thinks he's subhuman so it works to their advantage," Boyd returned, thinking aloud as his eyes narrowed. "It would allow them to test out theories they want to try on a person who no one would care was hurt, while at the same time it forces him further into alienation because of his differences. Every impossible thing he does would give them scientific data while at the same time reinforcing the general population's fear of him and making it even less likely their work would ever be discovered. It would solve two problems for them at once."

Owen's fingers stilled against the coffee cup. He raised his eyebrows, looking impressed and mildly disturbed. "That's true. I didn't think about that."

"If that's the case, they've purposefully been maligning Hsin even more than I thought," Boyd said with forming anger, his eyes darkening and lips tightening.

A beat of silence met the observation and Owen looked away once more, scanning the room. His fingertips pressed against the cup, his expression pensive. "Honestly, Boyd? I think something probably has gone down with Sin in the past. But I also think you'll never know exactly what or why, and even if you find out you won't be able to do anything about it."

"Let me worry about that," Boyd said firmly, leaning back in his chair and staring hard at Owen. "Where can I find more information on them?"

Owen shook his head. "That's about the extent anyone knows."

Boyd quirked an eyebrow and continued to stare at Owen.

After a long moment, Owen scowled and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "Look, dude. I'm not lying. I mean, you could try Kaspar."

"Why Kaspar?" Boyd asked immediately. "Why not Ivan?" He knew of Ivan's reputation for this sort of information more than Kaspar's.

"Well, you could," Owen said dubiously. "He's the conspiracy king. He probably knows a thousand times more rumors than even I know but I doubt he has any official data on it. Plus I'd think the whole 'you stole my man' thing would make you want to avoid him for a while. But Kaspar's got that library, you know?"

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Boyd raised his eyebrows, deciding not to comment on what Owen said about Ivan. Instead, he tried to remember all the times he'd been in the old library. "I don't remember a restricted section."

"Well, there isn't. Not really," Owen said with a frown. "But it's like, dude's got no life outside books, right? And his mom used to be crazy hardcore about saving everything she found. She's like some sort of bibliophile hoarder, I swear."

Owen shook his head to himself and yet at the same time, he seemed pleased despite his words. "She worked a lot on the databases so I bet, if it's anywhere, you can find stuff there. Also, I know Kaspar's got a rockin' collection of books back at his apartment. He's got three bedrooms and two of them plus his living room are libraries. No lie."

Boyd crossed his arms, eyebrows drawing down faintly as he looked out the window. He could see the barest ghost of his expression reflected back at him, looking determined and stubborn. He contemplated how best to get the information from Kaspar when Owen continued casually:

"Plus, he remembers everything he's read and he's got a hard-on for you. I think you'd make him joygasm just by asking to see his pad."

Boyd quirked his eyebrows and looked over at Owen, who raised his hands in helpless innocence. "Just sayin'."

Boyd shook his head to himself and pushed his chair back. "Thanks, Owen. I'll get you into the cafe next time you want lunch. Give me a call."

Owen brightened considerably, his back straightening and a huge grin crossing his face. "Oh, what! Sweet! I've been waiting for this day my whole Agency life! And PS, the cornbread was thoroughly superior."

A faint smile crossed Boyd's face. "How do you know that wasn't the placebo effect?"

"Because you would never break my heart and lie to me like that, Boyd Beaulieu," Owen deadpanned, giving Boyd a doe-eyed look. "I trust in your decency above all others."

The smile became a light chuckle. "Well, when you put it like *that*..." Boyd started to stand and then paused, looking at Owen in curious contemplation. "You were talking about The Powers That Be earlier."

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"Sure was," Owen agreed happily. His mood seemed to have heightened considerably once the offer of visiting the cafe was out in the open.

"They're in charge of both Agencies, right?"

"Yep." Owen raised his eyebrows. "Which reminds me; I have plans for merch somewhere down the line. What do you think about a t-shirt that says, 'Tagged by TPTB' for new recruits? I was thinking it'd be like froshing them in advance so it's less painful when it happens later."

Boyd shook his head, although it was more in response to Owen's digression than anything. "Who are they? Who's in charge?"

Owen snorted. "Dude, I'll know whether those sleigh-bells I heard one Christmas morn really came from Santa before I know who's calling the shots here. Gotta be someone huge and international but that's about as far as I can guess."

Boyd stared at Owen for a long moment and then turned away, his gaze returning briefly once more to the ruined city spread beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. He wondered whether he would ever learn the answers to any of the questions he found himself increasingly intrigued by.

"Okay." Boyd crossed his arms and studied Owen. "If you hear of anything new, let me know."

"Roger Wilco," Owen replied casually with a dutiful salute.

Boyd turned and left, already running through what he could recall of Kaspar's schedule and determining when he would stop in there next.

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Boyd strode down the empty hallway. He had barely seen anyone on the way up to Carhart's floor which wasn't unusual for this residential complex. He wondered whether Emilio would give him shit for being ten minutes late. He hoped not, since when Emilio got on a rant he sometimes didn't give up the topic for hours.

When Boyd reached Carhart's apartment, he knocked loudly on the door without delay.

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There was no answer and when a long moment passed, he knocked again. Once again, there was an extended pause and just as he was considering leaving, he heard sounds on the other side. It sounded like someone talking loudly and angrily but Boyd couldn't make out the muffled words. When the door opened abruptly, he caught the tail end of one sentence.

"--give a shit who's at the fucking door. You always find a goddamn reason."

It was Emilio's voice, snarling at Carhart, who had been the one to open the door.

Carhart looked at Boyd blankly and seemed generally unfazed by the fact that Emilio was apparently cursing him out. "Yes, Boyd?"

Boyd fought the urge to raise his eyebrows and instead looked briefly past Carhart's shoulder. He couldn't see anything of note so he met the general's eyes again. "Emilio told me to come by for training."

The general raised his blond eyebrows slightly but that was the only hint of expression on his face. He was the picture of calm neutrality as he raised his fingers to continue buttoning his shirt and stepped to the side so that Boyd could enter.

Emilio stood at the back of the living room, fuming. His dark eyebrows were lowered over blazing green eyes and he was glaring at Carhart before shifting the stare to Boyd.

Boyd shifted his gaze past Carhart's shirt, which was clean and pressed and had been only partially unbuttoned, and met Emilio's eyes calmly despite the man's glare. "Are you still planning to train?"

Emilio scoffed and turned so that his tattooed back was to the two of them. He was only half dressed, in loose pants and barefoot with his hair spikier than usual. "Well I guess I have nothing better to do."

Carhart rolled his eyes and picked up his black jacket from where it lay on the arm of a chair.

Boyd nodded and crossed his arms, shifting so he leaned against the doorjamb. He kept his gaze bored, as though he had nothing on his mind except to wait for Emilio. But the peculiarities of the moment did not escape him. Emilio's comment, Carhart getting dressed, the fact that Carhart's clothing was unwrinkled... Carhart's calm reaction compared to Emilio's irritated one...

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Carhart slid into his jacket and nodded at Boyd. "Good luck with training." That being said, he shifted past Boyd and departed the apartment.

When the door shut, Emilio turned around and flipped it off. "Little bitch."

Boyd quirked an eyebrow and couldn't stop himself from asking mildly, "Troubles?"

"Your face is trouble," Emilio muttered sullenly, sprawling down onto the sofa and crossing his arms over his chest like an upset child.

"I get told that a lot," Boyd deadpanned.

He didn't shift away from the wall near the door, although he did glance around the apartment briefly. Nothing seemed out of place.

Emilio ran a hand through his hair and released a long, low sigh. "He pisses me off. He never fucking changes, not even in nearly twenty years. Still the same jackass with his morals and black and white ideas of shit," he muttered.

"Hmm." Boyd studied Emilio thoughtfully.

He wondered whether Emilio had made a move on Carhart and was turned down. He'd been wondering for a while whether there was more going on between those two, but the only vibes he ever seemed to get came from Emilio.

He didn't say anything because he knew Emilio wouldn't tell him anything anyway but it was a question that hovered in the back of his mind.

"And he thinks he's got me all figured the fuck out. Every time I say anything he thinks he knows why or what I'm really thinking. He thinks he's got everything so well in hand and in order but he's always the first one to back down and run away when he feels cornered," Emilio continued to rant, eyebrows lowering further over his eyes.

"He likes to mindfuck me, blondie. And I'm going to flip out and fucking murder him one day because of it."

Boyd didn't know what to say to that, although it lent weight to his theory. He paused and then pushed himself away from the door and loosened his arms. "That does sound

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like him," he agreed. "At least as far as being a few steps ahead and seeming to think he knows what a person's thinking."

"Sometimes," Emilio said in a low dangerous voice. "Sometimes I get so fucking angry I just imagine myself killing him. That's how crazy he drives me. Sometimes I just want him to fucking die so I won't be like this no more."

Boyd didn't doubt that Emilio could kill Carhart, provided he ever did lose himself enough to do it. Emilio had proved to be on par and to even surpass Sin in some ways which led Boyd to believe that as formidable as the General may be, he wouldn't win that fight.

"If that ever happened you'd regret it far more than anything in the end," Boyd replied calmly.

"Yeah," Emilio agreed quietly, nodding seriously in response. "I'd probably blow my own brains out after. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad though..."

Emilio seemed completely serious. Boyd studied him-- the face that was so familiar to him, combined with dark comments that were reminiscent of things Sin sometimes said when he was truly upset and saw no point in the future. Boyd couldn't ignore comments like that from Emilio any more than he could from Sin.

Boyd walked over and sat down in a chair near the couch. "Why do you say that?"

"Because my life sucks," Emilio replied with another sigh, finally looking over at Boyd. His full lips twisted up into a mockery of a grin and as he sat up straight on the couch, he rolled his shoulders. "But I love myself too much for suicide so it won't happen."

Boyd considered Emilio for a long moment and then shrugged casually, leaning back in the chair and resting his hands against his lower stomach. "Good. Because if you killed Carhart and then yourself, I think it would upset Hsin. At which point I would have to hunt you down in your afterlife and kill you again." He quirked his eyebrows. "It's much less work to avoid the entire debacle in the first place."

"You couldn't kill me if you really tried, which is why your bitch ass is over here disrupting my shit in order to beg me for training."

"I don't recall begging for anything," Boyd replied, watching Emilio with an unfazed expression. "I seem to recall you telling me to meet you here because you were too lazy

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to meet me in the gym." He gave Emilio a mild look. "The fact that you forgot isn't my fault."

"Well maybe not," Emilio replied, once again in full on exaggerated joker mode. "But I do recall you begging for Hsin's cock. 'Fuck me harder, harder, oh--oh god--YES!'" Emilio exclaimed in a voice that was obviously meant to mimic Boyd's.

Boyd smirked and shifted, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his open knees. He knew Emilio was trying to get to him and he wasn't about to give Emilio the satisfaction. "I never said I didn't beg your son," he said in a low rumble, raising his eyebrows. "I beg him a lot." He flicked his gaze along Emilio's body and shrugged, meeting Emilio's eyes again. "I just don't beg you."

Emilio's mouth stretched into a wide grin and every trace of anger and darkness fled his handsome face or at least appeared to. "Oh but you would if you'd go for a ride. I guarantee it, cutie."

"Believe what you want," Boyd replied idly. "But that's a theory that will remain untested."

"What if Hsin agreed to a threesome?" Emilio asked, raising his eyebrows.

Boyd almost laughed at that. "He wouldn't."

"I know he wouldn't," Emilio said, making a face. "But in theory, if he did."

"Why are you so curious?" Boyd asked, drawing his eyebrows down and giving Emilio an odd look. He was starting to become genuinely perplexed by the man. "Did you actually get intrigued watching me fuck Hsin or are you just not used to people telling you no and now you need to figure out what it would take to become yes?"

Emilio shrugged, clearly unashamed. "Both. And I wouldn't mind fucking both of y'all."

Boyd stared at Emilio and then shook his head dismissively to himself. The talk about Sin, no matter how far-fetched, made him think of what he'd wanted to talk to Emilio about.

He straightened and looked at Emilio more seriously. "I've started looking into the Reapers."

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Emilio gave Boyd a considering look as if he was debating continuing to pursue his previous line of questioning. Ultimately, he simply shrugged. "And?"

"Mostly rumors so far," Boyd admitted with a shrug. "But I have a possible lead where to look for more information."

There was a low expulsion of breath and Emilio leaned forward slightly, hunching over the coffee table. He took a bag of weed out of his pocket and emptied it onto a stack of magazines where he began breaking it up. "Any chance of you getting to a point?"

"Well, some of the rumors talk about drug experimentation," Boyd replied, leaning back in his chair with a contemplative look. "There's even a theory that the Reapers were formed with Johnson's, that it was one of the reasons this became the cover, and that they only later got incorporated into the Agency when the government took over."

Emilio arched a brow at that and slipped a small glass pipe out of the same pocket. "Sounds like some grade A paranoid bullshit to me."

"Well, considering the fact they think the Agency was solely about experiments in the beginning, probably," Boyd agreed with another shrug. "But when you think about it, it's true that they did take over a huge pharmaceuticals headquarters. The facilities are designed to manufacture drugs and if they incorporated any of the original staff, there would certainly be people who still know how to design new ones. And--"

Boyd shook his head. "If it weren't for the impossible things I've seen Hsin do, I'd probably think it's a ridiculous conspiracy and that's it. But now I'm not so sure something isn't going on..."

"That's all well and good but 90% of the shit that people say about the labs, and have been saying since I was younger than you, is total bullshit." Emilio began packing the marijuana into his pipe and put it to his lips although he paused before lighting it up. "I could buy that Johnson's developed some kind of drug that acts like a steroid, though."

Boyd considered Emilio thoughtfully. "After this all came up, I started thinking about the box. I know they keep him sedated when he's in there but what if they're slipping something else in there too? Maybe a drug like that?"

Emilio flicked his lighter and dipped it into the bowl of the pipe. He inhaled deeply for a moment before pulling away and exhaling. The smoke flooded the room and wafted

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over to where Boyd was sitting. "Or even some kind of pure form of Pandora, you know? I got to thinking 'bout that the other night."

"Pandora?" Boyd echoed, drawing his eyebrows down and ignoring the smell. "You think it would generate those kinds of results?"

Emilio took another hit from his pipe and spoke through a cloud of smoke when he finally exhaled. "I bet you don't know much about PD, do you? Not a clean cut rich kid like you."

Boyd crossed his arms, taking some offense to the comment. "That really has nothing to do with this. But I'll take your answer as yes, it would."

"That has everything to do with it," Emilio retorted, rolling his eyes. "Do you know what the fucking drug is all about or don't you?"

"Yes," Boyd said in mild irritation. "It's a popular street drug that affects people differently; some experience a high that often results in sexual encounters and others seem to feel as though they've become more powerful. A person can't build immunity to it, which is part of its allure, but massive quantities have been known to cause heart attacks and other serious issues which have, in the past, led to death."

"Yeah so when you take enough, it makes you feel all jacked up and it ain't exactly just a state of mind type thing. You fuck longer, you fight harder and whenever I used to pop enough caps, I could run a fucking marathon and still feel like I wouldn't break a sweat, you know? It was some crazy shit. And you never build a tolerance to it so people who pop that shit like candy are always feeling like superman, well, until they keel over and die."

Emilio leaned back in the sofa and set the pipe beside him on the cushion. He stretched his arms up and rolled his shoulders, looking entirely more relaxed than he had when Boyd first arrived. "So imagine that shit but without being cut with other stuff."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, rather horrified by the idea of something like that being used on Sin. "That does sound like it could be... If they kept him on a relatively low dosage of that over a long period of time, it never would reach critical levels for him." He paused and frowned, crossing his arms. "But what about in Monterrey? He didn't take anything there. Would it have lasted eight months?"

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"No. And he couldn't be on a low dosage for it to work the way it's supposed to neither." Emilio shrugged.

"How high of a dose would he need if it were pure?"

"I dunno, I've never fucked with the shit pure before. But for him to be able to do the shit he does, I imagine it'd have to be pretty high. But it wouldn't add up anyway because Sin ain't never high. People who are fucked up on PD look like they're fucked up on PD. So unless Johnson's made some special batch of it..."

"Or something else entirely that no one's heard of," Boyd said, tilting his head thoughtfully. "Who's to say they didn't create their own cocktail out of aspects of pure Pandora and other drugs to generate the results they wanted?" He considered that. "Although, I think it would be difficult to create something that effective with so few side effects or telltale signs."

Emilio nodded, shrugged and lapsed into pensive silence. After a while he tilted his face against the sofa and rubbed his cheek against the fabric like a cat. He gazed at Boyd from beneath his long black eyelashes. "Wanna take a hit?"

Boyd found it a little difficult to look away from Emilio when he had such a relaxed, languid expression; probably because it automatically made Boyd wonder whether Sin would ever look at him like that. "Not really."

A flicker of disappointment flashed through the stunning green eyes and Emilio rolled his eyes upward, turning his face to the side. "Zach used to smoke with me a long time ago."

"That's nice but I'm not him," Boyd replied with a shrug. "I don't want to compromise my ability to think."

"Yeah, well you're a little bitch anyways."

Boyd leaned back in the chair and watched Emilio, unfazed by the offhanded reply. He wouldn't care no matter what Emilio thought of him but especially since Emilio didn't seem serious, he didn't feel the need to respond.

"How do you and my boy even have fun?"

"We don't need to be high to have fun with each other," Boyd replied pointedly.

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Emilio scoffed at that. "Yes, I forgot that you got all that Vega dick to keep you entertained. So sorry."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "If all I cared about was fucking him then things would've turned out differently. We have fun because we enjoy each other's company. We talk or hang out. We have some similar taste in books. We were listening to music the other night."

Emilio wiggled his fingers. "What a couple of party animals. How can you stand it?"

"You do realize not everyone's concept of a good time includes getting high, drunk, or partying with random people," Boyd said evenly. "You know Hsin isn't like that so I don't see why you expected a different answer."

"He was in Monterrey sometimes," Emilio said with a frown, glancing over at Boyd seriously. His eyebrows drew together thoughtfully. "I used to watch him when he was at work."

Boyd watched Emilio for a moment and then shifted forward, resting his forearms on his knees. He considered not answering with the full truth of the situation, yet there was no reason for that. Emilio, for all his faults, had so far seemed to do right by Sin since he'd returned.

"I know," Boyd said, his eyebrows drawing down and honey brown eyes turning regretful. "We were just talking about this the other night. The difference is, that was Monterrey, where he could relax and no one recognized him. He was happy there. Here, we just tried to go to a restaurant and he was so uncomfortable that I told him we would bring the food home."

"Oh." Emilio rubbed his perpetually stubble-covered jaw and used his other hand to finger the smooth surface of his pipe. After a moment those intense green eyes lifted and studied Boyd seriously. "What's the point of the two of you being the way you are again?"

Boyd drew his eyebrows down. "What do you mean?"

The older man shrugged his tattooed shoulders slightly and slid his gaze away, twisting the pipe between his fingers. "What's the point of being together... that way."

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Boyd stared at Emilio blankly. It took him a moment to realize he meant being monogamous. It was probably pretty telling about Emilio in general that he didn't even say the word aloud, yet Boyd got the feeling that Emilio honestly wondered about the answer. He would probably deny it and pretend he was high if Boyd asked but that didn't matter.

"Well," Boyd said slowly, "for one, the time that didn't happen everything got fucked up for a year. After everything fell apart, I tried doing the casual thing and it was fun for a while but ultimately, it felt pointless. I still cared about him, couldn't stop thinking about him... the idea of him being with anyone else hurt. We love each other and don't really want to be with anyone else. At that point, there's no reason to be with other people."

Emilio's well-formed mouth pulled down into a skeptical frown and he looked at Boyd from under his eyebrows. "You *never* want to fuck around with anyone else?"

"Well, like I said, when I wasn't with him I slept with other people. But when I'm with him, no," Boyd said seriously. "I don't. Because it's not worth it to mess up what we have. I'm happy with him."

Another pause. "I don't understand why people think it's so bad."

"What? Fucking someone else when you're involved with someone?" Boyd asked. "Or staying casual indefinitely?"

Emilio just shrugged silently. He'd gone from casual and relaxed to moody in the space of five minutes it seemed.

Boyd paused and leaned back in the chair. He didn't know what Emilio was getting at but he decided to answer regardless. "There's nothing bad with casual relationships if that's what you're into. But fucking around with someone else when you're involved, unless you're both okay with it, is a betrayal of trust. That's what it comes down to."

"Maybe if you're a sentimental bleeding heart," Emilio replied, not looking at all convinced of the explanation. He shook his head and scoffed quietly to himself.

Boyd crossed his arms and gave Emilio a narrow-eyed look. "If you're going to be a dick about this, forget it. I got it in my head you wanted honest answers but if you just want to hear the bullshit you expect, then I suggest you talk to someone else."

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"It's forgotten," Emilio said, arching an eyebrow. "I didn't think the answer would make you sound like such a weepy over-dramatic woman. You act like fucking someone else is some ultimate breach of loyalty. I can't even take you seriously when you tell me that kind of nonsense."

"Coming from a person who can't even say the word monogamous, who probably has issues with trust, and who seems to think that by not admitting aloud that he loves his son and wants to protect him then it won't be painfully obvious that it's the case," Boyd trailed off pointedly and shrugged. "Frankly, I don't give a shit if you think that about me because you're clearly so far in the other direction that anything dealing with acknowledging love will probably seem overly emotional to you."

The other man shrugged again, seemingly unconcerned. "And you're so obsessed with your conventions of love that you can't understand anyone who doesn't believe in it or go along with it. Big deal."

"Not really," Boyd replied blandly. "You asked why people have an issue with that type of behavior. I answered with the reason most people would give. Like I said, it depends on the people and what they're okay with. Personally, I couldn't care less what you do with your life."

"You said it like it was a fact. It's a betrayal of trust, you said. Just the retardedness of that statement makes it impossible for me to take anything else seriously about this entire conversation."

Boyd just shook his head. He didn't want to continue with the conversation because it was clearly going nowhere and it was only serving to irritate him. Instead, he was struck by Emilio's varied speech pattern, which had become increasingly obvious to him during the course of the conversation.

"Why do you talk like that?" Boyd asked instead.

Emilio glanced over at him again. "Huh?"

"The way you speak," Boyd clarified, tilting his head and studying him. "Sometimes you speak so casually, with more slang than anything, and sometimes you speak so properly." He shrugged. "I thought at first it was related to when you were being yourself and when you were not but I'm not certain if that's the case."

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"Oh." Emilio sat up straight and poked at the pipe, peering at whatever was left in the bowl. "Whenever I'm trying to explain something to a stubborn motherfucker and trying to make my point, I tend to start talking more like how they taught me to speak, you know? And whenever I'm just chillin' I talk more regular like how I used to talk before they tried to knock it out of me."

"They as in the Agency?"

Emilio nodded. "Yep. They kept me in fucking speech and deportment classes for ages when I first got recruited."

Boyd watched Emilio thoughtfully. Now that he thought about it, Emilio had been a street kid for most of his life. "You probably never did go to school, did you?"

Pale green eyes rose briefly, flicking over Boyd before settling on his face and for a brief moment the older man was silent. But then he just raised his eyebrows almost challengingly. "Nope. I didn't even read or write all that well until I got here."

"Hmm." Boyd considered that. "How long did it take you?"

"Not too long to get better with writing and speaking proper, I guess. Maybe a month, maybe less. But they wanted me to completely change me the fuck around and turn me into some lame ass with no personality. All of a sudden I was supposed to stop using slang and stop dressing the way I dress so I could assimilate easier with the rest of the compound. Fuck all that."

Boyd smirked slightly in bemusement. He couldn't imagine Emilio being like everyone else. "That's impressive," he said simply.

Emilio just shrugged and lifted his pipe again, taking another hit. He closed his eyes briefly as he inhaled, held it in for a moment and then exhaled slowly. When he looked at Boyd again, there was something dark in his eyes. As much as he'd been obviously trying to get over whatever had been going down before Boyd arrived, the lingering effects of it could still be found in his face.

"I dunno if I feel like training today," he muttered.

Boyd nodded, unsurprised. As soon as Emilio had settled in, he'd assumed that may be the case. "I'll go on my own, then."

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"You could just go bang Hsin and get a workout that way."

"That's what I planned for the encore," Boyd deadpanned as he stood.

Emilio smirked and shook his head.

Boyd left Carhart's apartment and headed toward the gym. When he entered the room, he saw that a few people were already there. Two agents he recognized from Counter-Terrorism were sparring in one corner and another agent was working out on her own.

Boyd was just about to head toward an empty area when he noticed a familiar form at the other side of the room. Sin was working out on the pull-up bar, his shirt discarded to the side and showing off his muscular torso. Sweat shone on his skin and Boyd paused, taking in his lover's form. After a moment, he walked over and stopped next to him.

"Hey," he said with a small smile.

Sin had his feet dangling from the bar and was lifting his upper body with ease, bringing it up to his toes. His eyes focused on Boyd as he continued his reps, full lips flitting into a pleased smile. "Training?"

"Supposed to," Boyd agreed, his eyes running along Sin's body. "Vega Senior bailed on me so I was going to come here alone." The smile widened, playing on his lips with faint mischief. "I think I'm glad he did now."

Sin smirked and stopped his exercise. He flipped backwards off the bar and stood up straight, raising his arms to tie his hair back tighter. "Stop looking at me like that, troublemaker."

"Hmm." Boyd casually shifted so he was facing away from the others in the room. He smirked, running his gaze even slower along Sin's body, thinking about how much he wanted to run his lips and tongue along that glistening skin. "Maybe you should stop looking like that in public, then."

"You're insatiable." Sin's mouth twisted up further and he picked up a towel that lay discarded at the side, rubbing it over his face and flinging it over his shoulder.

"True," Boyd agreed with a pleased tilt of his lips. He took a step back and made an effort to be more casual. He tilted his head toward the pull-up bar. "How long have you been here?"

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Sin picked up his t-shirt as well. "A couple of hours. I was about to head back to the apartment."

Boyd glanced over his shoulder at the training room. The female agent was discreetly peering at them from beneath her arm as she stretched and he found that he didn't really care. Even so, the desire to spend the next several hours training paled when he could potentially spend the time with Sin. There was plenty of time for him to train later.

"Mind if I join you?"

"I was hoping you would want to." Sin gave him another of his discreet smiles and turned towards the exit.

"Good." Boyd slid his hands into his pockets and followed Sin to his apartment. The guards gave them some sidelong looks but they were growing accustomed to Boyd being around Sin's more and Boyd didn't pay much attention to them.

"What happened with my father, anyway? Why didn't he go?" Sin asked as the door shut. He walked into the kitchen area and pulled a bottle of water out from the fridge.

"Carhart and he were arguing when I came by and it seems like I interrupted something." Boyd trailed Sin into the kitchen and leaned against the countertop. "Carhart left and Emilio was upset and angry. Personally, I think he tried to come onto Carhart and he was turned down."

Sin didn't look particularly shocked by this statement and he simply nodded agreeably as he drained half the bottle.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down. He wasn't surprised by Sin's lack of response and yet it just made him even more intrigued. "What's going on with those two, anyway?"

There was a pause as Sin finished the entire bottle and set it down on the counter. He wiped moisture from his lips with the back of his hand and shrugged. "I don't know about what is going on these days. I don't speak to my father that frequently and I doubt he would tell me anything now."

"These days," Boyd echoed, watching Sin thoughtfully. He tilted his head, his elbows resting on the counter behind him. "What about before?"

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"My father had a disturbing obsession with him before. I wouldn't be surprised if it's reared up again now that they're living together." Sin pulled himself up onto the counter and leaned his head back against the cabinet above it.

"Disturbing obsession?"

Sin reached up and pushed his hair back again, frowning slightly at the strands that clung to his still damp forehead. "He wanted to have sex with him badly. Not from the start but even at the start, something about Carhart drew him in for some reason. I had never seen him behave that way about another person before."

Boyd pushed himself up onto the counter across from Sin, his feet dangling. "What was he doing so differently?"

Sin seemed to consider the question carefully before answering, as though he were trying to remember the details. "He would talk about him a lot, which was odd enough on its own. My father didn't trust anyone but yet it became clear that he was very fond of Carhart and liked him and wanted him around. He even started bringing him to the loft and hiding me just so that he could see him more."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "Odd," he mused. He thought about it a moment. "I'm guessing Carhart denied any advances, if any, that were made?"

"The strangest thing was that for their entire partnership, he didn't make any overt advances that I was aware of and I am sure he would have told me. He ranted about his frustrations with Carhart constantly even though I barely responded. I thought his attraction was fairly obvious but Carhart, it seemed, was oblivious until they were sent on an extended undercover mission together at Brighton Community Prison."

Boyd knew Brighton to be a rather infamous, all-male security prison. If the mission was extended and undercover in a place like that, and especially taking into account Emilio's personality...

"Something happened there between them, didn't it?" Boyd said, although it came off more as a statement than a question. "I can't imagine they'd get away on an extended undercover in a place like that without at least one encounter."

Sin smirked and raised his eyebrows slightly. "According to my father, due to the nature of the environment they ended up changing their cover stories so that Carhart was his male lover instead of just his sidekick. I'm not sure on the details but as far as I know,

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they had sex several times and my father believed that this sort of relationship would continue outside of the mission. But when they returned, Carhart let him know that there would be none of that."

"Ahh," Boyd said in understanding.

He leaned back, bracing his hands on the counter behind him and narrowing his eyes in thought. That made complete sense with what he'd been seeing since Emilio's return. Emilio's preoccupation with Carhart clearly wasn't one-sided, though, or Bree wouldn't have made the comment she did about Carhart forgetting his other friends now that Emilio was around. Even so, the idea of Carhart and Emilio sleeping together...

Boyd made a face and shook his head. "I don't want to think about Carhart having sex."

"Why? He's not unattractive."

"I know, but..." Boyd waved his hand. "He's like my dad. At least, he's the closest person to what I remember my dad being like. It's like imagining my parents having sex." Which was really not a mental image he wanted to consider either, come to think of it.

Sin nodded, watching Boyd and said randomly, "Did I tell you that my father kissed me during a mission recently?"

"What?" Boyd said, completely taken off guard. "Why?"

"It was months ago, actually. In the summer. We were sent on a mission to deal with a woman with a kink for gay sex. She seemed to find the idea of us together appealing."

"Ahh," Boyd said again, although this time he tried not to imagine Emilio and Sin together for different reasons. "I imagine he was thrilled with the idea. Do you know twice now he's mentioned the idea of a threesome with you?" He shook his head to himself although he couldn't help a faint smirk of amusement. "The first time he actually asked me if I wanted to be in the middle of a Vega sandwich."

Sin stared at him for a moment before allowing a half scoff, half laugh to escape his mouth. "He's such an idiot."

"Yeah," Boyd agreed, his tone somewhat thoughtful before he shook his head. "He'll probably lay off the idea for a while but we'll see."

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One of Sin's dark eyebrows arched and for a moment it was like looking at Emilio again. Disturbingly similar features and the exact same skeptical countenance. If it weren't for the scars on Emilio's face and the fact that Sin's eyes were almond shaped while Emilio's were large and round, it would be like looking at the same person.

"You're intrigued by this idea, aren't you," Sin said knowingly, his voice sounding vaguely amused.

"Maybe," Boyd admitted reluctantly, pulling some hair behind his ear and giving Sin a half guilty, half bemused look. "I mean, it's like being asked if I want to fuck two of you at once and that's not exactly a horrifying thought to me."

The smirk didn't leave Sin's face but he rolled his eyes. "Just don't say that to him."

Boyd shook his head with a faint smile. "I won't. He'd probably take it seriously and think it would actually happen."

"If I'd go along with it, I bet you'd want it to."

A smirk grew on Boyd's face and he flicked his eyes along Sin briefly. "Maybe," he drew out somewhat playfully and then he shrugged. "But only if it was something you actually wanted. And even then it's weird. He's not you even if he looks like you and he's still your father."

Boyd paused and smirked. "So I think the only solution is to clone you and have both of you pleasure me at once."

Sin slid off the counter and turned to the fridge, opening it as he replied. "Like I said. Insatiable." He removed a bag of mini chocolate bars from the refrigerator and shut it. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Sure," Boyd said, gaze caught by the chocolate. Some things never changed. "What is it?"

There was a lull as Sin unwrapped one of the bars and popped it into his mouth. He chewed slowly and stared at Boyd, seeming to hesitate.

Boyd waited for Sin to continue and when he didn't, he drew his eyebrows down and looked at Sin more alertly. He started to wonder why Sin would hesitate and could only

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presume it was something Sin was reluctant to bring up. Which probably meant something bad.

"What?" Boyd repeated, growing a little paranoid. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Sin's gaze shifted to the side and he focused on a point beyond Boyd's head. "I was just wondering about the possibility of... an idea, that I had."

"Okay," Boyd said slowly, giving Sin an odd look. "What's the idea?"

Sin began to fiddle with the empty candy wrapper, chewing slowly as he flicked his gaze over to Boyd. "Well, I thought perhaps we could go somewhere together."

The comment took Boyd off guard and he searched Sin's expression for a moment. His lips tilted up faintly on the edges but he was still cautious, wanting to know what exactly Sin was considering.

"Where were you thinking?"

"I'd read something about Vermont. The mountains there. I thought maybe we could rent a cabin." Sin's gaze had shifted to stare at the wall, his posture rigid.

"A cabin..." Boyd stared at Sin. He almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. The idea of it was incredibly appealing to Boyd, even more so because Sin had brought it up. A smile grew on Boyd's face but even then, he still had to be realistic about it. As great as it sounded...

"Hsin, it sounds amazing but we'd have to get time off..."

Finally Sin looked at him again. He tossed the wrapper in the garbage and shrugged. "I already spoke to Carhart. He said he would try to make it happen."

"What?" Boyd said in surprise. "You think they'll actually let us?"

"I'm not sure. He said he'd see about it but he doubts we will get as much time as I asked for." A slight frown crossed Sin's face but he shook his head as if dismissing the disappointment. "I hadn't really expected them to go for that anyway."

"How much time did you ask for?"

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Another brief pause. "Two weeks."

"Two--" Boyd started to say incredulously and then cut himself off. He stared in a mixture of shock and building happiness at Sin.

Ever since he and Lou had been small, they'd had grand dreams of going off some day on a trip-- just getting away and having fun. After everything that had happened and especially after Boyd had become entrenched in the Agency, he had never believed he would have the chance to do anything like that.

A full, genuine smile stretched his lips and lightened his expression. He slid off the counter and walked over to Sin, stopping in front of him and resting his hands on Sin's hips.

He couldn't deny how happy he felt; how touched he was by Sin's idea and the fact he'd already looked into it. He felt like this was a moment that showed him without words that Sin truly loved him.

"I can't believe you did that," Boyd said quietly, his eyes searching Sin's intently and his expression clearly pleased.

"You don't think it's... stupid?" Sin asked slowly, skeptically, green eyes narrowed slightly with suspicion.

"No," Boyd assured him, the smile still on his lips. "Not at all." He slid his hands up to Sin's shoulders and pulled him down into a kiss. "I love the idea."

The end of his sentence was muffled by Sin's mouth. What was meant to be a chaste, sweet kiss turned into something deeper and more intense as the anticipation of two weeks with complete privacy began to take hold of them.

Making it Count

Sin tilted his head back against the driver's seat and tried not to allow his eyes to slide closed. His long fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly as he guided the rented truck down the winding mountain road. He tried to focus on the sharp turns and not the feel of Boyd's mouth wrapped around his cock.

"Fuck," he uttered hoarsely as Boyd's mouth briefly withdrew.

The blond agent smirked to himself and shifted into a position that would allow more access to Sin's lap. He wound up hunkered down in the passenger seat and twisted sideways.

"Eyes on the road, Vega," Boyd drawled and took Sin in his mouth again.

Sin bit down on his lower lip, his fingers clenching the wheel tighter. The feel of those full lips and wet mouth gliding over his erection would never get old. He dropped one hand from the wheel and gripped the back of Boyd's head, flexing his fingers as Boyd took him down to the base.

"Ah..." Sin uttered in a high, strained voice, releasing a shuddering gasp and a swear in Mandarin.

Boyd made a sound deep in his throat that vibrated around Sin's dick. Sin's mouth dropped open and he released a breathless series of desperate moans that filled the car and mingled with the music that was playing.

The road was relatively empty and surrounded by trees, which was fortunate. The town in northern Vermont was small and he and Boyd stood out enough without vehicular sex adding to it. Sin had chosen the town because of its distance from any major cities and its relative isolation. It was only an hour away from Canada and surrounded by state parks and mountains.

Sometimes it was easy to forget the fact that the war hadn't damaged every part of the country. Sin hadn't seen such pristine and untouched beauty in nature since he'd been a child.

But right now he couldn't focus on the scenic road, the trees, the buffalo crossing signs or the green mountains that soared above the forests and went well into the sky. The

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only nature he could focus on was the sheer animal instinct to thrust violently into Boyd's talented mouth.

Boyd was giving it to him wet and sloppy, just the way Sin liked it. He liked the feel of Boyd slavering on his dick, of saliva and precome glistening on Boyd's lips. There was something incredibly hot about Boyd playing the part of the dick hungry whore but when he glanced up at Sin with a smoldering look, Sin reminded himself that Boyd wasn't really playing. Over the past few years he'd become a connoisseur of oral sex; it turned him on almost as much as getting fucked.

"Yes," Sin moaned, his eyes rolling back in his head as he began fucking Boyd's mouth faster. "God, yes."

He bucked his hips frantically, feeling Boyd's saliva running down his shaft and into his pubic hair. He could feel Boyd's lips tightening around his thick cock and Boyd's jaw working as he took the length of it deep into his throat.

The pressure in Sin's stomach began to build overwhelmingly and lights sparked behind his eyes as he briefly squeezed them shut.

Sin was practically hunched over the steering wheel, his breath coming out in frantic sobs as he did his best to come in the two minutes they had left before he turned into the town.

The muscles in Sin's body tensed like springs on the verge of snapping. He turned onto the edge of Main Street and came explosively in Boyd's mouth with a strangled shout. Boyd swallowed easily, his throat still working around Sin's cock as he took in every drop.

Sin's lower lip was torn and bleeding from the pressure of his teeth biting down on it. He slumped back into the seat and tried to ignore that his vision seemed off somehow, as though an explosion had gone off behind his eyes.

Boyd zipped up Sin's pants and slid up nonchalantly just as Sin guided the car alongside the sidewalk and stopped. He wiped his mouth with his hand and glanced out the window calmly, as if he hadn't just finished giving a world class blow job. He observed Main Street, literally the town's main street, and the group of five stores that were on it.

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Sin didn't move. He stared at Boyd from beneath nearly closed eyelids and fought the urge to drag Boyd across the center console and kiss him savagely.

Sin didn't know if Boyd felt his gaze on him or if he saw the reflection in the window, but after a moment he looked over. A self-satisfied smirk stretched his lips. "Now who's the troublemaker?"

"You're the one deep throating me while I'm driving," Sin replied flatly, eyes burning like green fire as he stared at his lover.

Boyd shrugged but still seemed quite pleased with himself. "It was too tempting." His fingers curled around the door handle and he was out of the truck before Sin had the chance to respond. "Let's go," he said as he shut the door.

Sin took the keys out of the ignition and got out of the truck, subtly fixing his pants before they entered the store. It looked more like a convenience store than a grocery store but there did seem to be a variety of things crammed inside.

The cashier at the front of the store looked at them curiously as they went inside and Sin ignored his gaze. He followed Boyd into the dairy section and reached out to idly wrap his fingers around Boyd's shoulder, squeezing slightly and moving closer to him.

Boyd paused and looked over his shoulder questioningly.

Sin's eyes flicked over him before he moved in until his body was nearly pressing Boyd's against the refrigerator doors. "Don't you want to get off?" he asked in Boyd's ear, his voice nearly a whisper.

A shiver ran through Boyd that was unrelated to the temperature of the refrigerator doors. His fingers twitched at his sides but there was disbelief in his voice when he said quietly, "Here?"

"No," Sin replied, rubbing his mouth against Boyd's earlobe before shifting to press a kiss to the side of his neck. "But--"

Footsteps could be heard coming closer to the aisle and Sin backed off reluctantly, casting a dark glare at two teenage girls carrying fishing equipment and chattering loudly.

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One of them, a blond girl named Cassie judging by her friend's rambling, fell silent and looked rather startled in Sin's direction. She paused, subconsciously moving away from him. The other girl, a brunette, looked between Boyd and Sin curiously. When she saw Sin's look, she also fell silent and the two of them shuffled past the agents with sidelong glances.

When they were down the aisle, they started whispering to each other. Sin could hear them wondering about who the two strangers were and how they were pretty hot if it weren't for the death glare. The girls turned the corner and headed toward the cashier.

Boyd watched the girls disappear before turning back to Sin with a faint, bemused smirk. He moved in closer to Sin and said under his breath, "Guess we'll have to finish that later."

"I was going to suggest we just go back to the cabin, anyway."

Boyd studied Sin and it was clear he was tempted to agree but then he looked away with a slight frown. "After we get supplies." He looked distractedly at the refrigerator section, which displayed a variety of milk, cheese, and an assortment of beverages. "What do you want for the next few days? Aside from candy."

"I don't know," Sin replied with a scowl, crossing his arms over his chest. "It doesn't really matter to me."

"Why are you the one so put out?" Boyd asked with a quirked eyebrow. "At least you got off."

Sin arched a brow. "So? Maybe I like to reciprocate."

"Hmm." A small smile played on Boyd's lips before he turned and headed down the main aisle.

They picked up a basket and loaded it with the freshest-looking produce Sin had ever seen outside of the Agency, including a couple of nicely cut steaks that he planned to cook using the grill. The basket was full to overflowing by the time they reached the register and Sin grabbed a few more snacks along the way.

The girls were still hanging out at the counter when they got there even though they'd obviously already finished their purchases. Cassie was holding a clear bag of what appeared to be deli sandwiches.

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"She must be freaking the eff out," she was saying to the guy behind the counter. Her face was pressed in what appeared to be genuine sympathy. "Angela and me tried to call over there but the line was just busy..."

The boy didn't seem surprised by that. "Yeah, well I doubt she has much hope about Kitty coming back."

"This could be something else, though," the brunette, presumably Angela interjected sharply. "She was like pretty upset these days, maybe she just ran away."

The cashier just shrugged apathetically and looked at Sin and Boyd. He smiled briefly, showing off glinting braces with red rubber bands. "Sorry about that, these girls won't piss off and let me do my work."

Boyd glanced at the two girls before turning his attention to the cashier. He shrugged and set the basket on the counter. "It's no trouble."

"We're not just standing around yapping with him," Cassie said with an eyeroll, discreetly looking at Sin and Boyd. "He wishes."

"Yeah. We're talking about this," Angela added, indicating a newspaper that sat on the side of the counter.

The headline read, Local Resident Disappears into the Woods. There was a picture of a smiling teenage girl on the cover with the caption 'Kitty Green.'

Sin's eyes flicked over the article quickly, ingesting the information. Apparently dogs had tracked her scent into the nearby woods before it abruptly disappeared, despite the fact that there were no roads nearby or tracks from vehicles.

Boyd leaned over, his arm brushing against Sin's as he skimmed the article. He raised his eyebrows slightly, looking over at Angela and Cassie. "The fifth time this has happened?"

Cassie nodded at him and adjusted the grip on her fishing rod. She glanced over at Sin as if to make sure he was also paying attention before speaking. "For the past fifty years, every few years around this time someone disappears without a trace."

"It's completely fucking weird," Angela added with narrowed eyes.

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Boyd looked between the two with a slightly skeptical tilt of his eyebrow. "The same way as that girl did? With the trail going cold?"

"Yeah," the boy replied with yet another uncaring shrug. "Always the same spot or whatever. People think it's some weird serial killer dude or some kind of I dunno, ghost."

Sin stared at him. "A ghost."

"I'm just repeating what I heard, dude," the kid replied, ringing up their groceries.

"Fifty years is a long time to have a trend like that," Boyd observed and Cassie nodded.

"Yeah but we have records going back," Cassie explained, perhaps reading in Boyd's expression that he wondered about the validity of the claim. "Old newspapers and the like."

"What about the recent investigations?" Boyd asked with a faint frown, seeming distracted by the details of the case. He either didn't hear the mention of a ghost or wasn't moved by it. "Are the same people investigating each time? Are the same dogs used?"

Angela shook her head. "They always call for help from bigger cities with actual crime labs. We're too small to have anything like that. Different people come with different dogs."

Boyd's eyes narrowed in thought and when Sin glanced over, he could see that Boyd was starting to become intrigued by this. "Is there a connection between the victims?"

The three locals looked at each other and ultimately Cassie was the one who shrugged. "Not really. Everyone's been different ages. Kitty's the third girl to disappear," she added with a disturbed frown.

"What about their families?" Boyd pressed.

"They're devastated," Cassie said with a shake of her head. "But not everyone had one. Old Man Jensen was all alone."

"The only thing in common between all of them is they went out alone, usually on a short errand, and never came back," Angela added.

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"It's not possible they planned to run away?" Boyd asked. He looked over at Angela. "You said Kitty's been upset."

"They always seem like they planned to come back," the cashier said as he continued to ring up the items from Boyd and Sin's basket. "Wallets or keys left inside, tvs on, sometimes food cooking..." He looked at Boyd and Sin with a shrug. "That's why it's so weird."

"Miss Wilkinson two years ago even left her baby crying and her door unlocked," Angela put in, her eyes narrowed as she leaned against the counter. "It doesn't make sense. She and her husband tried for *years* to have a kid. She was so excited when she got pregnant. There's no way she would've left her baby alone except for maybe a few minutes for something really important."

Sin looked between them and said nothing. The disappearances sounded strange enough and he thought it was likely that there was indeed a serial killer lurking around the town.

"They disappear in the same spot too," the cashier said. He was putting their items in plastic bags that crinkled quietly each time he moved them.

"Where is it exactly?" Boyd asked. Although he was looking at the cashier, it was Cassie who replied.

"You know where the restaurant is?"

"Bob and Carol's?" Boyd asked and when Cassie nodded, he nodded in return. "I saw it when we parked."

"Well, if you go straight east from there into the woods about three miles and then go north about 200 feet, you'll find it. It's a small clearing in the middle of nowhere, you can't miss it." Cassie looked between Boyd and Sin seriously. "I wouldn't go in there at night, though. It's creepy."

"I don't even like going there during the day," Angela said, crossing her arms and pulling them closer to her. "I always feel like something's gonna happen."

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"Well, no one's been taken out of the woods yet so you're probably safer there than anywhere," the cashier said offhandedly. He dropped the last candy bar in the bag and rang up the total.

Boyd handed the cashier a wad of money without bothering to ask exactly how much. Instead, he was looking at the two girls. "There's no one in town who seems strange?"

Cassie let out a laugh at that. "There's plenty of those folk but no, nothing obvious. Everyone's been interviewed up, down and sideways since the first disappearance, even back in the day when it first started happening, and nothing new comes of it. If it's a serial killer, it's someone who disappears with the wind and leaves less of a trace. And even then, why would he care about this place?"

Boyd studied her for a moment and then said, "If there's a belief it's a ghost, there has to be a story that goes along with it."

"Oh, there is," Angela agreed.

Sin made a face and picked up the bags, not really wanting to hear it. Boyd seemed interested though, so he refrained from leaving.

"The story goes, fifty years ago, this girl named Annie wandered into the woods and got lost. The other kids made fun of her and she lived alone 'cause her dad had died the year before and she'd been abandoned by her crazy grandma. No one cared about her. She was missing for like ten days before her dog finally tracked her down. They found her dead, her body all mangled and bloody, but no one ever knew what killed her. She'd been killed in the spot people go missing now." Angela's voice was heavy when she relayed that tidbit.

"Ever since then, in no real pattern of years we can figure but always on the day of her death, someone goes missing. They get tracked to that spot where they vanish like they never existed. And they're never seen again."

"People say her ghost's vengeful 'cause no one in town cared about her," Cassie added ominously, raising her eyebrows. "They say only dogs can track the people to that place but after that, Annie takes them away and that's why the trail goes cold."

Boyd watched them with a mildly thoughtful look before he glanced over at Sin. Seeing his lover holding the bags and apparently ready to leave, Boyd turned back to the locals. "Interesting. I guess we'd better be careful then."

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Sin detected the mild way Boyd said that and that he probably wasn't taking this fully seriously but Cassie and Angela nodded intently. "Just don't go anywhere alone and you should be okay."

Boyd nodded and turned, glancing at Sin before he headed toward the door.

"Have a nice day," the cashier said in the same bored tone.

Sin strode outside and over to the back of the truck. He began loading the groceries in and gave Boyd a dull look. "Was there a reason for you to extend that pointless conversation?"

"To increase your sexual frustration so it's even hotter when we get back to the cabin?" Boyd offered innocently.

Sin shook his head, going around the side of the truck. They'd rented it specifically for the road trip and he'd decided that he was going to be the one driving for a change.

Boyd hopped into the passenger seat and waited until they were both inside with the doors closed before he continued more seriously. "Actually, I was just intrigued when they first mentioned it. You have to admit, it's strange. Even if there is a serial killer, why terrorize this small town in the middle of nowhere unless it's personal?"

"Most serial killers are insane and don't have logical reasons behind their behavior," Sin replied as he started up the truck and pulled away from the sidewalk. He guided the vehicle up the hill that led away from Main Street and towards the woods. "It's probably a lunatic who is using that spot for the sole purpose of gaining attention and notoriety."

"Yeah but no one's even going to know about it here except the locals," Boyd said, leaning his arm against the door as he absently watched the trees swish by. "And no one even seems that terrified. Not to mention, even serial killers often have some sort of victim pool. This is completely random."

"I'd be surprised if the story wasn't widespread in these parts, especially since the child mentioned outside help being brought in."

"True," Boyd said with a tilt of his head. Even so, he still seemed thoughtful as he continued to stare out the window.

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The drive to the cabin was a brief one but beautifully scenic. They went through a covered wooden bridge that sat above a stream with the clearest water that Sin had ever seen. Right before entering the property where the cabins were located, they drove by a field with the mountains looming in the background. It was picturesque and looked untouched by anything man-made.

The property itself was large and in the midst of the woods although some of the trees had been cleared away from the site to make space for a recreational center near the office, a playground and a pond. The entire place had a very welcoming feel about it and Sin imagined that if the economy would pick up, business at the lodge would likely be quite hectic.

He drove away from the main area and further into the woods where their cabin was situated. The setup of the cabins was one of the main reasons he'd chosen this particular lodge. They were far enough apart to ensure a lot of privacy even if Boyd screamed at the top of his lungs while getting his ass pounded.

The truck stopped just beside the cabin and he got out. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah," Boyd said, getting out of the truck and shutting the door behind him. He moved toward the bed of the truck and pulled down the hatch. He raised his eyebrows and looked over at Sin. "Are you offering to make me food?"

Sin snorted and took the keys to the cabin out of his pocket. The cabin was more modernized than he'd originally envisioned it as but he found that he liked it that way. It had energy-saver electric appliances, a wood-burning fireplace and a television with cable. The fact that there was a Jacuzzi included had helped.

"I'm too hungry to wait for you to figure out how to light a grill."

"Fuck you," Boyd said with a laugh, gathering up several of the bags.

"After we eat," Sin replied with a smirk.

Boyd returned the smirk with one of his own.

Once inside, Sin began to season the steaks while Boyd put away the rest of the food.

Boyd kept looking at Sin sidelong as he opened cupboards and balled up the empty bags. "Was this part of Emilio training?" he asked curiously, pushing the bags into one

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open one. "Otherwise, I don't see how a man who eats refrigerated candy bars for breakfast knows how to properly grill a steak."

"It's not exactly rocket science," Sin replied with a scoff. "But I do know how to prepare certain foods due to my time with my father. He cooks very well and typically prepares everything himself."

Boyd made a 'hmm' sound and considered that as he put away the last can. He shut the cupboard and shoved the bag filled with bags into an empty cabinet.

He walked over to Sin and moved in behind him, lightly pressing their bodies together and wrapping his arms loosely around Sin's lower stomach. He rested his cheek against Sin's back and looked at what he could see of the ingredients spread out before them.

"I guess I should be grateful, then," Boyd said idly, his cheek briefly rubbing against the fabric of Sin's shirt when he shifted his head. "I like it when you're domestic."

Sin didn't stop the small smirk from sliding across his mouth. "Don't get used to it. I like having chips for dinner. What do you want with this anyway?"

Boyd moved his shoulders in a small shrug without bothering to move away from Sin. "Whatever's easy. We got some potatoes earlier, didn't we?"

"Yeah." Sin slid away from Boyd's hold and wiped his hands on a towel. He grabbed the bag of charcoal they'd gotten from the office and he skimmed the directions. It was apparently a self-lighting bag and lighter fluid wasn't needed. He arched an eyebrow doubtfully, wondering if it would burn hot enough.

Boyd leaned against the counter and watched Sin thoughtfully. "You weren't interested at all in what they said earlier?"

"Not particularly."

"Why not?"

"Why should I be?" Sin picked up the bag of charcoal and walked to the door of the cabin, heading outside and to the small grill that sat below the steps.

"I don't know," Boyd answered, trailing behind Sin and stopping at the steps. "It's not something we hear about every day."

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Sin snorted and dropped the bag at his feet as he examined the grill. It was covered in debris and the remains of someone else's burned charcoal. He picked up the brush at the side and began cleaning it off as he said, "Yes, hearing about death and disappearances is very out of the norm for me."

Boyd rolled his eyes and sat down on the top step. He rested his arms on his knees and made no attempt to help Sin clean the grill. "Yes but usually we're the ones doing the disappearing. This time it's a mystery."

"Maybe you should call Ivan and the two of you could go investigate." Sin swiped the brush across the grill again and tossed it aside before grabbing the charcoal.

Boyd scoffed quietly and leaned back on his hands, turning his attention to the woods with a narrow-eyed gaze. "I think I'm going to check out that spot tomorrow. You're welcome to come if you want."

"Not afraid the ghost is going to pop out at you?" Sin shoved the bag of charcoal onto the grill and lit the paper. He was doubtful about how hot it would burn but figured it was better than nothing.

A faint smirk crossed Boyd's features. "I like ghost stories but I'm not worried. The ghost's met her quota for the year."

"Maybe." Sin watched the rest of the bag burn and poked at the coals for a bit. "Hopefully she will make an exception for you so that you learn your lesson about butting into business that has nothing to do with you."

Boyd fell silent as he considered Sin for a moment. His expression was pensive despite the fact that Sin wasn't being entirely serious. A flash of hesitation moved through his eyes that was gone almost before Sin noticed it. Whatever may have been going through his head, Boyd dismissed it.

"Well," Boyd said belatedly with a shrug, "it won't hurt anything if I look around. Plenty of other people have. I'm just curious what that spot looks like."

Sin shrugged, knowing it was a lost cause even attempting to talk Boyd out of it and he wasn't extremely passionate about the subject to begin with. If the authorities had failed to find clues, he highly doubted they would. Thus, they would not somehow be drawn into the case as would be their rotten luck if they did.

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Instead of going on with the topic and speaking his thoughts, Sin turned and headed back to the house to get the steaks. It occurred to him that he should have prepared the potatoes first but the meat had looked too tempting. The pre-made potato salad they'd bought from the market would suffice for a side dish.

"This place would be a good area for you to train," he said as he went back inside.

"Yeah," Boyd's voice came from outside through the open door. "I was thinking about that earlier. I wanted to do some hiking and bring my sketchbook, too."

"That is not conducive to training."

"I meant them as separate events," Boyd said in amusement. "I'm not going to train all week."

Sin didn't reply until the steaks were carefully placed on the grill and it was covered. "Well, let me know when you want to. It will be interesting to see how well you do."

"Maybe I'll even beat you," Boyd said thoughtfully. "For a second."

There was silence for a moment before Sin simply gave his partner a discreet half-smile. "We'll see."

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Boyd was silent as he slipped through the woods. The trees towered around him, moving faintly in the wind, the leaves a quiet rustle in the background. He was straining his ears for any slight noise out of the ordinary and he continually scrutinized the area around him. He searched for the smallest details to tell him which direction Sin may have gone and how close he was.

Sin was adept at moving through the woods practically unseen, so his trail was difficult to follow. Boyd had to pay especially close attention to tiny snapped twigs and the faint dragging of the leaves across the ground. He could see his lover's footprints appearing and disappearing like a ghost that flitted down to Earth and revealed itself occasionally, just often enough to remind the living of its existence.

Nearly an hour had passed since Sin had disappeared into the woods ahead of Boyd and a trickle of adrenaline kept Boyd's senses on high alert. Every short cry of an

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animal, every rustle of the leaves, every shift of a tree branch, and Boyd's gaze snapped over to identify whether the roles had reversed and his lover was stalking him.

It was the first time they'd decided to do training in a roleplaying capacity and Boyd found it to be intriguing. Sin was the target Boyd was meant to track down and incapacitate. They pretended this was a mission and even when Sin had gone into the woods, they'd already been in character. It was more fun than the typical sparring they engaged in and Boyd had the brief thought that Doug should have tried something like this during level 10 training.

There were times Boyd lost the trail completely and times he wondered whether he was even following the correct one. It was possible he'd lost Sin long ago and now he was following the tracks of an astute hunter.

Finally, moving slowly and silently, he spied his lover's form ahead of him, nearly hidden by the trees. Sin was moving calmly through the woods, his head tilting this way and that as he presumably searched for Boyd while at the same time ensuring that he left the least telling tracks as possible.

Boyd slid to a crouch and was especially careful not to make a noise as he shifted in a wide arc around Sin to move behind him. He crouched in the cover of the foliage and trees, pausing occasionally behind a tree trunk for a patient length of time to ensure his presence wouldn't come upon Sin too quickly. He moved closer bit by bit, his gaze zeroed in on his lover and occasionally darting around to consider how best to apprehend him.

The woods were thick and there wasn't much to work with. Although he could have fashioned a weapon, it would have made too much noise and it would have seemed like cheating. Boyd wasn't about to throw a rock at the back of Sin's head; he wanted to bring him down in hand-to-hand combat or it wouldn't truly be training.

He determined that his best chance for success was taking Sin by surprise from behind and adapting as quickly as possible to any of Sin's reactions afterward. With that in mind, Boyd moved forward more quickly, although silence was still his top priority. He wasn't going to have spent an hour tracking his partner down to ruin it by stepping on a twig at the last second.

When he was finally within reach of Sin, hidden behind trees and foliage to the side of where Sin was still moving, Boyd braced himself. Even hidden as he was, if Sin looked

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behind him at the right angle he'd see Boyd crouched there. Not wanting to take the risk, he positioned himself as best as possible and abruptly threw himself at Sin's back.

Sin turned around and immediately strafed out of the way, blocking Boyd's attack. There was nothing in his face to tell whether or not Boyd had truly surprised him or if he'd allowed him to get that close for the sake of the game. His expression was completely emotionless and intent. It was disturbing to look at Sin and see the way enemies saw him, without a flicker of compassion or familiarity in his pale green eyes.

The fight began in a flurry of movement with Sin delivering a series of decisive attacks that Boyd barely managed to dodge. It always caught him off guard to spar with Sin because of his extraordinary speed. Boyd was confident enough in his ability to say that he was now on par with Kassian and Jon, but with Sin it took him awhile to adjust to the sudden onslaught of sheer power that his partner possessed. It was something completely out of Kassian's and even Emilio's boundaries and one that Boyd always found himself unprepared for.

Even so, just the fact that he managed to dodge blows and land a few of his own caused Boyd's confidence to build and his performance to improve in the first full minute of combat. It didn't, however, prevent him from being slammed to the hard forest floor as if he were a mere ragdoll.

Boyd hit the ground and had already rolled away before Sin could hold him down. Sin kicked him in the stomach as Boyd started to stand. Although Sin was holding back his strength, it was only enough to make it non-lethal. The impact into Boyd's torso was enough to reverberate through him and throw him back.

Boyd recovered quickly. He ran at Sin and grabbed one shoulder at the same time as he jumped up, wrapping his legs around Sin's other arm. Boyd twisted his body, trying to throw Sin to the ground, but Sin was strong enough that even with that weight and momentum, he was able to catch himself. He grabbed Boyd by the back and flipped him to the ground yet again.

The air was nearly knocked out of Boyd, causing a pained whoosh of air to leave him, and he started to roll to the side. Sin barely let Boyd come to a stand before he was on him with another wave of furious attacks.

The fight continued, Boyd's attacks and blocks slower than Sin's but just fast enough to keep him free and moving around, until Sin suddenly wrenched Boyd around and snapped him back. Sin captured Boyd in a headlock, their bodies pressed together and

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Boyd gasping for air. Boyd could feel his heart thundering in his chest hard enough to be a physical ache, and Sin's arm against his windpipe was slowly siphoning his breath and ability to think.

After a moment of struggling, Boyd was able to get Sin off balance enough to gather his strength and flip Sin over, slamming him onto his back. When Sin hit the ground, Boyd felt a moment of triumph that he'd been able to take control away from his near-superhuman partner.

That feeling didn't last even a second. Sin hit the ground and immediately rolled to a stand. Sin had been holding back before but now his eyes narrowed, ablaze with green fire and almost frightening in their intensity. Boyd didn't even have the chance to straighten fully before Sin was on him.

Despite his increased awareness, Boyd still didn't know what happened.

One second he was standing and the next Sin had him pinned to the ground face down. Sin's speed was incredible to the point of incredulity; if Boyd hadn't been by Sin's side for years, he would never have believed some of the things he did would be possible. As it was, there had been no transition for him and it took a second for his mind to process what had just happened.

He grunted in surprise, his mouth open as he panted against the dirt and leaves and his blood sang with adrenaline through his veins. His eyes were wide with pain as Sin's fingers practically crushed his lower arms and wrenched them up behind his back at an awkward angle.

Boyd struggled, trying desperately to buck Sin off him, to twist to the side or find a weakness in the hold but there was none. He was incapable of moving and they both knew it. Sin was too powerful for Boyd to be able to realistically counteract his hold. He collapsed with his forehead pressed against the ground, breathing heavily and squeezing his eyes shut.

The forest seemed especially silent and still around them with the absence of their fight. Without the sound of flesh striking flesh, there was only the faint chirping of the birds and the soothing rustle of the leaves to accompany them.

Despite that, adrenaline continued to thunder through Boyd's veins and he felt hyperaware of everything, including the weight of Sin's body pressing him down.

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Sin reached down easily and removed the flexicuffs that Boyd had been carrying in his pocket; an added prop to the game of agent and detainee.

"What do you plan to do now, agent?" Sin demanded, cold and without an ounce of compassion. "I could kill you if I wanted to."

"If you planned to you would have already," Boyd returned evenly. Despite that, his shoulders tensed in anticipation.

The second Sin's grip shifted in order to use the flexicuffs, Boyd abruptly jerked his arms and tried to twist away. Sin accounted easily, as if Boyd had little more influence or strength than a child. The leaves scraped against Boyd's cheek as he struggled to break Sin's hold but the other man simply tightened his grip with one hand and expertly put the flexicuffs on with the other.

Boyd's wrists ground against each other painfully and Sin held Boyd against the dirt, pressing their bodies together.

"You're right," Sin replied flatly. His grip tightened powerfully on Boyd as he wrenched them closer together until their bodies were flush against one another. It forced Boyd into an awkward position, partially held off the ground. "But it would make more sense to interrogate you first."

"Ha," Boyd scoffed. "Try what you like. I won't talk."

Sin snaked one arm around Boyd's side, gripping his chin and pushing his face to the side. He spoke harshly in his ear. "Really? I heard that you sing like a bitch if your head is underwater for long enough."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "You heard wrong."

"Did I." It was spoken as a statement more than a question and Sin's fingers dug into Boyd's face violently.

Boyd didn't reply. Before he could register what was happening, he found himself being spun around and slammed against the hard ground once again, this time on his back. His shoulders wrenched aching in the movement, causing him to draw in a startled, tense breath.

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"Do you think I'm playing with you, agent?" Sin demanded. His deep voice was low and intense, laced with an unspoken threat.

Boyd's fingers curled uselessly beneath him, scratching against the dirt. "No," he returned evenly.

Sin's expression remained hard, as if carved out of stone, as his strong hands dug into Boyd's body. "Then tell me-- do you want to do it here or do I need to drag you to the river?"

Boyd's expression was stony but he had a flicker of doubt as to whether Sin would actually go through with bringing him to the river. He didn't think he would and yet... "You know I can't answer your questions regardless."

Sin jerked Boyd's shoulders and growled low in his throat, "You won't right now but that will change. If your stamina for torture is anything like your stamina in a fight, I have nothing to fear."

Boyd's eyes narrowed at Sin's coldly sarcastic comment. Even though Sin probably didn't fully mean it, it still served to irritate Boyd since he'd made it longer against his partner than he'd expected. It wasn't his fault that Sin was a super agent, capable of the impossible.

"I didn't run out of stamina." He jerked at his arms and gave Sin a challenging look. "Let me go and I'll show you how much longer I can fight."

Sin's full lips twisted into a smirk and his long lashes lowered over his eyes as they narrowed. It was difficult to tell what he thought about the comment, whether he was truly amused by it or if he was still playing his role. Either way, he leaned closer until their faces were nearly touching and said in a low, even voice, "Do you think you could defeat me? I'm surprised you've made it this long against less formidable opponents."

Boyd glared coldly. "You don't know what I'm capable of. You may be unusually fast and strong but I've killed plenty of people in the past." He flicked his gaze along Sin dismissively. "Everyone has a weakness. I'd just have to find yours."

There was a brief moment of silence as Sin observed him before he arched one dark eyebrow and released Boyd's shoulders. Sin stood up without delay and stared at Boyd, silent and challenging.

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Boyd didn't waste a second; he rolled onto his side and quickly but somewhat awkwardly scrambled to his feet. It was made more difficult with his arms secured behind his back but he didn't let it stop him. Once up, he immediately started sprinting away from Sin, knowing better than to try to confront the man when he didn't even have his arms free.

Still, the effort turned out to be in vain.

He was snatched seemingly out of the air and slammed back down to the ground before he could even comprehend what had occurred. A shock of pain moved through him. Lights danced in his eyes for a brief moment before his vision cleared and he saw Sin standing over him staring down. Sin was completely calm, his face set in the same flinty mask despite the fire of adrenaline in his eyes. He didn't say anything to gloat about his overpowering abilities; he just stared down at Boyd, in complete control of the situation.

Boyd laid still, his knees partially bent, his shoulders aching, and his blond hair fanned out around him collecting leaves and dirt. He watched Sin alertly, taking in his stance and his reach and in the process getting a clear view of his powerful body.

Even as he calculated how to try to get out of this, in the back of his mind he couldn't help noting how attracted he was to this side of Sin. The strength compacted in that body; the speed... Boyd wasn't used to being the recipient of an extended situation where Sin was completely in control and Boyd felt an especial thrill because of it. Usually Boyd could find a way to gain control of the situation but this time Sin wasn't letting him.

That didn't help him with trying to escape, though. And he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

He quickly ran through his options but there wasn't much he could feasibly do. Sin was too powerful and quick at the best of times, even when Boyd didn't have the handicap of his arms secured. He wouldn't be able to get out of the flexicuffs without the use of something sharp and it would take too long regardless.

If he tried to roll away again, he would just get caught once more. Physically, he was outmatched. That didn't mean he couldn't try something else, though. Maybe if he was lucky he could catch Sin off-guard enough to somehow escape.

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Boyd relaxed against the ground for the most part, although he kept his legs and shoulders casually positioned in a way that would facilitate a quick attempt at a getaway. He raised his eyebrows and watched Sin steadily. "What do you want?" "You to admit that you are powerless in this situation." Sin looked down at him from beneath a fall of black hair that had come loose from the knot he'd taken to tying it in. "You have no partner. No team. You are alone and weak."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "I'm not weak."

In the middle of his sentence, he abruptly jumped up and snapped his leg out in a low spin, putting all his strength and momentum into aiming at the weakest part of Sin's knees. Sin was powerful but he was still human with joints that were susceptible to certain hits.

Sin's legs were knocked out from under him and Boyd was on him immediately, snapping his legs around Sin's throat and pulling him down into a hard fall with his extra weight. Boyd twisted in the process, his thigh pressing into Sin's windpipe as he choked him.

A normal man would have faltered when his breath was cut off but Sin grabbed Boyd's lower legs, which were wrapped around each other to increase the stability of the move. With a powerful burst of strength, Sin wrenched Boyd's legs apart and in the same move threw him across the clearing. Boyd was unable to stop himself before he rolled and slammed into a tree with a pained gasp. He fell face first to the ground and started to struggle to push himself up when Sin yanked him up. He spun Boyd around and slammed his back against the tree.

Sin's eyes were brilliantly green, alight with adrenaline and a dangerous undertone. His expression was intense and stony, without a flicker of emotion as Boyd twisted and struggled. Sin shoved against Boyd briefly, the entire tree shaking ominously in the movement. His muscles were stark as he held Boyd up by one hand without a problem.

"Do you give up?"

"No," Boyd snapped as he tried to kick Sin, who caught his foot without breaking eye contact.

Sin held Boyd's leg painfully to the side while he simply pressed his body against Boyd's free leg. Boyd was caught without the ability to move.

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"Do you give up?" Sin repeated, his voice dropping.

Boyd stared down into Sin's gaze with half-shut eyes. His heartbeat thundered in his chest and he knew Sin had him. The attraction he'd felt before flared as Sin continued to dominate the situation. But there was still a stubborn part of him that held out, that didn't want to give the satisfaction of admitting his defeat.

"N--"

He didn't even get the word out before he was flipped through the air. He hit the ground and cried out in pain. There was barely a fraction of a second before Sin dropped on top of him, his body holding Boyd down while his fingers dug into his shoulders and shoved him against the dirt. Boyd tried to twist or move his legs but he was completely helpless; Sin held him down in a way that took away every chance of escape, every chance of movement.

Boyd was trapped.

He dropped his mouth open and panted, his eyes nearly falling shut, his gaze intensifying as he watched Sin through his eyelashes. Sin's body was hard and heavy on top of him, with sweat shining on those powerful, exposed arms. Boyd could feel Sin's body thrumming with power while that cold expression drilled into him.

Adrenaline sang through him and he felt hypersensitive to Sin's touch. The feeling of their bodies against each other-- the violence of the fight and the way Sin had completely dominated him-- it all served to arouse Boyd.

He was used to being able to take control of most situations, by manipulating his way out of it or by being let up after he was caught in sparring. This situation was new to him; Sin moving Boyd where he wanted while Boyd's arms were secured behind him. Any time they'd come even close to something like this before, Boyd hadn't actually been held down for any period of time. He'd always had the options of using his arms, his legs. He'd never had his lover's sweaty body pressing into him while his arms were tied behind his back and he wasn't allowed to get away.

Being that vulnerable and helpless in front of someone like Sin would probably terrify most people. There was a time when it would have terrified Boyd. But after everything they'd been through in the past several years, Boyd trusted Sin completely and all he could feel was desire.

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The attraction he'd been feeling became outright arousal that burned through him, intoxicating, and made him yearn to have their naked bodies rock against each other. He wanted to kiss Sin savagely and the fact that he couldn't, the fact that this was all in Sin's hands now, only made it hotter.

The intensity of his arousal caught him off guard and for a moment, he didn't know how to react.

Judging by the way Sin's eyes narrowed knowingly, he had immediately recognized the expression on Boyd's face. That flushed, heavy-lidded look of desire that left Boyd's lips parted as he breathed harshly from exertion and excitement at once.

Sin's lip curled and for the first time, a hint of his true self shone through the single-minded hostile role he'd been playing. His dark eyebrows rose, a filthy smirk twisting his full lips as his eyes roved Boyd slowly and deliberately. But when he spoke, it was still in character.

"I could do what I wanted to you right now, agent. And I suspect you'd like it."

Boyd tried to force the arousal out of his expression. He couldn't bring himself to let Sin win this part of the sparring, even if he'd already won physically. "Don't flatter yourself, rebel."

"Really." The word rolled off Sin's tongue and he moved quickly, almost in a blur. Boyd was spun around with his back pinned to Sin's chest before he'd even realized what was going on.

Sin clamped one arm across Boyd's chest and slid the other down to his crotch, squeezing in a way that would have been excruciating if he did it a notch harder. "So then why are you hard?"

Boyd grunted and drew a hissed breath between grit teeth. His eyes narrowed and he couldn't stop himself from pressing his head back. He was mildly irritated with himself for reacting to any of this in the first place. He wanted to continue with training; he wanted to prove he could remain professional around Sin. At the same time, he couldn't deny the way Sin's hard body was making his heart pound. He refused to break character and he jerked against Sin's hold.

"What's it matter to you?" he demanded. "That how they teach you lowlifes to interrogate?"

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"And is this the way they teach you professionals to get out of interrogation?" Sin's low velvety voice asked quietly in his ear.

Boyd's eyes narrowed as he tried to ignore the way that tone got to him. He stared straight ahead with a doggedly neutral expression. "Are you planning to bore me to death before the interrogation?" he asked coolly. "Or were you going to get to it sometime this century?"

Sin's hands slid up and deftly undid Boyd's belt within the space of a second. His hand was sliding inside the depths of his pants before Boyd even had a chance to react.

Boyd started and automatically pressed back. His attention zeroed in on Sin's hand, on how much he wanted Sin to get him off. The rough slide of calloused fingers against his sensitive skin was torturous.

Still, he didn't let his expression change other than his eyes falling partially shut. "What are you doing?" he demanded lowly.

"I'm getting to it," Sin replied against his ear and squeezed before sliding his hand out and using it to yank Boyd's pants down entirely.

Boyd jerked as his bare skin hit the open air. He struggled against Sin's hold but that only caused Sin to hold him tighter. "I didn't mean--"

Sin's hand snaked down, wrapping around Boyd's erection and squeezing. Boyd's breath caught as Sin asked emotionlessly, "Didn't you?"

"No--"

"Liar." Sin's tone was hard and intoxicating because of it. He squeezed his fingers to the fine line between pain and pleasure and Boyd couldn't stop an aroused groan that wrenched out of him. He threw his head back against Sin's shoulder, his mouth dropping open as he drew in quick breaths. His head was spinning from being the extended recipient of this side of Sin.

Sin scoffed deep in his throat, a sound lost between cruel and pleased. "Pathetic."

Arousal and pride warred within Boyd at the comment and he grit his teeth, trying to jerk away. He struggled, his knees scraping against the hard ground, his hands crushed

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between their bodies. Unsurprisingly, he didn't get anywhere. He could hear Sin unfastening and yanking down his own pants with one hand. It was a measure of his strength that he had no trouble holding Boyd still with one arm.

When Sin yanked them together, Boyd could feel his lover's erection pressing against his bare ass. It turned him on more and he longed to reach down and touch himself so that he could alleviate some of the yearning. He jerked at his arms but the plastic tie only dug into his skin.

Boyd grit his teeth in frustration and shifted awkwardly. The feel of Sin's hands on him was driving him wild but he was unwilling to be the first one to break character. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head faintly, trying to drag himself out of the fog of lust that was overtaking him.

"So desperate to be used, aren't you?" Sin observed in the same detached tone even as he slid his arm around Boyd's neck.

Anger and something close to humiliation burned in Boyd's chest but before he could react or deny the claim, Sin's fingers were sliding into his mouth.

He made a helpless noise and, without thinking, closed his lips around the digits. He couldn't resist it, not when Sin was stimulating his mouth like a blowjob. Not when he could feel Sin's cock growing harder from the action. Not when the familiar feel of Sin's hard body pressed against his was a constant distraction. It was only after Sin began fingerfucking his mouth more thoroughly that Boyd realized what he was doing and how eagerly and easily he was giving in.

He breathed harshly through his nose as he tried to pull away. Muffled grunts and frustrated sounds escaped him but no matter how far he pushed his head back or tried to turn it, Sin's hand followed. He tried biting Sin's fingers but Sin didn't seem to care; his arm only tightened around Boyd's chest and the fingerfucking became harsher. Boyd nearly gagged, desperate to not give in at the same time he couldn't deny how arousing this was to him.

Sin wouldn't let him pull away until he was finished proving that Boyd would do whatever Sin wanted and Boyd could do very little about it. Knowing that inexplicably made Boyd's cock harden further, straining for attention between his legs.

Sin finally removed his fingers, allowing Boyd to breathe but before he could take more than a gasp he was being abruptly shoved forward. Boyd couldn't hold himself up. His

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body weight tipped and with his arms useless behind him, he fell flat on his face in the dirt.

He turned his face to the side and felt his body jerking as Sin yanked his pants and underwear the rest of the way off, ripping them savagely over his boots. Sin's movements were rough and unceremonious as he discarded the clothing and grabbed a fistful of blond hair to yank Boyd's head partially up.

A pained shout dragged out of Boyd, echoing around them. His body strained awkwardly, his lower body exposed to the cool air. He was helpless and vulnerable in Sin's hands, forced into whatever position Sin wanted, and his neck and back arched achingly. He groaned and breathed harshly through his open mouth, squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head. Damp blond hair shifted around his face, some of it catching against his cheeks.

"Hurting me won't work," he hissed. "I won't talk no matter what you do."

"We'll see about that," Sin's voice growled hotly in his ear, his breath coming in ragged pants despite his steady voice.

Boyd couldn't deny the delicious thrill that went through him. Why the hell was he so turned on by this? Why was Sin being completely in charge, remaining aggressive without giving him a chance to react, and even hurting him in the process, all so incredibly hot to him?

He couldn't deny the reality of his body's reactions but even so, he wasn't ready to give up yet.

Boyd waited until Sin shifted again before he abruptly flipped onto his back and kicked up. Before his foot could connect, Sin effortlessly caught his ankle and twisted it. His grip was like a vice on Boyd, sharp and relentless, and Boyd writhed against the ground with a pained groan. Before he could attempt another strike with his other leg, Sin grabbed that ankle with his free hand and spread Boyd's legs open wide as he knelt between them.

Sin's striking features were masked with cruel amusement that Boyd had never seen directed at him before. He wondered if this was how people felt when they were the recipient of Sin's wrath, when they were foolish enough to try to fight him and think they actually stood a chance. It was clear that there was no chance. Sin was too strong; too fast; too dangerous.

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Even as Boyd lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes defiantly, he couldn't help running his eyes over Sin. There was something exotic and wild about him and seeing him in this way only emphasized it. He was like a deadly creature, something foreign and frightening but something that a person still could not look away from no matter how hard one tried.

Boyd did try though. Because if he kept looking at Sin, he suspected that by the end of it all the older man would definitely win their game. When it came down to it, Boyd wanted Sin too badly to be able to resist him.

Hands shifting to Boyd's hips, Sin lifted him up and abruptly shoved his thick cock deep into Boyd's ass. Boyd gasped harshly for air. At some point Sin must have slathered his erection with saliva because the penetration wasn't as mind-numbingly agonizing as it could have been. Even so, it still sent a shock of searing pain through Boyd's body as Sin started fucking him hard.

Boyd's eyes widened as that hard cock started slamming into him. His fingers curled uselessly beneath him and he twisted, his shoulders aching from the pressure of being shoved against the ground. He grunted between gritted teeth and ignored the way the uneven earth ground harshly into his back as Sin pounded into him relentlessly.

He squeezed his eyes shut and his breath came in harsh sounds through his nose. The pain soon mixed into that familiar mix of white hot pleasure and it was difficult for him not to slam up against Sin to try to get it harder.

He was trying so hard not to make noise, not to respond, but then Sin shifted his grip and shoved Boyd's legs up and back until his hips were lifted off the ground. He was left wide open and completely vulnerable as Sin slammed into him deeper and more violently than before.

An aroused shout wrenched out of Boyd despite himself and his eyes snapped open. Sin's pale green eyes held a knowing glint of fire that sent a shock of desire straight to Boyd's stomach.

"Fuck," Boyd hissed helplessly, twisting against the ground. He wanted to get away almost as much as he wanted to push closer, to rock against Sin and get completely lost in the sex. He felt the desire building in him, something that he knew was going to grow more and more carnal; that would take away even his stringent hold on his control.

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Their bodies slammed against each other, sweat starting to form on each of them, causing their shirts to cling to their skin. Boyd's toes curled inside his boots each time Sin speared him especially deeply and he couldn't stop himself from the aborted grunts and moans of being taken so hard by his lover.

The fact that his dick remained untouched was starting to drive him crazy. He struggled against the plastic ties, causing them only to dig deeper into his skin but unable to stop himself anyway. His mouth was open as he panted harshly, as mindless moans started taking over any other sound that left him.

"Jesus--" Boyd groaned, shaking his head back and forth. His voice was a desperate twist between stubbornness and arousal. "Oh-- fuck--"

"Have you stooped to begging, now?" Sin asked, his voice deep and rumbling between harsh breaths.

Boyd shook his head frantically and squeezed his eyes shut, eyebrows drawing down. "Like hell," he ground out, the words gravelly and low.

Sin said something, probably talking in character still, but Boyd was starting to get too far gone to be able to understand the words. All he could feel was desire growing overwhelmingly in him, wiping out all thought as his stomach started to knot.

Sin released his grip on Boyd's ankles and pushed his legs so that one was sprawled to the side while the other remained raised. Sin wrapped his fingers around Boyd's leg and pushed back as he snapped his hips faster in sharp staccato motions. His cock wrenched out quickly before slamming back in harder and deeper, hitting every nerve ending that made Boyd nearly scream before he could stop himself. Explosions of pleasure shot through his body and caused his eyes to snap open once again.

The trees were a blur before him, dark brown shapes that he couldn't focus on any more than he could understand if Sin was saying anything to him. He felt something; eyes watching them as they fucked frantically in the middle of the woods. But even then he couldn't bring himself to care. Sin's dick was a pulsing hot length pounding into him, branding Boyd as his. The thought was maddening and it whited out anything else in his mind.

Harsh, helpless gasps of air and moans left Boyd. He was so aroused it hurt and he wanted to touch himself so badly that it was all he could think about. He didn't even hear himself begging for Sin to touch him or let him touch himself.

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Sin didn't respond and he didn't even seem to hear it. Desperate groans were leaving his mouth as he likely neared orgasm. His head was tilted slightly backwards and his lips parted as he growled low swears that Boyd was too far gone to properly understand.

He never would have thought that Sin could make him lose his mind with desire like this. He never would have thought that having his hands tied behind his back and Sin being relentless would make him burn so violently with lust that he was blind and deaf to everything except his lover's body slamming against his.

Somewhere along the way, the line between the characters they played and the people they were blurred, and Sin had won the game. The stubborn streak in Boyd was replaced by breathless gasps and a body that writhed against Sin's hold. Boyd had stopped caring about not letting Sin win and instead he had given up complete control. Somewhere along the way, his resistance was replaced by helpless compliance.

Sin started jerking against Boyd more quickly, his hot dick searing into Boyd as Sin's moans grew breathier and more urgent. When Sin finally came, Boyd's name slid off his lips in a low throaty groan that made Boyd shudder.

Even after, he remained hard inside Boyd. He continued to rock against Boyd as he finally took pity and wrapped his long fingers around Boyd's painfully hard cock.

Boyd threw his head back, writhing and groaning. The rough slide of Sin's calloused fingers across his sensitive, straining erection became the center of his universe.

"Oh fuck," he moaned desperately, his entire body trembling and expression twisting. His eyebrows drew up and his lips parted. His face was flushed as he mindlessly rocked his body against Sin's. "Oh please, don't stop, don't stop, I'm gonna-- Oh-- oh God don't stop--"

Sin's hand moved faster on Boyd's cock and that was all it took. Boyd's vision turned white for a moment, his voice cracking as he screamed.

He came harder and longer than usual, the intensity of it leaving his body trembling. He was completely overwhelmed by the orgasm, by the power of the pleasure that ripped through him and made his body snap and arch without him being aware of it. His blood pounded in his veins along with the pleasure, along with Sin's cock still moving in and out of him, and for a moment Boyd was so lost in ecstasy he wouldn't have even been able to say his own name if asked.

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When it was over he was hanging in Sin's grip, panting harshly and still moaning helplessly.

When Sin finally let go of Boyd, he collapsed against the leaves without bothering to stop himself. His entire body was tingling from the aftermath of the orgasm and his mind was in another world. His mouth was open as he tried to catch his breath, as he slowly started to come down from that incredible high.

As Boyd lay there, he distantly felt his body tilt and then jerk slightly. After a moment, he realized Sin had cut the zip ties. Boyd's joints ached sharply as he started to work at straightening his arms, bringing them back to his sides. He lay on his back and clenched and released his fingers as he tried to bring feeling back to them. His entire arms, from his shoulders to his fingertips, felt uncomfortable with the needle-pricking of his arms regaining feeling and the blood starting to circulate properly again. He absently rubbed his wrist and looked over to see Sin lying on the ground next to him.

Boyd felt a surge of affection, disbelief and desire at the acknowledgment of what had just happened; at how he had never wanted his lover so badly as he did just a few minutes ago. He almost couldn't comprehend that it had been so intense.

It partially made him want to suggest they do this again sometime, and partially made him wonder how it was that essentially roleplaying being raped could have made him want his lover so badly. He would have wondered if there was something wrong with him if he hadn't already concluded long ago that there was and that it didn't matter because his and Sin's turn ons meshed so well. Not to mention, he knew he wouldn't have reacted the same if it had actually been happening with a real rebel. He'd been so aroused because he knew it was Sin, because it was a game he was playing with his lover to see who would come out on top.

They usually didn't get into competitions or games. Sin typically wasn't interested and Boyd knew Sin would ultimately win anything they tried simply because he was abnormally fast, strong, powerful, and good at everything he did. Boyd didn't remember ever having been fucked so thoroughly as he just had been, though, and the high still buzzed through him with intoxication.

He rolled over and kissed Sin passionately, his fingers catching in Sin's hair and clutching when the heat and taste of his lover mingled with the reverberations of the orgasm still shuddering through him. He was overwhelmed by the moment and as Sin responded Boyd nearly didn't want this to end. But his limbs still felt shaky and his arms

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still buzzed annoyingly and it wasn't long before, gasping for breath, he broke the kiss and bonelessly flopped onto his back again.

Boyd turned his head to stare at the canopy shifting far above them. Now that he wasn't driven mad with lust, he could hear other sounds again aside from his hammering heartbeat. The background noise of the forest, with birds chirping and leaves rustling in the distance, started to trickle into his awareness. He closed his eyes, letting the waves of pleasure move through him, and languidly listened to Sin's breath near him.

After a moment Sin shifted, pressing his upper back against the ground as he pulled his pants up. "You realize that someone has been watching us this entire time," he commented with calm indifference.

"I know," Boyd said lazily, opening his eyes and dropping his head to the side to look at Sin. "I was too into it to care."

"It wouldn't matter. We're capable of fighting naked if need be." Sin stood up and rolled his shoulders, staring down at Boyd contemptively.

A roguish grin grew across Boyd's face and he ran his gaze down what he could see of Sin's body. The mental image of grappling naked with Sin, sweat coursing over their bodies, was intriguing to say the least. "Something to keep in mind for next time."

Sin's mouth twitched and he arched a dark brow. "I'm beginning to think my father was correct about you."

Boyd raised his eyebrows and finally pushed himself up so he was sitting. He looked around until he located his underwear and pants strewn carelessly across the clearing. It took a massive effort to stand and even once he was upright, his knees still felt unsteady. He ignored the sated buzz that moved through him and swiped his clothes off the ground. He had to shake them out to remove as much of the leaves and sticks as possible. When he turned around, he saw Sin flick his gaze along him briefly, taking in his half-naked body before it would be covered.

"Do I even want to know what he said?"

Sin shrugged briefly, turning his face away to peer through the trees that surrounded them. There were no sounds other than the water flowing along the river not too far away and the small woodland animals rustling in the trees. "He said that you, and others who are attracted to me on the compound, get off on the fact that I could murder you

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quite effortlessly if I wanted to."

Boyd considered that for a moment as he pulled his underwear and pants back over his boots. He didn't want to have to take his shoes off just to get dressed again. "I guess it's true enough. The power in your body is incredibly hot to me-- that's why I thought you'd be more my style in the first place. But I also like it when you're gentle because I know what you're capable of." He shrugged as he adjusted his clothing. "I'm attracted to you for a lot of reasons, though."

Sin nodded, still looking thoughtful. "Is that why you got turned on just now, though?"

"Yes. The way you dominated me and didn't give me a choice made me crazy for you," Boyd said bluntly, his gaze going distant. He wondered whether they would ever fuck like that again. He shook his head to himself and glanced at Sin curiously. "Does that surprise you?"

Another shrug and Sin reached up to adjust the loose knot his black hair was tied into at the nape of his neck. Despite the fact that he'd allowed his hair to grow out so long, having it near his face seemed to irritate him. "Not really. I'm just curious about it all, I suppose. I wonder if you would be as sexually attracted to me if I weren't a supposed super assassin."

"I'm sure I would," Boyd replied easily. He ran his fingers through his hair to remove some of the leaves and sticks that had caught in it during the roleplaying. "That's not the only reason I want you. When we first started having sex, I wasn't as into the aggression as I am now. I liked it rough but even that increased with time after being with you. But all along I've been attracted to your personality and looks. Your strength is just an added bonus for me."

Appearing satisfied, Sin nodded and went back to staring into the forest. "Should we seek out the eyewitness to our roleplaying?"

Boyd nodded and shook his hair out before brushing dirt and crushed leaves off his clothing. "I've been wondering who it is. It could even be the killer." He looked over at Sin and quirked an eyebrow. "Or the ghost."

A low scoff emanated from Sin. "And it begins."

Boyd grinned and started to head in the direction of the spot Cassie and Angela had talked about. "You know you like it."

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"Your stubbornness?" Sin asked with a great deal of skepticism in his voice but after a moment his full lips twitched upwards. "Maybe."

Boyd gave Sin a pleased smirk. They headed through the woods, the trees shifting around them with the occasional colorful leaf raining down. They stayed alert the entire way, keeping watch for anyone. Twice, Sin tilted his head in a direction as if he'd heard something but Boyd never did and ultimately it was dismissed both times.

As they walked, the woods became denser. The shadows grew across the ground and despite the fact that Autumn was underway and the leaves had started to turn colors and fall off the trees, the canopy here seemed thicker. The natural sounds Boyd could hear in the background started to fall away and become more muffled somehow. It could have been his imagination but it seemed like there were fewer birds singing and the trees started to creak rather than rustle.

There was an ominous quality that Boyd couldn't quite place and he glanced at Sin to see if his partner noticed it. Sin was looking around with the same hawk-like gaze as he had before, making Boyd believe he was unaffected by what Boyd perceived to be a subtle shift in the environment.

He didn't know if he was just imagining the change. He'd had an affinity for ghost stories ever since he was a child and his dad used to tell stories in the attic, a blanket thrown over them in a makeshift fort while Lou and Boyd sat wide-eyed staring at him. Cedrick used to use a flashlight and flicker it on and off, aimed up from beneath his chin to cast his features in shadows.

Ghost stories reminded Boyd of that time and of the murder mysteries his father had started to write before he died. They made him feel nostalgic and he couldn't deny that he had a certain amount of interest in them. Especially since he didn't actually disbelieve in ghosts, although he didn't particularly believe in them either.

As they went deeper into the woods, Boyd decided it was probably a good thing they hadn't decided to walk there in the middle of the night.

He kept an eye out ahead of them, keeping in mind the directions they'd been given and following Sin every time he shifted in a different direction. Boyd's ability to navigate forests had increased over time, although he still had a harder time than in buildings or the middle of a city. When they reached the area Boyd thought the spot was supposed

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to be, at first he didn't see anything that stood out. The forest looked the same in every direction.

But as they pushed their way through some foliage, they saw a skinny, winding path that led into a deeper, darker area. They followed it to a small clearing that opened up around them, only a few feet across and crowded in by tall trees that would appear gloomy in the dark.

As they stepped into the clearing, Boyd felt a shiver move through him even though he couldn't say why exactly. It wasn't any colder here than elsewhere; it was something else about the place. Something that almost seemed... off.

"This is it," he said, looking over at Sin seriously.

Sin didn't respond at first. His pale green eyes were moving about the area and frequently flitting to the trees that surrounded them as if his already sharp senses were hyper-aware.

"Yes," he agreed belatedly.

Boyd turned in a circle, peering into the woods and seeing nothing that seemed amiss. "Do you see anything?"

"No." Sin frowned slightly and glared around the clearing. "But I feel like I should be able to."

"It's the ghost's veil," Boyd said ominously as he approached the northern edge of the clearing. "Annie has recognized your power and she's taken extra precautions to keep you in the dark."

Sin ignored the comment completely but not without rolling his eyes. He walked the length of the clearing and swept it with his eyes. "What would you intend to do if we actually found something that the police did not?"

"I don't know," Boyd said somewhat absently as he peered into the woods.

He thought he saw a flash of something slightly darker than the background move but when he tried to follow it with his gaze, it disappeared. He scrutinized the area he'd seen it and couldn't see anything that led him to believe someone was there. The shiver

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he'd felt earlier moved through him again and he abruptly walked back toward Sin. He didn't want to say aloud that he was finding the place to actually be a little creepy.

"I guess tell them about it," he said belatedly with a shrug, keeping his tone completely casual. "Or try to leave them a clue so a local can find it." He looked over at Sin. "Why?"

Sin crouched next to a rotted log and ran his fingers along it idly. "There are two reasons why I think we should not get involved," he admitted. "One is because of what I would likely be inclined to do if we actually found something."

"Which is?" Boyd asked, pausing and looking at his lover in mild intrigue.

"Probably do to them what I did to Jared," Sin replied calmly. He glanced over at Boyd with a slight frown. "I find it odd."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down and looked at Sin. He wasn't particularly surprised to hear Sin say that; it wasn't unusual for Sin to kill someone to protect or avenge innocents. "What's odd?"

Sin continued to run his fingers along the log, his eyes moving from Boyd's gaze to once again begin searching the woods. "That I even give a shit. This isn't something that I'm involved with or that I'm responsible for. I wish that I didn't have this bizarre inclination to avenge or help civilians. Annabelle believed it was guilt from the incidents in my past. I wish it would go away."

Boyd paused and studied Sin; that long, silky black hair that was starting to fall out of the knot again, the pale green eyes that could be so enigmatic, those sculpted features with those full lips... Even somewhat perturbed, Sin was gorgeous. Boyd could see how the inclination could frustrate Sin but for Boyd, it was just another part of his partner that made him who he was.

He shook his head to himself. "I don't think it's just guilt," he said, his gaze caught by Sin's eyes. "But the fact that you do care is one of the reasons why I love you."

A faint smile formed on Sin's mouth and he gave Boyd one of those rare looks that made warmth flood Boyd's body. It wasn't very often when Boyd could say that Sin looked truly and genuinely happy.

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"Now that we're here," Sin said after dragging his gaze away and clearing his throat as if the moment had made him uncomfortable. "What would you like to do, Detective Beaulieu?"

"Investigate of course," Boyd said importantly. He looked down at the ground to see if there were any obvious indications of foul play, movement, or of what had happened. "I'm wondering about the footprints. How can someone just disappear without any indication as to how? There have to be tire tracks, footprints, drag marks-- *something* to show what happened."

Sin said nothing and didn't appear genuinely interested in the puzzle. He watched Boyd look around the scene quietly before asking, "If I hadn't agreed to come here, would you have come on your own?"

"Probably," Boyd said, pausing as he crouched near the edge of the clearing. He pulled some hair behind his ear and looked over his shoulder curiously. "Why?"

"Because I'm not entirely comfortable with that," Sin replied evenly, a frown marring his striking face as he shifted his gaze away. He crossed his arms over his chest, shrugging slightly. "What if you were to disappear without a trace?"

An amused smile curved Boyd's lips. "You believe in the ghost now?"

"No," Sin scoffed. "But obviously something strange is going on here. Something that cannot be readily explained, even by an assassin such as myself who excels in making people disappear without a trace."

"True," Boyd agreed.

He scrutinized the disturbed dirt. It was clear from the number of footprints that more than one person had been in this area in the last few days, but he'd determined that most of them were probably a few gawkers and the local law enforcement. Most of the tracks wove around aimlessly, as if the people had been searching for someone, and the prints he saw the most were accompanied by paw prints from a dog.

"But I would've been able to handle it even if I ran into the local serial killer," he added.

"Maybe. But without any information on who they are, how can you be so sure? If this person is skilled enough to have been causing people to disappear without a trace for years, who is to say what they're capable of or what kind of training they have?"

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Boyd stood and turned back toward the direction of the town, although he paused before he continued his search. "I don't know," he said more seriously, watching his partner. It was true that he didn't really know what they were dealing with, especially since the atmosphere here was mildly disturbing on a level he couldn't explain. His eyebrows drew down. "Was that your second reason?"

"No." Sin's eyes roamed the trees around them once again. The thick forest that surrounded them somehow made his eyes look greener. "I just don't want you to become arrogant because of your improved abilities. And I mean that for all scenarios--not just the one I gave."

Boyd raised an eyebrow, not sure whether or not he was insulted. He crossed his arms and straightened his back. "You don't trust me to know my own limits?"

"I don't really know if me trusting you has anything to do with it. I asked because I wouldn't want you to come here on your own because the situation in this town and these woods is strange and unexplainable at the moment and I would be concerned." Sin arched a brow and looked at his partner again. "But your answer implied that you are completely confident coming here on your own without knowing who your opponent might be. Either you're brushing it off as it being a crazy hick or you're assuming you can take anyone down. The impression given is that you're pretty sure of yourself now."

There was a moment of silence as Boyd watched Sin before he dropped his gaze to the footprints. He'd been trying not to contaminate the scene too much while walking around and it took him a moment to see where the footprints began that he attributed to the missing woman's.

Hers were smaller, lighter, and the only set of footprints in the clearing that walked in steadily, without weaving around. Judging by the stride and impressions of her shoes, she'd been walking a little slowly but otherwise with a purpose. Hers were the only footprints that suddenly and inexplicably disappeared just off-center of the clearing.

He stopped near where the woman's footprints disappeared as he considered what Sin said. "I am pretty confident now," he admitted, his eyes narrowing in thought.

Boyd frowned to himself and met Sin's eyes again. "But I'm not stupid. If I'd felt anything amiss, I would've left or not approached on my own in the first place. But this ghost or serial killer or whatever it is seems to only hit once every few years. If one person is already missing, why would the killer break their fifty-year pattern for me? It seems more

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likely the killer is someone who takes their time with the victim and is probably enmeshed in their routine right now. And unless the person we're dealing with is a clone of you, I'm fairly certain I would be able to get away even if they did come after me."

Sin nodded, and after a pause his eyebrows drew down slightly. "I'm sure you would. My concern for you isn't because I doubt your abilities. Our little training exercise more than proved that you're on par with Jon and perhaps even Trovosky now. It's because I care about you and I don't think I can deal with any more traumatic occurrences now that we're finally together."

Boyd smiled, undeniably pleased by the sentiment of Sin's words. "I'll keep that in mind and be especially careful, then."

He paused, experiencing what was becoming a familiar feeling of eyes watching them. He looked over his shoulder into the trees but the shadows engulfed anything that may have been visible. A mildly troubled look grew on his face, his eyebrows drawing down as he looked over at Sin again. "That reminds me, though. Have you felt like you're being watched back home at all?"

"At times," Sin replied without hesitation, looking at his lover more seriously. "But it's usually when we're together so I typically attribute it to agents keeping tabs or nosy neighbors. Why?"

"I don't know," Boyd said pensively, turning fully toward Sin and forgetting for the moment about the mystery laid out in dusty footprints at their feet. "For months, on and off I feel like I'm being watched, usually when I'm alone. There tends to be a rational explanation, like Mrs. Hensley peering through her blinds or someone I know stopping by, so I can't tell if I'm being paranoid. But the fact it hasn't stopped has started to bother me and I wondered if I was the only one."

"At the moment," Sin began, straightening and casting his hawk-like glare around the clearing sharply. "I think we both know you're not."

They met eyes briefly, unspoken words passing between them. Without hesitation, they both moved silently into the woods surrounding the clearing. Boyd could feel the presence of someone amongst the groaning trees; someone who had been watching them for a while now. As he moved through the forest, Sin's familiar form at his side and occasionally disappearing for portions of a second behind tree trunks, he felt adrenaline grow within him.

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He wondered if he'd been wrong; if the serial killer had returned to the scene of the crime and if the pattern would have escalated had they not been there to stop it. He wondered if the mystery would end here.

He strained his ears and could hear quiet sounds-- muffled breath, the shifting of weight, the crinkling of leaves. His attention zeroed in on those noises while he and Sin spread apart further, keeping each other in view while still starting to circle around their target.

The shadows darkened despite the relatively bright sky shining above the canopy. It was inexplicable save the fact that these woods were unusually thick in this area. Boyd could feel his heartbeat increasing while his thoughts grew quicker-- if this was the serial killer, had he been the one watching them have sex? Why would he do that? Why had he followed them here? If it wasn't the same person, who had been watching them earlier?

Whispers grew in front of them, mingling with the susurrations of insects and the leaves rustling in the trees. Boyd wouldn't have listened to the words even if he'd been able to understand them, although he did note that they seemed to have two targets. Before their targets could do anything, the two agents moved in quickly and slammed them to the ground to incapacitate them.

Two very female, terrified screams pierced through the woods. Boyd looked more closely at the body struggling beneath him and he was surprised to see Cassie staring up at him with wide eyes and a mouth that wasn't stopping a rambling of pleas and explanations. Boyd glanced over and saw Sin had Angela pinned to the ground.

"Cassie?" Boyd said incredulously.

"We didn't see anything!" Cassie was protesting desperately. "We won't tell anyone!"

"Tell anyone what?" Boyd demanded, wondering if she'd overheard something she shouldn't have; something related to the Agency.

But Cassie's entire face reddened and she darted a nervous glance toward Sin and Angela.

Sin stared at Angela's blanched face, rolled his eyes and released her. His face was unreadable and it was difficult to determine if he was relieved that they weren't happening upon any real trouble or disappointed by the same fact.

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"Um..." Angela trailed off nervously.

If it hadn't been clear before that Cassie and Angela had been the ones watching them have sex earlier, it was obvious now. Boyd released Cassie, watching as the two locals scrambled to their feet. He shook his head and stepped back, running a hand through his hair. The adrenaline that had built was still thrumming through him despite the fact there was nothing to spend it on.

Cassie straightened her clothes and looked between Boyd and Sin with wide eyes. Angela stood near her, close enough that they were nearly touching, and the uncertain way they held themselves with their shoulders hunched made it clear enough that they didn't know what to do. Cassie opened her mouth but Boyd held up a hand to forgo another round of rambling.

"Just-- go," he said in exasperation.

Relief won over the embarrassment and guilt staining their expressions. Without waiting for Boyd or Sin to change their minds, Cassie and Angela nearly tripped over themselves as they scurried away. Boyd stared after their forms until they disappeared between the trees, and only then did he look over at his lover.

The buildup of adrenaline crashed around Boyd, and the creepiness of the woods surrounding them seemed at once embarrassing and unchanged. The hypersensitivity he'd been feeling to the dark, groaning trees didn't dull, yet he was glad he hadn't said anything to Sin because in the fact of two terrified voyeuristic teenagers scrambling away, the whole thing seemed silly. Here they were, agents for a secret organization, people who routinely fought for their lives-- and they'd been distracted by two girls curious about gay sex.

"Well then," Sin said flatly.

"I don't know whether to be amused or disappointed," Boyd admitted with a grimace. He ran a hand through his blond hair and looked to the trees. The shadows still engulfed the world around them and yet now, with the absence of eyes watching their every move, it didn't seem as mysterious. "I was actually starting to get excited about the idea of catching the killer."

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"Despite myself, I was too." Sin smirked and shook his head, giving Boyd a sidelong glance. "But there's more interesting things we could be doing, anyway. Let's get out of here."

Boyd flashed an intrigued smile and followed his lover through the woods and away from the clearing that had inexplicably taken so many lives.

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The morning dawned bright, cool and breezy. When Sin's eyes slid open the light streaming in through the white curtains was somewhat startling. He looked at the rays of sunlight blankly, his eyes following the dust motes that danced in them.

He felt abnormally well-rested and for the first time in a long time, his body was completely absent of tension. If it weren't for the fact that Boyd was notably missing, Sin would have likely entertained the idea of trying to go back to sleep. The king-sized bed in the cabin's bedroom was nearly as comfortable as the one in his apartment but with the added bonus of complete privacy.

Sin rolled out of bed and stood up, cracking his back in a stretch before running a hand through his inky black hair. He grabbed his pants as an afterthought before going out into the living room. He slid into his pants as he glanced around.

The living room and kitchen were connected with the front door sitting right at the junction of where they connected. The door was wide open although the screen door was shut. Sin walked outside curiously, the wooden porch floor cool against his bare feet.

Boyd was sitting on the swinging bench on the porch, a sketch pad in his lap and his eyes focused on the woods that surrounded them. The sunlight was even more striking out here; golden light sifted through the leaves and created a spectacle of untouched nature that Sin hadn't seen in years. The light caught Boyd's pale features, his cheeks faintly tinged pink from the cool morning air, his blond hair still mussed from sleep.

"What are you doing?"

Boyd looked over with a serene smile, although he didn't move his hand from the sketchpad. His eyes seemed more golden than usual in the light. "Morning," he greeted and tilted his head toward the woods. "I woke up early and was inspired."

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"It is pretty inspiring," Sin agreed, sitting down beside Boyd and stretching his legs out in front of him. He folded his arms over his bare chest, gaze skimming over the scenery. In the cool morning air he could faintly feel Boyd's body heat against his side. "I like it here."

"I do too." Boyd started drawing again, his gaze flicking between his sketchpad and the trees. "I wish we could stay like this."

"Like what?"

"More... normal, I guess," Boyd said with a shrug, pausing and looking over at Sin. "I wish we didn't have to return to the Agency and we could go on vacations whenever we wanted. It would be nice to live in a place like this for a while."

"Oh." Sin tilted his head back against the back of the bench and stared up at the sky. "I wish there was a way to leave."

"Yeah," Boyd agreed quietly, looking down at the half-finished drawing. After a moment, he set the pencil down and selected another one, looking up at the trees. "Maybe someday we'll figure something out."

Sin looked over at Boyd with surprise. "Like what?"

"I'm not sure," Boyd admitted with a faint shift of his shoulders.

His fingers moved confidently as the blank white paper was slowly replaced by a rendition of the scene before them. Even the tiny leaves in the drawing seemed realistic despite the fact that Boyd seemed to be absently sketching them in. It didn't appear to take much effort for him to replicate what he saw, which was unsurprising to Sin after having watched Boyd draw in the past.

Despite the fact that Boyd often downplayed his ability, there was definite talent in his art.

"But Emilio figured it out for almost twenty years," Boyd continued thoughtfully. With two elegant strokes, he created a bird soaring over the canopy in the distance. "Granted, that same trick wouldn't work twice and any other I can think of would fail, not to mention even if it didn't we'd be chased our whole lives." Honey brown eyes flicked over to Sin. "But we don't know everything that will come with the new administration. It's possible we'll discover a loophole with her that we didn't find before."

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Sin didn't respond at first and he dragged his eyes away from Boyd. The comment stirred something in him that was hopeful yet the cynical part of his mind almost immediately stamped it down. Emilio's plan had only worked because Sin had been present. He'd counted on Sin being there to kill the remaining assassins. As far as disappearing and making it obvious that they'd gone rogue... it was always a possibility but living on the run and being continuously hunted appealed to him as much as assassinations did.

"Maybe."

Boyd finished with the trees and started working on drawing the sky. He set the pencil down and selected a different one. He seemed to be choosing them based on how dark and thick the lines were. "I don't know how realistic it is," he added, probably having similar thoughts as Sin. "But I'm not about to give up on the idea of getting away someday, no matter how it happens."

Sin narrowed his eyes contemplatively. "What if you got bored with me in that sort of situation? In a... normal situation."

Boyd stopped and looked over incredulously. His fingers had stilled against the pencil and judging by the look in his eyes, he was taken aback by what he believed to be an absurd question. "Why in the world would I?"

"I don't know," Sin replied with a shrug, a sheepish half-smile finding its way onto his face. "Maybe I'm not so interesting when we aren't surrounded by intrigue and danger."

Boyd stared at Sin for a moment and then shook his head to himself with a clearly exasperated look. "You're ridiculous," he said not unkindly, returning his attention to sketching the clouds. "I'm going to love you regardless of your setting so you'd best get used to the idea."

Sin chuckled quietly and looked at Boyd sidelong. "So, is this your plan for the day?"

"I hadn't thought much past finishing this. Why?" He glanced over sidelong, pushing some hair away from his face with the back of his hand. "Did you have any ideas?"

"Not really." Sin stretched his arms over the back of the bench and leaned his head to the side, watching Boyd contemplatively and running his fingers over the smooth oak of the bench. Part of him wanted to use the complete isolation and privacy as a chance to

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fuck all day and night but the other part of him wanted to explore the area around them more thoroughly.

A thought occurred to him. "There's a bike rental place in town. Would you be interested in getting some mountain bikes and exploring the forest some more? It might be interesting."

Boyd's pencil stilled against the page as he raised his eyebrows in an intrigued look. A small smile tilted the edges of his lips. "I'd be very interested. Do you want to go now?"

"Whenever. We have time."

"Let's go after breakfast, then." Boyd started shading in the trees.

Sin watched him drawing for a moment before nodding and getting up. They'd established early on in their stay that Sin would be doing the majority of the cooking. Things were a lot easier without Boyd stumbling around the kitchen trying to figure out the difference between a sauce pan and a frying pan.

It didn't take long to fry up some bacon and scramble half a carton of eggs. By the time Boyd came in, likely drawn by the smell of cooking food, Sin was toasting bread. Boyd wandered over, his hands running along Sin casually and his lips a gentle caress against the side of Sin's neck.

He ignored Boyd's comments about how he'd make a good housewife and tried to ignore the idea that popped up in the back of his mind at the joking exchanges that followed. The thought had been recurring ever since they'd gotten to the cabin: that it would be nice if they actually lived together back in the city as well.

Sin sat at the tiny wooden table across from Boyd and eyed his partner discreetly. He didn't think he'd mind waking up next to Boyd every morning or even doing most of the cooking. It would be... fun.

His mouth twitched slightly and he made a bacon and egg sandwich with the toast.

Boyd washed the dishes while Sin got ready for the day. The shower was powerful and the water was deliciously hot. Boyd joined him and they stayed in it for forty-five minutes, fucking mindlessly against the tiled wall.

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It was almost noon before they got to the bike rental place. Sin parked the truck on the street and as he got out of the vehicle, he realized that he was in an obscenely good mood. He'd been happier than normal lately anyway as a result of their reconciliation but ever since they'd come to Vermont it'd been more prominent than ever. He had to really wonder how he ever thought he'd be able to be with anyone other than Boyd.

The thoughts gave him the uncharacteristic desire to want to touch Boyd affectionately; to hug him or squeeze his hand. But considering the old man behind the counter was already looking at them like they were from another planet, it wasn't the best idea.

"What are you boys looking for?" the man, Chandler according to his name tag, asked. He looked like someone's kindly old grandfather but he had a voice like a grizzly bear.

The building wasn't particularly large and the majority of the floor space was taken up by bicycles of varying shapes, colors and sizes. Helmets were on display on one section of the wall, grouped by size, and the rental prices were clearly posted on a sign behind the counter.

"We want to rent two bikes for the day," Boyd said belatedly after having looked around the space. He turned his attention to Chandler. "We plan to bike through the woods so we'd need something sturdy."

Chandler made a 'hmm' sound and walked around the counter, still eyeballing the both of them before turning his attention to the rows of bikes displayed before them. "Not much experience mountain biking?"

Sin didn't bother to answer and ran his fingers along the leather handlebars of a red and black bike. They'd already come to the unspoken agreement that Boyd dealt with small talk and civilians. Sin looked at it as a trade-off for the cooking.

"No," Boyd said in agreement. "But we're both in shape."

"Looks like you both could afford some meat on your bones if you ask me," Chandler replied with a low chuckle. He moved over to where Sin was standing and nodded at the bike. "That one there is good for speed but it won't cut it through these here woods."

Sin shrugged, unsurprised. It didn't look like it would have worked.

"What you boys would be wanting is a dual suspension all mountain bike. It's real rocky around here; you need something that can get you through it."

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Boyd trailed over by Chandler and started to examine the bicycles in the area. He seemed especially intrigued by a sturdy-looking black one with silver handlebars that twisted up a few inches on the sides. His fingers stilled against the bicycle frame as he glanced up at Chandler. "Any of these over here would work, then?"

"Yep." Chandler looked at Sin and seemed to sense that he wasn't interested in being followed the entire time because Chandler took a step away. "Let me know if you boys need anything else or have any questions."

Boyd nodded and flashed a small, polite smile. "We will. Thank you." He waited until Chandler returned to the counter before he turned to Sin curiously. "See anything you like?"

Sin shrugged and slid his hands into his jean pockets, walking over to the rack Boyd stood beside. "I don't know. I don't know much about bikes. This seems like something Trovosky would be educated on."

The comment caused Boyd to look at him in mild surprise, his eyebrows raising slightly and head tilting the way it did when he was curious or perplexed. "Since when do you know anything about Kassian's hobbies?"

The bell above the door jingled as another customer entered the store. Sin looked over and saw that it was a young couple, bright-eyed and all friendly smiles as they greeted Chandler. Obvious tourists.

"I ran into him a couple of weeks ago. He was in a bad mood about something so I decided to comment that they likely offered Midol in the med wing." Sin stopped in front of a forest green bike that had a faint camouflage print. "Somehow the topic turned to him deciding to go camping in some woods somewhere in the Midwest."

Boyd looked genuinely intrigued by this and had turned his attention solely to Sin. "Interesting. I'm surprised you two actually stood around chatting long enough for that to come up."

"So was I. But it didn't last after I reassured him that if he became a mountain man, no one would miss him at the Agency anyway since he is a terrible agent now or whatever nonsense he was complaining about."

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Boyd watched Sin a moment before he shook his head to himself and looked down at the bike. His eyebrows drew down and he seemed caught between bemusement and concern. "Odd. I wonder what he was worried about. I haven't heard of any major screw ups from him."

Sin squatted down and looked at the wheels of the bike, not really knowing what he was looking for but deciding they looked thick enough to be reliable for how he wanted to ride. "Apparently they've been giving him babysitters on assignments. Once with Jon and once with my father."

"What-- Why?"

"I'm not entirely sure. He didn't get into details but alluded to the fact that they think he's having alcohol issues."

Boyd grew quiet and stared at a deep red bicycle with a silver design that was near him. A troubled frown briefly darkened his expression and Sin knew Boyd well enough to recognize the flash of guilt that went through his eyes.

Boyd seemed distracted and turned away to survey the shop. His gaze briefly rested on the happy couple who were chattering with Chandler as they grouped around some lightweight bicycles near the front door. The woman seemed pleased by the silver bike she was studying as she listened to Chandler describe a meandering trail through the woods nearby.

"So, what are you getting?" Sin asked abruptly, not really wanting to get sidetracked on lamentations about Kassian's issues.

Boyd looked around at the all-terrain bicycles and frowned to himself. "I don't know." He pulled some hair behind his ear and seemed to shake off the reverie. He started walking around, putting more effort into studying the choices. He paused by one that was a hunter green color and eyed it in assessment, tilting it upright so he could test out sitting on it. He looked thoughtful and glanced over at Sin. "You find one yet?"

Sin jerked a thumb at the camouflaged bike.

Boyd smiled to himself with fondness clear in the tilt of his lips and the look in his eyes. "You didn't even look at any others."

"I don't want to. It will take too long."

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The smile widened before Boyd pushed himself off the bicycle and headed toward the first few bikes he'd been studying. He casually walked by Sin in the process, passing close enough that he discreetly ran his fingers along Sin's.

Since the moment they'd started their trip and especially since they'd reached the cabin, Boyd had been particularly apt to touch Sin, from gentle caresses to obvious sexual advances. Sin didn't know exactly what it was about the setting that apparently made Boyd feel especially endeared toward him but he suspected it may be because they were finally able to have complete privacy. Whatever the case, Boyd had been touching and kissing him more than usual and Sin couldn't say he minded.

The brief slide of Boyd's fingers against Sin's hand was gone almost before it was there but it left a tingle on his skin in its wake. When Sin looked over, he saw Boyd give him an intimate look that if they weren't in public probably would have resulted in one of them pulling the other into a deep kiss. As it was, his blond hair barely sheltered his expression from the others in the shop. The look disappeared as he shifted and the others would see his face.

"I'll go with this one," Boyd announced as he paused by the black bike he'd first considered.

They had to wait a few minutes for Chandler to stop chatting with the couple and that was enough time for Boyd to examine his chosen bicycle more thoroughly. They paid for the rental in cash and started off on the ride. Chandler had given them some directions for a bike path he recommended based on what Boyd explained they were hoping to do.

They started out on the trail that Chandler had recommended, Sin ending up in the lead because he'd been the first into the forest. The path wound around, ducking around tree trunks sometimes at the last second like the meanderings of a stumbling drunk. They rode fast, almost recklessly, the ground rising and falling beneath them but starting to head at an increasingly steep incline.

The trees were clustered together, dark shapes that rose well above them and flashed by like blurred red and brown lines. Crinkling leaves and brittle sticks littered the forest floor, crushed beneath their tires as they flew past. The uneven ground gave ample opportunities to jump the bikes over small distances and when one or both of them tried to take too quick of turns, sometimes the back tire slid across the ground in a spin out and they would have to put a foot down to keep their balance.

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Sin could hear Boyd close behind him. Boyd laughed as they sped through the forest, a happy adrenaline-high of a sound that was occasionally lost to the wind rushing past Sin's ears. Sometimes Boyd heckled Sin, yelling that he wasn't going fast enough or he was too much of a pansy around a particular turn, although they both knew he was just talking shit. Sin was fast enough that he nearly left Boyd behind more than once.

The longer they road through the forest, the more daring their stunts became. More often than not, it was necessary to do them to get around the natural obstacles that frequently got in their way. One such moment occurred when Boyd challenged Sin to an impromptu race.

They'd begun speeding down a steep hill and realized belatedly that the hill ended abruptly in a small cliff with a sharp drop. Boyd wisely slid to a stop but Sin didn't.

He wasn't experienced in bike stunts and had been doing most jumps on a whim so far. But for some reason he wanted to keep going. A part of him deep down wanted to see how far he could push himself. How crazy he could go, how reckless he could be, until he proved that he wasn't an indestructible science project.

Flying off the edge of the small overhang proved that point but it quickly became clear that it had been stupid to do the jump without even looking to see what was below. He barely even heard Boyd's frightened shout in the distance as the wind rushed past him. He was weightless, the bike loose beneath his grip, the trees flashing by like a silent movie on fast forward.

The freedom only lasted for a scant handful of seconds.

The bike soared downward before slamming into the ground violently. The front tire slammed into a group of rocks that caught the bike forcefully. The back end of the bike flew upward, wrenching the handlebars out of Sin's hands and throwing him off.

He hit the ground hard and instantly covered his head with his arms to protect himself as he half rolled and half slid the rest of the way down the slope. Rocks, sticks and raised tree roots slammed into him from every angle and for a moment all he could hear was the rushing of the noises around him and the crashing of his bicycle as it disengaged from the rocks and clattered down the slope after him.

By the time Boyd raced down, Sin had already noted that he was relatively unscathed except for a likely sprained ankle from getting twisted beneath him.

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"Hsin!" Boyd yelled breathlessly, concern and fear clear in his face as he jumped off his bike before he'd slid to a complete stop. He nearly tripped over himself in his haste to crouch next to Sin. He automatically ran his hands over him to check for obvious broken bones or trauma.

"Are you okay? Can you feel your feet? Are you hurt?" His voice stumbled over itself the way his feet had; slightly shaky and unsteady and rushed to ensure his lover's safety.

When Sin looked up and he saw just how far the drop had been, it was probably no wonder that Boyd was so alarmed.

"I'm fine." Sin brushed dirt off his jacket and surveyed the distance of the fall. It annoyed him. He should have at least broken something. "Maybe just a sprain."

Relief warred with disbelief in Boyd's eyes. He leaned back, pushing hair away from his face with a trembling hand, and glanced back up at the drop that Sin had managed to survive nearly unharmed.

"Jesus Christ," he said distantly, starting to gather his wits again. He turned back to Sin with narrowed eyes and punched him on the chest, leaning in. "Pull that shit again and I'll kill you. You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry. Spur of the moment decision," Sin replied, actually meaning it. It was entirely possible that if the fall had been worse, he could have broken his neck. If Boyd had done such a thing, Sin likely would have had a fit.

Boyd let out a low breath and shook his head. He ran a hand through his hair again, a grimace of worry and distraction lingering. "Forget it. I'm just glad you're okay." He pushed himself up and looked along Sin's length again, in assessment this time as if he was trying to verify that Sin really wasn't hurt terribly. "What's sprained? Do you need help?"

Sin threw him a derisive look and stood. "I've finished storms with bullet holes in my body. I'll manage."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Excuse me for wanting to help my crazy lover who just rode off a cliff." When he saw that Sin seemed to be managing fine, he returned to his bike and pulled it upright.

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"What do you want to do now?" Sin asked.

With the bike leaning against his thigh, Boyd paused and studied Sin more seriously before glancing around them. The cliff would be difficult to get back up with their bikes but there were patches they could ride through down here as well as a path that could be seen between some trees.

"Why don't we head back? I'm starting to get hungry anyway."

Sin nodded and pulled his bike upright. "That's fine with me. You can do the cooking this time."

Boyd smirked and swung one leg over the bike. "Be careful what you wish for."

The ride back to town and the hike back up to their cabin proved to exacerbate the sprain. Despite the fact that Sin had indeed survived storms with a lot worse wounds, they were usually dealt with on excessive adrenaline highs when he could barely feel it. Walking sedately with a steadily swollen ankle was becoming a nuisance.

By the time Boyd had finished preparing a plate full of turkey sandwiches for them, Sin's ankle was swollen and discolored with bruising.

"Appetizing," Sin commented, motioning to his ankle and grabbing a thick sandwich.

Boyd set his plate on the table, his eyebrows drawing down as he looked at Sin's ankle. "Are you sure it's not broken? Can you wiggle your toes?"

"It's not broken," Sin replied blandly around a mouthful of turkey breast.

"Then we should get some ice for it."

Boyd walked over to the kitchen and pulled some ice out of the freezer, dropping it into a plastic bag that he wrapped in a dish towel. He returned to Sin's side and didn't give him a chance to say he didn't need the help; he picked Sin's leg up and gently rested his foot on one of the extra chairs, then balanced the ice against his foot.

"You should be keeping it elevated anyway," he said absently, mostly to himself.

Sin just made a face, not entirely feeling gratified by the attention. "Can we not make a big deal over a ridiculous sprain?"

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"No." Boyd leaned over as he passed by Sin and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He returned to his side of the table and dropped into his chair. "Someone has to take care of you and you won't do it yourself," he said lightly as he picked up his sandwich.

"I have better things to do with my time," Sin replied. "Like finishing this series of sci-fi novels I recently acquired. I was considering making an attempt at relaxation tonight and starting to read one in that Jacuzzi... thing."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, looking intrigued. "That sounds like a good plan. I may join you."

"Who said you're invited?"

Boyd smirked to himself. "Maybe I'll just crash the party," he said playfully and took a bite of his sandwich.

"Well if you do," Sin said, looking at his lover with an arched brow. "Remember that I am there to *read my book*."

"Oh, I will," Boyd drawled, his lips lifting at the edges impishly. "But I may have to entertain myself since you didn't bring me anything to read."

"You do that." Feigning disinterest was amusing but Sin found the idea highly intriguing. It was too bad that submerging his ankle in hot water would likely make it worse. Perhaps he would have to keep a bathtub rendezvous casual after all.

He held on to that vow until he was actually sitting in the Jacuzzi with his leg propped up on the opposite end, his head resting on a towel and book in hand. The water felt good and surprisingly, it did help him to relax. There was something oddly soothing about the suds surrounding him while the water jets massaged muscles he hadn't even known were sore until they began to unwind.

The bathroom was steamy and hot from the running water, making him feel even more lethargic. When Boyd finally entered the bathroom and slid into the tub naked, Sin could barely do more than give him a lazy once over before returning to his book. He felt too comfortable to move.

"How's the book?" Boyd asked as he settled against the opposite side of the tub. He extended his legs, one of them sliding briefly against Sin's.

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"Interesting. I'm not sure what to make of it yet. I'll let you know after a few chapters," Sin replied, not taking his pale green gaze off of the pages.

Boyd made a 'hmm' sound and fell silent. For a few minutes, there was only the sound of Sin flipping pages and the whirring of the Jacuzzi. Boyd stretched and leaned back, his eyes falling shut. He rested his head against the edge of the tub and groaned appreciatively. "God, this feels good. I wasn't expecting this."

"Shut up. I can't relax if someone is talking."

"That's a sad story," Boyd said idly, rolling his head back and forth as he seemed to be working out some kinks. "Maybe I should help you learn how to multitask."

Sin didn't bother to reply and flipped a page in his book.

Silence fell between them again and Sin started getting back into the book. He didn't pay much attention to Boyd, although he could feel that golden brown gaze studying him. After a period of time, Boyd shifted and ran his foot along Sin's leg. The slide of skin against skin seemed to be more as a way to get Sin's attention than anything overtly sensual.

"Hsin?" Boyd watched Sin intently, his eyebrows furrowed the slightest in the center and his eyes thoughtful. "Do you like staying with me? Like here or Monterrey?"

"I hate it," Sin replied automatically. He read the passage he'd been in the middle of before the words filtered through his mind and he glanced up at Boyd. "Why?"

Boyd continued to study Sin before he dropped his gaze to the water, watching the suds rise and disintegrate. He swished a hand through the water, leaving a miniature wake of destruction behind it. "Because I like living with you."

Sin carefully closed his book and dropped it over the side of the tub to the safety of the rug that stretched across the wood floor. "The feeling is mutual," he said at length. Some of his earlier thoughts echoed in his mind and he wondered what Boyd was getting at.

Boyd smiled to himself, appearing pleased. He pushed some suds into a small mound in front of his chest and looked up to meet Sin's eyes. His hands disappeared beneath

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the layer of suds and he shifted, one foot sliding against the tub floor and briefly brushing against Sin's.

"Well," Boyd continued slowly, tilting his head and flicking his gaze across Sin's face. There was the slightest hint of hesitation and nervousness in his eyes, but his expression remained largely contemplative. "I was thinking it would be really nice living together back home too."

There was a brief moment of silence before Sin closed his eyes again and tilted his head back on the towel. He allowed the warmth of the tub to fully consume his sensations once again even as he replied. "I was thinking the same thing just this morning. However I didn't want to propose it until the new year when the new administration arrives. I didn't think it'd be practical to try doing it now, even if you'd agreed."

"To finalize everything, we probably should wait until we know what they'll allow," Boyd agreed, sounding pleased by Sin's response. "I thought eventually we could buy a place together. But until then, if you ever wanted to stay at my place for a while I'd like to have you there."

Sin opened his eyes and looked at Boyd with surprise. "You'd leave the house?"

"Yes," Boyd said without hesitation. He ran his foot absently against Sin's underwater and tilted his head. "In fact, I was thinking of selling it if we lived together."

The information was more than a little welcoming and Sin smiled slightly as he took it into consideration. "It isn't that I have something against the house, but I would never want to live there. That was one point of contention when I started thinking about suggesting this. I could never feel like that place is my home."

"I didn't think you would," Boyd said with a nod. Part of his hair was submerged, turning the golden blond a deeper shade on the ends. "I never got the impression you cared for the neighborhood and it would probably feel strange moving into someone else's house."

"More specifically, Vivienne's house." Sin frowned slightly, unnerved by the idea. "It just would not feel normal to live there."

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"I hadn't thought of that," Boyd mused, frowning to himself. "I would have wanted to move away anyway, though. Even if she never comes by anymore, I wouldn't want her to suddenly decide to while we're in the middle of something."

Sin sifted his hand over the water, skimming the surface and deflating the suds that the jets continuously made. His expression was thoughtful as he watched the water move around his hand, heavy eyelids low over the pale green of his eyes. "Would you have anything specific in mind to share?"

"I hadn't gotten that far," Boyd admitted with a bemused smile. "I was just hoping you'd say yes."

"Ah." Sin nodded and allowed his mind to wander idly.

There was a part of him that didn't think any of it would ever come to pass but there was another foolishly optimistic part that was looking forward to actually having his own home. He'd never lived anywhere that was his own in over thirty years. He'd never had any kind of haven-- somewhere that he didn't feel uncomfortable or spied on. And along with that came the idle musings about what *kind* of place he would want.

"Once we know if it'll work under the new administration, I thought we could start looking at postings," Boyd continued, leaning his head back against the edge of the tub. "We could each come up with things we wanted. Maybe you'd want a gym room. I'd love an art studio with maximized natural light..." He trailed off wistfully.

"I don't want a house," Sin replied automatically. "And no suburbs."

"What are you thinking? An apartment in the city?"

A frown pulled at the corners of Sin's full lips. The idea of an apartment in the middle of downtown didn't sound any better. Being forced to live in a single building with two dozen other families was mildly disturbing, especially considering his paranoia about being in the city in general.

"Maybe..." Sin trailed off, thinking. He didn't know what he wanted but he knew exactly what he didn't want. It was quite backwards and irritating. He pictured places he'd stayed in before, attempting to find one that didn't entirely horrify him, and finally said, "Maybe a loft in the industrial district. That's where Ivan lives. His space is very large and I believe he lives in the building alone."

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Boyd quirked an eyebrow. "You want to move into Ivan's building?"

Sin stared at him. "No. I was using his place as an example."

"Good," Boyd replied idly. "I think I'd be about as comfortable living in a building with him as you would be living at my mother's old house." He paused and looked at Sin curiously. "Not that I'm opposed to lofts but what's wrong with a house? They're not all in suburban neighborhoods. Is it a house itself you don't want or is it the locations they usually have?"

"I just don't want a house. There's something about them that bothers me. They seem so stifling." Sin's brow furrowed slightly as he tried to explain. "I prefer penthouses and lofts, I think. Wide open spaces and large windows."

Boyd considered that. "That could be nice. The open concept was one thing I liked about our apartment in Monterrey. We could talk no matter where we were."

"You're assuming I consider that a good thing," Sin replied with a smirk, raising his eyebrows at his lover.

"Oh, you'll learn to like it," Boyd drawled, his eyes sparking in amusement. "The fine print for me living with you states that the duties of my mouth are non-negotiable. You get me talking and blowing you or you get nothing at all."

Sin's smirk widened slightly into a grin and he shook his head from side to side. "You're ridiculous."

Boyd chuckled quietly and they lapsed into mutual peaceful silence.

For a long stretch of time Sin drifted into a daze as the jets massaged his back and knots slowly unwound until he was slouching dangerously low in the water in complete relaxation. He looked over at Boyd and saw that his lover was in a similar state. His normally pale skin was flushed from the heat of the water and the steam. His head tilted backwards as he sat with his eyes closed and full lips parted slightly. His blond hair was damp and in some places clung to his face. He looked fucking amazing.

There was something intriguing about looking at Boyd like this. Sin could count on his fingers the amount of times he'd seen Boyd so relaxed and at ease. He was sure Boyd would say the same about him. And as Sin really thought about it, he realized that wasn't always because of the Agency. It didn't always have to do with missions.

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Their relationship seemed hectic sometimes, even without external forces pressing down on it. They were both always in a rush to do specific things together, take specific outings or even be together sexually as much as possible. It was like they were going down a list of things they wanted to do together before something inevitably happened to rip them apart. There was rarely any time for them to just enjoy each other's company and relax. As passionate as they were together, their union it seemed also caused considerable tension in both of them.

As the thoughts drifted across Sin's mind he found himself vaguely wondering if it had been easier and more peaceful for Boyd with Kassian. For the first time in a long time, the thought didn't sting. There was no reason for it to. Boyd was his. Boyd loved him. Sin had never been so doubtless about anything in his life.

"Did you have an easier time relaxing with Trovosky?"

Boyd's eyes blinked open and he looked at Sin in clear surprise. "What?"

Sin gave a one shouldered shrug. "Kassian. When you were spending time with him a lot."

Boyd's eyebrows furrowed faintly and he started to grow more alert, some of the dazed relaxation falling away to be replaced by confusion. "You said before that you didn't want to hear about it," he said slowly, eyeballing Sin. "What changed?"

"That was when we first got back together. I still felt unsure of everything and paranoid." Another shrug. "He isn't a threat to me."

There was a moment of silence as Boyd continued to study Sin almost suspiciously. "So you want me to tell you the truth about any of it? I don't want to ruin a nice night if we're going to end up in an argument over something that's over and done with."

There was a beat of silence before Sin said blandly, "I have occasional nightmares about us having a threesome with that meat-head. I'm far from being easily shocked."

"What?" Boyd looked completely taken aback, his eyebrows shooting up. "That's the last thing I thought I'd ever hear from you."

"It isn't exactly a voluntary thing. It's quite horrifying. I usually wake up before he can put his dick in me though." Sin made a revolted expression, his lips twisting in a scowl of

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disgust.

"So I shouldn't expect to be propositioned for this threesome too in the near future?" Boyd asked jokingly.

Sin stared at Boyd and didn't bother to reply.

Boyd continued to watch Sin in amusement for a moment and then sighed. He pushed himself up more upright in the tub.

"To answer your question-- Yes," he said simply. "I did."

"Why?"

Boyd frowned to himself and seemed to be considering the question. His eyes narrowed faintly and he ran a hand across the suds, absently smoothing them out in front of him.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I think a lot of it is personality. I never felt like I had to be anyone for him, or prove anything. He didn't care what I did or thought. It made it easier to relax."

"And you felt like you had to be someone for me?" Sin asked with an arched brow. "I liked you before you had a personality."

The comment drew a chuckle out of Boyd. He smiled slightly, although it soon became tinged with pensiveness. "I did, though. I think we tested each other a lot."

Boyd shook his head to himself. "When I think back, I realize I had a subconscious desire to prove to you that not everyone was as horrible as you'd so far experienced. I was the first person who got that close to you and it became a responsibility to me-- you had such deeply ingrained distrust of people that I felt like I couldn't mess up, like if I did it would show you people couldn't be trusted after all."

He drew his eyebrows down as he mused, "Maybe I felt like I had to counteract nearly thirty years of abuse with two years of trying to be a good person." He frowned, destroying the plateau of suds he'd created. "But since I have a lot of my own issues, I was bound to fail."

Sin watched Boyd silently, not entirely sure what he thought about that. He didn't feel like he'd ever pressured Boyd to be a 'good person' but he supposed, Boyd's

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assumption that Sin needed that mirrored Sin's own assumptions about what Boyd had wanted from him back then.

He'd thought that Boyd's refusal to acknowledge anything wrong in him, whether it be mental or former actions against people, stemmed from Boyd not wanting to see the truth because the truth would possibly be too much for him to handle. That was what had led Sin to go through so much trouble to hide things from Boyd in the first place. How ironic that Boyd's real reasoning had been that he'd felt the need to defend Sin against everything, even when it was something he didn't need defense from.

Sin glanced at Boyd again, not commenting on his thoughts because he didn't want to sidetrack the conversation. Talking so openly about Kassian for the first time brought more questions to mind.

"So you initially became friends with Kassian because you didn't feel pressured around him," he surmised.

Boyd nodded. "I don't think either of us expected to become friends. It just happened, mostly because neither of us cared what the other felt or thought. I didn't care whether Kassian lived up to the image he had at the Agency and because of that he felt like he could relax around me. And he didn't care that I was your partner or Vivienne's son; he just let me be myself."

"Are you implying that I didn't let you be yourself?" Sin asked, a spike of irritation rising inside him.

"No, not at all." Boyd's eyebrows drew down. "If I couldn't be myself around you there's no way we would've worked out. I would never have gotten to where I am now, wanting to live the rest of my life with you."

Mollified by the answer, the irritation bled away into the warm water that surrounded them and Sin relaxed again. It was hard not to when Boyd kept making nonchalant statements like that.

"Okay, so I suppose I understand how your friendship came to be. It makes sense. It even makes sense to me that you hung out with him frequently while we were apart and you were having difficulties. But why did sex have to come into the fray?" He'd tried to ask the question neutrally but as soon as the word 'sex' had left his mouth, it did so with a slight demanding edge.

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Sin frowned and shook his head slightly. "I'm not trying to pick a fight. I just want to understand why."

Boyd studied Sin for a moment and then sighed quietly, looking away. He pushed his hair back from his face, water dampening the strands and causing some to clump together. His eyes narrowed but it was a pensive look more than anything, his gaze tracking back and forth minutely as he stared at the wall of the bathroom. He was silent for a few seconds and Sin got the impression that he was formulating his answer.

"I've always been in others' shadows," he said at length. "My whole life. Even when I came to the Agency, no one saw me as Boyd-- I was the Inspector's son, or Sin's partner. I think I've always lived in reference to other people: trying to be who my mother wanted, who Lou liked, who my father loved, who I thought you needed..."

His eyebrows twitched down, followed by the edges of his lips, but when he met Sin's eyes again he only looked thoughtful. "I'd never done anything just for myself. When everything between us fell apart, I was just... so tired of feeling pulled in so many directions. Of always feeling like I wasn't measuring up to what others expected of me. I felt like I needed something simple, meaningless really, that could also distract me from how miserable I otherwise would have been. Kassian said he was interested in me but I didn't think much about it until one night when it came up again and I needed that release."

His lips pulled down into a frown. "I honestly never meant to hurt you, Hsin. I never would have hurt you on purpose."

Sin studied the younger man silently for a moment. It was a sore point in their relationship and likely something that would always bother him even if he didn't hold a grudge over it. But at least now he understood to an extent.

However Kassian aside, there was still something about the entire time period that bothered him. Despite the fact that Boyd had felt that he'd "needed" the release of being with Kassian, the thoughtlessness of the entire situation and several other things he'd said around the same time had made him seem completely uncaring about anyone's feelings but his own. At certain points, Sin had felt like he hadn't even known Boyd at all.

After a pause he said, "You seemed very different during that time. Even before the Ann thing. You just seemed... different after you went into training."

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"I'd never been accepted by others before." Boyd paused and shook his head. "It sounds stupid, but it's true. I'd always been the one on the side, ignored or harassed. Even at the Agency, people hated me before they even knew me because of my mother, because I was in the Janus unit, even because I was your partner. I'd never been on such even ground with my peers before, never even realized it was possible for people to see me as me and seem to actually value my opinion for once. It was... a bit of a relief."

He trailed off briefly and then grimaced. When he continued, the way the explanation was so calmly said, without hesitation or avoidance, led Sin to believe that Boyd had thought about this enough to have identified the issues in the last several months.

"The problem is, I went too far. I got lost in my autonomy and became selfish in the process. I thought about myself, my training, and not anyone else. I didn't realize what it was doing to you." He searched Sin's eyes, his gaze regretful and sincere. "Regardless of why I started that with Kassian and why it continued, I should have been more sensitive to how it would make you feel. I never should've said such hurtful things. I was wrong and I'm sorry."

There was a brief pause before Sin nodded slightly, glad that Boyd had acknowledged what had been nagging at Sin for months. He'd begun to wonder if Boyd hadn't noticed what he'd been like at times back then and had worried that without knowing the cause of it all, it could happen again the next time they got into a bad fight.

"At any rate," Boyd continued after a pause, "it was inevitable that all of that would change after a while. I'm too naturally introverted to handle being social for long."

A slight smirk graced Sin's lips again. "I've noticed. I think Captain America has too. He made some side comment about not seeing you much anymore."

Boyd smiled faintly. "That would be a side effect, yes," he said mildly. "Although you're part of it too. I've been so happy to be back with you that lately I haven't thought about much else."

"As much as I loathe to say this," Sin drawled, rolling his eyes. "I don't really think you should neglect your other... people, because we are together again. You'll end up where you were before."

"I was thinking that earlier, actually," Boyd said, tilting his head. "It was never a conscious decision to avoid anyone else; I just got wrapped up in being with you. I'm

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going to call Kassian when we get back, though. I'm worried about him."

"The meat-head will be fine."

"I'm sure he will but I'm still going to check," Boyd said idly, resting his head back against the side of the tub and closing his eyes.

Sin didn't reply and Boyd didn't speak again immediately. Silence fell between them once again, aided by the heat and the jets of the Jacuzzi. Boyd's eyes remained closed but his eyebrows drew down and it wasn't long before he opened his eyes to watch Sin.

"There's something I've never understood," he said with a faint frown.

Sin glanced at him again, raising an eyebrow. "About what?"

"Ann," Boyd replied simply. "How did you two ever get close in the first place? She hated you."

There was a beat of silence where Sin realized that Boyd had never heard important parts of the story of what had happened during his training. It was strange considering a large amount of time had passed since then. It only showed how poor their communication skills could be.

He observed Boyd for a while as he tried to figure out where to start the story before asking, "Did I ever tell you that I'd begun visiting Lydia some time ago?"

"No. You only mentioned you'd thought about it."

Sin nodded, thinking back to the time he'd mentioned it briefly. "I was feeling out the conversation because I wasn't sure what you would think if I told you the truth. You were so passionate about how pointless it would be that I decided against it, though."

"I didn't say it'd be pointless; I said she didn't deserve it after what she did," Boyd said with a shrug. "So you were already visiting her?"

"Yes, I'd started going every now and then. I was having nightmares about her, Jessica... everyone, pretty much." Sin frowned slightly, not wanting to relive those nightmares and feeling relieved when they didn't start flashing through his mind. "I'm not sure why I started visiting her. The entire situation seemed very surreal to me for a while. I knew what I'd done to her but I suppose I wanted to go there and see the proof

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of what I was capable of in person. After the first time, I felt compelled to come back. I'm still unsure why."

He looked at Boyd again. "In any case, Ann found out I was going."

"She wasn't mad?" Boyd asked doubtfully.

"She was at first," Sin replied, thinking about the incident in Lydia's room when Ann had glared at him with such contempt. "But it was more over the fact that she believed me being there could possibly make Lydia worse somehow than her believing I meant harm. By that time she had already seemed to have accepted that I wasn't the unrepentant bastard she'd always assumed me to be."

"Why would she suddenly change her mind about that years later?"

"Well, I doubt it was sudden. She said it had happened over a period of time. And she had viewed the tape of the incident at some point, which apparently proved to her that her sister had been responsible for my condition at the time of the incident."

A frown marred Sin's face and he ran a hand through his damp hair. "That was what led her to want my case after the incident in the elevator. If she hadn't taken it, no one would have and I'm not sure where I would be now. The only reason I have a doctor now is because he's from the new batch of Euro division staff."

Boyd was silent for a moment before he spoke again. "That explains how she became your doctor but you still didn't say why you two had sex."

"Because I was falling apart at the seams and I felt completely isolated from everyone. I turned to her out of desperation to forget everything. And I turned to her again because when I felt like a complete monster, someone touching me and being kind to me helped. It's not an excuse for my behavior but those were my reasons at the time. Had I known what would have happened, I wouldn't have allowed myself to react that way."

There was another long beat of silence and then Boyd nodded. "Okay."

They looked at each other for a long moment, and then Sin sat up. He swung his legs over the side of the tub and stood up. He wrapped the towel around his waist and looked down at Boyd. "I want to get my foot out of this hot water for a while. Are you staying in?"

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"No." Boyd got out as well, grabbing his towel and starting to dry off.

Sin padded out of the bathroom and across the short hall into their bedroom. With a low sigh, he stretched out across the king-sized bed and propped his foot up on the frame.

After a few minutes, Boyd walked in. His hair was still damp and the occasional droplet of water glistened on his skin where he'd missed it while drying off. The towel was nowhere to be seen and he hadn't bothered to put any of his clothes on again. His gaze flicked along Sin's length, pausing briefly on his ankle before returning to Sin's eyes.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all." Sin turned his head slightly to look back at Boyd.

Boyd crawled onto the bed next to Sin. He remained sitting up, looking down at Sin's foot while leaning back on his hand. "How's your foot?"

"Swollen. I should probably be icing it down but I can't be bothered." Sin shifted slightly and rested his face against the pillow. "My back is beginning to ache though, likely related from the fall. It's amazing how emphasized the slightest pain feels when I'm completely relaxed."

Sin could feel the depression in the mattress when Boyd shifted next to him.

"Do you want a massage?"

There was a brief pause as Sin debated his answer. After a while a small half-smile played on his lips and he shot his lover a look. "Will it be just a massage?"

Boyd smirked. "Well, I can't make any guarantees..."

Chuckling quietly, Sin settled down on his stomach. He rested his arms on the pillow and turned his head to the side, his cheek against his forearms and eyes closing once again.

Boyd knelt beside Sin, hovering over him. It wasn't long before Sin felt Boyd's hands rest on his shoulders and slide down his back. It was a sensual touch that dragged back up to his shoulders, where the massage began.

Boyd's fingers strengthened, pressing down and working at the sore muscles. He

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moved steadily down Sin's back, alternating between rubbing his thumbs in powerful circles and kneading the muscles.

"Mmm," Sin said appreciatively. He hadn't seen the use in massages until Boyd had forced one on him one night after a particularly brutal mission.

"Am I hitting the right spots?" Boyd murmured, his voice low and lulling.

Sin felt his dick respond to the combination of Boyd's hands and voice but he ignored it. He ran his teeth over his bottom lip and released a slow exhalation of breath. He was determined to prove to himself that he could be in an intimate setting with Boyd without it always resorting to sex. He could do it. He would.

"Yes," he said belatedly.

"Good," Boyd said in the same tone.

His hands moved lower, pressing into the muscles in Sin's lower back. Sin could feel Boyd shift behind him for better access. He leaned forward even though it wasn't necessary, drawing close enough for his warm breath to faintly curl against Sin's neck.

"Boyd," Sin said from where his mouth was pressed against his arm. "Be good."

Boyd chuckled lowly and tilted his head, brushing his lips against Sin's neck. Sin could feel Boyd's still-damp hair fall against his shoulder.

"Why?" His voice had a definite husky quality to it.

"Because I'm determined to not fuck you at the moment and if you keep behaving that way, I will have very little choice."

"What's wrong with fucking me?" he murmured against Sin's neck. His breath was warm; his lips a brief caress. The pressure of his hands lessened, turning into more of a sliding motion.

Sin felt himself getting harder but he ignored it, responding neutrally, "I'm attempting to prove to myself and you that we are capable of not having sex in an intimate setting."

"Why do we have to be capable of that?" Boyd asked, sliding one hand so low that his fingers brushed the top of Sin's ass.

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Sin rolled onto his back so that he was facing Boyd again. "Because you had commented some time ago that one of the reasons you'd begun to have doubts about our relationship in the past was because it had become all about us fucking every time we were alone."

Boyd shifted and hovered over Sin, his fingers absently kneading Sin's shoulders. His gaze was heavy-lidded and focused on Sin's mouth, his full lips parting.

"True," he murmured and looked up to meet Sin's eyes with desire clear in his eyes. "But we'll have plenty of time to prove that when we aren't alone in a cabin with the woods as soundproofing."

"Boyd," Sin said reproachfully. "I'm serious."

Boyd paused and partially straightened his back. He looked at Sin in assessment and, noting the steadiness of Sin's expression, a disappointed look crossed his face but he still pulled his hands away. He leaned back and didn't make a move to touch Sin again.

"I don't think we need to worry about that anymore, but okay. If you're concerned, I'll stop."

They looked at each other silently for a sullen stretch of time before Sin shook his head and pulled his lover down on top of him. He rested his arms across Boyd's lower back. "I'm still unsure of a lot of things. I don't entirely know what I'm doing so I'm trying to be careful."

Boyd sighed. He held his upper body away from Sin's by resting his forearms on Sin's chest. His fingers sifted through Sin's hair. "I'm confident we'll make it indefinitely if it's up to us but I'm worried about what we can't control. About what could take you away from me. I don't want to miss any chances with you. It makes me not want to miss one second while we're finally completely alone."

Sin turned his head and looked out the window. It had already gotten dark outside and he could only make out the barest hints of shadows through the tight clusters of trees. They were completely and utterly alone except for the handful of other couples who were also staying somewhere on the grounds. The feeling of isolation from the rest of the world was strong and his hand slipped down Boyd's back, rubbing the smooth skin slowly.

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He felt Boyd settle down on his chest, his breath curling out against Sin's bare skin.

For a moment he could only wonder what it would be like if they could stay. What would it be like if it really was just the two of them alone in a place where no one knew them? What would it be like if they weren't in the Agency?

In that moment, Kassian didn't matter, Ann didn't matter-- none of it did.

"I want it to be like this forever," he admitted finally, his full mouth drawing down at the sides. "I'm sick of being a captive. I'm sick of always expecting to disappear any moment and never see you again."

Boyd's fingers tightened against Sin briefly and he shook his head. "I wish that wasn't such a real possibility. It was hard enough losing Lou and my dad but I feel closer to you than anyone in my life."

His voice dropped as he said quietly, "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

Sin turned his eyes back to Boyd, eyebrows drawing together. "You'd keep doing what you have to do," he said forcefully. "Right?"

There was a moment of silence and then Boyd pushed himself up enough to see Sin. His eyes were somber, his mouth pulled down faintly at the edges. He studied Sin's face, a serious expression he usually got when he was committing something to memory, and met Sin's eyes.

"I love you more than I've ever loved anyone, Hsin," he said soberly. "It would be really hard. But I promise, if you die I'll keep going."

A feeling swelled inside of Sin that he didn't entirely understand and he had to once again drag his eyes away. His brows drew together and he opened his mouth to say something but he didn't know what to say. There was a heaviness inside of him that was depressing and disturbing but it was accompanied by an almost simultaneous surge of affection for his partner.

In the end he just shook his head and leaned up slightly, pressing his lips against Boyd's forehead. "I think I'm going to get some rest," he said finally. "Do you want to stay?"

"Yes," Boyd said quietly.

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He rolled off Sin and briefly disappeared into the cabin to shut off any lights that had remained on. Sin had the blankets pulled down by the time Boyd came back into the bedroom. Boyd flipped the light off in the room on his way to the bed, where he crawled under the covers with his partner.

They shifted until they were comfortable. Boyd ended up half sprawled on Sin, one arm loosely wrapped around his side, his cheek resting against the left side of Sin's chest.

Silence fell between them for a few moments. Sin could feel Boyd's breath curl against his bare skin and the faint, steady tempo of his heartbeat against his side. Sin slid his eyes closed and he was on his way to relaxing completely when Boyd's quiet voice broke the stillness.

"Hsin?"

"Yes?"

There was a pause and then:

"What if something happens to me first? What would you do?"

Sin shifted in the bed and pulled Boyd closer to him. "I don't know."

Boyd's arm tightened and his face shifted until his ear was more directly over Sin's heart. "I wouldn't want my death to destroy you," he said quietly, sadly.

Sin had no response and as the minutes passed, the combination of warmth and the hypnotic sound of even, undisturbed breathing lulled them to sleep.

===

At first, Boyd didn't know what woke him. He had been deep in the middle of sleep when something dragged him out of his dreams. He sleepily made a face and slid one hand across the bed when it filtered through his mind that Sin's warmth was missing. He was just about to roll over when he realized something was wrong.

He didn't know what it was but the hair on the back of his neck stood up and he casually went still as his mind jumped to full alertness. He ran through a number of scenarios quickly but he didn't want to make a sudden movement in case the unfamiliar presence

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he felt in the room was something dangerous. He slid his eyes open just enough to look through his eyelashes.

He could see his partner's familiar body near the far wall, still naked except for a pair of underwear he'd slipped on. There were two other people Boyd could see in Sin's vicinity but before Boyd could tell anything more than that he felt a presence at his side. A hand reached toward him and Boyd snapped a hand out, grabbing the wrist and wrenching it up as a man let out a startled shout. Boyd half sat up and was about to jump out of bed to attack the man when he flicked his eyes in quick assessment across the room.

Five people stood in the room aside from Sin; four men and a woman. Boyd was too caught off-guard to immediately recognize three of them but when he saw Archer's hawk-like stare and Jon's calm expression across the room, he felt a moment of surreal confusion.

His first thought was that he was having a bizarre dream but then the man reached over and yanked Boyd's loosened hand away.

Boyd looked over. The man was in his late thirties with a five o'clock shadow and wavy brown hair. His eyes were a pale brown and as he stepped back from Boyd, he rubbed his wrist with a scowl. Boyd absently placed him as Leo Vasile, a Level 9 Insurgency agent from another unit.

Boyd glanced over and saw Sin glaring at the others, looking highly pissed off.

"What the hell?" Boyd demanded, half bewildered and half annoyed.

Jon gave Boyd an apologetic and chagrined half-smile as Sin glowered hatefully. "The Marshal sent us in when the two of you went silent."

"Silent?" Boyd echoed, even more confused. He looked between Jon and Sin. "What?"

"My fucking cell phone got smashed when I fell yesterday," Sin growled, barely resembling the relaxed and affectionate man who Boyd had spent time with for the past few days.

"And yours goes straight to voice mail," Jon informed Boyd with a frown. "Honestly, they sent us out not knowing if we'd find you lot dead or on the offense after having gone rogue."

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Boyd grimaced, feeling a spike of annoyance. He'd been looking forward to spending the rest of the week with his lover, and being woken to a room full of agents wasn't at all how he'd hoped to start the day. He was even more irritated because if their phones had been working maybe they wouldn't have to be in this situation.

"My phone ran out of batteries and I forgot the charger," he said, running a hand back through his hair and frowning. The sheets shifted slightly where they gathered in his lap, hiding his lower body but not the implied fact that he was naked. "I didn't know his phone was broken. What the hell do you need us for anyway? We have a few more days off."

"Unfortunately, you don't. Mission came up," Jon replied, not looking at Sin's murderous expression. "That's why they were calling you in."

"A mission," Boyd said flatly. He had never been so annoyed with the mercurial aspect of his job as he was now. "And they couldn't send any of the other thousand agents or three Level 10s running around the Agency right now?"

He knew it wasn't Jon's fault and he should bring any questions up with the Marshal but he couldn't help feeling frustrated by the turn of events.

There were still things he'd wanted to do-- they hadn't had enough time. He didn't want to leave the idyllic setting they'd found. He didn't want to have to suddenly leave behind the quiet solitude; the way they could enjoy each other without external pressure. He didn't want to leave behind Sin's relaxed state and small, sincere smiles.

He didn't want to return to the Agency. He didn't feel ready.

"Guess not," Jon replied with a shrug, as unperturbed by everything as he'd been throughout training.

"Should we step out?"

Boyd looked over when the female agent spoke to Jon. She had a long rope of auburn hair hanging over one shoulder and clear blue eyes below long, sculpted eyebrows. He'd never met her in person but he knew she was Jenny White, the Level 9 valentine operative from Intel that Kassian had once recommended as potential dating material for Sin. Considering the fact she was known to have wanted to fuck Sin at one point, it wasn't surprising that she looked slightly uncomfortable with the situation now.

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Jon looked at Sin and Boyd in turn. "We need to return to the compound ASAP. Since there appears to be nothing violent going down, do you need any help gathering your gear?"

"No," Boyd said with a hint more of an edge than he intended.

He saw Archer give him a stern look and Boyd looked away.

Boyd saw that the last agent was a pale man with jet black hair and pale blue eyes, who had a few scars on his face. Boyd recognized him to be Adam Blake, a Level 9 agent from Intel. Boyd had run into him a few times over the years although he'd never spoken to him much. Adam was looking between Sin and Boyd but he didn't have a particular expression so Boyd couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Leo was now studiously avoiding looking at Boyd or Sin, his light brown eyes narrowed and eyebrows drawn down. His lips tightened into a frown and he'd crossed his arms. The way he was leaning slightly toward the doorway made it seem like he wanted nothing more than to get out of that room, which was a sentiment Jenny seemed to share although she looked more uncomfortable than disturbed like Leo did.

Archer was angled with his back against the wall, so he could keep an ever-roaming watchful eye on the rest of the cabin through the open door at the same time as he could watch the window in the bedroom. Aside from the sharp look he'd given Boyd, he didn't seem to be paying much attention to the conversation. His expression was as serious as usual and with how little Archer seemed perturbed, Boyd almost felt like he and Sin could have been in the middle of fucking when the agents entered and Archer still wouldn't have blinked an eye.

The irritation Boyd had been feeling didn't leave but it did become less intense. He knew he couldn't blame any of these people and when he imagined how awkward it would be to have been sent to retrieve, say, Jon and Harriet, and finding them naked in bed... Well, he probably wouldn't want to be in the room either.

He returned his gaze to Jon again and made more of an effort to stop being so confrontational. Jon probably hadn't wanted to come on the retrieval in the first place. If Boyd had anyone to blame, it was the Marshal. He couldn't help feeling irritated with her; could she really not have found someone else to do the damn mission? He and Sin asked for one single week free of Agency responsibilities and they couldn't even get that. Although as far as that went, they were lucky she'd agreed to even that week.

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"We didn't bring a lot," Boyd continued more reasonably. "Give us a few minutes and we can meet you outside."

"Will do," Jon said with a nod. He didn't even have to say a word before the others trooped out of the room.

The door shut behind Jon, and Sin released a noise that sounded like a growl. He looked furious and his posture had once again returned to its typically tense form.

Boyd looked over at Sin and finally got out of bed. "I'm pissed too but unfortunately we can't do anything about it," he said as he looked around for clothing.

Sin didn't respond and violently grabbed the jeans he'd discarded the day before. He got dressed in icy silence, his black hair curtaining most of his expression although his mouth was in a visibly tight line.

Boyd pulled on his underwear and jeans but paused before he searched for his shirt. He took in Sin's tense posture and walked over, running a hand down Sin's arm and stopping to briefly wrap his fingers loosely around his wrist. "Hey."

"I'm tired of this shit," Sin growled, yanking a black shirt up from the floor.

"Not having a say?" Boyd asked, watching Sin.

"Everything. I've just fucking had it." Sin yanked the shirt over his head and tied his hair back in a knot.

Boyd was at a loss for words at first. He was tired of this too, although he thought Sin felt it more strongly. He wanted to say they could find a way out of this lifestyle, that if they just searched hard enough surely there would be an answer, but there weren't many feasible options. None that he knew anyway, although that wouldn't stop him from looking regardless.

Emilio was the only person he knew who had ever successfully escaped and although he'd seemed to have a plan for Sin when he was on death row for Bridget's murder, it was unlikely that the plan could easily be expanded to include two people.

And even if it could, Boyd doubted he and Sin would be able to disappear without the Agency tracking them down or at least chasing them the rest of their lives. He didn't want that as a life; constantly looking over his shoulder, afraid to trust anyone, and more

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terrified than usual that Sin was going to be killed without him being able to stop it. At least at the Agency there were rules, of sorts. If they managed to go rogue, they would be targets from every angle.

"I am too," Boyd said instead, placing his hands comfortingly on Sin's shoulders. He looked up into his lover's face with determination, his fingers squeezing briefly. "But we'll get by and we'll figure things out. In the meantime, we can finish the rest of this vacation later-- we could spend some time together after the mission. Maybe the next time we have some days off at the same time we can take a short trip near the city."

Sin looked up at him through his overgrown hair and shrugged, his lips still downturned. "I had plans for you today," he said sullenly.

A smile played on the edges of Boyd's lips. "Yeah?" He stepped closer to Sin, his hands shifting against Sin's shoulders. "Would I have liked them?"

A grudging smirk briefly made an appearance on Sin's face and he couldn't seem to maintain his anger with Boyd trying so hard to snap him out of it. "Yes. It involved me making up for last night."

Boyd made a 'hmm' sound, the smile growing as he tugged Sin down. He kissed Sin; it started out chaste, just a brush of his lips against Sin's, but Boyd soon parted his mouth. The heat of their breath intermingled and when Sin opened his mouth too, Boyd briefly forgot his train of thought. He would never grow tired of the feel of Sin's hard body against his, of Sin's taste filling his mouth as their lips and tongues meshed. Every time it felt like his heartbeat quickened and the world lost importance around him.

Boyd's hands tightened against the back of Sin's head, his fingers loosely tangling in the silky black hair that was already starting to unravel from the knot. A moan escaped one of them, he wasn't sure who but he thought it was him, and Sin's arms wrapped around his back and pulled him closer.

The kiss was deep and filled with a passion that only grew stronger, more urgent. For a moment, the only sound in the room was their muffled breath, the shift of fabric as their hands gripped each other, and the occasional hint of a moan.

Before long Boyd pulled away, his lips reddened as he caught his breath. A smirk crossed his face as he murmured huskily, "Did it involve something like that?"

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Sin exhaled against Boyd's moist lips and said in a low heated voice, "It involved me counting the amount of times it takes me to ram my cock into your spot before you come all over yourself."

Boyd groaned, his fingers twitching against Sin. He felt himself start to harden at the thought combined with that voice. "I think I need to know that answer too."

He was yanked against Sin with near-violent intensity before his mouth was once again ravished. Boyd found himself being pushed up against the chest of drawers that lined the wall. Sin's powerful hands picked him up, leaving him perched on the edge of the dresser with his knees apart and Sin between them as they kissed each other fiercely.

Boyd lost all track of everything but Sin. They nearly devoured each other, their tongues scouring each other's mouth and leaving an intoxicating taste behind. He couldn't stop himself from groaning desperately. The harder Sin pressed against him, the deeper and rougher they kissed, the more Boyd was aroused.

The layer of clothing between them was becoming a nuisance and Boyd's breath started to quicken from excitement as he imagined Sin slamming into him, repeatedly hitting him in the spot that made him crazed with pleasure.

He slid his hands beneath Sin's shirt and up, his fingers digging into Sin's back and his moans becoming quicker and louder. His bare torso felt flushed and hypersensitive to the air, to the rough callouses on Sin's fingers as he dragged his hands across Boyd's back.

Boyd's heartbeat thundered in his chest and his need for Sin was making him lose control--

The door suddenly opened and Boyd was startled into looking over, seeing Jenny standing there.

"Get the fuck out," Sin snarled at her, panting against Boyd's neck where he had been sucking it.

"Ah," Jenny said awkwardly, delicately arched eyebrows rising as she took in their intimate position and flushed faces. Her blue eyes skimmed them with interest and although the discomfort was more evident on her face than it'd been before, she didn't appear unattracted to the scene before her.

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"General Carhart wants a response within the next five minutes," she said quickly and backed out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

Sin hissed between his teeth in obvious frustration and straightened. "Fuck them all."

Boyd groaned and slouched forward, hands sliding off Sin's body to grip the edge of the dresser. He tilted his face down, his hair curtaining his expression while the top of his head brushed Sin's chest. He tried to ignore how strongly he wanted to rip Sin's clothes off and fuck him mindlessly.

"I'd say let's continue if I didn't know we'll be interrupted again in a minute," he grumbled.

Sin nodded stiffly and finally pulled away, adjusting his jeans and looking very put out. "And when we get back, it won't be much better."

Boyd slid off the dresser and padded over to where his shirt was still lying crumpled on the floor from the day before. He swiped it off the floor and yanked it over his head. He looked over at Sin as he straightened the shirt and the rest of his clothing. "Yeah, well, I'm expecting you to fuck me twice as long when we get the chance."

Still looking mighty disgruntled, Sin grabbed their empty duffel bag and tossed it onto the unmade bed. "Count on it."

Mildly mollified, Boyd set to the task of gathering his things. He hadn't brought much clothing so that didn't take long but once he left the bedroom and saw the other agents in the living room, it hit him even harder that they had to leave. Seeing the formerly empty room filled with an unavoidable reminder of their situation made the fact they had to return burn in him.

All he could do was run down a mental checklist of the moments they would miss.

Sin and he hadn't had the chance to fully appreciate the fireplace yet; they hadn't gotten through all their food. They hadn't had sex in the Jacuzzi, which he had been looking forward to doing especially since last night. The last drawing he'd started would never be finished. He would never know what had happened in the woods to all those people. They wouldn't have the chance to bike through the woods again or to light a fire and make s'mores like Boyd had been planning for that night. He wouldn't be able to lean against Sin's chest and feel that steady heartbeat and those powerful arms encircling him, and know without a doubt that they were alone, that no one was peering in on the

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intimate scene, and that the relaxation he felt in his lover's body was his and his alone to share.

The last few days had been a dream unlike even what he remembered in Monterrey, because he knew that back then they hadn't been in the same mindset; they hadn't truly been a couple. Spending the days with Sin, having the opportunity to touch him and kiss him and have sex with him as much as he wanted had been incredible. He'd enjoyed his time here. He'd liked walking into the kitchen and seeing Sin prepare a meal. He'd liked knowing Sin was always nearby.

And more than anything, he'd loved falling asleep next to Sin and waking up to his warmth. Since one of his preoccupations a year ago had been that Sin didn't seem to want to spend the night with him, it felt comforting to know that he could fall asleep to that steady heartbeat and not have to wake to a cold bed.

He'd felt comfortable and liberated and safe at this place, hidden in the woods and removed from reality. He'd felt at peace.

He hadn't gotten enough time to enjoy it, to enjoy Sin. He hadn't had enough time to pretend, for just one week, that they were normal and that he didn't have to fear his loved one getting ripped away from him once again. He hadn't had enough time being with Sin as only a lover instead of a combination of that and work partner.

It was almost heart-wrenching to know that the peaceful life they'd managed to build for those few days was being taken away so casually.

"He's a smarmy git, that one is," Jon was saying, his voice breaking through the reverie Boyd had fallen into. It was obvious that Jon, Adam and Jenny at least were all familiar with each other likely because they were all from Intel.

"He's not that bad," Jenny laughed. "Just a bit of a smartass. The first time I met him he caught me off guard too though. But I figured if Adam was hanging around with a character like that, he must have something good about him."

Adam shrugged, not appearing to care either way although a flicker of a smile crossed his solemn face before he looked at Boyd and Sin, who walked through the door behind Boyd. Jenny's blue eyes also turned to the agents and she stood up from where she'd been leaning casually against the wall. She was rather tall for a woman and her legs were encased in tight black pants that made them look even longer.

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"I don't know if you all have been acquainted," Jon said, looking mostly from Boyd to the rest of the people on the team likely because Boyd and he had become something close to friends during training. "This is Jenny White and Adam Blake from Intel. Leo Vasile from Insurgency and I'm sure you know Archer."

Sin didn't respond and began shoving something in a duffel bag, studiously keeping his back to the group.

"It's nice to finally meet the infamous duo," Jenny said casually, her eyes sliding from Boyd to Sin. "I doubt Senior Agent Vega remembers, but I auditioned to be his partner as well."

"You did?" Boyd asked, looking over at her. He wasn't entirely interested in getting pulled into a conversation and yet he did wonder about that tidbit. He'd never known who all had been in the running to be a candidate for Boyd's position.

"Yes. They chose me because I am a very experienced valentine operative," she said bluntly. "But in the end General Carhart didn't think that route to be the best."

Boyd didn't know what to say to that. He didn't imagine that would have worked well either but then again, he didn't really know. "I see," he said neutrally, and glanced over to see Sin packing up the rest of their items in the main room.

"I wonder if it would have worked," Jenny went on, a mischievous smile crossing her face. Adam raised his eyebrows at her and shook his head as she eyeballed Sin exaggeratedly.

"I don't think he's paying attention, hon," Jon observed idly as his eyes moved about the cabin with interest.

Sin let the bag drop to the floor with a thud and walked over to the couch to sit down where he began putting on his boots. He didn't look at any of them and didn't speak. They may as well have not even been in the room.

"Too bad. I was just trying to get him to cheer up."

Boyd thought that all the agents leaving would be the only way to cheer either of them up but he didn't bother saying so aloud. Instead, he noticed his drawing pad sitting on the side table where he'd left it and went over to pick it up.

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He half leaned over Sin to grab it and asked quietly, "What should we do about the food?" He didn't feel like having a conversation with everyone listening in; they'd already had too many eyes on them in the bedroom.

Sin frowned and yanked on his other boot. "Just leave it, I suppose. The disposable things anyway."

Boyd nodded and dropped his drawing pad on his messenger bag as he passed. He headed toward the kitchen and left most of the food there, but he did grab a few items including some of the leftover candy. He figured Sin would probably still want that.

The other agents remained largely out of the way, watching as Boyd and Sin finished gathering the last of their belongings. It wasn't long until everything was packed and ready to go. Jon led the group out of the cabin, a few of them talking amongst each other while Boyd and Sin remained silent. They grabbed their bags and followed the agents out toward the van.

The cool Autumn air hit Boyd on the face as another wake up call. He paused very briefly on the deck, seeing the trees shift around them tranquilly, the sunlight already struggling to pierce through the clouds. Birds chirped and leaves rustled, and the faint squeaking of the bench swinging on the deck caught his attention. The thought strengthened about how much he was going to miss this and his free time with Sin. He was even going to miss the beat up truck they'd rented and the trips to the local grocery store on a double-lane road winding through the countryside.

He didn't turn to look at Sin because it would have made the moment harder for him. He made himself move again, letting the heavy front door of the cabin slip along his fingers until it swung away from his grasp.

As the door to the cabin shut with finality behind him, Boyd didn't let himself look back.

Medley

Boyd spread the last Journalist Guild photocopied article out on the cleared-off living room table and sat back on the couch, his forearms resting on his knees and eyebrows drawn down as he surveyed the information before him. He skimmed the dates, trying to decide which to start looking through first. Inevitably, the same article that had been on his mind for days drew his attention once more.

The June 18, 2016 edition; the article on the fourth page, upper left corner. He skimmed the headline without consciously intending to: Police Corruption in Murder Investigation.

The initial disbelief, indignation and anger he'd felt when he'd first seen the article had dulled. Even so, he still felt something shift uncomfortably inside when he thought about it. He was just starting to reach for the article when an abrupt knock on the door nearly made him jump. He jerked his hand back and looked at the door, irritated with himself for being so skittish, and left the articles strewn about the table as he strode to the door.

He peered through the peephole and saw a familiar face half-turned away, clear blue eyes narrowed slightly against the cool air and grey jacket barely visible from Boyd's angle. Boyd unlocked and opened the door, stepping aside so Kassian could enter.

"Hey," Kassian said as he moved inside, tennis shoes making muffled sounds on the carpet. "It's getting cold already. I didn't notice until I walked over here."

"It is," Boyd agreed, shutting the door behind Kassian. "Want anything warm to drink?"

"Sure." Kassian shrugged off his thick grey jacket to reveal an indigo button down shirt.

"What do you want?" Boyd asked as he started to walk toward the kitchen. "I have tea, coffee..." He paused to think and added, "I may even have hot chocolate."

Kassian followed Boyd after tossing his jacket over the back of the couch. "Coffee's good."

Boyd nodded and pulled out the coffeemaker he'd bought a few months ago to use when Kassian was around. He placed a filter in the receptacle, and scooped some ground coffee beans out of a tin can he kept in the cabinet.

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"I hear your vacation got cut short," Kassian said as he sat down at the table and stretched his legs out in front of him. He rolled his shoulders slightly and appeared to be trying to lose some of the stiffness from his chilled limbs. It wasn't surprising considering Fall had come with a vengeance. Although the summer had been surprisingly pleasant, October felt more like winter than anything else.

Boyd grimaced and swung the receptacle shut firmly. "Yeah," he said, moving over to the sink to get some water. He looked over at Kassian as the glass filled. "I was unhappy but there wasn't anything we could do about it."

Kassian nodded, not looking very surprised. "I hope the mission was important."

"It was," Boyd grudgingly allowed. He shut the faucet off and poured the water into the back of the coffeemaker. The power button made a quiet clicking noise when he flipped it on before heading toward the tea kettle. "It was a storm on a large base; they needed everyone. Emilio was there too."

There was a beat of silence as Kassian seemed to digest the information. He shifted in his seat, an odd look flicking across his face before it vanished completely. "Ah," he replied finally, resting one elbow on the table. "So, uh, how was the trip anyway?"

Boyd wondered what that look had been about but decided not to question it yet. He couldn't help keeping a subtle eye on Kassian, trying to get a feel for what, if anything, was going on with him.

"It was good," he said as he filled the tea kettle. He set it on the stove and turned the burner on, turning around and leaning against the counter. A small smile pulled at his lips as he thought about the vacation and amended, "Really good. Neither of us wanted to leave."

"What'd you do?" Kassian smirked slightly. "Besides the obvious."

Boyd smirked briefly and pulled the chair opposite of Kassian out from the table. He sat down and leaned forward, his forearms resting on the edge of the table. "We just... spent time together. We checked out the local town and woods. I got time to draw. He cooked for us. We trained and went biking. We had fun." The smile grew as he tilted his head. "Moving in together came up."

An appalled expression crossed Kassian's handsome face. "You're kidding."

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Boyd laughed and leaned back in his chair. He was trying not to be so stupidly happy about the whole thing but even a few days later, when he thought back to the time at the cabin he had such a good feeling that it was difficult not to let it show. "I'm not. Why, what's wrong with that?"

Kassian shrugged, eyebrows rising. "I'm just a strong believer in personal space. You're already partners as well as lovers. You know all the same people, are constantly in contact with each other's families, go on the same missions..."

The tea kettle started to make bubbling noises, the precursor to when it would whistle to indicate it was boiling. Boyd stood, the chair making a faint scraping noise across the floor in the process. He turned off the stove and glanced at the coffeemaker; it needed a little more time to get enough coffee brewed for a cup.

As he moved, he considered what Kassian said. He pulled the teapot over and checked to make sure there were still some loose jasmine leaves in the strainer before he poured in the water. He set the kettle to the side and put the top on the teapot again, then turned toward Kassian with faintly furrowed eyebrows. His hands braced on the counter behind him. He supposed Kassian had a good point, and yet it didn't change the way he felt.

"I don't know what it would be ultimately be like," Boyd said honestly. "Maybe after a while we'd get sick of each other and have to move apart. But we lived together for almost a year in Monterrey and I liked it even then, before we got our shit together and knew where the other was coming from. At this point, I want to spend my life with him. I want him over all the time anyway so if we lived together and I needed personal space, I wouldn't mind leaving for a bit."

He shrugged, trying to figure out how to explain what was going through his mind. "I feel really... comfortable and happy with him. And since that feeling is hard to come by in our line of work, I want to feel that way as long as I can."

Kassian still had the same appalled look on his face but he appeared to be taking pains to hide it. After a moment he just said, "Did he already ask about a housing switch?"

"We're not bothering to clear anything until the new admin rolls in. We'll bring it up once the new Marshal's settled and we have a feel for what she's like." Boyd turned to the teapot and pulled the strainer out, shaking it a bit to remove as much liquid as possible.

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"I bet they'll be pissed to have to change your residency now that you finally are going to install their security system here," Kassian said. "They nagged me for months before I finally broke down and did it at my place. They say it's because it's more secure than anything in a civilian market but I think they just like knowing our codes."

Boyd smiled humorlessly and nodded as he poured himself a cup of tea. The coffee pot looked full enough so he poured Kassian a cup of coffee and brought both steaming mugs over to the table.

"Probably," he said ruefully, pulling the chair over and dropping into it again. "I'm not happy about having to give over the codes. I know they could have walked in any time before but it seems worse knowing I'll have a security system and they can compromise it whenever they damn well please. It's a complete lack of privacy."

Kassian took a long sip of his coffee before answering. His blue eyes closed appreciatively as he ingested the hot liquid. "They have to keep us off-compounders on a leash some kind of way. I wouldn't be surprised if there were secret cameras hidden all over our houses."

Boyd made a face at that. "I hope not. I have enough videos of things I didn't want recorded in my file as it is." He paused to take a sip of tea, the taste of jasmine a pleasant warmth against his tongue. "Maybe I'll ask Ryan or Jon to check on that sometime. I bet they could find out."

"Probably. Not that it'd matter even if they did. They wouldn't let you get away with disabling them if they do exist and what would you do? Cease behaving normally in your own home? They already know everything anyway, so it doesn't make a difference." Kassian said the last part bitterly and his eyebrows drew together over his eyes. His mouth was drawn down at the sides and a flash of irritation crossed his handsome face.

Boyd was silent a moment, watching Kassian. He set his mug down quietly, his fingers partially curled against the warmth of the ceramic. "Is everything okay with you?"

The other man laughed humorlessly and looked into his coffee cup. "You could say that my Senior Agent Trovosky persona hasn't been up to par lately."

"What happened?"

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"Hmm." Kassian up and seemed to consider the question. He rubbed a hand along his jaw and seemed to stare into space for a brief moment. "You know Boyd, I'm not exactly sure what happened to me in the past couple of months."

"What's been going on?" Boyd asked. "Hsin said they've had you working with others."

The strange look passed Kassian's face again and he shifted in the seat. A large hand wrapped around the coffee mug. "Yeah. General Carhart wanted me... monitored."

"Did something happen that made him feel that way?"

There was a brief hesitation before Kassian glanced at Boyd again. He looked embarrassed. "I'd forgotten that I had a physical and I'd been drinking already that morning. They picked up on it and reported it to Carhart. Apparently a blood alcohol level of .05 at noon is something to be concerned about," he said with obvious self-mocking.

Boyd watched Kassian without judgment and shook his head slightly. He wasn't that surprised by the information; Kassian had been drinking more for a few months as far as he'd known. But Kassian had never seemed to let it interfere with work before. The fact that it had showed how he'd started to be affected by it. Or it showed how pervasive Kassian's mood may have been. Boyd felt a little bad for having not been there as Kassian's friend during this period but then again, he hadn't heard about any troubles until Sin mentioned it.

"Carhart set you up with partners right after that?"

"Yes. Not on every assignment but for important ones, he gave me a babysitter." Kassian's lip curled and it was obvious he was still sore over it.

"For how long?"

"Until I'm up to par again, I guess."

Boyd was silent a moment as he considered that. "Has it changed anything?" he asked. "Or have you been drinking the same amount?"

"I dunno. Less sometimes. More others." Kassian gestured vaguely, not seeming very interested in talking too much about that aspect. "I've just been caring about things a lot less, not pushing myself as hard. I don't really know why."

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"Did something happen that started all this?" Boyd asked curiously, drawing his eyebrows down. "I remember you were starting to drink more a few months ago, around when Bridget was murdered."

"I don't really know," Kassian responded although the stiff way he said it implied it wasn't entirely true. He picked up his mug and drained it of its contents.

Boyd paused. He wasn't used to this sort of reception from Kassian, who typically was open and blunt and didn't avoid many topics. Especially related to drinking, which had been one of the first things that Kassian had trusted him to know about.

"If you don't want to talk about it we don't have to," Boyd said after a moment. "I'm not trying to get in your business. I'm just concerned about you as a friend and want to help."

Kassian didn't immediately respond and the only sound in the kitchen for a stretch was the coffeemaker finally finishing its percolation and somebody's leaf blower whirring outside. He dragged his finger against a bead of dark coffee that had trickled down the side of the mug and finally sighed.

"It's not you. It's just that I've been dealing with a new development in my life and I don't understand it enough to really talk about it out loud yet?" His brow furrowed. "So until I have things figured out, I'd rather just leave it alone."

Boyd nodded easily and let the topic drop. He didn't know what it could be that was bothering Kassian so much but he wasn't about to press his friend for further information. He finished his tea and held a hand out for Kassian's mug. "Do you want more coffee?"

"Sure." Kassian looked around the kitchen as if he were trying to clear whatever thoughts had begun to cross his mind. His gaze fell on the packages for the security material and he stood up, moving over to examine it.

"You installed that yourself at your house, right?" Boyd asked as he headed toward the counter to refill Kassian's mug with coffee and his own with tea.

Kassian nodded. "Yeah. Are you using the cameras?"

"I don't know," Boyd replied with a shrug. He brought the coffee mug over to Kassian and held it out. "I was thinking about forgoing them. Do you use them?"

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Another nod as Kassian's eyes began to sweep over the windows of the kitchen. "I think they're useful. I don't look at them religiously but I like having a record of what goes on in my property when I'm gone for long periods of time. If anyone is snooping around, I'll be able to see who they are and what they were doing."

"That's true." Boyd thought about the occasional feeling of being watched. "Actually, I think I will."

"Have you eaten?" Kassian asked, turning away from the packaging. He didn't seem in a rush to get right down to the task.

Boyd shook his head. "No. Want to order something?" A small smirk crossed his lips. "I'd offer to make you something but you know my aptitude in the kitchen too well."

"Annie's delivers now," Kassian replied automatically, wincing at the possibility of watching Boyd cook.

Boyd chuckled and set his mug of tea on the counter on his way to the phone. "I'll order the usual."

He called Annie's and was unsurprised when Pete answered. The man always seemed to be working there no matter what time Boyd had contact with the place. He ordered a large pepperoni thin crust pizza, with a side of garlic knots and two sodas. Pete informed him in his typically unimpressed voice that they should expect a knock on the door in about thirty minutes.

"Half an hour," he informed Kassian when he hung up.

"Nice. I'm starved." Kassian had reseated himself at the table while Boyd called. He pulled a folded up mass of envelopes out of his back pocket and spread them across the table as he seemed to sort it out.

"Got my mail on the way out," he explained.

Boyd raised an eyebrow and dropped into the seat across the table from Kassian. "What the hell, you get a lot." He reached out and picked up a white envelope with red letters on the side proclaiming that a deadline was looming for special savings. "Anything interesting?"

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"Well," Kassian said with a raised brow as he pushed a stack of what appeared to be bills to the side. "I got a letter from my ex-wife and junk mail advertising a new kind of sex enhancement drug."

He smirked and stood up, sticking that one to Boyd's refrigerator with a magnet. "I'll leave that one for you and Vega."

Boyd laughed. "Thanks," he drawled. "Nice to know you think we need it."

"Everyone can use a boost after back-to-back missions," Kassian replied wisely.

Boyd smirked and shook his head to himself. He dropped the envelope he'd been holding and crossed his arms against each other as he leaned against the edge of the table. "So what did Kelly have to say?" he asked curiously.

"Don't know. Didn't read it," Kassian replied with a tone of disinterest. "Want to do the honors?"

"Sure," Boyd said, holding his hand out for the envelope. Kassian handed it over and it was quickly evident that it was probably a greeting card of some sort, judging by the dimensions of the envelope. Boyd opened it, seeing a graphic design on front, and flipped it open. "It's a birthday card. It says 'Happy Birthday and best wishes.' She wrote a note underneath it. 'Kassian, I'm still thinking of you and I hope you're doing well. Kelly.'"

Boyd raised his eyebrows and looked up at Kassian. Not only had he been unaware that Kassian's birthday was coming up, it also was mildly surprising to him that she'd bothered to send a card judging by the way Kassian had described his ex-wife. Then again, Kassian's sisters had seemed to see her in a different light.

"It's your birthday?"

"In a couple of days," Kassian replied, looking distracted. He leaned forward and grabbed the card, giving it a quick once over. "Huh."

"She must not usually send birthday cards," Boyd surmised, watching Kassian.

"She doesn't. It's pretty strange that she did this year." Kassian flipped the card over and looked at the cover before glancing at the envelope it came in.

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"Have you seen her recently?"

Kassian shook his head, blond eyebrows still drawn together as he puzzled over the card. "No. I know she keeps in contact with Leighton, though..."

Boyd considered that and wondered whether Leighton had noticed anything in her brother lately that had made her concerned. He wondered if it was possible that information had somehow made its way to Kelly and whether she had thought it would be a good idea to let Kassian know people were still thinking about him. It still seemed curious but Boyd shrugged and leaned back in his chair.

"Do you plan to call her?"

A low scoff escaped Kassian's throat before he answered with an emphasized, "No."

"Maybe Leighton will know," Boyd said offhandedly and glanced in distraction at the tea he'd left sitting on the counter. He moved his chair back and stretched, grabbing the mug by the handle and bringing it back to the table. "Or it may simply remain a mystery."

"Maybe..." Kassian still looked thoughtful but he set the card on the table with the bills and began sorting the rest of the junk.

They fell into mutual silence for a few minutes as Boyd idly sifted through the mail Kassian put to the side that Boyd guessed was the junk pile. There were a lot of useless items; credit companies, promises of free vacations to places that would cost far more than the front of the envelope declared...

He opened one of the vacation envelopes out of curiosity and skimmed the letter, which promised a whole lot for information they claimed was necessary but unimportant. Of course, that same information could be used to compromise a person's identity, get them stuck in some sort of scam, or create even more annoyance by being added to lists for other junk mail.

The pictures they included were certainly enticing, though. One in particular caught his attention of a woman on the beach, the water cerulean blue behind her and the sun a bright red sphere in the background slowly disappearing over the horizon. Boyd wondered whether that had been digitally altered or if there really was such a place in the world where such pristine views still existed.

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As he scanned the photo, the woman's brilliantly green eyes reminded him of Sin, which in turn reminded him that Sin had mentioned Kassian had been on a mission with Emilio recently. That made him wonder how that had went; Kassian tended to be the alpha and didn't like others to take charge, yet Emilio wasn't exactly the sort to let everything be decided for him either.

"How was working with Emilio, by the way?" Boyd asked curiously, the photo tilting down in his hand as he looked up at his friend.

Kassian looked at him briefly before appearing to shift uncomfortably in his seat. "Um. Fine."

Boyd paused, noting the reaction, and smirked in amusement. "What? Did he annoy the hell out of you?"

"No..." Kassian trailed off and studied what appeared to be a phone bill carefully. "I wouldn't say that."

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly and set the picture on the table. He crossed his arms and leaned against the table. "Now you have me intrigued. What would you say instead?"

Kassian spent a large amount of time closely examining the same piece of mail before setting it aside. His face was now studiously blank and he gave a rolling shrug before raising his eyebrows slightly. "Well. We fucked."

Boyd's eyebrows twitched higher. "Really. During the mission?"

"Yes."

Boyd wasn't particularly surprised to hear that it had happened given what he knew of Kassian and Emilio. Kassian was certainly attractive enough to potentially get Emilio's interest. And Kassian had said before how attractive he thought Sin was. And since Sin and Emilio looked so similar...

However, it wasn't necessarily like Kassian to have sex on a mission. As far as Boyd understood, the time they'd almost messed around on the Canada mission had been quite atypical. And Emilio took missions surprisingly seriously given his personality. In addition, Kassian's reaction was of mild interest, since he was typically so offhanded about his casual partners.

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"Is that what bothers you about it?"

Kassian stared at him in relative confusion. "What? No. What are you talking about?"

"You seem unusually uncomfortable for just having sex with someone," Boyd replied with a shrug. "I was wondering why."

"Ah."

The older agent fiddled with the envelopes on the table some more and once again waited an abnormal amount of time to answer the question. It was the first time Boyd had seen Kassian fidget or avoid talking about one of his many sexual encounters. Kassian seemed just as aware of it as Boyd did, though, and a sigh escaped his mouth.

"Well, see, it was just a little different. That's all," he said finally, looking at Boyd from under his eyebrows.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down. Surely sex with Emilio couldn't be that dramatic a departure from sex with other people. "Different how?"

The chair screeched across the linoleum as Kassian pushed it back and stood, walking to the coffee pot to refill the cup he'd drained in one gulp. He gave a shrug of his broad shoulders and turned his back to Boyd as he poured.

"Different entirely," he said with an overly casual tone. "For starters, he has the art of seduction down to a science. And it isn't Thierry seduction or anything you'd expect. It was obvious that he tailors his approach for whoever is currently in his sights."

"What did he do for you?" Boyd asked curiously. The intrigue he'd felt occasionally about Emilio's playboy reputation resurfaced now that he was hearing about it from someone he knew well rather than the rumors that were most likely exaggerated by others.

Kassian turned back to Boyd and leaned against the counter. He had both hands around his cup and rolled it precariously between his palms but none of the hot liquid spilled out.

"Honestly," he said after a while, his brow furrowing as he apparently thought back to the mission. "Honestly, I'm not sure if he'd really intended on it from the start. I'm not

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even sure if he really was all that attracted to me for being... me." Kassian said the last part slowly, nearly cautiously.

Boyd watched Kassian thoughtfully. "As in, maybe you reminded him of someone?"

"Yes... maybe," Kassian replied in the same cautious tone. He narrowed his eyes slightly and it was clear that he was hesitant to say outright whatever he was implying. The topic appeared to make him uncomfortable but after another hesitation, he shook his head and pushed on.

"Look, it's odd to say but do you think he ever had his eyes set on General Carhart?"

Boyd couldn't help letting out a short laugh. "It's not odd. He does. In some ways, you and Carhart are similar enough that I could see that happening but what gave you the impression that was what was happening?"

A look of relief crossed Kassian's face but just as quickly morphed into one of alarm. "They've never fucked around, have they? I mean in theory that would be an arousing mental image but in reality, I don't want to think about a world where that would go down."

Boyd considered the question as he leaned back in his chair. He absently shifted the mug back and forth in hands and tilted his head. "As far as I know, they never fucked around here."

That earned him a blank look. "Here?"

"There was a deep undercover mission years back at Brighton." Boyd took a drink of tea and set the mug down again with a shrug. "Something happened there, possibly as part of their cover story. Apparently Carhart was never interested in it continuing outside of that mission. And Emilio was."

"Ahh." A look of understanding crossed Kassian's face and he set his own cup down before crossing his arms over his chest. "That sounds more reasonable. Sorry but I can't picture General Carhart allowing himself to be seduced, especially by someone who's known for seducing."

"I can't either, honestly," Boyd replied with a subtle shake of his head.

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There was another pause before Kassian shook his head slightly. "In any case, it was just the way he acted. At first he was all brooding and pissed off. I figured it'd be a miserable mission since there was a night of recon involved and I wasn't in any kind of great mood either. I actually thought we'd end up arguing like his son and I do," Kassian admitted.

"But of course I couldn't take my eyes off the bastard and he noticed. So that's when it all started. Him *noticing* me back. And pointing out that I remind him of the way 'Zachary' used to be with him on missions."

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding. He couldn't help thinking that Emilio wasn't exactly subtle with that reference since the interaction with Kassian later led to sex. "Was he as smooth as rumors imply? He's come onto me a few times but it's always been obvious and half a joke. I'm curious what he'd be like if he was actually serious."

Kassian grinned wryly. "I wasn't prepared for it, to tell you the truth. By the way you'd described him, he has a tendency to act a fool but there was none of that on the mission. He was very intense the whole time, even before he noticed that I existed in a manner other than being his charge to be babysat. And after, he was just fucking hot without trying to be. His eyes-- his voice."

There was a pause and Kassian cleared his throat, unfolding his arms and grabbing his coffee again. "He was just... I can't explain it. But he got me to do things I would not normally do."

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly, growing more intrigued. "Like what?"

"Like... things." Kassian gave Boyd a significant look. "That I wouldn't normally do."

From Boyd's experience, Kassian's main compunction was that in essence he wouldn't do anything that was traditionally gay. He'd fucked Boyd and liked receiving blowjobs but he'd refused to give one in return. And he wouldn't be on the receiving end of anal sex. It had taken a lot of convincing for Kassian to let Boyd even finger him and despite the fact that he had seemed to like it, in the end that had never gone anywhere.

The significance of the situation was not lost on Boyd, to the point that for the first time surprise made it to his face. "He fucked you?"

"Yeah," Kassian said, looking a mixture of embarrassed and sheepish. "He kind of talked me into it. I don't think he would have let me fuck him just out of principle of him

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being so dead set on convincing me. I think I ended up just being some kind of... challenge."

There was a definite bitter quality about the last word but Kassian took another hearty gulp of coffee before Boyd could analyze his expression.

Boyd watched Kassian for a moment. Emilio certainly had an impressive set of skills if he'd managed to talk Kassian into that. Yet it wasn't something Boyd could exactly admire since Kassian didn't seem comfortable about the whole thing. "I can't tell whether you liked it or regret it."

"I liked it," Kassian said automatically. "I more than liked it. In fact, embarrassingly enough, in the couple of weeks immediately after the fact I became kind of obsessed with the little bastard. Of course he forgot I existed as soon as the mission was over though."

"Obsessed how?"

Kassian frowned but although he was clearly uncomfortable with admitting it, he didn't appear to plan to stop confiding in Boyd. "I can't explain it. I don't even really get it. It's gone now after not seeing him in weeks but right after the mission I was preoccupied with thoughts of him and what happened. I wanted it to happen again. I actually went to the compound for the sole purpose of seeing if he'd be around twice but the time I actually ran into him, he acted like he barely knew who I was."

The frown turned into a scowl and Kassian rolled his eyes. "There's something about that guy that fucking gets people all wrapped up around his finger. When he has his sights set on you and he starts making his moves, all reason is out the damn door."

"I know," Boyd said, eyes narrowing. "I don't understand it. I hated him before I met him because of what I thought he'd done to Hsin. I love Hsin; I'll always side with him. Yet when I met Emilio it was hard to hate him the way I had before. He's come onto me a few times, even twice bringing up a ridiculous idea of a threesome with Hsin--"

He shook his head to himself and made a face. "You'd think I'd dismiss it entirely like I would with anyone else but something about that damn man makes the question stick in the back of my head. I tell myself I'm only intrigued because he looks so much like Hsin but who knows, maybe it's just his charm."

"It's got to be," Kassian muttered, looking irritated by it. "Bastard."

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Boyd smirked but before he could reply, the doorbell rang. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was about time for their food to arrive.

When he went to the front door, he found a pimply-faced teenager standing there dutifully holding their order. He barely looked old enough to drive and when Boyd absently gave him quite a generous tip rather than bother asking for change, the teen's eyes lit up even though he otherwise didn't change his disaffected expression. He probably didn't want to be too obvious about it in case Boyd changed his mind. The food had barely been passed over to Boyd before the delivery guy half-jogged back to his car with the money clutched in his hand.

"Hey Kass," Boyd called out as he balanced the bag of garlic knots and two soda cans on top of the pizza box. He shut the door behind him with his foot. "Want to eat in there or out here?"

The other man entered the living room. "Here's fine."

Kassian started towards the couch and stopped when he noticed the papers spread out over the coffee table and cushions. "Can I disturb any of this stuff?"

"Push it to the side for now," Boyd replied as he headed toward the coffee table. "I can put it back in order later."

There was some rustling as Kassian began moving the papers around so that he could sit on the couch and so Boyd could set the pizza down.

"What is this stuff?"

"Copies of Journalist Guild articles." Boyd glanced down, his gaze inevitably straying to the article he'd been staring at when Kassian arrived. His eyes narrowed a hint before the article was covered by others and set to the side. He frowned briefly to himself and looked away, smoothing out his expression as he set the order on the now-cleared table.

Kassian arched a brow. "Is it for a mission?"

"No." Boyd set the garlic knots and soda cans on the table, sliding one can over for Kassian. He reconsidered his answer as he opened the pizza box, the aroma

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surrounding them and made him even hungrier. "Well. Not one for the Agency. It's more of a personal mission."

"How so?" The question was muffled as Kassian bit into a large slice of pizza. He settled into the sofa comfortably and watched Boyd.

There was a pause as Boyd grabbed a slice of pizza and shifted so he could see Kassian better. He considered for a moment whether he should bring this up to Kassian but he knew he could trust him and it may be good to know if Kassian had any additional information.

"I'm looking into the Reapers," Boyd explained. "One of the possible leads brought me to the Journalist Guild so I've started looking through their issues."

"The Reapers," Kassian repeated slowly, brows lowering over his eyes. "Why?"

Boyd shrugged somewhat uncomfortably and took a moment to chew a bite of pizza. His gaze traveled the room absently, moving past the indentations in the wall he had never fully fixed after the night Sin had nearly killed them. He leaned forward, grabbed his soda and opened it.

"You remember what Hsin was like in Monterrey." Although it was a statement there was a hint of a question in the inflection. "When we saved him."

"Of course." Kassian rested one of his ankles on the opposite knee. "You think the Reapers had something to do with his amazing recovery?"

Boyd nodded. "I always thought it was strange how quickly he recovered but it wasn't only that. Since then, sometimes he seems even stronger and faster than he was before. He's always been capable of the improbable but now there are times when what he does seems impossible. I probably wouldn't have thought anything about it but Owen mentioned the Reapers one day. I'd never heard of them. He started talking about how they supposedly operate out of that red brick lab building by bunker three."

He looked significantly at Kassian. "Hsin said that's the building he woke up in after his coma. And later even Emilio said he knew something was off with Hsin the day they met again when Emilio returned."

"You mean during the infamous battle of the two Vegas outside of Carhart's office? People still talk about that."

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Boyd nodded again. "Hsin threw Emilio across the hall."

There was a moment of silence as Kassian chewed slowly. It was punctuated finally by a swallow as Kassian said, "I thought perhaps that part was exaggerated but I can't say I'm surprised."

Boyd finished the slice of pizza and wiped his hands on a napkin. "On a mission Emilio, Hsin and I were on a month ago, Hsin ripped the counter off a bar with his bare hands and threw it like it weighed nothing." He frowned, pausing before he took a drink of soda. "I watched the metal twist and snap."

This time Kassian froze in mid motion and his eyes caught Boyd's. "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately." Boyd watched Kassian seriously. "And on our trip at the cabin, he rode his bike off a small cliff, hit the ground hard and rolled down a hill. He walked away with a minor sprained ankle and a twinge in his back, neither of which seemed to bother him that much."

"If you think about it, he's escaped much more insane situations than that. Even before Monterrey, he had a way of doing a storm single-handed and coming out mostly unscathed. No one ever thought it was normal but..." Kassian trailed off for a moment and frowned. "People always talk about the Reapers but... do you really believe it?"

"I don't know what I believe," Boyd said honestly. "That's why I wanted more information on them." He grabbed another piece of pizza from the box. "Some of the theories about them seem ludicrous but some could be plausible. And when I take into account all these other coincidences... Hsin should have died after Monterrey but he recovered fully, which was unusual even for him. He woke up in that building. After that he started having his breakdowns. Seeing things, hearing things... And there are other things too. His sense of hearing is uncanny sometimes and I don't remember that being the case when we met, although it's possible I didn't notice."

Kassian rubbed his chin as he seemed to mull this all over. It wasn't clear what he thought about it but he didn't appear to be immediately brushing it off, either. "You know, there are urban legends on the street about people being illegally modified. Having their DNA spliced or tampered with. No one ever really buys into it because it would be such an expensive procedure and only the elite would be able to do it but I always thought there was some merit in the idea. If anyone would cash in on a reality of that, it would be the Agency."

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"Genetic modification..." Boyd leaned back in the couch. He took a bite of pizza and chewed, considering that. He hadn't thought of it in those specific terms yet. "Do you think that could successfully be done after someone's born and not only during embryonic development?"

"Sure. I mean they've been doing it for years with gene therapy and there's always been that kind of question of when will someone do the experimentation on humans to see if they can take it all a step farther." Kassian shrugged.

Boyd made a 'hmm' noise and balanced the open soda can on his knee. "Owen said there's a theory that the Reapers were at Johnson's before the Agency. That Johnson's was doing drug experimentations and the government chose them as the cover partially because of that. It's possible Johnson's was already working on genetic modification and the Agency provided a good chance to try out concepts like super soldier programs."

"That kind of sounds like a stretch. Do you buy it?"

"Not all of it," Boyd said with a shrug. "But I don't disbelieve the concept. I think it's possible the Agency has ulterior motives and additional agendas we don't know about. The only person I know who's shown any potential signs of anything like what they say is Hsin."

"Mmm," Kassian grunted noncommittally. "What's this got to do with the Journalist Guild?"

"One of the people I talked to has a whole library at home and thought he remembered a mention of something similar to the Reapers in some periodicals. Maybe the urban legend you mentioned. He wanted to show me other books but I got curious about the periodicals and found out he has almost every issue published of the Journalist Guild since they started twenty years ago. I planned to start by checking for anything to do with Johnson's compound or anything that sounds like the Agency to me."

Boyd frowned faintly to himself. "When I was there I found an article that mentioned me, though, and I got sidetracked looking into the Guild in general."

This time both of Kassian's eyebrows shot up and he paused in mid-bite. "Why the hell were you in a JG article?"

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Boyd leaned forward, setting the can and half-eaten slice of pizza on the table. He half-crouched so he could reach the pile of articles and sifted through them until he found the one he wanted.

"Because of Lou." He tossed the article on the couch next to Kassian.

There was a period of silence as Kassian abandoned his half-eaten slice and read the article. He appeared to only skim it at first but then he went over it again to read it more carefully. Once finished, he whistled softly under his breath.

"I remember hearing about this, now that I'm reading this," he admitted with a nod. "Kelly was all freaked out that such a brutal murder happened so close to the house."

"She didn't need to worry," Boyd said as he settled back against the couch. "Jared targeted Lou for beating him in a fight. He was going to kill me too but a woman interrupted it."

Shaking his head, Kassian set the article back on top of the pile. "The police got away with a lot of shit back then. The whole force became so damn corrupt after the war. Things are better now but I doubt any of the things they did got rectified."

"And the ones who are good enough to go out of their way now get put on hit lists for their trouble," Boyd said bitterly.

That comment earned him a peculiar look from Kassian but he didn't comment or ask. Instead he changed the topic back to their original discussion. "I'm still confused as to what you thought you'd find in the papers about the Reapers."

"Well, ideally I'd do all my research in-house but I get the feeling that wouldn't be a good idea." A wry look crossed Boyd's face. "I have access to some old Agency books and manuals I'll be looking into, back when everything wasn't digitized. That's so far my best lead for trying to find anything on what was happening around the Agency's origin. But even though these manuals were supposed to be destroyed so it's possible there's sensitive data in them, I still don't trust any documents made by the Agency to accurately record everything."

He looked over at the pile of articles. "That's where the Guild comes in. I'd heard they were relatively neutral but after seeing that article about Lou, I believe it. As far as I can tell, all they did was tell the truth; and not only that, they went out of their way to research the situation. I'm hoping I'll find some 'truth' they've uncovered about

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experimentations, Johnson's, the Agency..." He shook his head. "Anything that pertains. I'll start building a timeline and see what I discover."

Kassian didn't look altogether convinced about what Boyd's efforts would get him but he didn't voice his doubts out loud. "What does Sin think about you looking into this?"

Boyd shifted uncomfortably and looked away. "He doesn't know. When Emilio and I brought up the Reapers after that mission with the bar, he told us to drop it."

"Why are you investigating this at all if he doesn't want you to?"

Boyd made a face. He leaned forward to grab his half-eaten slice of pizza and took a moment to chew a bite. "Because I think it's important," he said after a moment. "And because I know Hsin. He doesn't want to think about the possibility that it's true because he's tired of being different. He'll ignore it until it's potentially too late. But I'm looking at it as a way to try to help him."

"Even if you find out it's true, how could you help him?" Kassian asked reasonably. "You can't stop them from doing whatever they're doing and even if you could, if they have turned him into Super Agent, do you really think that's that bad?"

"It is if he didn't ask for it," Boyd said firmly and without hesitation. "If because of that they use him more. Hurt him more."

He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees. "If I'm right, they decided to use him as their guinea pig, probably for years now. They took someone who was already messed up and made it worse. They made him too fast, too strong; inhuman. They created a persona of a monster for him that alienated him from everyone and made him be their own pet assassin. If I'm right, their actions aided in years of abuse he's been suffering because they thought they could play God."

"Yes," Kassian said patiently. "But what do you think you can do about that? Even if you found out tomorrow, it's not going to stop them."

"I know." Boyd's expression set seriously. "Believe me, I'm well aware of how powerless I am in this organization and that it will get even worse with the new regime. I know I could be spending hours researching something that will be meaningless in the end."

He grimaced, leaning back into the couch and running a hand through his hair. "But I can't ignore this. I can't hear this information, *know* they may be doing something to

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him, and turn a blind eye. I have to research this. I want to know what exactly, if anything, they did to him. I want to know what help he may need; what I'll realistically be able to do to support him. I want to know what I'm working with so if there's anything at all I can do, I'm ready this time."

Kassian didn't say anything at first. He crumpled a paper napkin in his hands and looked thoughtful about the entire thing. In the end he just shrugged. "Well. I guess you'll see."

Boyd nodded but didn't answer as he finished the slice of pizza. There really wasn't anything to do but wait and see what came up in the research. He finished off the can of soda and stood, grabbing some of the garbage off the coffee table.

"I'm going to go unpack the system," he said, ready to be off the subject of experimentation.

He brought the boxes out of the kitchen into the living room while Kassian cleaned up. Kassian put the Journalist Guild articles safely on a side table and stuck the leftover pizza in the fridge. By the time Kassian finished, Boyd had unpacked the boxes and spread the components across the living room table.

There was a metal box with a bunch of wires inside that functioned as the main boards and battery supply, several LCD keypads to input the codes, glass break sensors that looked like little round cameras, the cameras and the wiring to go with, and magnetic sensors for the windows and doors.

Although directions were included, the two agents set them to the side at first. Kassian had installed the alarm system before so at first it didn't seem necessary. Luckily, the system was wireless so the amount of wiring through existing walls was next to nothing, although they knew they would still have to drill through the wall for the control panel to connect to an outlet.

One of the disadvantages of getting the wireless rather than wired was a lot of it was dependent on batteries, which Boyd knew ahead of time since he'd done research. The Agency had developed a hybrid system, however, which was much more self-sustaining than the brand name systems that could be bought in a store.

While Kassian placed the components in like piles, Boyd went through his house planning where to place sensors, keypads, and other components. They also ended up in a discussion about the placement of the cameras, how many he should use, and where the information should be routed. Boyd's father's computer had died long ago

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and he'd never gotten it fixed, and although he had gotten a laptop after a while it wasn't as powerful as a desktop would have been.

They ended up in an argument over where the cameras should be placed, the angle of them, and whether it made sense to route the feedback to his laptop or whether he should buy something specifically for that task that he could keep in a more protected area. For as much as they were friends, their mutual stubbornness hadn't changed whether or not they were on an official Agency mission.

It took several hours, a few glances at the directions, and another break to finish off the cold pizza but in the end they finally got the security system up and running. Boyd was feeling relieved just to get the project over with and he suspected Kassian felt the same.

Kassian went outside to walk in and out of the camera views while Boyd checked his laptop to make sure it was properly refreshing and he knew how to use the program to record, bookmark, and watch live. Once that was confirmed they went half by memory as they put the control panel into test mode to check whether all the sensors worked. Boyd walked around the house, opening and closing windows and doors while the alarm's siren periodically went off. Kassian kept shutting the siren off with the code Boyd had designated and Boyd would move on to the next test.

It took them several minutes to test everything to the extent that they were both satisfied. They were in the process of cleaning up the mess that was left behind when Boyd turned to ask Kassian something and found Jon standing by the hallway.

Boyd was so thoroughly startled that he almost dropped what he was holding. "What the hell?" he blurted.

Jon's scarred face was as calm as ever as he shrugged broad shoulders that were enveloped by a thick black cable knit sweater and nothing more. "You respond that way to me quite often, Agent Beaulieu."

Kassian stared at Jon. "What the hell are you doing here, Logan?"

"What a chilly reception," Jon commented blandly, his gaze focusing on Kassian without expression.

Boyd looked between Jon and the hallway, as if he could see the back door from this angle. "What's going on?" he pressed, sounding as confused and disconcerted as he

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felt. "And how the hell did you get in without the alarm sounding? We just tested everything."

"You must not have set it properly." Jon looked at him reproachfully. "I was sent to check on things at the Beaulieu homestead because one of you tripped the alarm that goes directly to the compound."

Boyd stared at Jon and then glanced at Kassian. "Oh," he said blankly, feeling slightly chagrined. "Well. That was stupid." He leaned over to shove the collapsed boxes into the large black garbage bag he'd brought into the living room. "The alarm wasn't supposed to go anywhere; we were in test mode. We just finished installing the system."

Kassian continued to frown at Jon, not appearing appeased in the least by this explanation.

Jon stared back and smiled in a detached and polite kind of way.

"How's Harriet?" Kassian asked abruptly.

"As luscious as ever," was the serene reply.

Kassian's mouth twitched as if he was going to respond but instead he turned his back.

"Nice house," Jon commented to Boyd as though the conversation with Kassian had never occurred.

Boyd decided not to get involved in anything between Jon and Kassian. "Thanks," he said as he finished shoving the garbage in the bag and tied it. He straightened and pushed some hair out of his eyes. "I can't take credit for any of it, though. It was bought and decorated by my parents, as you can probably tell."

He gestured to the minimalist decor with a general lack of personalized decorations and the sleek-lined modern furniture that fell in line with some of the furniture in Vivienne's office.

"I wouldn't expect you to live in this neighborhood," Jon continued, sliding his hands into the pockets of his slim cut slacks and acting as though he were oblivious to Kassian's stiff posture. "But then, your mum doesn't seem like the keeping-up-the-large-two-story-home type, either."

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"My dad chose this place," Boyd explained with a slight smile.

It seemed like everyone who walked into the house who knew his mother from the Agency thought it was a strange place for her to live. Since he'd been raised in this house, it was natural to him to think of the house in connection to her so it was interesting sometimes to see how others viewed it.

"She moved out years ago," he continued with a shrug. "Everything's in my name. She lives at the Agency for the most part but I think she has a condo somewhere downtown too."

Jon nodded, his brown eyes moving over the room. "I should probably inform them that all is well," he observed mildly.

Boyd nodded. "Can you show me what went wrong after that? I don't want that to happen again. I've had enough of agents suddenly appearing when I don't expect it," he added blandly.

The Irish agent smirked and nodded shortly before holding up one finger and turning away with his phone at his ear. He took a few steps down the hall and murmured quietly into his phone when he was out of earshot, likely to protect the privacy of his call-in code name.

Kassian shot Boyd a frown. "That guy irritates me."

"I doubt he'll be around long once he helps with the alarm," Boyd said noncommittally with a shrug. He'd come to like Jon for the most part but he didn't say that aloud since there was no point. Kassian obviously didn't like him, which was unsurprising given the conversation they'd had before about Harriet.

"Why should he need to help with--"

Jon returned to the room, looking even more calm and collected in comparison to Kassian's irritation. It seemed that he'd shifted his dislike for Sin onto Jon.

"I'd bet you just weren't in the test mode at some point and the sensor went off. I could have a look if you like, to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"So one of the individual alarms was for sure tripped?"

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"Apparently," the other man replied. "I came in believing you were being burgled. Luckily not. I don't know what I would have done with a civilian thief."

"You mean you wouldn't have called 911?" Boyd teased blandly.

Jon raised both of his dark eyebrows. "No, I would have likely had to kill the poor bloke and then call a cleanup team," he said in a near apologetic tone.

Kassian stared at him.

Boyd reflected that it was sad that the Agency would likely expect that. "We'll have to make sure that doesn't happen, then," he replied more seriously. He glanced at the control panel. "If our only mistake was not being in test mode when we thought we were that's not a problem. Now that I know the alarms work I'll be more careful and I shouldn't need to test them out again."

The other man shrugged. "Okay. No harm done."

"Thanks for checking, though," Boyd said easily. "At least this time I was wearing clothes when you showed up."

Kassian snorted and Jon just smiled politely. "Should I go out the front door?"

"Sure."

Before Jon could do more than turn toward the door, his phone rang. He hesitated, pulled out his phone and once again flipped it open. He murmured his codename so low that even with Kassian and Boyd in the room, it was difficult to make it out intelligently.

Kassian eyeballed Jon curiously as the other man started to exit the house but then paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"Yes, I'm still here." Jon's brown eyes moved to Boyd as he continued the phone conversation. "Okay. Will do."

The cell phone clicked as he snapped it shut and raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "We have been summoned."

Boyd raised his eyebrows in return. "Okay." He glanced at Kassian as he headed toward his cell phone and keys. "I guess we'll have to hang out later."

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Kassian stood, the curiosity on his face more apparent although he didn't ask questions. They never really talked about missions unless they had to and with Jon standing there, it was even less likely that Kassian would say more than was necessary anyway.

All three of them left at the same time and Boyd made sure he set the alarm behind him.

Part II

A row of glass doors gave access to Windrift International's corporate headquarters. Two sets of revolving doors were flanked by regular doors, with polished silver bar handles and silent hinges. Despite the number of entrances, no one could walk in without immediately being funneled into a security checkpoint, with detectors and security guards standing to the side scrutinizing every move.

The men and women who entered the establishment were well-dressed, with finely chosen articles of clothing that were tailor made. When Boyd had gone to the Civvie Squad to get a suit, Jazz had almost tried to give him the suit he hadn't worn at a similarly high-end mission months ago with Emma when they'd infiltrated what amounted to a secret society of wealthy and influential individuals. Luckily, Cynthia had stopped her.

He'd ended up with an Italian three-piece suit, deep charcoal grey with pinstripes and a crisp white shirt beneath, his tie black and skinny. His hair was held back in a low ponytail, with the front pieces falling forward to frame his face. They used some sort of hair product that made his hair look perfectly done without losing the masculine touch. His black shoes shone as he walked confidently into the building, a briefcase at his side like many of the other men. The silver watch on his wrist was very expensive as was his leather brand name briefcase.

He hadn't seen Jon since they parked, which was unsurprising. Jon and he were entering separately on purpose, to minimize the risk to the mission. Boyd had entered first, to stake out the building and ensure nothing was amiss, while Jon watched discreetly from afar. If Boyd didn't give a signal, Jon was to enter a few minutes behind him. That way, if Boyd ended up being caught he would simply serve as distraction for Jon, who was the one needed for extracting the heavily-encrypted files.

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No one paid Boyd any attention as he entered the line to go through the security. Two women ahead of him chatted about what to do for an upcoming deadline and behind him a man was in an irritated conversation with someone on the phone. Boyd couldn't tell what it was about since the man's responses tended toward clipped, one word answers.

Boyd checked flashed his expensive watch after a moment as he checked it. He looked around with a briskly impatient set to his features as the line slowly inched forward. In the process, he took a moment to look around for anything out of the ordinary.

Windrift International was one of those companies which made it impossible from the outside to say what exactly it did. Their PR touted phrases like 'global strategy' and 'operationalizing change' and the informational brochure Boyd had seen of the company was, despite key phrases and specific verbiage, vague at best. He was accustomed to having some sort of background on a mission; to knowing what specifically they were doing and why, even if the reason they were given was likely to have some sort of propaganda instilled.

In this case, however, he had no idea. He and Jon had been called to the Marshal's office to be informed that they would go undercover into this building, find their way to John Karr's office, copy some heavily encrypted files off the hard drive without leaving a trace that they had done so, and leave with no one the wiser. There were to be no gun fights, no confrontation, no explosives. It was a quiet operation that was as confidential as any Level 10 mission, and they were under strict orders not to raise anyone's suspicions. She had explained that they were chosen because they were the best undercover operatives of their classification level.

The two women ahead of time cleared security and it was finally his turn. The security guard eyed him suspiciously but it was no more than he had done to everyone before him. It was interesting to Boyd that the security guards here actually seemed to be paying more attention than he'd seen in other buildings. Between that and this clandestine operation, it made him wonder what exactly Windrift International was hiding.

"Show me your ID," the guard said, holding his hand out. Boyd held out the fake identification card he'd received from the Agency. The guard's eyes narrowed as he looked along it, noting all the features that were meant to authenticate it, and then held it up to look between the picture and Boyd's bland face. The name on the card was Nathan Aaronson, and after a long moment the guard nodded and handed the ID back.

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"Please proceed, Mr. Aaronson."

Boyd walked forward with the absent yet slightly impatient movements of someone going through a routine, even though he'd never set foot in this building before. He set his briefcase on the revolving belt and walked through the detector. It was specially designed to analyze the body through bioscanning technology as well as not react to the typical accessories like metal in a belt buckle or shoe sole. The detector, he suspected, would alert to more than simply metal; no doubt it would also detect explosives or other common weapons as well. He and Jon had been unable to bring any weapons, after all.

The detector stayed silent and the briefcase, filled only with fake papers, went through without trouble. By the time Boyd picked up the briefcase, the security guard had already turned his attention to the next person.

Boyd strode across the nearly echoing chamber that served as the foyer. It was wide open, with a ceiling that had to be at least thirty feet high due to several stories of what amounted to balconies looking below. In the center of that vast open space was some sort of glass art fixture suspended from the ceiling. When Boyd looked up at it as he passed underneath, it looked like it could have been blown glass but it was hard to tell, as the intricate installment hung a good fifteen feet off the ground floor.

There was a main desk that he walked by without a second glance. He didn't know the specific layout of the inside of the building but he wasn't about to belie that fact when he was supposed to be an employee who'd worked here for some time.

He casually walked past a directory and glanced at it with no more interest in his expression than he would show staring at a blank wall. In the quick glance, he didn't see Karr's name listed, which was unsurprising. However, he knew that Karr supposedly worked in the consultation services department, which was listed as the tenth floor. That fell in line with the minimal information he'd received during the briefing.

He calmly headed to the elevator bank and stood in the crowd of other people waiting to ascend. The elevator system seemed to be as quick as the Agency's, and in no time there was a ding as the sleek silver doors slid open. He and a number of other people crowded into the elevator, leaving only a few stragglers to wait for the next available car.

When he made it to the tenth floor, he headed down the right hallway. The information they'd received from the informant stated that John Karr was typically out of his office at

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this time of day on an extended lunch break. However, they weren't positive that would be the case.

In addition, he knew that Karr had a receptionist who worked in the main room, with Karr's office around a disconnected wall behind her desk. He was aware that she was overly conscientious and had worked with Karr for five years, which would make it more difficult for Jon to pass by undetected.

As a result, Boyd was to serve as a distraction.

He paused long enough to pull a folder out of his briefcase before striding confidently down the hallway. He made it appear as though his attention was solely on the papers but as he approached the main part of Karr's office he checked in his peripheral vision to ensure no one else was in there. The only person who he could see inside was the receptionist.

He strode into the main room without looking up.

There was the sound of a chair rolling across the floor and a woman's sharp, "Stop right there."

He ignored her, pretending he hadn't heard her while in truth he was testing her to see how far she would go. If she was the type to relent immediately and call security, that would tell him a lot about how much effort he had to put into this.

She wasn't, as it turned out.

Her heeled steps were quick and loud as she strode over to him and with a grip he wouldn't have expected from a woman her size, she jerked him to a stop. "No one is allowed back there without an appointment," she said coolly, and he finally looked over at her.

She looked to be about his mother's age, maybe a few years older. Her eyes were lost between hazel and brown and her hair was long, wavy, and a deep brown with auburn highlights. Her dark grey skirt suit fit her well, revealing glimpses of a curvy, large-busted woman with shapely legs. The three-quarter-length jacket fit her perfectly while the silky white blouse with a colorful design beneath showed off a hint of cleavage. Her high heels looked like a lacquered burgundy color with a peep toe.

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Her full lips were currently tightened and her eyes narrowed. Despite her age, there was barely a single wrinkle he could detect on her face. Her makeup was tasteful but a little on the thick side, especially accentuating her eyes.

He had to wonder how much of her appearance and body was due to cosmetic surgery.

Knowing that he was going to have to talk to her for a while in order to distract her, he made sure to put in a slight pause when he first looked at her. A quick, appreciative once-over of her that he made seem like second nature; like he just couldn't help taking in how attractive she was. It was there and gone within the space of seconds and although she didn't react to it, he knew she would have noticed.

"I just need to see John," he said, smoothly slipping the folder and envelope under his free arm without dropping his briefcase.

"Your name?" she stated, unmoved by his excuse.

"Nathan Aaronson," he replied, watching her evenly. He held up his ID where she could look down and scrutinize it with narrowed eyes. "PR."

There was a long moment in which he wondered whether she saw something the Agency had done wrong when replicating the ID style; she was scrutinizing it more than even the guard downstairs. But then she met his eyes again and he knew she thought it was legit.

"What reason does PR have to be in Consultation Services?" Her fingers remained on his arm and he didn't move, wanting to have the chance to work with her. He didn't want her to think he was going to be resistant and have her call security after all.

He raised an eyebrow, giving her a look as if he were reassessing her intelligence. "You can't be serious? You must know in our line of work that sometimes certain clients have," he paused, "red flags. It's in all our best interest to mitigate any issues before it becomes a nightmare for my office and an embarrassment for yours."

Her eyes narrowed further until she flicked her gaze toward the entrance on the side of the room, where Karr's office was hidden by the disconnected wall. She seemed to be debating something until she nodded curtly and tugged him in the direction of the desk. She didn't hold his arm the entire way and although her eyes weren't on him, he knew she was watching him like a hawk in her peripheral vision. He could tell she would call him on the first suspicious move he made.

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He kept his body language slightly impatient, glancing at his watch with a displeased frown. He set his briefcase and paperwork on the desk a little harsher than he needed to. She rolled her chair back in front of the desk and sat down, expression all business and curtness as she turned her attention to the computer screen. From his angle, he couldn't see what was on it.

"Do you have your calendar available?" she asked tersely. "I can schedule an appointment for you."

He let out an exasperated puff of breath and leaned against the side of the desk. "Is this really necessary?" he asked pointedly. "It'll take five minutes. I just need to see the man--"

"You will see nothing but the back of that door if you don't follow the rules in this office," she said shortly, turning hard eyes up to meet his.

He could see the strength and stubbornness in her gaze and he reflected that she probably would have made a good agent. He wondered whether she knew exactly what it was that Karr was into that had gotten the Agency's attention, or whether she was simply that loyal and discreet of an employee.

He raised his eyebrows and leaned back a little, an unspoken agreement to back off. "Alright," he relented, glancing quickly at the little name plate on the side of the desk, "Eva. I apologize if I came off as too forthright. Deadlines, you know."

Eva stared at him closely for a long moment, studying him as if looking for anything to imply he was simply placating her. When she didn't find it, she nodded and there was a subtle relaxation of her shoulders. She turned her attention to the computer screen again. "Understandable but it isn't Mr. Karr's problem if you didn't have the foresight to schedule this ahead of time."

"I wish it were that easy," he grumbled and leaned one arm against the desk. "It's not even my problem. Abbey dumped this on me just this week."

She didn't rise to the bait. "I can get you in at 3:15 next Tuesday."

He grimaced and ran a hand through his hair. Her eyes flicked up to him almost of their own accord, and it was the first time he was able to see through her tough exterior that she did think he was attractive. Her gaze focused on the breadth of his shoulders

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beneath the tailored jacket before flicking down briefly to take in the rest of his build. Her eyebrow rose minutely but her face gave away nothing more.

She looked at the computer again and seemed ready to ignore or deny her brief lapse but he latched onto it, wanting to find a way to wheedle away at her attention.

"Eva," he said more quietly, putting a subtle sense of entreaty into his tone.

She seemed the type that would like someone who had some spirit but who also would let her be the boss. He was hoping that tone would get her attention and he was rewarded with her hazel-brown eyes turning up to meet his golden brown ones.

"I hate to ask this," he said, his eyes narrowing as a pained expression crossed his face. "But I really don't have a choice. You heard of the layoffs in PR?"

She didn't look away, her lips pursing slightly. "No."

A slight, wan smile crossed his face and she very briefly flicked her gaze to his lips before she seemed to catch herself and returned to his eyes with a subtly hardened expression.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," he mused. "PR at its finest. Not even letting the rumors make it to the rest of the building..."

"What rumors?" she asked, seemingly despite herself. For a moment she looked slightly annoyed, her eyes narrowing faintly and mouth tightening. He didn't let her get too far along the thought that he suspected she was having: that she should just tell him to shut up and go away.

"We had a scandal a few weeks back," he explained in a neutral tone, glancing around discreetly as if to make sure no one was within hearing distance. It was unnecessary since they were alone in the office and the open door to the hallway was too far away for even normal speaking voices to carry.

"You won't get anyone to say it since it was a pretty big deal and Janice isn't in the habit of admitting defeat." He casually named the head of Public Relations that he'd seen listed downstairs.

Eva quirked an unimpressed eyebrow. "Then why are you telling me?"

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"Because it's pertinent," he said grudgingly.

He rested one arm on the desk and leaned closer until their faces were only a couple of inches apart. Pursing his lips slightly, he raised an eyebrow and began speaking quietly enough to give reason for the sudden proximity. "It was a simple mistake that compounded."

Judging by the way her eyes magnetized to his face despite her best efforts to find something to do on the desk to take them away, it didn't seem as though she would have minded if he had continued speaking at normal speaking level. Regardless, he didn't want to make himself entirely obvious just yet in case the level of her attraction wasn't strong enough to go beyond simply admiring the view of the young attractive man who was currently focused entirely on her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the slightest hint of movement as Jon went by. Boyd had arranged himself at the desk so Eva was more angled away from the door, her head tilted so that she shouldn't have been capable of seeing the movement even in her peripheral vision.

Her body didn't so much as twitch when Jon passed across the room and he knew she was too engrossed in him to have noticed anything else. He felt a brief sense of relief but knew it wasn't over yet. Now he had to keep stalling her until Jon was done.

Boyd started spinning his tale and speaking lowly. He leaned closer as his gaze captured hers. "It shouldn't have happened. We lost two of our best people and one of our worst to the aftermath and everyone else has had to take up the slack. I'm one step away from a promotion but I got saddled with the majority of their projects."

Boyd gave her a significant look, not missing the opportunity to once again allow his eyes to move about her face in a manner that wasn't entirely necessary but implied interest in what he saw. "One of them was something our worst employee should have taken care of long ago and is now about to erupt in a second scandal. If I don't take care of it this week, ideally by tomorrow afternoon, I can kiss my career goodbye."

After his speech, Boyd pushed away from her slightly. He composed his features to look as though he were waiting for condemnation about the state of his career in the face of a woman who obviously had her own together.

Eva finally tore her gaze away from him and shifted in her chair. She raised one manicured hand and brushed hair away from her face, simultaneously adjusting the

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collar of her blouse with her other hand. Only after she had seemingly composed herself, she looked at him again.

"Even so, that doesn't affect Mr. Karr's schedule." Her voice wasn't quite as firm as it had been before but she still didn't seem convinced.

"Come on, Eva," he said in a cajoling way, leaning closer. When she didn't immediately reply, he raised his eyebrows and extended a finger, touching it beneath her chin.

Eva's eyes narrowed and for a moment Boyd wondered if he'd moved to physical contact too soon. It was a risky move and one that would likely get him kicked out of the office if she considered it condescending. But when she merely quirked a challenging eyebrow without moving away from his touch, he allowed his mouth to twist up into a smile.

"I could always repay you for your kindness. Although I suppose my idea of repayment would suit my interests as well."

There was a long pause and this time Eva's eyes took him in more obviously. She didn't try to hide the examination of his physical features and she did it in a way that was nearly businesslike. He wondered if she were weighing the pros and cons of the situation; an opportunity to pursue an incredibly attractive man over two decades her junior or missing the chance of that over a favor that likely wouldn't cost her much in the long run.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked finally, focusing fully on his eyes once again.

He smiled and this time he allowed it to become overtly flirtatious. "Dinner, if you're interested. L'Atelier Rouge. Friday night at seven."

He watched her consider that. The way he'd rattled off the name of one of the most expensive restaurants in the city without hesitation should show her how serious he was. And how much money he had. If she was the type that liked to have a little money with her fun, he wanted to make sure he was offering it to her as extra incentive.

"And if I'm not?" she murmured, watching him with a different sort of scrutiny. Now it was more like a hunter honing in on her prey.

"We could always skip dinner," he said smoothly, letting his eyes speak volumes.

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She smiled finally, and it was a sharp, predatory look. She casually slid her hand forward, her fingernails dragging lightly across the back of his fingers. He dropped his gaze to watch and then looked up, making sure to take in her cleavage before meeting her eyes again.

"And how do I know I can trust you?" It was a challenge and an invitation all at once.

He put all his seductive charm into the expression that crossed his face. "What would you like me to do to prove it?" He felt rather pleased with himself when her fingers twitched against his skin, her breath quickening subtly.

There was a brief moment where he wondered if his question had been poorly worded. How could he really prove it, anyway? But then she seemed to shake herself and shifted in the chair once again.

"Where can I reach you?" she asked finally.

Boyd leaned forward without hesitation, reaching for a pen and pad of paper that was near her keyboard. He let his fingers trail across her hand as he reached out and she shifted so the back of his hand brushed the side of her breast as he pulled the paper and pen nearer to him.

His gaze lingered on her before it dropped to the paper in front of him. He wrote a phone number the Agency provided for covers. He rarely used those sort of options but it was a precaution on any undercover mission involving a cover story and it would help cement his identity if she called and got the voice mail proclaiming him to be Nathan Aaronson. Eventually, in a few weeks or months, the number would come up as disconnected or would switch to a different name in a different voice, making it seem like the phone number had switched to a new person entirely.

He took his time writing the phone number and his name, trying to draw this out as long as possible, although he didn't make it obvious he was stalling. When he was finished he looked up and saw that her attention had zeroed in on him completely. It was possible it was due to her attraction to him but it was also likely that she was watching him for signs of deception.

He grinned at her slightly, one that he knew would look just a bit arrogant but mostly confident and overall, very seductive. It was a smile that reeled people in if done the right way. A smile that contained unspoken promises without appearing overly

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aggressive. It was the kind of smile Emilio used on women all the time and Boyd hoped he was mirroring it properly.

So far his valentine assignments had dealt with men. The only flirting with women he'd ever had to deal with had been side conversations on normal missions. This was his first time having to specifically focus on a woman as his assignment. Seducing a man was a lot more straightforward than a woman and stealing a few moves from Emilio's repertoire seemed like a good idea.

He folded the paper into a small square without looking down and moved to the side of the desk. He didn't break eye contact with her the whole while, wanting her to continue to forget the rest of the world around them so that Jon had all the cover he needed.

Boyd leaned forward and, still watching her eyes, slid his hand along the edge of her ribs and down. It was a touch that he knew would be leaving a tingling wake along her skin despite the fact there was clothing between his hand and her body. At least, that was how he imagined he would feel if Sin touched him like that.

He moved his hand down until he could slip the paper into the pocket in her jacket.

Eva's legs seemed to unconsciously shift apart further than they were. Her skirt was tight across her thighs and ended at her knees. At a different angle, he would have easily been able to see what underwear she was wearing today. Somehow, he imagined something black and lacy.

He let his hand linger for a moment before he pulled away, but not without running his fingers against her ribs again, followed by casually brushing his fingertips along her thigh on his way to bracing his hand on the edge of the desk. Her lips parted briefly, eyes narrowing on him. For a moment, he thought she was going to yank him down into a heated kiss.

But then the moment passed and he leaned away briefly. When he spoke, it was low and husky. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Eva?"

He was greatly relieved to see Jon slipping out again from the corner of his eye. The man's hacking abilities were brilliant and at the moment, Boyd was more than a little thankful for how fast he worked. Boyd had no real idea what else he could do for the woman out in the open.

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However the relief faded quickly as Eva seemed to sense something. Her eyebrows furrowed and she started to turn her head in the direction of the door. Jon wasn't quite out of the room yet and the whole mission would be ruined if she saw him.

Boyd reached out without thinking, running his hand down the side of her face and effectively stealing all her attention again. Her eyes snapped to him and she leaned against the touch as he slid his fingers into her hair, his palm warm against her cheek.

All recollection of whatever she had sensed vanished and this time Eva reached up and slid her hand slowly down the length of his hand. She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and guided it away from her face but there was no denying the steadily building desire in her expression. She wanted him, all right. But it would happen on her terms.

He brought his hand up to his hair and ran his fingers through it, making the motion look slightly nervous and abashed. He ensured that his body language was apologetic, making it seem as though he'd simply gotten caught in the moment.

She didn't speak at first and looked back at her computer. The realization of where they were seemed to have resonated through her mind because she glanced around briefly as if ensuring that they were still alone.

When she didn't see anyone, she returned her attention to Boyd as he walked to the other side of the desk, stealing glances at her as he started to open his briefcase. Meanwhile, she was busying herself with straightening her jacket and smoothing her hands over her skirt.

He felt bad for a moment, imagining her waiting for him at L'Atelier Rouge and getting stood up, or calling his phone number repeatedly, wondering why he wouldn't pick up or return her messages. He didn't like the idea of leading someone on, yet it had been necessary for the job.

She was an attractive enough woman that if he hadn't been gay, he may have been intrigued by her. But as it was, there was no chance. Then again, he suspected she didn't have trouble finding dates when she wanted them. For all that it would probably irritate or upset her when she never saw him again, he doubted she would let it bother her for long. She seemed too tough to get hung up on a guy she knew for ten minutes.

He didn't let any of that make its way to his expression, being sure to keep up appearances as he left out the manila envelope but slid the folder into his briefcase and

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clicked the locks shut. She couldn't seem to stop watching him despite the few times he saw her try to drag her gaze away to focus on the computer screen.

At length, she cleared her throat and said more professionally, "He has no time for an earlier appointment. But if you leave the information with me I'll see to it that he receives it."

He gave her a full smile, with a mixture of relief and gratefulness. "That would be wonderful, Eva. Thank you."

He picked up the sealed manila envelope, with a sticker on the lip marking it as confidential. Inside was forged information about a fake company the Agency had recently had contact Windrift International as a possible client. The information warned against accepting the company's contract, based on evidence that was all fabricated. It would appear legit and since there was little doubt John Karr would deny the client's request, the Agency's involvement in any of this would never be discovered.

"For Mr. Karr's eyes only," he murmured, leaning forward as he slid the manila envelope over to her. Her lips twitched as she accepted the package.

"Of course," she replied smoothly.

He ran his gaze along her face and dipped briefly down to her chest again before he dragged his eyes away as if it took effort to look away. He stood up straight and cleared his throat quietly. She had turned to the computer screen but there was a knowing look on her face and something smug in the lifting of the edges of her lips. She subtly shifted so her cleavage was more visible to him.

He straightened his suit coat and took a moment to compose himself, running a hand absently through his hair again. He could feel her watching him from the corner of her eye so he made sure he lingered his gaze on her as if he wanted to take her in while she wasn't looking. Her smile increased in satisfaction just a hint.

"I have to get back," he said by way of apology and she nodded, then paused to glance around the room once more before meeting his eyes.

"If you're playing me, I'll track you down and make you regret it," she warned. He could see in her narrowed eyes that she was serious. She probably figured she'd find him within the company; it would make her job much more difficult to find him elsewhere.

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After a point, he doubted she would bother to look for him at all; especially after she found the fake termination file Jon was supposed to be setting for him. It was a precaution; the Marshal didn't want anyone realizing later that someone who hadn't existed had been here. A fake notation of him being fired would help explain his absence.

And if she went to the Public Relations department asking about him, the size of the company would work in his favor since it was highly unlikely everyone was memorable within the system. Even if she recounted his tale to Janice, if Janice denied it then it would reinforce his comment that as the head of PR she didn't want any embarrassing information to be revealed. It was a neat little package of lies that he was fairly pleased with, considering some of it he'd made up on the spot.

"I would expect nothing less from you," he said smoothly with a smile. She watched him but didn't reply and after a moment he left before either of them had to say anything else.

He walked calmly through the building, navigating his way easily down to the main entrance. No one looked at him twice along the way and he left Windrift International without incident. It didn't take him long to arrive at the meeting place around the corner two blocks away.

A sleek black car was waiting for him, with Jon already situated in the driver's seat. Boyd didn't know if it was Jon's personal vehicle or an Agency issued one.

"How did it go?" Boyd asked Jon as he got in.

"Very tricky," Jon said mildly, guiding the vehicle into traffic. He drove with one hand and idly tugged at the tie he was wearing. "They had more booby traps set up than I think is decent."

Boyd was tempted to ask how much constituted 'decent' but decided against it. "I suppose that falls in line with the little bit of information we received on this," he said instead, putting the briefcase on the floor. He belatedly put on his seat belt. "Did you see what the file contained?"

"No. I was told not to even open it."

Boyd nodded, unsurprised. "I'm still curious what the mission was about but we'll likely never know. I didn't see anything around Eva's desk that gave any clues."

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Jon gave him a sideways look. "What were you saying to her, anyway? She looked quite flustered."

Boyd shrugged with a ghost of a smirk. "Let's just say she wouldn't suspect I'm gay."

A low chuckle escaped Jon's mouth and he guided the car through the traffic, weaving between lanes without using his blinker and likely irritating the other drivers on the road. Despite that, he wasn't driving particularly fast. It seemed that he simply didn't want obstacles in his way.

"Well, you did a good job of it. I thought she was all hard as nails and what not. Turns out she was just a regular old cougar."

"Sometimes looking young is more convenient than other times." Boyd leaned back in the seat and idly looked out the window. "She probably won't be happy when I don't show up at dinner like I said I would."

Jon calmly cut off a nearby motorist and glided towards their exit recklessly. "At least she has fantasy material when wanking from now on, though. She had a regular GQ model type hanging on her for a good ten minutes."

Boyd couldn't help a faint, bemused smile. "When you put it that way I just made that woman's week."

The other man gave a discreet smirk and nodded. "That was likely the most interesting bit in the whole mission. Goddamn waste of my time, honestly. As clever as it all was, I was hoping it'd have been a bit trickier to make it worth the trip. Any level 10 hacker worth their salt could have handled that but I suppose I'm the only one they've got."

"I know what you mean," Boyd agreed, shifting in his seat and trying to stretch one leg out. His foot was caught beneath the briefcase, though, and he didn't bother to move it. "Despite the fact that we were thrown into it with little information, that may have been the shortest, smoothest, and least interesting mission I've been on yet. Walking out of there, I half expected something to suddenly go awry simply to fall in line with my luck."

"Damn waste of time," Jon murmured again. "I had plans with my lady this afternoon and everything."

"What were you planning?" Boyd asked curiously.

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"I'd wanted to get laid, quite honestly," Jon said in a completely unapologetic tone. "But after having to ditch her to go check on the Beaulieu homestead and not having even been able to contact her regarding that assignment, well..."

"It's still fairly early in the day," Boyd said easily. "There's probably still time."

"She likes afternoon sex," Jon said solemnly. "After her daily workout. She's most vigorous then."

"Ah," Boyd said knowingly. He could sympathize with that since he tended to get most invigorated after working out or missions as well. "Maybe you'll have better luck tomorrow."

Jon opened his mouth to comment, ignoring yet another driver who was honking and flipping him off, when his cell phone rang. The other man grimaced and used one hand to pat his pockets. He extracted a phone that was small and silver, different from the one he'd used earlier when Vivienne had called. Unsurprisingly he had one for his own personal use; most agents did.

He glanced at the screen and his expression went from its typical calm to downright cheery. "Hello, vision of loveliness," he said into the phone, winking at Boyd.

A faint smirk crossed Boyd's lips and he idly looked out the window at the passing traffic. He didn't have to ask who was on the other line.

"Of course, you're right. I am the most thoughtless git in the history of all things unholy and terrible. But I do in fact have a defense and a piece of evidence sitting to my right who can vouch for my innocence in the matter," Jon replied to whatever accusation Harriet was likely making. He seemed a lot more talkative ever since the two of them had become involved.

Boyd couldn't even hear a murmur of Harriet's low pitched voice on the other end but whatever she said caused Jon to tsk.

"Doubting me, are you? Well I'll have you know that Boyd and I were sent on a very daring pilfer mission that required me to slither into a den of evil quite unseen while he, the nasty bastard that he is, practically humped some old broad out in the open. Quite sick he is, but we likely would have died if he hadn't."

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Boyd couldn't help an amused grin at the exaggeration. He returned his attention to Jon, wondering if the story was going to end there or if Jon was going to add more. Maybe he'd get in them rappelling down the side of a building, too.

There was silence for a moment before, out of nowhere, Jon did an abrupt U-turn in the middle of the street. He swerved around the traffic without blinking.

"See you soon," Jon said into the phone and hung up. He cast another look at Boyd. "Her car is dead and she's been waiting on me to pick her up."

Boyd thought that explained why it sounded as though Harriet had been especially displeased. He nodded in understanding and bent one knee as the briefcase started to feel uncomfortable against his foot. "Does she know what's wrong with it?"

"Nah. I told her I'd have a look tonight." Jon paused as if a thought occurred to him. "You don't mind me picking her up now, do you? If so I can drop you first."

"I'm in no hurry," Boyd replied idly. "I don't have any plans after turning in a report."

The other agent nodded and turned down a side street off the main road. He appeared to be heading into the Industrial District. The scenery of the reconstructed downtown area quickly morphed into hulls of old factories and plants. They passed the waterfront and the ship graveyard that loomed there.

After the initial conversation, Jon seemed to have lapsed back into his customary silence. Despite that his expression was not stoic; he just appeared calm. He was definitely a man who could appreciate comfortable silences. It seemed that he saved most of his chit-chat for Harriet unless he actually had something specific he wanted to discuss with anyone else.

They drove for another few moments before Jon pulled around to a nondescript building that was huddled between two mammoth-sized factories that appeared to have been deserted for a long time.

Harriet was standing by the curb, appearing unconcerned about the sketchy neighborhood she was in. She was zipping up a fitted army green jacket as they pulled up, not even looking at them directly from under the brim of her matching cap.

"Sorry," Jon said as she climbed into the back seat.

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Harriet scoffed at him and nodded a greeting at Boyd.

"Hi Harriet," Boyd greeted, looking over his shoulder at her. "Were you waiting long?"

She shrugged. "Yes, but it doesn't matter if you were on assignment."

Boyd nodded and turned back toward the front of the car to avoid getting a crick from craning his neck. "In Jon's defense, Kassian and I accidentally triggered the alarm on my new security system so Jon was called out to check on me. While there, we suddenly got word that we had a mission."

"So, you still spend time together," she observed.

"Yes," Boyd said, glancing in the rear view mirror at her. "Although we hadn't seen each other in a while."

She nodded, not appearing particularly surprised by the information but her expression didn't give away what she was thinking or why she'd commented on it. "How was the mission, without Logan's theatrics?"

"It was fine," Boyd replied with a shrug. "We had to get unknown information for unknown reasons for the Marshal. Jon took care of downloading the encrypted files and I distracted the receptionist."

Harriet looked out the window, not appearing very surprised that Jon had fabricated his version of events. Jon just smirked in the driver's seat.

"Do you want me to drop you off home?" he inquired. "Boyd and I have got to do our reporting to the Marshal."

"Might as well, since I missed my training session with Lorna." Harriet hesitated briefly before raising her eyebrows at Jon. "Are you coming over after? I hope you're not planning to leave me alone with everyone after you partially encouraged this affair."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Jon replied although he didn't appear too enthused about whatever she was talking about.

Boyd quirked an eyebrow, intrigued by their reactions. "What horror do you have planned tonight?"

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"I saw Emma recently and she encouraged me to have a dinner party type affair," Harriet said darkly, her eyebrows drawing down at the notion. "For some reason I agreed. She, Pat and Blair will be there."

"I'm impressed that she managed to talk you into that." Boyd looked over his shoulder at Harriet. "She even got you to do it at your place?"

"Unfortunately." She looked at him. "You're welcome to come if you like. Agent Vega too."

"Hmm." Boyd considered that; initially he'd planned to spend the day with Kassian but after everything that had happened, he didn't anticipate them getting together again. "What time?"

"You could show up around eight or nine," Harriet replied. Surprisingly, she actually appeared pleased that he'd agreed to it. "Do you think Sin will come?"

"I don't know," Boyd said honestly. He wondered why she seemed pleased about him coming, and couldn't help reflecting that it was certainly a change since when they'd first met she'd all but hated him. "I'll ask."

"Well, let me know."

Boyd nodded assent and they fell back into silence. The Agency soon loomed before them and it wasn't long before they parted at the car, Harriet heading in one direction while Boyd and Jon went to write their reports and turn in the information. Given the short mission, it was no wonder that it didn't take too long before he was finished with everything. He checked his watch and saw that it was just past 2 pm.

He grabbed his things and as he left the main level of the Tower, he flipped his phone open and called Sin.

"Yeah."

"What are you doing tonight?" Boyd asked without preamble. He almost plugged his other ear to tune out the chatter of the crowd moving around him in the main foyer of the Tower.

"Nothing to write home about. If I had a home, that is."

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Boyd smiled to himself mostly about the reminder of 'home' and in turn thinking of them getting a place together sometime in the future. He evaded two guards who were moving quickly in the other direction. They looked intent but since there were other guards standing around in the area and there didn't seem to be any sort of crisis occurring, he ultimately ignored them.

"Harriet invited us to a dinner party at her place tonight. I'm thinking of going."

"Okay?"

"And I'm wondering if you want to come with me," Boyd said patiently, although there was faint amusement in his tone. "I got the impression that Harriet would like it if you came."

Silence. Then a doubtful, "And who else is going to be attending this dinner party?"

"Jon, Patrick, Emma and Blair," Boyd listed as he walked through the double front doors of the Tower and headed into the courtyard.

"That sounds terrible."

"Why?" Boyd asked as he paused, holding the cell phone between his cheek and shoulder as he dug for his keys.

"Because I don't particularly like Patrick, Emma or Blair."

"I don't think it'll be that bad," Boyd said reasonably. "Patrick's quiet, Blair can be too, and Emma's usually good about reading a situation and knowing when to lay off a subject. If you don't mind Harriet or Jon, you may enjoy it. You could always leave early if you didn't."

"I already said I didn't like them," Sin replied blandly. "But if you want me to go, I will."

Boyd took a moment to seriously consider his answer.

He could easily go on his own and it wouldn't matter that much. At the same time, since he and Sin were a couple now this sort of thing was bound to happen once in a while. He liked the idea of avoiding polarized social circles, with he and Sin almost alone in one, and the majority of the other people Boyd knew in another. He preferred the idea of being able to spend time with Sin as well as others at the same time. Still, he knew how

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little Sin liked these sorts of functions or dealing with other people, especially when it wasn't necessary.

"I'd like it if you did," Boyd said honestly. "But if you think you'll be miserable during it then I can go alone."

"If I get too annoyed, I'll just leave."

A brief, pleased smile crossed Boyd's face and he slowed as he approached his car in the parking lot. "Okay. She said we can come by around eight or nine. I can stop by later if you want."

"That's fine. See you then."

After they hung up, Boyd called Harriet to tell her that they'd be coming. Their conversation was brief and it turned out it was good he'd called since, once he got her address, he realized she didn't live anywhere near where Jon had picked her up. Harriet hung up sounding a hint less unenthusiastic than she had when they'd spoken earlier.

Part III

Boyd ended up spending a few hours cleaning up the mess he'd left behind earlier, breaking down the rest of the boxes and shoving the packaging into bags which he dragged out to the curb to be collected the next morning.

When that was finished, he set to work rearranging the Journalist Guild articles by date and subject. He hadn't yet determined how he was going to do this. There were twelve editions per year of Journalist Guild and it had been released for twenty-one years; almost his whole life.

From even the few editions he had, he could see that they seemed to vary in size. It wasn't a dramatic change but enough that he noticed it. Taking that into account as well as the fact that the articles themselves varied in length, there was probably anywhere from six to sixteen articles per edition.

He would probably be best off making some sort of database but that seemed like too much work so he decided instead to jot notes down on a notebook, with detailed

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information about the edition and where he had found the information. He felt more comfortable working on this project with paper copies than anything electronic, which could more easily be tracked by the Agency.

As he arranged the articles by date, he decided it may not be a bad idea to verify whether there was any consistency to the release dates as well. When he pulled up a calendar and started checking, he was somewhat surprised to see that the Journalist Guild magazines were released on the third Saturday of every month. That seemed like a strange release date to choose but maybe the people who worked on it had regular Monday through Friday jobs and found it easiest to work on their side project on the weekends.

He had to admit that the more he skimmed through the articles, the more he liked the Journalist Guild. He appreciated the way they simply told the facts without taking that irritating extra step of trying to force-feed an opinion in addition. It was left up to the reader as to how to interpret what the information meant.

For almost all of the articles, that was. Yet for some reason, the Lou article seemed to be one of the exceptions...

His gaze inevitably slid over to the article and, after a moment, he picked it up. His back was starting to ache from slouching on the edge of the couch so he settled back, drawing his knees up and resting his arms on them as he held the article in front of him and reread.

Local police appear to be covering up a corruption scandal. At 1:13 pm on Monday May 23, 2016, city residents Louis Krauszer and Boyd Beaulieu were attacked outside First Bank on Dauphin Street in the Vickland neighborhood.

Krauszer and Beaulieu, local teenagers, were walking down the street when they were interrupted by five teenage males. Based on research into the incident, it is the belief of the Journalist Guild that the culprits' names are Seth and Thomas Nguyen, Vincent DeMarco, Kenneth Stratford, and Jared Strickland. The five of them appear to be related to a local gang known as 'the Outlaws,' which has claimed responsibility for a number of thefts and attacks in the area...

He drew his eyebrows down, once more skimming the names. He would never have been able to forget the names he'd heard, yet if it hadn't been for this article he would not have known all their full names. He wondered how in the world the Journalist Guild had tracked that down; and why they even cared.

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From what he'd so far seen, it wasn't unusual for the Journalist Guild to go the extra step to identify as much information as possible. But it couldn't have been easy figuring out who was there when it was an attack no one witnessed in the first place.

Why did it matter to the Journalist Guild who had been there, when the majority of the rest of the article focused on Jared anyway?

The gang members were led by Jared Strickland. Journalist Guild subscribers may recall his name from previous reports in which he was accused of sexually assaulting two women on separate days as they returned home from work. He has also been accused of multiple accounts of assault with a deadly weapon and manslaughter. At least five incidents can be proven to involve him and yet the police have so far chosen not to investigate...

It was unsurprising to Boyd to find that Jared was already on the Journalist Guild's radar, or that they'd realized even back then how many crimes he'd committed. It made Boyd wonder whether Lou had known that; whether he'd realized just how dangerous the teenager he'd been messing with was. He had to believe Lou hadn't, or else why would he have provoked him?

At the same time, Lou had always been a bit foolhardy and when it came to a fight, he'd never been willing to back down. That may have been what had happened the fateful night that he and Jared had fought and Lou had won.

The night Jared had probably decided that he was going to kill Lou.

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he leaned back further against the couch. Enough time had passed that he didn't get emotionally unbalanced about Lou's murder the way he used to, but it didn't stop him from still feeling regret that it had happened. And he still couldn't help feeling anger toward Jared's reckless disregard for life; the way he'd seemed to revel in others' pain. It felt good to know that eventually, Jared had gotten exactly what he'd deserved.

Despite that, though, it still struck Boyd as a little odd just how far the Journalist Guild had gone for Lou's death. He knew that the Journalist Guild was all about truth and presumably justice, and it sounded from the article as though the writers were displeased with Jared not being held accountable for the crimes he'd committed.

Yet... The Journalist Guild had tracked down the surveillance footage, they'd submitted it to the local police precinct and requested the case be assigned. They'd pressed

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multiple police contacts about what standard procedure was in a homicide and why hadn't the case been investigated. They kept following up and found out that the surveillance tape had been destroyed, supposedly an error in the inventory room, and after that they'd submitted the information to the statewide gang task force and even the FBI. That had gotten them nowhere as well.

The Journalist Guild had even done research and determined that there were multiple instances where Outlaw-related incidents weren't investigated or charged, while the crimes related to Outlaws' rival gang South Side Boys saw a dramatic increase in assignments and prosecution.

Boyd hadn't yet seen the other articles where Jared had been mentioned, but he had to wonder if that much effort had been placed on the other incidents. He had to wonder why they seemed so upset.

The Journalist Guild will continue to watch the actions of the police department closely, as it has been proven in this most recent horrific event that the men and women who were hired to protect the citizens of this city will look the other way when particular gangs are involved. This is a travesty for the city at large and an outrage for innocent victims such as Louis Krauszer and Boyd Beaulieu, who cannot trust the police department to do a proper investigation even in a homicide with clear surveillance footage.

The article stated that corruption would only increase if left unchecked but he wondered whether there was something more to it. Whether someone who worked for the Journalist Guild had been a victim of Jared's at some point as well, and something about the incident with Lou stirred up those sentiments.

Or maybe it had something to do with Lou himself. After all, his parents had been influential left-wing politicians who, as far as Boyd's memory served him, had been interested in a lot of the same ideals the Journalist Guild strove for. Maybe they were partially upset that the Krauszers' son had been the victim of such a horrific crime.

It was also possible, he supposed, that they recognized his own name in relation to his dad's and connected that he was the son of a well-liked journalist. But he couldn't be the only child of a journalist who'd run into hard times after the war so that seemed less likely to him unless the Journalist Guild focused the same amount of attention on any family member of any journalist. Doubtful, he thought, and determined it had to be something to do with Lou.

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He couldn't help wondering what Lou would say about this all. About the fact that his killers had been identified by a news source within weeks of his death and law enforcement had apparently all but outright refused to get involved.

He wondered what Lou would have done had the roles been reversed. If Boyd had been the one killed, would Lou have not stopped until the killers were found? Would he have been stronger than Boyd in those initial few weeks? What would he have thought about this article?

That led to questions he'd asked himself so many times since Lou's murder: What would he be like now? What would he be doing? If Lou could talk from the grave, would he consider Boyd's relationship with Sin to be a betrayal or would he be happy that Boyd had moved on and started living his life again? What would he think of Boyd being in the Agency?

If Lou hadn't died and Boyd had instead, would it have changed Lou's life? Would he have gotten out of the somewhat sketchy things he'd been doing and straightened out? Or would he have fallen into it further and ended up losing his life later over something equally inane? Or would he be happy and in love with somebody new? Would he be the one wistfully reflecting over the sort of person Boyd may have become?

Boyd shook his head to himself and set the article to the side. Such thoughts did him little good. The what if's didn't really matter when compared to reality.

Regardless of the Journalist Guild's reasons for anything they did, despite even the invasive feel of knowing that one of the worst moments of his life had been dug up and put on display for anyone to read-- in a way, it was nice to know that someone, somewhere had cared. That someone had noticed the senselessness of the situation and had fought against it.

Since joining the Agency, there had been too many times when people like that were taken out for the supposed greater good. The Finleys and McCalls of the world were not only killed but maligned first, to destroy the causes they'd given their lives for. He felt something like relief to know that the Journalist Guild's presence meant there were probably still some people out there like that who hadn't yet been silenced forever.

He got so distracted by the articles that he didn't realize what time it was until after 8 pm. He hurriedly picked up Sin and ran a red light or two on the way to Harriet's.

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Her neighborhood ended up being a quiet, middle-class area with mostly one story, ranch-style homes and well-kept lawns. A few houses had kids toys strewn in the front yard and several of the houses had Halloween decorations. One in particular appeared to have a haunted tour of some sort set up in the back yard.

He recognized Emma's car as he parked his car on the street. The closing of Sin's and his car doors sounded especially loud on the quiet street. He took a moment to take in Harriet's house as they approached.

Her house blended in nicely with the rest of the neighborhood. Pale brown siding emphasized the length of the house while white trim and darker brown shutters made the windows stand out. Her porch light was on and he could see that lights were on in the house as well, although her curtains were closed so the light was diffused. She had a small porch in the front that was little bigger than the size of her entryway. Like the other trees on the street, they were medium-sized but still fairly young, and her landscaping was colorful but looked like it was low-maintenance.

By the time they walked up to Harriet's, it was a little past 8:50. He could already hear voices inside when he knocked on her door.

Harriet answered and blinked at them in seemingly relative surprise for a moment. It could likely be attributed to Boyd actually showing up. It was no big secret among his fellow trainees that he'd mostly gone back to his natural reserved tendencies following the first few months of their training completion. They didn't give him crap about it though; not even Toby. They seemed to accept that it was his way and didn't immediately label him as arrogant anymore.

The expression of surprise lapsed into one of relief and she backed out of the way of the door. She was dressed in a pair of indigo distressed jeans and a dark red sweater that contrasted nicely with her rich caramel skin.

"Hi," she said only a little awkwardly.

Sin looked around with distaste. "I can't believe all of you people own actual houses."

Harriet made a face at him and some of the awkwardness disappeared. She seemed more relaxed around Sin for some reason which was an oddity in itself. "Well. I don't even know what to say about that."

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Sin shrugged and looked at Boyd for a cue as to what he should do next. Harriet didn't seem in a rush to move out of the entryway and into the next room where the sounds of voices were coming from. She in fact seemed content to stay in the half darkened foyer.

The air was crisp and Boyd didn't want to spend more time outside than was necessary. He tilted his head toward the house, his hands in his pockets. "Can we come in?"

Harriet shrugged and a grimace stole across her face before she nodded them further inside and shut the door behind them.

There was a hall that led deeper into the home and immediately branched off into an open room that served as a large living room and dining area with a bar separating it from what appeared to be the kitchen. There was another hall leading off from the living room which likely led to the rest of the house. It was a nice space and was decorated modestly in deep earthy colors with the occasional dark red or burnt orange thrown in.

When they walked into the room, Boyd could see that the others were already there with the exception of Jon. Patrick, Emma and Blair were in the middle of a conversation, although Boyd's initial impression was that Blair was doing most of the talking, his eyebrows drawn down and expression serious.

"--ade it there in no time and we still never knew what happened," he was saying darkly.

Emma was sitting in a chair, a frown marring her face in an unusually somber way. "So did you--" She cut herself off when she noticed movement, and when she looked up at the newcomers she broke into a smile. "Boyd! You made it. And Agent Vega, too," she said, sounding pleased.

Blair twisted and looked over, taking in Boyd and Sin with that same intense look Boyd remembered from the first time they'd met. "Hey. I wanted to place a bet on whether you'd show but they wouldn't let me."

Emma made a face and opened her mouth to say something but Boyd merely shrugged idly and said to her, "You should've let him. You could've made some money."

"Well, I don't gamble on my friends," she said seriously.

"No sense of fun," Blair muttered blandly, scooting to the side of the couch to give more room for the new arrivals.

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Boyd sat down on the couch in the middle, between Blair and an empty spot to his left, giving Sin the option of sitting next to him or taking one of the other seats in the living room. Instead, Sin just crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall.

Harriet sat on the arm of a chair and looked at them. "Blair was just telling us about yet another Agency mission gone awry."

"A rescue mission," Blair explained, shifting so he could view the others more easily. "In Palermo. Agents Gidding and Mathaus were on a joint Intel mission. It was supposed to be maybe three weeks long but a week and a half into it we got an SOS from Mathaus. The message said there was trouble, he didn't trust even the secure communication, there was a breach of security, and he'd explain the situation upon retrieval. He referred to something to do with Gidding but it was unclear what he meant. I'm Pararescue," he added, glancing at Sin, "so I was the one of the responders. When we got there, Mathaus was dead and Gidding was nowhere to be seen."

"How did he die?" Boyd asked, shifting further down the couch to give himself more room.

"Professional hit from behind," Blair replied. "Even if we'd gotten there in minutes he probably wouldn't have made it."

"Why don't you think it was directly related to the mission they were on?" Harriet asked with a raised brow.

"A combination of the message, how it went down, and Gidding," Blair said with a shrug.

"Why Gidding? Do you think he ran?" Boyd asked but it was Emma who replied.

"Maybe. Gidding was always," she paused, frowning faintly and drawing her eyebrows down as she seemed to search for the correct word. "Questionable," she said diplomatically. "And Mathaus was an extremely paranoid and hyperaware person. He consistently beat his peers in physical training and even David wasn't able to get the drop on him from behind. Blair was telling us that Mathaus didn't have any defensive wounds. So either the killer was extremely adept to the point of imagining someone taking, say, Jon by surprise, or he knew his attacker."

"That still doesn't answer Harriet's question," Boyd pointed out. "If Mathaus felt they were in trouble enough for an emergency evacuation, it isn't inconceivable to imagine

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the enemy was that good. It doesn't automatically mean Gidding was to blame. What specifically did the message say in reference to him?"

"That's the problem," Blair said with a frown. "It got cut off and he was hurrying so he did single words. It was something like, 'Important. Gidding.' And nothing more."

Boyd considered that. "It's possible he turned traitor, then, but isn't it equally possible that Gidding was hurt or otherwise compromised? That could be the breach of security. Maybe he wanted to ask for additional help."

"I would probably think the same if I didn't know Gidding," Emma said with a frown. "But I did and, unfortunately, there isn't a better word to describe him than 'creep.'" She seemed to have given up on being polite in her description. She looked at them all before continuing seriously.

"He was good at his job but there was always something a little... off about him. The way he looked at others; the things he'd say to you. I don't want to get too far into it but he never seemed particularly trustworthy. He would've sold out his own mother to get what he wanted. I never heard him say anything against the Agency within the compound but I was on a mission with him once at a hotel. We had to sit in a bar for hours and after a few nights of surveillance he got sloppy and started drinking."

She shifted in her seat, the seriousness not leaving her expression. "I had to bring him back to his room and when he was drunk, he talked about how he wasn't paid enough at the Agency. How the people who raided it did him a favor by taking out some of the people he didn't like. Wondered how much independent, professional hitmen made compared to us. The next morning when I tried to bring it up, he said he had no recollection. I didn't care for him but I didn't want him to get in trouble with the Agency so I never reported it. I thought it was the rantings of a bitter man. But now..."

Her frown increased and her eyebrows furrowed as she shook her head. "Let's just say, I certainly wouldn't put it past him to not hesitate if he was offered something better."

"Some people would describe me a lot worse than creep," Sin finally added in a bored tone. "I wonder what people would think if I'd been there..."

"Do you actually want an answer to that question?" Harriet asked doubtfully.

"I don't need one. They wouldn't suspect me in a second. For some reason they think I'd never turncoat on them."

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"You don't seem the type to sell out others for your gain," Emma said with drawn down eyebrows. "You wouldn't have gone so easy on us in training if you had been as callous as they say. I think Gidding would have, to make himself look better. That's the difference in the impression I get."

Despite Emma's words, Harriet continued to study Sin thoughtfully. After a moment she shrugged her shoulders and averted her gaze. "That's assuming, though, that one's gain is monetary. If someone's freedom is at stake, that's not callous. A lot of people hate being chained to the Agency. A lot of people would do anything to get out of the threat of do or be killed."

"Maybe," Emma said doubtfully. She was looking pensively at nothing in particular, her gaze distant. "But to kill a coworker who did you no harm? It seems so cold, especially since they're in the same position as you."

"It's a lot different for some than others," Harriet said a touch impatiently. "You don't have a tracking device implanted in *your* body and a torture device waiting for you if you misbehave. If Vega went rogue tomorrow and planned to burn the compound, I can't say I would honestly blame him."

Sin's gaze remained on Emma as if he were wondering what her response would be without actually being very interested in it. His expression was relatively unreadable and it wasn't entirely clear whether he even cared about the debate or if he was just stirring things up for impending boredom's sake.

Emma leaned back slightly and her gaze moved quickly to Harriet with an assessing look. She seemed taken aback by the response. "Sorry. I was talking about Gidding. I know him well enough to know what type of person he is and that he's basically in the same position as you or me. Agent Vega's circumstances are different."

Emma looked at Sin. "I don't know you at all so I don't really know what you would or wouldn't do. It's none of my business, regardless." She opened her mouth as if she was going to say something more, glanced at Boyd, and then returned her gaze to Sin. She shrugged a little awkwardly and fell silent instead.

Sin didn't bother to reply and looked fairly pleased with himself for disrupting the peaceful brainstorming session about Gidding's motives.

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Patrick frowned slightly but he didn't seem to be aiming it at anyone in particular. He'd seemed disturbed by the conversation and Emma's obvious discomfort with the turn of the conversation likely only made it worse.

"It's possible," he began in his low, deep voice. "That everyone is just on high guard because of the traitor we all know does exist."

Harriet shrugged. She didn't seem at all perturbed by Emma's and her impromptu debate but she was by nature a far more confrontational person in general. "I'm not arguing with that."

"I'm still trying to figure out who that bastard is," Blair commented, kicking his feet out and leaning back into the sofa.

"Whoever it is, they're very good," Boyd said with faintly narrowed eyes. When it became obvious that Sin wasn't planning on sitting on the couch, Boyd moved to the other side to give himself more space. "Even back when Hsin was framed for Bridget's murder, I thought it was possible there was a connection to that and the other strange events. The fact that it's continued and that person was never caught only makes it more likely that it's all related."

"A lot of people think it's the same person who was behind the raid. Whoever raided the compound knew a lot about the compound," Patrick rumbled, eyebrows drawing down.

"Could be," Boyd replied. "All these events have the same effect: causing havoc."

"Must be one seriously pissed off employee to take it out on everyone else too." Blair frowned, crossing his arms and moving his feet back and forth idly.

"Whoever it is probably views the Agency as a whole as their enemy which would include all of its minions and lapdogs too," Harriet said with a raised eyebrow. She stood up, glancing at her watch and moving over to the portal that led to the kitchen area. She could still be seen through the open area through the bar.

"You seem to have a lot of insight on how rogues think," Sin observed mildly. "Given defection any thought lately?"

Harriet snorted quietly from the kitchen and didn't deign to reply as she audibly punched numbers into a cordless phone.

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Boyd furrowed his eyebrows as he thought about the situation. "What seems incongruous to me if it really is related to the raid, is why was there over a year lull?"

"We all figured there was a reason they broke in like that," Blair responded with a shrug. "Maybe they stole sensitive data."

Emma absently played with the beads on her long necklace. "If they did, it's possible it took that long to decipher it, given the level of encryption the Agency typically uses."

"It seems different, though," Boyd said, shaking his head. "In the first place, missions are often assigned within hours or days of the start. This is now real-time data that would have to be intercepted and interpreted. And the Agency doesn't keep the same keys on a regular basis."

"Well, that's why it's an inside job." Blair raised his eyebrows. "Obviously, someone's still on the inside messing up the missions."

"But what was the point?" Boyd pressed. "I know I said that they created havoc and if that's the only reason, it was a success. But if so, why not attack again right after the raid, when the Agency was still vulnerable and in a state of transition? Why wait all this time, then suddenly frame Hsin, and then move on to compromising missions? If it's all related, what was happening during that time that required the pause?"

"I agree that it seems strange but whoever raided the compound obviously made that move for a specific reason and got what they wanted at the time from it because it wasn't attempted again," Patrick put in, as neutral as ever.

He paused, looking at the wall thoughtfully before speaking again. "I wouldn't think the point was theft. Material is stored electronically and a good enough hacker can get that from thousands of miles away. Perhaps it was just the first step in a process of breaking down the system. Decapitating the Agency by killing Connors and having an entire readjustment occur while all of these other events start spiraling out of control when the new administration is coming to take over. If it is related, the person involved has done a wonderful job at making the Agency look inept. It could be that they want the entire chain of command killed off and replaced."

Boyd's eyes narrowed at that and he looked away, gaze absently resting on Harriet before shifting past. He didn't know what he specifically thought about Patrick's point except that despite everything there was still a part of him that resisted the idea of Vivienne dying.

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Emma glanced at Boyd with a faint frown before turning her attention to Patrick. "I hope it's just replacement that happens from now on."

"It'll be interesting to see if everything stops when the new admin rolls into town or whether it'll be unaffected," Blair put in. He drew his eyebrows down in a perplexed manner. "I don't know which way I'd prefer."

"It'd be interesting if Carhart and Vivienne were demoted to field agents," Sin added randomly, completely off topic.

Emma looked over at Sin, mildly startled. Blair looked highly intrigued by the idea.

Boyd shook his head. "Vivienne was never a field agent so if that happened, she would have to become a menial civilian or lose her position at the Agency altogether. I can't even begin to imagine how furious that would make her."

"Imagine her in Payroll," Harriet scoffed as she walked back into the room, still holding the phone. There was irritation written across her striking face but she didn't comment on why that was. Judging from the lack of conversation that had drifted in from the kitchen, it was safe to assume she hadn't gotten in touch with Jon if that was who she'd been calling. The man seemed to always be behind schedule for something to do with Harriet.

"That would be a catastrophe," Boyd said mildly. "She would focus all her control tendencies on our paychecks. We would never receive our money and she would be perpetually angry."

"Sounds a lot like Mona," Blair said blandly. "She's been there, what? Thirty-five years?" He looked around for confirmation.

"Thirty-eight and be nice," Emma replied, making a face. "She isn't that bad. She's just... socially disinclined."

"If you say so," Blair said dubiously. "More than once I've wanted to get her with the Helicopter." He raised his hands in a martial arts gesture. "Some of our enemies have nothing on her glare."

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"That's ridiculous," Emma said, shaking her head. Even so, her tone was more dismissive than harsh. She turned her attention to Harriet. "Is everything okay with Jon?"

"Late as usual," Harriet grumbled, appearing peeved. "It's ridiculous how ADD he is off a damn mission."

"What's he doing?" Boyd asked. Because he didn't smell food and didn't see Harriet spending the time cooking for this gathering, he followed up with, "Picking up the food?"

"Supposed to be," she replied in a clipped tone.

His gaze lingered on her briefly before he nodded. He wondered if Harriet thought something else was going on. Jon had, after all, seemed quite interested in women from what he'd said during their training. Although he seemed to truly care about Harriet, Boyd didn't know Jon well enough to say whether cheating was something he would contemplate. Until there was any evidence, he saw no reason to suspect that was what was happening, though.

"There was a surprising amount of traffic given the time," he offered. "He may be delayed."

"Maybe."

Patrick's eyes were also trained on Harriet as if he were trying to gauge the true source of her irritation but after a moment he looked away. A slight crease was between his eyebrows and he looked troubled but said nothing.

There was a lull in the conversation that afforded Blair a chance to stand and stretch. He absently crinkled his can of beer and headed toward the kitchen with only a brief glance toward Harriet. The sound of aluminum against aluminum was muffled as he presumably threw the can into the recycling in the other room.

Emma's eyes were partially narrowed, her eyebrows twitching down thoughtfully along with the edges of her lips. The expression was brief, her eyes sweeping past Harriet and the direction of the front door, before she tilted her head and crossed one leg over the other. Her dark red skirt rode up on her thighs but the black stockings she wore beneath covered what would have been bared flesh.

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"Did any of you see the batch of rookies this morning?" she asked curiously.

"I did," Blair called from the kitchen. The sound of the refrigerator door opening was followed by, "Anyone want anything?"

Unsurprisingly, Sin didn't answer. He looked increasingly bored to Boyd but the others likely just thought he was being stoic. Boyd wondered how long he would end up staying around after all and felt a little bad about asking him to come since he obviously wasn't enjoying himself. Then again, Sin had seemed to get along with Harriet decently in the past and Boyd thought it was possible that once Jon arrived, they'd get along as well.

Even so, he made a mental note to thank Sin later and, if he continued to be bored all night, make it up to him in whatever way Sin wanted. Which, knowing them, would probably end up being sexual. He didn't think Sin would be getting a bad deal, in that case.

"I'll have a beer," Emma replied. After a glance toward Pat in which something unspoken passed between the two, she amended, "Make it two."

Blair ended up mumbling, "Okay," and then there was the sound of cans moving around and him juggling with them. There was a faint rattling as the refrigerator door was shut.

He came around the corner and without having been asked, pressed a beer into Harriet's hands with one of his silent, intense stares. Boyd thought it was possible something passed between them as well but it was hard to tell with Blair, sometimes.

Considering that Blair and Harriet had been regulars in Kassian's teams in the past, Boyd wouldn't be surprised if Blair knew Harriet well enough to be able to get thoughts across without having to speak them aloud. Or know what she wanted without her saying anything. But Blair was also a fairly strange person and sometimes it seemed like whatever was going through his head didn't always match up with what was going on around him.

Blair distributed the beers to the others and ultimately plopped down in his spot on the couch again. The hiss of the beer cans opening scattered around the room.

"Anyway," Blair said contemplatively, drawing his eyebrows down and staring intently at apparently the blank wall as he took a long drink. "Looks like it'll be interesting."

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"Why?" Boyd questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, it seems like the Agency goes in waves sometimes," Blair responded with a frown. Even so, he still seemed more contemplative than anything. "A few of the recruits looked like a couple of hard asses."

"Prison recruits?" Emma asked and Blair nodded.

"One at least, anyway, I'd venture." He shrugged idly and looked at the others significantly. "He didn't exactly have the crew cut and here-to-follow-orders-Sir! vibe that the military recruits seem to have."

"Rank?" Sin asked, idly interested.

Blair's dark gaze slid to Sin with the same deep stare he'd given everyone else. "Level 1 and up like the rest with no background, far as I know," he said blandly. He paused and flicked a look at Boyd with a slight frown. "Well. Most of the rest, anyway."

There was no reproach or judgment in his tone and Boyd didn't take it as a slight; more than anything, Blair seemed to be amending the statement to be more accurate. Boyd had known for a long time that it had been extremely unusual that he'd been sent straight up to Level 9 without any sort of background at all. Usually, even the recruits who were highly skilled and trained couldn't be recruited at higher than Level 8.

"You know," Emma was saying thoughtfully, her face scrunched up as she didn't seem to be fully paying attention to the rest of the conversation. "I think I saw the kid you're talking about. Asian? Kind of young-looking with tattoos on his arms? Trailing behind the others?"

Blair nodded and took another drink. "That's the one."

"I wonder why they recruited him," Patrick mused out loud, not appearing very impressed with the system of taking felons out of prison.

"The reason they recruit anyone," Sin replied, still maintaining his position against the wall with his muscular arms crossed over his dark grey sweater. "They have a skill that the Agency wants. He could be a master thief, good at infiltration or hacking. Or he could be a good murderer."

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The crease between Patrick's eyebrows reappeared and he opened his mouth to speak but paused. He glanced at Boyd and looked at Sin again before saying dubiously, "A good murderer?"

Sin shrugged, pale green eyes focused on the man. "Good at the art of killing. Maybe he knows how to inflict pain in such a way that would make him a good addition to the staff on the Fourth. Or perhaps he was a good hitman until he finally got caught. Or maybe, he killed someone that the Agency wanted dead already and that brought him to their attention."

Harriet looked suitably distracted by Sin's words that some of her irritation at Jon appeared to fade. Everyone was looking at Sin directly for the first time since they'd arrived. He never spoke this much unless he had to.

Patrick's mouth turned down even more and he shook his head. "That's..."

"That's logic," Sin cut him off flatly, seeming to sense that Patrick was uncomfortable with this side of the Agency. "It's a lot harder to find a good assassin than any other position here. Storms, undercover assignments... You people can fool yourselves into feeling noble about your task. You're told there's a bigger reason. A greater good. Assassination doesn't have that wiggle room. It's just you, your target and a gun. Usually in cold blood and from a distance. They don't even know you're coming."

Patrick's deep brown eyes narrowed at Sin slightly. He didn't appear offended but there was something unnerved about the look on his face. There was obviously something he wanted to say but he didn't seem capable of bringing himself to say it. He shook his head and glanced at Boyd before allowing his gaze to move over to Emma.

Sin didn't seem at all uncomfortable with the heaviness his comments had brought to the conversation. In fact he seemed kind of smug about it. No matter how much his disposition changed, Boyd could tell there was always a part of Sin that enjoyed getting under people's skin.

"When did you become an assassin?" Harriet asked bluntly.

"Officially?" Sin raised his eyebrows. "I was 14. Unofficially, I was 11. Maybe 12. I'm a little unclear about my birthday."

Patrick's gaze snapped to Sin but Harriet just shook her head. "Man, you're weird," she said.

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Sin laughed out loud at that and the tense moment appeared officially broken.

Boyd lingered his gaze on Sin briefly; he always liked to see Sin laugh or smile. It made him feel good, even when he had nothing to do with it. Especially since they'd gone through their fair share of difficulties over the years, he felt drawn to any of Sin's less serious expressions.

He thought that if he'd had his sketchbook with him he would have drawn Sin. It wasn't that the moment was particularly important, or that Sin was showing an expression Boyd had never seen before. It was just the feeling he got that made him want to be able to remember it. No matter what happened in the future, if he could take snapshots of the good parts of his life by drawing them then at least he would always have proof of those memories.

After a moment he dragged his eyes away from his lover and saw Blair looking unaffected by the entire conversation. That dark stare of his was latched onto Sin, unwavering, but his expression was unreadable as he sipped his beer.

Emma, on the other hand, wasn't quite looking at anyone. There was a small smile on her lips reflecting the mood of the room but it didn't make it to her eyes, which were more sober. He wasn't surprised, since she'd shown sympathy during training about the idea of a child being used in an agent's capacity.

"Well," Boyd said idly to draw the conversation back. "I'm sure we'll run into him and the others at some point."

"Who cares?" Harriet grumbled, looking moody again as she checked her watch. "By the time he catches up enough to matter to anyone in this room, half of us will probably be burnt out or dead or something equally horrible."

"What a charming girl, you are," Sin smirked.

"I try my best," Harriet retorted flatly.

The sound of keys jingling and the door bursting open interrupted any further exchanges. Jon blew in, looking more than a little harassed. His thick black hair was windblown, cheeks red and his eyes narrowed as he carried in bags of takeout that smelled strongly of Indian food.

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"And where the hell were you? I could have sworn that Dhaba House was on Breaker Street, not in Sudan," she sneered at her boyfriend, looking unimpressed by his stressed-looking expression.

Jon sighed and disappeared briefly behind the bar to deposit the bags on the dining table. "Well darling, all I can say is Americans can't fucking drive, takeaway boys can't fucking bag-- I smell like I took a bath in a plate of Masala for all the shite leaked all over me in the goddamn car," he griped.

Some of Harriet's hostility seemed to dissipate as she took in Jon's stained shirt and genuine agitation.

On the contrary, Patrick smirked behind his can of beer, appearing to want to laugh out loud. This was the first time most of them had seen Jon lose his cool and it was over such a hilariously domestic issue that amusement seemed to bounce off Patrick and echo on several other expressions as well.

"At least you smell good," Harriet offered with a shrug of her toned shoulders.

"Right. I don't even like Indian food. That's all I fucking ate when I lived in the UK. I had every nearby takeaway on speed dial," he grouched, stripping off his shirt without hesitation and exposing his incredibly toned and muscular upper body.

His pale skin was smooth with the exception of the scars that riddled his body. Boyd noticed Sin's eyes briefly lingering on Jon's bare chest but didn't know what to make of it. He'd never actually seen Sin take notice in another man before.

Harriet nodded, not looking sympathetic in the least as she began taking out containers. "Well you have some stuff upstairs. Thanks for going, Jon."

"No problem, my Nubian goddess," he muttered, still appearing grumpy and not his usually overly charming self when he spoke to Harriet.

She scoffed. "Take it easy with that. I'm from Texas."

Jon just smirked and left to change. The rest of them stirred from their spots, drawn by the delicious smell of the Indian food. Emma helped Harriet get everything ready and by the time Jon returned to the room, they were already starting to eat.

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They didn't talk about anything in particular over dinner. They mused about the new administration coming in a few months and what that would be like, and at one point the discussion returned to the new recruits although they didn't say much more than was already mentioned. Emma brought up a movie she and Pat had seen recently with his kids, which led to Blair blandly observing that she may as well marry him already if she was already doing kid duty and acting like their mom. In typical Blair fashion, it was uncertain whether he was joking or not and Emma had gotten suitably flustered that she forgot to continue with that topic.

Boyd didn't speak much; he found that when he didn't force himself, he had little to say. Even so, he enjoyed the company of the others. He kept an eye on Sin, half expecting him to leave early since he didn't seem that enthused. Still, the food was good and Sin seemed fine with sitting quietly to the side, interjecting in the conversation once more by the end of the night.

Jon remained in a bad mood for a while but by the end he'd started to return to his normal self, although he still seemed a little off his game. Boyd wondered if Jon was so unaccustomed to getting stressed out over something that it took him a little longer to recover. After all, the man typically seemed to do everything practically perfectly on his first try.

The conversation started to die down once the food was finished and the takeout boxes were thrown away. Emma, Pat and Blair seemed content to hang around for a little while longer, chatting about nothing in particular, but Boyd didn't want to make Sin stay any longer than he already had. He didn't have much interest in staying, anyway.

He pointed out the time and said he was getting tired, and made an excuse for them to leave. There was the process of saying goodbye and Emma enthusing that it had been fun and she hoped they'd come again. That maybe a dinner party would have to become a semi-regular thing. Boyd gave a noncommittal answer as they left.

The air was cool on their skin when Boyd and Sin walked away from the house. The lights on in Harriet's house glowed through the windows, warming up the immediate atmosphere. Several of her neighbors had lights on in the houses and a few had their porch lights on even if the rest of the house was dark and silent. Boyd and Sin's steps sounded especially loud with nothing else happening on the block. The Halloween decorations on one of the houses shifted uneasily in the breeze. The way the ripped, white cloth danced and twisted in the dark would have seemed eerie if Boyd had been in the mood.

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He looked over, assessing his partner for any sign of what Sin had thought. He didn't imagine Sin would be interested in attending another dinner party in the future but he wondered whether Sin considered it to be a completely wasted night. He couldn't read anything in particular in his expression, though.

"Did you have an enjoyable time?" Sin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Boyd couldn't tell if Sin was being sarcastic or not so he simply shrugged and dug his car keys out of his pocket. "For the most part, yes. At times the conversation bored me because I had nothing to contribute but overall it was fine." He walked around to the driver's side and looked at Sin over the roof of the car. "You?"

"It was curious."

Boyd got into the car and waited until Sin did as well before he continued the conversation. His car started up nearly silently. "How so?"

Sin shrugged, threading a hand through his long black hair. "People react very interestingly to me. To us, as well."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down, looking at Sin askance and turning the car off Harriet's block toward the main road. "You, I get. But us?"

"Perhaps," Sin started slowly, rolling the word on his tongue as he glanced at his lover. "They think you are my keeper."

"What are you talking about?" Boyd asked, not bothering to hide his confusion.

"They just act strangely. As if they are either too intimidated to be completely forthright when they address me or they want to ensure that it's okay with you if they engage me directly or something along those lines."

"I think they're probably intimidated. Emma, at least," Boyd amended. "I didn't notice Blair or Harriet acting strangely and Pat's hard to read sometimes. I don't know why you got the impression they needed my okay, though."

"Because they look at you before speaking to me," Sin replied blandly.

Boyd had to take a moment to think back on the night. He hadn't noticed anything particularly out of the ordinary at the time but when he thought about it more, he did

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remember Emma and Pat doing that more than once. Harriet, Jon and Blair never seemed to. But then, Harriet had been around Sin a few times, Jon wasn't the type to do that sort of thing, and Blair was... Blair.

Even so, Pat and Emma were enough that Boyd could imagine that being irritating or uncomfortable from Sin's perspective.

"I guess they did," he acknowledged with a small frown. He glanced at Sin. "I don't think they meant anything by it, though. They probably just didn't know what to do with themselves."

"Maybe," Sin said noncommittally. "But you don't know what they're thinking."

"I don't," Boyd had to agree. He took a moment to concentrate fully on driving as he merged onto one of the few streets in the city that always seemed to be busy, no matter what time of day or night. "But you don't either." He looked over at Sin. "Have you noticed that happening with anyone other than Emma and Pat tonight?"

"Yes. It happens a lot when we are together."

"Oh." Boyd considered that. "With many different people?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's irritating," Boyd said, unimpressed by this information.

His eyes narrowed slightly. It irritated him if people really did think of him as Sin's keeper, because for all that Sin could tear him apart in a few seconds flat, he still thought of him as his equal.

"I'm sorry I never noticed," he continued. "I'll call them on it next time."

Sin snorted. "Why bother? People are never going to react to me in a way that you'd want them to. And I don't exactly need you to defend my honor."

Boyd gave him a sidelong look. "But what if I want to?"

"I'd still tell you not to," Sin replied blandly.

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"Alright," Boyd relented. "I won't say anything." He turned on the last street before he had to make a decision about which place he was headed. He gave Sin a curious glance. "Am I bringing you to your place or mine?"

Sin shrugged. "Either is fine. What do you prefer?"

"I don't have a preference," Boyd replied easily. "I just wondered if you wanted to spend the night with me. I felt bad making you go to the dinner since you didn't seem to enjoy it." A quirked smile flashed across his face. "If you're interested, I thought I'd make it up to you."

There was a brief pause and a small smile played over Sin's full mouth finally. "Well. Since you're offering."

Boyd's smile widened and became pleased. He took the turn toward his house, since it was closer. "Good, because if you'd said no I would've been thinking of it all night. I've been wanting to kiss you since halfway through the party."

"Am I that irresistible?" Sin asked dryly, although his smile inched up a bit more. "Is my blank face that attractive?"

Boyd had to chuckle. "Sadly, for me-- yes. You could probably be staring at paint drying and I'd think you're the sexiest person in the room. And it didn't help when you laughed earlier." He glanced at Sin again, his softened expression showing that despite the slightly teasing smile, he was being honest. "I always love to see that."

Sin just shook his head and looked out the window so that Boyd couldn't see his expression anymore. "You're insane."

"Maybe," Boyd said lightly as he turned onto 5th Avenue North. "But somehow, I doubt you mind."

Abeyance

It was snowing outside, which usually annoyed Sin but at the moment the white flakes drifting down from the sky actually seemed kind of nice.

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He looked out the window and wondered what other people were doing right now. Normal people. People who were celebrating today because it was Thanksgiving, not because unlike he and Boyd, it was the first time they were seeing each other in a week due to a particularly obnoxious seek and assassinate mission of Sin's.

He'd missed Boyd's birthday and that fact had irritated him more than he'd thought it would. But he'd wanted to actually make an attempt to make the day nice for his partner. He'd even bought a normal present this time. Instead of a bloody necklace from a long deceased friend, he'd gotten Boyd a SIG Sauer P229R DAK.

It was just the kind of handgun that suited Boyd as his first personal weapon. There was minimal recoil, breakdown was extremely easy as was cleaning the weapon, and it had a smooth trigger pull. The DAK trigger had two reset points that made it easier to double-tap and pull the trigger again on the same round in case of a failure to fire. It had two barrels that could easily be swapped out, with different calibers. It was also one of the most accurate guns that Sin had ever used which would be especially of use for Boyd who was still perfecting his aim.

The SIG P229 was black with a Nitron finish that helped protect against bluing. Sin figured given Boyd's penchant for everything black, it was an appropriate choice.

Sin looked down at Boyd, who appeared to be dozing. He was sprawled elegantly across Sin's chest, the lamp in the corner casting golden light across him. Pale shadows rose and fell with the angles of his body. Sin could see the relief of his toned muscles-- the result of months of hard work-- and the faint blond hair that was nearly invisible along his arms. In this lighting, Boyd's long blond hair looked even more golden than usual, and the lack of any tension in his body made him a warm, comforting weight.

He looked relaxed, sated and gorgeous.

It was a perfect winter night. All they needed was a roaring fire and the cabin in Vermont and things would be picturesque enough to be nearly sickening.

The thought caused the side of Sin's mouth to twitch up slightly and he ran a hand through Boyd's hair. The other man stirred and glanced up at Sin with a mirroring smile that was alert enough to give away the fact that he hadn't actually been sleeping at all. In fact, there seemed to be a shadow across his face that had nothing to do with the dim lighting. It was out of place with the perfection that Sin had been thinking about the night.

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He watched Boyd for a moment and tried to figure out what could have gone wrong but couldn't think of anything. Immediately upon returning from his debriefing with Vivienne, Sin had gone to his apartment to retrieve the vaulted box with the gun and had hurried to Dhaba House to pick up some of Boyd's favorite Indian food. He'd actually pushed himself into close proximity to a civilian by taking a taxi to Boyd's house so it wouldn't get cold.

They'd feasted on lamb Vindaloo, jasmine rice and naan bread. After dinner, Boyd had seemed truly pleased by the gift. The smile he'd given Sin had seemed genuine and touched in a way that didn't normally happen. He'd thanked Sin before it turned into a deep, languid kiss. Boyd had taken apart his gun and put it back together five times, talking about going to the shooting range together sometime. They'd shared a bottle of wine and retired to the bedroom.

Nothing had gone wrong. It was almost irritating to think that some unknown anomaly was ruining what Sin had thought was, for once, a smooth and peaceful birthday, even if it was belated. This time there were no mental breakdowns. This time no one was thought dead or banished from the Agency. This time they were actually on speaking terms and everything.

"What?" he demanded accusingly.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down and shifted up so he could see Sin better. A small frown curved his lips but he looked more confused and caught off guard than anything.

"What?"

"Something is upsetting you."

A flash of guilt went through Boyd's eyes and he looked away. "Oh." His frown increased and he settled down on top of Sin again, returning to his favorite position with his ear resting over Sin's heartbeat. His fingers absently ran along Sin's side. "Sorry. It's not you. I was trying to figure out when to bring something up without ruining the mood."

A low sigh escaped Sin's lips. "What happened now?"

Boyd smiled to himself mirthlessly. "I was thinking of waiting until tomorrow but I guess there's no point now, is there?"

The question was rhetorical and although there was a slight pause, Sin got the impression Boyd was gathering his thoughts rather than waiting for an answer. After a

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moment, he pushed himself up again, studying Sin. "I was assigned a mission the other day. A solo."

The sentence was innocuous enough. Sin had just come from a solo and they'd barely batted an eye at the information when he had been alerted. Something about Boyd's comment was off, something about how serious he looked.

There was really no other explanation.

"It's either long term. Or a valentine."

"It's both." Boyd's tone was heavier than usual and his eyes narrowed faintly. "Probably. It's an extended undercover."

Tension seeped into Sin's frame and he sat up entirely, his pale green eyes focusing on his lover. Jealousy and irritation welled up inside of him. Irritation that quickly turned to fury at the organization that controlled their lives so explicitly.

After everything that had happened, after finally becoming a relatively stable pair...

"What's the mission?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Boyd frowned, taking in Sin's expression. He reached out, briefly running his fingers through the ends of Sin's hair before he sighed and dropped his hand. "There's a business called Cyclone that seems to be a front for," he hesitated, as if trying to find a better word, then gave up. "Human trafficking. They take youth off the street and sort through them somehow. A portion of them get sold to Janus as soldiers."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "They want you sold to Janus?"

Boyd shook his head. "No. It's unlikely they'd look at me and think I'd make a good soldier. I got the impression there are other deep cover agents being sent in later for that reason, though."

There was a pause as Sin stared at him blankly. "So then what are you meant to do?"

"Cyclone's founder is Aleixo Forakis, an extremely wealthy man who apparently has a preference for my type. It sounds like the people who aren't sold as soldiers get picked through and maybe get sold elsewhere. Forakis has a number of households and at each place he keeps a," his eyebrows twitched down and he seemed to hesitate once

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more for the proper word. He shook his head once. "Slave. They want me to catch his attention and get close to him."

"How are you going to get picked up by his people?" Sin asked, brow furrowing. His stomach was sinking as the conversation progressed. It was a struggle to not show how frustrated and disturbed by this he was beginning to feel.

"Intel says a lot of people have disappeared from the Bowery over the last few months." Boyd's expression was mostly neutral as he explained but Sin didn't have to be a mind reader to see in his eyes that he wasn't happy about this assignment. "They want me to start there, pretending to be homeless. I'll probably have to be there at least a few days until I can figure out how or where to get picked up."

"I see."

Sin's mouth turned down and he shifted, lying back on the bed so that he could look up at the ceiling. The description of the mission gave him an odd feeling. The uncertainty of it all. There were a lot of ifs involved. What if it took Boyd weeks to get picked up? What if it took him even longer to catch the man's attention? What if he couldn't catch his attention, what would the Agency do then? Pull him out or leave him in to see where it led?

What if two months turned into three or four? What if Boyd failed? What if something happened to him completely unrelated to the mission? Sin had been to the Bowery. He saw the type of people who ended up there and what they became. Boyd was a good fighter and a good agent but anything could happen.

"And what if it takes longer?" he asked finally.

"I don't know," Boyd had to admit and the shadow of doubt from before became more prominent. He drew his eyebrows down, his hand resting on Sin's chest. He looked worried; uncertain.

"I'm going in alone without any way to communicate. I can only assume that if I stay in the Bowery for a month or two and don't see or hear a hint of Cyclone, the mission will have to be aborted and I'll return home. But the Marshal seemed... very invested in this mission and I got the feeling she's not going to take, 'Sorry, didn't see them' as an answer. In that event, they'd probably reassign me to another place to try again."

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"I see." This time when Sin spoke, he didn't try to hide the weight of his words. Something that felt very close to hopelessness began to seep into him and cast away all traces of the happiness that he'd felt only moments ago.

This was the way it would always be. For one reason or another, something would always try to keep them apart.

Boyd's gaze was heavy as he studied Sin's face. He ran his fingers down Sin's cheek and into the long strands of black hair. His expression twisted unhappily and he said quietly, "I wish I could say no. I don't want to be anywhere but here with you."

"I wish we could leave."

"I know." Boyd dropped his gaze and laid down on Sin's chest again. "I do too. I hate this. It seems like any time we manage to move forward, something happens to push us back."

Sin's lips thinned and he closed his eyes briefly. "When are you expected to leave?"

"In two days," Boyd said quietly, his voice slightly muffled as he shifted his face further against Sin's chest. "I was worried you wouldn't get back from your mission before I had to leave."

The words hit Sin harder than he expected. He shifted away from Boyd violently and jumped to his feet, anger abruptly taking over the depression that had started to settle in. "Are you fucking serious, Boyd?"

Boyd sat up, looking startled. He stared at Sin with an expression that shifted toward slightly guarded. "Yes."

Sin turned away and exhaled slowly. He braced his hands against the wall instead of punching his fist through it like he wanted to and let his head tilt forward as hair curtained his face. He took several deep breaths, trying to remember the calming techniques that Ann had taught him so long ago. The anger and frustration didn't leave entirely. He was too wound up with emotion and too ready to direct his fury irrationally onto everything around him.

So he took another deep breath and exhaled slowly before speaking.

"Why did you wait to tell me?"

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"Because I wanted to enjoy the day with you. You were being so damn thoughtful; it made me happy." There was a hint of wistfulness to Boyd's tone. "It's been years since I had anything this relaxing around my birthday and I knew as soon as I brought this up, the mood would change. I was trying to delay that as long as I could."

Sin just shook his head and glared at the wall. He didn't know what to say in response. He would have liked to have had more time to process what was going on but it didn't matter in the end.

"I don't have a good feeling about this at all," he said finally, his tone low and harsh.

There was brief silence and then Sin could hear the quiet squeak of the bed and rustle of sheets. Boyd's bare feet padded across the floor and he moved behind Sin, wrapping his arms around him from behind and resting his cheek against Sin's shoulder.

"I don't either," Boyd said, subdued. "I'm worried. It'll be my first extended solo undercover, which would be enough on its own. But with everything else..." He trailed off.

Sin shook his head again, mouth drawn down into a frown but he pushed away from the wall to face Boyd. "What exactly did she say about it?"

Boyd sighed and stepped back, running a hand through his hair as he looked away. There was a dark cast to his features, his eyebrows drawn down as he studied the bookcases along the wall. "She said they anticipate it taking a month or two once I'm picked up, which shouldn't be terrible. She said I should anticipate going through the sorting process. They don't know exactly what that will be. After that I'll probably have to wait around awhile until Forakis shows up."

"Wait around *where*?"

"I don't know," Boyd said with a frown. "I asked her and she said it was unimportant. I can only guess they must have some sort of facility for people as they wait to be picked through."

"And these slaves that he keeps for his own homes," Sin said sharply, eyes narrowing. "What does he have them do?"

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"He--" Boyd searched Sin's face for a moment and then sighed. He sat on the edge of the bed and slouched forward, meeting Sin's eyes. "He fucks them. I'll have to do whatever he wants."

Sin cut his eyes away and stared down at the bed silently.

It was ruffled with evidence of their previous sexual activities. It was amazing how he'd gone from peacefully lounging there to feeling... like this, in the space of only a few moments. He'd gone from enjoying the feel of Boyd against him to being told that Boyd would be leaving for months and likely be fucking someone else during that time.

It was a testament to how screwed up everything was. Even when things seemed normal and good, they never would be. Nothing ever would be. Someone else would be pulling their strings for the rest of their lives while Boyd was prostituted out in the process.

He could feel the jealousy burning at the idea of Boyd being with someone else but even then, it was dull and muffled. In the long run, he knew it would mean nothing. He'd known this would happen all along. He'd prepared himself for it. But it still made him want to smash in someone's face. Preferably the powers that be. Or Vivienne.

It was the time that bothered him the most, though. The separation for so long with no contact. Even if something bad did happen, no one would likely tell him for even longer...

Sin realized he'd lapsed into silence and he glanced over at Boyd briefly. The blond man was watching him with his brow furrowed and Sin just shook his head before saying bitterly, "Things never work out for us. It's always the calm before the storm. Maybe it will always be this way until we finally fucking die in this place."

Boyd's his eyes narrowed. A hint of the familiar stubbornness crossed his face. "Maybe but I'm not going to let it stop me from always returning to you. They can throw what they want at me and I'll just get more efficient to minimize the amount of time I have to be away. They may be able to fuck with my life any time they want but I'm not going to let them win."

There was another long pause before Sin sighed and reached down, running his fingers slowly through Boyd's hair. The strands were smooth and silky to the touch, growing long again like the way he remembered when they first met.

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Sin could feel the anxiety and tension setting into his shoulders. He could feel the anger building inside of him. He felt helpless. Impotent. He didn't want this. He didn't want Boyd gone. He couldn't even process how it would feel to go from being with Boyd most nights to not seeing him again for months. To knowing that somewhere, Boyd was being used by some stranger.

"I don't want you to go."

The stubbornness in Boyd's expression shifted, overcome by something more melancholy. He placed his hand over Sin's, their fingers curling against each other. After a moment he tugged Sin down until Sin knelt by the bed in front of him. He pulled Sin close, wrapping his arms tightly around him and burying his face in Sin's hair.

"You'll wait for me, right?" he asked, sounding uncertain and maybe a little afraid. "Even if it takes me longer to finish you'll still wait for me?"

Sin frowned and looked at him as best he could. "What?"

"What if--" Boyd cut himself off, the uncertainty growing. "It sounds terrible to ask because I'm probably going to have to have sex with a stranger, but what if I can't get back right away? What if--" He pulled back and frowned to himself, his fingers tightening on Sin as he searched his eyes unhappily. "Would you have sex with others while I'm gone?"

The frown deepened into an annoyed scowl. "No. Why the hell would I do that? That's ridiculous."

Relief unmistakably crossed Boyd's face, removing the furrow between his eyebrows. His lips lifted slightly on the edges in a somber smile. "Good." His fingers sifted through the hair at the back of Sin's neck. "I don't want to share you with anyone."

"Too bad I don't have that option," Sin said sourly.

"I wish we did." Boyd's fingers continued to thread through Sin's hair. His voice was laced with displeasure. "I wish / did. I'm not looking forward to that part of the mission."

Sin shrugged silently, his pale green eyes focused on the carpet. After a moment he sighed quietly and got onto the bed. He let himself fall backwards. "Fuck everything."

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Boyd crawled up the bed and stretched out, settling down on top of Sin the way they'd been situated before the topic of the mission. He was silent a moment, looking pensive with his eyebrows furrowed and his lips tilted down on the edges. His hand was resting on Sin's side and he absently ran his thumb along the smooth skin.

"Are you doing anything the next few days?"

Sin shook his head wordlessly, extending his arm to pull Boyd closer to him until their bodies were flush against each other.

Boyd moved deeper into Sin's hold, sliding his arms around Sin and shifting his ear over Sin's heart. "I have to go to Unit 16 tomorrow but otherwise I want to spend the time with you."

There was the barest motion of movement as Sin nodded. He wanted to say something more. That he wouldn't have wanted to spend the time any other way. That whatever else he'd have been doing didn't matter. That Boyd meant more to him than anything else in existence. That Sin never wanted him to leave the bed. That he never wanted to let him go into the uncertainties of tomorrow.

But he didn't and as they lay there intertwined and Boyd really did fall into a drifting sleep, Sin wished he had. There weren't very many moments when he expressed the extent of his feelings verbally. It never came out right when he tried. But he wished he hadn't let the moment pass.

He wished he could recapture it but he settled for remembering the feel of Boyd against his chest. For the next few months, that memory would keep him going. And it would have to be enough.

Endgame

Carhart had taken to wearing earphones at his desk.

The concept had been introduced to him by a new agent who'd just made the leap from trainee to the field. After one particularly grim evaluation where Carhart had scowled into the distance rather than give the trainees his sole attention as per usual, Agent

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Rothland had given him one of those impish smiles that would likely land him in the candidacy for youth undercover roles and said slyly:

"Music helps, you know. With the internal noise."

And so it did.

The small folder full of digital music that he'd compiled over the years was finally getting use. It was mostly older acid jazz but he didn't pay attention to the media enough to know more current songs. Zero 7 was more than helpful in silencing out all of that "internal noise."

Having Victoria stooped awkwardly at the filing cabinet across the room, was not.

Carhart's blue eyes remained focus on the screen and he shifted in the seat, rolling his shoulders back.

Time was moving quickly and the new Marshal and her crew would be arriving within days. She'd sent down the house cleaning list in advance; the people she wanted removed or terminated immediately after she arrived. The people she didn't want to waste time dealing with, likely because she wanted to spend her first few weeks focusing on the less black-and-white candidates for demotion, removal and termination.

He idly wondered if he was on the list for demotion. At the moment he only had access to the list of Fourth inmates who were being written off to ensure that they really had nothing left to give. He wouldn't know for sure where his own future lay and likely wouldn't right until it happened.

His record was nearly impeccable but he wouldn't be surprised if she was bringing in her own people to replace the key players at the American division. People she could trust solely; people who she knew would be her eyes and ears regarding everything.

Carhart wouldn't be surprised if Vivienne, he and the rest of the generals were all demoted or put on watch in some way. And at the moment, he was torn about whether or not he cared.

The job was wearing on him and the case rotating on his computer screen was just an example of why.

Detainee #359/Jane Doe.

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The Fourth Floor Detainment Center was getting cleaned out as well. Prisoners who hadn't broken and were taking up resources, prisoners who had already exhausted their information or who were out of the game too long to provide anything new... All of them were being given the axe. Literally.

Jane Doe was slated to die.

Something about it put a bad taste in his mouth. Seeing the images of her made something close to pity bubble to the surface which was unsettling in itself. He wasn't supposed to feel sorry for her. She'd attacked them and played a role in the deaths of many of the Agency's people.

But then again, she was likely just a foot soldier who'd been doing what she was told. And look where she was now because of it.

Jane Doe wasn't even a shade of her former self. The tall tough fighter who'd actually gotten a couple of blows in on Sin was a husk. Months and months of physical and mental torture had left her eyes glazed and dull. Her skin was chalk white and sagging from the pounds that had melted off her frame. Her hands trembled violently when she tried to use them, she was incontinent and she was said to scream in her sleep every night.

She knew she was going to die. If not by their hand, she wouldn't last much longer in the outside world anyway. Her body was fragile and he thought it unlikely that she would last long anyway without the nutrients that they forced into her body, forcing it to keep animating itself as long as it could possibly be useful.

But it wasn't anymore.

Carhart's gaze was riveted on Jane Doe's picture and it didn't stray even when Victoria approached his desk. He'd been intent on the file for longer than she'd been in the room; replaying every interview the woman had been subject to, every transcript.

He wasn't learning anything new now but he still didn't shift his eyes. Not because he thought he would garner some new information from looking at the deteriorated woman on the screen but because it was better than looking at the blond trying to get his attention.

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Even so, when she cleared her throat loud enough to be heard over his music, Carhart scowled and muted it with one flick of the touch screen.

"Yes?"

She stood there silently for a moment. He could see her shifting uncomfortably in his peripheral vision. "Can you take the earphones out, Za-- General Carhart? Please."

He debated leaving them in but it was technically rude to do so and he wasn't trying to play childish games.

So instead he whipped them out and raised steady cerulean blue eyes to her gorgeously tortured expression. "What is it, Victoria?" he asked without emotion, raising an eyebrow with some impatience.

"I'm resigning from this position," she said all in a hurry, crossing her arms over the oversized and off-the-shoulder grey sweater she wore. The black leggings and heels she wore beneath made her legs appear to go on forever. If it weren't for recent events, he likely would have fucked her right there on the desk.

"Okay," he said blankly, unsurprised. He was surprised this hadn't come sooner, actually.

A frown dipped the corners of her mouth as Victoria's cobalt eyes narrowed. "I was a fucking good employee, Zach."

"Did I say otherwise?" Carhart asked blandly, already bored with whatever drama was in the works. Why did women persist in arguments that had already come and gone without the screaming and theatrics they'd anticipated? It seemed sometimes that a lack of response was more unsettling to them than anger.

"If you had appreciated my work, I'd think you'd try to dissuade me," she said in a steely tone.

"Hmm."

Carhart sat up straighter and reclined his chair so that he could get the full view of her. She was possibly more enticing when riled up. It occurred to him that he could let the incident pass, get over his wounded ego and just go back to having her as a lover. He

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may have done just that if the circumstances were different. But they weren't and he couldn't enjoy her company anymore because of it.

"Okay, Victoria. I valued your work as my assistant but due to the fact that you fucked Emilio Vega in my apartment, I cannot in fact say that I'll miss the sight of your face in my office."

Her face colored and she looked away quickly.

It was the first time he'd spoken the words aloud. They'd never actually spoken about it at all. He'd returned to his apartment after a nearly week-long trip in Canada to find her clothes scattered around and the unmistakable sound of intense fucking emanating from his own bedroom. Judging from the reek of sweat and bodily fluids, it had been going on for quite some time.

But he hadn't confronted them during the act. He hadn't given Emilio the dramatic showdown he'd likely been expecting.

"I was drunk," Victoria said steadily but the thickness of her voice gave away the emotion she must have been feeling. "I don't even remember the night. I was blacked out completely. The last thing I remember is talking about cars."

"Mmm."

"I'm not lying," she snapped and with strength that emphasized the conviction that flashed in her lovely eyes. "I swear to fucking God, Zach. I would never do that-- I'm not that type of woman. I don't understand why-- I just can't even begin to explain. I don't even remember drinking that much..."

Victoria trailed off and the miserable, confused look on her face made Carhart sigh tiredly. He raised his hands to his face, massaging his temples slowly.

"I don't expect you to care about my excuses. It was inexcusable and horrible but Zach, I really just don't get it! I even tried to confront Emilio but he wouldn't even speak to me. He just seemed irritated that I was still in the apartment. I haven't seen him since."

Carhart scoffed and dropped his hands, refocusing on her. "I'm sure between missions and looking for somewhere to live, he has his hands full."

There was a brief silence before she ventured very carefully, "You're kicking him out?"

Interludes

"Of course," he replied flatly.

Another silence and she dropped her eyes again, he was sure to try to hide the satisfaction she seemed to get out of that revelation. It seemed obvious to him that she blamed the entire situation on Emilio but for some reason she didn't want the General to know that. Perhaps she thought it would enrage him further-- the fact that she wasn't taking her share of the blame. Perhaps, he thought dully, she hadn't even realized exactly what had gone on that night to the fullest extent.

"Victoria."

She looked at him again.

"You do realize he drugged you."

Her eyes narrowed again, mouth falling open. She shook her head, stopped, and just stared at him.

"There were still glasses littering my living room when I returned home the following afternoon. I took the one with the lipstick stains over to Analytics and there were traces of Pandora in the glass. Unless, of course, you willingly took it..."

"No!" she shouted in denial but the sound was strained, hoarse. Victoria looked more drained and tired than outraged. "I wouldn't-- I told you, I don't even drink usually because of my medication. I'm-- I'm surprised that I didn't have some kind of reaction from..."

Victoria trailed off when she caught sight of the flat look on his face.

"Small doses of Pandora heighten your sex drive and release inhibitions. It does not cause amnesia. The fact that you blacked the entire night out is a reaction."

She didn't respond and they just looked at each other for a long stretch of time. When she didn't speak again, Carhart returned his gaze to the computer. When he stared at Jane Doe's face, the entire situation with Victoria and Emilio seemed inconsequential.

"If you knew this. If you knew he drugged me, why are you still treating me this way?"

Interludes

He'd seen that one coming and his response was automatic, "Because, Victoria, I have no idea what your intentions were that night. You know Emilio, you know his reputation. As far as you told me, you were disinclined to even speak to the man. What were you doing in my house drinking with him late in the night? Did it not occur to you what the guards posted throughout the building would think when they saw a woman who was known to be my lover, coming home with Emilio when I was known to be out of the country?"

"It wasn't like that! He approached me and claimed he wanted us to become friends. He said that he thought you and I were going to get serious and he didn't want to not get along with me. He said--"

"You're a fucking gullible idiot," Carhart cut her off bluntly. "Or pretending to be one. I can't tell which one it is and frankly, I'm not going to continue having a relationship with you and wonder if you're bullshitting me or not."

Victoria took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, as if she were trying to calm the storm that was brewing in her expression. "I was trying to be nice to your best friend."

He gave her another unimpressed look. "A friend who you had previously dismissed as a unrepentant asshole who mistreats women. If I may recall, just as recently as two weeks before the incident, you had commented on how stupid women were for falling for his charm. You'd commented on how you didn't understand how a woman like Agent Guerrero could have..."

The sentence trailed off as something in his memory suddenly sparked into clear focus. The image of Guerrero in his apartment, of the conversation with Emilio after-- and the image of Jane Doe currently hovering on the screen.

"I didn't plan this!" Victoria yelled with obvious frustration. "I don't understand how you can--"

Carhart waved her off, all interest in the conversation gone. "Leave."

"Zach--"

"Get out. I have something to do."

He could see her trembling with anger out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't care anymore. The argument suddenly seemed very far away.

Interludes

"You know what?" Victoria demanded in the nastiest tone he'd ever heard her use. "Fuck the both of you."

He made no reply.

She turned and left, slamming the door violently. Fortunately, he'd moved everything breakable from the nearby shelf.

Carhart's hands were selecting items on the touch screen before his brain was even fully processing what he was doing. His ears were still ringing from the sound of the door slamming when Elaine Guerrero's file appeared on the screen.

Carhart used the pad of his finger to drag her image alongside the first picture they'd taken of Jane Doe.

The similarities were stark. The caramel complexion, thick black hair, deep brown eyes and even the same lithe build. They were both tall for women and slender but muscular. The two women could have been sisters, they were so similar.

Tension began to seep into Carhart as an onslaught of thoughts began to scream in his brain. There wouldn't be any music capable of silencing out this cacophony. But above it all, one strain of thought, one memory stood out.

The General's eyes closed and he saw very clearly the morning he'd come home to find Guerrero naked in his apartment. He very clearly remembered the conversation with Emilio after the woman had fled. He remembered Emilio's reason for sleeping with Guerrero multiple times.

"She reminds me of someone I know. A girl from 4FF," Emilio had said darkly, handsome face drawn in the brooding expression he often got.

"Someone I fucked over."

And fucked her over, he most certainly had.

===

The Tower cafeteria was nearly deserted when Carhart entered and he was highly thankful for that.

Interludes

He'd only been roused from his reverie by the violent protests of his stomach, not because he looked forward to being around other people. It would have been easy to return to his own quarters to eat but the possibility of running into Emilio at the moment was not high on his list of things to deal with until he had everything sorted out.

The only problem was, he found himself unable to actually figure out exactly what he was supposed to do.

The General had spent the better part of the last several hours analyzing every memory of every conversation he'd had with Emilio since he'd returned. He'd mentally cataloged every comment alluding to the man's return, every reaction to conversations surrounding the raid and Marshal Connors' death.

He'd made a mental list of every vague comment Emilio had ever made about the aforementioned things and the results of that list had actually chilled Carhart.

The General was well aware of his own failings. He was well aware of the fact that he could choose to ignore something when he wanted to. He was well aware of how easy it was for him to not see what was right in front of him. He could just ignore it until it became an issue. Until he couldn't ignore it anymore.

It was how he dealt with things that disturbed or frightened him.

He'd done it in the past, when he'd tried so hard to ignore the obvious infatuation Emilio had had for him since their partnership had begun. He'd done it with Sin, when Sin had confessed that he believed he'd killed his father. And after Emilio had come back, Carhart had done it then. He'd ignored the clues and the veiled comments; he'd refused to evaluate Emilio's words even when at times, it seemed that Emilio had *wanted* him to figure it all out.

Emilio had given that away on more than one occasion but the one that stood out the most was when Sin had once again been sentenced to die for Investigator Monaghan's death.

During their argument about what course of action to take Emilio had snarled viciously, *"If you knew what I had to do to get back here, you'd fucking know that the possibility of termination doesn't scare me."*

Interludes

Even then, the comment had made Carhart's stomach churn. He'd had an inkling then, a bubbling to the surface of a revelation, but still... he'd pushed it aside. Focus on the matter at hand, he'd told himself sternly. Deal with it later. Ignore it for now.

What an idiot he was.

After that bit of self-deprecating disgust, Carhart had spent more time watching the interviews with Jane Doe again. He'd read the transcripts and notes for the second time that day. And unlike the first reading, this time things had begun falling into place.

The interrogators of the Fourth had gotten bits of information from her here and there but it hadn't been anything of value. She hailed from Argentina, her father was a rich businessman, she spent most of her time in Mexico and Central America doing odd jobs for different black market groups but she had never specified which ones or for whom she had worked.

It wasn't exactly evidence that she was a member of 4FF but by her own admission, she'd been a part of something similar. But there was nothing concrete. Members of 4FF were very rarely photographed and in all of his research, Carhart had never heard of a woman being a solid member.

But Emilio himself had admitted that there was a woman who he'd known in the group. A woman that had looked like Agent Guerrero...

It hadn't been enough, though. The connection wasn't strong enough. It hadn't been until Carhart had replayed the level 10 training interrogations out of pure desperation. He'd remembered something else bizarre about Jane Doe but he'd nearly given up before getting there.

Watching their clumsy interrogations had been irritating when Carhart just wanted facts. He hadn't had real hope of getting anything from watching it but then Boyd's turn came and one tidbit gave Carhart real pause.

The woman had actually asked about Sin. Directly. She'd seemed abnormally interested in him even considering the fact that he had been the one who had detained her. And then she'd asked about his ethnicity.

Why would that matter? Why, unless there was something about his appearance that struck her.

Interludes

And then Carhart remembered Sin's report of what had happened the night of the raid. How he'd made the idle comment of how oddly the woman had reacted to him.

It hadn't made sense then but it made sense now. Anyone who saw Emilio and Sin would say that they looked so much alike they could be brothers. Jane Doe clearly hadn't been expecting a doppelganger of her leader to be bringing her down.

Carhart realized that he'd been standing in the middle of the line with his tray in his hand for nearly a full minute when the cashier gave him a searching stare.

The General cleared his throat and walked over to the register, paying the civilian employee for the platter of grilled tilapia and Spanish rice before going to sit down. He'd automatically chosen a lonesome table in a far corner before a headful of black curls caught his eye.

Before Carhart even realized what he was doing, he found himself walking over to Doug.

The Training Instructor was hunched over a palm panel with an empty crumb-filled plate now doubling as an ashtray as he calmly sucked on a cigar. Smoking wasn't exactly allowed in the facility but Carhart highly doubted that anyone was going to challenge the formidable Australian.

"Hello, Douglas."

Doug squinted up at him through the halo of unruly curls. "Yo."

Carhart placed his tray on the opposite side of the table and sat down. He stared at Doug and didn't move to touch the food. It smelled delicious but Carhart found that even though his body was demanding nourishment, he had no real appetite. The afternoon's revelations were too disturbing and now that he'd digested all of the information, he felt sick.

Sick and horrified by his own blindness, but somehow still not as shocked as he thought he should be. He should be completely thrown. He should feel completely betrayed and at a loss. But he didn't.

Because it was something that Emilio would do. It was just like him.

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Emilio, who only cared about what was in his own self-interest, who had always thought of the most flashiest and out of control spur-of-the-moment plans to accomplish his goal. Emilio, whose loyalty was solely to himself. Emilio, who felt that if his own life was in danger he would do whatever it took, no matter how psychotic, to protect himself.

The raid had never been anything other than a diversion to kill Connors. To get him out of the way so that Emilio could come back. To divert attention from him, when he did come back. A clean-cut assassination would have made them suspect Emilio who had been on Connor's hit list since back when he'd disappeared. But a full assault on the compound? They would have immediately suspected one of their more dangerous enemies. No one would think Emilio was crazy enough to show his face after pulling that off.

But he was. And he had.

He'd been responsible for a number of Agent deaths just so he could get Connors out of the way.

Carhart looked down at the grilled fish on his plate.

But was that really it? Was that really all there was to it? Had he really just been getting Connors out of the way? Or... was it something else? Everyone had always assumed the raid was tied with everything else that was happening in the Agency. What if it was?

What if Emilio had something to do with all of it?

"Did you come over here to fuckin' stare at me?" Doug demanded, as grumpy as ever as he glared at the General. "Cause I don't remember inviting you."

What if all of this time, Emilio had been the one feeding someone Intel on the Agency? What if everything had been an act to get on the inside? To get close to Carhart again? After all, the man knew all of his passwords...

"Are you fucking deaf, man?"

But something about that didn't jive to Carhart. After all, Emilio had nearly been killed on one of the sabotaged missions. And he'd gone out of his way to save Sin when the Monaghan debacle had occurred. He also seemed genuinely pleased with himself for being back at the Agency.

Interludes

"Damn it, Zachary, I don't feel like lookin' at your hangdog face while I eat so why don't you just piss off?"

Carhart blinked and looked up from his fish to stare into Doug's surly expression. "What?"

Doug scowled. "Some little blond minx lets another bloke dip his nib in her and this is what happens?"

Carhart stared at him for a moment, processing the comment. After a pause he shook his head and made a face, nearly smirking despite himself. "It has nothing to do with that situation but it's nice to know everyone knows about it, regardless."

"I ain't 'everyone,'" the Instructor replied acidly, talking around his cigar and tossing the panel onto the table with a clatter. "Vega told me about it personally."

"I bet he did." Likely with some very intimate details about the inner workings of Victoria's dipping well.

"No need to get all bitchy about it," Doug mused, the corners of his mouth rising wickedly. "After all, I took your side about the whole damn affair and I don't even like you that much."

Now that was a downright shocker. Carhart looked at Doug ponderously, grateful for the other man's presence. It was temporarily distracting Carhart from the unpleasantness of Emilio's other, more deadly betrayal. "Did you?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yup." Doug exhaled a cloud of smoke and ashed the fat end of the cigar in the plate. His stare skated around the cafeteria before focusing on Carhart again. "It's bad business, man. Fucking your boss's woman. And he don't like it, shit I don't either myself, but you're second in command. You was third before Connors kicked it. It ain't right to make a fucking fool of you over some bit of blond snit and a pair of big titties."

Carhart felt his eyebrows rising.

"Also, it don't help that he acts like he's your best friend and shit, all up your ass all the time. But then knowing Vega, that was the motivating factor. He's a real possessive shithhead. He prob'ly just wants you all for himself. He probably wants to fuck you if he hasn't already," Doug said in such a benign way that Carhart nearly dropped the forkful of food he'd finally picked up.

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"Have--" Carhart shook his head slightly and stopped before starting again. "Have you had sex with Emilio?"

"Nah. I ain't gay. He's sucked my dick, though, when we was drunk and watching porn together." Another casual exhale of smoke. "Damn good pair of cock-sucking lips on that boy, if I do say so. 'Course that was all back in the day."

"Of course." Carhart put his fork down. He was pretty sure he would never have an appetite again but even so, he couldn't stop himself from wondering if Doug was lying. If it had gone further than that. Doug would be far from the first heterosexual man to take what Emilio offered them. For some reason straight guys were the first ones to get curious when they encountered a masculine fighting machine like Emilio who also happened to like taking it in the rear. And despite stereotypes and misconceptions, for such a macho tough guy Emilio loved to be on the receiving end of a brutal ass pounding.

"What ya thinking about, General?" Doug asked with a leering smirk. "Memories?"

"No," Carhart replied curtly, pushing his plate away entirely. He shoved all random musings out of his mind. He refused to allow distractions to take over. It was just a cop out that he always allowed himself to take when it came to dealing with issues.

"I want to ask you a question, Douglas."

"Mmmk."

"Do you trust Emilio?"

"Not with my woman, that's for damn sure," Doug replied in the tone of someone who thought he was far wiser than the man sitting opposite him.

Carhart sighed slowly. "That isn't what I meant."

"Oh."

They looked at each other silently; Doug still smoking his cigar and puffing out clouds of smoke while Carhart frowned at him morosely.

"So?"

Interludes

The General made a face. He couldn't tell if Doug was just trying to give him a hard time or if he really was incredibly thick sometimes. "As a person, Douglas. Just in general. Do you trust him?"

The question earned him a thoughtful stare and Carhart scowled. "I realize that you were friends with him before I joined the Agency and that you two appear to have struck up that camaraderie again but I am asking you as a fellow agent."

Doug grunted and sat back. His broad shoulders and muscular frame looked somewhat out of place on the small metal chair. He appeared to be mulling the question over as he chewed on the end of his cigar, eyes wandering over to a civilian female employee wearing a tight dress as he did so.

For a moment Carhart didn't think the other man would answer. After all, Doug had never particularly cared for him even though he respected him as a colleague and officer. But there had been an air of dislike between them ever since Carhart had become Emilio's partner all of those years ago and Emilio switched from spending a lot of his free time with him rather than Doug.

Doug had been just as much of a bad boy as Emilio had been back then and just as much of a hound dog. According to other people, before Carhart had come into the picture Doug and Emilio had been a real duo. Both exotic in a way (Emilio's looks and Doug's ruggedly permanent tan and accent) and both not giving a shit about anything anyone had to say. They'd caused so much trouble together that they'd been prevented from even going on missions together.

The trouble followed Doug even when he was alone, though. He'd never had any respect for authority or any tolerance for someone barking orders at him. His talent as a fighter had saved his life and landed him the role of head training Instructor when it became obvious that he would never have the discipline for a field operative.

It was no mystery why the idea of Emilio preferring him to Doug had especially rankled the man, especially since he'd always considered Carhart an ambitious little kiss ass.

"That's a pretty loaded question, brother," Doug drawled finally. "Any particular reason you wanna know my opinion? My say so don't mean squat around here."

"You're the only other person who knows him as well as I do if not better. He may show you a side of himself that I never see."

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Carhart thought it was likely that he saw aspects of Emilio's personality that Doug had never seen as well. He couldn't picture Emilio ever letting Doug, his past partner in crime, get a glimpse of the insecure and bitter man that he could sometimes become.

Doug's eyes were rapt on his face, curiosity and reluctance visible in every line. "I suspect you're askin' this for a damn good reason, yeah?"

"Yes," Carhart replied, attempting to keep his patience.

He wasn't even sure why he was asking Doug. It didn't matter in the long run. Doug didn't know what he knew. But somehow Carhart found that the answer was important to him. He found that he needed to hear something to make him figure out whether or not he was looking too deeply at the circumstantial evidence he'd gathered because he was angry at Emilio or if he had good reason to think Emilio was capable of what he'd done.

"Well then I guess I better answer." Doug tilted his head, his eyes rolling upward. "Since I met Emilio Vega, there was one thing that he always made pretty fucking crystal. He was his own top priority and he didn't give a witch's tit about how badly he could fuck you over if it meant he was getting what he wanted."

The Instructor dropped his steady gaze to Carhart again and gave a brief shrug. "And that's all I gotta say about that."

Carhart nodded and focused his eyes on the plate in front of him. Even though Doug was apparently in consensus about Emilio's character, it wasn't making anything clearer. He didn't even know why he'd thought hearing it would help.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

There was a stilted and uncomfortable silence. Carhart felt that the world was a very strange place when he suspected the man who got himself involved in soap opera dramas with his best friend's girlfriend was also a mass murderer capable of killing sleeping agents just to get back to living a life where that kind of stuff was possible.

Interludes

Was Emilio really that unhinged that such a plot made sense? Yes. Most certainly. They'd had missions in the past where Emilio had suggested blowing up an unrelated building simply to create a diversion.

Was he really so cold-blooded that he'd carry on some ruthless campaign to destroy the Agency by being a double agent later on? Maybe. But Emilio loved the agent lifestyle too much and even then, he didn't ever think that far in advance. He lived in the moment.

"What the fuck is going on, Zachary?" Doug demanded finally. "You look like someone just shit in your coffee and you're asking me if I can trust Vega. What's this all about?"

Carhart met Doug's glare evenly and pushed the plate away from himself, having no delusions that he'd actually be able to eat anything on it.

"It's about knowing where everyone stands."

The General pushed his chair back and stood. He looked down at Doug and then walked away from the table without saying another word. It had probably been a mistake to even have said that much to Doug. Who knew what would happen if it all turned out to be true? And that was the big question that Carhart had no answer for.

He had no idea what he would do if it was.

He began walking again, out of the cafeteria and towards the elevator.

It seemed like he got to the Fourth Floor within a matter of two minutes when he'd have preferred for it to take longer. He had no plan of action of what he was actually aiming to do here and nothing had sprung to mind on the very brief journey upstairs. All Carhart knew for sure was that for some reason, he had to see her.

He came across Officer Grant on his way to Jane Doe's cell. The guard was stationed between the holding wing and the maximum security wing. He looked insanely bored. There wasn't much happening on the Fourth-- not anything that would be heard beyond the soundproofed rooms, anyway. The guard's presence was mostly necessary due to the fact that there wasn't constant surveillance beyond the point of maximum security. The people kept in holding were deemed not a threat and were either waiting to be released or to die.

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"General!" It came out as more of a surprised exclamation than an address but Grant recovered himself quickly and nodded to his superior with respect. "What brings you here, sir?"

"I'm going to speak with one of the prisoners before her time with us expires," Carhart replied vaguely.

Grant nodded again, not appearing very interested in the news. This had been an occurrence ever since the list had come down for inmate termination.

"Well, good luck, sir. Hopefully you are able to find out all that you need."

"Let's hope so."

He turned away from Grant and walked to Jane Doe's holding space. Punching in the code and entering the metallic door that slid open caused him more anxiety than he thought was necessary considering the woman barely looked alive. But he was more concerned with what he would or wouldn't find out.

She was laying on a thin gurney and hooked up to an IV. Her body was barely more than skin and bones. She appeared to have aged two decades in the past year. Despite this, her eyes were still mostly clear and they focused on him as soon as he entered the room.

They stared at each other for a moment and for the first time, Carhart was thankful that there were no cameras in this wing.

"I know who you are and where you're from," he said abruptly.

A slim dark eyebrow lifted skeptically. She had a tough spirit, even at the end. And it was very obvious that she was near the end.

"A soldier in 4FF and a favorite of the man who called himself *lo más chingón*," Carhart said clearly, so he wouldn't be misunderstood. The last part was a bit of an assumption but not a difficult one considering the brooding expression that had been on Emilio's face when he'd mentioned the elusive Guerrero lookalike.

Jane Doe's reaction was discreet but it was the one he'd wanted. A slight widening of the eyes, mouth falling open in shocked disbelief-- all in one millisecond before Jane Doe's gaunt face shut down completely.

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"I want to know why you came here."

"Go fuck yourself," was the tart, hoarse reply.

Carhart crossed his arms over his chest and paced closer to her. "I know who you are," he repeated again, an edge in his tone. "I know the man who told you to come here. The man who left you here and by his own admission, fucked you over."

Jane Doe looked uncertain again, but only briefly. "I do not know what you are speaking about," she said in her accented English but she was searching his face. And she didn't appear to be trying to hide that entirely.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded impatiently, skipping all of the interrogation bullshit and getting to the point. "You allowed yourself to be tortured. Your mind isn't what it used to be even if you are focusing on me now. I know you scream at night. I know you go in and out of consciousness. I know you sometimes forget what you're saying as you say it. I know everything about you, girl. I know that you are slated to die. Soon. Sooner than you'd think even though you wouldn't last long in this state anyway."

"Good," she snapped harshly. "I welcome it."

"Because you let yourself be turned into this for a man who doesn't give a damn about you except what you could do for him. That's why you welcome it. Because you know your life has been forfeit from the moment you entered the compound and he left you here."

The silence that followed was charged. She seemed on the verge of saying many things but none of them crossed her lips and she turned her face away, to the wall. She looked frail and pathetic on the little gurney and he felt a profound pity for her. He felt shame at himself for harassing her in her final days. But he couldn't stop.

"So devoted," he said with deep disgust and loathing, unable to stop himself. "So devoted and do you even know what you're so devoted to? The charm, the danger, the fucking green eyes and smile?"

She didn't say anything and kept her face turned away.

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"He's been fucking and carrying on exactly the same way as he'd likely been before he dragged you and your friends here. He doesn't mourn you. Why are you protecting him?"

Jane Doe didn't make a sound.

Carhart lost his temper. He stormed closer to her, putting a large hand on either side of the dinky metal gurney and leaned close to her face.

"Why. Are. You. Protecting. Him?" he growled, putting emphasis on each word. "*Why?*"

"Why does it matter to you?" she returned in the same hoarse, strained voice. She finally turned her head to meet his eyes. The proximity didn't appear to frighten her.

He didn't know. He couldn't answer. That wasn't the question he wanted to know. He wanted to know why Emilio had planned the attack-- why they'd come. He wanted to know if Emilio was the mole. Somewhere along the line that had become more important than the fact that Emilio had done it in the first place.

Carhart jerked back with a grunt of frustration and turned away, combing a hand through his hair. He was furious-- with himself, with her, with Emilio. But mostly himself. Because he knew how this was going to play out. He was as fucking bad as she was.

"This room is unmonitored," he informed her harshly. "That is why you are always escorted elsewhere before interrogation. I'm not here for the same reasons as them. I don't want anyone to know what we say here."

He faced her again and found her gaze rapt on him. Thoughtful and suspicious.

"He's-- he was my friend. Even before you knew him-- before he became *lo más chingón*. I want to know why he did this."

"If you are thinking that your friend is guilty-- what does his motive matter?" she asked in the same barely-there voice.

"It matters to me."

Their eyes met and in that moment he knew that she knew. She knew they were caught up in the same web. And that's probably the only reason why she ended up talking to him at all.

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It seemed like hours later when he left the cell but it was only a matter of twenty minutes. His head was still spinning.

The apartment was eerily quiet when he returned. Since their bust up, Emilio mostly stayed to himself in the tiny room they'd created for him. He seemed resentful that his Victoria plan had backfired-- that his plan to show how traitorous she was had in fact cast him as the villain. His mind didn't work like other people's and neither did his logic.

"You need to leave here now," was the first thing out of Carhart's mouth.

Emilio looked over from his brooding contemplation of the ceiling and stared. He was laying on the small sofa that was crammed into the room, wearing jeans and nothing more. "I told you, I'm looking for a place."

"Now." The word came out with all of the ice cold ire that Carhart could muster and he shuddered violently, unable to keep the anger in check. Confirmation of what he'd hoped had been wild suspicions had hit him harder than expected. Confirmation that he and Gioia had a lot more in common than he'd thought was even worse.

"What's up, Zachary?" Emilio asked slowly, luminous green eyes narrowed with caution as he pulled himself into a sitting position on the bed.

"Gioia is what's up," Carhart said with chilling precision. He forced himself to look at Emilio again and the man's complete lack of alarm made Carhart's temper rise even further.

"I figured you would find out about her sooner or later," Emilio said simply, face guarded but not looking frightened in the least. "You know me better than anyone. And I let a lot slip around you."

Carhart made a sound of disgust deep in his throat and turned away, holding up a hand as if to ward the older Vega away. He swallowed convulsively before demanding, "How could you do it?"

"I needed Connors gone," Emilio replied flatly and Carhart knew he was telling the truth.

He knew that Emilio wasn't the mole. The raid and everything else was unconnected. According to the girl who called herself Gioia, Emilio had planned the raid at the spur of the moment after encountering Boyd and Sin. In the end, some things had rung true. It

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had been his son's arrival in Mexico that had prompted Emilio to return and he'd taken the most ostentatious and insane route to get back into the Agency. The wildest thing imaginable but the one that would make him the least likely suspect.

"Self-defense," Emilio said when Carhart didn't answer. For a moment he sounded a lot like Sin had several years ago during the very first partner trials. "I knew Boyd would mention 4FF to you. I knew Connors would find the fuck out and hunt me. He needed to be out of the picture if I wanted to live. Coming back to the Agency was a bonus."

"And what do you call sacrificing your 4FF pals?"

"Hey," Emilio growled, finally sounding like he was feeling something other than mild interest in the direction of the conversation. "I fucking told them there was a chance. There always was when we went out like that. Fuck-- that wasn't even the worst fight we'd ever been in. There have been times when we've lost scores of men and had the heads of kidnapped guys sent to us later. Don't fucking preach to me."

"Seen Gioia lately?" Carhart demanded scornfully, enjoying it when Emilio flinched.

"I told her," Emilio said angrily. "I fuckin' told her to stay with me so I could make sure she'd be okay. I told her to run if we got separated and not to try to take anyone on one-on-one. Trying to prove how fucking strong she is, she did just the opposite and got fucked by Hsin of all people."

"As if you hadn't thought it was a possibility that she wouldn't come across him?" was the derisive retort. "Or perhaps you'd thought maybe Sin had died in the residential buildings that were destroyed so there wouldn't be a threat?"

Emilio's face contorted into fury and he jumped to his feet. "You shut the fuck up," he snarled viciously. "I'm sick of you thinkin' you know what's up with me and my son. He ain't your son, got it? He's mine."

"And yet you put his life in danger. He could have died in his bed without even having the chance to react just so--"

"I told Hector," Emilio hissed from between grit teeth, green eyes glittering dangerously. "To kill the lights and create a *fucking* diversion. Not to smash the fucking buildings like World War *fucking* IV."

Interludes

"Of course. Always an excuse. Never your fault. It was your idea to storm the castle but you didn't know they'd use catapults instead of arrows."

They looked away from each other and the room was practically humming with tension.

"You really hate me now. Is that it?" Emilio demanded harshly. "I kinda thought you'd known already. Thought you'd figured it out..."

"No." Carhart shook his head, mouth in a thin line. "No."

A humorless chuckle escaped Emilio's lips. "And here I stupidly thought you just... got me. Thought you understood."

"Oh, I understand." Their eyes met again and this time Emilio flinched away from the weight of Carhart's glare. "I understand that you are far sicker than I had ever thought imaginable. Far more deranged and sociopathic. And now you must understand that you have to leave my apartment, now. I can't have you here. I don't care where you go."

"Zachary--"

"No." Carhart said from between his clenched teeth. "I'm done with this. I'm done with you. I'm sick of this game we have going between us. Whatever was or could have been-- whatever would have happened-- it's done. Your secret will die with her, and that will be before this night is over."

The General didn't look at Emilio to gauge his reaction to that news. "I'm just as sick as you are. I'm willing to keep your secret. Somehow, I still can't see you die. But you have to go because I can't fucking deal with you anymore. I swear to fucking God, Emilio, for once in your life think of someone other than yourself."

"Zachary--" Emilio tried again, an edge of pained desperation in his voice. He made a move as if to come closer and for the first time in his life, Carhart got the drop on Emilio. He sent the other man flying half across the room until he slammed into the door with a grunt.

"I'm keeping your secret. Now you leave me be."

There was a finality to his voice that caused a shred of pride to rise up from the remains of Carhart's battered ego. He'd forgiven so much over the years but this was bigger than him. It was bigger than them. And he couldn't do it anymore.

Interludes

And for the first time, Emilio seemed to understand that Carhart was being real. He wasn't fighting some inevitable attraction that Emilio wished was there. He was abjuring Emilio and he meant every word.

When Carhart finally looked at his former partner and former friend, for the first time in years he wasn't struck by the pain he saw there. For the first time he didn't wonder what could be causing the darkness in those typically carefree eyes.

For the first time he didn't care.

"Get out."

Emilio left. For the first time, he didn't come back.

End of Interludes

Interludes

Third Party Reject

Verge

Flip Side

Part I

Part II

Part III

Alter

Part I

Part II

TwoStep

Kith and Kin

News Flash

Masquerade

Chronological Disorder

Sift

Backwards Compatible

Forfeit

Entre Nous

Circles

Honey Trap

Cause/Effect

Part I

Part II

Part III

Part IV

Part V

Tacos, Raggaeton and Paranoia

A Matter of Time

Part I

Part II

Part III

Part IV

Part V

Interludes

Executive Decision

Rhapsody

Pandora

Pulling the Strings

Sub Rosa

Making it Count

Medley

Part II

Part III

Abeyance

Endgame