Fade

Book Four

_of_

In the Company of Shadows

by Sonny & Ais
Prologue

The air in Annadale Beach smelled like a mixture of salt, ash and rotting wood. It wasn't exactly pleasant. In fact, it reminded Danny at times of the decayed strip of land that had once been New York City.

He and Kayla had made the long road trip up there when they'd first started hanging out. The sprawl of a decimated urban jungle had made one hell of a first date. What had started out as an intriguing and exciting adventure into the ruins of one of the greatest cities of the not-so-distant past had quickly turned haunting and disturbing as soon as they'd arrived.

It was a reminder of how fucked up their world was and how far from it all Annadale Beach could really seem. Sure, the air had something reminiscent of New York's rot but it couldn't be avoided. The number of vacant businesses, shuttered and foreclosed houses, and boarded up gone-for-the-season homes on the beach were busy collecting mildew in the moist air. But the salt from the sea could overpower all of that sometimes. It reminded Danny that he was lucky to be in the tiny apartment and to be making a small living in the small town.

He was lucky to be somewhere that still had that fresh air smell. Lucky that there was still one place that hadn't been condensed into a concrete wasteland that was vast and overpopulated like the major cities that had survived the wars. The people in those cities were nothing more than nameless identification numbers with residency placards. They were cogs in a machine that churned ruthlessly as it tried to get back to what it once was while cracking down on the civilian population in the process.

"Babe?"
Danny looked over his shoulder at the thin feminine form on his narrow bed. She always slept in the fetal position and was fitful even then. She would thrash often; red hair sticking to sweaty cheeks as nightmares got the best of her.

"I'm going to work," he called quietly across the room. "Go back to sleep."

She murmured something sleepily and rolled over. He admired the fall of silky red hair over one pale, freckled shoulder. It seemed more innocent than sensual, though, and not for the first time he wished that his perception of her would change.

Danny turned back to the glass balcony door and looked out at the grey rolling waves of the ocean. It was a gloomy day, which was fine with him. He wasn't in the mood for sunshine. Sunshine always made him feel guilty when he wasn't in a good mood. As though he was wasting one of those rare but increasingly frequent clear days.

He was glad for the coming storm. The guilt and unsatisfied knot in his gut wouldn't let him enjoy anything else.

In the nearly six months that he'd been in Annadale Beach, he'd had three lovers. Kayla was the third. She still wasn't what he was looking for. He was starting to wonder if his desperation to unwind that knot in his stomach was leading him in the wrong direction. Finding lovers hadn't worked; not male or female.

Maybe a lover wasn't what he needed. Maybe it was a real friend. Family. Something other than the superficial ties he'd forged at the Beach so quickly. But he'd never considered that and so lovers had been what he'd sought.
What had started out as a flirtation had taken a sharp turn towards seriousness after that trip to New York.

Danny closed his eyes, thick eyelashes blocking the already muted daylight, and allowed himself to flash back to that trip.

He remembered picking their way along the border between the safe area and the radioactive land. He remembered the shattered and staggered skyscrapers looming in the sky like destroyed machines with a thousand unseeing eyes. He remembered the prickling-skin-sensation of someone watching them in the dead zone and not seeing that person. There appeared to be no one around for miles and miles.

He remembered Kayla’s hushed admission that she was scared of the stories. The tales of mutated survivors who were said to still live in the radiated hulls of these dead cities. The people who lived in the tunnels and sewers; the places they'd sought refuge in when the bombs had exploded their lives.

The scavengers. The Ferals, people called them.

Danny had never believed in them himself but that day, he'd started to.

He'd started seeing vivid images of feral faces with leather-like skin stretched taut over bone. Hands that had turned into claws from all of the digging in the wreckage as they looked for something to survive. The yellow eyes like the sickliest jaundice and the greyish skin. And he'd started wondering about the intense paranoia that they were said to have. The paranoia of outsiders combined with a mentality that made anything that wasn't a Feral look like food.

Danny remembered Kayla’s panicked face as the feeling of being followed persisted until they scrambled over the remnants of a bridge. He remembered wondering if they'd fall into the filthy river as they climbed across
the only remaining extension that crossed the entire body of water. He remembered the bursts of relieved laughter as their fear of Ferals dissipated only to have it replaced quickly with something a lot more real.

Another urban legend but this one true. The kids from the Bowery.

The memories were vivid and Danny felt the burn of anger just remembering that day. Flashing images crossed his mind and he unconsciously looked over his shoulder at Kayla. He didn't want to remember the helpless rage as they'd been robbed and attacked. He didn't want to remember the desperate fight. He didn't want to think about what would have happened if the patrols hadn't arrived when they had.

Kayla murmured something again in her sleep, jerking Danny out of his reverie. He blinked rapidly.

What the hell was wrong with him today?

He let out a sigh and returned to getting dressed. Loose jeans, a button-up flannel, backwards cap over long hair pulled back into a low ponytail and his apron over one shoulder. Customary work outfit. It didn't take much thought and so his mind once again began to wander.

Back to Kayla. Back to his failure to find what he was looking for.

They'd bonded that day. Bonded over the intensity of nearly dying, of her gratitude and his protectiveness and guilt that he hadn't been able to do more. She said she felt love. He knew that wasn't what his own feelings were. It made him feel bad and the guilt burned every time he enjoyed her body but he was too weak to stop taking what she offered.

Kayla didn't stir as he left the apartment. She was working third shift today and would likely sleep until then. Being the only full time short order cook meant that he'd probably be pulling a double and would be leaving as
she arrived. He didn’t want to acknowledge the relief he felt about that, but couldn’t deny that it was there.

His boots made noise as he jogged down the winding, narrow staircase of the tiny apartment complex right off the beach. The world was silent except for some seagulls and the rolling waves. It stayed that way until his ancient little motorcycle roared to life and took off down the road, looking like nothing more than a few pieces of metal strapped together with an exposed motor.

As usual, he didn’t wear a helmet but there was so little traffic at the Beach at this time in early October that it hardly seemed necessary. Business had already died down from the short summer. Only the locals remained, along with the students who flocked to the shitty little college that offered nothing more than a prime location. The tourists would be back again next summer to make Annadale Beach a breathing sauna of human sweat and crowds.

There was plenty of time before that happened again, though.

Plenty of time to think.

Plenty of time to try to unwind things. The blur of his past and his memories. The war that had left him completely alone and the bleakness that had surrounded him during that time.

It’d been a dark time for him. A whirlwind that he’d mostly managed to push so far into the depths of his mind that a lot of it was shadowed and vague. He liked it that way. The blur was better left a blur.

If not, it was possible that the solitude, the rebellions against the world, the time when he was put away—it may just poison the way he’d allowed himself to settle after arriving at the Beach. If he remembered the ghostly memories of being locked up, of so much anger and loneliness and despair, it could possibly taint the fact that he was determined now to just live.
He'd managed well at first. The mind-numbing job didn't even bother him. He knew the customers regarded them all as peons but it didn't get on his nerves as much as it should have. He didn't have money or an amazing apartment but he had a good life for what it was. A steady job, a great town and for the first time, peace of mind. A complete shedding of his demons.

If only he could embrace that and stop feeling like there was a void that needed filling, Danny thought bitterly as he pulled over a block down from The Blue Moon Diner. He turned the bike off and rolled it along for no real reason other than to enjoy the silence of the walk by the waterfront.

He had just walked up to the diner and was about to stoop down to unlock the gates when the low sound of synthetic jungle techno music emanated from somewhere down the road.

Danny's eyebrows rose slightly and his hands paused on the gate just as the vehicle careened around the curb and screeched to a halt not even a few yards from where he was crouched in the shadow of the awning. He had no idea who would be there at this time of morning. The Blue Moon was the only business for blocks around and it didn't open until nine. It was possible that whoever was there was simply using the place as a meeting point; it was the most popular spot on the Beach and it happened frequently.

The music abruptly shut off and was replaced by loud voices. Loud, angry voices.

"You better shut that fucking bitch up before I do it myself," a man's irate voice snarled. "I've had it with her shit. If she backs out of this now, she screws us all."

Danny stilled completely and pushed himself further into the shadows. For the first time he was grateful for his long, lean frame. Whatever was going
on with these people, he wasn't going to make himself visible until he was sure they weren't going to make the parking lot some kind of crime scene.

"Just be quiet, Leens," another man urged. "You said you were in."

"Yeah, you fucking said you were sure. You said after all of the shit that happened with your parents and your brother, you were fucking in for sure!" the first guy shouted furiously, his voice echoing around the parking lot. "If anyone has reason to be here it's you, you dumb bitch! O—"

"Just relax with that shit, Rucker."

"Screw you, dude. She's a waste of my time. I never wanted her in—I knew she'd flake. She doesn't give a shit that the government fucked over her entire family. She's too scared to do anything about it."

Danny's frown deepened and he peeked around the side of the entrance. Through the fence that separated the beach patio from the building, he could see a black and neon green jeep sitting in the middle of the parking lot. There were three men and a girl; Leens, Danny assumed.

Leens was standing there with her hands balled into fists. She had long auburn curls and was nearly a foot shorter than the three men that stood around her but that didn't seem to deter the stubborn glare on her face.

He assumed that the man who looked outraged and had a green mohawk was Rucker.

"Dude, I was all for joining her club at the school but I'm just saying, now you could be going to get involved with some kind of crazy extremist group for all we know!"

"We have to be extreme if we're going to ever try to make changes in this country."
Danny allowed a smirk to cross his face. These college kids never ceased to amaze him. They always thought they were going to be the ones to step up and change the world. Never mind the fact that people with more experience had likely been struggling to do the same for years. But according to Rucker and a lot of the other kids Danny overheard talking in the diner, they would be the ones to make everything different. They were the ones with the good ideas.

The arrogance was unbelievable.

"Four weeks in some weird seminar camp? It sounds like some fucked up jihad type thing," Leens countered. "It sounds like extremist brainwashing shit. And we don't even have to pay or anything? It's all just free? Why would it be free? Rachelle said they're putting up scores of college students."

That did sound odd to Danny and he wasn't even involved. The fact that some kind of seminar geared towards college students was being held at the start of the semester made it sound even fishier. Why would they essentially convince students to leave school for the semester if whatever club had been started in the college?

"Listen—"

"Shit, I think this is them. Shut the fuck up," one of the dark-haired men hissed.

Danny ducked back into the shadows just as a sleek black SUV slid into the parking lot.

The conversation that followed was mostly too low for him to overhear now that people weren't shouting. Another peek through the gate allowed him to view an SUV with very illegally tinted windows, a woman with dark hair, and a guy in a long black coat that was unwarranted for even the brisk air.
Danny made a face. Those two certainly weren't freshmen but they didn’t look like any students he’d ever seen around. He knew most of the kids who were second year and up from just working part of the previous semester.

Leens was talking again, in a high, slightly anxious voice.

"I changed my mind, that's all."

More talking, and unfortunately for several minutes Danny couldn't hear anything. Rucker was behaving himself now, it seemed, and the new people were trying to keep whatever they were doing to the empty sanctuary of the parking lot.

After nearly fifteen minutes of crouching uncomfortably in the shadow of the front door and remaining hidden behind the gate, Danny heard the woman say:

"Michael will take your jeep back and meet up later."

There was an almost simultaneous sound of doors slamming shut and footsteps hurrying away from the parking lot. One of the vehicles, Danny assumed the SUV, left the parking lot and it was then that he looked through the gate once again.

What he saw spooked him.

Leens was walking away from the diner. The guy with the coat, "Michael," was following her, not taking care of the neon green and black jeep.

The image stayed with Danny as he followed through with his morning routine. It distracted him the whole day. He told himself that a likely scenario was that Michael was simply going to try to convince her to come along with them when he regrouped. It made sense.
Even so, Danny called the police department and filed a report about what he'd overheard. Just in case.
Chapter One

The sun seemed too bright. Boyd paused at the steps of the Tower, staring out at the courtyard.

The Agency compound felt alien to him; more than it ever had before. The air was cool against his skin and he felt... strange. Nearly a year stolen from him and in a way, it was like coming full circle. Or would have been, if it were possible to imagine being in the same state of mind as he had been when he'd left.

His gaze slid across the buildings. It felt odd not seeing the deep green-blue of the Ionian Sea, or the peaks of mountains in the distance. The white buildings with their tan roofs. The sprawling property with the magnificent views. The place Aleixo called home. The place Boyd had spent the last several months.

His fingers twitched and he was jogging down the steps before he realized what he intended. His feet led him unerringly in the direction of Sin's building even as he found himself strangely apprehensive.

He was worried about what Sin would say. He couldn't help wondering whether Sin would be angry with him. What was supposed to have been a one to two month endeavor had ended up lasting nine. Not counting the two months the Agency had held him for rehabilitation upon return.

His eyes narrowed and he sped up his steps, pointedly derailing his thoughts before they went down that path. None of that mattered now.

Still, uncertainty ate at him. What if Sin had moved on? It had been nearly total radio silence in the long months of the mission. He’d only checked in twice during all that time and he doubted the information had made it to Sin.
For all he knew, Sin believed he was dead. For all he knew, Sin didn't know
he'd returned.

The last nights they'd spent together seemed a lifetime away and part
of Boyd was afraid that he would be too late. Afraid it would turn out he'd been
gone too long and they could never go back to the way it had been.

The thought was more than alarming. Especially after all the long
nights he'd curled around his latest tattoo, struggling to keep in mind all the
details of his lover. Holding onto Sin's memory with a near desperate quality.
The times when he'd feared he'd lose himself in the mission and never
escape he'd thought of Sin so intently he'd almost made himself believe Sin
was there with him.

He'd obsessed about the memory of Sin's deep voice. The brush of
stubble on his jawline on the mornings before he'd shaved. The planes of his
body and the strength of his hands. The comfort that could be found in the
knowledge that there was someone out there who was stronger than anyone,
who could do the impossible, and who loved him without hesitation.

He'd thought about what he would say to Sin when he was finally
home.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at the people around
him with narrowed eyes. It was off-putting coming back here—to everything
so normal, like nothing had changed. Everyone acting the same as they had
before he'd left. Mostly.

There was a slight difference, the way he'd noticed something similar
when he'd returned from Mexico with Connors full in power. People were
being more careful. More on edge. There was more tension in the air.

The wind blew his hair into his face and he automatically pulled it back.
Several strands caught in the earrings dotting his ears and he wondered once
again whether he should remove them. They were a reminder of the mission as were the clothes he wore.

The fitted dark jeans and the shoes were designer brands. The burnt orange zip up sweater with white accents that he wore was something he could remember Vika buying for him. Holding it up as she’d murmured that he would look so good in it she couldn’t wait to take it off him again.

As Boyd approached Sin’s building, he saw glimpses of the light shining off the windows.

He tried to figure out what he would say when he knocked on the door. What he could even say about the whole mission when it was still so fresh in his mind. He’d tried to imagine the best words of homecoming and all he’d come up with was, “I missed you so much.” He wasn’t positive he’d even get that much out before he would bury his face in Sin’s chest, a sensation he felt like he’d come too close to losing the memory of, and hold tight.

Sin’s residential building rose before him in no time. The guard at the front, Amos, was one who had been there the first day Boyd had ever been on compound. Amos gave Boyd a strange look when he approached but otherwise appeared to be impassive. Boyd ignored the man for the most part, already ten steps ahead in his mind.

His sneakers made little noise as he jogged up the steps, two at a time. The closer he came to Sin’s, the more nervous he felt. He wondered what Sin’s expression would be. He wondered how many questions Sin would have, and how long he could put off answering some of them.

He wasn’t going to lie to Sin about what exactly had happened on that mission, or why it had taken him so damn long to complete, but he wanted to put it behind him for now. He wanted to focus on the things that were more
important, like reacquainting himself with his lover. Like picking up where they'd left off.

Like seeing if they could get a place together still. And whether Sin was still interested in doing so.

There was no need to rehash anything now. No doubt the expectations of him would come up soon enough, the next time the Agency gave him a valentine mission. He just hoped he never had to play another Cameron Whittaker again.

When he reached Sin's landing and headed toward the door, he was surprised to see that there weren't any guards there. He slowed down and looked around, as if the answer would be written on the walls or the guards were just out of view. The landing looked perfectly normal and perfectly empty.

His eyebrows drew down and he turned his attention back to Sin's door as he approached. He wondered what the lack of guards meant. He'd assumed that the new administration would have included a much stricter regime. That, if anything, Sin's guards would be increased. He didn't know how differently Marshal Seong ran the compound, though. There had to be some sort of logical explanation.

He walked up to the door and, after a moment of hesitation, knocked.

There was no answer.

He frowned and wondered if Sin was out. It was possible he was on a mission or even at the gym. He paused there a moment, debating whether he should check around, before it occurred to him to try calling. He pulled out his phone and speed-dialed Sin's number but the automated voice said the number had been disconnected.
His eyes narrowed and he pulled the phone away from his ear, staring down at it. Sin's name flashed on the screen. He hadn't misdialed. He tried again just in case and got the same response. Was it possible they'd changed his phone number? But why would they do that?

Without giving himself the chance to hesitate, he swiped his card in the lock box next to the door. The light flashed green and he opened the door, already calling out, "Hsin?"

He peeked around the corner and was unsurprised to find the apartment empty. The place was spotless, without a single thing out of order. That wasn't unusual since Sin didn't have many belongings in the first place and the few he had, he kept in their place. He was the sort of person to make his bed every morning after he woke up, so neatly and cleanly it could appear as though he'd never been there.

Boyd absently pushed the door mostly shut behind him as he looked around. So many things seemed off yet he kept walking. Sin's bedroom was perfectly made, which he expected. He hovered there for a moment and then opened the closet door on a whim, not sure what he intended to do. Rifle through Sin's clothing and reacquaint himself with his lover's scent? Check to see if Sin had packed clothing for a vacation? Whatever the case, what he found was not what he'd wanted to see.

There was nothing inside.

He stared and shoved the closet door open further, looking around inside and seeing nothing. He went to the dresser. Nothing. He strode quickly back into the main room and looked around for the books Sin usually kept out of the way.

They were gone.
A pit was growing in his stomach but he ignored it. He went to the kitchen and the bathroom because somehow he had to verify; had to make sure it wasn't something stupid like Sin had just thrown out his clothes. There was nothing in the bathroom, not even an old razor blade. The kitchen was equally empty, the cabinets and refrigerator looking desolate without a single item inside.

Gone, gone, gone. Everything was gone.

He stopped in the middle of the kitchen and looked around, feeling like the building was looming over him ominously. Wariness and alarm dredged up from the depths of him but he forcibly ignored it. He concentrated solely on what he saw in front of him.

He went back out to the landing. Maybe he’d chosen the wrong apartment. That year in Europe could have made him forget simple directions around the compound. But it was the right place. He remembered all too well the nicks in the door. The familiar view out the windows at the end of the apartment. The apartment number.

He stared at the apartment blankly. There could be a reason for it, his mind supplied him helpfully. Maybe they were cleared to get a new place. Maybe Sin had decided not to wait and had gotten his own place off compound or somewhere else. Maybe Sin had been staying at Boyd's all this time in an effort to remember his lover while he was gone. Sin had never been that attached to this apartment anyway.

Boyd turned on his heel, striding back out the apartment and not even bothering to shut the door behind him. He headed toward the Tower automatically and, perhaps in denial or perhaps needing to reassure himself, he flipped his phone open and called Sin's number again.

He got the same message as before.
The pit in his stomach grew.

Without needing to think about it, his feet unerringly led him to Carhart's office.

Every second that passed felt like it was too long. As much as he tried to ignore the alarm it was still there; a weight in his stomach that lent speed to his steps and tension to his shoulders. All he wanted was to see Carhart immediately and stop the questions rushing through his mind.

No matter how long he'd been gone from the compound, some treks were ingrained in him. It didn't take him long to reach the open lobby in front of Carhart's office. A young looking black man was sitting at the desk and looked up as Boyd entered.

Boyd stopped in front of the reception desk, not bothering to try to force his way past and cause a scene immediately. "I need to see General Carhart."

Carhart's new admin looked at him blandly. The nameplate on the desk read 'Brian LeBlanc.'

"Do you have an appointment?" Brian asked drolly, his wide brown eyes analyzing Boyd's appearance. There wasn't even a spark of recognition in his gaze so he likely didn't know that Boyd was, or had been, one of the key members of Carhart's elite unit and wasn't just some random fieldie.

"No." Boyd could see the door he'd walked through so many times to enter Carhart's office; overlaid with Sin's door burning a hole through his mind. The questions of why and what and how were making it difficult to summon any sense of patience for red tape right now. With that came a slightly clipped quality to his words. "I just returned from an extended undercover. I work in his unit. It's important."
"I'm sure what he's doing now is important," Brian replied, unimpressed. "You'll have to sign in and wait until he has a free spot. There are appointments lined up."

"That's ridiculous," Boyd said with an edge. Somehow it felt like the longer he dallied here, the further away Sin was getting. He couldn't say why he felt that, yet the thought wouldn't leave the back of his mind that Sin should have been there. He should have answered his phone.

Every second Boyd spent before he could get back with Sin was a second wasted. After so many harrowing months longing to return to his lover, to be stopped at the last second was frustrating.

He leaned forward and pulled out his identification badge, showing his name and his picture from years ago when he'd stared blankly at the camera. "I'm in one of the most classified units in the Agency. I need to talk to him immediately. He won't want you to turn me away." Although technically it had nothing to do with Janus and the unit, the implication that he had imperative information couldn't hurt. "Just tell him I'm here."

Once again, Brian didn't look very impressed with his claims. It was possible that higher tiered field agents tried to talk their way into Carhart's office all the time. "You'll just have to wait. Sorry."

"God damnit, just fucking call him!" Boyd shouted, losing his temper. He slammed his hands on the desk, leaning forward. The desperate voice in the back of his mind was growing fearful—saying over and over, \textit{I need Hsin, I need him, let me see him, I need to see him now, God please let me see him—}

"Wow, you have some serious entitlement issues," Brian noted calmly.

Before Boyd could respond, the door opened and Carhart appeared. He looked different than the last time Boyd had seen him. The General looked
older. Wearied. His hair looked more ash blond than golden and his eyes were hard, even as he looked at Boyd.

Carhart's lips thinned and he looked at the younger man for a long moment before allowing his gaze to slide over to Brian. "It's fine. Thank you, Brian."

Brian shrugged and went back to looking at whatever was on his desk as the General retreated into his office once again, leaving the door open behind him for Boyd.

Boyd followed the General into the office and shut the door behind him. He turned toward Carhart immediately and without preamble said, "Why the hell is Hsin's apartment empty? I went to visit him and everything's gone."

Carhart walked to the other side of his office, stopping briefly to peer out the window. He stayed that way for a fragment of a moment before turning back to Boyd with the most detached look that Boyd had ever seen on his commanding officer's face.

"I realize you have been gone for some time but you are not the first agent to leave on an extended mission. Don't presume that gives you license to disrespect me or my office by harassing my assistant. He doesn't answer to you and he won't be intimidated by you or anyone else."

Boyd leaned back, taken aback by the response. He had to take a moment to rein in the emotions that had been building since he'd seen Sin's empty apartment. He made more of an effort to quiet the part of him that desperately longed to see Sin and see him now. He wouldn't get anywhere if he started burning bridges the moment he returned.

"I'm sorry. When I came back and his apartment was empty I was concerned. I knew you were the best person to talk to so I wanted to see you for one minute to ask about him." His eyebrows drew together and he
gestured at the door. "If you could tell me where to find him I'll get out of your way immediately."

Carhart looked at him for a long moment. The weariness was shrouded around him like a cloak and he turned away to the window once again. "Maybe you should sit down."

The sinking feeling from before grew stronger but Boyd avoided acknowledging it. He tensed, a defensive reaction, and eyed Carhart's back warily. "Why?"

"Because you should prepare yourself," was the flat response.

Boyd's stomach dropped and his throat went dry. He couldn't look away from Carhart's back. He stayed still for a long moment, not liking Carhart's words or his tone. Not liking where this conversation seemed to be going. Not liking that the tenuous explanations of, "he's just on a mission," or, "he decided to move," seemed to be getting even thinner.

He shifted and for a moment the pressure made him think of fleeing the room. He could tell Carhart he'd just look for Sin himself and he was sorry to bother him. He could prolong the time he could keep telling himself everything was fine and all these signs meant nothing. But he knew that would just be a fantasy.

He hesitated and then walked over to one of the chairs, taking a seat. The chair felt too heavy in his hand. The seat was too hard. Nothing was right.

By now, he was supposed to be telling his lover how much he'd missed him. He was supposed to be feeling like everything could be alright again after all.

Instead, he was sitting here feeling like he was waiting for the executioner's axe to fall.
"What happened?" His voice came out thinner, a little more afraid than he'd intended.

"She had him terminated in March." Carhart's voice was still blank; emotionless. "He's dead."

Although Boyd had as much dreaded as expected that reply, it still hit him hard. Like a weight slammed into his chest and knocked all the air out of him. His heartbeat was fast but it hurt, like the muscle didn't want to work properly, and for a moment he wondered if he was imagining this all. If this was some bizarre dream and he'd wake up to Aleixo beside him in bed.

He didn't realize he was gripping the arms of the chair until it slowly filtered through his brain that his fingers hurt. Carhart's emotionless face burned into him. The man who had been more protective of Sin than anyone, the man who had time and time again been there for Sin, the man who acted like Sin's father more than Emilio—and he was standing there telling Boyd with a straight face that Sin was dead?

He was saying it so calmly, like it didn't matter—like the person Boyd loved more than life itself hadn't been ripped away from him while he'd fucking been—While—

He shook his head; a distant and disbelieving motion. Everything felt one step removed. Nothing made sense. This couldn't be real.

"I—" Boyd's words stumbled over his tongue that didn't seem to want to move properly. His eyes had started to drift away and he dragged his gaze back but that was almost worse, staring at that dead expression when he felt like his world was crashing down around him.

He couldn't make sense of this. "I don't under..."
He brought one hand up to his head, to push back his hair with shaky fingers and he didn't even know what it was within him that was holding him together. What it was that took over immediately after hearing that sort of news. What could keep him calm and collected when all he wanted to do was scream and deny.

He shook his head again. He was doing that a lot. "Why?"

"He was on probation from the beginning. When she arrived—" Carhart said "she" with a near tangible tone of dislike but other than that, his voice was continuously devoid of all emotion. His blue eyes were like chips of ice. At the moment his expression was reminiscent of Vivienne.

"She wanted to give him the opportunity to prove that his past incidents were just that. Past. She didn't want to waste a valuable asset. But towards the end, his performance began to suffer. His personality began to change back into what it had been before. Reckless, uncaring about the mission, hostile to authority. His missions were successful but they began to resemble the messiness that they'd had in the past. He was—"

Carhart broke off abruptly and stared at Boyd. His jaw worked and his eyes narrowed before he finished the sentence. "He was gone before I'd even been aware that the order had come down."

Boyd couldn't look at Carhart anymore. He couldn't even sit still.

He stood abruptly and turned away, walking a few steps but having no destination. His fingers tangled in his hair and he tilted his head up, staring at the space where the wall met the ceiling. There were cracks in the plaster that spiderwebbed out. He wondered where they came from. The thought was distant and unrelated to the rest of the world; unimportant and passing through his stunned mind with as much context as caring about what the weather was like the day it happened. The day Sin—
The cracks seemed to blur and it took him a moment to realize that it was his eyes that were blurry. He blinked and tried to hold in the howling mess he could feel rising to the surface. His chest felt constricted. He couldn't breathe fully; his body felt too hot. His heartbeat hurt his ribs, or maybe it was his heart itself that ached.

This didn't make sense. This couldn't actually be happening.

He couldn't think.

His throat closed and he distantly noted that his scalp hurt from the way his fingers were gripping the strands. His eyes burned and for a moment he thought he wouldn't be able to hold it together. That he was going to break down right here and never get out of the office. Quaking, tenuous control was all he had. Pieces of string wrapped around his stubborn will and it wasn't going to hold for long, fraying strand by strand with shuddering leaps.

He would never see Sin again.

The truth and weight of that simple sentence was almost too much.

How could it be true? How could—

He would never touch Sin's hair or breathe in his scent or lean against his warm body or—

Gone.

Forever.

This wasn't really happening. This—

No, no, this wasn't right but it was real—

He couldn't speak. The words wouldn't form in his mind and even if they had, he couldn't have said them. Even air was stretched thin through the
constriction of his throat. Words were too large, too meaningful to make it past.

"Boyd." Carhart was speaking again and although his voice was just as steady, it wasn't quite as wooden as it'd been before. "You should rest."

Boyd shook his head, wordlessly at first until he could draw in a breath that seemed too sharp. He blinked rapidly, trying to focus; trying to hold it all in. Trying so hard to maintain the control.

"I can't." His voice was quiet; strained. Hoarse. His muscles were taut—trembling ever so slightly. "I won't be able to. I'll—" I'll lay down and I'll think of him. I'll close my eyes and dream of him. I'll convince myself he's still here. I'll wake up and every time, every time I'm alone and the bed is cold and I remember I'm all on my own now it'll rip me apart—

The tears welled and the next time he blinked they ran down his cheeks; silent and undeniable and liable to strengthen, to become a flood rather than a stream.

There was a hint of a sound behind him and then he felt a small bottle being pressed into his hand.

"Sedatives," Carhart's voice said quietly.

Boyd's breath was too shallow, his eyes aching. His fingers curled around the bottle tightly, like a shadow of the lifeline Sin was supposed to be for him right now. His knuckles were white and it was all he could do to drop his head forward, to squeeze his eyes shut and simply nod.

Silence fell in the room; a kind he didn't have the presence of mind to even begin to identify. He could hardly focus on anything external when everything internal was so perilous. So ready to shudder and shatter and break.
He stood there, alone and slumped forward, focusing all his stubborn will into smoothing his breathing as much as possible. Into gathering the frayed ends of his control and yanking it all tighter, tighter, into a ball he could hold together just long enough to get away from this place.

He didn't know how long it took him but finally, his voice sounding distant even to him, he said, "I have to go." At least, he meant to say that. He didn't know what words actually made it out of his mouth.

Carhart's voice sounded further away when the man spoke next, as if he had already retreated to the other side of the room. "You should have a couple of weeks left of downtime. Use the time wisely. They will be watching you for signs of weakness upon your return to active status."

Boyd couldn't even begin to think about that, let alone how to respond. He wiped the tears off his cheeks and shoved the bottle in his jacket pocket. He tilted his head down so his hair would fall forward, sheltering his face, and he left without a word. He didn't look over to see whether Brian glanced up at his exit. He didn't look up at all; not when he went to the staircase and not as he jogged the several flights down.

He kept his back straight for the most part, a charade of stability and confidence he absolutely could not feel. Maybe it was the part of him that came in for damage control that allowed him to hold off on any reaction until he felt it was acceptable.

Maybe it was his deep-seated stubborn will that wouldn't allow himself to show obvious weakness within the Agency compound, where Agency eyes and Agency whispers could follow him. He wasn't going to give any of them the satisfaction of seeing how fractured the world had become around him.
His hands were shoved in his jacket pockets and later, he wouldn't remember how he got home. Time jumped around him; fragments of reality broken apart and stitched back together by an amateur.

He found himself in his living room.

Dust coated everything; the sentinel of an empty house. His fingers hurt and he realized he was holding the bottle so hard the plastic had started to hairline fracture. He pulled it out and set it on the table. Carefully, so gently. A slide of plastic against scratched wood.

Tension was a taut rubber band within his muscles. Constricting him. Making him shake.

His mind was so crowded and strained that at first he didn't understand what was happening. He couldn't formulate a thought and certainly couldn't string together a sentence. The house that should have been so familiar to him felt alien. Removed. On the other side of an inter-dimensional rift and he was standing here, on this side, looking across the chasm to a reality he could no longer have.

A dusty museum of memories surrounded him; color fading from the world like a watercolor painting left out in the rain. His movements were stilted.

He ended up in his bedroom. The curtains were drawn, drowning out the cheerful sunlight that was so incongruous anyway. Everything was just as he'd left it. In a hurry all those months ago, he'd tossed his clothes around looking for his keys. He'd left his closet door wide open.

The sheets and covers were still crumpled from where Sin and he had slept.
His feet led him unerringly to the far side of the bed. To Sin's side. He stood beside the bed and stared down, lifting one hand with his fingers spread as if to touch his lover's face; to stroke back that silky black hair and brush against that smooth skin. He could almost see Sin lying there, his strong body relaxed and motionless, his chest rising and falling. He could almost see those vivid green eyes half-closed in relaxation. The elegant lines of his arms at his sides.

The way he used to look when he'd lain there, relaxed and at peace. The way...

The black of Boyd's bedspread bled into the sheets as tears coursed down his cheeks. The little ball inside him cracked and jolted. He was shaking; tremors that started small and soon overcame his entire body. He didn't hear or feel his quickened breath. Didn't feel his fingers clench or his teeth grit. Didn't feel his face contorting.

In his mind he still saw Sin. He saw the man he'd been, the man he'd become after years of struggling and fighting and setbacks. He saw the man he'd loved, still loved, more than anything and anyone forever and Sin was supposed to be here. He was supposed to be just a phone call away. Just a simple knock on a door and when it opened he would be there, angry or relieved or upset—it didn't matter, it didn't matter at all anymore, as long as he was there.

Sin was his salvation and now—

And now—

Fissures in his control and the moment Sin wavered and disappeared from his mind's eye was the moment he broke.

A guttural sound wrenched out from the depths of him and he suddenly couldn't stay still. The groan became a shout became a scream and he
turned, ripped the lamp off the nightstand and threw it across the room. The crash against the wall didn't make anything better; didn't do anything to calm the storm raging within him and the vast emptiness that waited for its end. He screamed as he turned to his bookshelves, tearing books off, ripping down boxes. Destroying the order in a room that didn't deserve it anymore.

He threw and broke things haphazardly—not caring what he grabbed, what he threw, as long as it ended up as broken as he felt inside. The only thing he didn't touch was the bed. The place Sin had been. The home for his memory.

Paper and splinters and glass and he was blind to what he was doing, deaf to his own howls. Tears filled his sightless eyes. He lost connection with everything except the agony that burrowed a seed down into his heart and wouldn't leave.

He didn't know what he was doing until he distantly realized his wrists were jarring with impact and he came back to himself enough to know that he was violently pounding on the wall. A futile effort, as if tearing down his house could tear down the walls that separated them.

All those years of struggling and craving for each other and there had always been obstacles, sometimes intangible, but they'd always overcome them. How could it be that it turned out this way? Even if he'd known for a long time that there was the possibility that Sin would die, he'd always imagined himself there for it. He'd imagined he'd at least have a chance to react.

He'd never imagined that it would happen and for months and months he'd be clinging desperately to the image of a lover he didn't know was dead.

Gasps shuddered through him and he was crying so hard he couldn't draw a full breath. He hit the wall one more time and stilled, his forehead
pressed against it and body slumping until he slid down to his knees. He curled forward, his fingers digging painfully into his sides.

The top of his head pressed against the wall and he was sobbing; a wretched mess in the middle of chaos and it hurt, it hurt so much. If he could have just one thing he would have given anything to have Sin back. To hear his voice just one more time. To feel his breath against his cheek.

That only made his gasp catch; made him cry so hard he couldn't breathe and couldn't think. His body was mindless, snapping around the wailing and even his voice was starting to leave him.

Every thought hopelessly rotated around Sin.

He didn't know how long he stayed there, mostly crying and sometimes pleading with empty air. Twisted words that drowned in his sorrow, ebbing and flowing with his breath. Yearning, desperate murmurs of, "Hsin—Hsin—" mixed with moans of, "no," and, "please," and, "oh God, don't leave me."

The house loomed around him. He felt alienated. Alone. Light years away from everyone else on the planet; halfway between this world and the next.

How was he supposed to go on like this? He couldn't get out of his mind the memory of Sin's body, warm against his bare skin. The weight of Sin's arm on his back. The comforting murmur of his heartbeat and the rise and fall of his chest. The memory of the cabin; of the night they'd fallen asleep talking about what if's.

He remembered clearly the darkness around them that had felt special back then, rather than terrifying like now.
He couldn't forget the memory of his whispered confession, *I don't know what I'd do if I lost you*, and Sin's firm response of, *You'd keep doing what you have to do. Right?*

He remembered the pain he had imagined that he would feel in that possible future and it was nothing like reality. There was no comparison. He remembered leaning up to stare at his lover's face; to commit to memory every detail of those beautiful features. And he remembered his reply:

*I promise, if you die I'll keep going.*

Those words had been an oath; a balm for Sin's worries. Yet now he cursed himself for them. What had been reassurance for Sin now became shackles for Boyd. He couldn't go back on his word; he could only trudge forward into a future that was meaningless and hopeless and without end.

Why did he always have to be the one left behind? Why did he always have to be the one to gather the broken pieces and glue them back together, a mockery of what he'd once been? Why did he always have to suffer through the loss—that gaping, wrenching loss that sucked him up, ripped him apart, and carelessly threw him aside?

Why did it have to be this way? Why did he have to be alone again? Why could he never seem to hold onto happiness?

He cried until there was nothing left. Until every ounce of moisture was sucked out of him and drenched his knees in tears. His nose was so stuffed he could only breathe through his mouth and his head pounded. He was exhausted and even when the sobs slowed and eventually stilled except for the occasional shudder, he couldn't bring himself to move for a long time.

When he finally shifted, his body ached and his legs tingled from being in the same uncomfortable position for too long. He felt empty and lifeless and yet as he stood and looked over the damage he'd done to his room, and when
his gaze fell on his bed, he knew it wasn't over. He knew the pain and anger
and sorrow would only return, again and again and again. He knew it would
be a very long time until those feelings left him, if ever at all.

He shambled through the house, forcefully trying to keep his thoughts
on the sedatives alone. He did not look around; did not give himself the
chance to rekindle other memories that would rip him open once more. He
picked up the bottle and went to the kitchen, filling a glass with water and
taking two sedatives immediately even though it said to only take one. He
filled the glass again and brought that and the bottle back to his room.

He had to drag one of the nightstands back in place. Although it was
scratched and looked worse for the wear, it was steady enough and that was
all that mattered. He put the glass of water and the bottle of sedatives on the
nightstand, so when he woke and wanted to fall right back asleep like he
knew he would, he wouldn't have to leave to drug himself again.

The thought of lying there indefinitely taking pill after pill until he wasted
away was appealing. He didn't entertain the notion for long because he knew
he wouldn't do it. His promise kept him from giving up. He couldn't go back on
his word.

When he laid down in bed he automatically turned on his side, facing
the side of the bed where Sin usually rested. He imagined he could still see
the imprints of his lover's body. His fingers met nothing but cold sheets and
empty space when he reached his hand out and even though he thought he'd
cried all he possibly could, he could already feel the tears pricking at the back
of his eyes. Could feel his throat and heart constrict and the dread and fear
move within him.

He closed his eyes and rolled over, pulling the other pillow closer. He
thought he could still faintly smell Sin's scent; cigarette smoke and musk and
something alluring and so painfully familiar. The tears rose as he clutched the
pillow, burying his face in it and curling in the fetal position. He clung to the pillow like it was Sin himself. Like it could bring Sin back to him.

After the mission he'd just finished, he hadn't thought he would ever feel relieved by the seductive pull of drugs on his mind again, insidiously stealing his thoughts and his control until darkness rolled in. But curled on his bed, missing his lover so intensely it was like someone had reached inside him and ripped out every major organ while he was still alive—he did feel relief.

He couldn't think anymore. He didn't want to exist. He wanted to fall into empty darkness and forget for awhile that this was what his life had become. Forget that Sin was never coming back.

Sleep shuddered along the edge of his vision and moved in swiftly, a deadening weight that stole his senses and pulled him into the yawning black.

Part of him hoped he would never wake again.
Chapter Two

Time stretched meaninglessly for Boyd. He woke and took sedatives and slept again, although he couldn't say how often it happened because everything blended together. In the back of his mind he knew this could not be indefinite but he couldn't bring himself to care. He knew it couldn't be this easy; that he wouldn't be able to keep this tired lack of energy for long but he saw no reason to push it along. The sedatives had successfully deadened him for hours on end but it only worked when asleep.

He moved through his house slowly, barely touching anything, barely feeling like he was there. The surreal disbelief hadn't quite left him. Even though he understood what had happened, even though every time he thought about it too hard he found himself crying again and just as pained and at a loss as before—there was still a part of him that couldn't believe that after everything, this was what he had left. He wanted to believe he'd misunderstood Carhart, or it had been a trick, or a bad dream. But he knew from Carhart's dead expression that it had been true.

He felt like the mission had stolen his life. He had nothing anymore.

Sometimes when he walked through his house, feeling no interest in doing anything yet knowing that if he gave himself enough time he'd lose the grogginess of the sedatives and start to feel despair again—Sometimes in the back of his mind, a voice whispered that it would be so much easier if he just had Slide.

The drug that had stolen his mind, that had stolen months from him, that he still couldn't think about too clearly because it created confusion. Dual memories of the mission and everything that had happened on it—the hands
and the filth and the desperate groans from a voice that couldn't possibly be his were overlaid with the all-too-clear memory of the ecstasy he'd felt.

How attractive it was to imagine himself getting lost in it again. The seductive pull of the drug burned in his mind. Sometimes he didn't realize until later that his hand was at the crook of his elbow; brushing fingertips almost comfortingly against the faint scars.

The addiction may never fully leave, they'd said. Fight it, they'd said. He remembered those words at times and at other times he didn't.

It would be so simple and this could all go away... He wouldn't have to hurt anymore. He wouldn't have to feel anything but mindless pleasure that wouldn't give him even the opportunity for fear or pain or hatred. He could let himself drown in it. Suffocate.

It was more than tempting. Memories of his dead lover saturated the house the way it had with Lou, with his dad, and he'd really come to hate these halls. These rooms.

He didn't know how many days or weeks or hours passed before one day the empty routine was interrupted. He was standing blankly in the middle of the kitchen staring at the stove, vaguely thinking of making tea and vaguely thinking he shouldn't. It was too tempting to think of lighting something on fire. Of letting the whole place burn down around him, purifying his memories.

He hadn't come to a decision when an unexpected sound cut through the silence. At first he couldn't think well enough to know what it was, although he turned his head in the direction. It took him until the second set to realize someone was knocking on his door.

He had the absurd mental image of the agents from the time he'd been suspended showing up at his door. Black sunglasses and straight faces and
an Agency van in back. Maybe they were here to terminate him. Would it go against his promise if he simply didn’t fight the inevitable?

He didn't even bother looking through the peep hole before he opened the door. The first thing he noted was that apparently it must be morning judging by the light. The second was the somewhat unexpected sight of Ryan and Kassian standing there on his doorstep.

He stared at them, at first not having the presence of mind to react any other way.

"Hey," Ryan said in a very small voice, his wide indigo eyes growing wider and taking Boyd in from every angle. His gaze skimmed the blue ends of Boyd’s long hair, the piercings glinting from his ears and the unnatural thinness. All leftovers from the mission.

"We um. I heard you were back. So..." Ryan trailed off again and reached up to tuck unruly spirals and cowlicks behind his ear. He was as skinny as ever but he lacked the fragility he’d had a year ago. His body looked more solid but his face had aged. There were liberal amounts of grey in his hair that hadn't been there before.

Kassian just looked at Boyd and appeared at a loss as to what he should be doing or saying. In the end, he said nothing.

Boyd watched them for a moment and then stepped back, opening the door with him in a silent invitation.

Ryan walked in almost immediately but Kassian hung back for a few seconds, eyeballing Boyd warily before he finally entered the house.

"Are you—" Ryan winced, and shook his head as if mentally crossing out the question of what he’d been about to ask. He seemed to struggle with
what to say because after a few seconds of making faces he shot Kassian a helpless look.

The taller man looked unimpressed. The two made an unlikely pair to show up on Boyd's doorstep but their interactions didn't necessarily seem awkward with each other, just with Boyd. With the situation.

"Ryan found out you were back," Kassian said finally, his deep voice seeming especially loud in the silent and untouched living room. "He was afraid to come over alone in case you'd killed yourself since you weren't picking up the phone for days so he called me. I would have come anyway, obviously, but that's why we're here harassing you together."

Ryan glared at Kassian briefly before turning to Boyd. "We could leave, though. If you want."

Boyd could feel the cobwebs slowly fading from his mind. He still didn't feel fully connected to reality or these two people standing in front of him who had at one time seemed so close. Now, despite the proximity of their bodies, his mind felt planets away.

He shook his head faintly and belatedly realized he hadn't shut the door. It sounded louder than Kassian's voice when it shut. "It's fine. I was sedated." His voice was scratchy and hoarse. He hadn't used it other than to scream and cry for days. "I didn't hear."

Kassian and Ryan looked at each other for an extended moment. Then Kassian defaulted into Senior Agent Trovosky mode.

"Why don't you go up the street and get some breakfast and coffee? There's a small diner not too far up," he suggested to Ryan, giving him a look that dared him to disagree.
Ryan looked relieved to have a task at hand and nodded. "Okay, sure. I'll be right back then."

Boyd didn't react, although distantly he wondered when it was he'd last eaten. And what he'd had. He couldn't remember what was in his kitchen or whether he'd even checked since he'd returned.

The dark haired R&D agent disappeared out the front door without another word. Kassian looked Boyd up and down again, the wary expression returning.

"And you go shower. You smell awful."

Boyd didn't bother to argue or question the command. In a way, it helped that Kassian was taking charge. It gave Boyd time to struggle up from the depths. He went to his room and grabbed the first clothing he could find in the mess. He hadn't bothered to clean anything up. There didn't seem to be a point.

When he got into the bathroom, he pointedly didn't look in the mirror. He knew what he would see; dark circles around the eyes, pale skin, a thin body, and all the markings of his time as Cameron.

He hadn't thought he cared either way about being clean but once he was in the shower, once the steam started to surround him and the hot water soaked deep into him, he started to feel more awake. It seemed like forever since he'd had such a simple shower. It felt almost as good as his first shower had felt after the two weeks he'd spent in the Bowery.

He focused intently on shaking off the apathy, partially self-imposed and partially pushed along by the deadening of the sedatives. The soap felt like it was cleansing him of more than grime. For as much as it was possible given the circumstances, the shower made him feel better.
By the time he stepped out to a billow of steam, the vestiges of the sedatives were gone and he was feeling much more inclined and capable of talking to the two agents. He got dressed—an old pair of dark wash jeans and a faded grey t-shirt that probably should have been thrown out ages ago.

He dried his hair as best he could but he knew it would be damp for awhile so he dug around in the vanity drawers until he found an old hair band. He pulled his hair back into a ponytail and tossed his dirty clothes in the hamper.

His bare feet padded across the floor as he left the bathroom. He could hear movement in the kitchen and when he came into the room he saw Kassian cleaning up, getting rid of the dust and all the other assorted surprises left behind when a person thought they would be gone a month and ended up gone for a year. Boyd ignored the pang at the thought and paused by the doorway, his arms crossed loosely. He leaned against the doorjamb and watched Kassian with a more alert look.

"Sorry it's a mess," he said, his voice less scratchy than before. "I've been... preoccupied and didn't expect visitors."

Kassian shrugged and dumped a carton of juice in the trash, swinging the fridge door shut at the same time. "Don't apologize. I figured you'd need some help sorting the place out after all of this time."

"Thanks," Boyd said quietly.

He pushed himself away from the wall and walked over by Kassian, figuring he should probably help although for such a simple task he felt at a loss as to what to do. He wondered how long it would be until he would be capable of functioning normally again. A sharp pain shot through him at the thought. It took him a moment to realize that it was because, at least the way
it had been with Lou, learning to function normally again meant learning to let go. It meant fully accepting his new reality and moving on.

His throat closed at the thought and he had to turn away from Kassian abruptly. He took a stilling breath and tried to mask his movement by straightening up some random mail shoved in the corner. He didn't even know what they were. He didn't care.

He cleared his throat and forced himself to stay in the moment. To stop letting his mind wander into dangerous territory. "I didn't think I'd be gone so long," he added as explanation. He managed to say it relatively calmly, as if it wasn't indicative of so many things better left unsaid.

Kassian made a sound at the back of his throat and there was the sound of something else being tossed in the trash. "Yeah. Everyone kind of started to wonder. They don't exactly give friends and family updates on longterms."

"It wasn't what they told me." It came out more bitter than Boyd had intended. He tried to temper it by following up with, "I only had the chance to check in twice, including the pick up call."

"How long did they tell you it'd be?"

"One to two months," Boyd said darkly.

The familiar anger started to burn in him. It made it easier to remember the mission; to think about what had happened. It was a protective coating against any sharp edges of memory.

The person he was most furious with was his mother. He remembered her sitting there, staring him straight in the face and lying to him. He knew she had to have realized it would likely have lasted longer and what would happen
in the interim. He couldn't forget her even, unchanging expression as she’d told him that where he would be kept in the interim was unimportant.

When he’d first understood what had happened and when he’d thought back to the briefing—he hadn't been able to believe she’d done that to him. He hadn't been able to believe she’d lied about something that couldn't be less unimportant.

She’d known, and she’d acted like it didn't matter.

"I'm not surprised," Kassian replied from behind him, his voice tinged with bitterness of his own. "I didn't know my mission would be over two years with the added bonus of being sent back for long periods of time even after that."

There was a moment that Boyd could have let slide. He could have kept the anger inside. But the memory of his mother's calm face was like a slap in the face that wouldn't go away.

It was something he could only fathom saying to Kassian, at least for now. Something he didn't want to talk about in front of anyone else.

He shook his head and turned to look at Kassian. His eyes were narrowed and his face was more serious than usual even for him. He didn't hide the hard look in his eyes; a glare that wasn't directed at Kassian but rather the world at large.

"The length alone would've upset me but it wouldn't have made me feel the way I do. Like I could tear the Agency down to the last piece of mortar and still want to destroy more." He didn't raise his voice but the intensity, the edged and quiet anger that was behind it, made it more powerful. "She blatantly lied to me about everything. Not just the timeline but what the mission was really about. What was going to happen there."
Kassian finished dumping the last of the likely spoiled food and looked at Boyd with raised eyebrows. "So, what really happened?"

"They forced me down and drugged me," Boyd said flatly. "My memory's confused for a bit. The first thing I clearly remember is suddenly realizing a man was fucking me."

"Was anyone supposed to be fucking you?" Kassian asked, clearly nonplussed but not appearing entirely shocked about the concept. Boyd's valentine status wasn't a secret to him or really anyone on the compound. "What did she tell you the mission was about?"

"She told me I was infiltrating a human trafficking ring that sold soldiers to Janus and sometimes slaves to individuals," Boyd replied, his arms crossed and back stiff. His eyebrows were lowered above cool brown eyes. "All I had to do was seduce one man, the leader, and call back with his location. The catch was waiting for him to come by. She said the place I'd be held in the interim was 'unimportant.' I was under the impression it would maybe be a holding cell and that the wait shouldn't be terribly long."

Kassian's mouth thinned slightly and he nodded to indicate that Boyd should continue.

Boyd felt on edge and had to take a moment to decide what to even say. How to explain how furious he felt. How betrayed.

His jaw set and he couldn't stand still anymore. He walked across the kitchen toward the cupboards, a thought growing in the back of his mind that he should make tea. But he'd run out of tea before he left and he realized he didn't want it anyway. He just felt like he needed to do something. To move.

Yet he had nowhere to move to. Nowhere to go. The house felt stifling. His entire life did.
He ended up leaning against the counter and crossing his arms again. Ended up just the way he'd started out, except in a slightly different location. It felt like an allegory of his life.

"I didn't understand what was happening for awhile. I couldn't think. I was confused. I didn't know who I was, where I was. It took a few weeks before I remembered what I was supposed to be doing there. At first I thought I was just—"

His jaw tightened. Frustration and betrayal prowled in his chest before he met Kassian's eyes again. "They kept us in these tiny, crowded rooms downstairs. They were shit holes. I slept on a filthy mattress on the floor, with springs poking through the fabric. It was covered in dirt and come and who knows what else. There were guards who brought me upstairs when I was supposed to service one of their clients." The last word twisted bitterly.

Kassian nodded slowly but his expression remained unchanged at the knowledge that Boyd had been turned into a sex slave. It was possible he'd already anticipated this but it was also possible that he was schooling his expression so as to not further feed Boyd's anger.

After a brief moment, the older agent turned to the sink and began washing his hands. The table and counters had been covered in a layer of dust before he'd thought to clean them and the dust was now on his hands.

"How long were you kept in that position before accomplishing your goal and coming back?" he asked in the same tone. Once again it was hard to tell if any of this was coming as a shock to him. It was likely he'd undergone equally horrible things on his long mission in Russia so it was possible he now expected horrors to come with longterms.

Even so, there was tension in his broad shoulders that gave away the fact that he was disturbed by the information. Kassian, who had always called
Boyd "kid," sometimes seemed to see Boyd as just that. A young kid who'd been thrown into this line of work without fully understanding all that would come with it.

Kassian had sisters Boyd's age—he was one of the few people in the Agency who regularly interacted with civilians. He'd told Boyd on more than one occasion how he wished the younger man could have had a normal life—be a normal twenty-three year old kid.

"They didn't have clocks or calendars there. But when Aleixo finally brought me to his house I found out it was mid-June," Boyd said. "So, six months."

Another nod and this time Kassian leaned against the refrigerator door and crossed his own muscular arms across his long sleeved t-shirt. He studied Boyd for a moment and seemed to debate something before he said finally, "Perhaps it isn't necessarily the worst thing in the world that you hadn't known beforehand."

Boyd shook his head with a glower and dropped into one of the chairs by the table. The legs made a scratching noise against the floor before he sat down.

"The only thing ignorance got me was a lot of confusion, panic and anger. If I'd known, I could've prepared myself better. I could've said a better goodbye. We thought I wouldn't be gone long." He paused briefly, those words lingering as he imagined how difficult it must have been for Sin. How he must have wondered if Boyd was even alive. "I don't know which way would've been better for him," he added somberly.

"He didn't start acting out because he was worried about you," Kassian said bluntly. "He did it because he was angry and he hated the Agency for
separating the two of you at all. If he'd known what was going to go on during that mission, he would have just been in a lot more pain before he died."

Boyd looked up at Kassian, searching his face. He didn't know what he felt other than a strange mixture of relief and distress.

He wanted to believe Kassian.

He wanted to believe that somehow, in some way, Sin had been spared unnecessary pain before it was all over.

There was nothing he could do about what he'd gone through himself—the panic when they'd forced him down and he hadn't known what they were about to do; when he'd wondered whether he was going to die before he even officially started the mission. The confusion and betrayal when he'd found himself in a position where he was used all day while the drugs ate away at his mind. The fear that he would never get away; that the Agency would forget about him and for the rest of his life he'd be just another rentboy to fuck.

Even though he felt very alone with what he'd gone through, at least this way Sin had been protected.

"Did you talk to him?" He hadn't intended to ask the question but once it was out there he perversely wanted to know. Even though it hurt to think in terms of 'the last months of Sin's life.'

"Yes." Kassian looked away quickly as if to hide the brief flash of distress that crossed his own face. Boyd wondered if the other man had grieved for Sin. It wasn't a stretch even if the two had been something close to enemies for so long.

"I went to him when it started. I told him he was being reckless. We argued but he knew I was right. He admitted that he couldn't help not caring about the Agency anymore. He hated it very... very much by then. More than
ever before. He hated what they were making you do and he hadn't even known the half of it."

Boyd's eyes burned and his fingers clenched in his hair. He forced himself to drop his hands to the table before he could do any damage. He thought about what Sin must have been going through, thought about what it would have been like if Sin had known—and he thought about his own disjointed memories of that time.

Carhart had said that the order was carried out in March. Boyd's sense of time had been skewed but he knew he'd still been at the Palace then. It was entirely possible he'd been in the middle of a drug-induced orgy, mindlessly and desperately begging for it when the man he loved more than life itself had been back here, suffering and ultimately silenced.

The thought made him sick.

"I hate this, Kassian," he said, his voice thin and pained. He didn't intend to say it but once it was out in the open he couldn't stop. "I hate them for doing this. For taking him away from me when I need him more than—"

His voice caught and he had to draw in a shaky breath, forcing down the pain and longing. It created a lump in his throat that was difficult to speak around. "I hate that I have all these memories now. And I can't even..." He couldn't seem to finish a sentence. "I can't think about him without feeling like I'm going to fall apart but I can't stop. I miss him so much."

Kassian came over and wordlessly pulled Boyd into a hug. It was the first human contact Boyd had had since he'd found out his life may as well be over and it almost hurt. Not a physical pain, because Kassian's arms were comforting as he held Boyd close.

It was an emotional pain, because even as he desperately clutched Kassian closer he couldn't help thinking how this was the way it was
supposed to be with Sin. This was what he’d been anticipating for months. This comfort; this warmth and weight.

It was all wrong. The scent that was supposed to be surrounding him; the deep voice he was supposed to hear. The warm breath that was supposed to stir his hair.

Even as he clung to Kassian, unable to hold back a short sob that he muffled against Kassian's stomach, he remembered all the moments he had held Sin this close, and thought of all the missed moments he would have in the future. All the times he would need Sin's support and end up stumbling. All the times he would need Sin's warmth and feel only cold. All the times he would need Sin's love and end up feeling lonelier than ever before.

He tried to hold it all in. Tried frantically to keep himself from falling apart. Kassian's presence both hindered and helped that endeavor and he struggled furiously until he was able to gain some sense of control. Some semblance of normalcy.

It was sad how difficult that was for him.

He was just forcing himself to pull away from Kassian when he heard the door open. He pulled back and scrubbed at his face, trying to dispel as much evidence of his instability as possible. He gathered every thread of self-control and held tight, winding it all together into a paper-thin shroud of normalcy that he was determined to hold until the two left. It was bad enough that he couldn't hold himself together around Kassian—he wasn't going to make Ryan worry more than he needed to as well.

Boyd twisted in the chair and greeted Ryan with a small, wan smile that he didn't entirely feel but made himself do anyway. "Hey," he greeted, voice subdued and a hint thick. He did his best to steady his tone; to sound as casual and in control as possible. "Find everything okay?"
Ryan's eyes flicked between Boyd and Kassian quickly before he nodded. He was carrying a large bag in one hand and a large cardboard jug in the other. He seemed to sense that something had been happening but he tactfully didn't comment on it.

"I bought a jug of coffee for me and Kass. Some breakfast sandwiches, muffins and a box of tea for you just in case, um, I didn't know if you'd restocked stuff..."

The R&D agent put the packages on the table and began taking out foil-wrapped sandwiches and other things quietly.

"Thanks, Ry," Kassian said with some warmth in his tone. He put a large hand on one of Ryan's scrawny shoulders and squeezed as if trying to reassure him of something.

Boyd smiled and this time it was a little more genuine. "Thank you. I was out of tea."

He pulled the box of tea closer, pleased to see that it was his favorite kind, and stood. He left Ryan to unload while he went to the stove. It occurred to him that the kettle should probably be washed but he couldn't bring himself to care. He turned on the hot water at the sink and rinsed it out instead. Having something to do with his hands helped him focus on the moment.

"So," Ryan said, a nervous edge to his voice. "I guess you haven't seen much of anyone yet."

Boyd shook his head wordlessly as he dumped out the kettle and filled it halfway with fresh water. "Just the people who were there when I returned." He didn't think it would be a good idea to bring up detox or the psychiatrist. He shut off the faucet and brought the kettle over to the stove. "And Carhart," he added, glancing over.
"Oh." The word was loaded, and Ryan focused very carefully on pouring coffee into one of the paper cups he'd brought.

Boyd paused with his fingers on the dial to turn on the stove. A pit of dread grew in his stomach but he didn't let it get to his face. What other terrible news could there be that he had yet to hear?

"What?" he asked, unable to quite keep the wariness out of his tone.

"Nothing," Ryan replied quickly, adding creamer to his cup and perching on a chair next to Kassian. He seemed drawn to the other man for assurance. It was a big change from the last time Boyd had seen them together. "He's just really different now. Zach is, I mean."

"I noticed." Boyd turned on the stove and got the kettle ready so it would whistle when finished. He leaned against the counter near the stove and crossed his arms. "He seemed... cold."

"He is. Now, I mean. Like—" Ryan paused and unwrapped what appeared to be a sausage and egg sandwich. "He's just shut down. A lot's happened."

Kassian scoffed and ignored the dainty paper cups the diner had supplied Ryan with. More familiar with the kitchen, he grabbed a larger mug for his coffee. "Understatement of the year, Ry."

Although Boyd doubted he would like the direction this would go, he wanted to hear from his friends what he'd missed. He'd had enough of suddenly finding himself in trying situations without any warning. "What happened?"

The two agents across the table exchanged looks before Kassian nodded at Ryan. Ryan seemed to always be more in the know than most other people at the compound and that hadn't seemed to have changed.
"The new admin came in January. She'd had it all prepared based on our evaluations and reviews of histories. In her first week, the terminations started."

The dread grew stronger in Boyd. "Anyone I know?"

There was a long pause as Ryan fiddled with the wrapping of his sandwich. His face had drawn into a nearly haggard looking frown. "Yeah. A lot of people... Andrew Torres was one."

"What?" Boyd said. It came out a little strained.

Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised; after all, the man had always been a little soft for Agency standards. Boyd still remembered the time they'd been together on the raid and Andrew had hesitated to kill men who wouldn't have blinked before killing him in return. He'd insisted on flipping people instead of killing them, and had believed that he could save a lot of people even while trying not to harm the ones who wanted to harm him. It was noble and a good idea in theory that, in Boyd's experience, rarely worked well in practice.

It was just the sort of thing someone like Andrew would think.

Boyd ran a hand over his face. "Ryan, I'm sorry..."

Even though Ryan and Andrew had broken up long ago, even though it hadn't sounded like there was any chance they'd ever get back together—Boyd had spent enough time around the man during training to know that Andrew had been a good guy. He remembered late night breaks in the cafeteria, Andrew's hushed voice as he talked about his goals and ideals.

He'd been the kind of person who tried too hard to fix things. He'd tried to be the hero.
Too bad in the Agency's eyes a person was only truly the hero when they were the villain. And now there was one more man, one more good person, who was a victim of the Agency's silent slaughter.

Ryan just shrugged, trying hard to look unmoved.

Kassian cleared his throat, appearing as though he wanted to spare Ryan from having to talk about it one way or the other. "Alvarado got it too. Those are the only two people I know you knew off hand."

Boyd shook his head. He'd never worked much with Michael aside from the mission in Mexico but he didn't wish the guy any harm. Once again, he could see what the reason had likely been; the man had seemed a little unreliable. But enough to be killed?

Boyd himself had caused far more problems than Andrew or Michael likely ever had. He could only assume he was still alive because of his recent successes in missions and the fact that he'd given the Agency even more than they'd expected on the last mission. Still, he didn't expect that to last indefinitely. With the standards it seemed the new regime was holding everyone up to, it was probably only a matter of time until he was deemed unfit as well.

He could hear the water churning and he turned around, shutting off the burner before the water got too hot. He pulled out the strainer and started to shake some loose jasmine leaves into it. "Has anything else changed?"

"Yeah, some things," Kassian replied, finally unwrapping his own breakfast. He'd already downed two cups of coffee. "There's no possibility of refusing a mission at all now but I always knew that would be coming. Termination is pretty much guaranteed after two infractions as far as I can tell based on people who were close to terminated agents. Agent Keeps told me that her boyfriend had made a mistake on some storm in Brussels—the
mistake being that he went back for an injured teammate and delayed the egress dramatically—and was given a warning. But then on a following mission, another mistake occurred and he was never seen again after getting an escort from check-in."

"And I'm not sure if there's such thing as status separation anymore," Ryan mumbled. "I think everyone just has to do whatever they're told, if you have a certain status or not. 'Cause I know an R&D agent who fit a certain profile and got sent on a field mission to attract the attention of some important terrorist."

Kassian nodded, as if he'd also heard about that.

"Oh," Ryan said, looking at Boyd from behind his large glasses as he chewed slowly on his food. "And there's new people in the unit now... Replacements for you and Hsin."

Boyd paused as he sat down, mug of tea in hand. He couldn't say he was surprised about any of the information and yet it was still disconcerting to consider.

Being back at the Agency was already enough of a change for him after a year of being a drug-addicted sex slave half out of his mind. Being back without Sin as support was something he still couldn't quite comprehend. Being back at the Agency with even the Agency itself being different, including the unit he worked for... It felt alien to him.

It made him realize his own situation could have changed well beyond even the amount he'd come to anticipate. After all, the main reason he'd been in the Janus unit had been because of Sin...

He took a moment to grab one of the muffins and started to unwrap it. His fingers shook slightly in the process and his stomach almost felt concave. It was an odd feeling and made him wonder how long it had been since he'd
last eaten. He wondered if he was so hungry he didn't feel hungry at all. He wondered if he would ever feel normal reactions again.

The smell of breakfast and the texture of the muffin only reminded him of the first time he and Sin had ordered from a diner and had decided to eat breakfast in bed. He remembered lying back against Sin's chest, rising and falling evenly with his breath, their legs intertwined. A tray sitting next to them on top of flattened-down covers and the feeling of relaxation that could only come from being with Sin. They'd talked about what they wanted in their new place. They'd hoped a diner like that would deliver there as well.

At that time, there had been any number of breakfasts in bed in their seemingly open future.

Now, that hope was gone. He took a bite of the muffin but it was tasteless to him. He may as well have been eating cardboard. It all seemed so meaningless and pointless to him; these routines he had to go through when everything led back to Sin. The Möbius strip of his mind.

He continued to chew, not letting his thoughts make it to his face, and looked at Ryan. "Do you think I'll be reassigned?"

Ryan swallowed a particularly large bite of his sandwich and shook his head. "I don't think so. At least, whenever Zach did the whole intro to the new members of the team thing, he said Jordan, one of the girls, would only be in the unit until you came back."

Kassian was nodding in agreement as he wiped his greasy fingers on a napkin. "She's more for undercover ops and valentines. I heard she was pretty much going to cross division for that type of thing."

Boyd wondered if the Agency would assign him something like that in the future as well. After all, they'd been so impressed with his latest mission
that no doubt they'd like to test out his new-found skills whenever possible. The bitterness was evident even in his own mind.

"What are they like?" he asked even though he was only mildly interested. He continued to pick apart the muffin.

Ryan made a face and shook his head, unruly hair moving around like a black halo. "Weird English-Japanese twin girls. I don't like them at all. Bex is a real bitch. She hates Owen especially."

Boyd set the half-eaten muffin down and drank his tea instead. He was unsurprised to find that even jasmine tea, his favorite, didn't taste the way he remembered. Would anything ever feel the same again? How long would it take to find pleasure or familiarity even in the simplest of things, and did he really want to gain that back?

He didn't want to forget Sin. He couldn't forget him. Yet the constant reminders everywhere, in even the most innocuous of places, were exhausting.

He struggled with twin desires that made it harder to care about anything else; harder to think and feel. He wished he could shut off his thoughts while at the same time he was afraid of the moment he would wake up and not have Sin be the first thing on his mind. Not be the face he saw in every memory. He felt so conflicted and tired.

He found himself wishing Kassian and Ryan would leave so he could take another sedative.

He sipped the tea, trying to pretend he was savoring what tasted like nothing more than bitter hot water, and made an effort to stay in the flow of conversation. "Why?"
"I don't know. She thinks he's stupid and annoying, I guess. She's—well, she's supposed to be..." Ryan trailed off awkwardly and looked pained. "I guess she's supposed to be the new super assassin..."

"Ryan," Kassian said in a warning tone.

Ryan just frowned. "Sorry. But, I mean, someone is going to say it to him sooner or later. And... And when he goes in to meet Bex she will probably say it herself."

Boyd stared down at his tea. He was getting so tired already that he almost couldn't bring himself to feel anything at that information. And yet...

And yet he thought of the new Marshal, callously casting Sin aside. Of the person he loved more than life itself getting killed and someone already there to take his place. An assembly line of soldiers. Ryan had really meant it when he’d said 'replacement.'

It sickened Boyd. It infuriated him. It made him so sad it hurt.

She wasn't Sin's replacement. No one was. No one could ever take his place. He tried to imagine going into the Agency and working with anyone but Sin. The idea was repellent. And working with someone who was supposed to be the new super assassin?

He hated the new girl already and he hadn't even met her.

The anger was there again, muffled and nearly silenced by the churning hopelessness. He didn't know if he could do this. He didn't know how he was supposed to move on without Sin in his personal life, let alone his professional.

He resisted the urge to push away the half-finished muffin. He was under no delusions that he would finish it. Any hunger he could convince himself he felt was gone.
"I see," was all Boyd could think to say.

There was a beat of silence and Kassian crumbled the foil from his sandwich into a ball. "I have to get going in a minute. Are you going to be all right, Boyd?"

The older man sounded uneasy. It was clear he was worried about Boyd sitting alone in the empty house. Ryan looked nervous, probably for the same reason.

Boyd stared at the muffin for a moment, the question moving through his mind. Would he be all right emotionally? Not now. Maybe eventually, far in the future. So far in the future he couldn't even comprehend it right now. And would he be all right physically?

He dragged his gaze up, meeting Ryan's eyes first before moving to Kassian's. He wondered if he looked as dead as he felt inside. He wondered if it mattered even if he did.

There was only one answer he could think of for the question. Only one reassurance he was capable of giving them.

"I promised him I would keep going."

"Did—" Ryan broke off and his indigo eyes, for a moment, looked lost and hurt. "Did you talk about it before? About... if it happened?"

Boyd nodded wordlessly and listlessly pushed some hair back that had started to fall out of the loose ponytail. He was silent at first, thinking back to that time. Remembering the what if's that had become reality. He wondered what it had been like for Sin. He'd had his own what if's to deal with during the mission; his own uncertainties.

"What was he like?" Boyd asked before he could stop himself. "During—while I was gone."
Kassian and Ryan exchanged another one of those wordless looks that now seemed common between the two of them. They had been barely acquaintances before the mission and now they appeared undoubtedly closer. Much closer. Kassian almost appeared to be some kind of support system for Ryan but in the past several months, the younger man had likely needed one desperately.

"He was okay at first," Ryan said finally. They had apparently silently decided that Ryan would do the talking. It made sense. He would have been around the most. "Well, as okay as he usually is. But then the weeks started going by and it started becoming really obvious that he was just really angry with everything, especially when the twins were transplanted into the unit. I don't really know what all he thought about the new admin—he didn't really talk about it."

There was a thoughtful silence as Ryan's brow furrowed. "Bex surprisingly seemed to like him. It seemed like she wanted to understand him or know him better but he didn't share the interest. The only person he really talked to or I saw him with during that time was Ivan so he may know better what Sin was really thinking or feeling. I mean, besides what he told Kass that one time."

Boyd nodded again and fell silent. His gaze dropped to his tea, to the golden liquid that was slowly cooling. He didn't feel like finishing even that one cup. It was pathetic; even his comfort drink no longer looked good to him.

It made him think of his mission again, made him resent it even more. He could remember the months dragging out for him. The routines that had developed. The ebb and flow of his high. The constant back and forth between the filthy lower levels and the ludicrously opulent upper levels. The faceless men and women who'd waited in the suites, looking over with pleased smiles when he'd been brought in.
He remembered that time and now it wasn’t just the things they’d done to him and the things he’d begged them to do. Now, every moment had a counter-moment that made it worse. Where he imagined what it had been like for Sin, and he imagined how he could have made those last months better for his lover. If only he’d been here. If only he hadn't been gone. If only they hadn't drugged him and spread his body open and fucked him over and over—

His eyes narrowed and he realized he didn't know how long he'd been silent. His expression tightened and he ran a hand over his eyes. He was so tired. It was so hard to keep going with everything hurtful and hateful clamoring for his attention. It was no wonder Ryan and Kassian kept sharing looks; he probably seemed half out of his mind. In truth, he probably was.

He looked up at the others with a mumbled, “Sorry.” He tried to stay in the moment and rested his hands around the lukewarm mug of tea. “Was he okay physically? Nothing terrible happened on any missions? They didn’t—" His fingers twitched against the mug, his eyes narrowing faintly. “They didn't put him in the box?”

"Nothing happened... that I know of beforehand. Everyone in the unit found out really belatedly and then it kind of spread around the compound. He'd been gone for a week when I found out." Ryan swallowed audibly and took his glasses off, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Emilio and Zach found out right away. Zach shut down—even when he told us, he was so... so... just not there anymore."

Boyd stared at Ryan. What would he have done if he had been here and it had still happened like that? Without warning or word; Sin just suddenly... gone. He shook his head slightly to rid himself of the thought. "And Emilio?"

"Heh." Ryan flashed a weak grin.
"Threatened to blow the new Marshal's brains out. He's been kept in a holding cell on the Fourth for months. I'm not sure how long he's punished for though," Kassian informed Boyd with a shake of his head.

Boyd's eyebrows twitched up slightly, the first reaction he'd shown in awhile. "Was it to her face?"

"Oh, yes. He fucked up a few guards to get close enough to her. Allegedly, some people thought he was going to try to kill her right then. He's lucky not to be terminated if that was the case but I think she may have expected that reaction and terminating him would be another level 10 resource gone."

Boyd shook his head. He almost said aloud that it was too bad Emilio didn't succeed but decided against it. He didn't need them worrying about him going vigilante too.

"Have you met her?"

They both nodded.

"Carhart said they'd watch me for signs of weakness when I return to active duty." Boyd's fingers brushed against the mug and his eyebrows twitched down.

Active duty still felt forever away even though it was only a couple of weeks; probably less by now. At the same time, it felt too soon. He didn't want to go active duty again as equally as he wanted to go active simply to have something to focus on other than grief.

"Is there anything I should know before I have to meet her?"

Kassian shrugged. "I'm not sure what to say, really. Even though she came in with a reign of terror, when I met her for a mission she was relatively
unremarkable. Straightforward, curt, but nothing that different from anyone else here.”

Boyd considered that. At least that told him something. What, exactly, he likely wouldn't know until he met her himself. That was yet another thing he wasn't looking forward to. He sighed and finally pushed the tea and muffin away from him. "I suppose I'll end up meeting her soon enough anyway." He paused as something occurred to him. "Has it been said whether Emilio will return to the unit once he's released?"

"Zach said he will be," Ryan said with a nod.

"Good."

At least there would be one person he knew how far he could trust on missions. It would be good to have one familiar face after all the changes, even if that face was going to make letting go of Sin be that much more difficult. He knew he was going to end up cursing how similar they looked at some point.

Kassian looked at his watch and stood. His forehead was creased with a worried frown. "I really have to get going, Boyd. Call me if you need anything. Don't fucking hesitate, kid."

Boyd nodded although he already knew he wouldn't call. He was going to have to figure out how to deal with this on his own eventually. Relying on anyone else too heavily was just going to make it worse. In the end, support was only fleeting. Under this new regime, how long did any of them have? How long until Kassian was terminated, or Ryan, or anyone else? How long until he was left alone again, assuming he wasn't terminated first?

At the same time, he knew it was easy to think that in the daylight with people around him. In the middle of the night when the bed felt too large and empty and all he had were memories masquerading as dreams...
"You're still on speed dial," was all he said.

Kassian leaned forward and pulled him into a half hug, squeezing one of Boyd's shoulders. "Take care," he said briefly against Boyd's ear before pulling away and heading to the door.

Ryan stood as well, looking mildly disappointed. "He's my ride so... I guess I'm going too. I brought extra stuff because I figured maybe you didn't have a lot here after so long."

The R&D agent ran a hand through his hair and offered a barely there smile. "I'm sorry I'm not much of a comfort anymore. I just... don't know what to say about stuff anymore, I guess. There's nothing really to say to make any of this better."

Boyd shook his head and stood. "You don't need to say anything. It's enough that you came."

Another withered smile was sent Boyd's way before Ryan left as well. He had changed so much over the past couple of years that there was barely anything left of the energetic and enthusiastic young man that Boyd had first met upon entering the Agency.

That seemed to be the way it worked at the Agency; a person was worn down until they became a shell of who they once were.

Boyd didn't leave the kitchen until after he heard Kassian's truck start and drive away. He trailed out to the living room, locking the door and absently setting the alarm, and then stood there not knowing what to do with himself. He felt curiously blank and he wanted to stay that way; to have even that brief respite from the intense and fluctuating emotions.
In the end, he curled up on his couch, wanting to avoid his bedroom as long as possible. He lay there waiting to doze off, hoping he wouldn’t have to take sedatives in the end.
Chapter Three

"Hold him still."

Panting heavily as he lay on the bed, his back encased in silken covers, his chest heaving. Sweat made his skin slick. His lips were bruised and mouth still tasted of condom from the man who'd just crawled off him.

He was high on lust, on energy, and he tried to touch himself but hands snapped around his wrists and forced his arms down above his head. His knees fell open and his feet slid against the sheets, trying to find purchase. Another set of hands on his chest, holding him down.

He moaned, a desperate and plaintive sound, and was about to beg when firm fingers gripped his straining erection. His moan became a helpless groan. His eyes opened; a muffled view of the ceiling, detailed and high, with the walls a blur around him. His gaze slipped and slid, down the length of his body to the man crouched between his legs.

James.

The name was interlaced with other memories, other moments like this; a confusing jumble that turned into one. The tilt of those brown eyebrows; the flick of that light stare, proprietary on his bare skin.

He was holding something and Boyd couldn't comprehend what it was or whether it should be strange. A thin metal rod that was slightly curved at the ends. James looked down at Boyd's erection, held firmly in his hand.

"I've always wanted to try this," came the mutter.

The rod was at the tip of Boyd's erection. Boyd's breath quickened but before he had the chance to understand what was happening, an intense
pressure mixed with pain made him throw his head back with a strangled shout, his body arching as best he could. His feet slipped against the bedding and he tried to pull away but there was nowhere to go.

"Look at it move," James said, intrigued.

"That's hot," muttered Kent.

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut and breathed harshly. The pressure increased. He could feel James pushing the rod into the hole in his dick deeper, deeper, until he swallowed it whole. The rough feel of a calloused thumb was at the tip of his erection, holding the rod in.

Whimpers escaped Boyd, mostly from the confused jumble within his mind that was already translating the alien feeling into something highly arousing.

"What happens if he comes?" Tom asked.

"Dunno," James said unconcernedly. "Let's find out."

Shifting of the bed and body arching up. Hands switched at his cock, holding the rod down. Boyd felt James arranging himself, hands moving along Boyd's hips and angling his body up.

Boyd could feel something hard pulsing at his entrance. His muscles were automatically tightened from the feeling of the rod. Half-heard sounds escaped him in helpless waves and James had to drop one hand from Boyd's hips to guide his cock into him.

A shove and James forced his way inside. Boyd's harsh breath became a strangled groan. The rod was a pressure that was driving him insane and once James started to move, it only became worse. Hard thrusts that made him moan and pant, pleading, "Ohh, fuck," and "ah—ahh..."
Something shifted at his cock and he could feel the rod start to push out before it was shoved back in. Another shout from Boyd, an intrigued, "Let's fuck him with both at once," from Kent, and soon a counter-beat fucking that made him scream.

Flash of black—disjointed sounds and a crescendo of need—

A voice hissing plaintively; twisting like the body he felt too strongly but couldn't control—"Fuck me. Ohh fuck, fuck..."

Pleading words that made no sense to the rushing of the blood in his head. An erection, hard and hot, slamming into him—hips rising up to meet each other and only then did he realize he was fucking himself with the rod in his own dick. Heard a voice in the background urging him to continue; telling him he couldn't stop.

That was right—He couldn't stop, he couldn't stop. It felt too painfully good—

He was pressed awkwardly against the bed—his face to the side, body partially balanced against one shoulder. An uncomfortable position he couldn't bring himself to change. He started fucking himself faster with the rod, moaning for more, please, please, more.

Hands at his hips held them up at an angle; dug crescent moon bruises into his skin as the fucking got harder, shaking his entire body—silk covers sliding beneath his knees and groaning in the background from more than one voice—

The world twisting and fading. Growls moving in and out of his understanding—

Someone was screaming; ten steps removed and it was good, that scream, it showed how much he wanted this—
A voice he didn’t recognize but did. Eternity to realize it was his own. Everything was blood slamming through his veins like the energy like the erection, pushing deeper and deeper inside and making his entire body come alive.

He wanted it—he needed it. Begged for it. Arched his back so his ass was straight up in the air and he didn’t even know which of the four men was fucking him. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was sating the hunger that scoured through him relentlessly with the endless need to be fucked more, faster, harder... An out of control urge that didn’t let him question anything; that only let him plead.

He was building to the height of another orgasm, fucking himself with the rod harshly, nearly making himself scream from pain that he could only translate as pleasure, pleasure, pleasure—a reckless abandonment so strong that even blood streaming down his ass would be seen as helpful lubricant. A feeling that forced him into only wanting more, more, to the point that he would do anything. He would fuck himself to death and still beg for it with his dying breath. Still plead for one more time, one more go, just one more man thrusting into him...

They growled dirty talk, calling him whore and slut and bitch and it only made him moan wildly. His breath was building, he was about to come—

They clamped their hands around his cock; pulled his balls down until they strained at his skin and he was shouting helplessly, needing that release and oh fuck when they took turns ramming his ass it felt so fucking good—He needed to come so badly he could taste blood in his throat from crying out and yet they kept going—

The pleasure-pain built until he couldn’t breathe around the feeling, his body hot and tingling from toe tips up to his head; he could almost feel it in his hair, his nose was even tingling, his lips; his mouth was wide open and his
voice had risen so long and so loud he was nearly hoarse, his body not his own to control anymore—it was all the need, the desire, the lust, making him slam that rod into himself desperately, thinking maybe he could force himself to come around their hands—

Erections that moved in and out of him, sometimes filling his mouth and choking him while fingers gripped his hair and someone else continued to fuck him—voices changing and a hand-held video camera shifting in and out of view—hands shoving him this way and that as they took turns fucking him in different positions, as the grunts of the men increased. He was nearly crying he was begging so desperately for release until finally, his legs splayed, the bed soft against his back and an erection seated deep within him, someone said to let him go.

He felt his balls snap up so quickly, so far, it felt like they were going to crawl up into his body. He didn't even need the cock inside him for the ecstasy to crescendo.

The orgasm hit him harder than ever before. His entire body snapped up, arching against the pleasure roaring out of his stomach and scouring out of his body. The whole world became white, his eyes wide open and sightless, and he didn't even realize he'd been gripping the sheets and screaming with abandonment until, what felt like hours later, he slowly came back to himself.

Video camera aimed at his heaving body, an erection still pounding into him passionately, and the rod against his side. Semen covered his chest, had even made it up to his face. His body rocked with the man fucking him; that deep voice groaning while hips slammed almost violently against him in an uncontrolled rush.

Excited voices were going back and forth. "Did you get that?" and "God damn, that was fucking hot," and "That's right; tag that bitch, Pat. Ride it till it bleeds."
Time distilling; stretched and snapping back with parts missing in between. Black and fuzzy around the edges—his body never stilling for longer than a handful of seconds. His cock only twitching but never softening, not with the need burning him alive from inside out. A marionette to the desire, his limbs were already jerking and shifting; head thrown back and his throat a bare curve as someone raked their hands across him, pulling him into the optimal positions—

A new angle, half twisted on his side with bruised lips wide open and breath warming the covers. He barely heard another voice telling Tom to wait but he acutely felt it when the erection stilled inside him. Blood was a pounding rush in his head that whispered only one thing: more, more, he needed more. He whimpered and shifted, needing that cock to start moving again. Needing to be pounded for the rest of his life.

Hands on him and body shifting again and he was pulled up, rearranged until he was seated with a body beneath him. They slid him back onto the erection. His body burned for it as he felt that pulsing heat inside him. He moaned, threw his head back and started riding it. Rolling his hips and panting harshly and hearing Tom groan beneath him...

He was shoved back, his legs pulled up, his back against Tom's chest. Shifting of bodies that seemed too distant for him to understand, other than the words, "Think he can take it?" and the weight of another body crawling up the bed.

Words in the background that barely made sense. He could hear them rearranging the camera, talking about the right lighting and the right angle, and then another body was hovering over his. James, looking down at where Boyd and Tom were joined, and Boyd felt pressure at his entrance. Another erection trying to stretch him wide around them both and he was half screaming, half gasping; body twisting before James shoved inside—
Fuzzy darkness that wasn't coalescing properly into shapes and his chest was heaving. Somehow he'd sat up and the hands weren't there. The feeling of forceful arousal was missing—the voices were gone—

It took Boyd a few highly confused, panicked seconds before he realized he'd been dreaming. He was sitting up in a bed, body soaked in sweat and mind buzzing. He looked around frantically, trying to remember where he was.

He had to be at Aleixo's, waking from a nightmare—

He jerked his head to the side, certain he would see Aleixo reaching over with an annoyed expression for waking him, or Vika sprawled with dark eyes regarding him sensually. He expected to see one elegant hand raised to pull him back down, a smile on her lips as she would murmur, "No, lie back, Cameron darling. Today you are mine to play with—"

But no one was next to him and in the scattered panic of the moment he didn't understand that. He looked up—dark walls and broken furniture; shadows deeper than the night—

This didn't make sense—he knew this place. It was his room, his childhood room, but it was a mess. Everything was broken and why—

—screaming and crying for a different reason and Sin, Sin, he was gone—

Reality hit him like a wall slamming into his whole body, compacting his lungs. It was a moment of being stunned before it all came crashing down.

Anguish overwhelmed him and he slouched forward, knees drawing closer as he squeezed his eyes shut and gripped his legs. His breath was harsh and catching in the silent house.
Emotions built within him powerfully until he could feel his eyes burning. Until he couldn't breathe around the pain and intense sense of loss that formed a lump in his throat.

The dream played behind his closed eyelids but it wasn't a dream; it was a memory.

A shameful reminder of what he'd been like; of the wanton way he'd laid himself open to be used over and over. The way he'd begged for it from lines of strangers he'd never even seen before; his moaning sucking of their cocks; the women's bodies laid before him as he'd gone down on them; the groups that had fucked him and the way he'd only pleaded for more—

The lump grew in his throat and he felt sickened. He was barely able to throw himself out of bed and stumble to the bathroom in time before he fell over the toilet, retching the little food he had left into the water. Even when that was gone his body still heaved, a violent pull from the base of him upward, and he felt hot, angry tears burning in his eyes.

When he was finally able to calm himself, his fingers remained gripping the edges and he coughed miserably. His face, his entire body, felt pained and heated, and he rested his forehead against the cool porcelain lid.

Everything within him felt ten times worse than before. He pressed his head hard against the toilet, squeezed his eyes shut to the point of pain, and tried to keep the disgust from shifting the hatred on himself.

In the light of day, he always felt rage more than anything else. A furious need to lash out at everyone around him; to protect himself through anger. But at night, half-muddled by sleep and with the memories more vivid than the shadows surrounding him, it was disgust and shame that dominated him. It was hopelessness and resentment and misery.
It was memories of the lust that had burned him alive from the inside out, and distress at the undeniable knowledge of how much he’d craved any touch. How he’d so willingly become a thing for them to toy with, and terror at how easy it had been for them to strip from him everything he’d ever thought he’d known about himself and turn him, instead, into an animal for mere entertainment.

The flashes of memory were too strong. Even crouched there he could still remember it all. The laughter in the background. The excited grunts of mens' voices in his ear and the moist, warm puff of their breath. Erections shoving in and out of him; out of sync beats that stretched him too wide but still had his toes curling in agonizing, desperate need--

Boyd released a strangled groan and threw himself up to the sink. Tried to focus on something a normal human did by rinsing out his mouth and brushing his teeth to rid his tongue of the taste of vomit but even then he felt their ghostly touch. The bruising force of fingers clutching his thighs, his sides, his arms--

"No--" The word was strangled out of his lungs, followed by it again in a rising twist. The no's he hadn't been able to say back then crescendoed now in his mind, overtaking all.

He rushed back into his room, not knowing what he planned. Standing taut and still. He wavered in place, feeling revulsion clench his stomach and lungs. He felt utterly alone in the house; dead black without a sound from inside or outside.

Boyd stood in the middle of his destroyed room, shoulders tense and body shifting without direction. He felt uncertain and on the cusp of something much larger than himself. Something frightening and unknown.

He wanted to flee.
He wanted to run away and never look back and what was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to handle any of this? How was he supposed to have energy after it was all sucked away to kick Slide?

He couldn't do it. He couldn't. He needed—

Vulnerability, and the world loomed terrifyingly. His feet moved of their own accord. He grabbed his jacket and keys without thinking. Threw the jacket on and barely remembered to step into his shoes. He was out the door and striding down the street within seconds.

It was the dead of the night. His block was silent. Nothing stirred, not even the branches on the trees. It was eerily still. Very few of his neighbors kept their porch lights on and the streetlights were inadequate. The whole world felt compressed and dark. Claustrophobic.

He was afraid.

Afraid the memories would never dull enough for him to deal with them properly. Afraid he would become too used to them. Afraid he'd revert to the emotionless shell it had taken years to leave behind. Afraid he'd find out he just wasn't strong enough to move on. Afraid the anger would leave him for good and he'd end up trudging through life pointlessly, with grief a sharp knife slowly bleeding him dry.

He'd only joined the Agency because of Sin. With Sin gone and with that promise keeping him moving forward, the only future he had to look forward to was being used by the same people who had sent him off to be a drugged up sex addict. Missions of killing and deceiving people for a goal he didn't believe in would be intermixed with missions where he was whored out. Licking and sucking and fucking like a commonplace hustler for nothing, for fucking nothing, because all he truly wanted was Sin.
He could have gone through anything and it would have been okay if only Sin were there.

But he wasn’t.

He was gone and Boyd was left alone to grief and hatred and fear, and memories that wouldn't leave him be.

He may never find meaning in anything again.

He didn’t know where he was going. He’d had no special place in the city with Sin. Why hadn't he thought to create one? A place to retreat to when he had nowhere else. Nothing else...

He didn’t realize he was heading toward the Agency until he turned the corner and it loomed before him. Lights glowed faintly from windows. The Tower was a monolith in the dark; well-lit even in the dead of the night because the Agency was always moving. Always awake.

He almost turned back. He put his hands in his jacket pockets and started to slow. Something hard met his fingers and he realized his wallet was in his pocket. Which meant he had his ID.

He didn't stop to think. He walked up to the gates, flashing his ID without meeting the scrutinizing gaze of the guards. Downtime didn't mean he wasn't allowed on compound.

They let him in.

A familiar trek that soon, with time, would be lost to his memory like everything else he wanted to keep. The clutter, the pain—that would remain. But the good times would be lost to the inexorable march of time soon enough.
The guard at the base of the building gave him an odd look but once again had no reason to deny him.

The world was white noise around him. He didn't specifically remember walking up the stairs or swiping the card. He found himself in Sin's former living room and looked around. Dead silent and empty. Just like him.

If he gave himself the chance, in his mind he would overlay the apartment the way it was supposed to be. A book tossed to the side here. A shirt he'd left behind there. Rumpled sheets from lovemaking and steam from the shower billowing out from beneath the bathroom door. A deep voice he longed to hear again to the point that it stifled his breath.

The apartment was blurry. Tears tracked down his cheeks again and it would be forever until this pain wasn't so easily uprooted.

He walked into the bedroom, the white walls mixed with white sheets and white nothingness and he could feel it looming. The terrible, gaping emptiness that threatened to swallow him whole at any given moment. His breath quickened and he was finding it harder to stay still.

He crawled onto the bed without even removing his shoes. He lay down in a fetal position, curling himself into as small a ball as he could. As if he made a smaller target that way. As if he could make it all go away by disappearing himself.

He was acutely aware that Sin should be there in the bed with him. That Sin's even breath should be the backdrop to his dreams and that the mattress should be tipped down just so, just enough for his body to naturally roll toward his lover's.

His breath caught and somewhere within it all he was crying again; the silence broken the same as his emotions. He clung to himself, to the memories of Sin that still stained these walls and saturated the air.
Shuddering sobs wrenched out of him, filling the silence with wretchedness that only made it more undeniable how very, very alone he was.

"Come back." A plaintive, reedy whisper in the night. Voice thick around the tears that were making it hard to breathe. "Don't leave me. *Please...*

Empty silence answered his plea. The feeling of being utterly alone and alienated only increased and soon Boyd was lost to everything. All he felt was agony that tore him apart piece by piece, and dark silence where he should have at least found the comfort of Sin's ghost.

There was nothing for him anywhere. His home was alien to him. This bed that had once been a sanctuary was now cold and isolating.

He had nothing in life and it hurt so much it made him want to scream around the weeping but he didn't have the breath for it. It made him want to tear everything apart and make the world as broken as he felt, but he couldn't make his body move.

He was railing against the world, against his life, but it came out in choking gasps and grief-stricken sobs. No more words came to his lips because they were all meaningless. All he could do was struggle weakly to avoid getting thoroughly overwhelmed. To keep from letting everything unravel completely.

It wasn't the first time he cried himself to sleep and certainly wouldn't be the last.

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"Agent Beaulieu."
The voice moved down through the darkness and dragged him back up to the surface. A few repetitions and he shifted, his head moving just so, and squinted his eyes open against the light.

Staring at a blank white wall, he didn't know where he was at first. He blinked a few times and looked toward the voice.

A man in a uniform was staring down at him evenly. His face sparked some recognition and with it came a name, Amos, and with that came a place, Sin's apartment, and with that came the reason.

Sin's death.

Boyd dropped down against the bed, his eyes closing. He felt exhaustion roll over him along with depression. Hopelessness. He wished he never had to move again.

"You have to come with me," Amos said calmly.

"Why?" Boyd's voice was dull.

"You'll miss your appointment."

"What appointment." He didn't care enough to make it a question.

"With Dr. Shapiro."

Amos sounded patient but Boyd could hear him moving closer to the bed. He wondered whether the guard would literally drag him out of bed and up to his appointment. He wondered whether that would constitute one of the two infractions he was allowed.

Boyd sighed but there was nothing he could do except obey.

It took great effort but he made himself roll off the bed and stand. He didn't bother to straighten his clothing or his hair. He didn't care. He kept his
gaze on Amos' back, not letting it wander even a bit so as not to unearth more memories that would leave him struggling against sorrow.

The walk out of the building was spent in silence but by the time they were crossing the courtyard, Amos was glancing at Boyd discreetly from the corner of his eye. Boyd didn't react or acknowledge the movement. For a bit it almost seemed as though Amos was going to say something but in the end he remained silent.

It didn't seem to take that long to arrive at Dr. Shapiro's door. Amos dutifully stood to the side while the psychiatrist's administrative assistant Allison told them it would be a few minutes. Boyd stood there, blank-faced and staring at the wall. Waiting until he could leave this place.

Within minutes, the door opened and someone left. Boyd didn't look over to see who had been the previous patient. He didn't care.

Soon, Dr. Shapiro was at the door. He was a man who appeared to be in his late forties or early fifties, with mostly dark brown hair that was peppered with silver on the sides. The wrinkles at the edges of his eyes made it seem like once upon a time he had smiled a lot, and his expression seemed to default to neutral.

It was a different type of neutral than Boyd had always defaulted to himself. Boyd shut off his emotions whereas Shapiro simply seemed to be perpetually reserving judgment. Even when he'd seen Boyd at his worst as he'd gone through detox and rehab, he'd watched Boyd without opinion.

Shapiro's brown eyes unerringly found Boyd. "Come in," he said as he stepped back. Amos left and the secretary turned back to her computer.

Boyd followed Shapiro into his office.
Shapiro waited until the door was shut and they were both settled before he spoke calmly. "You missed the last session."

Boyd was silent, staring into thin air.

"Boyd, I need you to talk to me."

A long moment passed in which Boyd considered ignoring the prodding. But he knew it wouldn't do him any favors at the moment. And he was tired—so tired from fighting the dual weight of the loss of Sin and the repercussions of his mission.

"What day is it?" His voice sounded empty.

Shapiro watched him, his palm panel nearby for notes. "Friday. October twentieth."

Boyd stared blankly at him. Seven days. Had it already been that long? Had it only been that long? He vaguely remembered Shapiro telling him at the last session that they were to meet again on the eighteenth. Obviously that hadn't happened.

"You did not answer the phone," Shapiro explained as if he could read Boyd's thoughts. "I planned to send a retrieval squad to your house on Wednesday but I was alerted by the guards that you appeared on compound in the middle of the night. I rearranged my schedule so we could meet today."

"Why?"

Shapiro studied him at length. He had the same thoughtful look as always, half as if Boyd were the most interesting thing in the room and half as if his mind was lightyears away in analysis. He shifted, sitting up straighter in the chair. "Tell me this. You were found in Agent Vega's former apartment. Obviously you know it's empty. Do you know why that is?"
Boyd nodded dully.

"I would like you to say it aloud."

"He's dead."

It was the first time he'd spoken the words out loud. His voice sounded distant and hoarse even to him. The words were too final; too loud in the silence.

He wished he could take them back.

Shapiro watched him and nodded once. He made a few notes on his palm panel. "What was your reaction to that knowledge?"

Boyd stared at the doctor.

"Boyd, I know this is difficult but I need to ensure you have come to terms with this. The only way to do that is to acknowledge how you feel and—"

"Move on?" Boyd interrupted, his eyes turning dangerous. A flare of defensiveness shot through him—the cogs of the machine were here, already trying to flatten him back into shape.

"Cope," Shapiro replied calmly. "You've experienced tremendous stress and if you do not acknowledge it, you will only harm yourself in the long run."

"That would be terrible for the Agency, wouldn't it?" Boyd asked offhandedly, his tense shoulders contrasting the barbed words. "Losing an agent they've only just managed to regain."

"It would be terrible for you," Shapiro corrected him.
His dark eyes took in everything of Boyd; the stony, shuttered expression and the way his body language closed everything off around him. Boyd watched Shapiro with increasing anger and distrust. What did the man expect from him? What did he want him to say? He wanted Sin to be forgotten so easily? He wanted Boyd to get on the bandwagon of saying, 'yeah what a waste but oh well, guess it's all over now'?

His teeth grit and he wanted to tell Shapiro to get out of his face. To stop pretending he knew what any of this felt like or that he wasn't just trying to efficiently push Boyd along so he could return to being useful. Shapiro didn't give a shit about him or his coping. How could he, after sitting there for all those weeks—staring Boyd straight in the face and not even bothering to give him any warning—

"Why didn't you tell me?" Boyd ground out. The words came out accusatory. Hard.

Shapiro shook his head; a subtle motion. "The timing was inappropriate. You were already in a very vulnerable position."

"And when I left?" Boyd demanded, eyes narrowing to slits. "It didn't occur to you that maybe someone should tell me before I ran to his apartment and had every goddamned hope for the past year ripped away?"

There was a beat of silence and then Shapiro said in his same neutral tone, "Boyd, we need to talk about this."

Boyd only shook his head sharply, his jaw setting, and he looked out the window. Tension made his back so stiff it was nearly painful. Resentment and anger moved within him and he wanted to get up and storm away. He wanted to shout at Shapiro that they didn't need to talk about anything—that anything that should have been said or done was long past. That any bullshit
salvation Shapiro wanted to offer Boyd was just a blatant lie that he could see right through.

"It's alright to feel anger, Boyd," Shapiro was saying in the background. "It's alright to feel betrayed. Holding it in won't make it go away."

Boyd's lips twisted coldly on the edges, the rest of his expression remaining as hard as stone. "Why don't you tell me more of what I feel, Doctor? It seems we don't need to talk about any of this at all since you already have me all figured out."

Shapiro watched Boyd with that same neutral stare as always. "We've talked about this. Remember when you first returned and you were in denial about what had happened. We talked about your tendency to avoid directly confronting psychologically challenging situations and how that hurts you in the long run."

Boyd's eyes narrowed dangerously. Fury was a dark river moving through him, sweeping away everything in its path. He didn't want to hear some Agency-paid shrink telling him some contrived analysis. He didn't want all these bullshit lies about caring about his health or the long run or any of that. They didn't care at all what the long run was for him; all they cared about was using him up in the short run first.

They wanted their notes and their charts and their bullet pointed lists. They wanted to know how best to exploit him. They wanted to fuck him just as much as Aleixo and his clients did, only the Agency would do it more metaphorically. And that made it almost worse.

Disgust and hatred made Boyd incapable of sitting still any longer. He stood, his body tense as a rubber band and expression shuttered and cold.
Shapiro watched him with frustrated disappointment flashing in his eyes before it was hidden. The psychiatrist shook his head. "Don't do this, Boyd. I'd like to—"

"This isn't an official appointment so I trust cutting it short is acceptable?" Boyd interrupted flatly.

Shapiro hesitated and frowned. He looked down at his palm panel, flipping through a few screens or making notes; it was hard to tell. Whatever the case, his frown increased and he shook his head. "It isn't a full session," he allowed, "but I think it's best if—"

"Then I think we're finished," Boyd said tightly and strode toward the door.

"Boyd, you don't have to go through this alone," Shapiro said, standing up as well. His eyebrows were drawn down and the palm panel lay askew on the desk. His fingers were light on the desk but his right hand twitched; almost as if he wanted to raise it to stop Boyd from leaving. Or he wanted to pick up the phone and tell the Marshal how uncooperative his patient was being.

Yes I do, Boyd thought, the words barbed and hateful in his mind. He didn't speak them aloud; he simply looked at the doctor with a dark glare that said more than enough on its own.

He turned before Shapiro could speak again and paused at the door just long enough to say over his shoulder, "I'll be here on Wednesday, Doctor." Without waiting for a reply, he left.

He didn't know where his feet were taking him. He didn't have anywhere to go. He didn't want to go to his house or Sin's old apartment. Even if Ryan or Kassian were available, he couldn't bring himself to see them. The city felt too large and hectic; he didn't want to be around a lot of people. At the same time, he didn't want to be alone.
He felt cast out from every recourse and didn't know what he wanted or what he could do. He was restless and knew the closed-down control on his emotions would only last so long before the levy broke and he was overwhelmed once again.

Seeing Shapiro and having the man bring up when he'd first been assigned as Boyd's psychiatrist only served to heighten Boyd's restless anger. Shapiro had appeared when Boyd had been going through detox and rehabilitation; two of the worst months in his life.

He remembered flashes of conversations between the doctors during detox.

Impressed voices observing how Slide was a true synthetic aphrodisiac that had been perfected. How smart to target the brain rather than relying on the vascular system. How nice that it worked as well on women as men. How intelligently designed, to literally turn a person on whether they wanted it or not and force their thoughts into nothing but sex. Make them crave it with a desperation that could make them destroy themselves for it. How smart to add the amphetamine so the user could go for days and days. How smart to make it so highly addictive.

It had destroyed Boyd's body and part of detox had been trying to regain some strength. Although Aleixo had built up his nutrition enough that he met Aleixo's needs, Boyd had still spent months prior to that going on binges of sex that had literally lasted days or weeks at a time; day and night without rest, fucking this person or that. His body had repeatedly reached its breaking point and had shut down, causing him to pass out wherever he'd been and not move or reawaken for sometimes days on end.

His heart had taken a lot of strain from the mission. Even with their help, coming down from the high had been horrendous. He'd still longed for Slide; needed it with every fiber of his being.
He'd never struggled so hard against anything in his life, and it had been especially terrifying because he'd been struggling against his own mind and body.

Worse still was realizing later exactly to what depths he'd been pushed and how he'd wanted it at the time. Even with the doctors assuring him that it was physically impossible for anyone to fight Slide's effects, that it was a measure of his mental control that he'd been able to overcome the handicap enough in the end that he'd even exceeded the mission parameters, it was still difficult not to blame himself for it all.

It was difficult not to wonder how, in essence, he could have ever reveled in being raped. Wanted it. Begged for it. How even at the Agency, even knowing everything that had happened to him and knowing what the drug would do, the addiction had still made him crave another hit.

Shapiro knew that. He knew how hard it had been for Boyd. He knew the pain and fear that had dominated him. He knew that returning to Sin was the primary goal Boyd had clung to as strength to come clean. Strength to force himself through all the moments when it seemed so difficult; like an endless battle with himself as the enemy.

He knew, and he deemed it too inconvenient to warn Boyd that the support he'd so desperately been anticipating wasn't going to be there. That the person he'd forced himself to live through all that for wasn't even alive himself.

Expression setting, Boyd strode quickly down the hallway. Thoughts of drugs, sex, anger and Sin made his body tense and lips thin.

When he reached the elevator bank and waited, he ignored the people milling around him and the numbers flashing above the doors. Aggravation warred with restless uncertainty. His thoughts were a complete mess;
interwoven and stumbling over each other and incoherent but still so intense. He knew he couldn't, shouldn't, be alone but he didn't know what to do about it.

He couldn't say what passing thought triggered it but suddenly he knew who to visit.

The only person he could see at the moment, even though the thought of it was painful. Once the thought crossed his mind he couldn't ignore it. He needed to shove away his anger about the mission and focus on the more important question: what had happened to Sin.

He got onto the far elevator, the one with restricted access, and when he reached the fourth floor he flashed his ID and told the guard he was there to visit a prisoner. Some sections of the fourth floor were highly restricted and access was only allowed to certain people. But in this case, the area Boyd wanted to go allowed visitors.

The guard patted him down to search for any weapons. Once it was clear that he was clean, he was escorted through pristine, surgical hallways that he didn't let himself focus on too closely to keep memories from resurfacing. Memories of coming on this floor to save Sin. Of being brought to Shane's. Of torture at the hands of his own allies, all in the name of becoming stronger so he could be used more often.

A vicious cycle that only benefited the Agency.

He was led to a long hallway filled with heavy doors and small windows at the top with covers that when necessary could conceal even the hall from the inhabitants. He remembered the area from when he'd been sent to isolation.

His wallet, keys, ID, phone—anything that could potentially be a weapon or give the prisoner a chance to escape was confiscated at the door.
He focused on keeping his breath even and barely heard when the guard warned, "Just so you know, you're on your own in there. If any stupid shit happens like you get yourself taken hostage, we aren't saving you. Vega's staying in there and in that case, so would you."

Boyd nodded distantly, feeling his heart hammering in his chest as he stared at the innocuous door in trepidation. When the door swung open and he was escorted inside, he didn't even hear the door slam firmly shut behind him. His gaze had already shifted past the overwhelmingly white walls and focused unerringly on Emilio.

It hurt as much as he feared it would.

Those features were too familiar: vivid green eyes and olive complexion; full lips and an aristocratic nose. The differences didn't matter because looking at Emilio made Boyd see Sin, in more luring detail than he'd been able to recall for a year.

With how strongly longing hit him, it was like being reunited with the man he loved. It made his chest ache and breath catch and body go oh so still.

Overlaid on Emilio's face he could see Sin's; that smirk that used to twist his lips; the knowing look in those pale green eyes as they'd focused solely on Boyd. The strength of those smooth arms and the way he'd smelled—musk and cigarettes and soap and oh God, he needed Sin so much—he loved him so much it hurt, it was a physical ache and he wanted to rush to the corner and embrace him—

But then the face shifted; made an expression Sin never would. And the details that weren't quite right settled more firmly on the face. The scars. The more muscular build. The less delicate features.
Pain moved through Boyd so violently that he couldn't keep it from his face. He had to look away, half turning his body from Emilio so he was staring at the blank white wall. He physically hurt inside; a wrenching of his heart and stomach. He set his jaw and crossed his arms. He asked himself why the hell he was doing this to himself. Why he was visiting the one person who was going to make it impossible to forget how much he longed for Sin.

Yet he couldn't stay away. He felt compelled to understand what had happened. Compelled to see the only person left who may be hit as hard and hurt as much as he did. The man who had attempted what he himself would have done as well, if only he had he been here.

If only...

"Hi," Emilio's voice floated across the silent room, low and rough; likely from having been unused for however long he'd been remanded to the cell.

"Hi," Boyd returned, voice just as quiet.

Boyd took a moment to steel himself, drawing in a breath before he turned to look at Emilio again. He tried his best to look at him objectively, constantly reminding himself in the back of his mind that this was Emilio, not Sin, and he needed to forget that they looked so alike because it wasn't going to make this any easier.

Emilio looked exhausted. The same deadening had happened for him as had happened for Carhart but it didn't seem as severe. The usual joker mask was conspicuously missing. If anything, Emilio appeared to try to smile and failed. It was a marked difference from when Boyd had last seen the capricious man and he found it to be disconcerting.

He hesitated and then walked closer to Emilio, looking down at him blankly before he had to turn his face away again. Too close. Sin and Emilio still looked too similar. He couldn't look the man in the eye. His imagination
told him that the tired look may have been on Sin's face as well during his absence, when the anger faded and Sin found himself alone in bed at night.

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he sat down on the floor next to Emilio—not quite as close as would be normal but not far enough away that it was obvious he was trying to give himself some space. He pulled his legs up to his chest and rested his chin on his knees, staring straight ahead at the far wall.

"I just got back," he said, not knowing what else to say in the heavy, dismal silence.

He could hear the rustle of Emilio's hair brushing against the plain white tank top he wore as he turned his head to look at Boyd. "For real?"

Boyd nodded wordlessly, not letting his gaze waver from the wall. His fingers tightened briefly against his legs.

"Wow. Pretty long." Emilio shifted beside him and Boyd could hear things popping as the other man stretched. "Nice hair."

Boyd was silent, not knowing what to say to that. There was the briefest twitch at the edges of his lips; a faint, bemused expression.

There were a lot of differences in his appearance.

Unit 16 had given him a few ear piercings and had dyed the ends of his hair blue before the mission had started. As a runaway teenager who'd ended up destitute in the Bowery, it had fit the image better than his previous, more clean-cut look. On the mission itself he'd gained a few more piercings, mostly on his ears but most notably in his tongue. His trendier style of dress had been courtesy of Vika's preferences and Aleixo's wallet, and since his return he'd done little to bother changing the look.

So of all the things to focus on, the fact that it was his hair Emilio commented on brought Boyd back to a time that seemed like forever ago.
Jumping out of the van with a pounding heart. Standing there with his arms splayed and hands open as he’d stared into the blinding headlights and had waited for _lo más chingón_ to let them go. The swaggering footsteps and that purred, _qué lindo_, as he’d commented on Boyd's changed hairstyle.

He looked at Emilio sidelong, trying to keep it partially in peripheral vision so he couldn’t get sucked into those green eyes.

"What is it with you and hair?"

"You're just so cute that I can't help but notice when shit changes," Emilio replied, a wry grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Boyd smiled briefly and for a moment he meant it. But then he looked at Emilio more fully and seeing that face that close made the pain move through his eyes again. Made the smile fade.

His eyebrows drew down and he looked away. He pushed hair back from his face, propping one arm against his knees as his fingers curled into his hair and rested at the back of his head. Pensiveness clouded his expression and he had to take a moment before he could speak evenly.

"I'm still—dealing with everything."

"No doubt," Emilio agreed faintly, his deep voice still sounding loud in the cell. "I'm still dealing with shit and I been here the whole fucking time." A low scoff escaped his throat and Emilio sat up straighter, scrubbing his hands across his face.

Boyd's eyebrows furrowed and his fingers tightened against his hair. He stared at the wall, his breath quickening slightly like his heartbeat. He felt dismal and dull at the same time as a distant thought he'd been studiously ignoring since he'd heard the news grew stronger.
He stayed still a moment, knowing he shouldn’t even ask, knowing it was a stupid question considering the circumstances—but still wanting an out. Wanting to believe that maybe Emilio’s threats against the Marshal were all an act...

“Emilio, you didn’t—” His voice sounded too abrupt; too breathy and hopeful. He looked over at the older man before he could stop himself, the hope a sad, fervent glint in his eyes as he studied Emilio’s face. "The contingency plan you had before. You didn't—" You didn't get to Hsin before they could, did you? You didn't send him away and he's really okay, he's really alive, and this is all an act to fool the Agency?

The reaction was immediate. The unasked question seemed to hit Emilio like a punch in the gut. He flinched away from Boyd and for a moment, the pain was raw on his face. Like someone had just ripped the scab off a wound that still inflicted tremendous agony.

"Boyd," Emilio started, his voice rough and even quieter. "Boyd—"

He stopped again, and for the first time since Boyd had met him, Emilio seemed to be at a loss for words. Finally he just looked away and said in the same rough voice, "No. I didn't see it coming. No one did."

Boyd felt his heart twist, that hated familiar ache that made it hard to breathe, and he could feel his eyes brighten. He grit his teeth and looked away, rubbing his face as he wordlessly nodded. His breath drew in a little too quickly and he had to press his hands against his eyes, trying to ignore the way that answer added even more finality to something he kept wanting to be untrue.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice thickening as he struggled to keep inside the pain that wanted to rise again. He pressed more firmly against his eyes. "I didn’t—" I didn't mean to make you hurt again; I didn't mean to be like this. "I
don't—" I don't know what to do; I don't know how to move on. I don't know how to make this stop ripping me apart.

Words wouldn't formulate correctly and he couldn't seem to finish a sentence. He didn't know what to say; what to do. His mind rotated hopelessly around the future he and Sin were supposed to have. Around the broken hope that maybe somewhere out there Sin was waiting for him and if he could just escape the Agency, if he could just get away they could be reunited—

"We were supposed to move in together when I returned." He hadn't meant to say it aloud but it was there, twisted and hopeless and holding back all the anguish that seemed so close to the surface every second of every day, seemingly for the rest of his life.

There was another beat of stilted silence and the touch of a hesitant hand brushed Boyd's arm before it dropped.

"You know," Emilio said, his voice nearly back to its normal octave now that he'd swallowed whatever Boyd's suggestion had made him feel. "I feel worse for you than I do for me. And he was... he was my boy. Nobody ever believes me but I really..." A hesitation. "I... you know. You know what I mean."

"I know," Boyd said quietly, his voice heavy. It took him a long moment of fighting against the rush of emotions until finally he was able to return to some semblance of control. Even so, his eyes were red when he dropped his hands and looked over at Emilio. "I've known for a long time. It's the only reason I ever gave you a chance."

The crooked smile made another reappearance on Emilio's handsome face. "Thanks, chico. At least you got a little faith in my word. Other people around here think it don't mean shit. Some generals in particular."
Boyd shook his head and dropped his head back against the wall. "Why did he think you threatened the Marshal if not because you cared about Hsin?"

"Fucked if I know. I don't know what he thinks about that... I haven't seen him since before I found out."

"Oh." Boyd was silent and drew his eyebrows down. "He's changed. He's cold now. Tired. I don't know if that happened before or after."

Emilio looked at him for a long moment, digesting this fact slowly. "I wouldn't know either. He put me on ignore months before... it happened."

Boyd was quiet at first, not entirely sure what to say to that. He'd never fully understood the relationship between Carhart and Emilio, although he had assumptions and insights into parts. Belatedly, something Emilio said filtered through his mind. His eyes narrowed slightly, a contemplative look more than anything, and he looked over at Emilio.

"You haven't seen him at all since then? Didn't he tell you about Hsin?"

"Nope," Emilio drawled, forced nonchalance in his voice although his green eyes narrowed. "I overheard random strangers talking about what they'd heard. It had been more than a day already."

Boyd looked at Emilio sharply. He didn't know what all had happened between Emilio and Carhart and in all honesty he didn't particularly care. They had their own issues and Boyd had no particular loyalty to either above the other.

Emilio really hadn't been a bad guy to Boyd since they'd met. If anything, he'd helped out by training him and otherwise showing to Boyd, at least, that he did truly care for his son on some level. And for most of Boyd's time at the Agency, Carhart had done right by him and Sin. He'd been there...
since the beginning and he'd looked the other way on more than one occasion to spare Boyd or Sin punishment or worse.

Knowing how Carhart had always seemed before, Boyd couldn't believe what he just heard. He was angry enough that Sin had been terminated; angry that no one had been given warning at the time. Angry that he hadn't been warned, either, when he'd been released from detox. The fly-by-night way they'd all lost Sin was painful enough on its own.

But to imagine actually being here and not even finding out until a day or two later by gossip, no less, was horrible. Emilio certainly had his faults but he was still Sin's father. If random strangers knew it, Carhart had to have found out by that time.

"What the hell happened between you two?" Boyd asked in disbelief. "Why didn't he at least leave a voice mail or somehow send a note? He had to have known..."

Emilio shrugged, eyes flicking away to focus on some point on the wall. His heavily stubbled jaw clenched and unclenched before he shook his head, uncut hair shifting with the motion. "It's complicated, chico. There's a lot to it. He just don't have any reason to go out of his way to spare my feelings anymore."

Boyd shook his head. He didn't know what level of 'complicated' warranted not telling a father his son was dead but he wasn't going to argue the point. "They told me you threatened the Marshal," he said instead.

"If I'd had a gun at the time, me and her would both be dead now." A humorless smirk crossed Emilio's mouth. "She let me slide with a solitary sentence due to my 'expected distraught emotional state.'"

"How kind of her," Boyd said darkly.
Emilio just rubbed his hands together, lips pressing together in a grim frown.

Silence fell between the two for a moment and Boyd wasn’t sure what to say. There wasn't anything that could be said, really. He thought about leaving but he couldn't quite make himself. There was something else he felt like he had to ask. A morbid need to know.

"Did you ever find out how it happened?"

Emilio's hands stilled briefly and he looked down at them. His dark brows were drawn together slightly as he considered the question.

"You mean... why they did it or how they did it?"

"How they did it," Boyd said, studiously looking at the far wall. His eyebrows drew down and his fingers tightened against the folds of his pant legs but he otherwise did his best to keep his expression and voice as even as possible. "Did he—Was he in pain?"

There was another silence that was only broken by the sound of Emilio sighing quietly. He stood up and ran a hand through his tangled black hair, looking much thinner than he had months ago.

"I dunno if he was or not. No one saw him get taken so I dunno if he fought back... or if he knew what was going on or if they tricked him or whatever to get him to go. A lot of folks got terminated in those first couple of months. From what I heard about them, they got an escort to the Tower and never came out."

Boyd pushed his hair back and tangled his fingers in the strands, staring at the white wall with a blank nod. He knew what lay in wait for an agent who was terminated. No one knew exactly how they were killed—
maybe that depended on the reason for the termination—but the one thing everyone agreed on was where they ended up.

The incinerator in the basement of the Tower. Burned to ashes that spread out of a great black chimney on the edge of the compound. Released to the air to be caught forever in the bleak restlessness of the city.

A dismal end to lives forever cast in shadow.

And yet... Maybe it was because he still had it in the back of his mind that there could be another end to this, or maybe he simply wished to be in denial. Whatever the case, he couldn't help going over what Emilio had said.

No one saw it. No one knew it was coming. No one knew until it was over. Why was that? Had it simply been because the new Marshal had suspected some people would put up too much of a fight, or had there been another reason?

He frowned and looked up at Emilio. "The others were seen being escorted?"

"A lot of them, yeah." Emilio glanced over at him, his mouth still drawn down in a frown. "It ain't exactly easy to do shit in secret here even though they always tried to keep terminations hidden. We all know it happens but they try to make it not be so obvious. Usually, anyway. I'd never seen no shit like what happened when the new bitch took over. Dozens of people were terminated, chico. Too many to keep it discreet. And there's always people on the compound so after awhile, everyone figured out what the three-man escort to the Tower meant."

Boyd watched Emilio, dueling thoughts in his mind. One hopeful despite everything, wanting to believe there was more to the fact that Sin hadn't been seen. The other pessimistic, pointing out that Sin wouldn't be the
first person spirited away and never seen again. Even under the new administration.

There was no question why the new Marshal had terminated so many people. She’d been looking for people to weed out months ago—well over a year, he had to amend darkly, taking into account the year he’d been gone. Months before her first piece of furniture had landed on US soil, Marshal Seong had likely been determining who she felt could stay and who should go.

What he didn't know was how she operated.

Sin was a high profile person. Terminating him on its own was significant but the way it was done... Why in the dead of the night with no witnesses? If she’d wanted to exert control over the compound, why not make a public spectacle of it? Show everyone that even the strongest and most dangerous person was hers to control? Or had she purposefully done it silently to prove that sometimes not knowing and not seeing were more frightening than anything else?

Gears shifted in his mind. A spark of hope flittered through him.

"You're certain no one saw Hsin taken away?" Boyd pressed. "No one at all? Not even a glimpse?"

Now Emilio was staring at him with slightly narrowed eyes. His lips were twisted slightly, expression darkly brooding, but Boyd couldn't tell what the other man was thinking. And Emilio didn't volunteer his opinion on Boyd's sudden interest.

"Hsin being terminated was big news. It woulda come up if someone had seen it. The details would be everywhere by now."
Boyd nodded, not looking away from Emilio. He had to agree with that statement, which made it even more strange. Although Kassian and Ryan had both met the Marshal, they hadn't had much to say about her. It was difficult to understand what sort of woman had moved in to take ironclad control over the Agency, when what he heard about her was conflicting.

"Why do you think the new Marshal did it so no one saw?"

"I dunno." Emilio shrugged his broad shoulders and looked up briefly, as though he could see the woman they were talking about through the floors. "It didn't seem like she was trying to hide shit. It seemed like she wanted to make a statement and my boy would have been the icing on the cake of that shit. But then again she ain't stupid—maybe she knew he'd fight. Maybe she wanted as little people involved in the process as possible."

Boyd nodded again and looked away, his eyebrows drawing down faintly. His tongue absently moved in his mouth, shifting the piercing around as he considered that information. The answer didn't do much to settle the question either way.

He stayed silent for a moment, thinking how he would have to do more research on this. Somewhere along the way it had become a personal mission. A question he needed answered before he could move on. Something to focus on to take his mind away from the grief that otherwise seemed omnipresent.

He shifted and finally dropped his hands to the floor, moving away from the wall. He looked at Emilio, for the moment able to see him as the man he was and not the man he reminded Boyd he wanted to see. It was a sad state of affairs when even the mercurial Emilio was quieter and more serious, stuck in his own little corner of a terribly white room.
Boyd found himself looking forward to the day when Emilio was released, for no reason other than to be able to leave this image behind. Enough had happened on the compound when he'd been gone. He wanted at least a few things to remain the same so it didn't all seem foreign.

He sighed quietly without meaning to but even if he'd been able to, he wouldn't have taken it back. It summed up how he felt without words getting in the way.

"I should go," he said aloud, his voice calm and quiet with a hint of regret at leaving Emilio alone again. He knew how terrible isolation to one's own mind could be.

As if in response to Boyd's thought, Emilio looked outright disappointed. "It's cool," he said, sounding nearly sullen. "I appreciate you coming to see my lonely ass at all. No one else comes down even though they woulda been allowed to for the past couple of months. Maybe that means I'll be out soon."

Boyd pushed himself up, his body feeling like it was creaking in the movement even though he hadn't been sitting there that terribly long. "Maybe," he said, hoping that was true. He looked at Emilio and added, "I'll visit you again if that isn't the case."

A familiar glimmer of Emilio's old smile briefly graced the man's face before he said quietly, "Thanks, chico."

Boyd smiled slightly in return, subdued, and because he had no more words to say he walked over and knocked on the door to be let out. He didn't look back as he stepped into the hallway and the door swung shut behind him. He didn't want to see Emilio's expression. He would rather a glimpse of the old Emilio be his lasting memory. Just in case.
When he left, his mind was abuzz. He didn't stop to think about where he would go next; he had to get answers to his questions as soon as possible.

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It took a few hours but Boyd was finally able to track down Travis Rendazzo. When he finally found the guard, he was standing near the edge of one of the more secluded courtyards on compound. He seemed to be on break, having chosen one of the quieter places the same way Boyd and a few others did.

Travis was leaning against the thick trunk of a tree, a cigarette in one hand as he regarded the gates around them. His dark hair was windblown and disheveled around his long pale face. When he caught sight of Boyd he just raised his eyebrows slightly and exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"Hi," Boyd said as he drew to a stop near the guard.

"You're looking for me?" Travis asked, sounding half surprised and half suspicious. "Luke ain't here, bud."

"I know." Boyd casually shifted his weight so he was a bit more out of view from anyone approaching. "I was hoping to talk to you."

Travis flicked his cigarette and pushed away from the tree. His eyes swept their surroundings briefly before focusing on Boyd again. "What for?"

Boyd crossed his arms and leaned a shoulder against the tree. He met Travis' eyes calmly. He'd had time to consider how to go about this as he'd searched for the man. "I just returned from an extended mission and was hoping you could help me with a bit of information I won't be able to find a year later."
"Why in the hell would I do that?" Travis asked with a half surprised laugh. "You never even talked to me unless Luke was with me. And you're trouble, trouble I ain't looking to tango with, not with that dyke bitch up in the Tower looking down."

"I'm not asking you to do anything for me," Boyd replied, shaking his head in return. "I just have some questions, after which I'll leave you alone forever if you'd like. Even she can't find anything wrong with two people talking for a minute or two on their break."

Travis gave a rolling shrug but still looked uneasy, his dark eyes flicking to the Tower. "I dunno. I dunno, man. I don't know nothing."

Boyd sighed and shifted so he was blocked completely from the direction of the Tower by the tree. It seemed he was going to have to try the grieving lover approach. He dropped his hands at his side and looked at Travis earnestly. "Look—You know as well as everyone else that I was involved with my partner. You probably even know that I loved him. I was coming back expecting to move in with him and all of a sudden I'm told he's dead."

He shook his head, his eyebrows drawing together and up a little. "I understand your reluctance but all I'm trying to do is find a bit of closure. Just—two questions. Please. If you want something from me in return, I'll do it. But please, Travis. You're the only guard I know who treated him with any amount of respect. I don't know who else to ask."

"You could ask Luke," Travis suggested hopefully. "He's a guard. He actually liked that weirdo."

"He doesn't work the incinerator," Boyd said, shaking his head. "That's the information I need."
Travis scoffed and spat on the ground, looking around again. "I didn't work the incinerator either until that bitch came around. It was just temporary. But then she wanted more of her own people up on the Fourth and kept my ass down there on barbecue duty."

"It sounds like a lot of things were shaken up when she arrived," Boyd said with a frown. "You must have seen a lot of change, especially stationed where you were."

"Yeah, yeah, don't try that fake camaraderie shit with me, Boyd. You're a fieldie, and I'm a scumbag guard, and you only like Luke 'cause he helped your asses. Just tell me what you want before someone sees me hanging out with you and they think I'm involved."

Boyd was actually relieved by Travis's response; it was going to make this easier. "I'm trying to understand what happened when he died and afterward. Do you know anyone who was there when they terminated him?"

"Nope. All new guards were involved. Some of my more dickheaded colleagues were angry that they didn't get to take Vega out."

Boyd nodded, focusing on the information more than what he would have liked to be able to say or do to those colleagues. "New guards as in people from the Euro Agency or as in newly recruited or promoted here?"

"What do you think?" Travis asked impatiently.

"And after?" Boyd asked. "Were you there when he—When they must have brought him to the incinerator?"

At that, Travis hesitated. His eyes narrowed slightly and he frowned at Boyd. "Why would you want to know about something like that..."

"Because I want to know how he was treated. I couldn't be here to say goodbye, we don't have funerals and even if he'd had one I would have
missed it..." He frowned and shook his head, leaning back against the tree. His eyebrows drew together pensively. "I know it sounds macabre but I don't know any other way to feel like I have some sense of closure than to know what happened when I was gone. And since I know how little most guards liked him when he was alive, I just—"

He waved a hand and sighed, dropping his arm. "It worries me to imagine what could have been done to him. I'd rather hear the details, even if they're disturbing, than create even worse stories in my mind."

Travis stared at him and looked vaguely horrified. "You have issues, man. Thank God I didn't see anything. No one else did either. I'm not providing you information to go home and hang yourself."

Boyd's eyebrows lowered slightly as he gave Travis a dubious look. "You don't need to lie to me if that's what you're doing... I can take it even if something bad happened. I just need to know— I won't do anything crazy."

"I'm not lying," Travis snapped, glaring at Boyd and spitting on the ground again. "Nobody saw shit down in the pit. Trust me, everyone was all fired up about it. No fucking pun intended."

"How can that be?" Boyd asked with a slight frown as he crossed his arms. "She had all new guards there too?"

"That night? I guess. No one I know was on duty there..." Travis trailed off, looking at Boyd oddly. "Look dude, I got to go. You're weird as shit and I don't want to deal with it. Or be seen with you. Trouble."

Boyd nodded somewhat absently and pushed away from the tree. "Thanks for humoring me..."

Travis looked at him, shook his head, and turned to walk away.
Boyd stayed near the tree, mulling over what he'd learned. Although he was relieved to have had Emilio's information and his own theory verified, it still didn't help answer the question burning in the back of his mind:

Why were there no witnesses?

How could he believe his lover was dead, really dead, if he didn't have a body? If he didn't have an account from one person who saw that he really had been killed?

He headed back into the Tower. He spent the next several hours doing what research he could without getting caught. He ended up in the library on the fourteenth floor, making sure first that Kaspar was nowhere to be found. He didn't want to deal with anyone; his sole focus was on corroborating what he'd been told.

He checked the databases he had access to and even broke into some he didn't. He attempted to access the surveillance system but unsurprisingly he wasn't able to; not that it mattered. Whatever the cameras may have caught, by now the Agency would have wiped it all away or put it in storage. He searched for any sign of anything that could help him understand what had happened, or any hint that anyone had seen anything, but he ended up with the same conclusion he'd already reached:

No one had seen Sin disappear.

That understanding was followed up by a thought he couldn't ignore: Maybe something else happened. Maybe Sin got away somehow and Marshal Seong was covering it up.

Maybe they came for him and he beat them all down and he fled the Agency, knowing they were out to kill him. Maybe he didn't know Boyd was back yet and he would come out of hiding once he knew. It had been over two months since Boyd had returned but less than two weeks since he'd been
released. Boyd could endure whatever length of time Sin needed to wait to ensure he wouldn't be caught again. He could do it. He could give Sin any space he needed if only...

If only...

Boyd's expression was as studiously blank as the computer screen at the thought, although his insides twisted.

He had to know what happened. He had to put these questions to rest.
Chapter Four

“So, XRT-330, also known as Triple X, Liquid Sex and Slide significantly lowered your inhibitions,” Doctor Shapiro was saying as he looked down at his touch panel.

Boyd shook his head slightly, his eyes narrowed and lips thinning as he stared out the window.

Shapiro looked up and saw Boyd's expression. He leaned back in his chair, tipping the touch panel up as he crossed his legs, his calf braced on his thigh. "Yes?" he said expectantly and Boyd looked over.

"You disagreed with my statement," Shapiro clarified.

Silence met the comment. Shapiro waited for him to speak but when he didn’t, Shapiro's eyebrows twitched down. "Boyd, these sessions are for you to talk; not for me to make statements and you to silently disagree."

There was another extended silence after that. The distrust Boyd had felt earlier in the week hadn't changed. More than anything, his distrust of the Agency itself made him uninterested in giving them more intel to use against him. Shapiro watched him at length and then sighed, his mouth pulling into a frown.

"I dislike having to use threats in any form in a session but I've recently been reminded that I need to show progress in my reports. Today is the last chance you've been given. If you don't start working with me, I'll be forced to mark you as uncooperative."

Although Shapiro's tone was calm there was little doubt that such a mark on his report would result in Boyd's termination.
Boyd's eyes narrowed as they slid away. He gaze automatically fell on the compound that he could see through the window. Sin's old residential building rose in the distance. It was painful and yet every time he glanced out the window, it was the first place his eyes were drawn. He kept trying to look away from it and failing.

In truth, Boyd was more interested in focusing on that than he was in talking to Shapiro about topics that were meaningless. Topics that he was able to convince himself he felt nothing about when he didn't look at them directly but when he did focus on them the same collection of anger, betrayal, and resentment muddied his thoughts.

He didn't want to talk about any of this. It wouldn't change anything. It would only dig up all the issues and give him nothing for it in the end. But he knew as well as Shapiro did that he had to talk. He had to engage on some level or he really would be killed.

It was as simple as that.

His fingers flexed against the worn wood of the arms of the chair. The padding pressed against his back. There was the briefest moment in which he weighed the evils of the Agency against the promise he'd made all those months ago. The briefest moment in which he wondered if he could let the burn of distrust decide for him. But a flash of green eyes and the memory of a relaxing heartbeat beneath his ear brought a dual surge of frustration and resignation. His jaw shifted but he otherwise kept the darkness of those thoughts free from his stony expression.

At length, he spoke tonelessly. "Do you know why they call it Slide?"

"No," Shapiro replied. Although Boyd didn't look over he could see the man sit up a little straighter in the chair, anticipating a session in which Boyd actually interacted.
"Because people who are high on it are so loose you can slide right in and out of them," Boyd said mildly. He turned a golden brown stare onto the psychiatrist.

Shapiro watched him neutrally and made a note on the touch panel without looking down.

"So when you say I had 'lowered inhibitions,' you're wrong. I had zero. I would have done anything—anyone—for a release. An infant, an animal..." His eyes narrowed and shifted away from Shapiro's stare, settling instead on the blank wall. Reflecting the blankness of his expression—a feeling he wished would translate into his mind. "It wouldn't have mattered."

There was a pause while Shapiro studied him. "Did you?" he asked neutrally.

A flash of memory—deep reds on the floor and a stuffed chair at the side of the room. The world twisting confusingly and slightly muffled voices. Making no sense. Hands running along his body. Cloying smoke in the air clouding his vision. A woman's sultry laughter, sounding removed from his location. The distinct feeling of a hand pressing against his chest—pushing him down on the bed. Clothes disappearing and legs being rearranged. Head dropping to the side and seeing the rest of the place for the first time.

A little boy across the room, watching cartoons.

His fingers shifted, a brief tightening against the chair's arms to complement the tense lines of his shoulders.

He couldn't remember much after the boy. Couldn't remember who he'd been fucking or even whether it had been a woman or a man. Still, it plagued him. Had he screamed with as much abandonment even with a child in the same room? How could that parent have done that—to him, to the child, to anyone—or had that person not been the kid's parent at all?
That memory mingled with so many others—a muddled remembrance of harsh breath, feminine moans, excited male grunts, and his body arching in endless pleasure.

A voice that couldn't possibly be his.

"Not that I remember," was all he said aloud.

Shapiro nodded, his gaze unmoving as it seemed to burn into the side of Boyd's face. There was a pause, as if Shapiro was waiting for more discussion, before he spoke. "Please expand."

"On what?"

"The mission."

"It was a success," Boyd said impassively. There a crack in the wall he hadn't yet noticed despite all the times he'd stared at the same spot. "Further information is unnecessary."

There was a distinctly displeased air to the beat of silence that followed. "On the contrary," Shapiro said patiently, "it is very necessary. You've been avoiding this topic since we started. I didn't push it before because the more pressing issue was guiding you successfully through detox and giving you the opportunity to readjust yourself to the Agency. But now that you've had time, it's important that we go over this."

"Important for a promotion for you?" Boyd looked out the window, his eyes once more pulled like a magnet to Sin's building.

"This has nothing to do with a promotion."

"But it would help you, yes?" Boyd asked without care. "The more outrageous the stories, the more impressive it will be when you decide you've shown enough effort and can mark me reformed."
His gaze shifted over to Shapiro; emotionless. "Perhaps I should recant my earlier statement. One of the people who rented me took me to a stable. I didn’t understand why I was there until he brought me in back. There was a half circle of people. They made a horse fuck me and placed bets about how long I would make it."

Shapiro frowned slightly, studying Boyd intently for a moment. "Did that happen?"

"Would you like it to have happened?"

Shapiro's lips pursed and his eyebrows furrowed between his eyes. "I'm not interested in fabrications, Boyd. I'm here to listen to you and to help with what truly happened."

"I don't need help," Boyd said firmly.

Shapiro paused briefly, as if he were about to say one thing and shifted it to another. "Then what do you need?"

"To be left alone." Boyd narrowed his eyes. "But you won't do that for me, will you?"

"You know I can't," Shapiro said unrepentantly. "Your mental health is important—"

Boyd barely suppressed the urge to scoff.

"—and as such it's important that we discuss what you've been through. Until I'm satisfied with your progress, you will be my patient. And in order for me to feel satisfied, we will need to discuss specific details and situations."

The silence on Boyd's end spoke volumes. A stony mask quieted his thoughts but his eyes didn't move from Shapiro. He watched the man closely,
calculating what his motive was and how far the man would push it. How exactly Shapiro planned to use him and to what extent he would excuse hurting Boyd as being part of his job.

"I should think the report would suffice."

"The aim of the report was the mission overview and including information on Aleixo Forakis," Shapiro replied calmly. "As I'm sure you recall, you didn't include many details about your treatment itself. In order to properly help you, it's important that I understand what you experienced. This will also help me understand any reactions you may have. In addition, talking through it can sometimes help you deal with the repercussions."

"You don't need more details to know what happened. I was available for rent day and night and expanded my skills to marketing when Aleixo took me in. The end."

Shapiro studied him a moment and then skimmed some information on his screen. "The notes state that you exceeded expectations. You were to be noticed by Aleixo Forakis and be taken in as one of his slaves but you became his favorite and were even brought to his home base. This gave you unprecedented access to his wife and child, which ultimately gave the Agency a stronger hold on Aleixo. Is this correct?"

Boyd stared at Shapiro. "I didn't lie in the report."

"It sounds as though being his favorite afforded you opportunities you otherwise would not have had; opportunities that were very beneficial for the Agency. Yet it also made you more visible which made the execution of your mission more difficult."

"Yes."
Shapiro stared at him for a long moment, waiting for him to continue. When it became obvious Boyd wouldn't, Shapiro pressed, "As the favorite, what was your relationship with others aside from Aleixo? You mentioned marketing. What does that mean?"

For a moment, Boyd only stared narrow-eyed at Shapiro. He considered not answering. He considered giving a one line answer. He considered any number of options but then decided it was better to pick his fights. Who cared about unimportant details like this? Better to answer now and give the illusion of being cooperative so he could avoid topics he didn't want to discuss.

"If Aleixo wanted to sell the merits of Cyclone to a particularly high-end investor, he loaned me to them for a period of time that was proportional to the amount of money he stood to gain," Boyd replied in the same distanced tone he would relay facts from an article in a newspaper. "His wife Vika had free rein of me whenever she chose. And, like his personals at the other households, I was available for entertainment at exclusive parties and the occasional PR piece for the company."

Shapiro made a note. "PR?"

"Videos," Boyd said simply. "Pictures."

Shapiro took a few notes and then studied Boyd in silent appraisal. "For this session, let's focus on what you refer to as 'the palace.'" He looked questioningly at Boyd. "How is this in relation to 'the dungeon'?"

"They're just names the slaves came up with," Boyd said, lifting a hand briefly in a dismissive wave before dropping it to the arm of the chair again. He could feel the texture of the wood beneath his fingertips. Sitting here so calmly discussing that long year of rapturous hell felt surreal. "They're the same buildings."
"There is more than one building?" Shapiro prodded and Boyd's eyes narrowed as he shook his head. One wouldn't have been nearly enough for Aleixo's greed, he thought bitterly.

"There are seven scattered around Europe, Asia, and the US. I saw a few and they all seemed built with the same concept."

"Which is?"

Boyd settled an even stare on Shapiro. "High end, exclusive hotels owned by Cyclone. Decadence from the ground up and the opposite in the lower levels. Downstairs had rooms with too many slaves crowded in each, guards around every corner, isolation rooms for when people started to withdraw and became crazed..."

Shaking fingers ripping into the mattress; desperation making him tremble. His roommate Jada had to have a stash. Arms still aching from the guards' grips. Hunger for Slide gnawing at him relentlessly and intense fear when he wasn't finding a vial—A sound in the doorway. Jada's smoky eyes narrowing and their furious argument—

"—I don't fucking have any, asshole! And even if I did, I wouldn't give that shit to you—"

The fighting. The guards.

The room.

Throwing himself against the door and screaming until his throat was raw. It hurt, it hurt so fucking much—ripping him apart from the inside out. Tearing apart his organs, constricting his lungs. Fists slamming against the door; fingernails clawing at his own elbow. Looking around desperately for anything—chemicals, cleaners—anything at all to make it stop hurting so much—
Finding the place empty.

Shadows drawing in around him. Thoughts impossible to control. Panic taking over. Throughout it all, his own voice distant to his ears. Screaming furiously and desperately; begging them please, please, just give me a hit—I can make more money, please—

"There was a doctor's office as well," Boyd finished, keeping his voice and expression even despite the chill he felt at remembering that time. It hadn't been until long afterward that he'd realized they'd purposefully withheld his regular dose of Slide out of nowhere in order to make him go into withdrawal. To show what happened if he ever disobeyed. "They kept the drugs there."

"So the palace was what the clients saw?"

"It was everything upstairs. We stayed in the dungeon, below ground. We were prepared on an individual basis for the clients and their preferences. We only saw daylight when we were servicing a client." Boyd trailed off, his expression darkening before he looked away, out the window. Sin's building, so innocuous for all the memories it housed.

He wished he could believe Sin was in there waiting for him.

"So the downstairs felt like a prison to the slaves?"

Boyd was silent for a moment before he spoke. "In a way." There was more he could have said but he left it at that.

Shapiro considered him at length. He jotted something down on the touch panel and then leaned back in the chair. "I'd like to talk about what was expected of you. As I understand from your report, you were involved with people who were accustomed to having their way. What did that mean for a
typical session with a client? Specifically, I'm wondering whether you experienced violence as a form of control."

Boyd's jaw twitched but he continued to stare out the window. The world outside looked so simple and inviting. The few remaining leaves waved on the trees. The buildings he could see had come alive in the slowly dying light of the day. Reds and oranges warmed up the concrete greys and browns. Light cast from the setting sun behind thin clouds made everything look beautiful and delicate.

It was incongruous with the darkness he felt inside. The tension in the room and the shadows that were too deep.

He considered not answering but knew it would get him nowhere.

"Yes," was all he said.

There was a brief pause as Shapiro waited for more. "Could you expand?"

"Why?" Boyd turned sharp eyes on Shapiro. "Taking notes for the wife back home?"

"I already told you why I need this information, Boyd," Shapiro said patiently.

Boyd stared at him distrustfully for a long moment before he looked away again. His tone and expression were decidedly blank when he spoke. "For the most part I was treated well at Aleixo's because I was an investment."

"That isn't the question I asked," Shapiro pointed out. When Boyd didn't answer, he pressed, "Does that mean that you were not treated well at the palace?"

"I was treated appropriately for what I was."
"What does that mean?"

"I was a drugged up sex slave who could easily be replaced," Boyd said flatly. "What do you think it means?"

"I think it means you're avoiding answering this question for a reason." Shapiro rested the panel against the edge of the desk. "If you need some time to regroup..."

"Why should I need time?" Boyd asked, a spike of anger burning hot within him. It was just like the Agency to steal everything from him and then have the audacity to demand he perform for them a little longer by laying it all bare about what happened. "Do you think time will make it disappear?"

"It could give you the opportunity to heal—"

"Heal from what?" Boyd demanded, his tone turning mocking and hard. "Emotional scarring? Oh, but maybe the Agency is jealous. After all, fucking up the lives and minds of their agents is supposed to be their forte—"

"Boyd, we can take a break if you feel you need it but I am still going to return to this question as many times as I need to until you answer it adequately."

"What's fucking adequate to you?" Boyd shot back icily, leaning forward in his chair and feeling all the anger, resentment and bitterness swarm to the top at the same time. "Do you need me to draw you a fucking diagram? I was a nobody they hooked on a sex drug that made me incapable of anything but begging to be fucked. Incapable of telling anyone no. And then they sold me to people with power trips and said, 'Have at it! Just don't permanently break him. But hey, if you do, it's alright—we have more.' What the fuck do you think happened?"
Shapiro studied him, seeming unmoved by Boyd's outburst. "I think that means they hurt you."

"Give the man a prize," Boyd growled under his breath. He sat back in the chair, crossing his arms and looking broodingly out the window.

"Was it a common occurrence?"

Boyd made an impatient, scoffing sound. "Does it matter?"

"Please answer the question, Boyd."

A muscle in Boyd's jaw shifted. He debated jumping up and stalking out. But—*I promise; if you die I'll keep going*. His eyes narrowed.

"Some weren't like that."

"But some were?" Shapiro prompted.

"Yes," Boyd said shortly.

There was a significant beat of silence on Shapiro's part and Boyd continued impatiently, "Cyclone had an endless supply of Bowery kids to take in and fuck up. They didn't care about us other than as minimal investments. The penalty for taking a slave out of commission wasn't that strong, and killing one was hardly worse. Some clients just wanted sex and didn't want even a minor break in their privileges. They were careful. Others reveled in the high end promises Cyclone offered, of clean slaves and discreet services, combined with the free reign to do as they liked. Those clients were a large target audience for Cyclone, because Slide made the slaves open to anything and everything the clients wanted to do, and our low status meant no one cared if they exercised those rights."

His eyes were dark as he stared pointedly at Shapiro. "So, yes. The parts I can remember—Some were. Some got off on hurting me. Some used
the excuse to experiment with things they’d always wanted to try but were too wary to do themselves. Others liked to see how many people I could take at once. Or in a row. They made it into a game at some of the parties.”

He remembered laughter and groans; people bullshitting with each other and shouting out numbers in the background. And, of course, the ever-present person recording it all so they could jerk off to it later.

He wondered if any of those videos would be leaked out to others in the end. He didn't even care anymore how public it became. There had been a time when he’d been a very private person but any hope of that and rights to his own body had disappeared long ago.

Shapiro nodded, his gaze unmoving from Boyd’s face. "What was the process for a client to determine who they wanted?”

Boyd crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair. "They used the catalogue."

Shapiro's eyebrows drew faintly down. "What catalogue?"

"The one with our pictures when we were hard and high, with our stats and specialties written inside," Boyd said shortly. He added with his tone twisting, "The one they used to rate and review us."

"What do you mean by specialties or reviews?"

"They recorded what we were good at so clients could make an informed decision about what they felt like that night. Like perusing a menu at a restaurant. Would you like to know what mine said?"

Shapiro did not notice the mocking in Boyd's voice or decided to ignore it. "Yes."
"It said my impressive stamina made me ideal for weekend group rentals and that I could be loud. That I have the best mouth in Cyclone and I could cure impotence with my tongue alone." Boyd's eyes were cold as his eyebrows raised. An entirely humorless smile curled his lips. "One anonymous note recommended choking me to make me get off even harder and said they noticed I react especially strongly to being tied down. They said I was so enjoyable to play with that the next time they brought their friends."

There was a beat of silence in which Shapiro watched Boyd, who only stared back with hard lines on his face and an increasingly cold cast to his eyes. Shapiro frowned slightly; a subtle motion of his lips and the draw of his eyebrows.

"I see." Shapiro looked down at his touch panel and made a few notes before meeting Boyd's eyes again. "Was there anything else?"

Boyd's stare shifted and turned flat on Shapiro. The tense silence answered that question affirmatively while at the same time making it clear that Boyd had no intentions of continuing with the topic for the moment. After another beat of silence, Shapiro seemingly decided to move on.

"The results of your physical state that you are clean of any diseases," Shapiro observed. "Was that due to policies Cyclone adopted?"

Boyd looked out the window again.

_A memory of Jun's voice, idly relaying a fellow slave's status. _"He went to some party, something happened I dunno much about—but they brought him straight to Amy and he never came back."

"Yes," was all he said aloud. Shapiro quirked his eyebrows and Boyd grudgingly continued, "Generally, protection was a requirement. Some paid more to not have to use it. Clients for the general populace were screened but that didn't always catch everything. Slaves who became too problematic due
to a difficult or impossible to cure disease were taken somewhere and never seen again. The slaves called it Death Row."

"Do you think they were killed?"

Boyd shifted a steady gaze onto Shapiro. "I think the rumor that a snuff film director used them as actors is likely true. But I also think Aleixo would have capitalized on his investment and found other places to sell or use the leftovers. The same as he would have for me if I'd outlived his interest."

Shapiro's lips tilted down briefly on the edges. "Could you explain why you use those terms?"

"What terms?"

"You speak of yourself and others who were in your same position as objects."

Boyd's eyebrows ticked up. "Isn't that what I am? I was merchandise there but now I'm back to being a tool. It's nothing but semantics."

"You're a person, Boyd," Shapiro said not unkindly. "One who spent months hurting or feeling vulnerable. But it doesn't change that you're a person and you deserve respect."

Boyd snorted and looked out the window. "Whatever you say, Doctor."

There was a span of silence and then Shapiro apparently decided to switch tracks. "I would like to talk about Agent Vega."

Boyd shook his head, his eyes narrowing and jaw shifting, but he said nothing. The tension in his body skyrocketed at his lover's name.

"You left before we could fully discuss this before," Shapiro said. "I realize this is difficult for you but this is not a topic you'll be able to avoid
before I clear you for active duty, assuming I do. I'd like you to engage now and save yourself the frustration."

Boyd let out a short breath, incredulity moving through him. Save himself the frustration? Unbelievable. Like some minor annoyance in these bullshit sessions was his biggest concern. His stare became a hooded glare out the window that couldn't seem to avoid Sin's building.

At least he couldn't see Sin's apartment windows from this angle. At least he didn't have to remember the times he'd stood at that window. The reflection of Sin's face as he'd come up behind Boyd. The powerful strength of those hands. The soothing rumble of his voice, vibrating against Boyd's back.

He was starting to forget details—how long Sin's fingers were or the exact cast of his eyelashes. The quality of his voice when it was clear how much he loved Boyd—

"What are you thinking?" Shapiro's calm voice put in and Boyd felt irrationally angry with Shapiro for interrupting his memories. And for bringing the memories up in the first place.

"I'm wondering what my former love life has to do with you or the Agency, Doctor," Boyd said coldly. His eyes slid back to meet Shapiro's, the golden brown sparking hatefully. "What do you care? Shouldn't it be ideal to have a valentine with nothing to hold back for?" He lifted his eyebrows derisively. "I have it on good authority that I make a better fuck toy that way."

Shapiro was silent for a moment and then he set the panel down on the desk with a quiet slide. He sat forward, his fingers interlocking. "Boyd, as a psychiatrist who specializes in long term valentines my only concern is your recovery, both physically and mentally—"

Anger jolted through Boyd. He leaned forward, hands curling into fists. That repeated, preposterous claim that anyone at the Agency cared about his
mental health after everything they'd done to him—after everything they'd taken away—

"Bullshit," he cut in sharply. "You want to shove me through your regimen and claim me as a success story just like anyone else. You don't give a shit what I feel—all you care about is me becoming stable enough that on assignments everyone can be sure I'll shoot only the people the Agency wants, and I'll bend over without question when the Agency needs it."

Aggravation burned through Boyd, making his tone raise furiously. "And you know what, Doctor? Mark me down as a goddamn success right now and let's stop these pointless sessions. Tell me who to fuck metaphorically or literally and I'll do it because I don't have a choice, but you fucking leave Hsin out of it."

There was a tense beat of silence and Shapiro's eyebrows lowered slightly. Hatred for the Agency, and for the man who represented it, made Boyd quake inside. He wanted to rip the Agency apart; he wanted to burn the place down and destroy everyone and everything who had taken away his life. He wanted the Agency to pay for what he was feeling and having Shapiro so calmly sitting there asking all these detailed questions was only making it worse.

"Agent Vega—" Shapiro started to say and suddenly it was too much.

"Shut the fuck up!" Boyd shouted, jumping out of his chair and slamming his hands on the desk. "You don't get to say his name-- none of you do! You all sat here destroying him bit by bit until you killed him and now you want me to play nice with your little games? You want me to tell you what I think or how I feel as if it makes a goddamn difference? You killed him! You sent me off to be fucking gang raped-- to rape my fucking mind while they were at it-- and you killed him while I was gone. What could talking about it possibly do to change anything?"
"I realize you're upset, Boyd—"

"Upset?" Boyd echoed incredulously, pulling back.

"—but as I've told you, my only concern is that you are in a healthy state of mind—"

"For being used by the Agency the way they used me there?" Boyd demanded furiously. "You want to make me healthy before you fuck me up more?" He shook his head, straightening and crossing his arms. He looked down at the doctor, his tone disgusted. "Forget it. I'm not the idiot who trusted you people like I did before—so stop trying to treat me like one."

There was another beat of silence, Shapiro's perpetually neutral face watching him steadily. "You don't trust the Agency, or you don't trust people you thought you could—like your mother?"

Boyd jerked back, his expression shutting off completely and his hands dropping to his sides. He felt like he'd been slapped in the face by that comment and he didn't know what to say. He didn't even know if he wanted to respond.

"Boyd, for over the last year, everyone who has had some measure of control over you has used it against you," Shapiro said calmly. "Your distrust of everyone around you is understandable but it is also unhealthy. Persistent and elevated levels of stress will only hurt you, and your fear of trusting others will only make it more difficult for you to grieve."

There was a long beat of silence, this time on Boyd's end. He looked down at Shapiro with a narrow-eyed stare. The man talked a good game but Boyd still didn't believe him. The people at Cyclone had talked a good game too. So had everyone in any position of power at the Agency. They all liked to act so earnest when looking at him—saying the words they knew they needed
to say while working their way toward their ultimate goal. Pretending they saw him as anything other than a pawn to control or a body to explore.

Boyd looked out the window again and crossed his arms, his gaze catching on Sin's building again. He stared hard at it, feeling frustrated and angry that Shapiro was still treating him like a naive idiot. Angry that the doctor kept trying to play this game when he had made it clear Shapiro should just be upfront about the way he wanted to use him.

He wanted to storm away. He wanted to give up on any of this and let Shapiro mark him as uncooperative. If they terminated him, he could let this pain go. He could stop hurting and stop hating and if he believed in an afterlife, he could believe he would be with Sin in the end.

But he couldn't die. Even without the promise he couldn't, because he still had to find out the truth.

It was the only way to finally understand what happened. The only way to stop clinging to the memories because they were all he had of Sin. Even though it ripped him apart to think of his lover he still couldn't help it. He couldn't stop himself from reaching out and out...

Like a moth to a flame he would die this way someday; burned by his own longing.

He tried to ignore the way his chest tightened. He just wanted this all to end. He wanted to be released from this. And more than anything, he wanted people to stop asking him all these prying questions about what was done to him and how he felt, and whether or not he was affected by Sin's death.

He wanted to forget his mother's face; so impassive as she condemned him to a year of being used. As she lied to his face. The panic and fear when he'd first realized on that mission that everything was going wrong—
It felt like she’d sold him, he thought with a sharp stab in his chest. It felt like the exchange of himself as goods for services had started that day in that office and would never stop again—but rather than being upfront about it like Cyclone had been, the Agency pretended to take the moral high road even as they dealt in the human trafficking of their agents.

Shapiro was silent for a long moment until he let out a quiet sigh. "I'd like to talk more about this but unfortunately that's all the time we have today. As it currently stands, your downtime expires in about a week. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't care," Boyd muttered. He dropped his hands at his sides and looked over at Shapiro. "It doesn't matter." It was much more even the second time.

Shapiro studied him for a long moment, his gaze intense as if he could see through Boyd to the words kept silent in his stifled lungs. The psychiatrist looked down at his touch panel and made a few notes. "I think you need more time."

Boyd shook his head, beyond caring what Shapiro recommended or said. "Do whatever you want," he said dismissively and started to stride toward the door.

"Boyd," Shapiro said before he could leave and Boyd paused, looking over his shoulder at the doctor. "Next Wednesday. Same time."

Boyd narrowed his eyes but had nothing to say in return. Shapiro so far wasn't recommending him for termination, it seemed. He supposed he could hope for nothing else.
The day came quickly when he was supposed to go in for the unit meeting. He hadn't slept well the night before. In truth, he hadn't slept well at all since he'd returned, aside from the days when he'd used sedatives. That night he'd considered taking sedatives after he'd woken for the fifth time with barely half an hour having passed and hours still until dawn. But he hadn't wanted to risk oversleeping in the end.

He ended up sleeping just enough to whet the appetite of his weariness but not enough to provide him much respite. He finally got up with three hours before the meeting. He knew there was no point in trying to go back to sleep. He'd either toss and turn or, more likely and a worse scenario, he'd fall into a dead sleep and miss the meeting.

So he moved around. Made tea that still tasted like ashes dissolved in water and picked at food he couldn't make himself eat.

He got to the compound early but didn't want to sit in the room alone, awkwardly waiting for everyone to walk in one by one and potentially give him those sympathetic eyes. So he wasted time walking around, although he stayed away from Sin's building so nothing could distract him.

He still made it to the conference room a little early. When he walked in, he found Jeffrey, Owen and Ryan there, but Carhart and the two new girls weren't. He was greeted with three varying reactions that drove home how completely different everything was.

Jeffrey looked up and, at the sight of Boyd, tensed. His eyes narrowed and ran over Boyd once, taking him in, before he looked away and ignored him.

Owen was surprisingly awake and less unkempt than Boyd remembered. He wondered whether Owen had straightened up or whether Boyd had exaggerated in his mind the memory of Owen's state of dress.
Regardless, Owen took Boyd in without much expression and a hand raised in a subdued hello.

"Good to see you, man," Owen said with a genuine-seeming smile but it was sober and there was something too serious in his eyes compared to what Boyd remembered.

Ryan just smiled slightly as Boyd walked around the table.

It felt surreal being in that room with those people. Walking to the same chair he always used to sit in. Knowing Sin wasn't going to come in after him and grab the chair next to him but still, somehow, expecting that he would. Still, stupidly, thinking how much he wished it would happen.

The chair felt heavy in his hand. Had it always been that way? He didn't think so. He thought it used to be lighter once; like the mood, his coworkers' expressions, and his own thoughts. It used to be easier to move. Or maybe his body had functioned better back then, not tied down by memories of a Was that would never become a Will Be.

He half expected to be grilled on the mission, or for someone to at least comment. But silence spoke louder than words as the four of them sat quietly. Boyd didn't really look at the other three but he could feel their eyes on him occasionally.

He wondered if Ryan had warned them not to mention the mission or what had happened with Sin. He wondered if instead they just didn't have the mind to ask anything. Or maybe they simply didn't care.

"I'm glad you're back," Ryan said after a moment. "It's good to have someone familiar..."
Boyd nodded and met Ryan's eyes before glancing at the other two briefly to include them in his statement. "I'm glad the whole unit didn't change while I was gone."

"It may as well have," the R&D agent mumbled, looking down at the touch screen laptop that sat in front of him. "Us three are the only ones the same."

Boyd didn't know what to say so he stayed silent.

Owen ended up breaking the silence with an optimistic, "Well now it's all gonna roll the other way. I've been waiting for you to get back. Maybe it means Emilio's coming back soon, too."

Jeffrey gave Owen a scathing look. "Based on what?" he demanded. "One member of the old team automatically means everything will revert?"

"I dunno, maybe," Owen said defensively, automatically leaning away from Jeffrey. "You gotta admit he's been there a long time so his sentence is probably about up." He frowned. "You don't have to jump down my throat about it."

"You make idiotic, baseless statements," Jeffrey said derisively. There was anger in his face that Boyd had never seen before. Although Jeffrey had seemed mocking or impatient in the past, the outright malevolence was new and it seemed to be especially strong when he was looking at Owen. "I'm tired of listening to it."

Owen's eyebrows dragged down and his shoulders were tense. He looked wary as he eyed Jeffrey. "If you're still pissed about—"

"I don't want to talk about it," Jeffrey cut him off icily. "Just shut up and stop talking when you don't have anything important to say. With you, that means you could practically be mute."
Owen's frown deepened and he leaned away further, watching Jeffrey with a mixture of wariness and disappointment. It was a guarded look somewhat reminiscent of when he used to look at Carhart, worried he was in trouble for falling asleep or missing a cue. After a moment he turned away, his face set seriously with subdued eyes.

"Alright, man," he said lightly with a shrug but something about the tone sounded a little forced to Boyd. "Chillax already." He tilted his chair back on two legs, balancing himself with one foot against the bottom of the table. He didn't quite meet anyone's eyes.

Jeffrey glared at Owen and then turned away and focused on a touch panel he had in front of him. He returned to ignoring everyone else in the room. Boyd wondered what that was about and looked over at Ryan to see if he thought anything of it, but Ryan didn't seem surprised.

"Things are a little tense lately," he said in the same barely-there voice. "It's all that bi—"

The words died on Ryan's lips when the door opened. He immediately dropped his gaze to his computer. There was obvious tension in his shoulders and he hunched forward, black hair falling around his face.

Boyd could only assume that the two people who walked in were Bex and Jordan. Their faces and long, thin bodies were identical but that was where the similarities ended. Their haircuts, makeup and styles were completely different.

One of the girls was maximizing her petite features to the fullest extent. Her lips shone with lip gloss, her round, almond eyes framed by long, likely false eyelashes. Her black hair was in long, loose curls that hung around her face in an obviously deliberate tousle. She wore black tights, sky-high stiletto
heels and a pink tunic-like dress although it was so short, it may have been a shirt.

She had to be Jordan. The girl who was apparently an amazing valentine operative. With her looks and youthful appearance, it wasn't difficult to figure out why that was. She would appeal to many.

Her sister on the other hand was the extreme opposite. Despite the same body and face structure, she barely looked like her twin. It's possible Boyd would have thought Bex was a man if he hadn't known that she was an identical twin of a female.

Unlike Jordan, Bex wore skintight leather pants, tall platform boots and a wife beater that showcased her thin, sinewy frame. She somehow looked more flat-chested than her sister but it was possible that Jordan compensated with undergarments that made her look larger than she was or the Agency had funded surgery.

Bex's hair was shaved in the back and long in the front, falling over her forehead and half of her face. She wore no makeup, had apparently shaved off her eyebrows and despite the fact that the twins looked the same, her cheeks were more gaunt than Jordan's. Her severe expression took away any bit of femininity that would have existed in her.

Her deep brown eyes fell on Boyd immediately and a muscle in her jaw ticked. There was something about her presence that seemed angry, violent—it was nearly reminiscent of the aura Sin had so often given off to people who were unfamiliar to him.

"Oh, hello there," Jordan said in a voice that was low and airy. She sat down delicately in the seat next to Boyd and turned her head to take him in very deliberately.
Her sister scoffed and dragged a chair towards her with one boot, sitting across the table and next to Carhart's position.

"Hello, Jordan," Boyd said with little inflection, looking over to meet her gaze.

"Your eyes are so beautiful," Jordan said, leaning closer. Her expression was strange—nearly vacant but with intense, narrowed eyes and an indulgent little smile. "Like butterscotch. No wonder they say you're the queer version of me."

Bex's lips curved up into a smirk at that as she slouched in her chair, long leather-clad legs sprawled out in front of her.

Boyd's eyebrow nearly twitched at that but he kept his expression even.

"In what way?"

"Oh," she said quietly, thoughtfully. "I'd heard you’re known for the way you look and your sexual habits ’round here. Back in Prague I was known for the same."

Jordan said it in such an amused, nearly proud sounding tone that it seemed as though she was missing the fact that she was basically admitting she'd been known for sleeping around. She also seemed to be missing that she was saying the same about Boyd.

Bex scowled darkly at her sister, all traces of amusement vanishing from her face. "Shut it, already. No one gives a shit about all the wankers that stuffed you."

"I see," Boyd said neutrally, his gaze centered on Jordan. "And what exactly did they tell you?"
Ryan was looking at Jordan with an obviously disapproving scowl but the woman seemed completely unaware. She didn't seem to realize that she'd even said anything offensive.

"I'd heard you volunteered yourself to be a valentine op. Most people loathe the status." She grinned as if they were in on a joke together, shiny white teeth making an appearance. "I volunteered for it myself back home. People used to say things about me too but it's all a load of bollocks. Some people like to negotiate in full body armor and I like to negotiate in my knickers. Ain't nothing wrong with it."

"Ah." Boyd watched her intently, trying to determine whether this was an orchestrated act to be insulting or whether she was serious. As far as he could tell, she meant it.

He shifted his stare to Bex and saw that she looked angry with her sister. She didn't appear to like that her sister was a valentine, or maybe just that Jordan apparently took such delight in it.

He turned his attention back to Jordan. He wasn't surprised that she'd heard that or, based on that, what assumptions she'd made. She seemed as though she actually may enjoy her valentine status, though, which was a sentiment he couldn't say they shared.

"I don't think we're as alike as you think we are," he said at length. His expression remained the default, unreadable neutral that he used when he didn't know someone well or was uncertain of their intentions. It was an automatic, guarded reaction that he felt no need to break.

Jordan just shrugged her dainty shoulders and flicked a few long tendrils out of her face. "I dunno. I'd heard you conquered Mr. Vega and supposed you must be something special in the sack. Loads of practice and all."
Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly. "I didn't 'conquer' him," he corrected, his tone cool. "He was my partner."

Before Jordan could say anything else, her twin's low voice cut in. "Don't pay attention to my sister; she thinks life revolves around arse, cunt and cock."

Jordan mumbled something inaudible, shifting minutely in her chair and crossing her legs at the knee. The strength of her sister's disapproving glare was enough to make her open the small purse she held and take out a palm panel without another word.

"But I do find myself wondering what it is about you that makes you fit to be where you are," Bex added, black glare turning over to Boyd. Her eyes flicked over him, taking him in and apparently not being very impressed with what she saw.

"Well good thing no one gives a shit about what you think," Ryan snapped. Boyd glanced at him and saw that the R&D agent was flushed red.

"Come off it, Ry-Ry," Bex drawled in her heavy British accent, using the nickname with exaggerated sarcasm. "Anyone's more fit to be here than he is. There's loads of people with more experience, more time put in, more skill—why the fuck is he here and not Trovosky? Not Logan? Fuckall—why not even Stevens or Blake?"

"Yeah, well why do you think you're so special to be here?" Ryan countered, his tone nastier and more hateful than Boyd had ever heard. "All your bimbo sister does is cause trouble and all you do is talk shit. We were a lot better—"

"Coming from some asthmatic little pissant who can't even pass a physical—"
"You just think you’re something special because you’ve been Modified."

Jordan’s head shot up and she was visibly alarmed but Bex just looked dangerous.

"She is not!" Jordan protested.

Ryan smirked and leaned back in his chair. "Oh yeah?"

"That’s illegal! She would never be able to get away with that. You’re barking if you think they wouldn’t notice."

Ryan didn’t reply and he and Bex stared at each other evenly. She looked ready to lean over and rip his head off his neck but there was no fear in his eyes.

Boyd’s eyes narrowed and he shifted forward casually, so if he needed to he could jump out of his seat and pull Bex off Ryan.

Since Bex was supposedly a super assassin, it wouldn’t be surprising if she was Modified. It was a very dangerous, sometimes unstable way of modifying a person, usually involving animal gene splicing. It could permanently enhance a person but the long term consequences still weren’t known. And it was highly illegal, which meant there was a large black market for it.

One of the investors for Cyclone was heavily involved in Mods and Boyd suspected a few of the slaves who’d disappeared during the sorting process had been sent off for tests.

"I suggest you back off of Ryan," Boyd said to Bex, his tone even but eyes flashing a warning. "And while you’re at it, stop making assumptions without knowing what you’re talking about."
Bex threw back her head and released a harsh laugh. Her eyes were glittering with utter contempt for Boyd.

"You're only here because of who your mum is. Everyone knows it. It's fucking blatant and just another reason why this agency is so dodgy. There's loads more qualified people to be here. What can you actually do besides bend over and take it in your arse? Are you a better fighter than the people I named? You got more experience? Been here longer? You wasn't even an agent when they kicked up your ranks and clearance. I heard you even fucked up in your rank 10 training. Fucked up so hard you probably shoulda been sacked then and there. But look, here you are. In this coveted spot in this elite unit while Hsin Fucking Vega is dead because you got him so fucking turned around—"

"Shut up!" Ryan shouted, slamming his hand against the desk.

"—that he ruined his life over you and got terminated like rubbish."

Fury made Boyd's vision go red and before he knew it, he was out of his chair and across the table faster than he would have thought possible.

The guilt over not being here for Sin—the anger over all those missed chances and losing Sin and the uncertainty of it all—the hatred due to the mission and the implication that he was only useful as a whore, the same sentiment shared by the people who had demeaned him for a year—and more than anything, the accusation that it was his fault Sin died; that he'd fatally compromised Sin and caused the death of the man he loved more than life itself—

It all hit him hard and suddenly he couldn't withhold the violence he'd been wanting to unleash since he'd returned.

His hand snapped around her throat and he threw her off the chair. She twisted and flipped backwards, breaking his hold. She was phenomenally
fast—bracing herself immediately and kicking him violently in the solar plexus. He was thrown backward, the angle making him fly up and crash on top of the table.

A resounding crack filled the room.

Boyd felt his back scream in pain but he got off the table immediately. A crack could be seen in the thick glass of the table, going right through the holographic projector that was built into the center. Just as he was about to take out more of his aggression on Bex, the door opened and Carhart walked in. He froze in the doorway, cerulean blue eyes turning to each of them in incredulous dismay.

Jordan continued to sit on her chair innocently, thumbing through her panel as if nothing had occurred while Ryan glared at Bex as though Carhart hadn't even entered the room. Jeffrey was looking at Boyd like he was a complete idiot. Owen was watching Bex with a dark, hard stare.

"What is the meaning of this?" the General demanded in a low, lethal tone. He looked from Boyd to Bex coldly.

"My apologies, sir," Bex said, instantly apologetic and looking genuinely chagrined.

"What happened?" Carhart snapped impatiently.

Her response was bluntly truthful. "Me and the boy had words regarding his status here and his former partner. He got angry and attacked me. I defended myself and in the midst, he fell backwards onto the table."

Carhart's eyes slid from her to focus on Boyd.

Boyd held himself a little gingerly, his back aching. He tried to keep the cold glare off his face when he looked at Bex but he wasn't successful. He shifted his gaze to Carhart, still angry and unable to feel sorry for attacking
her. He forced his expression back to the default neutral as best he could but he was so angry and shaken up that it didn't entirely work. His eyes were still hard and narrowed and his shoulders were all sharp angles and hard lines.

"I apologize, General," Boyd said stiffly. He made an effort to try to loosen some of the tension in his shoulders so he wouldn't appear so belligerent. "I felt provoked by comments she made about Hsin."

"I don't care what she said about him," Carhart snapped, barely contained fury in his voice. His gaze had hardened into a glare that appeared both angry and disappointed. "You will control yourself or you'll be gone from this unit. Do you understand?"

Anger burned hotly in Boyd. "Yes, sir."

"Get out of my sight. Both of you. The meeting will be rescheduled when I handle this mess."

Not wanting to be in the room anymore anyway, Boyd only nodded curtly before he left.
Chapter Five

The burning anger didn't leave even after Boyd had stalked away. He wondered how long it would be until he was brought in for the fiasco of the unit meeting and stayed on compound so he couldn't have to come back right away if he left.

He went up to the old library, thinking he could at least be alone for awhile, but Kaspar was in there and perked up when Boyd walked in. Kaspar looked like he wanted to get into some sort of completely pointless chit chat that Boyd was beyond uninterested in. Without bothering to say anything, he turned and walked right back out.

The fury was still there within him. A beast that prowled his chest and looked for the opportunity to strike.

He kept thinking about what Bex said. He kept thinking about Carhart's response and the possibility of being kicked out of the unit if something like this happened again. He kept wondering what would happen if Carhart did that. Would he be terminated or would they make him a full time, cross-departmental valentine? Would they do something else?

He ran through the meeting and scenarios over and over, the anger rising and falling as he alternately resented the situation and thought about where this could lead. He ended up wandering around the compound, waiting for the order to go to Marshal Seong's office. Every time a guard turned in his direction or answered a radio with a gaze sweeping by him, he expected to be flagged down and escorted upstairs.

After an hour and a half of wandering the compound feeling tense and on edge, he finally decided he wasn't going to wait anymore. And that being on compound was only making him feel worse.
He started to wonder whether she would care about this at all. Unless they were readying the three-man escort to catch him unaware.

He had just gotten to his car when he noted someone moving quickly toward him. He looked over, one hand on the top of the half-open driver's side door. He was at first perplexed to see Carhart's admin Brian coming toward him until it occurred to him it was possible the order was coming through Carhart's office rather than straight from the Marshal's. His expression closed off and he waited for Brian to arrive.

The man's caramel skin was speckled with sweat and his typically tidy suit was looking a little unkempt. He seemed to have jogged from wherever he'd been.

"Wait... a sec," he panted before holding up a hand as if begging a second to catch his breath. Within a moment he seemed to have composed himself and he wiped a hand across his forehead. "Sorry. I ran from the office."

Boyd watched him evenly, his eyes narrowed faintly. He didn't respond; he simply waited for Brian to say whatever he wanted to say.

"Killian's," Brian said vaguely only after his eyes had swept the area around them thoroughly. His mouth barely moved as he spoke. "Twenty minutes."

Boyd's eyes narrowed further and he watched Brian with outright suspicion. He didn't care about how covert Brian was trying to be. He could only assume this was some sort of meeting with Carhart but he wasn't even sure he wanted to play along.

He didn't want to see the General right away. He wasn't even sure he trusted the man. The General he'd returned to was not the man Carhart had
been when Boyd had left. He didn't know what Carhart's motivations were anymore. For all he knew, he was the new Marshal's lapdog.

"Why?" he asked flatly.

"Ask stupid questions if you want but I don't have time to waste convincing you." Brian didn't seem very concerned with the outcome either way. "Go or not. It isn't my problem."

Boyd watched Brian with hard eyes for a moment and then looked away. "Fine," he said neutrally and stepped around his car door. He looked at Brian, pausing before he got in. "Anything else?"

Brian scoffed. "No, thank God." That being said, he turned and walked away.

Boyd got in his car and left. He could have ignored the summons but there was no point. He wasn't even curious about what Carhart wanted to talk about; he just wanted to get it over with. It didn't take him long to drive to Killian's Pub, a place he used to visit with Kassian. He half expected to see Kassian when he walked in but was unsurprised when he didn't.

He recognized some of the regulars and employees. Shirley, a waitress he was used to seeing there, wasn't present but the bartender Mark was. Boyd didn't pay much attention to anyone as he headed toward the back where he assumed Carhart would be. That seemed to be the booth of choice for conversations best left unheard.

Carhart was sitting alone with an untouched drink on the table. He was working on a touch panel. Boyd sat down in the booth across from him.

"What the hell were you thinking?" the General demanded bluntly, not looking up from his computer.
"I was thinking I want to rip her fucking head off and everyone else's at
the Agency," Boyd snapped, not bothering to hide the ire in his voice.

"I understand that you think your feelings are more important than
anyone else's in the world," Carhart replied acidly, finally looking up. "But
believe it or not, they aren't. I lost Hsin just as much as you did and I had him
in my life a lot longer. So did Ryan. So did his father. You acting out because
we accepted his death and struggled to move on months ago is immature and
stupid. If you truly want to waste your life, do it outside of the Agency. Getting
yourself killed inside will just hurt others more."

"Sorry I missed the fucking memo that said we're only allowed to grieve
people if we knew them long enough," Boyd retorted furiously. "Sorry I came
back from being completely fucked over and didn't take well to learning the
man I loved more than anything was thrown in the incinerator like garbage.
Sorry I'm having a hard fucking time giving a shit what position it'll put you in
when I'm doing everything I can just to move on. And if you try to tell me you
got over him in two weeks without any problems I'm going to call you a damn
liar."

Carhart just shook his head, his mouth drawing down. "That's your
problem. You don't care. Forget about me. What about Ryan? You don't care
if Ryan has to play a part in the investigation of your termination and he finally
has the breakdown that's been coming for a long time. All you care about is
that Boyd is angry and sad and he's going to make sure everyone knows it.
Whatever your excuse is, your behavior is unacceptable. You think your grief
is so much stronger than anyone else's. You alone loved him so you have the
right to act this way. You don't. It's a new world here, Boyd. And you won't get
the second and third chances that your mother and Connors afforded you."

"Goddamnit-- what the hell do you want from me?" Boyd clenched his
fists and his eyes brightened with fury-laced grief. He could feel his chest
rising and falling faster as he tried to hold... something back. Tears, screaming, he didn't even know. "Is it supposed to hurt me any less just because you've had time to deal with it? Am I supposed to feel nothing about it just because our boss is ruthless? Why the hell are you expecting me to get over him in two seconds flat when you've had months to deal with it? Am I not even supposed to grieve now?"

"Grieving and attacking the new Marshal's personal favorite are two different things. One is accepted and was expected. The other is suicide. You're lucky Bex is not a completely cold-hearted bitch. She could have concocted a far worse version of events. She knows whose word would be taken."

Boyd's insides twisted and fury and resignation fought for control within him. Part of him could see Carhart's point and part of him still felt like it didn't matter-- nothing did. That part asked why he had to keep going anyway when there was nothing for him anymore. That part wanted Bex to be a cold-hearted bitch and report him so he could just fucking die already.

But then he thought of Ryan, so furiously snapping back at Bex. He thought of putting Ryan through something that could break him down. He thought of Ryan being as wound tight and unstable as he himself was and he thought of Ryan lashing out. Getting in trouble too. Maybe even being terminated.

The thought just compounded the hurt he already felt inside. The rage left him all at once, leaving him feeling emptier than ever inside.

He slumped forward, elbows on the table while he dropped his head into his hands. "She said it was my fault he died," he said quietly. "I didn't plan it. I just snapped."
Carhart’s response was instant and furious. "It isn’t your fault at all. That’s a goddamn fool thing to say. I hope you don’t think that, Boyd."

"I don’t know what I think," he admitted, his voice thick and muffled, lost somewhere between grief and distress. He dug his fingers into his hair. His heart was clenching; his eyes starting to burn again even as he squeezed them shut. "I don’t know anything anymore. All I know is I miss him so much I feel like I can’t breathe. And it hurts every time I remember he’s never going to walk in the room again."

There was a brief silence. Then, "He loved you very much, Boyd. And he seemed to somehow know that this would be his end for a long time coming. He always feared how you would respond."

Boyd grit his teeth as his heart ached. He could still remember Sin’s firm voice, telling him to keep going. Sin’s admittance that he had a bad feeling about the mission and those vivid green eyes watching him walk away for the last time.

The pain grew stronger and it hurt; it hurt so much. It was like breathing in fire that sucked all the air from his lungs even while burning the tissue from the inside out.

At the same time, he knew Carhart was right that his move earlier had practically been suicide. He knew how much Sin had worried he’d do something like he had when Lou had died. He knew that no matter how it hurt, no matter how much he wanted to lash out or give up, he had to keep going because he’d promised Sin he would. He knew he had to force himself to be stronger when he felt his most vulnerable.

He knew all this, but what he didn’t know was how he was going to manage it when it felt like he was being ripped apart just thinking about how
much he loved Sin. When he thought about how much more he needed Sin now that he was gone.

"I wish--"

_I wish I died on the mission._

He stopped himself just in time from saying the words aloud. Knowing how much it hurt to be left behind, he never would have wished that on Sin. But knowing now that he was the one left behind once more, he couldn't ignore the sentiment. Even if he hadn't died as himself, at least Slide could have made him feel good about everything till the end. It wouldn't have been this agonizing, torturous crawl through ragged anger and piercing pain.

He drew in a sharp, thin breath and finally looked up. From somewhere within him, he gathered together the remnants of resolve and determinedly stitched them back together. Because even if he wouldn't be leaving Sin behind if he died now, he would be leaving others. He squared his shoulders and managed an approximation of the steady stare that had once come so readily to him.

"I can't make any promises but I'll do my best not to respond in the future."

Carhart exhaled slowly and sat back, raising his drink to his lips for the first time. "You can't expect anything from me within the Agency walls anymore. They're watching me. Watching everyone in a position of authority, your mother not excluded. They're waiting for us to do something to warrant demotion or worse. They know my history—she knows I favored Sin and she knows I favor the people in my unit. Especially you and Ryan."

There was another pause as his cerulean eyes slid to the side, towards the door. They narrowed slightly. "Bex has a legitimate reason to be in the unit. But Jordan... I think she's just a spy. You may think Bex the worst of the
two but truth be told, I trust her more than her sister. She has a one track mind that focuses only on strength, on being number one in her ranks. She says exactly what she means and what she's thinking. But Jordan is a manipulator. A master manipulator. Watch out for her."

Boyd thought back to the two women and he could see that. He still didn’t know how much of what Jordan said was truthfully what she thought and how much was calculated. He let out a low breath and leaned back in the booth, his head tilting back against the seat. "How long until she leaves and Emilio returns?"

A sour expression crossed the General's face. "I just put a query in about that. Jordan is useless to me. She’s good at what she does but what she does isn't relevant to what we do here. The Marshal couldn't argue with that—Vega will be back in a few weeks. I suppose she couldn't be too nice by letting him out immediately."

At least Boyd wouldn't have to wait too long for some amount of normalcy to return. With Jordan gone and Emilio back, the balance may even seem in his favor a little more despite Bex's intense personality. He didn't know how Bex and Emilio were going to interact but he hoped to get Bex's attention off himself to make it easier to avoid further confrontations.

Even if he knew he needed to be more level-headed he also knew better than to expect that he could flip a switch and everything would be okay. There would be a transition and it would probably be painful.

Then again, with the tension that had apparently developed between Emilio and Carhart somewhere along the way, who knew if it would be better with Emilio back. Boyd didn't miss that Carhart referred to him as 'Vega' when he'd always called him Emilio before.
He nodded and dropped his gaze to Carhart's drink. He briefly considered ordering something and then decided against it, just in case the Marshal called him in suddenly to explain himself. It wouldn't exactly help his cause to lower his inhibitions around a woman he suspected he was going to like even less than his mother.

"Is there anything else I need to know? About the unit or new Marshal?"

Carhart shook his head briefly. "I don't really know. She's different with everyone. But she's watching. That's the most important thing. She's waiting to replace key players and bring in her own people or new blood that can be molded. She doesn't like the old standard and she doesn't like anyone who misses it."

He set the drink down and cleared his throat. "As for the unit, I'll have Brian bring a panel to your house. Study it—be up on your shit by the time you come back. Don't give them an excuse, Boyd. Don't make me have to be a hardass with you. I need you in my unit. I need a field agent I can actually trust. Do you understand me? If you think we have problems with our little political world, that isn't anything compared to the other danger looming just over the goddamn hill."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down, his gaze sharpening at the ominous words. "What do you mean?"

Carhart brought his hand up to massage his forehead. He looked weary; wearier than Boyd had ever seen him. And for the first time he looked his age. "If I tell you this, Boyd. It's between you and me. No Ryan, no Kassian—no one. I shouldn't even be telling you. Your mother and I have so far managed to clean up traces that it's happening. If the Marshal found out, I guarantee that both your mother and I would be dead within the hour of the news reaching her ears."
Boyd watched Carhart seriously. The gravity of this was not lost on him. A year ago it would have been hard for him to imagine anything resulting in Vivienne and Carhart's deaths, mostly because they'd both seemed above reproach. Not that they hadn't made mistakes but as for Vivienne, at least, he'd never seen nor heard of her having any consequences.

It was a little alarming to think of something so serious that word of it alone could jeopardize the lives of two of the highest people in the Agency. It was especially meaningful that Carhart was considering telling him.

There had been a time when he'd begun to wonder what exactly Carhart thought of him. When his and Sin's relationship had started to spiral downward and Carhart had told him to leave Sin alone, it had seemed especially underscored to him that ultimately Carhart had been thinking of Sin first. It hadn't been that surprising given their history but there had been a time prior to that when he'd felt like Carhart had cared equally about them.

Ever since those rockier times, he'd felt a little uncertain around Carhart; a little off balance.

When he'd returned from his latest mission and had been confronted with the cold-eyed Carhart, and especially after the disaster of the meeting earlier, he'd thought that with Sin gone Carhart had lost all trust or interest in him. He'd thought there was nothing left of the man who'd nearly felt like a surrogate father.

But after this conversation, he no longer questioned Carhart's loyalties. It was obvious he meant something to Carhart if the older man put him in the same category as Sin and Ryan; if he was going to tell him something not even Ryan should know. If anything, it showed he meant more to Carhart than he'd thought.

"What is it?"
"We have a traitor in our ranks." Carhart closed his eyes briefly and winced, eyebrows drawing together as if an especially bad headache was coming on. When he opened his eyes again, he looked even wearier. "Someone deep inside. Someone high ranking."

Boyd frowned faintly. A lot of people had already assumed the raid and framing had been inside jobs so the idea of a traitor wasn't, on its own, shocking. But the idea that the person was high-ranking was disconcerting.

"The person or people who raided the compound and framed Hsin?"

Carhart paused and his eyes dropped briefly to his cup. After a moment he picked it up and brought it to his lips, taking a long sip. "We've come to the conclusion that the raid is unrelated to the current issue. The raid seems to have been focused on murdering Connors. Apparently it was an extreme assassination."

Boyd's eyebrows lifted. "A rather sloppy one if it had so many unrelated casualties," he observed. "If someone like that is running around shouldn't they be cause for concern?"

"No. Unfortunately, we have more pressing issues than vengeance."

"Like what?" Boyd pressed, watching Carhart intently. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "Is there more to the person who framed Hsin? I always thought it was far too convenient how the camera system went down prior to Monaghan's murder. Things like that and getting the drop on Hsin would take a skilled person who knows how the Agency works."

"Precisely." Carhart finished his drink and set it down. "And it's worse than that, Boyd. For over a year now, missions have been sabotaged. It started discreetly and was blamed on sloppy intel or unreliable sources. But we quickly realized there was more to it than that. Teams were sent out to
locations that were empty because the targets received word in advance that someone was coming. Teams have been ambushed. And it's only getting worse. Whoever the mole is, whoever is feeding information to the outside, has gotten bolder."

Boyd's eyebrows rose. He'd had suspicions on smaller scales but nothing this large and interconnected. Nothing this calculated. He studied Carhart, not certain what he was looking for; all he saw was weary seriousness. Boyd's eyes narrowed and he ran a hand back through his hair, looking away pensively.

He saw now exactly why this was so serious. A mole was bad enough on its own. Having that person causing orchestrated havoc on missions was worse.

But for someone like that to be within the Agency, doing that for a year... Absolutely, Vivienne would be terminated. She would be deemed incapable if the powers that be knew she had been unable to stop that. And Carhart—if he'd been involved and equally unable to stop it, then it would fall on his head as well.

"And you don't know yet who exactly it is?"

"No, or they would be dead. We have a short list of agents, captains and generals who have the clearance to access such sensitive files but so far we don't know who it could be. This person is good. Very good. He or she covers their tracks well. The easiest way to flush him out would be to start heightening clearance levels but that now has to be authorized by the Marshal and she would ask why. Our next step is to disinform but even that is tricky. If the Marshal starts spotting decoy missions, she'll be equally suspicious."
Carhart sighed and looked at Boyd with tired blue eyes. "I think we're fucked. But we're trying. Even then, it just keeps getting worse. Now agents are going missing from missions."

"What?" Boyd asked, caught off guard. "How long?"

"Too long. Months. Before you even left."

Boyd stared at Carhart incredulously. "How did that not get around? I never heard anything about it being a common event."

"Covered up. Written off as defection or termination. But now it's becoming too frequent. It's going to get harder."

Boyd shook his head, trying to take this all in. "What's their goal?"

Carhart gave him a grim frown. "I wish we knew. I really did. It's all so sporadic—not that many of the groups are directly connected that have been involved with the missions. We can't even narrow it down based on country or affiliation. It's frustrating. Impossibly so."

Boyd released a low breath and sat back, his hands dropping off the table. His eyes narrowed, a pensive look that was reminiscent of the times he'd received especially difficult criteria for a mission. For the moment, all traces of the unstable man desperately missing his lover were gone as he focused entirely on this new information.

After a moment he frowned to himself and drew his eyebrows down. "Considering the gravity of this and how well you've both hidden it until now, why are you telling me this?"

"Because if I die, likely when I die, I want you to know why. And because you are one of the very few people that I trust implicitly. So please, try to be strong. I need someone I can count on."
Boyd searched Carhart's expression and couldn't help a mixture of feeling pleased and dismal. It was touching to know that Carhart thought that highly of him and trusted him that much.

It was emboldening to know that Carhart needed him. He'd been feeling so lost and alone since he'd returned from his mission. He'd been so unstable. Thinking clearly without the ever-present sorrow and anger clouding his vision, he had to acknowledge that this reminded him he wasn't on his own. He had Ryan and Kassian and, now, Carhart. Maybe he even had Emilio. There were people he could trust even if the rest of the Agency had gone to shit.

Even so, it was all overrun by a sense of impending doom. Even Carhart was expecting to die at any second. Even Carhart didn't trust the future. Even Carhart felt susceptible. It underscored the severity of the situation at the Agency.

He'd thought it had been bad before but it had been nothing like this. And to think it could get even worse...

Still, hearing from Carhart that he needed him to be strong gave him more reason to fight. It gave him more encouragement to be there not only as support for Carhart but for the others, too. Ryan and Kassian and maybe Emilio… they probably needed someone they felt they could trust just as much as he did. They needed someone to rely on. It was reassuring to feel needed.

"How long do you think it will be until you can't cover it up anymore?"

"I don't know. Hopefully it doesn't come to that. Maybe if it does, we can finagle things to make this revelation look recent if we have to. Maybe we can lead her to believe it happened under her own watch. Your mother is good at manipulating information to say what she wants it to say."
Boyd knew that almost better than anyone. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Be smart and keep your nose clean. I'm not telling you to forget Sin but don't let your grief win you over. Once that happens, they win. You'll be another agent who she can replace." Carhart shoved the cup away and started to stand, glancing at his watch.

"I have to go back before I'm missed. There is surveillance everywhere now. They watch the outside of my apartment so it isn't safe there to meet. Brian is one of the few people I trust—he has his own reasons for hating the new admin and he is our go-between because she doesn't pay as much attention to civilian staff."

"Okay." Boyd stayed seated so they wouldn't be leaving at the same time on the off chance the pub was under surveillance or one of them had been followed. A thought occurred to him. "I installed their security system at my house before I left. I have cameras on the outside. I assume they may be watching those too now?"

"Yes. The good news is, most of the surveillance does not capture audio. But still—be on your guard. And..." Carhart trailed off for a moment before shaking his head. "I know I'm putting a lot on you right now, Boyd. I'm sorry. But if you can, if you see him, keep an eye on Kassian."

"Is he still having trouble?" Boyd tried to think back to what Kassian had seemed like when he'd been over. He had been so upset about Sin, though, that he couldn't say for sure what Kassian's mood had been. He'd seemed relatively normal from what he recalled.

Another brief hesitation and it seemed that Carhart was reluctant to say all of his suspicions out loud. "I just think there is a strong possibility that she wants to turn him over to her side. She considers him good material—one of
the few highly ranked agents who has a clean record to date and shows no signs of defection. I'm not saying that it's wrong to obey orders, but there is a possibility that she will try to make him become her man instead of ours. And when that happens, there's one less person that we can count on. And unfortunately, Kassian knows a lot. He's also had his fair share of problems lately, and I cannot say how it affected him because he isn't giving anything away. I won't say more than that, out of respect for him."

Boyd frowned. Imagining Kassian not being someone he could trust or count on was a disturbing thought after all they'd been through. He wondered what Carhart was referring to and determined to visit Kassian the first chance he got.

"I will," he said seriously.

"Thank you." Carhart straightened his jacket and looked around again. "I'll send Brian over with a panel soon. Janus is active again and making moves. There's a lot to catch up on."

That being said, the General nodded at Boyd and made eye contact for a long moment before turning and walking away.

Boyd sat alone for a long period after Carhart left, mulling over everything he'd just learned and what steps he needed to take next.

It shifted his perspective and, in truth, helped him get his mind off the morass of pain and hopelessness he'd previously been feeling. It was still there but it no longer dominated every thought and action. He had the opportunity to think clearly, something he hadn't been able to do since he'd returned. He didn't know how long that feeling would last but he took advantage of it while it was there.
It took Boyd a few days to find out where to even begin looking for Ivan. He started at the Research & Development floor but for some reason it seemed like every time he visited the place Ivan wasn't in that day, or had just gone to lunch and couldn't be found at the cafeteria, or for one reason or another had simply seemed to disappear. He gathered that Ivan's routine wasn't very predictable anymore and it made it more difficult to track him down.

His frustration was further emphasized because he didn't want to be too obvious about his intense need to see the other man. They'd never been on particularly friendly terms so he couldn't keep coming by acting like he just wanted to catch up with an old friend when he barely even looked for Owen or Ryan or someone it would be more plausible for him to search out.

Luckily, he'd run into Kaspar early on and the quiet bookworm had learned how to be very discreet. He kept an eye out for Ivan without making it obvious and he texted Boyd simple information that would be meaningless if it was intercepted by someone. Cafeteria and working late and gone tomorrow were the sort of notes he'd send, never mentioning Ivan's name.

And since Kaspar was one of Boyd's fans, it made sense why he would occasionally seek Boyd out on compound. A puppy dog look on his face and a stack of books in his hands as always, and words under his breath when he drew close.

Strangely, Boyd felt safer relying on Kaspar for this than he did Ryan. He trusted Ryan completely, yet he knew if he told Ryan he was trying to find Ivan then the question would inevitably rise: Why?

Although Boyd could say he wanted to talk to him about the last months of Sin's life, which would be true enough, he didn't relish the half-unsaid lie resting within those words. The growing hope that Sin was really
alive. That Boyd could track him down and find him and everything would be okay in the end.

A happily-ever-after ending he desperately wanted to hope could be his. If only he believed in Sin enough. If only he researched hard enough.

This wouldn’t be the first time everyone accepted something of Sin and Boyd didn't, knowing there had to be hope for something else. Everyone had thought Sin had killed Bridget and Boyd had known he hadn't; he'd known if he just worked hard enough he could prove it to the world. Maybe this was another case. Maybe he could prove Sin was alive after all.

With a little help from Kaspar and a little bit of luck, Boyd was finally able to catch Ivan as he was leaving for lunch. Boyd casually moved in to walk at Ivan's side when the man passed him.

Ivan had changed a lot physically. He had never been a particularly robust man but now he was nearly bone thin. He had also cut his long ash blond hair off, leaving it in a buzz cut which made his emaciated state all the more severe looking.

The R&D agent barely even looked at Boyd as he continued walking. There were large headphones clapped over his ears and the muted sounds of music emanating from them.

Boyd watched Ivan from the corner of his eye, careful not to appear obvious for the cameras surrounding them. He couldn't tell whether Ivan knew he wanted to talk to him and was deliberately ignoring him out of paranoia that the Agency would know, whether he didn't particularly care for Boyd and felt no need to talk to him, or whether he didn't realize Boyd wanted to talk at all. There was no way for Boyd to strike up a conversation with the headphones there, and no way for him to get Ivan’s attention without it being obvious.
He casually followed Ivan until he had to break away or else it would be apparent what he was doing. He headed toward the old library as if that was what he’d intended all along. He decided he needed to go about this another way. He didn't want to talk about any of this at the Agency anyway; he’d just been trying to contact Ivan without pulling up computer records.

When he entered the library he looked around and was unsurprised to find that he was alone.

He knew where the cameras were in the library and casually moved among the aisles, grabbing books off the shelves with great deliberation as if he were searching for specific titles. When he had a few, he moved toward the back of the room where there were some more secluded tables by the old computers that used to be used for submitting reports.

Those computers were mostly blocked from the cameras by the large bookcases; a fact Boyd knew from remembering the angle of the video from his incident with Harry in this same room. That, and Kaspar had long ago given him inside information on the library.

Boyd made sure to set the books down on one of the tables just within view of the camera but he made it look as though he hadn't done it on purpose. Then, he casually moved out of view so it would look like he sat down. He moved his hand into the frame to grab a book and then pulled the book closer to him. He waited a moment, eyes narrowed as he listened to the silence in the library. When he didn't hear any sounds indicating anyone else was going to enter soon, he quickly moved to one of the computers.

It took him a bit to get access to the information he needed. Although he had high clearance because he was rank 10, he still didn't have access to the directory of agent’s homes. All he knew was Ivan lived in the Industrial District, which didn't narrow it down that much. He spent a few minutes with
his fingers flying across the keyboard while he constantly looked over his shoulder.

He utilized information he'd learned in classes, from Jon, and from Ryan to do the search in a way that let him cover his tracks. It was one thing he wasn't out of practice with; he'd had to do the same thing at Aleixo's the two times he'd managed to check in with the Agency. Of course, he acknowledged darkly, one of those times he'd been caught in the middle of it but at least his computer work had never been compromised. His eyes narrowed and he dismissed the thought before it could go any further.

Once he found Ivan's home address and memorized it he immediately backed out of the system. He made sure he hid or deleted any proof of what he'd done and then logged out.

After that he sat down at the table again and started leafing through the random books he'd grabbed. He had some time to kill.

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When Boyd stopped in front of the building, he eyed the number of heavy bolts on the main door. There was no way he would be able to bypass them without a lot of time, effort and tools that he did not have.

His eyes fell on the intercom that was installed next to the door. After only a brief hesitation he pressed the button, hoping Ivan was home by now.

There was no response from the other end of the intercom and after a moment, he buzzed again. A full minute passed with still no response and he was beginning to lose hope that Ivan had returned home.

He was just about to turn away and rethink his options when a voice emanated from the speaker.
"Why are you here?"

Relief mixed with hope. Boyd spoke into the buzzer. "I want to talk to you."

It was an obvious statement but he didn't know how much he wanted to say out on the street.

The pause this time was longer but eventually the intercom emitted a low beep and the light turned green.

Boyd opened the door immediately, before Ivan could rethink and change his mind. He walked into a dark corridor with a freight elevator in plain view. When the door fell shut behind him, it sounded especially loud and permanent. He didn't spare much thought to his surroundings as he manually pulled open the gates on the elevator. Since there didn't appear to be anything downstairs he could only assume Ivan was upstairs.

Another hallway opened up once he pushed open the elevator doors upstairs. He only saw one door, which was closed but had a hint of light spilling out from beneath. He walked over and didn't hesitate before he knocked.

The door opened nearly immediately and Ivan appeared in the doorway. His grey eyes were narrowed into slits and his mouth mashed into a tight, thin line. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, coming here?"

Boyd had expected that Ivan wouldn't be thrilled to see him, especially since Sin had told him how little Ivan liked him. "I want to talk to you about Hsin but I couldn't catch you at the Agency. I didn't know where else to find you."

Ivan stared at him incredulously. His jaw worked as though he wanted to say something but couldn't get the words out or else was restraining himself.
from doing so. In the end he gave Boyd another furious glare and stepped aside so that Boyd could come in.

When he did, Ivan slammed the door shut with more force than was necessary. The R&D agent strode by Boyd nearly immediately, putting an ample amount of distance between them, before standing in the middle of what appeared to be a large open space of an apartment.

There were no interior walls and not very much furniture. Just a section for a kitchen, a desk with a vast amount of computer equipment, a couch, a television and a mattress that lay on the floor. Along one of the walls lay a large whiteboard that was crammed full of cryptic blocky words that appeared unintelligible.

"Why should I talk to you about him?" Ivan asked coldly, some of his calm returning.

Boyd tried not to look around. He tried not to think about how Sin had been here in the past.

More than anything, he tried not to think about how in the back of his mind he could still hear Sin's words when they'd talked about places they could move. Maybe a loft in the Industrial District, Sin had said. He remembered his own comment about how the open concept would work for them and Sin's joke that maybe he didn't always want to be able to talk to Boyd anywhere in the apartment.

The hopes and dreams of that time seemed so fragile and translucent in the light of reality. His stomach clenched as he studiously avoided thinking about how much he really would have loved to live in a place like this with Sin.

Instead, he focused as much as he could on Ivan, on the cold displeasure aimed at him and the fact that Ivan truly had no reason to help him. Except for Sin.
"I'm not trying to dredge anything up but I just got back. I just found out," Boyd explained, trying to keep his body language as neutral as possible so as not to further irritate Ivan and risk having the man kick him out before he got any information. "I've been looking into what happened and some things don't add up. Ryan said you were the only one he spent any time with and I thought—I thought you might know more."

He shook his head and added earnestly, "I'm just trying to understand how this all happened."

Ivan scoffed quietly, outright animosity pouring out of his thin frame. "Why would you think of coming to me, Agent?"

"Because you know more about rumors and half-truths than anyone at the Agency," Boyd said seriously. "And I'm coming up short with explanations as to why no one saw Sin disappear, no one saw his body, yet everyone accepts that he's dead."

This time the studious looking man released a sardonic laugh, and shook his head in what appeared to be dismay. Ivan looked away from Boyd and began cleaning the lenses of his glasses with the hem of his shirt as he spoke.

"Could you be any more arrogant? Do you think you're making some major discovery—cracking open some case? Figuring out something that only you can see? Good thing for the rest of us saps that you came back from having your ass in the air for however fucking long. We may not have figured out the truth without you."

Boyd's eyes narrowed and a wave of anger swept through him that he kept in check. "I never said I was the only one," he said a hint tightly. "I'm following the leads, getting a lot of 'Give up, he's gone' with no explanation, and ended up here thinking maybe you'd have cared enough about Hsin to
have looked into his death at the time. Maybe you know something I can't find out a year later."

"Maybe I have no interest in rehashing it with you," Ivan replied, switching to clean the other lens before placing the glasses back on his face. "I don't owe you shit, Agent. I don't even like you. I bet you didn't even cover your tracks. I bet you got followed here."

"I'm not an idiot," Boyd said evenly. "I didn't have a tail and I covered all my tracks. And I know you have no reason to tell me which is why I'm asking you. Tell me what you want in exchange for this information, but please help me on Hsin's behalf."

Ivan just scoffed and turned away, pacing over to the whiteboard. He stared at the cryptic scrawls that covered it and picked up a marker. After a brief contemplation he began marking some of the free space on the board, his hands flicking quickly to make the incomprehensible mark.

"How is it on his behalf? He's gone, in case you didn't notice. Don't come to me throwing his name around, claiming he would have wanted me to help you or that I should do it for him. You want help because you want to feel better."

Boyd didn't move to follow Ivan in case he would take offense to him moving further into his domain. Instead, he stayed where he was, keeping his expression upfront. "You're right. I do want to feel better. I want closure. But I also want to do right by him. Even if others have looked down the same paths I am now, I want to go as far as I can looking into his death to understand. He deserves to not be thrown aside and forgotten. He deserves to have his story told, no matter how abruptly it ended. If the Agency covered something up, then all the more reason it shouldn't be ignored. That's why I asked on his behalf. Because I thought you may have felt the same way."
Ivan finished a long scrawl across the very bottom of the board and stood up straight. He stared at it for a moment and carefully placed the marker back on the sill of the board. "And what exactly are you thinking was covered up?"

"I don't know yet," Boyd admitted, not wanting to say aloud just yet his theory about Sin leaving on his own. "But it's very suspicious that nobody saw him disappear even though most of the others were escorted away, and that nobody saw his body be brought to the incinerator. That at every step of the way, Marshal Seong's people were in place. The fact alone that she didn't broadcast his termination doesn't seem entirely to fit the rest of her choices. I think something happened that she doesn't want everyone to know."

Ivan turned to face Boyd again and crossed his arms over his chest. He was wearing an extremely oversized t-shirt that practically hung off of him, the collar dipping down to show collarbones that jutted out extremely.

He studied Boyd through his narrowed grey eyes, his face a mask of unkind hardness. In the past he'd shown his dislike of Boyd blatantly. Following Boyd and Sin getting back together, Ivan had never deigned to fully acknowledge Boyd again and if he had to, he'd done so with obvious rudeness. But this was something different.

There was pure contempt to the point of hatred written on Ivan's face. Although it was currently blazing out at Boyd, it seemed unlikely that it was solely directed at him. It was more likely that Ivan's hatred of the world around him had increased exponentially since the death of Sin and likely other people he knew.

"I'm on their list, you know," Ivan said flatly, uncaring. "They know I know shit about them. They know what's locked up in my head. I'll be dead before the next few months are out—I know they'll find some excuse."
Boyd watched Ivan and didn’t doubt what he said. From what he’d seen since returning to the Agency, no one was safe, least of all people like Ivan who didn’t hide their opinions. "What do you know, Ivan?" he asked carefully.

"A lot." Ivan turned away again and crossed the loft, entering a kitchen area. He stood in the middle of it and didn't make a move to go one way or the other. "But all you need to know is, I don't think he was terminated."

Hearing the words Boyd had been thinking himself made his heart skip a beat. He had to force himself to keep his expression steady as hope suffused him. Sin really had escaped—he could be waiting even now—

"He got away?" he asked, his voice a hint breathless. He hadn't meant to ask that; he’d meant to ask what Ivan thought happened, but hope and relief sidelined his words.

Ivan's expression immediately caused the hope to ebb away. His face slowly became blank, guarded, and he backed further into the kitchen as if to put as much space between them as possible. There was something strange about his motions and the way he held himself but Boyd realized it had been that way since he'd entered the apartment.

Whatever was going on with Ivan seemed to run deeper than contempt for everything in the world.

Ivan fidgeted slightly and finally stood still next to the bar counter.

"I think he died as a result of their experimentation."

Boyd felt like he'd been hit in the chest and for a moment his steady expression wavered. He could only stare at Ivan, the words running through his mind. He had to take a moment to understand them. To fully take in all of what that meant.
Ivan thought Sin was dead. Really dead. The discrepancies weren't hiding him being alive, they were hiding—

Died from the experimentation. That could only mean one thing; what he'd been looking into all those months ago, the fear he'd had about Sin's strength, his hearing, his speed...

"The Reapers," Boyd said, his voice sounding distant even to him. He tried to push aside for now the repercussions of what Ivan had said and focus instead on the moment; on finding out more information. He didn't know how long that would last before it caught up to him. His eyes sharpened on Ivan as he turned all his focus on the other man. "They did it?"

"I'm not sure. But I think they were involved." Ivan rubbed his hand through his short hair and looked out the window. "I think whatever they were doing to him went wrong and he died. I think they said he was terminated to cover it up. No one is supposed to really know about what they do to people. People talk but there's never any proof."

Boyd shook his head. "Why do you think that's what happened? Why not..." Why not believe he got away? "Something else?"

"Everything leading up to it." Ivan shook his head back and forth, the anger transforming his face again. "We saw each other somewhat frequently in the couple of months before he died. He was angry and lashing out at everyone, and he would come to me to calm down. To get away from the compound. He was afraid he would do something stupid and ensure his own death before you returned."

Ivan reached over the counter and began rotating a pepper shaker. "There was an incident—he didn't follow orders on an assignment that he didn't agree with and we all thought he would be killed. He was issued a warning but nothing came of it. If they were going to terminate him, they would
have done it then. But as always, he escaped the noose. They kept him on as they always did. I always had the feeling it was because of what they were doing to him—the experimenting, the enhancements. They'd invested too much research and resources into his body to just hurl it into the incinerator like rotten meat."

Boyd hovered in the center of the room, not having moved an inch since he'd entered. His face was drawn, serious, and he looked away. He crossed his arms and frowned, keeping this all on a level of intellectual information. He had to think of it that way so he didn't get emotionally attached. So he didn't think about what they were discussing.

"I was doing research on the Reapers before I left," Boyd said. "I didn't get the chance to finish but I was certain of their experimentation. It was the only thing that made sense, considering..."

He trailed off, not wanting to remember Sin's extreme strength because that made him think of Sin doing things with his bare hands he shouldn't have been capable of doing. Which made him think of Sin's hands. Which made him think of those same hands sliding over his body, sometimes so gentle despite the power behind them...

He set his jaw, his eyebrows furrowing, and his arms tightened minutely against his chest. "I thought they'd been doing it to him for years. I don't know how many, but at least the last few, if not his entire time here. And if that's the case," he speared Ivan with a strong stare.

There was anger in his eyes but it wasn't directed at Ivan; it was at the Agency. The Reapers. The people who'd turned his lover into a guinea pig to poke and prod. "What do you think changed? They were damn insidious with the way they worked on him. Why would they suddenly make a mistake now?"
"I don't know." Ivan set down the pepper shaker and stared at it. "But something was going wrong with him. In the last month he was sick a lot and Hsin never got sick. He always had headaches, was always throwing up. He had no energy sometimes—he could barely concentrate on missions. And it all started when they started calling him into the lab. They told him they were following up on his medication—testing to see if he could continue without it. Doing probability simulations about whether or not he would relapse into mental instability without them. They claimed it was research for a potential long-term assignment but I don't think Hsin ever really believed it and I certainly never did."

Boyd looked away, his glare settling on the window and the darkness beyond. He imagined he could see the Agency all the way across the city, ghostly against the sky. Anger was becoming a constant backdrop to his thoughts. It was bad enough they'd been experimenting on Sin in secret all those years but then to make it more blatant, to make his life miserable... And for what? What the hell was their goal? What had they done to his lover?

"When did it start?" he asked tightly. "Before or after the new Marshal?"

"After."

Boyd nodded stonily, unsurprised by the answer. It was Seong. She was responsible for all of it. She'd had dozens of people killed. Then she'd taken the extra steps to play with Sin's life like it meant nothing, like he was a toy for her to toss around and discard when it broke.

He hated her.

He hadn't met her and he already hated her. He hated what she'd done. He hated her for hurting Sin, for fucking everything up at the Agency. He hated her for the control he knew she had over his own life, and how easily she could discard him as well.
But even with Ivan's opinion of what happened, even with that information backing up what he'd always thought about the experimentation occurring, it didn't fully answer his questions. He still didn't know for certain what happened.

And he couldn't rest until he'd explored everything. Because even if Ivan was certain Sin was dead, Boyd still didn't have proof. Maybe it was more likely he'd simply been killed as part of an experiment but maybe... maybe Ivan was wrong...

He didn't know. That's what it came down to. He didn't know enough yet.

Cold determination shone in his eyes; the sort of dead set seriousness he typically got when devising strategies for a mission. Which, in truth, he was.

"Do you have any idea what they were really doing to him?" he asked. "What their goal may have been?"

Ivan cocked his head to the side and peered at Boyd from behind the protection of his glasses. Once again he looked tense, wary and once more it was directed at Boyd. The tension had returned to his sinewy frame and he'd started fidgeting again.

The man seemed to go in phases. He settled down and seemed almost at ease when he was able to see what Boyd's intentions were, but as soon as the conversation took a path he didn't understand Ivan became skittish once again. His steel colored eyes skimmed Boyd's face as he chewed on the inside of his cheek, searching for... something. What, Boyd didn't know.

"I think you should go. I don't want to talk about this with you. I only said anything because I thought you were thinking like me. But you're thinking
something else and I don't want to be involved. I'm gonna go about this my own way and I can't have anyone fucking me over before it's done.”

Boyd watched Ivan more closely, although it was with more of a warily perplexed feeling than anything. "Ivan," he said in full honesty, "I won't fuck you over. I won't do anything to stop you or reveal whatever it is you want to do. I would never tell anyone what you said to me because I don't trust anyone at the Agency. What I care about is what happened to Hsin."

"No." Ivan said the word more forcefully although his low voice didn't rise. "You have to go. It's better for you anyway. You don't want to be seen hanging around me."

Boyd nodded, taking a step back to show he was listening. But he hesitated. Staring at Ivan, he knew this was the only person he could talk to who could give him any information on what Sin had been like, what he’d been feeling. No one else would know.

He couldn't leave without asking.

At that moment, the experimentation didn't matter, the Agency didn't matter, nothing mattered.

He wasn't Senior Agent Boyd Beaulieu, furious with the people who had destroyed everything. He was just Boyd, who missed his lover so much it felt like half his soul was gone, and who couldn't do anything other than search for scraps of information like they were pieces of treasure washed ashore from a shipwreck.

"I'll leave," he conceded, searching Ivan's face to try to see how amenable the other man would be. He cursed himself for not asking earlier, when Ivan had been more talkative. "But can I just—Can I ask you one more thing?"
The guarded hope, the deeply buried desperation for answers—it was probably evident to Ivan, who likely thought him pitiful. But he couldn’t change how he felt so he didn’t care.

"It depends on what it is," was the flat, impatient response.

"What was he like?" Boyd asked, forging ahead before Ivan could change his mind. "Mentally. Did he ever say anything about how he felt or—or anything like that?"

Ivan graced him with another of his deeply suspicious and analytical stares before turning away. He walked to the edge of the kitchen and appeared to be staring at the wall. His hands rubbed up and down the sides of his jeans in a gesture that could have been nervousness. Boyd had never seen Ivan like this—it was mildly unnerving. Whenever they’d encountered each other before, Ivan had always had a blanket of calm around him even in situations that would have caused anxiety in someone else.

It was possible that this was another change brought on by the new administration. Perhaps Sin’s death and Ivan’s own impending termination had kicked his paranoia into overdrive. Boyd remembered Sin briefly talking about the R&D agent’s mental issues. He remembered Sin’s reluctant admission that sometimes he thought Ivan really was paranoid—sometimes he really did seem to think everything was too much of a conspiracy.

Maybe it was worse for Ivan now.

"He didn't talk a lot about how he felt," Ivan replied at length. "But that should come as no surprise to you. But what he did say, when he talked about it, was that he missed you. He was lonely without you, even when he was with me. He would stay at your house sometimes, towards the end, when he thought you would have returned and didn't. And he knew something bad was going to happen. He knew it from the start. He saw your mission as the thing
that would finally come between you two for good although he couldn't explain why he felt that way."

Boyd pushed his hair back from his face, an absent gesture just to give himself something to do, and found his gaze straying across the apartment. Looking at the opposite wall because he couldn’t look at Ivan anymore. He thought if he did, Ivan would certainly see the pain in his eyes. He would see that the information was welcome at the same time as it hurt to hear.

After he’d returned and when he’d started to force himself off the sedatives, he’d noticed some things in his house. Items that had seemed to be not quite where he’d normally put them. Things that were out of place. He’d thought he’d done that himself during the moments he’d been all but gone from his mind, a walking ghost amidst a too-stark reality.

Now he wondered if any of it had been Sin. Had it been his hand that had last touched that book? Had he walked through Boyd's house, reacquainting himself with the dusty belongings of a lover who was supposed to have returned weeks or months earlier? Had he picked up that drawing pad and flipped through it before setting it aside, or had it all been Boyd himself, mad with grief and completely unknowing of his own actions?

He thought of his bed and he imagined Sin sleeping there alone, the way he was now. It made his heart ache, a vicious squeeze of the muscle that he could feel out to his ribcage. He felt like they were two silent movies overlapping, the screen flipping and half-fuzzing out; the two of them walking the same paths but destined to never see each other again.

He wished even more now that he hadn't been so crazed with fury and sorrow when he'd first returned home. If he hadn't torn everything apart he may have been able to identify the things that still could have Sin's touch hovering near them like an echo.
He could have gathered them together as mementos of his lover; a sad little museum of mundane items suddenly made special.

He could still remember Sin's pinched face; the serious cast to those pale green eyes and his low, *I don't want you to go.*

It hurt even more to remember that night. One of the last nights they ever had together. It hurt to remember how freely he'd been able to touch his lover. It had been so simple then. Stand up and walk across the room. Reach out and pull him close. Breathe in his scent and try to ignore his own growing worries and fears about the mission that had loomed before him.

If only he'd known at that time what lay in store for him. If only he could wind back time and tell them no, no, he wasn't leaving that room, he wasn't leaving Sin's arms. They would have terminated him but wouldn't it have been better that way? The few extra days he could have scraped by, those precious few extra seconds he could have spent with Sin, would have been worth it. If only he'd known the mission would take everything from him.

It was getting harder to breathe evenly and he recognized the deeply gouging sorrow that was ready to engulf him. That too-familiar pain and hopelessness that would surely become as equal a master of his life as the Agency was.

Had Sin known this was how it would end?

Had he known that far in the future Boyd would be standing here, trying to keep the brightness of buried tears from his eyes? A pale attempt at protecting the vulnerability inside when in truth it was all through him, bruising as deeply and easily as his skin. Or had he thought Boyd would never return, had never made it past a handful of weeks, and he was the one left behind waiting desperately for a reunion that would never come?
He drew in a breath that he managed to keep mostly steady and he rubbed at his face briefly. His throat was clogged with emotions, with holding back everything that wanted to rise every time he thought too closely about Sin. Every time he imagined his lover and every time he realized that imagining was all he had left.

He nodded wordlessly. He turned toward Ivan again and hesitated briefly.

Part of him wanted to ask more but the larger part knew there was nothing more to ask. Nothing more to say. Sin had been lonely. Sin had missed him. He should have been here.

His own haunted desires from when he'd first returned were now reversed. He should have been the one able to open the door and smile at Sin. He should have been on the other end of a quick phone call. He should have been here so Sin never had to be lonely in the first place.

But all the should haves in the world couldn't change the truth. In the end there was nothing he could do except struggle between mourning his dead lover and wanting to believe that despite it all, despite any apparent evidence, there was still a loophole. Sin was a master of the impossible. If it was impossible he was alive, didn't that mean even more that he had to be?

The thought was strained and hopeful even in his own mind and he didn't want to be there anymore. Suddenly, Ivan's loft felt stifling. Or maybe it was his presence. Or maybe it was all the uncertainty and longing that seemed to hover around Boyd like a shadowed cloud.

He faced Ivan more fully. There was still a raw and quiet edge to his voice when he said, "Thank you." He paused, thought about how much Ivan had helped him in the end despite their dislike for each other, and added, "If there's ever anything you need from me..."
He trailed off, not expecting a response, and was unsurprised when he didn’t receive one. Ivan was no longer paying him any attention. Whether the man was lost in his own thoughts or whether he was ignoring his guest, Boyd didn’t know.

Whatever the case, he watched Ivan, wondering how far this domino trail of disaster would lead before it finally all collapsed. As he left, he looked over his shoulder one last time and wondered whether some day he’d look back on this moment as the last time he ever really talked to Ivan.

Life felt cheap and empty and more precarious than ever. As he shut the door behind him and walked toward the freight elevator, he thought about that and the fleeting, storybook happiness he’d once had with his lover. It was even more reason to start working on a plan that had been germinating ever since Ivan had mentioned the experimentation:

Break into the lab and, once and for all, find out the truth.
Chapter Six

There was always somebody on compound; guards patrolling, staff sleeping, agents on their way to or from missions. There was always somebody to witness every mistake and every moment. But Boyd had discovered, after scrutinizing the lab building with more focus than he'd looked at anything in his life, that some places on the compound had curious blanks.

There were no cameras on or around the lab building.

On a compound where it sometimes felt like practically even the bathrooms were recorded, having an entire building in a dark spot was very telling. It wasn't obvious because most of the cameras on compound were well hidden. It had taken Boyd days to verify there really weren't any and when he had, he felt it made sense in a dark way.

This was the place where events occurred that even a secret organization wanted to remain hidden. This was the place where Sin had been taken, time and time again, until ultimately he'd never returned.

What had they done to him in there? How had they hurt him?

He spent a few days doing recon through subterfuge. As far as anyone else knew, he was reading or resting or aimlessly wandering the compound. During that time, he inadvertently learned bits about people he knew. A girl he recognized from R&D moved like clockwork every day across the courtyard, always pausing for a specific time frame by a particular tree and looking in a particular direction. He couldn't tell whether she was OCD or watching someone.

Another day he saw Jordan with her arm looped around General Hughes’. They were in a lesser traveled area of the compound and with the
way she leaned against him and the glances he gave her, there was no doubt how intimately they were involved. The General of Special Operations was known to have been involved with female agents in the past so Boyd was unsurprised by the sight. He watched them just long enough to see if there was anything of use for his mission and, seeing nothing, he dismissed their presence and continued the recon.

Three days before his last day of downtime and the moment he'd determined he would break into the lab, he started initial preparations.

He had the perfect cover for the Artillery. Having been gone for a year, he had every reason to visit the Artillery and, more importantly, check in with Keira. Being an IT person who’d helped design and update the comm units, she was the person all the agents went to with emergency technical problems or malfunctioned equipment. Her desk was conveniently located in the main room of the Artillery's entrance area where she was most easily accessible for last minute help.

The day he went she was busy, with a line of three people waiting to talk to her and the person at her desk growing increasingly frustrated. She looked harried and unhappy. The picture she used to have on her desk of her and her girlfriend Jolene was conspicuously absent and she was wearing a necklace he didn't remember. As far as he could see, it was a simple chain with a plain silver ring on it and she kept unconsciously checking to make sure it was still there.

As he glanced around the lobby, an idea began to form. He casually walked by one of the unmanned security desks and palmed one of the unused security tags. His stride didn't break as he headed toward Keira's line. He stopped at the end, waited awhile before looking impatiently at his watch, and left.
That night, he studied the tag. Having been through the Artillery more times than he could count, he had long ago learned how the security worked.

The main entrance to the Artillery required basic clearance that anyone in the Agency had. The vault held all the items. In order to access that area, everyone had to pass through sophisticated detectors at security check points that were manned by guards. This was required for the entrance and exit.

The security tags were placed on all the items. They could only be deactivated by a device that the guards kept under close observation, which were near the security check points. The detectors also scanned for the materials present on a person. When the guards deactivated the tags they also entered the checked out items into the computer. As long as the agent gave over everything new they'd acquired, and the tags were deactivated, the detectors didn't go off on the agent's way out. But if the detector recognized that the person was coming out with something different than what they went in with, it would alert the guard.

After studying the small tag for a few moments, he pulled out his art supplies and got to work.

The next morning he returned to the Artillery bright and early. Keira was alone at her desk, for once without a line. She seemed distracted when Boyd walked up to her. He struck up a conversation about the comm units and she smiled faintly in greeting but it was strained.

For the most part, he kept his words as few as he'd been known to have since he'd returned. But within that, he chose his words carefully, and fluctuated his expression subtly between emotions. Within seconds, he knew how best to manipulate her; she was upset by something, and judging by the way she kept subconsciously glancing at the computer it was related to that.
He shifted his weight, leaning one hand against the desk while he waited for her to check on an updated security patch. Her monitor was just in view; letting him see that everything was minimized but the taskbar was visible. A minimized image was named after Keira's lover Jolene.

Although there were many possibilities for Keira's mood, Boyd suspected by her reactions that Jolene was dead. Given the clues from the previous day, he thought it most likely she'd died recently somehow; perhaps terminated or a byproduct of being an agent.

He didn't enjoy the idea of using her loss and Sin's death in a ruse but ultimately it didn't change anything. He would do what he had to in order to get the answers he needed.

When Keira finally finished updating the comm unit and ensured it had all the right accessories, she pushed it across the desk and leaned back in her chair. She had never seemed to have much of an opinion about him either way in the past, but today she was more talkative.

"A lot of things must have changed for you," she said, watching him somberly. "So much can happen in a year."

He nodded, putting the comm unit in his right pocket. Pushing his jacket back revealed the holster to his gun in a way that he made seem incidental.

"It did," he said quietly. He touched the holster and stilled. He thinned his lips before he cut the expression off abruptly.

"What is it?" she asked, brown eyes studying his face closely.

He grimaced faintly and shook his head. Straightening, he left some tension in his shoulders and pushed his hair back with a slightly agitated hand. "Nothing. Thank you for the help."
He started to turn but she shot her hand out, grabbing his forearm. He looked down at her as she stared up at him intently.

"You can talk to me."

He saw in her eyes, the draw of her eyebrows, and the tilted down edges of her lips that she was lonely. That she felt alienated by the way everyone went about their day as if nothing had happened. She was probably used to no one showing emotions when they came into the Artillery.

Or maybe it was simply that he'd been gone for a year and his abrupt return made her think too closely about everything that had changed for her in those months. Everything she had lost.

He hesitated, flicking his eyes over to the nearest guard, who wasn't paying any attention to them as he dealt with someone going through the detectors. Keira's face twisted briefly before she abruptly let go of his arm. Her dark gaze dropped to the desk, then flicked uncertainly to the sides. He suspected she was checking to see if anyone had seen their failed interaction.

Boyd's lips turned down slightly on the edges and he stepped closer to the desk. "It's my gun," he said heavily and she snapped her eyes up to meet his. "It was a gift from my partner."

He saw the way pain and sympathy flickered across her face.

"Did something happen to it?"

"No, thank God," Boyd replied, shaking his head. His hand rested against the gun in the holster; a comforting gesture. "I pulled it out for the first time since I got back last night, though. While I was cleaning it, it made me think about a lot of things."
That was true so the flash of disquiet didn't have to be faked. It had been impossible to pull out that gun, to dismantle and clean it, and not think about Sin.

Impossible not to remember the night Sin had given it to him, and the happiness he'd felt. Those pale green eyes and Sin's carefully laid plans; the way Sin had seemed so determined to make the night be perfect. The hesitant and then pleased tilt of Sin's lips when he'd seen how happy Boyd had been about the gift, and the gentle caress of those fingertips against his skin.

Keira seemed to understand what he was saying without words. She nodded and broke eye contact for a moment, her hand resting near the neckline of her shirt. It wasn't long before her eyebrows drew together and she dropped her hand.

"Jolene got me a necklace for our last anniversary. I can't always wear it. Some days..."

She trailed off but he knew she was saying. Some days it made her think too much. Some days it made her long too much. Some days it was too painful.

He'd felt the same way lately.

He was silent a moment and then sighed. He looked away with a faintly troubled expression, his eyes falling on the guard nearby who was now watching the lobby for any activity. Although the guard was not looking in his direction, the way the man's body was tilted told Boyd that he was watching them from his peripheral vision and probably listening to the conversation.

"I hadn't touched it since before my mission so I didn't realize I was out of ammo until last night," Boyd said pensively.
She nodded and straightened in her chair. "While you're here, you may as well get some downstairs."

He nodded in return, his gaze sliding to hover past the guard. "I think I will."

She smiled and quietly wished him good luck. As soon as he started to turn away, she had already returned to her computer screen. Her fingers brushed the touch screen and by the tightening of her eyes he knew she'd brought Jolene's picture up again.

The guard didn't pay him much attention as he headed toward the security detector. The tag Boyd had hidden on his gun predictably caused the detector to go off as he strode through.

The guard came over and ran a wand along Boyd's entire body. It only beeped at the gun and when the guard, Hollins his tag said, saw that it was the gun he seemed slightly perplexed. Boyd pulled it out, dismantling it and putting it back together in front of Hollins. He held it just right to keep the piece of tag casually out of the man's view.

Hollins asked all sorts of questions about it, asking where Boyd got it and verifying that it was on the list of weapons registered to Boyd's name. Because agents had to remain anonymous and nameless in society, all their weapons had to be registered through the Agency, as did images of bullets fired from the guns. That way, if a bullet was ever searched from an agent's gun by law enforcement or anyone else, the Agency would be alerted and could react accordingly.

"Leave the gun here," Hollins ordered after the questions were finished.

Boyd narrowed his eyes. "No," he said flatly. "I've lost guns that way."
"I'm not going to steal your precious little gift," Hollins said derisively. "Like I'd even want anything that freak picked out."

Boyd's expression stilled dangerously and he took a step forward. "Don't talk about him like that."

"What's it matter?" Hollins said carelessly. "He's dead, in case you missed the memo."

"You will be too if you don't shut up," Boyd promised darkly.

Hollins' expression flickered briefly before he snorted and looked Boyd up and down. "You couldn't take me down if you tried. I dunno where you went but you came back looking too strung out to do jack shit."

Boyd stared Hollins down. The hard lines of his expression and icy cast of his eyes were reminiscent of Vivienne. In his peripheral vision, he saw Keira watching from across the room; looking tense and ready to intercede if needed.

After a long moment Hollins looked away abruptly with a grimace that he quickly hid. He stepped back, waving Boyd aside. "Whatever; I don't have time for you. Just go get your shit and get out of here."

Keira relaxed, looking back at her computer although her back was visibly tense. Boyd slid the gun back into his holster firmly. His stare remained unwavering on Hollins until he turned and strode through the detector, ignoring it when it went off again.

Boyd went downstairs and for all intents and purposes he appeared to go about his business. He checked out a few of the rooms, lingering in one of them looking at tonfa. He knew there were cameras down there watching everyone so he made sure to appear completely casual, even when he stole the decoder and a pair of night vision glasses.
The glasses were easiest to steal, as it was a simple matter of swapping out some glasses he'd brought in. The decoder was a little trickier because he had to conceal it better. Being that he was still on downtime, he had no reason to check out a decoder and if he was caught with it he would have too much explaining to do. He would have to delay breaking into the lab or end up not doing it at all.

As far as he was concerned, neither of those were viable options.

In the room with the decoders, he dropped a device he was examining. During the process of bending over to pick it up, he palmed the most powerful and smallest decoder they had. The Agency had several of that model so one wouldn't be missed for a few days. He discreetly slid the decoder into his shoe on the side, where he had a piece of layered foil that interfered with the material scan. The decoder went inside the foil and he used the motion of grabbing the device off the floor to disguise it all.

Afterward, he continued about his business, taking his time to get the ammunition he needed and look around a little more. He emptied the magazine, as if verifying that he'd grabbed the right ammo after such a long time away. In the process he switched the location of the tag on the gun.

At one point several minutes later and in a different room entirely, he bent to tie his shoe. Using that to mask the movement, he quickly folded the edges of the foil around the decoder and slid it more completely under the arch of his foot in his shoe.

He stood and continued to walk around, having to walk carefully so as not to damage the decoder while also not giving away that anything unusual was happening. It was highly uncomfortable but the decoder's small size helped.
On his way out, Boyd went through Hollins’ line. The detector went off again and the scanner had mixed readings, with the foil not fully blocking the material scan. The misread of the materials looked more like a glitch than anything so as expected, Hollins focused more on the detector going off on the gun. He looked more annoyed than suspicious.

Boyd stepped through the detector into the safety of the lobby and then pulled out the gun. He passed it in and out of the detector to show that it was what was going off.

"Let me see that," Hollins demanded, holding his hand out.

"I already showed you the gun," Boyd said flatly, his eyes narrowed and hand rested protectively on the weapon. "I'll take it apart again when I get home to make sure nothing's wrong with it that could be activating that."

"I don't give a shit about the gun," Hollins snapped impatiently. "I give a shit that it keeps going off when it shouldn't, especially since no one else's is. What kind of weird ass gun did your precious little boyfriend get you before he died?"

"I just told you I'd look into it," Boyd said coldly. "Maybe it's something to do with the detector. Did you even think of that or have you been too distracted thinking of new ways to be insulting?"

Hollins sneered. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it got switched to detecting skinny little faggots who need to choke on a dick." He glared. "Then I'd say it's working just fine."

Boyd's teeth grit and he took a step forward but at that moment, Keira said sharply, "Bill." She stood from her desk and strode over, her face set in partially concealed anger.
"Leave the gun alone," she demanded, her footsteps making harsh echoes against the floor as she practically stalked toward them. Boyd discreetly removed the tag from his gun and put it on Keira as she passed him.

"The detector could be glitching," she started to say as she passed through the detector. It went off and she stilled, jaw clenching as she glared at Hollins. "See? You know I don't have anything on me to make it go off."

Hollins rolled his eyes and seemed unrepentant. She shoved him out of the way so she could work on the computer. She mumbled about running some tests and Boyd stayed to the side, arms crossed and face set coolly as he stared into thin air. After a few minutes, Keira looked up.

"Try waving it through now."

Boyd did as she asked and the detector remained silent. Keira gave Hollins another pointed look, who made a sour face but otherwise didn't bother responding.

"These things are due for an upgrade anyway." Keira started to walk through the detector again and once again it went off. She threw her hands up in the air in exasperation and turned to glare at the detector, as if it was purposefully trying to anger her.

"Good thing you were here to fix it," Hollins said sarcastically.

"It probably just needs to be recalibrated," Keira shot back testily. "Cord this one off until it's ready. I'm going to let it cycle through some tests for now. I'll check back once the diagnostics are done."

Hollins looked put out but he followed through with the suggestion.
Keira started to walk past Boyd and he stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Thank you for the help," he said under his breath. He used the movement to palm the tag he'd stuck on her.

She smiled sadly at him and squeezed his arm. "I wouldn't want anyone touching my necklace either," was all she said. She met his eyes for one more moment and then turned and walked back to her desk.

Boyd left soon afterward. At home, he verified that the decoder was working and tested it a few times. Then he put it away until he was ready to use it.

The day he planned to break into the lab, he came in during the day as he had the previous week. His messenger bag was resting on his shoulder and he wandered around seemingly aimlessly at first.

An hour or so before it started to grow dark and there were fewer people around, he made his way to the more secluded courtyard where he'd spent a lot of time lately. He took a book out of his messenger bag, doing so where it would be seen on camera, and proceeded to settle down in view starting to read. He fidgeted a bit as if he wasn't comfortable. At length, he glanced up with a mildly irritable expression and gathered his things. He idly looked around as if searching for a better perch, coincidentally walking out of view of the cameras in the process.

When he was far into what he knew to be one of the blind spots, he settled down again and pretended to continue to read in case anyone was watching him in person. He let the time pass, flipping through pages and running his eyes down the pages as if he was actually reading. In reality, he was going through the mission in his mind one last time to determine if anything needed to change.
Long after it grew dark and the secluded courtyard was empty, he moved further into the shadows until he was in the hiding spot he'd found earlier.

He changed into all black clothing, including a mask that hid his face and most importantly his blond hair. He put on a different pair of black shoes than normal; a pair he'd bought specifically for this purpose that had thick soles that blended into the shoe. He'd done that not only because the shoes were absolutely silent, but also in case he was caught on camera. If they used software to estimate his height and weight to narrow down possibilities, at least it would mislead the machines by a few inches.

It wasn't foolproof and it was entirely possible they'd determine it was him anyway but he saw no reason to make it easy for them.

He wore gloves and the night vision glasses he'd stolen from the Artillery, so they wouldn't be able to see his eyes on any freeze frame. With such a unique eye color, it would have been another dead giveaway.

He then worked his way across the compound out of view of people and cameras until he was in the vantage point he'd chosen for watching the lab building.

He hovered near the building, waiting with eternal patience for the right circumstances. He watched the guards chat, watched a few opportunities arise and let them slip by because something didn't feel right about it, and hid more than once when someone could have seen him. Hours passed in a slow grinding of time but he didn't care. He watched like a hawk, letting the cramping of his body fall into the background as unimportant information, and finally he was rewarded with the perfect chance.

The two guards in back, Howlett and Mullins, were deep in the middle of a conversation. They were arguing about whether or not Howlett was an
idiot for wanting to become an agent. Howlett was growing increasingly aggravated by Mullins’ bland one line commentary until finally he stopped his rounds to turn on Mullins and furiously argue that he could make the cut.

The second the two were distracted, Boyd moved like lightning. He sprinted silently to the huge oak tree closest to the building.

His body was definitely not up to par with the way he’d been when he’d left but adrenaline pumped through his system, providing him with the stamina and strength he needed. Everything else was only a matter of his mind.

He scrambled up the tree, the bark rough and scraping underneath his gloved hands. It was difficult but he stretched and scurried and used the branches to pull himself up to the top.

The upper tree branch creaked alarmingly beneath his weight. He thought distantly that maybe it was good he was still underweight from the recent mission.

The night wasn’t nearly as dark around him as he would have liked, and every shift of the wind moved the tree enough to potentially affect his footing.

He crouched down as he ran across the branch, his hands out at his sides for balance. The ground was a long, long way down; the green of the grass and rich colors of the crumbled leaves were not hidden in enough shadows to belie the distance. He knew if he fell he would at the very least be seriously injured, and more likely die.

The end of the branch came up quickly and he had to exert a burst of power on his legs as he leaped to reach the roof. His feet hit the flat concrete top and he rolled to disperse the momentum. He was back on his feet within seconds. He ran across the building, staying crouched and low and moving...
into as many shadows as possible. There weren't many so he had to rely on being fast.

The roof access was locked from the outside, which was expected, but the swipe pad was right to the side.

He pulled out the decoder and hooked it up to the pad, then ducked down and kept an eye out around him. There were too many buildings that were much taller than this one, with windows that gleamed ominously. Any number of eyes could have been on him without his knowledge so he was relieved to glance back up and see the high powered, top of the line decoder was already finished.

He had to run it through one more cycle because he'd noticed that anyone who entered after hours seemed to swipe their card as well as key in some code. They did it discreetly, oftentimes trying to hide the movement with their bodies. Boyd could only assume it was a precaution against tampering. Perhaps if he'd tried to open the door without the second level code, the alarms would have gone off. Or perhaps it was simply a fake out; he didn't know.

Whatever the case, the light on the pad flashed green. Boyd detached the decoder and hid it safely in his pocket. He was inside and silently shutting the door behind him in seconds. He took a moment to survey his surroundings and was unsurprised to find himself in an abandoned concrete stairwell.

He listened intently to hear if anyone was around and when there wasn't even the hint of an echo, and he didn't see a single glimpse of a camera, he started down the stairs. He didn't know what exactly he was looking for but he knew from what Sin had said that all the doors would automatically lock and that there were offices on the floor with the lab he'd been in. Sin had also mentioned on another occasion of Owen pressing him
for details that he'd thought the lab had been on the fourth or fifth floor. So that was where Boyd headed.

He didn't see anyone on the way down which was fortunate. It was a little strange but at the same time, he'd gotten the impression from Sin that he hadn't seen many people either. When Boyd got to the door for the fifth floor he paused, listening intently for anyone.

It was a good thing he did.

A voice grew closer to the door and he barely had time to run up the stairs, grab the railing on the staircase going from the landing between fifth and sixth, and pull himself up to the next flight of stairs. He hit the steps and rolled to the side, bracing himself against the wall just as he heard the door abruptly open on the level below him.

"It's going as expected but I need more time," a man's voice said with obvious irritation.

Boyd went completely still.

That voice. It sounded vaguely familiar.

The man started to head downstairs with quick, thumping footsteps. "Then give me something better to work with," he snapped impatiently. "I need more resources if you want that timeline met."

Boyd cautiously peered over the side of the railing, able to see a glimpse of red hair and the man's features. Surprise and confusion shot through him.

Ethan Bruce.

A man he wasn't likely to forget any time soon. The former CIA operative who turned traitor and formed the bio-terrorist group Terra. The
subject of the Level 10 training exercise in Annadale Beach that to this day plagued Boyd's record as one of his major failures. The man who he'd nearly let get away due to his distraction about Sin, and the man who had nearly killed him when he'd tried to catch him alone.

What was Ethan doing wandering around the Reapers' lab as if he worked here? The man had been anti-government to the point that he'd been aiming his attacks specifically at government buildings. He'd been into biochemical weaponry and was supposed to have been interrogated and, presumably, ultimately killed. Even if they'd turned him into a long-term informant, what the hell were they doing allowing him access to a place like this?

Suspicion made Boyd's eyes narrow. He could see nothing good coming from the confluence of that man's abilities and the secrecy of this building.

"That will work if I can't get anything better," Ethan was saying, his voice echoing dramatically in the silent concrete stairwell. Ethan made a few noises of affirmation and contemplation. His footsteps moved further away until Boyd heard the creaking of a door opening.

"Fine. But in exchange—"

The door swinging shut cut off the rest of his words.

Boyd waited a few moments before he silently walked down to the fifth level again and listened at the door.

Nothing.

So Ethan had been in there alone, late at night. Presumably working on some type of project. Boyd didn't like the idea of Ethan being anywhere near this place; he still remembered the slightly crazed look when Ethan had
crashed the car they were in, and the same look afterward when he'd yanked Boyd out of the wreckage. He seemed the type to dedicate himself to his work or goals at the expense of all else.

A dangerous personality trait in certain circumstances.

But for all that Ethan's presence was perplexing, there wasn't time to worry about it.

He connected the decoder again and waited for it to flash green. Tilting the door open subtly, he looked up and down the hall as best he could before he verified it was empty.

He began his search, not knowing what he was looking for exactly but just hoping he would know when he saw it. There were a number of rooms, the doors all shut and locked. Some of them had a window into the interior. He didn't have the time to look around too well which was a shame because he wanted to know everything they did here.

The place looked completely normal. He had the passing thought that Owen would have killed to be here with him, maybe Ivan too, but they probably both would have been disappointed by how innocuous it was. Well, Owen would be. Ivan may have let it fuel his paranoia.

The rooms he glanced in mostly seemed empty, although most of them had tables with straps that, disturbingly, Boyd could tell were used to hold a person down.

Although he was glad there was no staff around it was making him paranoid. The level of clearance needed for this sort of place lent credence to Sin's comment about the small amount of personnel. Still, knowing that if he was caught it would be the end of everything before he'd ever gotten a single concrete answer... It was making him hyper aware of every tiny sound and shift in the environment.
He searched the entire floor as quickly as he could but didn't see anything that matched what Sin had described. He moved back out to the staircase, once again listening and waiting until he was certain no one was around, and then started into the stairwell.

He was just about to silently shut the door behind him when he heard a door open in the stairwell, followed by the heavy sound of boots.

"Nothing so far," a man's voice said gruffly from a level below. His steps were heading upstairs.

Boyd jerked back onto the fifth floor. He shut the door silently and ran down the hallway, hiding in one of the unlocked rooms. He barely had time to duck behind the open door and hadn't had time to shut it when he heard the door to the stairwell open. He held his breath and crouched down. His heart pounded furiously as he tried to make himself as small as possible. The rooms were all lit so he didn't have a good place to hide other than by shielding himself with the door. He found himself wishing he'd chosen a room that at least had clutter to hide behind.

The guard's footsteps were measured and echoed heavily down the hallway. Boyd could hear his weapons at his belt: the large flashlight to use for searching out activity or as a blunt weapon that bumped against the man's thigh, and the creaking of a holster that most likely held a gun, taser, or both.

Boyd himself hadn't brought weapons with him since his choices could help determine who he was if he was caught on surveillance. He hoped it wouldn't come to an issue where he had to steal one from someone or disable the guard and risk being seen.

He heard the guard peeking his head in the doors along the way. The guard came closer and closer until he stepped into the room where Boyd was hiding. Boyd held himself perfectly still, willing the guard to move away without
being thorough and checking around every crevice. The moment seemed to stretch but in truth it had probably been just as quick as the other checks.

The guard moved back into the hallway and continued. Boyd strained his ears, listening to every footstep and every movement of the guard, waiting for him to finish on this floor and move on. The guard sighed heavily toward the end of the hallway and then his footsteps turned and started heading back the direction he'd come.

Someone must have asked him something on the man's comm unit because he said, "Nah. Boring as usual."

He paused and then continued wistfully, "Remember that time we caught Lena and Terry going at it in the basement? I was just thinking how much I'd pay to see that with Jenny. Tits that size—What?"

The question was sharp and the man's steps stopped abruptly. He was silent for a long moment and then said with sullen professionalism, "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

He stayed still for another extended moment and then started walking, his footsteps seeming more aggravated due to the increased speed and heaviness. He continued down the hallway, blowing past the room Boyd was in. Just as he was nearing the door to leave the floor, Boyd heard him growl into the comm unit:

"Goddammit, Gene, that isn't fucking funny. Tell me when he's listening in. I'm going to kick your ass when I get back down there."

The door opened with a jerk and Boyd heard the guard saying caustically, "No, I still have a few more floors, genius. Some of us actually work instead of getting our buddies in trouble." The footsteps echoed in the stairwell and the door swung shut.
Boyd waited to be sure he didn't hear anyone else before he swiftly left the room. Judging by the conversation with the guard, it sounded like the guard was the only one doing the rounds in this area. Since he'd been heading upstairs and said he had a few more floors, Boyd determined that the guard must have already checked the fourth.

He checked the stairwell for noise or people and, when he verified it was clear, he ran down to the fourth floor landing. The decoder didn't take long to give him entrance to that door and he found himself in another abandoned hallway.

The fourth floor ended up being reminiscent to the one above and as Boyd moved further down the hallway, checking doors and seeing nothing, his stomach started to clench.

What if Sin had been confused by the floor number? How many floors would Boyd have to check to find where Sin had been held? What if any indications of where he'd been were long gone? Or what if it was all still there but any information on him had disappeared along with him?

He was just thinking he would have to reevaluate and determine if he could afford to check other floors when he found a glass door that, when he looked inside, looked like it led to an office. He quickly peered in from various angles and didn't see anyone inside, but this one seemed to match Sin's description more than the mostly empty office had a floor above.

He used the decoder, waiting impatiently even for the phenomenally fast device to work. He felt exposed standing in the middle of the hall, not knowing who used this office and whether they would be back. Whether the guard would decide to check this floor again after all.

Once the decoder was finished he went inside immediately, highly aware that there was no place for him to properly hide in there.
The place was in disarray, with reference materials everywhere. Some clothing was thrown to the side in the back which led Boyd to believe that whoever used this office sometimes spent the night. A computer was half-buried on the desk, the screen showing a file that was still open.

That was good and bad. Now he didn't have to take the time to try to hack in and access a profile. But it also meant the user of the office couldn't be more than ten minutes gone since there wasn't a screensaver. If they'd just run to the bathroom or outside for a smoke, they could be back any minute.

He took a quick assessment of the disarray and then moved to the computer. He minimized the file and went to work checking if Sin's information was on there. He had high hopes it would be. He remembered Sin mentioning spare clothing and this was the first place he'd seen that.

His fingers flew across the keyboard and screen as he searched more quickly and efficiently than he ever had before. It took a few harrowing minutes of searching different hard drives until he saw Sin's name on a folder. His heart skipped a beat, feeling like it shot up into his throat. His heartbeat pounded through his veins and he was hyper-aware of everything around him as he opened the folder. He looked around again, paranoid someone would show up suddenly, and then returned his attention to the screen.

The folder had a number of files; video as well as text. He clicked one text file just to be certain it was what he wanted. The font was tiny and filled the pages, with notes typed in the margins in some places. There were charts and the file was dozens of pages long, packed with information. He didn't have time to read it all but he'd anticipated that.

He pulled out a compact memory card and, keeping a close eye on the door, started to download the whole folder. His paranoia increased with every second that passed. Whoever was in this office had to be returning shortly.
The second the download was complete, he closed down the folder and erased all signs that he’d been there.

He pulled up the file they’d had on screen and even thought to check the power setting to see whether he should put on the screensaver. It was set to twenty minutes, which was a relief since it would have been difficult to force the screensaver without evidence left behind.

He slid the memory card with the coveted information securely into his pocket and stepped away from the desk.

He was just about to leave when he noticed a skinny door in the back. He went over and peered in the window. A few touch panels were in there on a desk that looked completely locked down. A file cabinet sat in the back with a heavy duty lock. There was another lock on the door.

He wondered if there was something else in there on Sin. He pulled out the decoder to use on that door too but something made him stop; a very faint sound in the distance that made him think someone was coming.

He got out of the office immediately, not seeing anyone in the hallway. He shut the office door behind him and was starting down the hall when his heart nearly leaped out of his chest at the sound of the stairwell door opening.

He used the decoder on the first door he saw, throwing himself into the room just as he heard a man and a woman's voices echoing down the hall.

"—such bullshit," the woman was saying vehemently.

Boyd closed the door as silently and discreetly as he could so they wouldn't notice anything amiss. He expected to be able to hear them but he was surprised and disturbed to find that all sound cut off immediately once the door was shut.

Soundproofed.
So the people being experimented on would never be heard even if they screamed.

It occurred to him that he was now in a difficult position. Stuck in a soundproofed room, he had no idea where the man and woman were, and this door didn't have a window. He had noticed that not all of them did. He wondered what that meant.

He looked around the room. The lights were very dim so at first it was difficult to tell if anyone else was in there. But as his eyes adjusted, he saw that what at first seemed to be a pile of discarded items was the silhouette of a person lying on a table.

Boyd's breath caught and he went still, looking at the person and then flicking his eyes around quickly. His heartbeat was pounding so hard it was making his hands shift. Was someone else in the room? Was he going to be caught before he could escape?

No one else was there. The person didn't move.

Now growing disturbed by the idea of potentially being in the room with someone who had died from experimentation, Boyd hesitated and then cautiously approached the table. At first all he saw was that the person was strapped down with heavy duty restraints, and that IVs were going into his arms. It was a man, in good condition judging by the definition of muscle that Boyd could see on his bare arms.

When he drew closer, he realized with a start that he recognized that profile. He stopped near the table and stared down in surprise and confusion.

Cade.
Eyes closed, chest barely moving, expression limp with sleep. He was paler than Boyd remembered, or maybe it was the lighting, and for as little as he moved it seemed he could be in a coma.

What the hell was going on here?

Boyd hadn't seen Cade for years; not since he'd nearly died when he was shot at the end of Level 10 training. He hadn't heard anything about Cade when he'd returned. He'd assumed Cade had recovered from his injuries or had been terminated long ago. What was the Agency doing with him, strapped down in a room in this secret lab?

Reaching a hand out, Boyd almost touched Cade but his fingers stopped, stilled, and curled inches from his former fellow trainee. He brought his hand back, staring down at Cade and then having to look away. He didn't see any paperwork nearby that gave him any information.

Although there were many questions that shot through his mind about why Cade was there and what was happening to him, he knew he wouldn't get the answers. They'd never been friends but Cade had saved his life once, and were their positions switched he would have liked someone to look into what was happening. He ran through a number of scenarios about waking Cade to talk to him or verifying that he was okay, but he had to take a few steps back from the situation and turn away.

There was nothing he could do.

He had to be in and out of here like a phantom or risk being discovered. Even if he could free Cade it would be pointless. They would find out someone had been here and all the work Boyd had put into planning and executing this mission would go to waste. He likely wouldn't even have the chance to read the files before he was caught and killed.
As far as that went, he didn't know why Cade was here. It was even possible Cade had nearly died and the Reapers were in the process of saving his life. Or that Cade had volunteered for something and if Boyd interfered he would only be signing his own death warrant.

He wondered if Ethan Bruce had been turned into a Reaper and that was why he was here. He wondered if the people in the office were Reapers as well.

Starting to grow worried that he'd stalled too long, he moved back to the door. Cade's presence was a heavy weight at his back that he had to ignore.

He ended up having to wait in there several long, heart-stopping moments before he dared use the decoder on the door, which had locked the second he'd shut it. The light silently flashed green and he very carefully cracked the door just enough to listen.

He could hear them talking but it was muffled and after a few moments he determined it was because they were in the office. It seemed as though the offices weren't soundproofed despite the fact the labs were.

That made him wonder, uncomfortably, whether Cade had had reason to scream at any point, and whether the lab personnel had continued an inane conversation undisturbed. His fingers twitched against the decoder. He shoved questions like that out of his mind so he could focus on the current issue.

This was very problematic. The office was almost directly across the hall with a full glass door. The walls were white and well-lit, and he looked every bit the burglar decked out all in black. It would be too easy for them to see him.
He had to wait. He opened the door enough to be able to see through the crack that they were indeed both in the office. They kept sitting and turning so he'd be seen in at least one of their peripheral visions.

It felt like forever until the woman finally left the office, telling the man she was going to run downstairs for 'the vial.' Whatever that meant. Boyd had to close the door when he saw her turning to leave and he had to wait another sightless, soundless several seconds before he dared peer out again.

The man was in the office, facing away from the door. He was sitting at the desk in one of the few cleared off areas and kept looking back and forth between his touch panel and the computer file that had been on screen on the computer.

It was the best chance Boyd would get.

He slipped out of the room and shut the door silently behind him, sparing just enough time to glance around to make sure no one else was there before he sprinted toward the stairwell. He listened briefly but didn't hear the woman's echoing footsteps so he opened the door.

The stairwell was vacant for now but he knew that wouldn't last long. He ran as fast as he could while remaining quiet. He only heard footsteps one time. He threw himself to the side, not being able to tell where they were coming from in the echoing chamber, but he never ended up seeing anyone.

It wasn't long before he made it up to the roof access once again and out to the empty roof. He didn't give himself time to do much other than make sure no one was looking or in the immediate vicinity before he sprinted across the roof. He leaped off the ledge toward the tree.

For a moment he was in free fall, his clothing flapping against him, and then the branch came up at him alarmingly fast. He hit it hard. It creaked and
nearly cracked, causing the whole thing to jolt beneath him. He slid to the side and nearly fell off before he was able to catch himself.

He hung there a moment, his heart pounding and fingers slipping. His stifled breath was harsh but then he narrowed his eyes and exerted a burst of strength to pull himself back up onto the branch. His arms ached and his body was shaky with adrenaline and overworking it after so long of being out of shape. He ignored it all, still focused on completing the mission.

He clung to the branch a moment, feeling it sway in the wind and, possibly only in his imagination, start to shudder. He was just about to scramble down the side of the tree when he recognized the faint sound of angry and panicked voices below. He looked down and nearly swore to himself when he saw Mullins and Howlett in the area.

Mullins was standing near the corner of the building, alternating between keeping an eye on the entrance and looking urgently toward Howlett.

"—telling you I can't fucking find it!" Howlett was saying, furious and panicked at once. His hand kept going to his side where the ID was supposed to be and he was looking around the area with a flashlight darting across the shadows beneath the trees.

"You're gonna get your ass killed," Mullins said, but there was a hint of worry mixed in with the irritation. "That's what you get for always skulking around over there."

"Fuck off," Howlett snapped. He swept the flashlight around in great arcs. "It has to be here. I don't know where else I would've lost it."

Boyd cursed his bad luck. Of all the times for Howlett to lose something in the area he often used for urination during his rounds, it had to be when Boyd was trying to flee. Now he couldn't climb down the tree without being seen.
The two guards hovered in the area for a bit. Mullins eventually said he was going back to the post and Howlett frantically searched the leaves on the ground. With the night glasses Boyd could see Howlett growing increasingly worried and terrified.

"Found it yet?" Mullins called out and Howlett shot back testily, "No."

Mullins snorted and said in irritation, "Just find it already and get back here. I'm not getting killed because you can't hold your piss for more than an hour at a time."

Boyd watched from above while Howlett swept the flashlight in increasingly fast arcs. The longer Boyd had to stay there, the more likely he was to get caught. He started imagining the guard from inside finishing his rounds on the roof. He imagined the guard looking over and seeing Boyd clinging to the tree, and the entire effort being wasted. Or anyone in the many windows that aimed in this direction from afar looking out on a quiet night and thinking he was the precursor to a new raid.

Would they simply kill him or would whatever unspoken thing they were doing to agents like Sin, possibly like Cade, happen to him too?

He couldn't afford to stay up here all night. His body was shivering in the cold, made worse by the sheen of sweat drying on him. It felt like ice layered his skin and froze his joints.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, Howlett caught a glimpse of what looked to be a white ID peeking out between brown and red leaves. He snatched it up and Boyd could hear his relieved sigh all the way up the tree.

He was still looking at the ID when he walked back toward the corner, calling out, "Found it."
"About fucking time," Mullins muttered and Howlett disappeared from Boyd's view. Boyd didn't wait for the two of them to come back for further investigation.

He scrambled down the tree and dropped onto one of the patches of grass free of leaves. His legs nearly gave out beneath him but after a few stumbles he caught himself and darted across the lawn to his hiding place. He ran back to the courtyard he'd left earlier, making sure he stayed out of view of people and cameras the whole way. He changed back into his clothing and shoved everything into his messenger bag he'd left hidden.

He slipped back into the courtyard amongst the trees and, once he was in the area he'd been earlier, he mussed up his clothing and crushed some leaves. He dragged the leaves through his hair until some caught.

He was out of breath and his heart was hammering in his chest. His knees felt shaky and unreliable.

It was annoying that he was out of shape enough that he had to take a break, closing his eyes and lying on his back for a moment while the world spun dizzyingly around him. He felt uncomfortable and cold while at the same time the sheen of sweat hadn't quite left. The dizziness nearly turned to nausea and he had to clench his teeth shut to keep from chattering.

He waited just long enough to catch his breath and for the heat from his face to die down. He couldn't afford for anything incongruous with his cover story to stand out, yet he didn't want to linger in case they belatedly realized someone had broken into the lab.

When his heart had returned to normal and he could breath evenly again, he sat up.

He put the bookmark a few hundred pages further in the book that he'd supposedly been reading and held the book casually in his hand. He walked
across the courtyard with a sleepy look, yawning as if he'd fallen asleep and was just now waking up. He looked around and glanced at his watch as he strode across the courtyard. He made a face and shoved his book in his messenger bag.

From there, it was a simple process of strolling across the compound, occasionally yawning and rolling his neck or shoulders, and looking around with half-lidded eyes. The guards didn't look at him twice when he left in the middle of the night since it was something he'd done often enough in the past two weeks.

Once he got home, he immediately went to his laptop and inserted the memory card. Anticipation was a second heartbeat pounding through him as he pulled up the folder.

The folder opened, showing the same mixture of video and text files. He ignored the video files at first and focused on the notes. He read through them voraciously, his heart clenching as the story unfolded.

Apparently Sin had been one of many who had been part of Project Zero, an attempt to genetically modify subjects to enhance their abilities and, ultimately, make them into superior soldiers. All the little things Boyd had noticed that Sin had been especially adept at made sense as he read through what they'd done.

It had started for Sin under Connors' administration. They'd begun the procedures about eleven years ago during the time when Sin had been locked up for the civilian incident. Everyone thought he'd spent the entire time on the Fourth Floor but when he'd been unconscious they'd transported him periodically to the lab building.

Sin had probably never known. From what Boyd had seen, the rooms in the lab were not dissimilar to some of the rooms on Fourth. During any
times Sin had been conscious at the lab building, he had probably thought one white room was the same as any other.

He hadn't been the only one in the project. There had been others and according to the data, many of them had died from complications. Or, for some, the modifications hadn't worked. There were notes attached to the documents about possible reasons for why different subjects failed when Sin didn't.

In the end, they didn't have a good reason other than the natural fortitude of Sin's mind and body.

That four year span of time had been an opportunity the Agency hadn't been able to pass up. It had allowed them the freedom to work subtly at first on the experimentation, monitoring his progress through a variety of tests. It had continued in the background on and off but had mostly stopped by the time Boyd had come around. He suspected that was primarily because Sin was no longer constantly in their custody.

But even if they hadn't been experimenting on him, they'd still been monitoring him.

It sounded like at first they'd monitored him primarily through the cameras in the Agency and Sin's apartment. Boyd thought they must have had other ways of monitoring Sin because there were notes even after he had ripped the cameras down.

They'd apparently increased the modifications after Monterrey at Connors' orders. It didn't say why but Boyd remembered the way Connors had been and suspected the man had felt Sin was likely to die anyway so why not go all out? Why not try things they hadn't yet?

The six-month coma Sin had been in had been induced by the Agency. The notes showed that he'd been physically responsive months before his
release and had even shown remarkable recovery rates. There was a mention of a time he’d nearly broken free before they were able to sedate him again.

After he’d recovered fully, they’d continued to watch him. There was a note added a few months later, mentioning Sin's illness and saying that the subsequent mental deterioration had been determined to be due to mission trauma, not Project Zero trials.

Although they’d continued to monitor him, that had been it. There were no more notations of additional experimentations after his return from Monterrey. They had determined that Project Zero had successfully turned Sin into the perfect soldier and, Boyd suspected based on the wording, patted themselves on the back for a job well done.

When he got to the last paragraph he simply stared at the screen. So much of it he had already suspected, so much of it didn't really come as a surprise, and yet...

And yet reading about it spelled out so clinically, noting things like stamina and strength and speed in relation to missions and other areas, made it impossible to ignore how this had all been a trial to them. Sin hadn't been a person; he'd been a lab rat. An experiment. A subject.

There were excerpts from mission reports, highlighting areas where Sin had done something seemingly impossible. Boyd looked back and saw more than one line from his own writing, even back before he'd known to question the things Sin did and he'd unknowingly included verification in the reports.

He saw references to Sin's stamina and strength in other areas, too; in training and even objectively mentioning sex. Boyd narrowed his eyes, wondering how they'd been able to obtain that information.

He didn't see anything implying new experimentation but based on Ivan's description it sounded like that was exactly what had been happening.
during the last few months of Sin’s life. After determining Project Zero a success, had they moved onto another type of modification? A follow-up project that they’d thought they’d be able to do since he’d done so well in the first trials? Had that project been too much? Had there been unexpected consequences that he’d died from in the end?

If Boyd looked at this in terms of years, it looked like the only time in the last eleven years that Sin hadn't been subjected to experimentation had been during Vivienne's regime. Connors had started the experimentation and he had authorized the increased modifications after Monterrey. There had been a reprieve while Sin had dealt with his mental issues during Vivienne's administration and even after he'd become stable again, nothing new had started. Then, after Marshal Seong had arrived, it seemed the experimentation began again.

He wasn't surprised by the decisions Marshals Connors and Seong had made. The orders seemed to fit their personalities. He hadn't even met Jae-Hwa yet but he already knew it was nearly impossible that he would like her.

He had to wonder why Vivienne hadn't ordered anything, though. Had she not bothered with it because the program had been considered a success and there hadn’t been any new innovations during that time?

He shook his head and flipped back to the beginning.

All those mistakes. All those lives lost.

Seeing all this, knowing the extent to which the Agency had played with Sin’s life, it was even harder to hold out any hope that Sin was alive. He wanted to believe there was a chance still because there was no proof. No one saw him.
Yet the evidence was resoundingly against him. There was no question that Sin was gone. And there was no way the Agency would let him go. Sin himself had said he wouldn't flee without Boyd so there was no reason he would have left on his own. And even if he’d wanted to, based on what Ivan and Carhart said, there was no way he would have been capable of it.

No matter how Boyd looked at it, especially with these hateful files staring at him on the screen, it seemed that the most likely scenario was Sin had reacted poorly to new modifications and he’d died as a result. And the Agency, unwilling to admit what they’d been doing behind closed doors to their own agents, had made it all silently disappear.

His expression turned dark, strained, and his fingers curled. He could feel his stomach dropping and he was abruptly, vividly reminded of the rooms in Monterrey when they'd been searching for Sin. The first room covered in blood and the second one where he'd run through the hallways and skidded to a stop to find Sin there, lifeless and broken and cold.

Had it been like that?

Had they strapped him down like Janus had, only instead of ripping him apart to break him down they'd done it to build him up? Had he been awake during any of it? Had he strained against the holds and had he known what was happening? Had he been in pain; had he been in distress? Had he thought about Boyd at all, even a flash of longing or fear? Did he ever have the chance to regret that he'd never see his lover again?

Boyd's eyes burned and he hissed in frustration to himself, "Damn it."

He squeezed his eyes shut, his elbows against the desk and his face dropping into his hands. He pressed his hands against his cheeks, his eyes; rubbed his face harshly and drew in a shaky breath.

He tried not to think the thoughts that wouldn't leave him alone.
The fear that Sin really was dead. That the sparks of hope he kept trying to fan, to turn into fire that could burn away the lies, were getting snuffed out one by one. The fear that in the end this really was all he had to look forward to for the rest of his life. And the fear of accepting that.

He drew in another breath, this one bolder but harsher, and his face was set in determination when he dropped his hands. He still had more to look at. Maybe there was something in here that would be useful.

Maybe something that could show Sin hadn't died... or something to prove he had.

He wanted to stop this constant cycle of wishing so hard only to have the hopes destroyed. Even if he found proof that Sin was dead, at least it could give him some closure.

He closed down the documents and looked at the folder. He decided to go through the videos and double clicked the first file.

The video didn't have audio and it was of Sin in his apartment. Boyd glanced at the date, wondering how old this was, and saw that it was long after the cameras had been ripped down. Boyd looked more sharply at the image of Sin. How was this possible?

The video continued, recording Sin working out tirelessly. Boyd flipped forward and saw that it spanned hours and that even at the end when Sin stopped, he had as much energy as he had when he'd started.

When Boyd closed the file he simply stared at the screen for a moment. How the hell—he'd never seen any cameras in there. That must have been what the notes referred to for more recent documentation. The Reapers had to have replaced the cameras right away based on the notes, only this time they'd made them so discreet that neither Sin nor Boyd had ever noticed.
He thought of all the times he'd been at Sin's, all the things that had happened, and he thought of it all being recorded. Monitored by researchers who took notes on it.

The thought was sickening.

He clicked on another similarly named file and was greeted with a video of him having sex with Sin. It had been at a time when he'd been healthier and had been working out more, not terribly long after they'd gotten back together and they'd had sex like each time would be the last.

He remembered that night. He'd gone to Sin's after a mission and he'd barely made it through the door before they'd been all over each other. They'd had sex multiple times, each time more intense than the last, with spaces in between where they'd started going about regular business but continually got sidelined. It had taken hours to finish dinner.

In the video, they were on Sin's bed. Sin was kneeling in the center but leaning back, his legs spread for balance and one hand reaching back to the headboard for support. His other hand was holding Boyd, who was facing him and had his head thrown back as Sin pounded into him. Boyd's hands were on Sin's shoulders but it was clear he was just using them for balance. A fact which was made even more obvious when he dropped one hand to start masturbating.

Although Boyd remembered it had started with his feet on the bed, somewhere along the way Sin had taken to fully supporting him, gripping Boyd's hip and holding him while Sin slammed his hips up against him. Boyd's thighs had started out squeezing Sin's body but soon his legs spread apart, wide open with his toes curling in mid air as Sin had the freedom to pound up into him as fast and hard as he wanted.
All of Boyd's weight was supported effortlessly by Sin's one hand despite the awkward position.

As Boyd watched, Sin's fingers curled against the metal headboard. The camera zoomed in as the headboard bent beneath his hand, deforming as easily as if it were malleable putty. The camera zoomed out and it was clear from Sin's expression that he wasn't aware of it.

The two of them were lost in the sex, both their faces flushed with desire, their mouths open as they'd no doubt been groaning or making noise. From the angle, Boyd could tell the camera had to be somewhere above the door to the bedroom, hidden in a crevice neither of them would have thought to look since they'd both been so certain no one was watching them.

Watching that, it hit Boyd how little privacy they'd had their whole relationship, even when they'd thought no one could see. He supposed they were lucky there was no audio on any of the cameras because who knew what they'd talked about? Who knew what things they'd said that could have gotten them in trouble?

It disturbed him how obviously objectively the Agency had viewed Sin's entire life. They'd experimented on him and monitored him and tested him. They'd taken notes on his behavior like he was a lab rat and they'd even kept videos of everything from mundane issues to private moments with his lover.

There had been a time when it would have disturbed him to no end to know someone had a video of them having sex and kept it in the files as an addendum illustrating Sin's strength. Now it was just another example of how he'd never had any control or privacy. The times when he'd believed that Sin and he could make it had been nothing but optimistic dreams.

The theme of Sin as a guinea pig only continued as he watched the other videos, clicking one by one through them as he watched Sin on
surveillance from missions, the compound, and, he discovered, clips from what appeared to be tests in the lab. Those seemed to be hand held camcorders which was a relief because otherwise he could have been recorded in the lab. Everything showcased some extraordinary feat of Sin's, all grouped together in a nice little package.

The hours stretched as he looked through everything and soon he could see the faint rays of morning light peeking beneath the shut door to the office. He only realized then that he'd spent all night looking through the information. All night going through the videos and, for some, watching them repeatedly.

It may have been a masochistic tendency or it may have been pure, unadulterated longing. Whatever the case, he'd found himself obsessively watching the surveillance from Sin's apartment. Remembering what he'd been like. The expressions, the mannerisms, the movements...

Although it was probably good that there hadn't been audio, he found himself wishing there had been. He could have heard Sin's voice. He could have closed his eyes and let that deep voice wash over him. He could have believed for a precious few seconds that Sin was there. That it wasn't a recording playing over his speakers.

He could have believed that Sin was just in another room—out in the hallway, the bedroom, the living room... Waiting for Boyd to return. Waiting for more of those wonderful mundane moments to continue. The kind he missed so intensely now.

But there was no sound and even if there had been, Sin wasn't there. He knew he couldn't keep telling himself Sin was alive out there somewhere, waiting for him. Miraculously having escaped the Agency without their knowledge and hiding out for his lover's arrival.
It was a hopeless thought, he knew. And one he still couldn't entirely erase no matter how much he knew he should. No matter how much, in truth, part of him wished he could.

Eventually he fell asleep, exhaustion overrunning his mind and pulling him into a fitful slumber slouched at the desk. He didn't know how long he slept but it felt like barely any time had passed before he was abruptly woken. It took him a moment of confused eyes darting around before he realized he heard his phone ringing in the other room.

He unraveled himself and barely made it out in time to pick it up. It was a secure phone call from the Agency, telling him to be in the Marshal's office in an hour.

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Seong Jae-Hwa's office was relatively nondescript. Her furniture was mostly sleek with a hint of antiquity. Her desk was a simple table; there weren't even any drawers. Behind her was a single file cabinet with a heavy duty lock. She didn't have anything on the desk at the moment but he could see the wires for where she would probably normally plug in her laptop. Her chairs looked as though they had been around awhile, perhaps even picked up at an antique store, but they were sturdy and served their function well.

She had some pieces of art on the wall, mostly modern-styled abstract with contrasts between black silhouettes in the foreground with saturated colors and curves filling the background. But he didn't see any personal pictures. She had a bookcase that was about three-quarters full, which at a glance seemed to be mostly nonfiction, especially on topics of military history.

Her office was a study in mild contrasts; just enough to seem off-putting but not enough to be jarring. That impression spread to her as well.
She looked to be probably in her fifties. Her black hair was spiky and styled in an offhanded way that fell partially across her forehead. Her eyes were dark brown and studied him intently. She had a jagged scar that crossed her cheek and cut through her lips on her left side, along with another scar that cut through her left eyebrow and went across her upper eyelid. Most likely she would have lost her eye if the wound had been even a few centimeters lower.

She wore a deep blue button-down shirt with the first few buttons undone; leaving the shirt open enough to give her a casual air but not low enough to be unprofessional or flirtatious. Her black pants were fitted and of a firm material like denim, but slightly faded. The black jacket she wore open over her shirt was pseudo-military style, with double rows of buttons and brocade across the front. Her clothing as a whole seemed comfortable and business casual.

She was completely unadorned except for a possible flash of silver beneath the shirt—maybe a necklace. He couldn't even tell if she wore any makeup; if she did, it was subtle. She wasn't androgynous and yet there was a faint air of masculinity to her. Within the first few seconds of meeting her, he couldn't imagine her ever wearing a dress.

"So," Jae-Hwa drawled as she leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms and looking him up and down. "I finally meet the infamous Boyd Beaulieu."

She tilted her head and dragged her dark eyes back to meet his. Despite the casualness in her body language and the near boredom on her face, her eyes were sharp. Calculating.

Boyd didn't respond. Jae-Hwa's lips thinned and she waved him closer.

"Sit down."
He walked in and sat, keeping his expression completely neutral and back straight. He sat perched forward in the seat slightly, his back not touching the back of the chair by about half an inch cushion of air. He was determined not to show her even the faintest flicker of emotion throughout this. Even if he hadn't received warnings that she would be watching him, he could tell she was. A scrutinizing, expectant look that she didn't bother to hide.

He wondered if the timing had been coincidental with his break in at the lab or whether she knew what he'd done last night. He should have been more terrified of the idea but he couldn't bring himself to fully care. The severity of the information he'd learned only underscored to him how much control the Agency had. If she planned to kill him, there was nothing he could do about it. Rather than feeling resigned to the fact, he determined to not let that uncertainty make him react in a way that would damn him even further.

"I hope you don't plan the rubbish you pulled on Bridget," she said bluntly, staring evenly at him. He didn't respond and she quirked her eyebrow pointedly. "Well?"

"I have no such plans," he said tonelessly.

She scrutinized him for a long moment before she nodded curtly. She leaned forward, her arms resting against the edge of the desk. "I've no interest in wasting my time. Your performance has been questionable in the past but of late you've had successful missions. Particularly the Forakis mission. I didn't expect you to return from that one."

The way her eyebrows lifted just so he could easily read her expression. She didn't seem interested in hiding her thoughts the way Vivienne did; she just left them clear on her face.

If he hadn't already had an idea, Boyd knew at that moment that she didn't like him. The feeling was bound to be mutual.
"I've read your report and the doctor's notes so we won't be having a debriefing as normal. For the record," she continued firmly with hard, dark eyes that bore into him, "I don't play these piss ant games you've seemed to enjoy with previous administrations. When I ask you a question, you bloody well better answer. If I issue an order, I expect you to obey. This isn't Girlguiding."

"Yes, Marshal."

She stared hard at him for a long moment, studying everything from his posture to his expression, before she finally leaned back in her chair.

"Now. Hsin Vega."

It was said calmly but with great weight and Boyd felt his shoulders and stomach tensing. He didn't want her so much as thinking his name. Not when she'd probably been the one who had gotten him killed.

"I've reviewed your record closely." She picked up a touch panel from her desk and tilted it toward her. Dark eyes tracked along the screen for a moment before her lips lifted faintly in distaste. "Vega this, Vega that. Mummy this, Mummy that."

She looked up at him through her eyebrows. "There are far too many notes in here about you and some manner of cock up. And through it all, two common factors: your mother and Vega."

When he once again did not answer, her eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking? Answer me."

"I'm not quite sure what you mean about my mother," Boyd said after a moment, not wanting to get into anything about Sin.

Jae-Hwa snorted. "Don't play dumb with me, boy. Even ignoring her bias from the start, you'd be dead ten times over if it hadn't been for her
whinging. She likes to play at being a big girl who's unaffected by it all but it's clear as rain from both your records that she's here to cock up any investigations that don't go her way. Including those about you."

Boyd stared at her evenly. He didn't know what all Vivienne allegedly had or had not done but when it came down to it, he doubted he had anything to do with it. If she ever did anything that appeared to be in his interest, it would only be because it was even more so in hers.

Jae-Hwa raised her eyebrows. "You don't believe me? You didn't truly think all those times you acted the child and got away with it was because it was in the Agency's best interest?"

She raised her hand in front of her and began ticking points off on her fingers.

"The botched mission in Canada where a known negotiator ended up dead, supposedly refusing to negotiate. Infiltrating the Detainment Center and releasing Vega. Defying direct orders to relinquish him when you were caught. The fiasco in Monterrey that created an international witch hunt and pressured the government here. The mishap during rank 10 training. Outright stating on a recording that the Agency didn't matter and purposefully failing a mission to bring Vega back to the Agency. Breaking Vega, once again, out of custody during the investigation into my agent's murder."

Jae-Hwa's eyes narrowed and she stood, dropping her hands to the desk. She hovered; a dark shadow cast across him. "Oh yes, I'm quite certain you were involved. Your mother has all manner of explanations but I know you had a hand in it somewhere. And these are only the times I've been able to gather; I've no doubt there are more."

Her eyebrows lowered, darkening her eyes. "All times when your termination could have, did, or should have come up... and was avoided,
miraculously, as if some god shone on you. Do you know what that tells me?"
She leaned forward and didn’t wait for him to answer before she continued
flatly, "It tells me you’re a liability."

Boyd stayed silent and still in his seat. He didn’t think she was taller
than him but at that moment she seemed to be. As slight as her body frame
was, she seemed larger; like an animal that could inflate to intimidate
predators.

"It tells me your loyalty isn’t to the Agency above all else," she
continued darkly. "It leaves me to wonder whether it’s with the Agency at all."

There was nothing he could say to that so the silence stretched. It was
a ringing lack of sound that made even the shift of fabric seem like an echo in
a cave. Her gaze felt like it drilled straight through him, and the fact that he
didn’t know exactly what she was looking for only made it feel more
uncomfortable.

Still, his expression remained unmoving; his body poised and still. He
waited for her to tell him whatever she’d likely already determined long ago
and met her eyes directly.

At length, she straightened her back. Her lips curled down. She sat
back down and leaned back in the chair, still watching him until she looked
down at a touch panel she picked up. Her fingers shifted along the screen
with expert flicks that were likely changing windows. The silence stretched
again before she finally spoke.

"I can tell you one thing. If you hadn’t done such a bang-up job with
Forakis, I’d have had you terminated the second you stepped foot back on
compound."

She didn’t look at him directly but he could tell she was watching him.
When he remained as stony-faced as before, unsurprised by the information
since he'd had the impression he wouldn't do well in the new administration since Bridget's interview, she shifted. She continued flipping through the panel.

"It's obvious from your file that you were quite taken with your former partner. Hsin Liu Vega," she said his name almost thoughtfully. She crossed her shin across her other knee and tapped the panel against her leg, her foot rocking idly. Her eyes hadn't moved from the panel.

"I've reason to wonder if you're a bit mad to have been so obsessed with him given..." She waved a hand idly. "Everything." Her eyes flicked up to meet his. "Of course, it seems he must have been a bit cracked as well to have reciprocated, yes?" She tilted her head slightly, studying him relentlessly. "Do you suppose it would have gone anywhere had your dream played itself through?"

Boyd's jaw shifted before he could stop himself. His expression didn't change but his eyes narrowed; some of the icy anger toward what had been done to Sin and himself in the name of the Agency rising at her words.

Her lips twitched, this time in a slight smirk. "You do then, don't you? You believed in all that rubbish about eternity and love and the like." She let out a short scoff that sounded genuinely amused. She dropped her feet to the floor and tossed the panel on the desk. Her arms crossed and rested on the desk, the brief amusement leaving her face as quickly as it came.

"You'd best forget all that, then. No matter the state of your poncing heart, I'll expect results the same as I expect from any other agent. You're barely back in town and already causing trouble in his name. I hear you were speaking of him when you decided to attack Agent Hunt." She looked at him pointedly, asking without words for confirmation.

Boyd was coldly silent for a brief moment before he said, "Yes."
"Yes, well, he's dead so get used to it." She must have caught the flicker of anger in his eyes because she turned that dark stare onto him and raised an eyebrow. "Look at the spine you grow when he's mentioned. Are you resentful? Especially as it occurred while you were gone?"

He stared at her for a long moment and couldn't stop his eyes from narrowing coldly. He knew there was no way to fully hide his resentment over the situation. She said she'd seen Shapiro's notes. She had to know how angry he was over the whole thing even without knowing he knew about the lab and the fury that was there on Sin's behalf for the experimentation.

But knowing those things—knowing what had been done to Sin—only made the anger in him burn hotter. His jaw shifted and clenched.

"Yes," he ground out.

She watched him idly before she arched her eyebrows. "Huh," she said as if his response were very mildly of interest. She leaned back in her chair, looking relaxed and calm.

"You may have worked on your penchant for lying but not near enough on your outbursts or we'd not be here."

There was a long stretch while Jae-Hwa scrutinized him more thoroughly than she had yet; looking at every part of him. His eyes, his expression, his body language...

She was searching for something.

Perhaps she was judging how close he was to snapping. Perhaps she was determining whether she could find reason to order his termination before he was out the door. Knowing those were very real possibilities, he kept everything inside.
At great length, Jae-Hwa leaned forward. "The question I've come to ask myself," she said conversationally, "is whether you're of use now. You've become quite the adept valentine but I've no need for a full-time nancy. You've returned to the Janus unit by default, but will you be useful in that position or shall I begin searching for somewhere else to place you? Assuming, of course, that doesn't end up being the incinerator."

There was a long stretch of silence in which Boyd didn't move or speak in response. She quirked her eyebrows, looking unperturbed. "With plenty of reason to have you terminated within the hour you may be asking yourself why you're still alive."

Boyd could tell by the look in her eye that she wanted a response. He didn't want to speak to her more than he had to so he simply nodded. He had to admit, he did wonder that. She obviously felt there was more than enough reason to terminate him. In truth, he couldn't even argue against her evidence.

"There are three reasons. And I'll tell you them so we're clear." She ticked off a finger for each point. "Your knowledge of Janus makes it easier to use you in Carhart's unit than it is to replace you. Until we've finished getting everything we need from Forakis, it's of no use to me to toss you out with the rubbish. There is always the slight possibility we may need you for follow up or leverage. And lastly, your outburst was expected."

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly. "Follow up?"

"Highly unlikely but a possibility nonetheless," she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Are you referring to another mission as Cameron?" His tone was sharp.

Jae-Hwa watched him for a long moment until a smile slowly grew on the edges of her lips. The expression hovered there while she leaned back in
her chair, her boots making thumping noises as she kicked her feet out in front of her. "That bothers you."

"Of course—" he started to say angrily but stopped abruptly. His mouth snapped shut and his jaw shifted, his expression darkening.

Her smirk grew wider. "You were just thinking to yourself how you don't want to do that but you'd do it if you had to, weren't you? No matter how you don't like the idea. Because you've no choice and you would have to submit."

His stony silence was answer enough.

She let out a sound of amusement and sat up in the chair. "Yet you didn’t even whinge at me," she mused. "They must have taught you a little obedience over there. And to know your place."

Boyd's eyes turned ice cold and his expression cut off completely. He could feel the tension inside him like rubber bands constricting his muscles tight to his bones. The fury he felt rose drastically but even then he knew to shut down and keep it inside rather than to lash out like she probably wanted.

In that moment with her relaxed knowledge of how much power she had over him, he wanted to shoot her. His fingers clenched against the arms of the chair. He understood completely why Emilio had wanted to kill her.

Her eyebrows shifted upward and she only seemed amused by him. After a brief pause her expression lost all humor. "Since you missed my opening statements when I arrived, know that I don't give second chances." Her voice was unyielding and her eyes were flat. There was no question that not only was she being utterly serious, she would also follow through on any statements she made. "I consider your pathetic background to be your first infraction, and I'm ignoring your attack on Bex as Shapiro warned that something was likely to happen."
She looked at him pointedly. "That is the extent of your pardon. I will not cater to your mood like the others did before me. The next mistake you make that causes even a fraction of a problem for me, it's over. I couldn't care less what woeful story you have as explanation. I'll have you terminated so fast you won't have even the chance to think goodbye. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Marshal."

"Good," she said curtly. "You've two weeks to become useful again. If you aren't capable by then, you're done."

Her narrow-eyed stare and her tone were more than enough to be a dismissal. He watched her a moment and then stood, not wanting to be in the room any longer than necessary.

"Beaulieu," she said sharply.

He paused at the door and looked over his shoulder at her.

"Bex and Jordan are my trusted agents. You are not. Bex is the team leader. You are not." Her dark eyes drilled into him. "Don't forget that. Under normal circumstances, your attack on her would've been worthy of termination. Try that again and you'll find I follow through on my word unlike your weak-willed mum ever did." She barely paused before saying curtly, "Dismissed."

She looked down at the touch panel and started flipping through screens, already ignoring him.

He didn't waste a second leaving the room.
Chapter Seven

Boyd didn't make it far from Marshal Seong's office when movement filtered into his brain and he saw Aisha walking down the hallway. Her head was held high and back straight; her body language seemingly casual. However, he could see the way her eyes flicked around quickly. With no one around, she came straight toward Boyd, her eyes locking onto him.

He was just about to speed up because he wanted nothing to do with Vivienne, even the woman's assistant, but Aisha closed in on him before he could. She placed her arm on his forearm and smiled pleasantly, briefly, as her fingers gripped his arm firmly. She tilted her head back toward Vivienne's office.

"Come with me."

His eyes narrowed. He wondered if she could feel the tension thrumming through his body. His fury had not dissipated with Jae-Hwa no longer in front of him. Going anywhere near Vivienne seemed like a terrible idea.

"This is not a good time," he said coldly.

Aisha seemed unmoved by his obvious reluctance. She smiled and casually jerked on his arm. "It's important. The Inspector ordered a meeting with you but you weren't answering your phone."

He considered pulling away and telling her he had a message for her precious Inspector: Fuck off. But he remembered Jae-Hwa's warning and even though he was still on downtime, even though there was obviously no love lost between the two women in charge of the Agency, he didn't want to push his luck when he was this pissed off.
Tension thrummed through his muscles before he relented and let her pull him along. Aisha looked relieved and smiled at him again. Her pleasantness seemed genuine yet it meant nothing to him. Lots of people had the ability to seem genuine even when they weren't. Even when they were about to do something terrible.

Aisha brought him straight to Vivienne's door where she swiped a card and the box on the wall flashed a green light. Aisha opened the door and Boyd walked in, closing off his expression as best he could. He couldn't keep the tension out of his body. The very thought of his mother brought too strongly to mind the memory of her expressionless face as she'd told him that where he was to be held on the mission was 'inconsequential.'

He knew his eyes must be glacial.

Vivienne was sitting at her desk, her laptop the only thing of note in view. She had her hands on the desk, fingers interlocked. She must have been waiting for him because she was already watching the door with that inscrutable expression.

Boyd walked in and sat down without needing to be asked. He could hear the door shut behind him. He wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

She studied him for a long moment, her eyes narrowing slightly as she took him in. "You look a mess."

His eyes narrowed. Typical. Her first comment always seemed to be about presenting himself properly. He resisted the urge to tell her if she had a problem with his looks she shouldn't have sent him on that damn mission in the first place.

Instead, he stayed silent. It had been his best recourse for Jae-Hwa and would be for Vivienne as well.
When he didn’t answer, she flicked her eyes distastefully away from his overgrown hair. She met his gaze evenly.

"I understand that you have been in denial regarding Agent Vega’s death," she said calmly.

His eyes were ice cold but he didn’t answer. He didn’t even bother to ask how she’d known that. She always seemed to know everything except how to act like a normal human being.

A lot of the questions he’d originally had about Sin’s possible death were gone now that he’d found what he had in the lab.

Logically, he knew further experimentation had to have been the end of Sin’s life. He knew Sin wasn’t coming back. But it was true that there was still a tiny part of him that didn’t want to give up hope. That resisted even the amount of proof he’d seen.

Vivienne’s eyes narrowed in return but the cold displeasure he expected to see wasn’t there. She seemed strangely nonjudgmental for what he remembered of her.

"You must learn to accept it." She spoke without any particular intonation yet there was strength to her words. "It will do you no good to live in a fantasy world in which he is still alive. You will do best to cease questioning it and move on with your life."

"What the hell do you know about how impossible that is to do?" he snapped before he could stop himself. "Not everyone’s a robot like you."

She stared at him for a very long moment. He expected her to be irritable with him for his attitude, or to lecture him about his lack of respect to authority. Instead, she simply continued to stare at him. There was something in her gaze that he couldn’t identify.
A faint frown pulled at her lips and she flicked her gaze to her laptop. Her finger moved across the mousepad on the laptop, presumably to select items on the screen. Her nail made a soft clacking sound as she double clicked a few times. He couldn't see what she was doing and she didn't indicate what it was.

At length, she looked up at him again, turning the laptop so the screen was toward him.

"I am well aware of how you operate. You are unlikely to cease your investigation until you have exhausted every resource. I took the liberty of procuring what proof there was in order to encourage you to abandon this futile daydream."

Boyd continued to meet her eyes, not looking down at the laptop. The stubborn part of him said he didn't want to be the first one to break eye contact. In truth, he wasn't certain he wanted to see what was on the screen. He needed proof and yet he feared it.

Still, the larger part of him needed to know what had happened. For better or for worse.

He looked down and saw a surveillance video paused on a familiar scene: Sin's living room. He could see that it came from the cameras that had been installed by the Reapers.

There was a moment of silence and then Vivienne hit play.

It happened quickly. Disturbingly simply.

A number of guards entered Sin's apartment, fanning out like hunters preparing to trap a cornered animal. Sin walked out of his bedroom and saw them. His pale green eyes narrowed and Boyd wished there was sound; he
could tell there was some sort of argument or at least words passed between them.

The guards approached Sin warily. Sin stood still, looking as though he didn’t plan to fight. He seemed overall resigned by the situation; as if he’d been expecting this.

Yet when they moved closer, tranquilizer guns aimed at him and faces set in determination, Sin started to resist. He moved as if he was going to fight through them; as if he would find a way to live. They shot him with the tranquilizers, several at once, and Sin staggered. The tranquilizers must have been especially powerful because Sin fell back against the wall.

There was a moment, just the briefest of seconds where it looked like he was ready to resist further. But he must have felt the tranquilizers working through his system. He must have known he would have to fight the entire compound to escape, since once the order came down there was no end to the manhunt.

As Boyd watched, resignation returned to Sin’s beautiful features. His pale green eyes went half-lidded. His hands were loose at his sides; fingers curled and no longer looking ready to fight.

He slumped against the wall and slid down, falling unconscious to the side within seconds.

There were a few seconds where the guards watched him suspiciously, perhaps expecting his high drug tolerance to kick in or believing he was faking it, but when he continued to lie there they moved in. They picked him up and dragged him out of the room.

Vivienne didn’t say anything but before Boyd could comprehend how to react, she flipped to several short clips in a row. The guards dragging Sin out
into the hallway outside his apartment. The guards taking him down the stairs and out into the courtyard in the dead of the night.

No one was around to see them start to drag him across the courtyard in a direction that could have been toward the Tower or the lab building. Boyd watched them until they moved out of screen into a deep black patch of shadow. The video stopped once they’d disappeared.

He continued to stare at the computer, feeling like he was a step away from reality. The room seemed faded around him, with all the color focused mercilessly on that simple laptop screen.

Vivienne did not click another video. She sat there silently and finally said in a subdued voice, "That is the entirety of the footage I was able to gather. After that point, they moved through the blind spots of the surveillance and, in all likelihood, entered the Tower through similar means. There are ways to access many parts of the compound without being seen if one knows the proper routes."

He couldn’t look away from the screen. Shakiness buzzed along his limbs, down to fingertips that couldn’t quite stay still. His hands twitched and tightened into fists.

His voice was quiet and strained when he asked, "Can I see it again?"

She didn’t say anything. She pulled up the first video and sat silently as Boyd watched again, obsessively taking in every movement and nuance of Sin’s. Every flicker of expression. Trying to read what Sin felt. Trying to gather any idea of what had gone through his mind.

But even with the high quality the screen was too small, or maybe it was simply that he wanted so badly for Sin to be life-sized and alive. All he could see was a moment where something changed, although what it was or why he didn’t know, but it was when the guards moved in. When Sin had to
have known without doubt that he was about to be terminated. Boyd watched the video and asked her to back up here or there so he could stare intently at his lover.

In the end, his initial impression remained the same: Sin had been resigned to his death. It had been just as Carhart had said; he’d known for a long time that this would be his end.

Boyd felt his mind buzzing and he dropped back into the chair, staring in shock at the screen.

Sin was dead.

He really, truly was dead.

The guards had come. They’d subdued him and taken him away. There was no daring escape in the night. No cover up for a magical disappearance that had taken the Agency by surprise. Even though the video cut out and he couldn’t tell for certain whether they’d taken him to the Tower or the lab, it didn’t matter. Neither was in the direction of an exit from the compound. Both paths led to the same end.

Either way, Sin was dead.

The words were immutable in his mind. He hadn’t realized until he’d seen Sin collapse against the wall and he’d seen the guards drag him away that somehow in the back of his mind he’d still been holding out hope. Somehow, part of him had stubbornly refused to accept this reality he hadn’t wanted to believe was true.

He’d known for so long and yet it wasn’t until now that he could fully, completely accept it.

Sin was never, ever coming back.
He would never walk in the room again. He would never look at Boyd again. He would never touch him. His lips would never press against that sensitive part of Boyd's neck; a gentle caress of warmth and moisture that had felt so sensuous and comforting at the same time. Boyd would never again gravitate to Sin's body in the middle of the night and wake up with his bare skin flush against his lover's. They would never make love or banter or even have an argument over something stupid just because they could both be so headstrong.

Those vivid green eyes had been closed forever and he'd seen it, right there on the screen. He had, in effect, seen the last moments of Sin's life that he could ever see.

The world made even less sense around him than it had before. There was a buzzing in the background—white noise in his brain that pushed sounds a step away and made his head feel like it was filled with cotton.

He stared at the laptop. At that unmoving screen. He was in too much of a state of shock to do anything else.

There weren't even any tears. Just a blank emptiness that had yet to be filled again.

Silence stretched in the office until he finally looked over at her. She was watching him with an unreadable expression but it seemed more neutral than cold.

"Why did you do this?"

She shrugged minutely and looked away, her gaze falling to the laptop as she turned it back toward herself. He couldn't see her eyes as she looked down and her expression didn't shift. "It does no good for you to wonder. Now that you know the truth of it, I expect you to focus more clearly on your job."
She spoke impassively, her tone as distant and removed as ever, and she continued to look down at the laptop. He couldn't tell what she was doing. It seemed to be taking a long time to close down a few programs.

He was silent for a long moment. The buzzing was growing stronger. He could have left but there was something he needed to verify. Something he thought he already knew but had to hear to be certain.

"Did you know?" His voice was quiet but there was an edge to it. "Did you know that Hsin would... That the Marshal would do that?"

"It was a very real possibility," she replied calmly. She finally looked up at him again but he couldn't read a thing in those sky blue eyes. "I had my suspicions."

His fingers twitched but he didn't look away from her face. The cotton head feeling was intensifying; like a swarm of insects taking nest in his brain.

"And my mission?"

"What of your mission?"

Even through the distance, he felt his shoulders tense. His eyes were hard. "Did you know what they would do to me there?"

She watched him evenly. "If you are asking whether I was aware of the prostitution ring and XRT-330, of course I was."

The world started to crystallize.

"And the duration you gave me? One to two months?"

"It was based on the absolute best case scenario," she said simply. "It was unlikely that timeline would ever be met. From the start, the assumption was that it would take closer to four months or longer."
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Fade

His heartbeat sounded loud; an echo in the dried up, empty cavern of his mind.

It all felt so surreal.

He couldn't believe her. He couldn't believe that she'd actually done that. She'd lied even about mission parameters...

He heard himself asking the words he'd been wanting to ask, to demand, since he'd come back to himself in Europe.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You would have been illogical and attempted to refuse," she replied without hesitation. She continued to watch him calmly, not appearing to see anything wrong with her responses or the situation.

"Illo..." He started to echo but couldn't bring himself to finish. His voice had grown quieter but it was a tense quiet; a tightly wrapped ball of silence.

"Of course, you would have been forced to go, regardless," she continued. She was watching him but did not see the anger that was coursing through him. Or maybe she did and didn't care. "For the efficiency of the mission and to deter unnecessary argument, I determined it was best to provide you with the information necessary for an understanding of the mission without providing superfluous details which would only distract you."

"Superfl—" Boyd cut himself off with a sharp shake of his head. The buzzing was a burn in his blood, in his body. Her words cut through every part of him to settle, like a necrotic weight, at the base of his stomach. "You sent me there knowing—"

He couldn't even finish the sentence.
There was no way to properly comprehend the repercussions of her offhanded comment. The knowledge that his own mother had sent him into that place, knowing what would be done to him and not telling him. Not giving him any indication of what to expect so he could at least prepare himself.

All in the name of efficiency of the mission.

He couldn't even be surprised. He'd known for a long time that she had to have known. Hearing her confirm it only verified to him that he couldn't trust her. He couldn't believe anything that she told him from now on. Who knew what manner of information she would keep to herself because she deemed it would be inconvenient to her if he knew?

He didn't understand her. He didn't even want to try anymore. She was alien to him and he realized he’d gotten to the point where it didn't matter anymore that she was related to him. If anything, he wished she wasn't. He would have preferred to be able to cut every connection with her if he could. But he couldn't.

Jae-Hwa seemed to think Vivienne had a thing for protecting him but he didn't know what to think. Even if she'd saved his life before, even if in the future he would appreciate being shown the videos because it let him have some sense of closure and could shut off that insidious hope, and even if some day later he'd think Kassian had been right that at least Sin hadn't known what was really happening—at that moment, it didn't matter.

Sitting there having just watched his lover be dragged off to his death and having just heard how much his mother had known and how little she'd told him, in his mind she was the reason he never got to say a proper goodbye. She was the reason he'd had such a difficult time adjusting when he'd returned. She was the reason he'd been completely blindsided by Sin’s death. She was the reason all he had now were ashen memories.
Her and her ice cold logic that forgot there were human hearts behind the pawns she moved on her chessboard.

He looked at her and he saw all the lies she'd ever told him; all the games she'd ever played. All the times she'd ignored him only to pull him out later to use him. All the times she'd hurt him because she'd felt he wasn't strong enough. Because he wasn't lining up with the reality she'd created in her mind.

And he realized he couldn't forgive her. Not this time. Maybe never again.

"I understand."

It may have been the quiet, resolute quality that made her look at him more sharply. Made her assess him silently.

He was finally able to look at her and see her for what she was. She was not his mother. She was not the Inspector. She wasn't even human. She couldn't be, not the way she acted. She was foreign to him, this woman who made decisions for others' lives offhandedly, as if it were her right. This woman who had alternately hurt and belittled him for most of his life and who always seemed to expect that he would come crawling back.

His throat closed and he couldn't have said anything more even if he'd wanted to. Even if he'd known what to say. Maybe it was the realization related to her or maybe it was the surveillance video playing in a loop in the back of his mind.


There was nothing else. There was nothing more.
Now all he had left was his resolution from earlier; to do what he could to prolong the life of the few people he trusted, until he was killed himself.

He stood and took a step back without looking away from her and somehow, in his mind, that cemented it. He was no longer interested in her explanations. He no longer wished to listen to her callous words wrapped in the guise of logic and efficiency. They worked at the same place and she was his superior so he had to be around her but even more than he’d felt before, he no longer wanted anything to do with her.

He started to turn and she went still. Neither of them spoke and some part of him had to wonder about that. About her lack of indignant demand that he would leave when she told him he could. As he turned his back on her and left, he wondered if he’d imagined the flash of uncertainty in her eyes. The doubt in the twitch of her fingers.

Or if that had been a lie as well.

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The door made a tired squealing sound as Boyd opened it. The small tattoo parlor was just as he remembered it; dully lit in front with pictures of tattoos and designs on the walls. The simple white bed sheet covering the back room was pulled halfway to the side, allowing a glimpse of Jaz working on a man’s shoulder.

She looked just as he remembered. A short, tight tank top that showed her midriff above baggy pants. Judging by her eyebrows, her hair was naturally brown but one would never know that based on her hair. She had bleached white blond dreadlocks that fell to her lower back even with most of it pulled back in a low ponytail. Mixed within the white, random dreads were vibrant purples, blues and teals. Her green eyes were dark and ringed with
hazel. She was several years older than Boyd and had colorful tattoos adorning much of her body.

She glanced up, her gaze passing over Boyd dismissively before she returned to the tattoo.

"Twenty minutes," was all she said.

Boyd had to shove the door shut behind him. It caught for a moment before he could force it. He looked around the room and after a moment walked to the wall of photographs, many of which were years old.

Jaz always offered to take a picture of the tattoos she designed. It was a commemoration for people who may lose it later in the war—amputated limbs, skin that burned off in uncontrollable fires—and snapshots protected for the loved ones left behind. Not everyone took her up on the offer, and others who did took the pictures with them. Some didn’t want a picture of the tattoo so much as the moment.

For the ones who wanted to be remembered when there was no one else to remember them, there was the wall.

Boyd walked to the back corner, searching the area from memory until he finally located it.

He and Lou sat on the bench smiling. Lou’s grin was huge and they were each holding up their shirts to show the tattoos on their lower stomachs. Lou leaned against Boyd and looked unquestionably proud. Boyd looked at his younger self with the smooth skin and the hopeful, tentative smile and he wondered where it had all gone. That short-lived belief that there could be a future for him that he desired.

The belief that he could be happy.
His fingers brushed over the photograph and for a moment he considered asking Jaz if he could bring it home with him. The moment was gone almost before it began. Most likely he would be terminated within the coming months. He'd be lucky if he made it a year. Even if they didn't kill him, it was only a matter of time until he died on a mission.

His future was set down a path he couldn't avoid or deny. Soon, he too would be a ghost of the past. It was safer to leave the photograph here, where that hopeful point of both his and Lou's memories could remain untouched. The ghosts of their happier times could haunt this place and leave reality to the life Boyd couldn't flee.

He didn't pay attention to time. At some length, low voices moved behind him. He ignored them, looking at the different pictures although not straying far from his own. The squealing of the door shut out the world beyond with finality. Soon he felt a presence at his side.

"Looking for inspiration?" Jaz asked, pausing just behind him.

He stayed still, not answering at first. His gaze had strayed toward the old picture again. He couldn't look away from Lou's happy face. He kept wondering what it would have been like had their places been switched.

She started to say something but at that moment he turned toward her. Jaz looked at him and there was a moment where all he saw was irritation before startled recognition moved through her features. She looked at the wall behind him, at the picture he'd been hovering near like a parent by a dead child's grave, and recognition was soon replaced by surprise.

"Boyd?" she asked, her eyebrows shooting up. "That you?"

He shrugged and stepped away from the wall, not really knowing where he was headed but not feeling like standing near the picture anymore.
Suddenly that time felt too personal to share. Even with the person who had taken the picture.

"Wow," she said blandly, looking him over. "Who knew you'd develop some style?"

"I need a tattoo filled in," he told her without preamble.

She raised an eyebrow and walked over to a sink at the back. "Nice to see you too," she said blandly. She cleaned her hands, taking the time to do it well.

He trailed behind her, stopping at the threshold to the back room. His gaze moved over the small area. It hadn't changed much, either. He could still remember sitting there with Lou. Pulling out their lists of Latin phrases and Jaz rolling her eyes at the 'lameness' they were presenting her.

"Don't you want anything cool?" she'd pressed. "Skulls, dragons—hell, even a good tribal design is better than that."

She'd crouched over Lou's stomach, tattooing him while he'd grit his teeth to keep from making any embarrassing noises of pain. Boyd had sat at Lou's side, watching with great interest and steeling himself for his turn next. Lou had said something snide to her and she'd relented, a flash of a smile on her lips before it had faded away as she'd concentrated.

The words had formed slowly across Lou's stomach, dark letters of hope and promise arching near his hip bone. Boyd's fingers had twitched as he'd thought about how he'd wanted to run his hand over that pale skin. He'd felt Lou's stare on him until he'd looked up. He'd been met by an enigmatic look in those blue eyes he hadn't been accustomed to, then a scrunched face as Lou had looked away.
Jaz had started on the second word and had said absently, relenting on her teasing earlier, "Tattoos are personal. You need to get what fits you and ignore everyone else."

"You know," she said, her voice seeming abrupt in the silence. "Last time I saw you, Lou was dead and you looked half gone, asking me to put some pretty depressing shit on your back."

She turned the faucet off with the back of her wrist and grabbed a towel as she turned. Her eyes were dark and intent, taking him all in; studying him as if she could see through him to his soul. She dried her hands off, a frown pulling at her lips and faintly narrowing her eyes.

"I thought you were dead."

Boyd thought he may as well have been, considering the Agency's secrecy and stronghold on his life. "I've been preoccupied," was all he said.

She quirked an eyebrow and threw the towel to the side, walking closer to him.

"Preoccupied?" she echoed, stopping in front of him and staring him hard in the face. She scrutinized his eyes, his neutral expression, and shook her head. "It's more than that. You look cold. Your eyes are different. It's a little like when Lou died, only wrong somehow."

She raised both eyebrows and said flatly, "Some bad shit's gone down for you again, hasn't it?"

His eyes narrowed. "What does it matter to you even if it has?"

"Lou's what matters to me," Jaz said firmly, giving him a steadfast stare that was nearly a glare. Her back was straight and he got the impression she would have crossed her arms if she hadn't just washed her hands. "I loved that kid like a brother and he loved you like you were the only thing on Earth. I
have an obligation to make sure you’re okay if you come by my place and I’m going to stick to it.”

Something about the way she said that tugged at Boyd's thoughts until it suddenly clicked. The memory of his first attempt at suicide flashed in his mind. Sitting in his room, covered in blood with splatters on the wall and the knife sliding out of his grip. Unrelenting pain and the blurring of the world around him. Wanting with every fiber of his being for everything to fade for good—and looking up to see his mother.

He was so surprised by the thought that he didn't think to hide it from his face.

"Did you call my mother last time?" he asked incredulously.

"Damn right I did." Jaz glared at him although she didn't seem angry; simply stubborn as hell and with an attitude to back it up. "It took me awhile to track down some contact information but did you really think I wouldn't? You looked like you were ready to kill yourself. I thought I'd be able to help you if you stayed with me but it was like you didn't hear a word I said. The second you left I dug up the numbers Lou'd given me before."

Boyd stared at her in disbelief. Yet, it all made sense. He'd always wondered why Vivienne had happened to come home at such a convenient time when she had typically been gone for months on end. It had always seemed a little strange to him but he'd never known to question it because it had never occurred to him that Jaz would actually call.

Vivienne had never said anything about being alerted and part of him wondered why that was. It made him understand her even less because that meant she had specifically returned home, knowing he may die if she didn't. It wasn't something she'd stumbled upon and reacted to without thought. She could have easily ignored Jaz’s phone call.
Instead, she'd come home to save her son's life.

Was it just because she hadn't wanted the word suicide related to her family? Had she simply wanted to ensure that if he died it was on her terms, not his? Or had there been some other, less conceivable answer? He couldn't believe it was for anything like love. The word hadn't been in the woman's vocabulary since his father's death.

It didn't matter, regardless. Even if she'd saved his life more than once she seemed to think it gave her the right to dictate what he did with it. And he was no longer interested in catering to that belief.

"So just so you know, if you have some sort of suicidal agenda going on here I'm not gonna let it slide," Jaz continued firmly. "You come into this shop, you better be prepared that I won't let you walk away and ruin all the hard work I just put into my designs."

Boyd watched her for a long moment and then shook his head, pushing his hair back and looking away. He felt bemused by the information and didn't know what to do with it. Everything to do with that time was so long ago that it didn't even matter to him anymore that Jaz had called on him. He supposed if she hadn't, he never would have met Sin.

More than anything, there was a faint wave of relief. He knew he could trust her to help him with the more difficult request; the one he hadn't wanted to deal with at the Agency. The reason he'd come here instead of going somewhere else.

Because he'd hoped their history, no matter how tenuous, would work in his favor.

"I won't try to kill myself this time," he said mildly. "I just want a tattoo filled in, like I said before." He paused and glanced at her sidelong. "And something else."
She gave him an unimpressed look. "Yeah? What's this 'something else' before I decide whether I want to spend time on your phantom ass?"

He studied her evenly before flicking his eyes back toward the main door. It was shut firmly and it didn't seem like anyone else was coming in. He decided to get it over with before they could be interrupted. He moved over toward the table she used for people getting tattoos on their backs and half-turned away from her as he said, "I need your help with something."

He leaned forward, pulling his pants and underwear down just enough to show her. On his right side, in the area that transitioned from his lower back to his ass cheek, a set of burn scars stood out in relief against his pale skin. Several angled lines went from large down to small.

It was a stylized tornado; Cyclone's logo.

Jaz walked over, her hands clinical as she ran them down his skin and she studied the scars. She quirked an eyebrow and looked up at him as he looked over his shoulder.

"You got yourself branded?" she asked, sounding as though she didn't quite know what to make of that, and Boyd shrugged.

"Something like that," he said, not wanting to get into the truth. "But I don't want that design anymore."

Her lips thinned and she looked down, eyebrows furrowing as she studied the scars more closely. "Well, I can see what I can tattoo over it..."

He shook his head and dug into his pants pocket until he could pull out a folded piece of paper. He handed it back to her. "I want you to burn that over it. Make it look like it said that all along."

She looked down at the paper dubiously. It had a single Chinese character on it and she frowned, looking between that and the stylized
tornado. "What's with you and foreign words all over your body?" she asked rhetorically.

"I like it," he said blandly.

He left out that it was Sin's first name. If he was going to be branded by anybody, he wanted it to be Sin. Even if Sin was dead, it was better having his memory burned into him than spending the rest of his life having to remember those moments of panic when he'd first known for certain the mission wasn't what he expected.

The guards who'd overpowered him and held him down. Distrust and suspicion and a spike of fear as he'd seen Amy approaching with the syringe.

"What the hell is that?" he'd demanded sharply and she hadn't answered. She'd never answered. She'd simply prepped him and stuck the needle in the crook of his elbow.

That moment was still crystal clear in his memory: the deep red of his blood pooling beneath the clear liquid in the syringe. The thought running through his mind, Hsin was right, followed by, What will he do if I don't come back?

The second that had dragged out before Amy had pushed the plunger down. His entire body arching and jerking against their hands; the startled "Ahh—" escaping him.

Euphoria and mindless energy and, for weeks, nothing else.

He didn't remember being branded, although he'd later learned it had happened right after they'd forced Slide on him. It was a measure of how disturbing Slide was that he didn't even remember his skin being vaporized. He knew they hadn't used anesthesia.
He'd probably gotten off on it, he thought darkly. He knew he'd been aroused; the pictures they'd taken of him for the catalogue had been right afterward. He'd seen the pictures and he knew what he'd looked like. The dilated eyes; the parted lips and the color in his cheeks. Even in the picture it had been clear that there had been nothing but sex on his mind.

Some memories were clouded but he would never forget that first breathless, rapturous hit of Slide. That first taste of ecstasy that had burned him alive and had him begging for more.

Jaz's fingers pulled the skin taut and it snapped him back to the present. He closed his eyes and tilted his head down, his fingers curling. His hair shifted and fell forward, sheltering his expression. He couldn't even feel anything about the memory or the disturbing blanks elsewhere. Not anymore.

"The design should overlay decently," Jaz was saying in contemplation. She was all business now that the aspect of art had come into play. "It'll look a little wonky but if I make it super stylized, it should work well enough."

Her fingers moved away from his skin and she stepped back. He pulled his clothing back into place before he turned to look at her.

"I dunno if I'm all about this burning idea, though." Jaz watched him warily. "Why don't I just tattoo over it?"

"Because it won't make what's under it go away," Boyd replied evenly.

She frowned, scrutinizing his face, and then shrugged and turned away. She walked to the counter space at the end of the room and set the sheet of paper down. "You do realize it's one of the most painful body mods you can do."

"I don't care."
"Anesthesia won't be used and it's done slowly, bit by bit," she continued pointedly. "It would take hours."

"It doesn't matter."

"And it takes months to heal," she finished.

"You won't convince me not to do this, Jaz. I understand what I'm asking."

She nodded but still hadn't turned around as she gathered some supplies. "Alright. I know some scarification artists I can ask for you—"

"I want it to be you," Boyd cut her off, shaking his head. "I'll pay you extra if you want but it has to be you. I want someone I know I can trust doing it."

She paused, her shoulders somewhat tense and head moving just so, just enough for her to start to look over her shoulder but not enough for him to see her expression. She was silent for a breath and then it was all business again.

"Sit," she ordered, nodding at the chair nearby. He obeyed and she pulled a stool over until she was sitting near him. "So what tat do you need filled in?"

He held out his left arm, showing her the roughly sketched outline that he had on his inner forearm. The tattoo he'd tried to do himself while in the midst of the mission at Aleixo's, afraid he'd forget who he was and fully become Cameron.

He'd made himself a tattoo to remind himself of Sin no matter what he was doing; on his inner arm so he'd see it even when he was holding a dick he was sucking, or his arms were held down above his head, or his fingers
were gripping a woman's hips as he slammed into her. He'd wanted something that could snap him out of the high no matter the sexual act.

It was the only thing he'd been able to think of at the time to give himself some reassurance that he could be strong enough to some day make it home. To return to some sense of normalcy. To some day again feel the strength of Sin's arms encasing him, and the support and relief that came with it.

"Homemade, huh?" she observed and Boyd nodded. "What'd you use?"

"Heated needle and pen ink," Boyd replied as he stared down at the dots that had taken forever to roughly outline the shape he wanted.

He'd never gotten to finish, anyway. Aleixo had found him one day and had demanded what he thought he was doing. Apparently his body hadn't been his to work on. It was alright to brand him or stick God knew what inside him but it wasn't okay to add to the tattoos already adorning his body. Not if it hadn't been Aleixo's idea first.

Aleixo had taken away the needle and pen and told him if he caught him at it again, there would be consequences. Not wanting to do anything to jeopardize the mission, Boyd hadn't ever tried to continue. Still, he had run his hand almost comfortingly along the lines whenever he'd been alone and had felt overwhelmed.

"There was no way I could properly finalize it at the time," was all he said aloud.

Her eyes narrowed in mild irritation and she turned his arm this way and that. "You know you can get an infection doing that shit, right?"

"I was lucky," he replied by way of acknowledgment.
She snorted but didn't comment. "So unless you want me to play a rousing game of connect the dots, I'm not positive what you were going for here."

He dug into his pocket with his right hand and pulled out the other sheet of paper. He'd drawn and colored what he wanted on his arm and held it out to her. She took the sheet and studied it, brow furrowing and eyes narrowed, her lips tilted down at the edges in thought.

He'd wanted something that could obliquely remind him of Sin; something that would be special to him in a way that wouldn't compromise the mission. Something he could potentially explain away as Cameron, but would remind him that he was Boyd. It had taken him awhile to settle on an idea, because nothing had seemed right. What he'd ended up with in concept was now painstakingly put to paper.

It was a drawing of a tree with the root system exposed. Tree branches wound around at the top, scraggly and circuitous.

He had used saturated colors. Great care was put into shading many of the leaves individually so it looked like a real tree hit by sunlight. The base color he'd chosen for the leaves was a brilliant green that was the closest color to matching Sin's eyes that he could manage. The roots of the tree interwove with a Celtic knot, making it difficult to tell where the roots ended and the Celtic knot began. Bits of root dangled at the end, making it look more natural, and he'd put imperfections in the bark to make it feel more realistic.

He'd drawn it remembering the shelter of the trees at the cabin. The peacefulness of their time together, away from the world. The safety of having Sin at his side.

Sin represented protection, safety, love, happiness... All the things he'd lost, and all the things he'd been terrified he would never regain.
The more he'd needed the tattoo and Sin's memory, the more meaning he'd placed on it: the idea of trees always coming alive again no matter how brutal the winter reinforcing that they could make it through anything, and the lines of the Celtic knot curling back in on themselves to underscore how every path he took led him back to Sin.

It became a visual promise to Sin that he would never stray. An unspoken message that he was committed to Sin for the rest of his life.

Now, he wanted it as a memento of a love he knew he could never recreate.

Jaz looked between the rough outline and the drawing and ultimately nodded.

"I can do this but I'd make a few minor changes, myself, so it'd look more like a tattoo and less like a drawing."

"That's fine," Boyd said dismissively. "As long as you don't change what it is altogether."

She nodded. "There's a lot of detail and colors, though." Her green eyes moved up to meet his. "It'll take more than one session."

"I assumed as much." He tilted his head toward the table where the other sheet of paper lay. "Maybe by the next session we can do both."

Her expression was unreadable as she shrugged. "Maybe. We'll have to see how long it takes me to get the chance to learn how to do it properly."

Boyd nodded, unsurprised by the response.

She frowned to herself and said, "Right. Well, we can do some of it today, at least."
She rolled her stool to the nearby desk, swiping a marker off it and returning to his side. She pulled his left arm until it was at a better angle for her to crouch over while she popped open the marker. Teal and white dreadlocks fell over her shoulder as she leaned forward, saying somewhat distantly in concentration:

"So this is how I think it should be done."

As he sat there watching the outline of the tattoo grow and when he later felt the familiar but welcome pain of the needle as the design formed in front of his eyes, he thought about the future. He thought about where he was now and where he would have to be tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. He thought about coping and moving on.

All that mattered now was the last bit of defiance he could afford. He couldn't change that he'd been branded with Cyclone's logo along with all the other slaves, marked as their property so that between that and Slide he never would have escaped. He couldn't change his future at the Agency. He couldn't predict the missions he'd be sent on or what other issues could await him.

All he could do was mark Sin's name on himself as a last fuck you to the people who owned his body. All he could do was give himself a personal, constant reminder of the man he'd loved more than anyone and anything.

Going into the future, he wouldn't be able to afford even a single mistake or he would be dead. He couldn't let thoughts of Sin distract him or bring him down. He had to shove his dead lover's memory into the recesses of his mind; never forgetting him, but having to focus on the present.

It was a hard and painful realization to come to but he knew it was the only thing he could do.
There were people still alive who needed his help. He hadn't been able to do anything other than struggle to prolong the time until Sin had been killed and in the end all his efforts had been in vain. But with the situation the way it was in the Agency now, there were people who needed him there to support them. People who, like him, had a very short list of people to trust. People who he would do everything he could to keep alive.

He'd been too late for Sin. He'd been too weak for Lou. He'd been too young for his dad. They'd all lived and loved and fallen, one by one, leaving deeper imprints on his soul each time. He couldn't change their deaths nor could he change that Sin was now in the same category as Lou and his father. People who he would have done anything for, lost to him in situations where that 'anything' had not been enough.

He didn't know what lay in store for him tomorrow, or even hours or seconds from now. He didn't know how long he had to live—how long any of them did. All he knew was he wasn't going to let the Agency win. They'd taken so much from him and there was still more they could take; still more they could demand and, ultimately, he would have to give.

He had been scared and alone and shocked and in denial but in the end he would live as long as he could scrape out his meager existence. He would protect those he could protect and do his best for those he couldn't. He would live when they expected him to die and he would do it all in the name of the people he'd lost.

He would do it to tell the Agency to fuck off and to show them how bad an idea it was to mess with him. He would do it to prove that even if they had control of his life, he would always come back and each time he would make himself stronger. Each time he would make it that much harder for them to win.
There was a lot he couldn’t control but there was one thing he could: his stubbornness, and with that his resolution to fight back against the people who thought they could break him.
Chapter Eight

The concierge always gave Carhart a half peculiar, half intrigued look when he came to the sprawling condominium complex at West Shore Drive. It was one of the most opulent hi-rise residential buildings in the Financial District and Carhart hadn't been surprised for a moment when he'd found out that Vivienne lived there.

The concierge, however, always seemed surprised that the General was coming to visit her. There was a complicated procedure of checking in and being escorted upstairs at West Shore that didn't surprise Carhart for a minute. The place had top notch security—there was no wandering over to the elevator and knocking on the door.

Each visitor was announced. And every time he said he was there to see Vivienne on the thirteenth floor, the man stared.

It was getting to be annoying but Carhart eased the irritation by telling himself that the man was probably assuming that they were lovers. If the man had known Vivienne for very long, it wasn't too surprising that he would find this sudden development surprising. The coldness that Vivienne typically projected seemed likely to scare off any suitor. But for their designed cover, Carhart was the exception to that rule.

After their first couple of meetings they'd both realized that they were being watched and sometimes even followed. The Marshal clearly was suspicious of their rendezvous, likely wondering what they were discussing or even planning. The most logical conclusion to combat that suspicion was that they would give the impression that they were having an affair. So far it had been working as neither of them had been called in for questioning about their intent.
"Hello again, Mr. Carhart."

Carhart nodded curtly at the man and glanced at the clock on the wall. He was running a few minutes late by now but he didn't think she'd make a point of it. Their covert meetings had become such a regular occurrence that they barely felt formal anymore except for the nature of the conversation.

"Benjamin, can you escort Mr. Carhart to the thirteenth penthouse?"

Benjamin, a tiny twenty-something man with buzzed brown hair, hurried over. He seemed to materialize out of thin air. He was as silent and unassuming as ever during the ride upstairs. None of the staff at West Shore ever spoke unless they needed to. It was disturbing but welcome. These days Carhart didn't have the head for idle chatter.

Carhart exited the elevator and left Benjamin behind. A hallway with cream-colored carpet stretched before him, leading to Vivienne’s door. He knocked twice, briefly, but Henry would have already announced his presence to her so she knew he was coming.

Given that knowledge, it still surprised him when she answered the door looking so completely casual. It hadn't been like that in the beginning—when they'd first arranged this as a meeting place she'd looked as impeccable and detached as she did at the Agency. Over the months, that had dwindled in such a subtle slide that he hadn't realized while it was happening.

Vivienne had on charcoal-colored linen pants and what appeared to be a black cashmere sweater with a wide over-sized V-neck that hung dangerously close to one shoulder. Her hair was down, the long blond waves twisted over one shoulder although the strands were coming loose and framing her face. She was barefoot and still looked effortlessly elegant.

"Sorry I'm late," he said after a short breath. "I brought dinner."
Her sky blue eyes flicked behind him the way they always did, as if verifying there was no one within view or hearing. She didn’t seem bothered by his slight delay but her expression was unreadable.

When she saw no one else in the vicinity, she stepped to the side and held the door open for him to enter. "Come in."

When he'd first come to her condo, he'd felt like a bull in a china shop. Tall, muscular and always feeling unbearably Midwestern even though he hadn't been to his hometown in decades—it seemed strange being in this sparsely decorated, extremely modern apartment with its all white and dainty-looking furniture. It was so unlike his own apartment and his own personal style that he’d felt like some oil-drilling roughneck traipsing into a crystal palace.

It had been awkward and a little uncomfortable. The fact that he'd felt ridiculous sitting on the low-lying couch hadn't helped. The only thing that had relaxed him was the windows. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the rooms. A view of the destruction of the city always centered him. It always put everything into perspective.

It hadn't taken long to stop focusing on the gap between her wealth and his own, her sophistication and his lack thereof, before he’d focused on business.

But after so long, after realizing that there were really only two of them against a whole lot of untrustworthies—sometimes business could wait.

"You look lovely today," Carhart commented offhandedly as he put the takeout bag on the glass coffee table that sat between the two white couches. They would never look like couches to him—they seemed more like cushion-less lounge chairs.
She leaned over to push the touch panel out of the way that she'd obviously just been working on. "Thank you." She paused briefly and observed mildly, "I have noticed you seem to prefer more informal attire."

He shrugged off his black coat and lay it over the side of the couch. "You're less frightening this way," he replied, shooting her a small grin.

The edges of her lips lifted briefly. It was a subtle, private smile that he'd only ever seen grace her features in the past few months and even then it wasn't often.

"Would you care for anything to drink?" she asked as she started toward the open concept kitchen.

"Wine would go well with the pasta. Whatever you have is fine, though."

She nodded and briefly disappeared as she knelt behind an island with a granite counter top. A built-in beverage fridge was hidden from his view. She gathered some glasses, plates, silverware, and a bottle of red wine. Despite the armload, she had no troubles balancing it all and smoothly returning to the table where she laid it all out. She pulled long blond hair behind one ear as it started to fall forward, and picked up the touch panel to set it behind her onto the couch.

When she was finished, she perched on the edge of the couch and briefly ran her gaze over him, simply taking him in. "Have you been eating poorly?"

Carhart glanced at her briefly as he removed the containers. "I haven't had much of an appetite. Why?"

"You appear thin," she said with a faint shrug. She pushed her hair behind her back and leaned forward to dish herself some of the shrimp.
primavera onto a plate. Her v-neck sweater fell forward in the movement, showing a glimpse of a cream, lacy camisole beneath. She sat up once she had her food and let the plate rest on her knees, looking at him. "Perhaps you have not been sleeping well either?"

"Is this your way of saying I look like shit?" he asked with an arched brow, smirking as he twisted his fork around in the food without actually eating it.

Her faint smile returned. "Well. If you wish to be so crass..."

Carhart chuckled and set the plate down in favor of the wine. He took a sip and savored the taste for a moment, twirling the stem in his fingers. "It's been hard to sleep for a long time now. I've been meaning to call Medical and get something to help."

She nodded knowingly and didn't respond at first as she took a bite of her food. Even the way she ate seemed carefully orchestrated and somehow elegant. There were no bits of food falling down; nothing was left on her lips.

She took the time to chew and swallow before she said in agreement, "It would be beneficial to you if you did. Were I unaccustomed to little sleep, I would have found it difficult to cope with the stress of the past few months and the subsequent insomnia."

The General nodded and looked down into his glass. He had the idle fleeting thought that the wine looked similar to blood sloshing around. He took another sip, allowing his gaze to stray to the window.

He was sorry he'd mentioned sleep. The topic brought to mind the nightmares he had when he did allow his eyes to close. The Agency in ruins. People he cared about dead. The future terminations of Ryan, Boyd and Emilio overlapped by the death scene he'd imagined over and over for Sin.
His chest tightened as he forced himself to take another casual sip.

Vivienne paused with her hand reaching toward the wine bottle. Her sky blue eyes studied him; it was similar to the scrutinizing way she did at the Agency but without the ice cold expression it somehow seemed less intrusive.

"I said something to upset you." She said it quizzically and her eyebrows drew down faintly as if she were perplexed.

"No," he replied quickly, looking at her again. It was so rare to be around Vivienne like this that he sometimes feared it would abruptly come to a halt.

Strangely, she was the only person he really spoke to anymore. At the Agency he felt too watched—he was too untrusting of the people around him and he couldn't reach out to the few people he did trust for fear that they would be observed. If this came to an end, he'd be surrounded by silence all the time and he didn't think he could handle that. He needed a connection to someone else, even as fleeting as these meetings were.

"I just had a thought. When I sleep, I have dreams sometimes. It's stupid, it doesn't matter." He shook his head and set the glass down, finally picking up his food again.

"Ah," she said in understanding, turning her attention back to the wine. She picked up the bottle and tilted her glass as she poured the wine. Her tone was nonjudgmental as she continued, "Nightmares. I had many at one point."

She said it simply; leaving it up to Carhart as to whether he wanted to continue with that topic or switch to another one. Letting him decide whether he wanted to talk about what was on his mind.

In the end, he didn't want to abandon one of the few times they spoke on personal terms.
"What was the cause?"

"Cedrick," she said, looking down at the deep red of the wine in her glass. Her lips stretched faintly but it was humorless; like a reflection of past pain. Her eyebrows drew down and she swirled the glass. She fell silent briefly before she looked up to meet his eyes. Her expression remained impassive, her tone simple.

"I dreamt many things. His last moments. His body as I imagined it must have looked. Perhaps the worst were the dreams that he was still alive." She tilted her head subtly. "I also dreamt of my homeland being destroyed. My grandmother dying. A few involved Boyd. I suppose it was a conglomeration of thoughts vying for my attention."

He nodded, gazing at her quietly, thoughtfully. It was a moment when he thought she may be able to understand his pain. When he thought she may be compassionate about the violent, bloody nightmares that revolved around Sin. About the regret and the guilt and the self-hatred he felt that he hadn't been able to stop it. That he hadn't known.

But then he remembered that Vivienne had been uncomfortably matter-of-fact about his surrogate son's death when it had come up in the past and he didn't say anything about Sin directly at all.

"Losing people you love is hard."

She nodded and sipped wine from her glass.

Carhart absently set the plate down again, his cerulean eyes sliding back to the window.

Some days he could function well. More than well; efficiently. Other days, he wished he could stay in the darkness of his bedroom and never show his face again. It was difficult to be on the compound—to face people
who either didn't care that Sin had been murdered or were glad that he had been. To see people going through the motions, carrying on with their lives and not even seeming to remember that the once-infamous Vega was gone forever.

He tried to put himself at the same level of acceptance that he'd been at after the Monterrey debacle but he found it impossible. He'd thought Sin had died then but in the line of duty. Even then, he'd had warning. He'd had days to come to the acceptance that Sin might not make it that time around.

This time, Sin had been stolen right out from under his nose. For nothing.

In the initial weeks after Boyd's mission had begun to drag on, Sin had turned back into his old self. Disrespectful, resistant, sometimes less cooperative with his new teammates than he should have been, but he'd never done anything to warrant termination. He wouldn't have put himself at risk—not when all he wanted was to be with Boyd when he returned.

But somehow those minor events had resulted in his death anyway. Somehow, a reason had been found to take a second son away from Carhart.

He drained the rest of the glass.

The words that came from his lips were unplanned and unexpected. But they were long overdue. He hadn't ever voiced anything about Sin out loud—not even to Boyd. He'd feared that admitting his own anger and bitterness would feed into the younger agent's rage. But now, for some reason, in the clean, chic lines of Vivienne's penthouse, the words fell from his mouth.

"It's hard, Vivienne. I know... this isn't exactly what you expected to be hearing today. I know it isn't your problem. But I can't sleep and I can't eat
because it's hard to get through the day working for someone who had him killed. For nothing."

She had been about to set the plate down but at his words she looked up at him with a pause.

"You do not resent me for it as well, do you?" she asked, a subtly worried look drawing her eyebrows together and tilting down the edges of her lips.

He shook his head, focusing on her once again. The hint of expression on her face made her endearing to him, which was odd in itself. Even odder, it made him want to reassure her. This was a woman who typically seemed so unshakable that a hint of a reassuring comment would likely seem condescending. But things were different here in this splendid condo so far away from the Agency's walls.

"This is the only thing I look forward to now, Vivienne. If I resented you, that wouldn't be the case."

She studied him seriously, as if searching for a hint of a lie or him being patronizing. When she saw nothing of the sort she nodded to herself. "Good."

She set her plate on the table and leaned back, holding the wine glass in her hand and studying him again, this time with a distant, thoughtful air. She seemed to be mulling something over until, at length, she spoke.

"It is an understandable response. I greatly dislike that woman and I did not lose someone close to me as you did." She paused, a frown crossing her features. She was watching Carhart closely; perhaps searching for responses or cues as to how much she should say. "In all honesty, I thought it inevitable that he would not last long upon her arrival. However, I hoped I was wrong and planned to argue for his necessity as I had before."
Carhart considered that for a long moment before speaking again. "We all knew it was possible. He knew the odds were stacked against him. She wants to recreate this place into her own sanctum with soldiers who will obey her without question. He was too resistant, too disrespectful and too strong. We had given him too many reasons to hate the Agency. He would never be her kind of soldier. He didn't fit into her equation. We all knew there was a possibility that she would use his past as fodder for termination."

A brief pause. He wanted to know the answer to his next question but at the same time, he was hesitant to hear it. "So knowing all of those things, why would you put yourself out there to argue for him?"

Her frown increased and she shifted her gaze away from him, looking out at the dark view of the city beyond. She seemed pensive, her eyes narrowed faintly and head tilting. There was no particular emotion in her voice when she spoke.

"I was reluctant to see him go. There are many who would have reveled in my death during the raid but he came to protect me. He was undeniably the strongest person at the Agency and as time passed and I realized I would soon need any protection I could attain, he seemed a viable candidate to potentially pursue."

She looked over at Carhart. "I felt that with his connection to Boyd and Boyd's connection to me, I did not need to fear that he would turn on me. It was... encouraging to potentially have someone of his caliber to call upon if needed."

There was the briefest pause. Her eyes narrowed and a curious expression crossed her face. Carhart couldn't fully identify it but he thought it may be confusion or bemusement.
"In addition, although I was beyond exasperated by their antics at the times when he and Boyd had issues, by the end it seemed as though they had reached a sense of stability. I had seen the way they looked at each other and I suppose... knowing that, as well as how important he was to others such as yourself, I felt it was worth pursuing attempts to retain his services to avoid causing unnecessary heartache and discouragement, which would only decrease production value at the Agency. It seemed especially unnecessary, as he was still of use."

Despite the clinical quality of her words, when she looked at Carhart he could see that she wasn't being dismissive of Sin's death. In her own way, she'd just said that she had appreciated Sin's strength, had been grateful for his role in her survival of the raid, had looked forward to him being a core part of the inner circle that she and the General were trying to create around them and had actually understood and accepted the love that Boyd and Sin had shared. In her own way, she'd admitted to a mote of regret that his life had been lost.

Carhart wished he could tell Boyd. He wished that someday the gap between the two Beaulieus would close. There was nothing worse to see than the estrangement of a parent and child, especially when one of the two could die at any moment. Carhart was sure that Emilio had regretted never telling his son that he loved him. The pain and loss that Emilio had felt had been evident enough in the surveillance video Carhart had watched of the incident.

He would never quite forget the way Emilio's face had transformed upon hearing that his child was dead. Had died days ago, a few buildings away from where they'd gone on carrying out business as usual. Carhart would never forget that bone-chilling scream of anger and heartbroken denial.
It had been enough for him to want to seek Emilio out. To comfort him. To make sure he didn't sink back into the depths of drugs and alcohol that had always been his solace.

But Emilio had been removed to the Fourth and Carhart had decided that it was probably better that way. The raid was too fresh in Carhart's mind. The unnecessary death. Ryan's near death. In the end, he hadn't been able to rebuild the bridge that had burned when the truth had come out.

"Boyd has been better in the past few months," he said after several moments had stretched in a mutual pensive silence. "I'd spoken to him right after his fight with the Hunt girl. I'm hoping he took my words to heart and his progress continues."

"Yes," she said, a faint frown on her lips, her eyebrows drawing down. She stared at her wine and after a moment leaned forward to set it on the table. When she sat back against the couch again she smoothed her pants even though there were no wrinkles. "I spoke to him after his meeting with the Marshal."

Carhart nodded at length. They didn't typically talk about Boyd or Sin in these meetings. He was surprised she'd volunteered the information. "How did that go?"

Her expression pinched and her gaze inexorably slid away. "Not well, but perhaps as well as could be expected."

She was silent a moment, her eyes narrowing. She absently curled her fingers against the fabric of her pants and then turned her stare back onto Carhart. "He was quite angry with me for not providing him with fully disclosed and accurate information regarding his mission."

He arched a blond eyebrow, finally twirling his fork in his plate of cooling pasta. "When I spoke to Sin some time after Boyd left, he expressed
concern that the mission wasn’t as straightforward as Boyd had implied. He had very serious concerns. Was he right?”

“Yes,” she said with a frown, leaning back further in the couch. She had looked away from Carhart again seemingly without realizing it. It was unusual for her; she typically appeared to have no problems keeping eye contact regardless of the topic. "I greatly misled him."

"For what purpose?"

She was silent for a long moment and then turned intent sky blue eyes onto Carhart. There was strength in her expression and the usual steadfast belief in her own actions—but somehow lacking the confidence. It was as if she were asking Carhart silently if she was right, while her expression was defiantly stating that she was.

"He would have died. Surely you understand that as well as I? Had I told him what it was, he would have balked and refused. He would have caused all manner of issues in an attempt to stay behind. Ultimately, I would have had to force him and it would have looked terrible on his record."

Her eyebrows twitched down. "Or what if he had adamantly refused and had remained at the Agency until Seong Jae-Hwa’s arrival? If she had not terminated him immediately, then surely when Hsin Vega was terminated as I highly suspected would happen, he would have reacted similarly outrageously as Emilio Vega. But without similar accolades in his record, he would have been terminated rather than incarcerated. Sending him away with the least amount of disturbance was the only way to allow Jae-Hwa to settle in and begin to feel powerful in her role, and in the process feel less inclined to make an example out of my son."
Carhart nodded at length, weighing the words in his mind. After a pause he asked, "Was it as terrible as Sin feared? Or was it likely worse than he imagined?"

"It was worse, I suspect," she admitted. She looked away again, her features turning a hint cool.

Her shoulders were stiff and she did not look at Carhart as she continued tonelessly, "I told him he would seduce one man but in truth he was infiltrating a prostitution ring. They kept their slaves docile through the use of a highly addictive aphrodisiac. I read the report; he was in the slave ring for six months prior to making contact with the target for a sufficient length to enact the seduction, and another two before he successfully completed the mission. Upon return, in order to address the abuse his body and mind had taken, he was sent to rehabilitation and detoxification for two months."

"Ah." Carhart nodded again, placing his plate down and rubbing his jaw slowly. The stubble that had already begun growing in bristled against his fingers.

For a moment, he didn’t speak. Almost from the very first year, he’d begun thinking of Boyd as another surrogate son. Another youth sucked into the Agency without truly knowing what it would be about. Just as Sin had been as a child when he’d arrived at the compound thinking it would be just about the missions without the power plays and abuse in between.

So Carhart expected to feel horror and anger at what had been done to Boyd but all that he felt was a dull, depressing resignation. In reality he’d always known that something like this was possible for Boyd. The valentine status branded him for any kind of highly involved sexual mission, especially ones of that caliber.
The Agency was not above mentally tormenting their own agents to justify their means. His and Emilio's mission in Brighton flashed across his mind. He remembered the people who had had to die or be tortured so that his and Emilio's identities would appear legit. He remembered watching Emilio cut off a teenage boy's fingers one by one—punishment for stealing from Lawrence Patrick; their target and the man they'd had to prove themselves to.

Even so, he couldn't damn Vivienne for it entirely. As much as it weighed on him to imagine Boyd in that position—she had a point. He would have refused and paid the price with his life.

"As much as it makes me sick to think of him in that position, I understand your point of view. It isn't dissimilar to my own suggestion of using the collar on Sin to keep him out of a drugged stupor in the box. The kids don't understand and they likely never will until the burden falls on their shoulders to make the ends justify the means."

The tension in her shoulders relaxed at his response and she finally looked over again. He didn't think he imagined the relief in her eyes, and the subsequent moment that made even that much emotion disappear.

"He frustrates me so," she said with narrowed eyes. "There are times I wish to break him down to force him to listen, and times..." She trailed off, her eyebrows drawing down and face pinching. She looked away with a stiff shrug. "At times I am convinced he received the worst of Cedrick's and my qualities. It can make him exceedingly difficult."

She paused and then pushed her hair away from her face. "At any rate, I anticipated his anger upon return but his reaction seemed especially final."

She frowned to herself, her fingers running down her long hair and briefly curling around the ends. Her eyes were narrowed and pensive as she looked out the window. "It seems possible I did irrevocable damage."
"It may seem that way but it doesn't mean it is that way. It sure seemed that way between Sin and me when he had to wear the collar at first. And it damn sure appeared that way between Sin and Emilio when they first reunited. These things have a way of working themselves out."

She frowned and studied Carhart. There was a long moment in which she appeared to mull over his comment until finally she said only, "I suppose it is possible."

"I can try to talk to him. If you want."

She arched an eyebrow. "Do you honestly believe it would make a difference with such a willful child? He is stubborn to a fault and liable to ignore anything that does not coincide with his world view. And even if he did not, he would not believe you if you attempted to convince him of anything regarding me that was not negative."

Carhart couldn't argue with that. "I could just suggest the alternative to the reality that played out. What would have happened had he refused or had to have been forced into it. You're right, though. He'd likely not care at the moment. It's all too fresh in his mind."

She nodded and said almost dismissively, "Perhaps later, if you feel so inclined. I have my doubts it would be useful, yet I will admit it would be more beneficial if I felt I could fully trust him right now. There are far too many issues already at play."

For a stretch the only sounds were Carhart slowly chewing his food. The comment had sparked a topic that he'd wanted to bring up for the past few months—since he'd talked to Boyd candidly at Killian's. He'd avoided telling Vivienne until now but it seemed a good time.

"I think you should know that I told him everything."
Her eyes snapped over and focused on him sharply. It was a difficult expression to read; not specifically disapproving but certainly not pleased. "Why would you do such a thing?"

Carhart sighed and ran the hand entirely over his face before meeting her gaze. "Two reasons. Would you like to hear the less sentimental one first?"

"Yes," she said curtly.

"I wanted to give him something to fight for," he said simply. "I'm sure you can imagine how he felt when he came back. You know the depths it's possible he can sink to over Sin's death. I wanted him to know that there are people here who still need him, people who count on him. I wanted him to understand the danger that this mole places for you, me, and the other key players of the old administration. I wanted him to know that if this gets out, she will have reason to replace and kill us all."

Carhart looked out the window again, wondering absently what Boyd was doing as they sat here discussing him. "Boyd will do anything to protect the people he cares about. After we spoke, he seemed more determined. More focused. And that aside, he can be of help to us. We don't mix with the general populace. He does. We can investigate the higher ups but it is in our interest to have a trusted field agent who can keep an eye on his peers."

Vivienne considered him at great length before she finally leaned forward and grabbed her half-eaten plate of food. She set it on her lap, one leg crossed beneath her other thigh, and shifted to become more comfortable. Her sweater fell closer to her shoulder, showing pale skin broken only by the strap of her camisole.

"That was not the sentimental reason?" she asked dubiously, twirling some noodles around her fork and looking up at him through her eyebrows.
"No." He gave her a crooked grin. "The sentimental reason is that I look at that boy like family and it felt good being able to share my worries with him."

She gave him a peculiar look. She paused and tilted her head, studying him closely for a long moment. He couldn't identify what passed through her eyes and before it even occurred to him to try, she was looking away with her expression turning impassive. She paused in contemplation with a forkful of food hovering just over her plate.

"I suppose there is merit to your thoughts," she allowed. "Did you advise him to contact you discreetly were he to notice anything unusual?" She took a bite of the food, watching him calmly.

"Yes. Brian will be our go between."

She nodded and took the time to swallow before she spoke. Her gaze dropped to the plate as she gathered another forkful, her tone almost absent. "Perhaps it will be beneficial, then. If not for the mole, at the very least in terms of the players we can pursue. It may be less conspicuous for him to pass along messages to certain people in the future."

"I wanted to discuss what was mentioned in our previous meeting," he said after awhile, shifting more to work-related topics. "I've been looking into people who could be useful to us."

Aside from these meetings being about strategy to find the traitor, they'd eventually also become strategy meetings about finding people to align on their side if it ever came down to needing a circle of iron around them. It was more than obvious that the Marshal would be perfectly happy getting rid of every officer from the previous administration. He and Vivienne had been devising precautionary plans in case that should come to pass.
The idea was to touch base with like-minded staff in order to get a good idea about who would help them if they or others ever needed to get out, and who could be their eyes and ears in the meantime. Vivienne had eventually told him she’d been slowly planning for something like this for awhile now.

She nodded. "Do you have any ideas?" She looked up at him as she took another bite.

"Kassian and his old team first and foremost, but it seems that the Marshal has decided to put her attention on Kassian and Harriet as well. I think she wants to coax them into becoming more of her faithful legions. She knows a large majority of the masses are displeased with her and she is smart enough to know that she cannot alienate everyone, especially the best agents available."

"I suspect you are correct but it would be problematic if she were successful," she replied, briefly resting the side of the fork on the edge of the plate. "They are two of our most viable candidates at the moment. It is possible that for one or both we will not have the luxury to wait to approach as we will with others."

Carhart nodded in agreement, eyes narrowing slightly as he thought. "Boyd could come in handy here. I know for a fact that he has a certain accessibility with both. If he approaches them now even with a warning that the Marshal has her eye on them, they'd become more wary of any promises she makes to win their favor. As far as I can see, she hasn't been very overt yet, other than granting Harriet the position of team leader in other capacities than Insurgency."

He frowned slightly. He was fond of Harriet because of her fortitude and her attitude. He liked the fact that she was no-nonsense and he hoped
that her recent accolades had been awarded on merit and not some manipulative scheme.

"I haven't noticed her directly contacting Kassian. I have noticed, though, that Jordan has been hanging around him some lately. But whether that's significant or just another case of her trying to sleep with as many highly-ranked agents and officials as possible is unknown."

Vivienne finished her primavera and set the empty plate on the table. Her expression was more serious and business-like as they talked shop. "Tell him to do so. It would behoove us to be preemptive."

She studied him thoughtfully. "What of others such as Emilio Vega? I did not report his involvement in the raid because it was to my advantage, yet the only loyalty of his I could ever fully discern was to himself, to Hsin Vega, and at times it seemed to you. With Hsin Vega gone, that leaves two options; one of which is unhelpful to us and the other of which I am not certain is valid any longer. What is your opinion?"

Carhart paused for a moment, choosing his words. He hadn't told her of Emilio's involvement but somehow during the course of these meetings, she'd alluded to the fact that she'd known. It seemed that she'd wanted him to know so that they could be at liberty to talk entirely candidly. She'd never said in so many words how she'd found out but Carhart believed that she'd known all along, perhaps even on the day of the raid.

"I'm not sure. His relationship with me has been strained. It's more on my side than his but after his incarceration, who knows how that has changed. He may despise me now for not coming to him sooner about Sin."

He shrugged and poured himself another glass of wine. He watched the liquid pool into the glass, contemplative and doubtful. "I'm fairly certain that he hates the Marshal for what she did but at the same time, who knows
what he’d do if it came down to it. Like you said, his main priority tends to be himself. I hope that doesn’t turn out to be the case, though. He makes a dangerous enemy. The raid is proof of that on its own.”

“The relationship is strained primarily on your side?” she pressed, watching him with the same calculating quality she often used in regards to her job. "For which reason?"

"What do you mean, which reason?"

"Are you estranged as a result of his involvement in the raid or due to Victoria?” she asked astutely. There was nothing in her expression to imply what she thought about any of this. "Are there other reasons you have kept your distance?”

Carhart shrugged, making a face at the mention of Victoria. That entire involvement had been a waste of time. "Mostly the raid. That caused me to distrust him professionally. The fact that he date raped a woman I was involved with would have just led to me severing any other personal ties we had. Although for all I know, it wasn't as black and white as I originally thought it was. Now that some of the anger has faded from that incident, I think it's more likely that she would have slept with him drugs or not. There's only one reason a woman would agree to go home with Emilio Vega. Everyone knows what he's like.”

Vivienne studied him at length, her eyes partially narrowed. It was a contemplative, calculating look, as if she were running through scenarios in her mind. "Regarding the raid, it was extravagant and unnecessary. However, in terms of a mission, he achieved his goal quite well. He was capable of leading an attack on a locked down compound he had not stepped foot upon for two decades and in the process killed a man who was otherwise untouchable. He did so in a manner that did not make it readily known who had orchestrated the attack, lending him the ability to return as if he had not
played a part. That is not an easy feat. Regarding his poor decisions on a personal level, from my perspective I do not see that his decisions have strayed that dramatically from the way that he has always been. If you were to take issue with such extreme actions as he tends to take, it would seem you would not have become involved with him in the first place."

She raised her eyebrows. "If those are your sole reasons, consider a scenario in the future in which he becomes our enemy simply because he feels spurned by your reactions. The damage he could render could conceivably be catastrophic; especially given his audacity, which appears to know no bounds. He can be a vindictive and unpredictable man. We cannot afford to have him become our enemy over issues that can be remedied."

"The fact that his people killed scores of agents who were sleeping in their beds can't be remedied," Carhart replied flatly.

"What does it matter?" Vivienne asked, her tone calm and dismissive. "Certainly that was a problematic time in the Agency's history and it would have been preferable had it been avoided but ultimately many of them likely would have died on missions or been terminated anyway. Is it more humane for them to die violently in a fight or to be terminated after having been ripped away from a lover than it is for them to feel nothing while they sleep? It did not appear to me that the deaths of the agents were the goal. In my reconstruction of that night, and given what I understand of Emilio Vega, I suspect that it was an unintended byproduct. Allowing the unfortunate deaths of some agents in the past to negatively affect strategies to minimize damage in the future will surely please no one, including those whom the agents left behind."

Carhart stared at her blankly, not letting the irritation and disgust well up to the surface. Why was he the only one who thought the raid was unforgivable?
"I have nothing more to say on this topic," he said flatly. "I have nothing to say to Emilio. If you want him to be aligned with us, you'll have to bring him in yourself. Dropping a hint that you know he was behind the raid should be enough to get his attention and loyalty. If anything, it's something you can use to blackmail him because the Marshal would undoubtedly have him executed on the spot if she were to find out."

Vivienne lips thinned faintly. "Very well," she said a hint coolly. "I will pursue that angle as long as you do not undermine my work by escalating any unnecessary confrontations with him."

Carhart shook his head, reminding himself that technically she was his superior so it would be a bad idea to release the response that wanted to spring from his tongue. The implication that he participated in childish confrontations at all was insulting. Suddenly she thought it was possible that he'd do such a thing just because he disagreed with her version of events?

He took a long sip from his wine glass, swallowing the scoff that wanted to come out. Emilio was a member of his unit. They'd spoken frequently since the dissolution of their friendship due to work. He didn't know what made her think something like that would suddenly occur when it hadn't thus far.

"Maybe we should turn to talk of the mole."

"Perhaps," she agreed.

She reached for her touch panel and by the time she had it resting on her lap, any remaining traces of the woman she'd been when Carhart had first arrived were gone.
Chapter Nine

The icy winds had blasted them unrelentingly as soon as they'd left the airport in Harbin and made their way out of the main bustle of the city center. Boyd hadn't experienced such brutal cold since his trip into the Arctic Circle during Level 10 training. The winters in northeastern China were proving to be on par with what he'd experienced during his two-day trek with Kassian through Russia and Finland.

Fortunately, it had taken them a lot less time finding a vehicle here than it had there. Emilio had completed the necessary transaction swiftly and although he'd spoken entirely in surprisingly fluid Mandarin, Boyd suspected the deal had been done off the books. Bex had expressed concern early on about the possibility of finding a vehicle that would not be traced back to three such obvious foreigners. It was more than a little satisfying that her irritating doubt in Emilio had been effortlessly put to rest.

The senior Vega had been reinstated as an agent over two months ago to the date of their current mission but this was only one of a handful of times they'd all worked together. Not long after leaving the Fourth, Emilio had been sent on a solo assignment that had lasted weeks. The current mission in China was their first long international journey and their first storm as a team.

The storm in question was a relatively straightforward one. Infiltrate a Janus node that had popped up in the area and decimate it. It was a location that Di Zhi had recently reported to the Agency due to their own hesitance to act.

While Boyd had been gone, serious tension had risen in Di Zhi after their takeover of the China Reform Party. The in-fighting had weakened them and left Xu Xiaolian hesitant to make a direct attack on Janus. She'd finally
decided to overtly cash in on the connection she’d formed with the Agency in a way other than information trading.

“ETA?” Bex asked as she peered out the window of the van they’d acquired.

The only sign that she felt the cold was the way her fingers clenched into white-knuckled fists which she quickly covered by slipping on a pair of gloves. She seemed determined to show no sign of weakness in front of Emilio. Her respect in his ability and history as an agent seemed about on par with what Boyd had heard about her obsession with strength.

Over the past few months of working with the woman, Boyd had realized that she deemed the worth of a person based on his skill as an agent. Her dislike of Boyd seemed to go beyond that standard but even then, her outright hostility had dimmed considerably when they’d begun working together. Despite her disgust with how she assumed he’d gained his position, she’d been unable to deny that he was a worthy agent. After he’d gone back into training to regain his form, it had been made even more undeniable.

“Ten minutes,” Emilio replied flatly, not looking over at the woman at all.

Bex nodded and slipped out of the passenger’s seat to join Boyd in the open space behind the center console. The vehicle appeared to be an old moving van which was fortunate considering they’d been able to easily store the equipment that they’d brought with them on the Agency flight.

She stripped off her civilian clothing and changed into similar gear as Boyd. Beneath dark-colored outerwear and flak jackets, they both wore black bodysuits with Kevlar micro-threading infused with other para-aramid synthetic fibers. The main difference in gear was their choices of weaponry. While she favored two M1911 ACPs, a Compact XM8 and a variety of knives
hidden on her body, Boyd simply carried the SIG Sauer that Sin had given him, a garrote, and his tonfa.

Bex glanced at him with veiled interest. After three months of working together, they'd barely had an entire conversation, even one that was mission-related. Their exchanges were always short and to the point; professionalism infused with an obvious air of dislike.

"You any good with that thing?" she asked, indicating the tonfa.

As usual, her question came out as more of a barked demand than anything else. He'd come to see over time that she spoke to everyone that way except her superiors. In the brief time that Jordan had been in the unit, he'd realized that Bex even treated her sister harshly if not more so than everyone else.

The combination of Bex's sometimes violent domination of her sister compared to Jordan's wide-eyed submission was bizarre, bordering on disturbing. Sometimes it had seemed that Bex had a power over her twin that went far beyond the normal bounds of sibling interaction.

"Yes," Boyd replied simply. He didn't look over at her, keeping his impassive gaze on the front.

She didn't appear to have expected more of an answer and her brief interest in him quickly faded. The next few minutes passed silently as they finished adjusting their gear and fixing their comm units.

When Emilio finally pulled the van to the side of the road, they were in a remote part of the city. Their target structure was the former headquarters of a corporation that had since been shut down, the building long ago abandoned. It was large, had multiple floors and a large outer courtyard with a parking lot that they would have to cross.
Next to that building was another, smaller building that was thought to hold secondary activity or act as storage. The orders were to destroy both to ensure the thorough destruction of the node.

Emilio slid out of the driver's seat and joined them in the back. His typically animated face was blank, his eyes emotionless as they went from Bex to Boyd. At the moment he looked more like his son than ever. It was the expression that Sin had always used around people who were unfamiliar or untrustworthy. The comparison to Sin came readily to Boyd's mind, as he suspected it always would.

"Let's go over this again," Emilio said flatly, his tone clipped. "Two buildings will be destroyed. Four charges set in the designated areas in each building to ensure maximum damage is done to the infrastructure."

Bex nodded, her eyes narrowed seriously. She was one of the most intense people Boyd had ever worked with on a mission. Even when Kassian and his team had come to get him in Monterrey, there had been familiarity despite the fact that they'd been highly organized and controlled. Bex, it seemed, never relaxed or didn't know how.

"We're not looking to scare them, we're looking to kill them. We want this node wiped out completely."

Once again Emilio's vivid green eyes slid from Boyd to Bex.

"Boyd you're on first position. Bex, you run the charges."

Bex's eyes opened wide and her lips pulled back in a grimace. "What the fuck?"

Before Emilio had returned, Bex had always assigned Boyd to be the runner. It was the riskiest position, placing explosives in the building, and as such it usually fell to the lowest-ranked agent.
Boyd simply nodded.

"He should run the charges," Bex said, clearly taken aback. "I'd create more of a diversion. He doesn't even have any real firepower to keep them occupied."

"I don't give a shit if he came armed only with pompoms. He's on first. You're running the charges," Emilio replied, staring at Bex with narrowed eyes.

She bared her teeth in a grimace, glaring at him in resistance. "When I was team leader—"

"Well you ain't the fucking team leader anymore," Emilio snapped, grabbing her by the neck and shoving her back against the van's wall. "This is my team. This is our unit. I don't care what you did in Prague with your cunt twin. You do what I say or I'll rip your fucking head off. Got it?"

Bex's mouth thinned in a tight line. "Yes."

Emilio released her with obvious disgust and looked at Boyd again. "I'll be running the mission from here. Alert me if you need backup." His gaze returned to Bex scornfully. "You'll have twenty seconds to get out once the charges are activated."

She didn't react to this information and turned around stiffly, sliding the door open.

Boyd barely bothered to look between the two. Emilio had never seemed to care that much for Bex and although this was the first time they'd interacted quite that tensely, it was also the first time Boyd had seen Bex directly question one of his orders. He didn't bother thinking too much about any of it, his mind focused on the mission instead.
Bex exited the van and Boyd paused only long enough to grab a grenade before he, too, left. She had already disappeared into the shadows by the time he set foot on the ground even though he was only a few seconds behind her.

This area of China seemed to include groupings of buildings and streets dotted amongst mostly blank fields. The size of the islands of civilization varied somewhat significantly, as did the length of fields in between.

The target building had a few smaller buildings scattered around it and a small spattering of trees in the fields stretching beyond. Boyd assessed the layout quickly and ran toward the nearest building that was set at the best strategic advantage for him.

The wind was ice cold, nearly sucking the breath from him. Ice crystals felt like they were forming in his nostrils from the moisture of his breath alone. He knew it wouldn't be long until he would feel the pull on his chest as the air felt too cold to warm on the way to his lungs. The wind made everything that much worse, whipping against him with little in the way to stall the strength as it rolled across large expanses of empty land.

He ignored the cold and paused at the corner of the building he was hiding behind. The night sky spread above him would have seemed beautiful had he been in the state of mind to appreciate it. The inky black was dotted with tiny sparks of stars, scattered across the sky like spilled diamonds. The moon was a waxing crescent, barely a sliver of pale silver-gold that did little to light the world below. Although there were lights, shadows crept amongst the buildings in dark, reaching tendrils.

Since Boyd's function was to cause a diversion, he didn't bother hiding his pale skin and hair. He pulled the pin and threw the grenade, watching it skitter and clatter against the concrete before he sheltered himself by moving
around the corner. The explosion rocked the quiet night with a concussion of fire and sound. There were shouts of surprise and pain and Boyd took advantage of the confusion.

He crouched and calmly started picking off anyone who ran within his sight. His hand was steady and every move was efficient and quick, going from person to person within seconds. He took kill shots, aiming at their heads, and impassively watched his targets fall. They sometimes careened forward with the momentum of their bodies and sometimes dropped where they stood.

He had grown accustomed to using his SIG Sauer since he'd returned to active duty. The first time he'd used it had been bittersweet. He'd had to ignore the thought in the back of his mind that Sin had known him so well; that the gun was perfect for his needs and he never got the chance to tell Sin how useful the gift had been. Since then, with the gun holstered at his side near his still-healing and refinished brand, he'd felt Sin's memory as a near-palpable weight.

It was at once depressing and comforting but it was something he never focused on directly anymore. At least not on duty.

It didn't take long for the hostiles to notice what was happening. As the dust was settling from the explosion, his enemies found cover and started returning fire. Bullets made sharp popping sounds as they shot by, hitting the edge of the building and sparking off the ground. Boyd used the corner as cover, calmly crouching with his gun aimed toward the sky. His head remained tilted toward the corner and he periodically ducted around to shoot back.

He knew it wouldn't be long until they realized his location and that he was alone. He did what he could to prolong it but soon they were creeping
closer between gunfire and he was certain some of them would be flanking the building.

He considered his options and then crouched low and bolted out from the corner. He drew gunfire immediately from two angles; the original space and the hostiles who had started to move around the sides of the building.

He ran quickly and in a darting motion to keep from being an easy target and then made sure he was seen ducking behind a nearby building. He ran around the corner of the building at full speed so they would assume he kept going but instead he slid to a stop and hid in a recess. He sheathed his gun and pulled out his tonfa, leaving them unexpanded at first.

It wasn't long until the fight shifted from guns to combat. The first hostile who came around the corner was focused far ahead, looking around for where gunfire may spark back at him. He wasn't expecting Boyd to dart out of the shadows and take him down in one sharp, forceful hit. The man fell, his momentum causing him to topple without a sound aside from the meaty weight of his body hitting the ground.

The next few hostiles met similar fates; Boyd blended into the shadows until he saw the best opportunity to strike. He moved quickly and efficiently; every strike causing maximum damage with the least amount of effort he could afford.

The arrangement couldn't last indefinitely, however. He didn't have time to hide the bodies so it didn't take long for the new hostiles to realize what was happening. He engaged in combat immediately, forcing them to sheath their guns or risk killing compatriots with friendly fire.

The next several moments were a flurry of activity.

Soon, knives and blunt weaponry entered the fray. Boyd was at the center of it, spinning between opponents, striking hard and fast and darting.
away from return hits. He was fast, much faster than many of the hostiles who likely hadn't had as intensive training.

He was in the best shape of his life after months of having nothing to do, nothing to focus on, except improving himself. He was confident he was even better than he'd been when Sin had said he was comparable to Jon or Kassian. He'd sparred with Kassian and Emilio on occasion and found it hadn't been difficult the way he remembered.

He could last longer and fight harder but in this case, the very nature of his role as diversion meant there was a seemingly endless supply of hostiles coming at him. When some fell, others came to fill their place.

It was only a matter of time until he started taking hits. One in particular jarred his arm so hard his fingers tingled to the point that he nearly dropped the tonfa. He recovered quickly, swiping the tonfa back to protect his arm while he expanded the left tonfa. He used his left hand as offense and right as defense until he started to feel his hand again.

His shoulders and arms were starting to feel the strain of constant jolts and drags; of slamming his tonfa up to protect his forearms and then flipping them around to strike out. He twirled the tonfa in protection, or in some cases flipped them so he could grab them by the end and use the hand holds to rip enemy's weapons out of their hands.

When people got too close, he elbowed and kicked and attacked with whatever was necessary. He kicked a woman in the stomach to throw her off balance while he dealt with the man bearing over her on her left. He returned to the woman once he'd dispatched the man, catching her across the temple.

He had to duck more than once and nearly got thrown to the ground at one point. The fighting became more intense and involved, with Boyd having to dodge and in a few cases jerk down and swipe legs out from beneath his
opponents. A few of them got their hands on him, yanking on his clothing as they tried to capture him or hold him still for their comrades to dispatch. A few had longer weapons that they tried to use on him. He felt more than one violent jolt to his body, including one cockeyed hit against his right side that left a lasting tingling feel.

It was chaotic around him but there was a zone of silence in his mind. The sounds of the furious shouts and the clanging and thumps of weapons and bodies hitting each other, and the harsh panting and running footsteps of reinforcements—All of it fell away around him the way he kept making the crowd fall away while trying to hit him.

Even in the midst of fighting his expression hadn't shifted from the impassiveness that let the world slide by around him. He listened only for the telltale signs of attacks coming toward him; the whoosh of a weapon through the air or the feel of an enemy too close.

He was just wondering how long he'd have to do this when he heard Bex's voice in the comm unit, stating that she was putting the last charge in the first set in place. He'd been moving steadily toward empty space and at her words he darted into the shadows and turned to run. Enemies pursued him but not all; some of them hadn't realized he'd fled yet and others were in no condition to continue fighting.

He'd made it almost to the next building before he realized there was a significant lack of weight at his waist. His eyes widened and he jolted his hand back, feeling for his gun. It was missing. It must have gotten dislodged during the fight.

A thrill of alarm fluttered through his heart; something he hadn't felt even during the most intense parts of the mission.
"Shit," he hissed emphatically and didn't hesitate before he pivoted and ran straight back into the thick of the enemy. He wasn't going to leave Sin's last gift behind.

He didn't let himself engage in any one-on-one combat; he hit them hard and fast as he ran past, throwing people's heads against buildings and driving his tonfa like a stake into their stomachs, throats and anywhere else. His entire arms buzzed from fingertips to shoulder blades with the strength of it all.

He was just rounding the corner when the first explosion rent the air like thunder and lightning. The building behind him jolted with the impact of the shock wave. Mist flew out from windowsills and snow rained down from the roof. Boyd barely jumped out of the way before sharp stalactites of ice crashed down and pierced through the soft flesh of the people beneath.

Screams and chaos overcame the immediate area and there was enough confusion that Boyd was able to look quickly, almost frantically, for his SIG Sauer. The fire cast strange, jumping shadows from over the roof and some of the hostiles took off back toward the building while others started recovering more quickly than he'd hoped.

He saw his gun clatter across the ground as someone kicked it in their hurry and he dove for it, narrowly missing getting knifed in the stomach in the process. He braced one hand against the ground and twisted out of the way. He skidded on his side and swiped the gun off the ground, raising it up to shoot the man in the head in the same movement. It was a clean shot that caused a small bleeding hole in front and blew out the back of the man's head. Blood and gore sprayed across the people in the vicinity and the body dropped to the ground.

Boyd was on his feet and gone in seconds. He ran at full speed, leaping over any obstacles and occasionally twisting to shoot at pursuit.
Emilio was sitting in the driver's seat and opened the passenger door when he saw Boyd sprinting toward him. Boyd leaped into the van and left the door half open, already discarding his empty magazine and shoving in a full one as he turned to see if he'd been followed.

Without waiting for Boyd to fully settle, Emilio slammed on the gas. The back tires on the van squealed angrily and Boyd nearly got thrown out the door before he caught himself on the ceiling handle. He held on with one hand and aimed his gun with the other, peering back and getting ready to take out any pursuit. No one was there but that was likely to change soon.

One thing he noticed was that Bex was conspicuously absent. He glanced questioningly at Emilio.

Emilio returned the look steadily and drove away without so much as a backward glance. "She only has six seconds to get out," he said uncaringly just as gunfire began exploding behind them. "And we now have a pursuit. Take care of it."

Boyd nodded curtly, finding that he wouldn't mind that terribly if Bex was left behind.

The second set of explosions sounded in the not too far distance. The short delay between the sets had been calculated to catch any enemies who ran in for damage control and to give Bex time for proper placement. Even this far away he could feel a faint shuddering of the air. The shock wave was powerful enough to throw people off their feet if they were too close.

He braced himself and leaned out enough to return fire. He jerked his head in and out of the vehicle to avoid getting hit. He volleyed between aiming at the tires on the pursuing vehicle and aiming at the gunmen trying to shoot them. He killed several of the gunmen and successfully shot the driver on one of the vehicles, causing the vehicle to swerve off the road. Another vehicle
was still in pursuit, though, and several of the hostiles had still been alive in the vehicle left behind.

Keeping an eye on their pursuit was the only reason he saw her.

Bex was running impossibly quickly to catch up. Her feet were a blur across the road and it seemed like what he was seeing should have only happened in a dream. His eyebrows ticked up a fraction as she easily came up on the van despite the fact that Emilio was driving fast. They hadn't gotten terribly far but even so there was no way a person would normally be able to catch them.

He continued to exchange gunfire, covering her until he heard a thump on the back followed by one of the back doors opening. Bex slid into the van and shut the door behind her. The sound of gunfire pinging off the back of the van continued and Boyd concentrated on returning fire.

Bex used her XM8 to knock out the windows on the back doors and began unloading at their pursuers, looking completely calm and not fatigued at all despite the fact that she had just run through hostiles and narrowly escaped explosions with not more than two seconds to spare. She pumped her shotgun efficiently, aiming at tires and blowing them out of the pursuing vehicle.

The pursuing car screeched to the side, then overturned and rolled. Boyd paused, watching to see if anyone survived and who would be determined enough to continue pursuit. No one immediately crawled out of the wreckage and as Emilio continued to drive, taking them around a corner where they were no longer in sight of the Janus node, Boyd finally shut the door fully and turned to sit normally in his seat.

He replaced the empty magazine and then slid the gun into his holster. He looked down, seeing that the strap on the holster was damaged in the fight.
and likely had been what had allowed the gun to fall out. His lips thinned and he determined to get that fixed as soon as he returned.

"I figured you died," Emilio said flatly, green eyes flicking to the mirror so that he could see Bex behind him.

She shrugged her sinewy shoulders and stripped off the flak jacket, revealing the thin, tough body beneath. At times her looks went far beyond androgyny—at the moment, the mix of her bodysuit flattening her already meager chest and the severely intense expression on her face made her appear very much like a man.

"Nah," she replied, not appearing very hurt by the fact that they'd left her. Her face was difficult to read so it wasn't clear exactly what she was thinking when she drawled soon after, "I'm quite hard to kill. They wasn't playing when they said I was the new Sin."

Emilio's gaze flashed to the mirror again and his expression could only be described as frozen. His full mouth thinned, lashes lowering over his eyes before they flicked back to the road.

Boyd's eyes narrowed and his back stiffened at her comment. He didn't look back at her but he turned a cold glare out the window as anger moved through him.

He didn't say anything; he knew better than to respond verbally or physically to anything related to Sin. That didn't, however, stop the vitriolic response in his mind; that she wasn't the new Sin. No one could replace Sin. His expression was stony as his fingers tightened against the familiar lines of the gun.

"Maybe you should shut the fuck up for the next thirty hours or I'll show you just how easy to kill you can be," Emilio said in a soft, dangerous voice, his gaze straight ahead and fingers clenched around the wheel as if it were
the only thing preventing him from acting on his threat. Tension held his entire frame tight and every outline of muscle stood out from beneath his clothing.

Bex looked at him for a long moment, the corner of her thin lips twisting up. "I forget how sensitive you lot can be. So sorry."

"What did I just say?" the senior Vega asked in the same low tone. He looked at her in the rear view mirror again and for a moment their gazes locked.

Whether Bex backed down because he was her superior or if it was something she saw in his eyes was unknown. But she shrugged again, scoffed quietly and disappeared to the back of the van to begin stripping off her gear.

Boyd glanced coldly back through the mirror when he heard her move out of the way. He entertained images of Emilio following through with his threat. He himself would never be able to get away with any actions against Bex but maybe Emilio would. Maybe. Maybe Bex would lose her attitude once she saw she wasn't impervious.

It wasn't going to happen but it was a nice thought nonetheless.

Boyd didn't keep his gaze on the back for long; he didn't want her to see. Bex already knew that Sin was a touchy subject for him but he hadn't reacted to anything since that fateful first meeting. He was determined to keep it that way and the best way to do that was to not give her more fodder. She generally didn't bother with pointless prodding but when she knew a person had a weakness, she had no compunctions with striking at it when the person least expected.

When it came to Sin, he cared too much and still felt too bitter and depressed when he let himself think about it. If he started engaging now he
would likely end up in a rapid downward spiral with a final destination of the barrel of an Agency-issued gun and a date with the incinerator.

When Boyd started to look away he glanced past Emilio and for a moment, their eyes met.

Emilio’s face was hard and angry. For all that he and his son had been similar, he didn’t have Sin’s gift for masking his feelings with a neutral expression and a sarcastically cutting reply. When Emilio felt something, it was written all over his face and now he looked murderous. He had changed a lot in the past year; the death of his son had taken an obvious toll on him. Perhaps other things had too—the death of his friendship with General Carhart as well.

Whatever was weighing more heavily on the older man’s shoulders, there was no denying that he didn’t seem as interested in playing the joker card anymore. He didn’t seem as amused by things or as willing to entertain by acting like the horny former street kid that everyone had always seen him as. Now he seemed dark, dangerous and impatient. There were still glimmers of the old Emilio here and there but now they seemed like pieces of a real personality instead of just a flamboyant act.

When Emilio’s eyes returned to the road, some of the tension seemed to have eased from his body. Boyd didn’t know why but he suspected that like himself, Emilio found comfort in being in the proximity of someone who understood.

Boyd looked away, returning his attention out the window. His hand lingered on the gun, his fingers brushing against the familiar lines comfortingly.

Neither of them spoke and with Bex still in back, the van fell into silence. Even when she came toward the front again Boyd didn’t look away
from the window. Towns and cities flashed by in islands of pale light and when the three of them got back on the plane, his view of the world below was similar. Black expanses of land broken up by small planes of scattered light, almost like a reflection of the night sky above.

The plane ride seemed to take forever and Boyd struggled against the morose anger that remained in the background of his mind. The voice that demanded why Sin had to die and why Bex had to be someone who was now invading their unit.

He tried to avoid thinking too much about Sin because it never did him any good. But between Bex’s comment and Emilio sitting at just the right angle for the side of his face to be so reminiscent of Sin’s profile, it was difficult.

It was probably good that he didn’t have any particularly fond memories of being with Sin on planes. No doubt if he had, he would have found it nearly impossible to ignore them and the gloom that still came with the knowledge that Sin was never returning.

For months, he’d found himself still looking up when he’d heard the door open, expecting to see Sin’s face. If someone had called, he had checked the caller ID and had thought for that painful half of a second that maybe it was Sin. He had rolled over in bed and reached a hand out absently for his lover, only to be half awoken by the sharp reminder that he was alone. He still reached out in bed but by now he’d mostly stopped expecting Sin to appear in the doorway.

His thoughts inevitably revolved around Sin as he leaned against the window and, eventually, closed his eyes for an unsuccessful attempt to sleep.

When they returned to the Agency, it was business as usual. Their check in and report writing thankfully didn’t take long. When Boyd was
finished and went to leave, something in Emilio's face told him to hover behind a moment. They ended up walking out of the Tower together.

"Big plans for the night?" Emilio asked, lighting a cigarette as he flicked a glance over at Boyd.

Boyd shook his head, sliding his hands into his pockets and narrowing his eyes faintly at a gust of cold wind. His long blond hair whipped in the wind, briefly lifting off his neck and causing a chill to run down his spine. "I don't have any plans at all."

Emilio nodded, taking a drag from his cigarette and pausing to zip up his leather jacket. "Wanna come by my place? I'm getting tired of staring at the walls on my own."

Boyd glanced at Emilio. It was the first time the older man had invited him over. Maybe Emilio felt the same way Boyd did; not particularly looking forward to sitting around alone tonight. "Sure."

"Cool." Emilio started walking to the parking lot. "I live over in Bedford now."

Boyd walked at Emilio's side, remaining silent at first. Bedford was one of the poorer neighborhoods of the city and not that particularly safe. But it was affordable because of it. Not that Emilio needed affordability with the kind of money he had, or that he needed to worry about protecting himself. Boyd wondered if Emilio felt most at home there.

"Have you been there long?"

"Yeah. I moved in a little over a year ago." Emilio flicked the cherry of his cigarette, sending ashes dancing into the cold wind. "It sucked living there at first but it ain't so bad now."

"Why Bedford? You could live anywhere."
"Well I meant living in that big ass apartment all by myself. But Bedford I guess 'cause..." Emilio trailed off and tilted his head to the side, cracking his neck as he seemed to consider the question. "I dunno. I like living around my own kind. I can't relate to rich folks. All that high class shit makes me uncomfortable."

Boyd nodded again and looked away. He'd suspected as much.

He found that even talking to Emilio about unrelated topics, he couldn't shake his somber mood. The fact that they'd leaped back twelve hours, leaving China before sunrise and returning to the Agency after sunset, wasn't helping. The dark sky seemed oppressive and made him feel tired in a way that wasn't entirely physical.

With Sin gone and their new life taken with him, the luxury of the Agency felt like a mocking reminder of the luxury of Aleixo's compound. Boyd was acutely aware that in many ways he was as caught by the Agency as he had been by Cyclone. In the end, maybe he would always amount to nothing more than a high-rent slave.

Boyd pushed his hair out of his eyes and returned his attention to Emilio, shaking off the dark thoughts in his mind. He wasn't entirely successful. Everything that had changed remained in his thoughts despite his best efforts; Sin's death chief among them. That seemed to be the case anywhere he was once he'd thought about his lover, but it happened especially at home.

"I've thought of moving as well. The house is too large."

"Are you really gonna do it or are you just gonna keep thinking about it?" Emilio asked, blowing smoke out of his mouth as they approached the end of the courtyard.
"I don't know," Boyd said with a faint shrug. "There aren't any places that appeal to me, yet I don't care for living in the house."

"Just get an apartment uptown. It don't got to be something really special. It'd probably do you good to put some distance between yourself and your past, you know?"

Boyd nodded absently, considering that. He'd been thinking about it on and off for awhile, it just never seemed to happen. Something always came up: missions, he was tired, the idea of looking for a place reminded him too much of how he'd been planning to look with Sin...

He didn't know what he would end up doing.

Truthfully, he didn't have the energy or presence of mind to sell his place. It would be a lot of work to pack and move and in the process no doubt he would dig up any number of memories best left untouched for a few more months at least. Not to mention, sometimes it was comforting to know that Kassian was so nearby; that if he really needed to visit a friend at a moment's notice, he could be there in less than five minutes.

Too often he'd woken from dreams in which Sin was still alive or from a nightmare reliving something from the mission that he'd rather forget. And, when reality was too powerful and his mind was still half-compromised by sleep, he listened to his own strained, harsh breath and felt tears track down his cheeks before he could stop them.

Even so, he hadn't visited Kassian much. The times in the middle of the night when he'd desperately wanted help he'd forced himself to stay still and deal with it on his own. He couldn't keep relying on others. But the knowledge that if ever his control broke he could walk to Kassian's was something that he sometimes felt aided him in his stoic silence.

"We'll see," was all he said.
They got to the parking lot and Emilio headed to a matte black muscle car that was sitting in a far corner of the lot, parked so that it took up two spaces. It was obviously several decades old and from what Boyd could remember, he thought it looked like a Gran Torino. It probably guzzled gas in insane quantities but it suited Emilio. The idea of him driving a small electric car seemed very out of place.

Emilio unlocked the car and slid into the driver's side. "Ready?" he asked as he turned the keys and the engine roared to life.

Boyd nodded and buckled his seat belt, looking around idly at the car. It had bench seats and an all black leather interior. "I can't imagine a vehicle that fits you better."

The other man flashed him one of his trademark grins. "I'll take that as a compliment."

With that being said, they roared out of the parking lot faster than was absolutely necessary.

Boyd rocked in his seat at the sudden power and absently braced a hand against the door. Emilio sometimes drove like a race car driver on speed.

Neither of them spoke on the ride over and Boyd half paid attention to the landscape flying past. Emilio got them there much faster than anyone who drove the speed limit and followed all traffic signals would. When Emilio finally pulled to the side and parked, Boyd looked over to see where the older man lived.

The brick building was large—seven stories and wide enough to wrap around half of one street and the avenue that ran adjacent to it. It was relatively straightforward—no gate or courtyards; just a simple brick apartment building whose main door led out to the sidewalk. The street itself was dark.
and quiet other than the faint sound of Spanish music floating from the open door of a corner store at the end of the block.

Although Bedford was considered a bad neighborhood by some, now that Boyd was here he saw that it didn't look that rough. It certainly didn't look as dangerous as some areas of the Industrial District and especially not the Barrows, which wasn't too far from the same area. This part of Bedford seemed quiet and primarily working class.

As if reading his thoughts, Emilio winked as he climbed out of the car. "Not too dangerous for you, is it?"

A man walked out of the store at the corner and started down the street. Both his hands were occupied by plastic bags drooping toward the sidewalk with heavy items. Judging by the lines, he'd probably purchased some canned food.

"I'll manage," Boyd said mildly.

Emilio shook his head slightly and flipped his keyring around his finger, walking around the car to the sidewalk. "If you go farther south it does get bad 'cause it's so close to the Barrows. Up here you got the college and Lincoln Square so it's too pricey for the hoodlums. 'Cept me, of course."

Boyd looked in the direction of the college, although he couldn't see it from this angle. Now that he thought about it, putting this area of Bedford into perspective with the areas he'd been, he realized Jaz's tattoo parlor wasn't terribly far away. Her store was in Lincoln Square where the district met with Bedford and the Barrows.

"I used to go to the college," Boyd said aloud, walking at Emilio's side. "I don't think I ever came this way, though."
"It's not a big destination. Ain't shit here, really, except houses and buildings."

Emilio swiped a magnetic chip against a panel near the door and it buzzed. He pushed the door open and walked into the lobby area. It was empty except for two sets of stairs on either side of the space, an elevator and a row of mailboxes in the wall. He bypassed the elevator and they took the stairs up to the third floor. It wasn't anything special—just plain tiled floors and metal doors with gold numbers on them. When Emilio unlocked his door it opened up to an extremely large apartment.

There was an entrance area that led into a huge living room. Arched doorways led to a large kitchen, a hallway, and another spacious room that had doors leading off of it. The living room was sparsely furnished except for a leather sofa, an arm chair and an impressive-looking television and stereo system.

"Ain't much," Emilio said, tossing his keys on a table by the door. "I dunno if I'm even going to bother pimping it up. I can't find it in myself to give a shit."

Boyd unbuttoned his coat as he took in the apartment. "It's big," he observed. He started to shrug off his coat, noting how the relative lack of furniture made the rooms seem even larger. He looked over at Emilio. "I could see how it could get lonely."

The other man nodded, shrugged his broad shoulders as he removed his own jacket and dropped down onto the couch. "I doubt I woulda cared before but it's like, more time to think and I don't got a whole lot to distract me."
Boyd set his coat over the back of the couch and, after a moment of glancing around, ended up sitting on the other end. He nodded and leaned back. "I know what you mean."

Emilio draped his arm over the side of the couch and picked something up from the table at the side of it. It appeared to be a little tray with a small bottle and a razor blade. Him grabbing it almost seemed like an unconscious gesture because immediately after, he just set it on the arm of the couch.

Rubbing a hand across his face, Emilio arched his back until it cracked as he simultaneously released a long sigh. He ran his long fingers through his short black hair and glanced over at Boyd again. He opened his mouth to say something, frowned slightly and stopped.

"What?" Boyd asked.

The other man shrugged and picked up the pill bottle, twisting it absently between his fingers. "It's just weird, is all. I never would have thought him dying would affect me this much for so long," he admitted bluntly, dark brows raising.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down faintly. "What did you anticipate?"

"It ain't the first time I thought him dead." Emilio's green eyes focused on the bottle as it twirled dexterously between his fingers. "I never would have thought him dying would affect me this much for so long," he admitted bluntly, dark brows raising.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down faintly. "What did you anticipate?"

"It ain't the first time I thought him dead." Emilio's green eyes focused on the bottle as it twirled dexterously between his fingers. "I never thought he'd have made it back here after the shape he was in down in Mexico. And if he did, I didn't think they'd waste resources with the surgery and time it shoulda took to get him back in order."

He stopped twirling the bottle and set it down on the table with a clatter, shifting on the sofa and drawing his legs up onto the couch. One knee bent and he rested his chin against it as he ran a hand through his hair once again. It looked disheveled and wild when he was done.
“So I mourned him but I was more pissed the fuck off than anything. Even when my snitch told me that it'd been reported he was dead. I still didn’t...” Emilio trailed off and looked at Boyd with a frown. "I dunno. It just ain't the same then as it is now."

Boyd watched Emilio a moment before he spoke. "What changed?"

"I dunno. It was different before. He wasn't really real to me." His brow crinkled in thought and he lit another cigarette, taking a long pull as he seemed to puzzle over his own words. His full mouth turned down into a frown as he did so.

"Just—see it this way, right? When I had him, I was a kid. Thirteen. When I got him back, I was a fucking assassin with a bad coke habit. I didn't know how to be his father. I didn't have no one to model myself after. My own father was a fucking gangbanger himself. I didn't feel anything for him but an obligation to protect him 'cause it was my fault he was around anyway and dealing with the shit his crazy mama put him through," Emilio explained with the same callous bluntness. He looked up at Boyd through a cloud of smoke, unapologetic for the brutal honesty.

"So I did the only shit I thought I could do while still being me. I didn't even know if I liked the little fuck, let alone loved him. I was glad that he survived after Connors sent the hit out on me and kinda followed his life from time to time out of curiosity but... he still wasn't real to me. He wasn't like, my son. I never felt that way. Like he was mine or my family. Even in Mexico when I watched y'all. He was just like, this project that I was proud of 'cause it did well. It wasn’t until I came back that I started getting attached to him, like the way I was supposed to, you know? And now him being gone just fucking is horrible. Just when we was getting along."

Boyd considered that with a faint nod; it made sense the way Emilio explained it. But the thought about how even Emilio had come to love Sin in a
way that made him feel his son's loss in such a painful manner... It was sad and Boyd didn't know what to say to that.

He looked away, his gaze passing over the pill bottle. He was starting to feel even more depressed as they talked about missing Sin and he couldn't stop the voice in the back of his mind that wondered what was in the bottle. That wondered how long whatever drugs were inside could make everything feel better.

He could admit to himself that in the depths of depression that sometimes made it hard to think or move during the lulls between missions, there were times he would have broken down and taken something if it had been right in front of him. Times when he'd longed for a hit of Slide and had contemplated going into the city to find a dealer. Times when the longing and pain of losing Sin had been so sharp he'd wished for anything to make it stop.

He'd ignored the temptation for the most part except one night a month and a half ago, when he'd remembered the leftover bottle of vodka in his cupboard from before the mission. He'd only meant to take a drink or two to dull the ache. But one drink had become several and in the process of sitting in his living room, reliving every terrible and wonderful thing that had happened in there, he'd ended up finishing the bottle. He'd tried to go buy more but had passed out before he'd made it across the living room.

The next morning, he'd woken to a hangover and the piercing ring of his cell phone, with a summons to a mission. He'd managed to make it through the mission successfully and, he hoped, without anyone knowing how much he'd had to drink.

Still, it had scared him. He could have messed up in the mission and gotten terminated over something as stupid as being unable to stop drinking once he'd started, because the pain was still so sharp and the alcohol seemed to temporarily make it go away.
Having just come back from a mission now, it was unlikely they'd be called in to another one so soon. They'd been unofficially told before the mission that they should expect to have a day or two of downtime following it. That knowledge wasn't helping quiet the voice that whispered he could, just for tonight, let it all go away again. He could, just today, find a way to forget.

He could find a way to manage the pain.

He hadn't realized he'd fallen silent, his eyebrows drawn down with a half pensive, half yearning look as his gaze hovered on the bottle. He narrowed his eyes and looked away with a sigh, running a hand back through his hair.

He was still so distracted when it came to Sin. Still so full of sad, desperate longing.

"Sorry," he said with a faint grimace.

Emilio looked over at him and raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

"I'm just..." Boyd shook his head and raised his hands in a helplessly vague gesture. "Distracted. Not very good company."

The other man scoffed around an exhalation of smoke. "It don't matter. I'm not exactly being mister entertainment."

Boyd shrugged and shifted on the couch. He felt his gun digging into his lower back with the movement. He pulled the gun and holster off and leaned forward to set it on the table, his fingers briefly sliding across the barrel as he sat back. He pulled his legs up, crossing them and angling himself in the corner of the couch so he could see Emilio better.

There was another moment of silence as Boyd thought about what Emilio had said earlier. The talk about family was sticking in his mind. "Hsin never spoke about his grandfather. Did they ever meet?"
"Nah, they wouldn't have. I don't even remember if I told him anything about my pops. The old bastard's been holed up in San Quentin for like three decades for a triple murder. Unless he's dead now. Or transferred to Brighton since that's what they do with lifers sometimes," Emilio replied without compassion, shrugging. "I probably would have never seen his ass again if I hadn't bothered tracking him down before he got sent off. The reunion wasn't that awesome, anyway, so it wasn't never no big loss."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Triple murder?"

Emilio finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in an ashtray. "Yep. Vegas have always been killing sorts."

"Who'd he kill?"

"Fuck if I remember their names. Some gang folks. No one worth missing." Emilio shrugged and went to extract another cigarette from his pack. He'd always been a smoker but never a chain smoker as far as Boyd had seen.

Emilio slid the cigarette between his lips and raised his eyebrows slightly. '"Course lots of people would have felt the same about him. Just another dead gangbanger. Probably a lot of people would still feel the same about me if I got shot tomorrow. No one ever cries too hard about us hoodlum types."

"What about anyone else?" Boyd asked, finding himself mildly intrigued by the idea of Sin's bloodline. "Other Vegas."

"Pssh," Emilio scoffed again, white teeth flashing in a sardonic grin as he took the cigarette from his mouth unlit. "All of my uncles were up to their teeth in the same shit as my pops. Any of my family who stayed down there together grew up and became part of drug trade or died because of it.
Whenever I found him after my exile in Brazil, my aunt made me a sandwich while my uncles and pops talked about killing some cops."

He watched Boyd, lips twisted up slightly. "That shit goes back deep. My grandfather wasn't no better. The last few generations of Vegas are all twisted up in illegal shit. I bet it's in the genes, all this obsession with blood and killing. My grandma used to say we descended from the Aztecs, though," he added finally, tapping the tribal tattoo on his forearm. "So I guess that would make sense, then. Although my mom brought in her own brand of crazy so I guess she didn't do me no favors."

"Hmm." It was strange to think of so many Vegas. That explained Emilio's tattoo, which now that Boyd looked at it more closely seemed to be a rendition of the Aztec calendar. It made him wonder what his own ancestors were like. He knew next to nothing about his family, although the little he did know implied his family history was far less violent. "Does everyone look so similar like you and Hsin did?"

Emilio actually looked indignant about the question. "Fuck no, they don't. Bad enough Hsin was prettier than me, I can't handle that much competition. I look more like my mom except for my skin and hair. She was Brazilian and Ecuadorian—my pops' family is mostly Mexican with some mixing here and there. My other son doesn't even look like me as much as Hsin did. He could even pass for a blanquito if he tried."

"So you do have other children," Boyd mused. He and Sin had wondered about the topic long ago. Given Emilio's promiscuity, Boyd had always assumed Sin had to have at least one sibling. "Just one?"

"That I know of," was the unashamed reply. "I used to move around a lot when I was young but when the Agency came knocking, I was mostly in the city and no other bitches ever came asking for child support. I didn't even know this one existed until recently—his mother told me she'd aborted him."
Boyd drew his eyebrows down. "How'd you find out, then? She can't have tracked you down at the Agency..."

"Nah, your mother told me. I looked him up after that."

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding. Knowing Vivienne, she had probably known for a long time and had waited until it was most in her favor to bestow the information. "What's he like?"

"Eh." Emilio made a face and adjusted his position on the sofa, stretching one muscular arm across the back of it. After returning to the Agency he had always bragged about Sin and how powerful he was. He didn't seem in any hurry to do that about his younger child. "I've never met him even though he lives here in Lexington now for whatever reason. He seems to be set up financially so I didn't feel obligated to help him out and he seems to have done okay without some daddy figure barging in. But let's just say he follows the Vega family footsteps even if his name ain't Vega."

Boyd shook his head in bemusement, wondering if there really was something in the genes. He wondered what Emilio's other son knew about his family history, and what he would say if he met Emilio, or if he ever could have met Sin. He wondered if any of the Vegas had ever had a strong familial connection like Boyd had felt to his own father before he'd died.

"Were you close to your father?"

"He dumped me in Brazil when I was six. So not really, no," was the amused reply.

"Why did you track him down, then?"

There was a brief silence as Emilio observed him. He idly caressed the scar on his lower lip and tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. "I don't remember, really. I was just a kid back then with stupid ideas in my head that
he'd help me out 'cause I was tired of sleeping in back alleys and dodging death squads. He did, I guess. He set me up to learn how to do what he did even though I took it like twenty steps further and turned their drug shit into some serious international trade. Tough guy but not much of a thinker. None of them was.”

Boyd nodded. It sounded similar to Sin's own past with Emilio; how Sin had once hoped his father would save him from a painful life and how in the process of attempting to do so the father intensified the situation. He wondered how far back the cycle went and whether Emilio's other son would end up in a similar situation with offspring of his own some day.

In the end, Boyd couldn't think of anything to say to that and they fell quiet once again. The silence wasn't particularly uncomfortable and yet it was something that seemed stronger than it should have to Boyd. Perhaps because he was used to silence when he was alone and it didn't bother him to be quiet around another person, but even Emilio's presence wasn't enough to stop his thoughts from inevitably sliding back to Sin.

Bex's comment earlier about her being the new Sin mixed with his own pensive contemplations about the future Emilio's other son would have, and how Sin would never get that opportunity. He and Sin never would have had children and even if they'd been capable Boyd didn't think they would have been interested. With their line of profession, it had also been inevitable that they would die young; it had just been a question of how young.

But they could have grown as old together as possible for them. They could have made a life together the way they should have all along. They could have been their own small, imperfect family. They could have loved each other into the future.

It felt too cruel, having spent years building a relationship that finally had become stable only to have it ripped away.
He wished there had been more time. He wished an entire year of his life hadn't been wasted on that mission and he wished he'd been there when Sin's life had ended.

He wished a lot of things, and had many circuitous thoughts, but none of it did anything to lighten his mood. And when he looked over at Emilio, he was struck once more with how much Emilio looked like his son. How much it hurt to see that face and know Sin would probably have looked something like Emilio if he'd only lived to be his age.

It was like looking at a ghost of a future that would never exist. It struck a chord deep in Boyd the way it did every time he thought about his lover's death.

His heart twisted and he looked away, his gaze falling on the pill bottle again. He was sidelined by the thought of something stilling the fatalistic downturn of his thoughts.

"What's in that?" he asked, gesturing to the bottle.

Emilio glanced down at the table. It seemed that he'd been in his own reverie.

"Pandora."

Boyd was fairly certain he'd been given Pandora on the mission but he didn't remember it clearly. The other drugs the clients had sometimes given him were all overshadowed in his mind by the memories of Slide. What he knew was that Pandora was supposed to be intense but not as debilitating as Slide. Knowing it wasn't addictive just made it harder to tell himself he shouldn't try it.

"What's it feel like?" Boyd asked, eyebrows furrowed.
Emilio’s dark brows raised in an expression that reminded Boyd so much of Sin that it was painful.

"It feels like whatever you want it to feel like," Emilio drawled, giving Boyd a level gaze. "Times one thousand and ten. I mean it depends on how much you take, but... why do you ask?"

"I want to stop thinking," Boyd said bluntly. His eyes were dark and pensive; his face drawn. He gestured toward the bottle. "Maybe it would help."

There was an extended silence in which they just looked at each other. Emilio’s gaze was slightly narrowed and thoughtful as he took in Boyd. After awhile of considering the younger agent, Emilio shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It's probably not a good idea, chico. And weren't you the one on your high horse about how you didn't need drugs?" Emilio arched a brow. "When you thought you'd lost Hsin before, you never wanted to start popping caps then."

"It doesn't matter," Boyd said dismissively. "Times change."

He was graced with another long stare before Emilio stood up in one fluid movement and slid the pill bottle into his pocket. He turned away from Boyd and walked to the other side of the room. Boyd felt a flare of irritation that Emilio pocketed the pills. He hadn't expected Emilio of all people to take them away when he expressed interest.

"You can have a drink if you want but that's about it." Emilio stopped in front of what appeared to be a small bar. "If you wanna start gettin’ all fucked up to drown your sorrows, do it with whiskey like a normal person. You don't wanna be like me, do you?"
"Pandora isn’t even addictive," Boyd replied testily. "I’ve been through rehab for Slide. I think I can handle a little PD."

"So go score it somewhere else," was Emilio’s flat reply.

Boyd’s eyes narrowed. Knowing there was a release from his anxiety there, across the room, but it was taken away from him made his frustration rise. "Why are you so resistant? You’re the one who told me I was too boring before."

Emilio didn’t answer for a moment and poured a generous amount of Johnny Walker into a stout glass. He turned when it was full and took a long drink from the golden liquid, green eyes focused on Boyd again.

"’Cause I don’t think my boy would appreciate me participating in you becoming some loser drug addict. I don’t benefit shit from getting you high except thinking Hsin would probably think I was some kind of motherfucker for doing it. Sorry, kiddo—the pros and cons ain’t adding up in your favor in that respect."

Boyd stared hard at Emilio for a tense moment and then looked away with narrowed eyes and a stubbornly set jaw. He felt a mixture of frustration, anger, and depression. That reaction overtook him for a moment, filled with resentment toward Emilio and thoughts of forcing the older man to give over the pills after all. He could probably get them away if he acted abruptly enough. What did the old man need to hog them for, anyway?

There was a clawing longing within him, needing something to fill the void.

For that second he turned calculating. He automatically ran through scenarios of how to get what he needed—and how far he may need to run before Emilio could catch up. How quickly he could down the pills before
Emilio had a chance to stop him and how at that point it wouldn't matter anyway and maybe Emilio would start supplying him with more—

With a conscious effort, he shoved aside those insidious thoughts. Instead, he made himself focus on what Emilio had said.

He was right; Sin wouldn't like it.

And for all that trying to keep in mind the expectations his dead lover may have had was sometimes as painful as his continued attempts to move on, he still knew that he couldn't in good conscience do anything else. Memories of Sin were growing clouded but he could still imagine the look Sin would have given him had he been privy to his thoughts.

"A drink, then," he relented.

The other man nursed his whiskey briefly before setting the glass down on the black lacquer top of the bar. Another glass was extracted and Emilio filled it, giving Boyd a sideways look before sliding it closer to the edge of the bar in his direction.

Boyd walked over and picked up the glass, taking a drink. Although he wanted to down the whole glass, he was careful not to do so. With the looks Emilio was giving him, he didn't want the older man to determine he shouldn't even be drinking at all. He looked down at the amber color of the whiskey and the diffraction of light in the liquid.

"Thanks," he said, more subdued.

Despite Boyd's concerns, Emilio tossed his own drink back in one gulp and refilled it instantly. There was silence between them as Emilio lounged against the wall, his green eyes focusing on some point across the room.

The gusting wind shrieked outside the windows, interrupting the silence briefly. Emilio's mouth tightened at the sound and he shook his head, sighing
in disgust and tossing back his second drink before pushing away from the wall and moving away. He shed his outer shirt, revealing a black wife beater beneath, and he kicked off his boots unceremoniously. His movements were short and there was obvious tension in his shoulders, the lines of his face set in irritation.

    Sin used to say that his father's moods had always swung abruptly, sometimes for no reason at all, and this seemed to be one of those times.

    Boyd found that at the moment he preferred that. Even if he didn't know what was going on in Emilio's head, it just proved that at least Boyd didn't have to be on guard. For all he could tell, Emilio's thoughts were a mile away. With the freedom of not being watched closely, he finished his glass and refilled a second that he drank just as quickly.

    The alcohol burned down his throat, all the way to his stomach. He could feel his body tingling faintly. He felt relief in the knowledge that soon he wouldn't have to care that his lover was dead and he was in an apartment with someone who missed him as intensely as he did. Someone who looked like the person Boyd missed so achingly.

    He filled the glass a third time and took a more normal drink. After glancing at Emilio, who hadn't moved, Boyd let out a sigh and walked away from the bar. He dropped onto the couch and leaned his head back, resting the glass on his knee. The cushions were comfortable and the alcohol made him feel warm while some of his cares slowly started bleeding away.

    He wondered if all of Emilio's thoughts inevitably returned to Sin the way his own did. He wondered if Emilio was mad about the pills. He knew Emilio was right about them but he didn't know if his own opinion would change once he started to lose some inhibitions.
"Sorry," he said before he realized the words were going to leave his mouth. Must be the alcohol working on him already; loosening his tongue and making the words bypass his mind. He looked over at Emilio. "Could you keep them in your pocket? It's less tempting that way."

A low laugh escaped Emilio's mouth as he grabbed the whiskey bottle from the bar. He sat on the arm of the couch and swigged straight from the bottle. "I'm all for getting fucked up but I ain't ready to help you go down that road. I'll save 'em until I'm by myself."

"Good." Boyd threw back his head, finishing off the glass of whiskey.

He started to hold his glass out for more before his eyebrows twitched down. An odd look crossed his face as it occurred to him that he could drink straight from the bottle, too. He set the empty glass on the coffee table next to his gun and looked over at Emilio, wordlessly holding his hand out.

Emilio handed the bottle to him carelessly, sliding down to sprawl beside him on the couch. "We're some miserable bastards."

"Heh." Boyd took a long swig from the bottle. He could feel the whiskey swirling against his tongue before he swallowed. He held the bottle back out to Emilio and once the older man took it, he dropped his arm to the cushion.

He tilted his head back as his lips stretched humorlessly, the alcohol warming every part of him, from his toe tips up to his head. "We are, aren't we? Pathetic..."

There was no immediate response as Emilio wrapped his mouth around the bottle and took a long gulp. His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed continuously and when he finally stopped, amber liquid trickled from the side of his mouth. His expression was hard to describe in that moment. Miserable, yes, but there was a savage desperation there that the whiskey wasn't easing away.
Emilio stood up again, gripping the bottle in one hand. He looked around the apartment blankly for a moment, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair again. "Let's do shots," he said abruptly, voice rough.

Boyd rolled his head to look up at Emilio. From this angle, Emilio looked taller than he was; as if he could have a few inches on Boyd if the two were standing. That impression enhanced those striking green eyes and the strong line of his jaw; the fall of light against his olive complexion and the line of those full lips that looked so familiar.

It was like staring up at Sin.

The whiskey wasn't enough to mask the sharp pain at the thought, nor the regret and depression that followed. Boyd's eyes narrowed and he looked away, his lips thinning and eyebrows drawing together.

"Okay."

He pushed himself up off the couch. He was a little unsteady when he stood, although it was more a feeling of mild dizziness than anything, like he'd stood too quickly. He let himself catch his balance with the back of his calf pressing against the couch, and when he was steady he walked over to the bar.

"Life is bullshit," Emilio said flatly, filling two shot glasses from a different bottle. "Just when I fucking think I know what to expect from myself and my fucked up life, people got to die or consider me dead and just turn me all the fuck around."

Boyd nodded and then reconsidered that action when it made him feel unbalanced. He pulled out one of the barstools and dropped onto it, leaning against the counter top on his elbows.
"I know," Boyd said. "Everyone I love keeps getting killed. Not that it matters; I'll probably die soon anyway."

"Nah," the other man said in the same bitter voice as he picked up his shot glass. "You might live out a couple of decades and end up like me. Cheers."

Boyd shook his head dismally. At the moment, he couldn't even sardonically imagine a future in which he lived more than a handful of months. He felt so hopeless. He picked up the shot glass and downed it at the same time as Emilio.

A sharp, powerful taste overwhelmed his senses and burned all the way to his stomach. He let out a low breath and squeezed his eyes shut, slouching forward and shaking his head sharply as if to fight off the kick of the drink. That was powerful stuff, whatever it was. It certainly made him lose his train of thought about the likelihood of his death.

Emilio poured him another shot, which Boyd downed just as quickly. It was a little less startling the second time but still hit him hard.

Things slowly stopped mattering or fully making sense. His senses were fuzzy and the room felt hot. He unzipped his sweater and dragged it off, nearly getting it tangled on his arms when he couldn't figure out how to get it off properly. He dropped it carelessly to the floor near the bar stool and leaned against the counter, eyebrows furrowing as he stared at Emilio.

The man could be Sin's twin. Boyd tilted his head and started thinking stupid thoughts, muddled and distant and irrelevant but seeming important to him anyway.

Would Sin pour a drink the same way? Would he like the taste of this alcohol? Did he ever learn any bartending skills at Lunar that Boyd hadn't
seen? What would Sin be saying right now? How would he be looking at Boyd?

Boyd dropped his chin onto one hand, watching with half-lidded eyes as Emilio filled a third shot glass for each of them. Details and worries seemed unimportant and far away. Emilio's eyes seemed so green. It made Boyd wonder if Emilio avoided looking in the mirror so he wasn't reminded of Sin. Boyd thought that he would have to do that if he were Emilio.

He downed the third shot when Emilio gave it to him. Everything felt so pleasant and blurry. The room was fuzzy warm like a blanket and out of focus. He leaned heavily against the counter top, supporting himself on his elbows so he wouldn't lean too far one way or the other. The two of them continued on in that way but he lost track of what he was drinking and how much after the third shot.

Some part of him acknowledged that he was well beyond thinking properly but he more than equally didn't care. None of it mattered. His worries were muffled and removed the same as the clarity of the room and the intricacies of speaking clearly in proper, complete sentences.

He knew he was feeling messed up but he couldn't tell how poorly Emilio was doing until Carhart came up. That in itself was a sign that the older man must have been more than feeling the effects of the alcohol. Boyd had never heard of Emilio talking about his feelings, or his obsession for the General, but there he was ranting about it all.

Boyd couldn't remember how the topic started; just that suddenly Emilio was talking about how much he missed Carhart; how much it bothered him that the other man was completely out of his life. How desperate he was for Carhart but there was also bitterness that swung in and out, making it sound like he didn't think any of it would be resolved.
If Boyd had been more lucid, he would have noticed that the savage desperation Emilio showed and his intense desire to get fucked up had as much to do with Carhart as it did with Sin. Instead, he listened and nodded and drawled responses, occasionally adding his own dismal proclamations. At times he forgot what he said almost as soon as it passed his lips. He forgot a lot of what was being said to him as well.

He remembered dragging the bottle of whiskey closer to him and drinking straight from it, the glass cool against his hands. At one point he remembered setting the bottle down with a clunk and drawing his eyebrows down, every movement seeming to take a lot of effort and go too slowly. He remembered wondering when Sin had gotten there and why he was so upset.

Something about the thought wasn't quite right but it didn't matter enough for him to determine what it was.

He remembered picking up the bottle again and it being really heavy in his hand, and he remembered taking a long drink and thinking he had to say something before he could forget; the thought already wandering away from his mind before he could fully formulate it.

After that, everything was blurred. He had vague memories of movement, and the room being hot, and sweat on his skin. The texture of the couch against his hands and a deep voice murmuring words he didn't fully understand.

When he woke, his head pounded and something seemed strange. It took him a moment to realize it was that he felt cold for some reason and that something had just changed in the room. He grimaced and squinted, the light seeming ungodly bright and his body feeling entirely unwilling to move properly. His mouth tasted terrible.
He realized he was lying on a bed at the same time that he realized he was naked. He frowned, arduously pushing himself up to a slouching sit and rubbing at his face. He noticed movement in the room and blearily looked over, seeing Emilio partially turned away from him and getting dressed.

Boyd stared at the other man, his mind still working through the fog of sleep and alcohol, but even then he didn't miss their similar state of undress.

"What happened?" Boyd croaked.

Emilio took a long time to answer, shimmying into his jeans silently and refusing to turn in his direction. The back of his tattooed shoulders were stiff and wrought with tension. His movements were jerky and sharp.

"Don't remember?" his hoarse voice asked finally, although he still didn't turn around.

At Emilio's voice, Boyd had a sudden flash of memory. That low voice growling into his ear and full lips pressed against his skin. Hands wrapped around his arms and his body on fire with need.

He remembered his back slamming against the counter top on the bar; their mouths crushed against each other intensely. His body stretching and glass sliding and crashing around him. Laying against the counter and his hands digging into the edges as a thick erection shoved into him. As he was filled in a way he hadn't been for months.

He remembered his own lustful scream; the way he'd thrown his head back and the way his back had arched in overwhelming pleasure. He remembered his legs wrapping around that muscular body, urging the thrusts to go deeper and harder. His own voice calling out in desire. Sin's name a breathy chant on his lips as he'd stared up at who he'd thought was the man he loved.
He didn't have to ask to realize it hadn't been a dream. And the man he'd thought he'd been having sex with hadn't been Sin at all.

Frustration and disgust with the situation moved through him sharply, pounding through his mind like the hangover. He grimaced, rubbing his hands over his face and curling forward with his knees pulling closer. His lower back and ass ached in the movement.

He wanted to shove the memory away because with it came a vague recollection of elation at being with Sin again. That knowledge just seemed disquieting and came with a flash of guilt when he realized that he'd been fucking Sin's father, thinking of the son.

"Damn it," he hissed.

Emilio made a low sound and finally turned, looking directly at Boyd. He looked like a mess. His hair was in disarray and his eyes were completely bloodshot. There was such naked guilt and vulnerability on his face that for a moment it was almost jarring.

But then he looked away again, quickly, and continued fixing his jeans. "I didn't seduce you. Don't be thinking I did. It just fucking... everything got fucked up. I can't even—" Emilio broke off abruptly and gestured wordlessly.

Boyd shook his head, his headache growing stronger. He looked for his clothes. His underwear was nowhere to be seen but his jeans were within sight. They were just outside the room, looking as though they'd been dragged across the floor, likely caught under someone's feet. He let out a low breath that came out harshly, somewhere between a scoff and a sigh.

"I thought you were Hsin," he said, his voice twisted in bitterness that was mostly aimed at himself. He got out of bed and walked over to his pants. His hair fell around his face as he leaned forward, pulling his pants up with sharp movements. "I probably jumped at the chance."
Emilio shrugged and wiped a hand across his face before combing his fingers through his hair. "I dunno. It wasn't like—like you came on to me. It was just—I don't even fucking know. It just happened and I don't fucking remember why I didn't stop it." His voice rose at the end and sheer frustration and anger could be heard in it. "I'm such a fuck-up."

Boyd shook his head. It wasn't like Emilio had forced him to come to the apartment or get so shit-faced drunk with a man who looked almost exactly like his dead lover. He couldn't help the frustration he was feeling about everything: the situation, his stupid hopeless thoughts about Sin that he couldn't seem to stop, and how pointless all his attempts had been to make the pain go away. None of it ever worked. None of it was ever right.

With a sigh, Boyd turned toward Emilio. One hand pressed against his forehead as if to still the pounding of his head, while his eyes briefly squeezed shut. His other hand raised, his palm out to the older man.

"Emilio, just—stop. You didn't make me come here. You didn't make me drink so much like a damn idiot. I should have known better. Even when I was sober I thought you looked like him."

He dropped his hands and looked at Emilio heavily. "You stopped me from taking PD. I wouldn't have been capable of stopping myself from starting down that path."

"Still." Emilio shook his head stubbornly and finally turned to face Boyd entirely. His full mouth was turned down in a frown, eyebrows drawn together miserably. "I know how I get when I drink. I fucking get all depressed over Zach and I just look for anything to just—just, I dunno—I don't mean like, that you were just the nearest body but—"

Boyd thought that was probably exactly the case but didn't bother saying that aloud since it didn't matter anyway.
Emilio stopped again, obviously struggling. "Fuck me, I can't even explain. But that's just how I do, Boyd. I drink and I fuck. I never shoulda started drinking with you."

Boyd sighed, more lowly this time. He looked away.

He wished he could go back and do the previous night over, only this time not drink. Or at least not let himself get so drunk that he didn't know to stop, or not start, everything that had happened.

That view of the wall was too familiar to him. He abruptly remembered the mattress beneath him and the view of the room through long eyelashes. He remembered the unmistakable feeling of Emilio's sweat-slicked, hard body moving against him.

But more than anything, he remembered his lack of thoughts.

It was a strong memory of being overwhelmed by the intensity—the way his entire body had been buzzing from more than the alcohol. He'd felt alight with heady sensation. Every shift of Emilio's fingers across his overheated skin; every tickle of hair brushing against his cheek when he'd felt the warm sucking heat of lips and tongue and teeth moving across him.

He remembered the way he'd thrown his head back with a gasp; the way his hands had clutched at Emilio's bare back and the way he'd alternated between drawing in sharp breaths and practically sobbing out screams of pleasure. He remembered kissing Emilio deeply; the sensual ravaging of their mouths and the short gasps of breath in between. The way Emilio had rocked deep inside him, hitting every perfect spot to make Boyd let out ragged groans that grew louder and huskier as time passed. The way they hadn't even needed to be joined at other times to make Boyd ratchet up higher in the bed and groan-gasp-plead for more.
He remembered the stretching of those lips into a smile that had captured his attention. The rumbling chuckle that had stilled Boyd's breath.

He'd needed it—needed those insanely talented fingers and lips and tongue and it was there, so vividly in his mind—the shuddering memory of sex that was so incredible, so intense, he'd been able to do nothing but jerk and moan and beg and writhe, wanting it to never end. Making the physical acts even more gratifying had been an aching feeling of love. So muddled into seeing Sin's features where instead there were Emilio's, he'd lost himself in ecstasy.

The shot of memory was so intense that for a moment Boyd stilled. His jaw shifted and eyes narrowed, and tension seeped into his shoulders. He abruptly dropped his hands and looked for his shirt.

Of course Emilio had to give him such mind-blowing sex he was going to have an even harder time ignoring the flashes. It made everything that much worse, especially contrasted with the love he'd felt for Sin. The feeling of being uncomfortable around Emilio only increased.

He didn't know what to say to the other man. He didn't know what would make this better or make either of them feel less responsible for any of this.

Boyd felt even worse about the whole thing than he would have if he'd gone into it without a thought of Sin in his mind. Even if that would have been like forgetting Sin and leaving him behind, it would have been better than what had really happened.

Boyd didn't see his shirt in the room so he guessed it had to be in the living room out of view. "None of this should have ever happened."
"Obviously." Emilio turned his face away again, eyes narrowed as he looked out the window. It was storming outside, rain pounding against the window. "Better to forget that it did."

Boyd couldn't argue with that. He just hoped he would be able to. He made a noise of assent, not having words to voice any of his thoughts and knowing it was pointless anyway. They were both thinking the same thing.

He walked out of the bedroom, looking for the rest of his clothing. His coat and sweater were by the bar and when he swept his gaze across the room he saw his shirt crumpled near the couch. The cushions were askew and he suddenly remembered himself crouched over, moaning lasciviously around Emilio's cock as he'd deep-throated the man.

The memory of that hot, pulsing flesh between his lips was so strong he could almost taste the pre-come and could remember the pressure against his tongue. The way he'd dug the ball of his tongue piercing into Emilio's sensitive flesh and had him crying out in pleasure. The intense, nearly frantic movements of their bodies. Emilio's fingers twisting into his hair, holding him still while he fucked his mouth.

Boyd's eyes narrowed into a glare as if he could dispel the memory through force. He swept the shirt off the floor, turning away from the couch as he pulled the shirt over his head. His back and shoulders were stiff with tension.

He didn't know what was worse; fucking Emilio while thinking of Sin at the time, or the memories now righting themselves and starring Emilio rather than Sin.

He pulled on the rest of his clothes, eventually finding his underwear where it had been ripped off near the bar. He shoved it in his pocket and
moved to pulling on his shoes. He could see Emilio in the bedroom still, not having moved from his position.

Boyd sighed again, a reaction he seemed to be having a lot, and tied his shoes tightly. His gun and holster were still sitting on the coffee table and he tried not to look anywhere that could bring about some sort of memory as he picked it up. He fastened the gun at his waist again, sliding it back to its place on his side, near Sin's name burned into his flesh. The gun felt heavier than it should, like a weight that wouldn't let him forget the night before.

His lips turned down. He could still feel the hangover pounding through his brain but more than that, he felt the other remnants of the night. His body was sated and sore the way it got after a long, hard fuck, or after a marathon of acts. He couldn't remember most of the night but somewhere within him he knew they'd been at it for awhile. The fact that he remembered Emilio fucking him in three different places told him enough on its own.

He couldn't even care anymore about random, casual sex. He'd been used for it enough on the long mission that it had become meaningless to him after awhile. But that same uncaring distance couldn't be applied to this situation.

Every plane of Emilio's body, every shift of his fingers, put him on the verge of remembering one more thing he didn't want to remember. Shoving into his face the shameful difference in his ecstatic feelings the night before and the far less glamorous reality of fucking the father of the man he loved. It felt like the ultimate betrayal to Sin's memory, played out in desperate, yearning movements and a mind that buzzed with longing and lack of common sense.

He was so disgusted with the situation that it felt like a pit weighed down his stomach.
His expression was drawn and serious by the time he was ready. He was tempted to leave without saying anything but he felt that he should. He walked over to the bedroom, pausing in the open doorway and staring at Emilio's tense back. The storm was crashing down rain on the city below, with angry clouds darkening the day. The weather reflected his mood.

Emilio didn't speak despite Boyd's presence and for a moment there was tense silence between them. There wasn't a perfect solution to this situation. There wasn't even a good one. There really wasn't anything they could do other than operate on mutual denial.

"We just won't talk about it again," Boyd said. "As if it never happened."

There was no hesitation before Emilio nodded his agreement although he remained faced away. For a moment it looked like he might say something but then he just sighed and crossed his arms over his chest.

In the end all he said was, "Take care of yourself, Boyd."

"You too," was all Boyd could say.

He stood there for the briefest second before he left, his lips parted as if he would say more. But no words would come and likely wouldn't no matter how long he waited.
Chapter Ten

The main training room in the Tower was more crowded than usual. When Kassian had arrived to meet Harriet, all of the private rooms had already been taken and they were forced to pick a corner of the main space. He would have preferred to spar without a dozen pairs of eyes following their progress but there wasn't much of a choice in the matter.

As one of the few Senior Agents, there would always be fascination with him and people would always watch and observe. Sometimes out of respect and other times, people just wanted to see if he was really all that he was cracked up to be. He couldn't blame him. He'd done the same to Sin when they were younger. Watching and waiting to see a flaw, some flaw, that would prove that Sin didn't deserve his rank. That had never happened of course and he'd eventually grown to respect the other man even though it had taken longer than it should have.

Harriet's knee slammed into his side and Kassian stumbled back with a wince. She bounded backwards, dropping into a defensive stance and raising her eyebrows at him.

"What the hell was that, Trovosky?"

He rolled his shoulders and tried not to look embarrassed. "Distracting myself with depressing thoughts."

She frowned and there was a brief moment of hesitation before she launched another series of attacks at him. Punch to the gut, kick to the head, spinning back flip that would have caught him in the chin if he was a fraction of a second slower. He dodged and deflected most of her attacks but it was always just barely and it was never effortless. Harriet was getting good; damn good.
"You're getting pretty bad ass," he commented after she landed a move that nearly sent him flying backwards. He would have slammed against the wall if he hadn't caught himself, grabbed her still extended leg, and tumbled her to the mat.

Harriet gave him a grim smile. She was pinned to the floor beneath him, sweating and looking gorgeous even with her hair tied back in a knot and wearing basketball shorts with a loose wife beater. "I've been practicing a lot."

"Jon not keeping you busy?"

It was out of his mouth before he could rein the comment in and Harriet's chocolate brown eyes narrowed. Kassian hastily backed off her but not before she caught him in the side of the knee with a well-aimed kick. It could have done serious damage if she'd been trying but they never sparred with the intention of injuring each other. Not usually anyway.

"Let's not talk about Jon," she said flatly, rolling to a stand. She wiped her arm across her sweaty forehead, a frown etched onto her mouth. "At least not here anyway."

Kassian looked at her thoughtfully. Maybe there really was trouble in paradise. They'd seemed to be a solid couple for the past two years but recently things had appeared to be changing. Harriet had started hanging out with the old crew a lot more, with Kassian in particular. After the stressful Investigator Monaghan incident when they'd looked after Sin at his house, Harriet had kept her distance from him. He'd been too obvious about his attraction to her and his animosity towards her new relationship and she'd backed off out of respect for Jon.

But in the past few months she'd begun calling him more, inviting him to train with her or play basketball at the park. They'd even had lunch together a few times by themselves. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed her.
company until he had it again. But that hadn't stopped him from wondering what the change was all about.

"Why don't we go to the cafe?" he suggested. "We've been here for two hours already and you've beaten me up enough."

She scoffed at that and tied the hem of her tank top into a knot. "You don't even attack me. How am I supposed to judge how well I'm progressing if all you do is turtle?"

"Don't worry. Next time I'll beat your ass now that I've studied all your new moves."

"You can try."

Kassian grinned and grabbed his t-shirt from the floor next to the mat. He threw it on before grabbing the small gym bag that he'd sat in the corner. It had a change of clothes inside but he wasn't going to put them on without a shower.

"How about we just go to a vending machine and grab a bench in the courtyard?" Harriet asked after a moment. Her gaze had strayed to the rest of the training room and she was looking irritated with whatever she saw.

"I've had it with the gawkers. I don't know what the hell everyone is doing here anyway. I guess they think the Marshal will give them brownie points if they appear to be training every day."

He laughed as they started out of the area. "Is that what your plan is?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, okay."

They stopped at the vending machines just by the front doors of the training area. He bought two bottles of juice and glanced at her as the
machine spit them out. "If not, then why are you in gladiator mode lately? I haven’t seen you work this hard in a long time. Not every day, at least."

"Two reasons."

Kassian picked up the bottles, handed her the cranberry one and cracked open the apple juice for himself. "Which are?"

She pushed the double doors open and didn’t respond. The corridor that led towards the exit of the Tower wasn't packed but there were enough people around that could hear their conversation. They didn’t exchange words again until they left the building entirely and began walking out into the grassy courtyard. Summer was rapidly approaching and everything was in bloom. The air was still cooler than it should have been but he didn’t feel too cold in his t-shirt.

"The first reason," Harriet started as she led him to a set of benches between the cafe and the Tower. "Is that I want to give rank 10 training a go again."

"Combat wasn't one of your flaws," he pointed out reasonably. "Your problem was that you weren't versatile enough when planning."

"I'm too by-the-book," she agreed with a nod, sitting down on the bench and turning sideways to face him as he sat down as well. She drew one leg up, resting her foot against the bench and took a sip of her drink. "But I've been working on that. Even General Stephen noted that my storms have been a lot less rigid."

"Good."

"Unorthodox methods do have merit, I've come to realize. Especially because it catches people off guard."
"Exactly." Kassian set his bottle down beside him and looked at her fully. "So what's your other reason?"

A shadow crossed Harriet's face and she frowned again. She chugged her juice for a long moment, draining the bottle and averting her gaze. Only when it was completely empty did she sigh quietly and glance over at him. "I've been wanting to distract myself."

"From?"

"Jon."

Kassian arched an eyebrow at her contemplatively. "Are you having problems?"

There was another silence and Harriet squeezed the plastic bottle, crushing it in her hand. She turned it over for a moment before shrugging and tossing it into a trash receptacle nearby.

"Honestly? I don't know. Stick me in a crowded room with a hundred civilians and I have no problems pinpointing the dirty one. Put me in a room with my boyfriend and I can't figure out what's truth, lies or evasion. It's pretty fucking impossible."

"Well, he is an agent. He's supposed to be impossible to read."

"Not to me," she replied sharply. It was obvious that this was a sore issue with her.

"It was never this way in the beginning. Now I'm lucky if we spend two nights a week together and that's not counting time spent on missions. He's so... distracted now. His attention is always somewhere else. He says it's stress from the new admin, but I don't know. He isn't even as affectionate as he used to be."
Hearing Harriet complain about a lack of affection was more than a little odd. For a long time she had seemed completely uninterested in love and romance entirely. He just couldn't picture her wanting to be stroked and cuddled.

"Work is pretty stressful lately," Kassian said diplomatically, running a hand through his short blond hair. "The pressure is on for everyone after the first couple of months when anyone below the expectation meter got terminated."

She looked at him for a long moment before shaking her head decisively. "He's fucking other people."

Kassian stared at her blankly. "What?"

"I'm sure of it," she said flatly, emotionlessly. "I've been cheated on before. I know the signs."

"Okay," he replied carefully, sitting up straight and rubbing his jaw. Fidelity wasn't exactly his strong suit either but he couldn't deny that the idea of someone playing Harriet dirty pissed him off. "So you think he's cheating on you. But what makes you think it's more than one girl? Do you really think Jon would do that?"

"Before we got together, Jon fucked anything with a hole between its legs. He's romanced most of the attractive female civilian staff and a bunch of agents too. He just doesn't go about it in the obvious douche way like Emilio. He's discreet, kind of like you."

Kassian made a face at the comparison but didn't interrupt.

"Emma was all for me and him hooking up but even she, Queen of Positivity, warned me that he was a ladies man. The first time he admitted
being attracted to me to her during training, there was apparently a laundry list of other women as well."

"Yeah but that doesn't mean—"

"Kassian!"

He stopped at her angry shout and looked at her closely. For the first time in a long time, her front was completely down. She didn't look like the hard ass tough chick she always tried so hard to be. She looked betrayed and heartbroken.

"Please stop defending him. You don't even fucking like him."

Well, there was no denying that. Jon had a certain kind of underhanded arrogance that got under Kassian's skin like nothing else. It didn't help that he'd gotten with Harriet at the same time that Kassian had gotten interested in her.

Although now, he wondered if that obstacle hadn't been a good thing. Jon was a shit for doing this to Harriet but Kassian couldn't honestly say that he would be any better of a mate for her. He hadn't gone the relationship route since he'd been married and that had ended in large part to him being unfaithful to his wife.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

She shrugged, face once again a mask of irritation. All traces of sadness were gone. "Shit happens."

"One question though—why the hell are you still with him?"

Harriet glanced over at him, raising her eyebrows. "I want proof. I'd really like to catch him in the act. And then I'll completely eviscerate him."
Kassian winced. He almost pitied the poor bastard when that happened. He opened his mouth to reply but before the words could get out, his phone chirped. He extracted it from his pocket and saw that it was an alert from his electronic datebook.

"Shit. I forgot I have an appointment at the Tower."

"Are you late?"

"No, but I won't have time to go home and change."

Harriet rolled her eyes. "I'm sure whoever won't be too shocked that you're not in Perfect Agent Trovosky form."

He smirked and stood up, thankful that at least the breeze had dried the sweat that had been running down his face and chest. "I hopped that train awhile ago, Stevens. I'm going to get going but give me a call if you need anything. I'm here. Always. For anything you need."

She looked up at him, a strangely wistful expression briefly crossing her countenance before she nodded curtly and looked away. "Thanks."

"And don't do anything that will get you terminated. If this is all true, he isn't worth it."

Harriet gave him a wan smile and he turned reluctantly to walk away. The entire way up to the psychiatric wing, the subject weighed on his mind. It bothered him that Harriet hadn't told him sooner and he wondered why she'd kept it to herself for so long. Had she thought he'd rejoice in the news or make light of it?

It also made him want to find Jon and bash his head into a wall. It was hypocritical given his own history but he'd always been fond of Harriet and protective of her. For years she'd resisted various agents who had tried to
come on to her and the first time she’d allowed herself to be sucked in, she’d been burned. It sucked. A lot.

Kassian had always thought that relationships between agents was a risky and often bad idea. It was almost as difficult as being with a civilian if not worse. At least with civilians, there was the illusion of a different life. It was full of deceit but he didn’t know if that was any worse than being with an agent.

Agents were trained liars. They were taught how to manipulate people in order to get what they wanted. Subterfuge was like second nature to them. Throw that in with the fact that they were all basically trying to live for the moment because the next could be the last and the fact that valentine or not, sex could always be a part of the job and he didn’t know how anyone did it.

How could two people like that make it in a relationship together? It was what he asked himself whenever he was lonely and yearning for something that he considered impossible. Unattainable even.

It was how he’d comforted himself back then. Or at least, it was how he’d tried.

Sin and Boyd had made it difficult after awhile. He’d never seen two people more in love. Two people who had made it work despite all of the shit they’d gone through together. They made the impossible seem possible and that was when the depression and loneliness had really gotten bad for Kassian. Everyone wasn’t inept at functioning with another agent. Or at being in love. It was just him. Well, that's what he thought anyway.

Of course none of these epiphanies or self realizations had come easily. He’d just started drinking again and wallowing in self pity. It had started to affect his work and eventually, he’d been ordered to start up the psychiatric sessions again to straighten himself out. He’d been resentful at first but in the long run, it had done him well.
The revelations of the roots of his problems had come with Ann. He was sure a lot of the rank 10 haters would love to be a fly on the wall during one of those sessions. They'd love to learn that Perfect Agent Trovosky, once a well loved agent back when he tried so hard to impress everyone, was a mess.

Insecure, self-hating, lonely, incompetent at expressing his feelings for another human and deathly afraid of failing in any way. Afraid of failing at work but even more afraid of failing in his personal life. And he was at an age where casual sex was fun but was starting to lose the glamor. He wanted a mate. Someone to talk to. He wanted someone who could understand him. He wanted what Sin and Boyd had had.

They had been a picture of hope for him after awhile. After the sessions had started and he’d started understanding himself more—After he’d started trying to help himself instead of rocking out at his own pity party—He’d started thinking, if they could do it, why couldn't he? The jealousy had slowly turned into seeds of inspiration. It had barely had time to bloom before Sin turned up dead and everything went to hell all over again. At the Agency and then even more horrifyingly, with his own family.

The thought made his heart beat faster and he shook his head slightly, pushing the thoughts into a space far away.

"Hey Sara," he smiled at Ann's admin as he entered the small waiting area outside of her office.

Sara grinned at him. Her eyes quickly and discreetly flicked over his muscular frame. She seemed to appreciate the sleeveless t-shirt and close fitting cotton shorts. "Straight from the gym?"

"Unfortunately. I forgot I had a session today." Kassian leaned against the side of her desk and found himself holding her gaze. She had pretty blue
eyes and thick sable hair. By default, he found himself flirting with her every time he walked in.

"Well, you're looking great as usual. I wish I had a fraction of your dedication. I'm ridiculously out of shape." Sara affected a self-deprecating smile that was utterly bullshit.

Whoever handled the civilian hiring at the Agency always took on people in good health who were relatively fit. There was always the chance that trusted and loyal civilians could move up in the ranks.

In the past several years, Douglas had told him that nearly 20% of new agent trainees were civilian staff members wanting to move up. It had never been that way in the past but paranoia of infiltrations from outside organizations had caused the powers that be to start promoting from the inside. And civilian staff members with an impressive tenure could be whipped into shape just as well as some sociopathic kid from Brighton or the Barrows. Maybe even easier since they came without the attitude problems and time spent on deportment training. It helped that they already knew all about the Agency and understood how things worked.

But Kassian played along and didn't hide the fact that now it was his eyes that were moving up and down. "You look just fine to me."

The pleased smile that spread across Sara's mouth was so sexy that a sudden mental image crossed his mind of him flipping her over, yanking her dress up and impaling her on his stiffening cock. It was pathetically easy to get him riled up. Sara seemed quite aware of her effect on him. They gazed at each other and there were definitely heated sparks flying.

But then Ann Cock Blocker Connors opened her door and gave them an unimpressed stare. She looked the same as she always did. Dark hair
pulled back in a long braid and business casual in dark dress pants with a pale beige blouse.

"Were you planning to send him in or were you going to be conducting today's session?" she asked Sara blandly.

Sara reddened and jerked her gaze away, fiddling with her computer and looking suddenly self conscious in her white dress. "Sorry, Ms. Connors."

Ann looked at her a moment longer, speared Kassian with a similar stare, and then turned to walk back into her office. Suitably chagrined, he trailed behind her and shut the door.

"I would appreciate it if you'd refrain from fucking my assistant," she said bluntly, picking up her purse from the desk. "It's hard to find one that isn't a complete agent groupie. She at least only seems interested in your penis in particular but it would be nice to keep the drama at a minimum in my workspace."

Kassian grinned. "How do you know it's only my cock she's after?"

Ann gave him a flat stare once again. "Because she only looks on the verge of humping her desk when you come around."

His laugh filled the room and she gave him a wry grin in return. This was why he loved having her as a doctor. She was so fucking blunt and in his face. She wasn't afraid to talk to him like he was a regular person. She was like a really cool friend who happened to be an incredibly intelligent doctor.

"You stink, by the way."

Kassian rolled his eyes and opened his gym bag. She seemed completely unfazed as he extracted deodorant and put it on in front of her.
"You don't look dressed to go out for lunch," Ann observed dryly. "I suppose you forgot."

He froze in mid-roll and looked at her blankly. Then it dawned on him and he winced. He had forgotten. During their last session he'd asked if she wanted to have lunch sometime—talk about things in a non-stifling compound setting. She'd been reluctant but had eventually agreed and now here he was, completely unprepared.

"Damn. I'm sorry. I've been kind of preoccupied. I can go change—"

"We could just stay here and have a regular session."

Kassian made a face. "No. It's not a big deal, really. I have clothes in my bag."

Ann put her purse down and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She looked impatient and a little exasperated. "If it means that much to you, why don't we just go to the deli. It doesn't have to be a fancy affair and I don't have a lot of time."

He agreed and they headed out. Sara pointedly stared down at her computer as they went by and Kassian felt slightly guilty for getting her into trouble. He'd told himself to tone down the flirting but somehow it never happened.

They took Ann's car to Mike's Deli, a neighborhood spot over on the east side of Cedar Hills. The front was a small convenience store and the back had tables and chairs where people could have their lunch. They ordered at the deli counter, Ann getting tuna on rye and Kassian getting turkey and swiss cheese, before grabbing a table in the far back. Thankfully it was empty, likely because the lunch rush had just left.
"So, how have things been in the past few weeks?" Ann asked as she situated her food on the paper plate. She had also gotten a fruit cup and a bottle of water to go with her meal.

He shrugged and thought about the question before answering. Things had gone from steady but dull to complicated as soon as Harriet had come back into the picture. Being around her was nice but also a cause of anxiety and irritation when the other factors entered the fray. "The same, I guess. Well, I don’t know actually. I guess back and forth."

She raised her eyebrows. "When I saw you three weeks ago, you seemed more positive."

"Yeah," Kassian admitted, picking up his sandwich and staring at it. "I'm trying to stay that way but it's hard sometimes when I start thinking too much. I've been okay though, no drinking or anything. The only time I really felt very down was today."

"Do you know the cause?"

He hesitated. He always hesitated when it came to talking about Sin to her. It was ironic that he danced around issues with his psychiatrist for worry that they would make her uncomfortable. It probably went back to the fact that he'd known for so long that he'd started thinking of her as a friend.

He couldn't imagine opening up to anyone else after having spent so long establishing this level of trust with one person. He couldn't imagining someone else clinically reading his file, learning the most personal details of his life, asking about his wife, the divorce, the long-terminated Agent Schafer, and more recently, Leighton.

Just the thought made his fingers twitch with anxiety.
Ann frowned at him slightly, sensing that he was holding back. "Did something happen?"

"No, it's just that..." Kassian trailed off and shifted in the chair, chewing slowly. "I was thinking about Vega earlier."

She didn't give a visible reaction as she asked, "Which Vega?"

He hesitated again, longer this time. "I was thinking about Sin."

There was an extended silence as she observed him. She sat back in the chair and touched her chin with long slim fingers. "This isn't the first time you've exhibited reluctance to discuss Sin."

Kassian shrugged, not denying it.

"Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about him?"

"No, not at all."

"Then where does the issue lay?"

He paused briefly and finally decided to tell her and be done with it. "I don't know if talking about him would bother you. I know it's ridiculous and that you're a professional and I'm sure I'm not the only one of your patients to bring him up but, there you have it."

Ann stared at him. Her eyes had narrowed a fraction, her mouth thinning in displeasure. "He told you, didn't he."

The words were so accusing and irritated that for a brief moment, it seemed like she wanted to jump up and go bitch Sin out for blabbing their business. But in that exact same instant, she seemed to remember that Sin was dead. She deflated and her expression turned weary as her eyes dropped down to her food.
"I'm sorry," Kassian said with a sigh. He shook his head and frowned. "It was stupid of me to bring it up."

"No. I'm glad you told me."

"Well, Sin didn't tell me. At that point we barely got along. As far as I know, the only people who know who are currently not at this table are Boyd and likely Vivienne since she seems generally omnipresent."

Ann regarded him carefully before nodding. "That is comforting at least." She didn't ask how he knew but given he'd talked about his friendship with Boyd over time, it likely wasn't hard to figure out.

"No one is judging you, Ann. You don't have to look at me that way."

She continued to watch him with the same inward expression and a flash of intuition went through him. He'd made a mistake by telling her. She was debating discontinuing him as a patient. The flash of intuition was replaced by a flash of panic.

After years of seeing her as a doctor, he'd truly come to appreciate their sessions. They helped him understand himself in a way that he'd never thought possible. They helped him make decisions based on that understanding. Would that happen with someone else? It was hard to say. Distrust was ingrained in him too strongly to confide so deeply in someone new. Especially with Jae-Hwa's people now infesting the psych department.

"You know everything about me, Connors. Why is it so earth shattering that I know something about you?" he demanded.

"It's inappropriate."

"We exist on a hitman's version of Gilligan's Island," he retorted. "We are pretty much isolated to the same group of people and it will stay that way indefinitely. Do you think everything about your personal life would remain a
secret? Especially for someone whose small group of friends includes people who were involved with that drama?"

She didn't answer but didn't break his gaze.

"If you drop me, you're doing it out of embarrassment. I've known about this for over two years, Connors. And look how much you've helped me since then. If you want to stop doing that just because I know you fooled around with Vega, you are one disappointing doctor."

"Are you through?"

He was working himself up into a nice furious rant but cut it off and nodded shortly. He picked up his sandwich and took a large bite.

They sat in silence for nearly five minutes. Him glaring out the window as he ate and her staring at him evenly. It was finally broken when she sighed and raised a hand to her forehead as though she had a terrible headache.

"I'm not going to drop you, Kassian. Unless you keep referring to me as 'Connors.' I detest that as much as I did my married name."

"Don't tell me that and then go behind my back and do it anyway."

"I'm not afraid of you, Kassian," Ann said dryly and finally picked up her own food. "If I was going to drop you, I would tell you. I would think you'd know by now that I am not frightened to tell you something you don't want to hear just because you're a great hulking brute."

He glared at her for a breath longer before grinning. "I guess you do prefer your men skinny."

She gave him an arch look. "Well," she said casually. "Obviously you had never seen the man naked if you characterized him as skinny."
"Believe me, Ann, it's not like I hadn't thought about it," he laughed and once again she cracked her wry smile. When his surprised laughter had died down, he thought for a moment before posing his next question. "Okay, hear me out for a second. I have an idea. Give me this one afternoon to pry into your shit, and then I'll forget the conversation ever happened."

"We should really be talking about you now, Kassian. Informal session or no, we are still here for you."

"Oh, come on now." Kassian crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head to the side. "We talk about me all the time. You've been my doctor for going on four years. We've been acquaintances for much longer than that. I know nothing about your life except what others have told me. Throw a man a bone."

"I'm your doctor. You don't need to know about my personal life."

"So for the next ten minutes, stop being my doctor," he suggested with a smile. "And then I'll never ask you about your personal life again unless you bring it up first."

Ann sighed long and low, clearly tired of the issue. "I fail to understand why this interests you."

"Because it's interesting," he replied dryly, making a face. "And I'm curious. Like I said, we've been aware of each other for, what? Fifteen years? And I know zilch about you except, as I said, what I've heard from other sources."

Her hazel eyes narrowed slightly when he repeated the last part and he wondered if that had been the deciding factor in her acquiescence. "Three questions and then we're done with this."
"Why did you sleep with him?" Kassian asked without delay. He’d wondered about that from the moment that Boyd had told him. Ann didn’t seem particularly surprised that it had been his first question, either. "It seems so not your style. Despite what they said about your sister, I never considered you to be an agent groupie."

Ann gave him an appalled look and chewed as she stared at him sourly. He just raised an eyebrow in response and finally she answered. "Lucky boy. That has a two part answer. Unfortunately for you, you will get the short summation of events."

"Which is?"

She thought for a moment, once again touching her fingers to her chin. Her hazel eyes drifted to the window and she seemed to be considering how to respond appropriately. "I was in a place where I felt as though control of my own life had slipped from my fingers."

"Because of your husband?"

"Is that your second question?" she asked pointedly.

"No. Never mind, go on."

Ann seemed satisfied that he wasn't planning to quiz her on her ex-husband. He didn't blame her. The word around the compound was that he'd managed to rip her off for a ton of money before using resources he’d gained from the Agency to disappear. According to Ryan, Captain Philip Scott had been unsatisfied with his lack of progress in the organization and that he’d blamed Ann bitterly for it. It was pretty irrational considering she hadn't been responsible for promises her father made before he'd been assassinated.

"Sin posed a way to strike back at the forces that were binding me by doing something that went against everything that was mandated of me. I was
willing, at that time, to risk everything to feel like I had control again. As you
know, it's a lot easier to accept a loss of control in the work place than it is in
your own personal life."

"And it didn't help that Vega was ridiculously good looking."

She gave another wan smile. "Yes. Vega men have the ability to make
you want them. In Sin's case, without even trying. He wasn't even attracted to
me."

Strange guy. Maybe he'd been gay after all.

"Next question." Her tone had returned to the brisk businesslike way it
had been before, as if she was decisively ending that line of discussion.

"Did it bother you when he died? You didn't seem very..." He moved his
hand vaguely. He almost aborted the question, but it had nagged at him since
the day that he'd found out. It had coincidentally fallen on the morning of a
session with her. When he'd told Ann, it had been the first she'd heard of it as
well.

"I guess I was curious because there weren't very many people who
gave a damn, and I wouldn't have even known that you had been involved
judging by your non-reaction on the day I told you."

Ann blinked at him and a shadow crossed her pretty face. She actually
looked away from him and touched her bottle of water but she didn't pick it up.
The question had clearly caught her off guard.

"I'm sorry, maybe that was an asshole implication."

"No, it's fine." She looked at him again. "I mourned more deeply than I
thought it would, if you must know. And it did nothing to absolve me of the
guilt I felt over what happened between he and I."
It was clear that she planned to say nothing more and yet he had so many questions. Did she use the word died because she didn’t look at it as murder or was she simply being Agency-PC because she was in a position of authority with an agent? Why did she feel guilty?

But he shook his head and didn’t ask any of those questions. They were leading into a realm that would likely make her uncomfortable, and he didn’t want her to regret talking about it at all. So instead he changed the topic entirely.

"What do you do when you’re not at work?"

Ann raised her eyebrows and her lips turned up slightly. She finished chewing and shook her head slightly. "You realize that is a very poorly phrased question."

Kassian chuckled. "Yeah, I did after the fact. Allow me to rephrase. Do you live for the Agency like Inspector Beaulieu or do you actually have an outside life these days?"

The smile on her face went up further and she seemed amused by the question. Amused and a tad pleased, as though she was happy that her personal life wasn’t making the gossip rounds anymore. "Yes, I do. I spend a lot of time reading these days and I have also been dating. Is that sufficient for your curiosity?"

"No." She didn’t seem ready to shoot down any related questions so Kassian figured it was safe topic as long as he didn’t push too far. "Do you actually have success dating civilians?"

Ann looked at him in consideration and finally uncapped her water. She crossed her legs under the table and allowed her hazel gaze to shift out the window. "It depends on the civilian. For the most part, no. They are too normal for me. I came to realize that when one views them self as damaged, it's
difficult to carry on a relationship with someone who's not. You feel self conscious. Inadequate. At those times, I would have appreciated being with someone who also had a questionable past."

Kassian's eyebrows shot up. "Wow. Most doctors wouldn't want to tell their patients that they consider themselves fucked up or damaged."

"Most doctors are full of shit," she retorted blandly. "I was raised in the Agency from birth. Anyone who would think I am anything but damaged is deluded. For a child to know the things that my sister and I knew, there was no possible way we could grow up normal in the conventional sense of the word. But the fact that I recognize that and don't try to put on airs of mental superiority is why I have a good relationship with my patients and why other doctors can still be regarded with distrust. Being marginally open with patients is pretty unorthodox but I find that it benefits both parties in the long run."

"Ahhh, I see." Kassian narrowed his eyes and smirked. He opened up the bag of chips he'd gotten to go with his sandwich and dumped them on his plate. "This is all a method, isn't it? This whole casual lunch thing. You're trying to seem more easy to relate to so I spill my guts."

Ann scoffed and wiped her thin hands on a napkin, tossing loose strands of light brown hair out of her face. "Oh please. You spill your guts already."

He grinned, not denying that and took a large bite of his sandwich. It was good but Mike's Deli was always pretty amazing. The deli meat was the best quality in the city and they used homemade herb mayonnaise that was delicious.

They sat in comfortable silence for awhile and watched the other patrons trickle in and out. There weren't many people. It was a neighborhood deli and most people were still at work at this time of day. It seemed that most
of the customers at this time were older people and that suited Kassian fine. He wasn’t in the mood to be crowded in the back dining area with a lot of other people.

Ann finished half of her sandwich before breaking the silence. "I've allowed you to eat in peace but now I'm going to remind you that we still need to get caught up. Casual lunch or no."

Kassian had expected as much and wasn’t very surprised when Ann asked what had caused him to start thinking about Sin earlier. He explained that his thoughts about Sin had been more byproducts of other events than anything else and recounted his time with Harriet.

"And you believe she is ready to be in a relationship with you now," Ann said, gazing at him contemplatively.

"That's just the thing." He shifted in his chair and rested his elbows on the table, leaning forward. "I think she'd be less opposed to being with me now. I think she possibly even regrets rejecting me before when they first started out. But even though I've been wanting to take a shot for awhile now..."

Kassian trailed off and his lips turned down in a frown as he ran a hand through his short blond hair. "Now I'm questioning if it's even a good idea. She isn't the kind of woman to do casual and I don't know if I can be what she'd want me to be. I don't want to cause more issues when she's already having enough."

Ann nodded and stabbed her fork into a melon slice. She was observing him the way she often did in meetings. Thinking about what he was saying and comparing it to things he’d said in the past. Making sense of him when he didn't even make sense to himself sometimes.
"Do you think the issues you have in your own life would be a problem for her?"

"I don't know. She knows about the drinking, or she did anyway. She saw it."

"Yes, you told me."

He shrugged and leaned his cheek against the open palm of his hand. "Ever since I got to know Harriet, I've always respected her. She's strong, smart, ambitious and doesn't rely on her looks to get what she wants. She doesn't try to fit anywhere like so many other people do. She has it together, she always has. And me..." Kassian released a disgusted exhalation and rolled his eyes. "I'm all over the fucking place, Ann. I have so many issues that I'm still working out."

Ann made a thoughtful sound as she chewed slowly on the likely canned fruit in her cup. Mike's was good for sandwiches and deli meat but the fresh fruit and vegetables weren't much to write home about. But to her credit, Ann didn't turn up her nose and complain. For a rich woman who could probably fly in produce from South America if she wanted to, it was somewhat impressive.

"The two of you go in cycles," she said finally. "She admired you but felt inadequate thus she became ambivalent about whether or not she should attempt to pursue you. Ultimately she decided not to try. She overcomes this and now you are where she used to be. Not feeling good enough, thinking you aren't on a high enough level to deserve her."

He scowled. Harriet had once categorized her infatuation with him as pathetic. The fact that he honestly was in the shoes she'd taken off two years ago wasn't exactly flattering. Would she think he was pathetic too? Kassian
considered that and shook his head. And here he was, obsessing over how she saw him again.

"This is really frustrating," he complained, sitting back and heaving a disgusted sigh. "I've been really trying to stop living this double life. I've been trying to stop caring so much about being perfect at work but it's fucking impossible with Harriet."

"Well she held you on the highest pedestal for years, Kassian," Ann replied reasonably. "I'm sure it's very easy to feel as if you've let her down by showing her that you weren't the archetype she thought you to be. And I'm sure it's difficult for yourself to see her view of you changing. As painful as it was for you to have that dual life, you've admitted yourself that you did enjoy having people think so much of you. I'm sure even more so with Harriet, since you admire her just as much."

He shrugged, staring down at the crumbs left on his paper plate. "I still don't know what to do about it. It's just like what you were saying before, honestly. When I'm around her now, I get hung up on how much more together she is than I am. It'd be easier if she had something wrong with her."

Ann raised an eyebrow.

Kassian made a face. "I'm joking."

"You need to lay the cards out on the table, Kassian. Will you ever get over this preoccupation?"

"I don't know. Probably not. I'll probably just end up being fake around her and trying to act like nothing is wrong. I probably wouldn't even tell her half the things that are on my mind ever because I'd think she would judge me. And she probably would. She can be very judgmental, especially if it's about something she can't identify with."
A group of teenagers entered the deli, laughing loudly and bombarding the previously quiet space with noise. Ann’s eyes flicked in their direction and for some reason their appearance prompted her to look at her watch.

"You mentioned that before, with the drinking."

"Yeah. Honestly, it was frustrating. She just didn’t get it. Her response to my being an alcoholic was as simple as ‘just don’t drink anymore.’ She couldn’t wrap her mind around how that wasn’t an easy fix and how hard it was for me. She just... didn’t get it and it made me feel like a jackass."

Ann crumpled the wrapping to her sandwich but didn’t avert her gaze from his. "I need to be going but let me ask you this before we bring this to a close. Is this an issue you see resolving in the future? Think carefully before you answer."

Was it likely that Harriet would stop being difficult to please with less than perfection? Would he stop wanting her to see him as perfect and nothing less? Probably not. They were apparently destined to always be on different wavelengths.

"Probably not," Kassian admitted reluctantly.

"Then keep that in mind before you decide what course to take."

They left the deli not too long after and she dropped him off at the Agency parking lot where he started to walk off to his truck. He’d barely managed to lift his arm to open the door when his phone beeped.

"Fuck me,” he scoffed, closing his eyes briefly and shaking his head. For a moment he wanted to smash the damn phone against the ground but the crazed notion passed and he slipped it out of his pocket.

Marshal Seong wanted him in her office in twenty minutes. Just fucking awesome.
Swearing again, Kassian opened the door with more force than was necessary and hefted his gym bag inside. Lips turned down in a scowl, he did an about face and strode back to the Tower. Weariness from the work out and the frustration over Harriet was giving him determined tunnel vision. All he saw was the Tower, the briefing, and the end of the briefing when he could hopefully get an hour of rest before he was carted off to whatever mission she was sending him off on.

That single minded determination was what caused him to miss Ryan until the shorter man elbowed him in the side.

"Rude," Ryan chastised, frowning at him. "Make me look dumb, why don't you?"

Kassian looked over at him in confusion. "What?"

"You ignoring me, ass. I've been yelling your name for the past couple of minutes and you just walk on like you're too cool to reply!"

"Oh. Sorry." Kassian paused, and then grinned despite himself. "I bet you looked like a loser."

"I did," Ryan complained.

"I didn't know you were so sensitive, babe." Kassian's mouth turned, and he gave Ryan a sideways look, gaze flicking him up and down.

"Don't call me babe. And don't give me that look. You're not really flirting with me, anyway."

Ryan said it in such a bland, uninterested way that Kassian couldn't help but laugh.

"But there was that one time... That one night..." he trailed off meaningfully, smirk growing into a leer as he wiggled his blond eyebrows.
"Oh please," was the indignant reply. "That was nothing."

That actually stung a little. Kassian shrugged, and made a face.

"Well to hell with you then, little man."

Looking entirely too pleased with himself, Ryan adjusted his glasses and hefted his large backpack. "Where are you going anyway?"

"Tower."

"Ann?"

"That was earlier. I have a briefing with the Marshal."

"Gross."

"Yeah."

Ryan hefted his back pack again, frowning. "I was going to see if you wanted to come over and—oh grosser, it's the she-devil."

Kassian looked over and saw that Ryan's expression had soured considerably. His indigo eyes were focused on a tall thin woman a couple of yards ahead of them. Kassian had opened his mouth to ask what Ryan meant but the question was delayed as his eyes caught on long legs encased in skintight black denim and an off the shoulder sweater that looked like it was made of studs and chains.

"Wow."

Ryan gave him a disgusted glare. "You'd screw anything if it came in a nice enough wrapper."

There was a moment when Kassian could have defended himself, but he couldn't think of anything honest sounding so he just shrugged. "What crawled up your ass? She's—"
The woman in question turned around and the sentence died on Kassian's lips.

"Kassian Trovosky!" Jordan flashed a blinding white smile surrounded by pillowy lips and pink lip gloss.

An image of Bex juxtaposed itself for a moment and there was no way in hell that the Agency had not surgically enhanced Jordan. That didn't stop him from picturing her mouth on his dick though.

"...Hunt," he said slowly.

"Go away," Ryan said with flat uncharacteristic rudeness.

"I was just thinking of you. How excited I was, to be going on my first mission with the famous Perfect Agent."

"What?" Kassian and Ryan chorused.

Jordan smiled and her dark eyes moved to Ryan.

"Oh, hello Ryan. I didn't notice you."

"Why are you going on a mission with Kassian?" Ryan demanded, staring at her suspiciously.

"Well, I don't know, we haven't been to the briefing yet."

Kassian barely reacted as she threaded her thin arm through his. She gave him a sideways look, her lips curling up devilishly. "But they only really use me for a certain sort of mission so I can only imagine..."

"Ugh." Ryan made a gagging noise.

"I have no idea what's going on," Kassian admitted.

"We'll find out soon enough."
Jordan started to tug him towards the Tower but Ryan grabbed his t-shirt, and dragged him back.

"Wait!"

Jordan's innocent expression turned into one of irritation. "What is it now, Ryan?"

"I don't need anything from you," Ryan said coldly. "I need to speak to Kassian. So... go away."

They stared at each other for an uncomfortable stretch of time. Kassian scratched the back of his head, not feeling any more enlightened.

"Fine," Jordan said flatly. She gave Ryan a cool stare before turning her attention back to Kassian. "See you soon, Kass."

"Don't call him Kass."

Jordan just laughed and walked away. Kassian enjoyed the view until Ryan punched him in the shoulder.

"Stop ogling her, you idiot! Don't you understand? She's perma valentine. They're going to make you have sex with her!"

Kassian raised his eyebrows slightly. "Sorry kid, but that isn't quite the crisis scenario you had me envisioning."

Ryan gaped at him. He made inarticulate noises before throwing his hands up in frustration. "Dude, it's like—she's evil, okay? If poke her, you're poking the devil's vagina. It's just not kosher."

A half laugh, half scoff bubbled up, and Kassian clamped down on it when Ryan gave him a death glare that would have made Sin proud.

"You do remember that I like women too, right?"
"Oh my God, you dumb ass blond."

Getting irritated now, Kassian sighed. "What's the problem, Ryan? Just spit it out and stop talking in weird riddles."

"She's just... her and her twin both—you just should stay away from them. And she's like fucking batshit, anyway. I looked her up and it's no wonder that she's so damn spacey and weird. You don't need someone like that in your life, Kass. Seriously."

"Ry, it's just a mission. One mission."

"But why her?" Ryan demanded, indigo eyes narrowing. "Why you? They never send you on valentine type missions! It just is creeping me out!"

Releasing another frustrated breath, Kassian frowned down at his friend. "You need to simmer down, little man. You're more high strung than usual. Stop hitting up the coffee shop with Owen so much."

Ryan glared at him and pressed his lips in a thin line.

"I'll call you later, okay?" When Ryan didn't respond, Kassian grasped his thin shoulder and shook him slightly. "Okay?"

"Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you that she's a mentally damaged cunt from another dimension of badness."

They looked at each other and then Ryan turned, and stormed off.

Confused and almost amused by the bizarre exchange, all Kassian could do was turn and continue his walk to the Tower. He frankly didn't mind being sent off with someone a little damaged. At the moment it actually seemed like it was right up his alley.
Chapter Eleven

The most interesting thing about the briefing so far was that Ryan had lopped off his curly hair. Of course, the meeting hadn't officially started yet.

The new team sat in their customary positions around the table; Ryan between Owen and Jeffrey on one side, with Bex, Emilio and Boyd respectively on the other. No one looked at each other and nobody spoke. Bex watched the door, waiting for Carhart to arrive. Emilio sat with his arms crossed over his chest and stared moodily out the window. Jeffrey ignored everyone and seemed to grow more distant by the day. He was looking at his palm panel but had it angled so no one else could see what was on the screen.

The tiredness in Owen's features had only grown more pronounced in the last few months; there were dark circles under his eyes. Pinched lines around his lips were starting to compete with the laugh lines he'd had before. Although he still leaned back in his chair, sometimes tipping back on two legs like he used to, his eyes were dark and often narrowed, and he seemed solemn. For this meeting he sat still, staring at nothing in particular.

That seemed to be the normal proceedings during briefings these days. The camaraderie of days past had gone with Sin and dwindled further with Bex's continued presence.

Ryan thumbed through his touch screen laptop with a pensive expression on his face. He was chewing on the inside of his cheek and looking exhausted. His hair was now cut quite short and neat, parted at the side and tucked behind his ears. The grey streaks looked more noticeable without the mess of corkscews and cowlicks. His indigo eyes also looked larger in his thin face.
"Ah ha," he muttered to himself, hunching closer to his computer.

"I like your hair," Emilio piped up randomly, his attention having been drawn to the skinny R&D agent.

Ryan gave him a startled look, obviously not paying attention. "Huh?"

"He said you look like less of a puff with your haircut," Bex said in her typically droll tone. "I'd have to concur."

Ryan frowned, giving Emilio a hurt look.

"Now do you really think I'd say some shit like that?" Emilio raised his dark eyebrows, giving Ryan a grin and a wink although they weren't as animated as they'd have been in the past. "She can't help translating compliments that way. That's how ugly people do."

Bex actually scowled at him. "Sod off, Vega. Fucking pretty boy."

"I bet you wish you were the pretty boy here. Then you could bone your sister with a real dick."

Ryan's eyes widened and he bent over his computer again. Despite his attempts to stifle it, a half-hysterical bark of laughter escaped his mouth. Bex observed him coolly for a long moment before shifting her midnight gaze over to Emilio again.

"Yeah? You might be fucking right."

There was a brief silence only interrupted by a softly uttered "ew" from Ryan.

Emilio's face broke out into a savage grin and he leaned indecently close to Bex. "I bet it just kills you that she begs for every cock that swings her way, don't it?"
She didn't reply and simply looked at him darkly, mouth curled into a sneer.

"I got more details than I needed from old Douglas," he continued, eyes running up and down Bex's front slowly and deliberately. "Said she came harder than a bursting levee. All over his desk."

Bex's mouth quivered and her nostrils flared as her fingers dug into the armrests.

Emilio didn't move an inch, despite the obvious fire building in Bex's expression. "He told her he had half a mind to share her with me. Just like old times, you know. But even if your dyke Marshal ordered me to, I still wouldn't touch that used up twat. Those lips have been wrapped around more poles than a fucking flag."

The reaction was nearly immediate but just as quickly aborted. Bex started to surge forward but caught herself, straining against the likely desire to bash Emilio's face in. And he didn't move an inch, watching her and looking like he wanted her to do it.

She took a deep breath and sat back.

"That's right, bitch. Know your place."

"Go to hell," she growled and turned her head sharply, staring at the door with eyes that were narrowed into hateful slits.

Ryan flashed Emilio a discreet thumbs up and the older man puckered his lips in return. Ryan reddened with a tiny smile and went back to his computer. Jeffrey continued to studiously ignore everyone around him. His eyebrows were drawn down and lips pinched. It almost seemed as though he hadn't heard anything anyone said.
Owen was watching the others but was mostly focused with dark, intense eyes on Bex. He rarely spoke anymore except when he was asked a question. There was never anything in his expression to show exactly what it was he was thinking but he seemed wary of her. Like he was keeping her in the corner of his eye at all times so he wouldn't miss any sudden movements.

Boyd lingered his gaze on Bex briefly, silently enjoying seeing her at a disadvantage for once. She was always the one making sniping comments at others or bringing up painful topics so it was good to see that scenario flipped.

Emilio was one of the few people in the unit who talked back to her, which was probably in part because he was in the best position to do so. Boyd still ignored her for the most part, partially out of a sense of self-preservation.

He glanced over at Emilio to show support but let his gaze slide by almost immediately.

Emilio was seated no closer than he ever was but sometimes it still felt too close. Their night of binge drinking was over two months in the past but the awkwardness still remained on some level. Although it had faded and it wasn't something they ever made obvious, Boyd could still feel a faint level of tension, especially when they were alone.

At that moment, Carhart strode into the room. He was wearing his thick jacket and didn't even bother to let his typically assessing gaze sweep over his team before he began speaking.

"Annadale Beach," he said sharply, resting one palm against the table as his fingers hit a couple of buttons on the panel. "Infamous college and party town of the northeastern seaboard, and full of liberal minded young people who are easily drawn into the propaganda of insurgents."

Carhart's cerulean blue eyes flicked up briefly as a holographic map of the small beach town began rotating above the table. It was only a couple of
miles long and only a mile wide, with generous beach fronts and a moderately sized college campus domineering most of it.

"There's been a slew of abrupt disappearances from Annadale in the past seven months that have been recently linked to possible Janus activity in the area." He looked over at the R&D side of the table. "Ryan?"

"Yeah uh," Ryan sat up straighter and fiddled with his panel some more. "Basically, there has been a rash of abrupt withdrawals from Annadale University since the start of the semester in September and those withdrawals eventually turned into missing persons reports from the kids' parents when they never showed up at home or spoke to anyone again. Most of the disappearances were linked to a new school organization that had formed, called United For Change. Pretty corny, ha ha."

He glanced around the table briefly and shrugged when no one else seemed to find it amusing. "Anyway, the bulk of the disappearances occurred only a couple of months after the semester and generally stopped over the winter break. The general thought was that it was some kind of cult or something. Authorities down there also tried linking it to drugs—there's this big Pandora problem down there."

"Ryan," Carhart said flatly, eyes narrowing with impatience as he stood staring down at the R&D agent.

"Okay, okay." Ryan fiddled with his panel again and an image of a young girl popped up. She looked to be in her late teens, had long auburn curly hair and vivid amber eyes.

"Two days ago the body of this girl, Leenah Crawford, washed up on the shore in southern Annadale. The body was badly decomposed which is why it had slipped out of whatever the killer had used to weigh it down. I have a source down in the Beach who's been keeping tabs on the disappearances"
and he linked Leenah's murder to that whole situation. Apparently back in October, an employee at the Blue Moon Diner, this popular hang out down there, witnessed something shady in the parking lot. He filed a really detailed police report and... well, that's basically why we're talking about this now. It speaks for itself."

An enlarged version of the report appeared, showing the text from the supplements. In the early hours of the morning on October 15th, the witness (referred to in the report as W/1) had overheard arguing in the parking lot. According to his statement, three males (one of whom was thought to be Thomas Rucker who disappeared around the same time as the incident) and the female who the witness said had been referred to as "Leens" argued about whether or not they should leave school to attend some kind of seminar.

Leens, or Leenah now that the witness had officially identified her with the police after her body was found, had insisted that the camp sounded like some kind of terrorist training or brainwashing camp and made several statements expanding on why. References were also made to indicate that the camp was associated with politics and changing the new administration of government.

The witness reported that in the midst of the argument, two other individuals arrived to pick up the kids. In the end, the three males (including Rucker, who was never heard from again) went with an unidentified blond woman and Leenah left alone. What had prompted the witness to report the incident was the fact that one of the men associated with the seminar or camp had followed Leenah into the darkness after she refused to go.

"And it turns out that this student organization, United For Change or whatever, wasn't even an official club. It sprang up at the start of the school year but the petitioners never actually went through the whole process of
making it a legit club. It was a pretty informal process—some paperwork filed with some signatures indicating interest, but there isn't a real trail to go back to who started it in the first place if it was even a student at all," Ryan said with a shrug. "Pretty creepy."

Carhart stood up straight and glanced at his field agents. "We have strong reason to believe that UFC was started by an insurgent organization who is using Annadale as a recruiting ground for young idealists whom they can brainwash."

"Smells like Janus," Emilio said, leaning forward to squint at the police report thoughtfully. "Ain't that how they started out at first? A bunch of young kids fresh out of college? At least, that's all who got arrested at the start when they were all new and sloppy."

"Right," the General said curtly. "We don't have proof that it's Janus specifically but it reeks of them. And lately, they have returned to recruiting on US soil full time. They like brawn but Janus has always been about recruiting intellectuals; thinkers. That's how they got as far as they've come."

Boyd's eyes lingered on the projection thoughtfully before turning to Carhart. "Do we have any intel as to why they would be returning to their old ways now?"

"We have an undercover who managed to make it into Janus' training camp. He was sold to them by Aleixo Forakis. According to the few reports the agent has managed to send in, he's overheard talk that they need people in key positions other than ones of combat. I can only assume it relates to their continued attempts to infiltrate the government from various angles. Where one fails, another must take his or her place."
Boyd's expression remained carefully blank, although his fingers twitched against the arms of the chair. He nodded and looked away, staring at the projection.

So it was true that deep cover agents, or one at least, had successfully made it through the ring and ended up with Janus. He wondered what that agent's life was like and how difficult it may be for him to resist any brainwashing. He wondered if that agent was wishing he could return home or whether he had gone into it expecting it to be over a year. He wondered if anyone had lied to him when he took the mission.

"So, what's the mission?" Bex asked, getting directly to the point. In that regard, she was like Sin. Like him, she never seemed very interested in the back story as much as the issue at hand.

Carhart lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "At the moment, there isn't a specific objective so much as recon in the area and specifically the school. Boyd and Bex will go down for a couple of days to observe—show interest in admission to the school, take a look at current and newly appointed organizations. Get a feel for the area. What we do next depends on what we find. I don't believe that Janus is done in that area—it's a hotbed for the kinds of minds they desire."

Bex pursed her lips together, not looking very thrilled. "Will there be repeat missions? Will we actually have to enroll in the school?" She seemed disturbed by the notion.

"There will be repeat recon missions throughout the spring and summer. I don't think Janus is stupid enough to pull the same move twice in the same school year but they may try again with new freshmen in the fall. What happens then depends on what you find during the next few months. If there are signs of Janus, one of you may be sent there for some time. If the trace appears to be entirely cold, then you won't. It's a delicate situation and
we have to be proactive. If we wait for a source to tell us that students have started going missing in October again, our window will be gone for one of you to enroll.”

Bex seemed to have relaxed slightly when Carhart said only one of them would be going. She likely figured Boyd would be the one, if any.

Boyd found that he didn’t actually mind that idea. It may be interesting to go to college. There were worse undercover assignments and if he enrolled, maybe he could even take some of the classes he’d never been able to take before everything had changed in his life. It was strange to think about how he’d gone to college years earlier than his peers, then dropped out, and now could potentially be returning when people his age would just be graduating.

It could be nice to be given that sort of undercover assignment, because if he did enroll it may mean he could get a reprieve from some of the more taxing missions. Even just for a little while. Maybe, for a bit, he could even pretend his life was normal.

"In the event it comes to that point, I'll volunteer to enroll," Boyd offered.

Carhart didn't look surprised and he nodded in acknowledgment, momentarily not looking as severe as he usually did lately. But then his face morphed back into one of indifference and he looked from Bex to Boyd.

"So basically, I woke up for this shitty meeting for nothing," Emilio commented, giving Carhart a deep scowl. "Cute. Real cute."

Ignoring him completely, the General flicked the holograph off. "You'll be taking separate forms of transportation there and staying at separate hotels for the next two days. The deadline for Fall admission approaches in
two weeks so you will go in the guise of students who are visiting the campus. Questions?"

"When do we leave?" Boyd asked.

"Two hours. Head to Unit 16 as soon as we have finished here."

Boyd nodded and glanced at Bex to see if she was going to ask anything.

"Are we to communicate at all?"

"Not in person. It cannot seem as though the two of you are working together."

Bex nodded, her lips still pressed downward.

Carhart looked at everyone again before nodding shortly. "See Cynthia at once." That being said, he turned and walked out of the room. There was only a brief hesitation before a scowling Emilio did the same.

When Boyd got to Unit 16 there was a flurry of activity as usual. By the time there was a chance to breathe, he was wearing slouchy, loose jeans with old tennis shoes and an over-sized flannel shirt. His hair was shoved back and he'd been given rectangular, black-rimmed eyeglasses that completed the look. They put a worn bookbag half on his shoulder.

For a moment he was alone in the room, staring at himself in the mirror.

The person he saw was a marked difference from the way he'd otherwise been dressing lately. The flannel shirt was long sleeved, hiding the faded scars from his attempted suicide all those years ago, as well as the newer scars at the crooks of his elbows from shooting up with Slide for a year.
The vibrant tattoo on his left forearm hid some of those marks, as had the slow progression of time in the half year since he’d returned.

For some reason, he felt glad to be in the alien clothing and leaving for a completely unrelated town. It was somewhat relieving to have the chance to leave his current life so far behind.

He watched himself for a few more seconds, now focusing on the mission. He adjusted the way he held himself until it fit his cover Tyler.

The Agency had created the Tyler persona to be attractive for what Janus would want in a recruit. He came from a middle class family who’d been decimated by the war. His mother and siblings had been killed. His father volleyed between wasting the remaining money they on booze and on trying, when sober, to be as good a dad as he could manage. Tyler had to work hard for everything and had been disillusioned by the general state of society. He’d expressed interest in politics during high school, had been on the debate team, and was now considering political science as a major.

Boyd took all that information into account when he determined how to act.

When he left, he was already playing the role as fully as he would when he was in Annadale. The way he walked, the way he held himself—he automatically kept it all constant so he wouldn’t slip character when he was closer to his goal.

He made it down to the station with time to spare and even had his choice of seats on the next bus leaving for Annadale. He ended up along a window seat, putting his backpack carelessly on the empty seat next to him.

After the initial rush, people trickled onto the bus. Boyd ignored everyone, staring out the window at the grey terminal beside him. He could faintly see his reflection, dull from more than the lighting and the dirty window.
He didn't pay any attention to anything until he heard movement at his side and glanced over.

A girl was looking down at him, hesitating as if she wanted to sit down. He automatically moved his backpack off the empty seat and shoved it between his feet. She smiled gratefully and muttered a quiet, "Thanks," as she sat down. Her back was straight and she glanced around nervously. Boyd looked out the window again.  

The bus left shortly thereafter, making a groaning sound as it rolled out onto the streets. Boyd watched the broken high-rises pass by and shifted until he was comfortable. With the route they were taking, it didn't take long for the desolate city to get left behind and some semblance of nature to wind its way into view.

The countryside flashed by, the leaves brilliant shades of green and yellow. One particular shade of green that was prevalent reminded him of Sin's eyes; of how vivid that pale color could be and how one look had been enough to make the world fall away around Boyd.

Not that any of that mattered anymore.

Sighing, Boyd looked away from the window and leaned back in the uncomfortable seat. The ride took a few hours which gave him the opportunity to start reading one of the political books he'd been given as a prop for his cover.

When he stepped off the bus he looked around, shading his eyes and thinking to himself that he may actually have to invest in sunglasses out here. Too bad his cover wore glasses.

Annadale Beach/ was like being in another world. It was trendy and clean and full of saturated colors, or maybe it just felt that way because the sky and air seemed clearer here. It wasn't the first time Boyd had been at
Annadale Beach but it felt different now for some reason. Maybe just because he wasn’t here at a highly stressful time like he had been before, in the middle of Level 10 training where he’d screwed up so badly that he probably should have been terminated.

His eyes narrowed faintly and he hiked his backpack higher on his shoulder, then pulled out a crumpled map of the city from his pocket. He glanced it over and started walking toward Drakes Common; an area between city center and the university and where Marabell Inn was located.

Annadale Beach had a small-town feel to it, with a lot of local shops and surprisingly friendly people on the street. The place wasn't perfect—there were boarded businesses and some of the houses looked vacant—but it did feel idyllic compared to the city with decimated wastelands never that far from view.

It didn’t take long for Boyd to find the inn and check into his room. He was on the fourth floor, with a view from the window that just barely caught the ocean. It was deep blues and greens and on the whole looked inviting. Not that Boyd planned to swim; large bodies of water never sat that well with him. He’d been drowned enough that the idea of running out there alone and throwing himself to the currents was alarming.

He sighed and dropped his backpack on the floor as he looked away. He supposed that was one more thing that made him not-quite-normal. One more thing that wouldn’t let him pretend to be a college kid with nothing more important on his mind than avoiding homework.

The room itself was decent. He’d been in better but he’d also been in worse. The double bed had an ugly, strangely Southwestern-themed bedspread and the lamps had light bulbs that were dim or burnt out entirely.
The bathroom was small but clean and there were sample bottles of haircare and body wash. There was also a lavender-scented bar of soap made by a company whose name roughly translated from French into 'the dirty little one.' He wondered if that had been on purpose as an ironic title or if they'd been going for something closer to 'the little room' and had missed an l.

He didn't stay long in the hotel room. The walk to Annadale University was relatively pleasant and only took about twenty minutes. When Boyd got there, he sat down in the courtyard for awhile, just letting the warmth of the sun soak into him as he watched people come and go.

He could tell when classes started and ended based on the wave of students that periodically inundated the area. Still, people were walking around at all times so he assumed some of them were skipping class or had days off.

A mixed group of Extreme Frisbee players were utilizing an expanse of vividly green grass. They were sweaty and several of the males had long ago tossed off their shirts. Some girls were sitting nearby, cheering them on between turning to each other in animated discussion. There were a number of young men in the area as well, paying more attention to the game than the notebooks resting next to them with pages fluttering in the wind.

He sat down on a bench and pulled a trendy political book out of his backpack. He'd been given it as a prop to attract the right kind of attention. He half skimmed the book and half paid attention to his surroundings.

The theme of the book seemed to be the usual propaganda about the degradation of the government, especially post-war, and the likelihood that it would continue in a manner that would be destructive for everyone if the right people didn't step forward. The book was just starting to get into what needed to be done to get the country back on track when he noticed someone approaching him.
"Hey, I just read that."

Boyd looked up to see a young woman leaning forward, her hands braced on her thighs as she peered thoughtfully at the book in his hands. She looked up at him when she realized she had his attention. Her hair was dyed a violent red and unnaturally dark black, and she had thick black eyeliner ringing her brown eyes.

"You a student here?" she asked.

He shook his head and put a bookmark where he’d stopped. He flipped the book closed. "No. Thinking about it, though."

She nodded absently, looking down at the book before she pushed herself to a stand. Despite the relatively warm day, she had on black tights and a short grey skirt, with a red shirt that had a giant skull and crossbones with a bow on it. The shirt fell off one shoulder, revealing a skinny black strap for her bra. Her boots were clunky and black and had more zippers and hooks than necessary.

"So you... go to school here?" he asked her somewhat dubiously.

She laughed. "Sure do. I'm poli-sci major, actually, even though you’d never think it." She gestured bemusedly to her choice of dress. "That's why I thought it was cool you're reading that, actually. You don't look the type to be into all that either, no offense."

He shrugged. "Well I guess appearances can be deceiving."

She grinned cheerfully and stuck out her hand. "I'm Zale, by the way."

"Zale?" Boyd repeated, automatically reaching out to shake her hand. She had a surprisingly firm grip.
She scrunched up her face. "Well, technically Azalia but it's a stupid name."

Boyd set the book aside. "Tyler."

Azalia smiled. "Hi, Tyler."

She dropped onto the bench next to him and leaned back on her hands, eyes tracking one of the particularly attractive men whose toned body was well complemented by a sheen of sweat.

"So you read Morrison's book?" Boyd asked after a moment, turning to watch her more fully.

"Yep. How far are you anyway?" She looked over and without asking for permission reached across him and picked up the book, flipping to see what chapter he was on. "Oh," she said with great meaning behind the syllable. Her eyebrows raised and she grinned impishly. "Just about at the best part."

"Yeah, until someone interrupted me and stole my book."

She laughed. "Sorry, sorry." She set the book back down on the bench between them. "It's good, though, seriously. I think Morrison did a good job following through with his analysis of the current regime and realistic expectations in the event of an upheaval."

"I read his other book and really liked it," Boyd said, sitting up straighter and regarding her with a bit of excitement. "You know, White Noise?"

"Oh yeah, I like that one too," she said agreeably. "This is better, though."
"Nice," he said appreciably. He looked down and picked up the book, his fingers curling around it as he set it on his lap. He turned his attention back to her. "So you're poli-sci?"

"And proud of it," she said cheerfully. "Even though lots of people seem to think we're posers, or too opinionated, or nuts." She paused, her eyes flicking skyward and lips pursing in thought. "Or I guess a combination of all three."

"So the classes are good here? I heard there was a great prof—"

"Larousse?" Azalia looked over with a grin. "She's awesome. She really believes in what she's teaching, you know? She's always figuring out new ways to get us all involved."

"Like what?" Boyd asked curiously, his thoughts immediately turning toward Janus.

"Like..." Azalia's face scrunched up in thought. She kicked her feet out in front of her, rocking one foot back and forth on the edge of the heel. After a moment she straightened slightly.

"Oh okay, so like one time she had the Social Mobilization class stage a coup. But the cool thing was, she'd split the class in half—one half was basically acting as the guys in charge and they thought the whole thing was some experiment about the range of leadership or whatever. But the other half of the class was actually given all this information, like where they'd be and when and all that. So then she had it set up where the people in charge were really surprised by a sudden uprising by the other half of the class. And then it turned out there was a spy in with the dudes in charge who'd been leaking the intel so the next part was figuring out who it had been. There was extra credit if you got it right, 'cause the only person who knew was Miss Larousse since she'd been feeding the info to the commoners, so to speak."
"That's really cool," Boyd enthused. He raised his eyebrows in interest. "So did anyone guess right?"

Azalia smirked. "Poli-sci legend has it that it remains a mystery to this day."

Boyd grinned. "Maybe that person should've been in acting instead."

"Must've been dead good at it, that's for sure," she said with a grin in return. "It was real cool. I'm kind of sad I wasn't in that class."

"Did that happen a long time ago?"

"Nah," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "Maybe four years ago or something."

"Maybe she'll do it again."

"I hope so, or something like it. I take every class I can with her—sometimes I wish she taught even more." Azalia shrugged and dragged her feet in closer, spread beneath the bench with her knees knocking together. "But she does other cool stuff now, too. She's fun. You should meet her sometime."

"If I get in, I'm definitely going to take her classes."

"Oh well you could probably do some other stuff too," she replied thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, some of her classes aren't entry level so you're gonna have to take them later, you know? But she used to be the prof sponsor for a few different clubs. So you could check into that and hang out with her and other like-minded peeps sooner rather than later."
"Oh really? What kind of clubs?"

She waved a hand. "A bunch of different ones, actually. It's depended on the year. For some reason, we're bad about creating a shit ton of different groups around similar ideas and then them falling through a year or three later. Seems to be the way it works here at AU. I think they're probably a little too liberal with their rules."

"So there aren't any going right now?" Boyd asked in disappointment.

Azalia glanced over, looking slightly startled, then laughed and shoved him roughly on the shoulder. "Jeez, man, don't go getting so bummed out. When you get here, there'll be some. And we have some now too but honestly I can't even keep track of them all, which is why I didn't really answer you more specifically. I don't really roll with the club scene—at least, not that kind of club." She raised her eyebrows with a slight smirk.

Boyd shook his head, smiling slightly to himself.

"Anyway, if you check the second floor of Dayton you'll probably find your answer. There's a crapload of flyers posted there for like every group ever. Pretty sure there's probably a group there for people who love groups." She said it so dryly that Boyd had to laugh.

"Cool. Maybe I'll check it out." He put the book in his bag and glanced around. "Where's Dayton, anyway?"

She pointed to one of the buildings in the distance. "See that one that looks like it's got a green roof or something?"

"Yeah."

"It's that one. A lot of the poli-sci classes are next door in Kirk so you could check out the classrooms too." She paused and drew her eyebrows
together as she glanced down at her watch. "Actually, don't. I think they have classes in there this time of day. You'll look like a total noob."

Boyd smirked. "Gee, thanks. You almost didn't tell me that, did you?"

She smirked in return and stood. She raised an arch eyebrow. "That, my friend, will remain another legendary mystery among the poli-sci clan."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "These mysteries are getting lamer by the telling."

She laughed and shoved him on the shoulder again. "Fuck off, man," she said delightedly. "See if I regale you with poli-lore anymore." She glanced again at her watch. "Shit, I gotta vamoose. Art's soon and I didn't finish my homework. I'll see you around?"

"Hopefully," he replied as he also stood.

She flashed a smile. "Cool. Later, Ty-baby." She raised a hand in farewell even as she turned and started jogging in the direction of what he assumed was one of the dorms. Her heavy boots made a clomping sound that was strangely reminiscent of a horse running.

Boyd watched her go and then headed toward Dayton. What Azalia had told him was certainly suspicious enough. It sounded like if there was any professor who may possibly be involved in a Janus-like group or who would know where to find one, it would be Larousse.

True to Azalia's word, the campus board was right where she said it would be and was filled with overlapping flyers and scribbled notes about different groups.

Boyd didn't see anything that seemed suspect but he also wouldn't have been surprised if some of the groups had long ago taken their ads down. It was nearing the end of the last semester so there was no point in keeping it up.
The second day at Annadale University was fairly uneventful. He eventually managed to track down Janelle Larousse, who was more than happy to give him information on the various student groups.

She was enthusiastic about the idea of him joining Annadale University and when she learned he was interested in politics, she urged him to take her introductory course once he became a student. She had the air of a genuinely friendly woman. He wasn't able to determine from the brief time with her whether there was more to her than met the eye, or whether she was simply a very dedicated professor with nothing darker hidden.

He didn't hear anything about United For Change but he wasn't surprised. She did mention that there were a number of political groups. With some subtle questioning on his part she eventually commented on one that sounded a lot like UFC, saying that she figured they'd likely be around the next year but she hadn't heard anything concrete yet. She mentioned in passing that when the summer semester started in June, there may be more information.

Nothing else of note happened, and he ended up heading back to the Agency empty handed.

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It wasn't until June that Boyd found himself back at Annadale University again. Even after a few weeks, and at the start of the school's summer session, there wasn't much of anything going on. It seemed that all leads to Janus had gone cold.

After determining there was nothing more to do for the mission at the university he returned to his hotel room. The fake glasses were starting to annoy him and he figured it wouldn't hurt to do recon without the Tyler cover in some other areas of the town. He changed back into normal clothing and swapped the glasses for sunglasses.
When he left Marabell Inn he had the vague intention to read on the beach. When he got there, he realized he was hungry and that he was right by Blue Moon Diner where Leenah had disappeared. He surveyed the parking lot where she’d last been seen alive.

Ryan hadn’t been kidding when he’d called it a popular hang out. The parking lot was full of cars, with several bicycles by the diner and a motorcycle toward the back. As he walked closer, he saw people milling around in the parking lot, apparently finishing some discussion they’d started inside. He had to wait for them to move aside before he could even access the door.

There were a few people waiting just inside but when Boyd said he was there alone, he was led to a table immediately. The hostess left him with a menu which he started to peruse while she was already walking away. He heard her tell the group it would probably be another ten or fifteen minutes.

Boyd skimmed the menu, idly listening to the people talking around him in case he would overhear any leads. He didn't hear anything of note. That seemed to be the case in general with Annadale Beach—a whole lot of leads that went nowhere. Either their information wasn't as good for this place as they'd hoped or Janus was being especially careful.

He ended up deciding on a sandwich and looked up for the waiter. He didn't see anyone in the area although there was one man who seemed like he may be the waiter except for the fact that he was idly leaning against the counter while people were trying to get his attention. Boyd watched the man for a moment, wondering if he was on break. Eventually he wandered over, taking Boyd's order for the sandwich but then leaving before Boyd had decided on a drink.

A waifish red-haired waitress was buzzing around the place, working that much more quickly to pick up the slack of the slow waiter. Boyd considered trying to get the waiter's attention to order the Arnie Palmer but
then decided he'd have better luck with the waitress. She disappeared just as he was about to try to get her attention so he ended up sitting back in his chair and waiting.

The Employees Only door swung open in the back of the diner. He automatically glanced over to see if it was the waitress—and froze with shock at what he saw.

Sin.

The world stopped moving around Boyd.

The menu fell from nerveless fingers. His heart stumbled and skipped a beat. Everything lost importance around him; colors bled out and dulled into a blur. Every fiber of his body zeroed in completely on the impossibility of what he was seeing.

Sin was moving through the crowd, disappearing briefly here and there between people. Boyd was so taken off-guard by what he was seeing that at first he couldn't believe it was real. He was convinced he was seeing something he wanted to see. That maybe he'd finally gone insane and it was starting with delusions.

Time seemed to slow. Even through the white noise of the world around him, seven steps removed from the startled disconnection of his mind, he saw Sin sidestep one person only for another to bump into him. Sin looked down at her and she apologized.

Boyd's wide eyes took that in. She saw him too. She was talking to him. He was real. It was him, it was Sin—

That achingly familiar face he'd obsessed about and dreamed about and saw every goddamn time he looked over and saw Emilio with an expression too close to his son's—Those pale green, almond shaped eyes;
that olive skin tone; those lips he’d kissed so many times and that body, God, the perfection of that body he’d almost forgotten—

—He was alive—

Boyd was out of his chair without thinking. He hurried after that form, terrified that if he took his eyes off Sin he would disappear.

He burst out of the diner, half expecting to see no one out there and half terrified that would be the case. But the familiar lines of Sin’s form were moving away and for a moment, for just a moment, he thought, That’s what he looked like when he walked away. It’s him. It’s him—God, it’s really him—

All the questions that went through his mind didn’t matter as he frantically ran after Sin. His knees felt weak, like they would give out beneath him. His pounding heart was a drumbeat from another world. The world was fuzzy; giving him a medicine-head feeling of dissociation.

He saw Sin heading toward the motorcycle and called out, "Hey!" without thinking.

Sin glanced over his shoulder, eyes focusing on Boyd. He stopped and turned entirely, eyes flicking over Boyd blankly. One dark brow arched slightly.

"What?"

Boyd slowed to a stop as he came up to him.

The world was strange and breathless and hopeful. Flashes of memories with his lover assaulted him; those green eyes watching him quietly, those lips curving up in a smile, those fingers brushing against his skin and lighting a fire in their wake—

It was Sin.
It had to be him. Every nuance of his face, of his body, was the same. His nose, his mouth, his eyebrows—everything was identical. It wasn’t possible that someone else could have the exact same combination of features, down to minor scars he remembered on his face. Puckered skin that he’d run his lips and tongue and fingers over so many times he knew them by heart.

Sin’s hair was longer than Boyd had ever seen it, tied in a low ponytail that trailed all the way down his back. He looked healthier, as though he’d finally managed to gain weight and have it stick to his lanky frame. The demons that had once haunted his eyes seemed largely to be missing.

The knowledge that Sin was alive, really alive and well in front of him, made every horrible and longing second Boyd had spent in the last year and a half have a reason. Elation soared through him, alighting his face with wonder. He felt drawn to Sin relentlessly; a current in the ocean that was as strong as the sea was old.

So many questions were on his lips—how are you here, why are you here, why didn’t you search for me, how long have you been waiting—

His lips parted and he stepped closer, starting to reach out—

But something was wrong.

Something very important.

It made him pause and look past the overwhelming relief. It made him look into Sin’s eyes and not see all the flashes of memories of his lover, but rather see the man staring at him now.

Sin was raising his dark eyebrows and looking at Boyd skeptically. They stood close enough to touch yet there wasn’t even a spark of recognition in Sin’s eyes. It was as if he was looking at a stranger.
A stranger who was acting bizarrely.

Shock cut an icy trail through Boyd's veins.

He searched Sin's eyes intently, looking for some sign that this was a carefully orchestrated act—that Sin was just pretending because the Agency was watching or he had to keep his cover or—or, it didn't even matter why, Boyd just needed a reason why Sin was staring at him as if they'd never met—

But there was nothing.

Boyd could still read that beautiful face well enough to know that, without a doubt, Sin didn't know who he was.

That knowledge hit him with a nearly physical weight. It felt like every ounce of breath left him in one violent snap.

This couldn't be happening.

Was he going insane? Was this a dream? But he felt pain when his fingers curled into his palms.

This was real.

The wind blowing past them, warm against his cheek; the sun beating down and making his eyes partially squint as the sunlight seemed to burn through his pale skin. Even the feeling of the world twisting confusingly around him; ten steps removed and partially blurred. A susurration of sounds that had no meaning beyond backdrop to the words that struggled to properly form in his own mind.

_He doesn't remember me. He doesn't know who I am_—
It was impossible to believe Sin was alive or would ever forget him. Yet he realized that even though he was staring at his lover, he was staring at someone else.

A stranger.

When Boyd didn't immediately speak, Sin looked around briefly as if wondering if the possibly insane stranger belonged to someone nearby. He looked like he wanted to turn around and be done with this awkward encounter. A flash of impatience flitted across Sin's face and his full mouth twisted to the side.

"Everything okay?"

That expression was so familiar. The spark in those green eyes; the shifting of those lips. The slight tilt of those dark eyebrows. But no matter how familiar it was, everything that had been behind it was missing.

The connection they'd once had was completely gone.

Boyd's heart wrenched and he looked away abruptly, dragging a hand back through his hair with faintly trembling fingers. Shock and disbelief made everything seem utterly unreal.

The rest of his mind kicked in, scrambling for some sort of conversational topic so he could keep Sin here. So he could understand what was happening. So Sin wouldn't think him too strange and walk away. Maybe never want to see him again.

His agent side took over, automatically coming up with a story. A reason. A way to act to make this all seem okay. A way to deal with this as if Sin were a mark.

"Sorry," he said, smiling sheepishly and meeting Sin's eyes again.
He tried so hard not to think about how familiar those green eyes were and how much he wanted to walk those few feet and yank Sin into his arms. How much he wanted to hold him close and say all the things he’d wanted to say for so long and hadn’t been able to.

"Do you know the area well? I'm new here," Boyd heard himself saying instead.

"Well enough," was the slow reply.

Sin flipped a stained apron over one broad shoulder. He wore a white tank top and a pair of black jeans with plain athletic sneakers. He looked somewhat relieved that Boyd was asking relatively normal questions but his eyebrows were still slightly drawn together as if he didn't know what to make of the situation.

"What are you looking for?"

"Well, I was thinking of getting a bike." Boyd tilted his head toward the motorcycle near Sin.

The entire conversation felt surreal. Even while he spoke aloud there was a desperate, disbelieving mantra filling the white noise of his mind:

*It's him, it's Hsin, he's okay—he's alive...*

"I thought you may know where to get one. I don't like stopping at random dealerships since I never know if they'll rip me off. Did you get yours in Annadale?"

*Why are you here, why don't you know me, what did they do to you...*

Sin glanced down at his bike dubiously, his full lips twisting slightly to the side. In truth, it was pretty shabby looking. It was obviously old and had very little bodywork. It seemed more like a dirt bike than an actual motorcycle.
"My friend actually built this one. I could ask her if she knows anyone, though—bikes are her thing."

Boyd was further surprised by Sin's casual mention of a friend. He'd never really had friends back at the Agency—he'd tended to be the person on the outside, uninterested in spending time around people other than a very select few. If he'd developed friends here, he had to have been here for a long time.

Who was the friend? Exactly how long had Sin been here? Since he'd disappeared from the Agency? What had the Reapers done?

And if he didn't remember Boyd, did he remember the Agency? His father? Carhart?

Anything?

"Does she build a lot of bikes?" Boyd asked instead.

Sin nodded and shifted a backpack off his other shoulder, pulling a faded baseball cap out and putting it on backwards. "Yeah. She's a mech geek. Anything electric gets her pretty jazzed. She has a few hulls of bikes and old cars in her garage that she plans to work on. I guess I could put in a word if you're interested but it might take awhile."

Boyd nodded absently. So many things were vying for his attention. The shine of the sun on Sin's hair. The nearly overwhelming urge to step closer, to touch Sin, to be near him and by him and with him and how could this be real, how could it be true Sin was here, alive and healthy and looking happy and talking to him—

"How would I find you?" He forced himself not to ask it too quickly. "If she's free in the future."
"I work here. I spend most of my time here lately so it shouldn't be too hard to track me down." Sin slipped the backpack back on after shoving his apron inside of it. "I'll ask her about it later. What's your name?"

"Boyd," Boyd automatically replied without it occurring to him to give a fake name. Maybe part of him wondered if hearing his name would trigger anything for Sin.

Whatever he'd been hoping, it didn't matter. Sin didn't even blink at the sound of his name.

"I'll let her know that someone is interested. Look for me here whenever you're around." He shifted the bookbag on and finally got on the bike. "I'm Danny, by the way."

"Danny," Boyd repeated, testing the name out on his tongue. It didn't seem right. Sin was Hsin, if anything. None of this was making any sense. "Got it." He glanced toward Sin's backpack, where he'd put the apron. "Are you the cook?"

The bike roared to life although it wasn't as deafening as Kassian's bike. "Yeah. I don't really know how that came to be but a job is a job, right?" Sin said blandly over the bike. He half-smirked again, obviously not too impressed with his job.

You were always a good cook, he wanted to say, remembering the times when Sin had taken over the kitchen to avoid any culinary massacres Boyd could have unintentionally created.

He swallowed all the words he wanted to say. He ignored the part of him that wanted to grab Sin by the arm and half beg, half demand, How can you not remember me? I haven't gone a day without thinking of you. We were lovers; we were partners. We were going to live together. Don't you understand what I've been through without you?
How can you look at me and not know me?

"Well, the food here's great," he said instead. "So at least you're good at the job you have."

Sin, or whoever he thought he was, just shook his head as if denying the praise. "Thanks. See you around." That being said, he drove away without a backward glance. As he sped off down the street, his black hair whipped out behind him.

Boyd stood there watching Sin until he disappeared around the corner. He thought about following him but with the looks Sin had already been giving him, and how caught off guard he was, he didn't want to ruin everything before it had begun.

Even so, once that familiar form was no longer comfortably in sight, he felt a jolt of paranoia and fear. Had Sin really just been here? Had that really happened? Without Sin in front of his eyes, it seemed beyond impossible that his lover truly was alive. That he was okay.

But he was. He knew he was. He knew he hadn't imagined that.

Sin was alive.

Somehow, for some unknown reason, Marshal Seong had decided not to terminate him.

Walking back into the diner felt surreal. Everything had a new light to him.

This was now Sin's place of work. This was a building Sin walked into every day. His feet could be overlapping steps Sin had taken. This was a door Sin had touched with those long fingers. These were customers he served. These were people he worked with and what did they know of him? What was he like around them? Were any of them friends? Was it like Lunar had been
for Sin in Monterrey? Was he happy here? Did he ever laugh and smile and have fun?

Boyd couldn't stop the churning questions in his mind and when he dropped back into his seat, he found himself staring at his food. Now it was food that Sin may have touched or made. Now when he took a bite, he wondered if he could taste Sin's influence in it; the ingredients he used and the way he prepared it. More likely, he was reading too much into it. Wanting to constantly reinforce to himself that he really had just seen his lover again.

That it really had all happened.

He remembered how unclear it had been which way Sin had been dragged; toward the Tower, or toward the lab. At the time, either had spelled death in Boyd's mind. There hadn't seemed a reason for Marshal Seong of all people to bother keeping Sin alive. But now he was convinced that this was why Seong's people had conveniently been stationed anywhere that a glimpse of Sin could have been afforded in his supposed dying minutes.

Now, the conspiracy Boyd had hoped so desperately to be true—actually was true.

He wondered if that locked room in the lab that he hadn't been able to access had held the answers to this new mystery.

He was convinced that Sin had been brought to the lab, and maybe they'd done some new experimentation on him. The nausea Sin had been experiencing, the exhaustion... Had that been because of this, or had this been something they'd resorted to after something else had gone wrong? But Sin seemed perfectly healthy; more than Boyd had ever seen.

Why would they implant false memories or at least erase the old, then let him build a life in a peaceful place like Annadale? It was so incongruous.
Neither Marshal Seong nor the Reapers seemed to be particularly benevolent people, yet in a way they'd given Sin what he'd always wanted: freedom.

What was happening? Why go to all the trouble of hiding Sin so well, and then put Boyd in a position to stumble upon him? Even if Boyd's presence was a good test of how well Sin's memories held, he could ruin the experiment. He could tell Sin everything, he could do any number of things, and all that work would be for nothing.

It didn't make sense.

It seemed like it may have been a coincidence instead; just a confluence of luck that led Boyd to finding his lover after so long. After all, if it hadn't been for that civilian's report, Boyd likely wouldn't have been assigned anything in Annadale any time soon that would have drawn him to the Blue Moon Diner in the first place.

Every track of thought that wound into analysis ended up cycling back to disbelief that his greatest hope for all those months turned out to be real.

When the waiter passed by and saw his empty glass of water, he paused to refill it. Boyd took the opportunity to look up at the man.

He needed more information. He needed to know what was happening and why, and what the potential risks were in moving forward. There were too many questions clamoring in his mind. Too fast of a heartbeat and too elated of a warmth spreading through him. Adrenaline was a reckless race that urged him to track Sin down immediately and tell him everything, get him to look at Boyd the way he used to; the way he should have all along—

"Hey, you know the cook here? Danny?"

The guy, Delsin according to his nametag, raised his thrice pierced eyebrows and nodded slowly. There was something hesitant in his sharply
angled brown face and his dark eyes narrowed slightly. But he didn't seem paranoid. If anything, he seemed confused and a little exasperated. "Uh. Yes. Why?"

"I was just wondering how long he'd worked here."

"...Why?" Delsin was eyeballing Boyd suspiciously. "No offense or anything but that dude attracts more stalkers than a PD vial attracts these little snot rag college kids. It got kind of old so you can't blame me for wondering what the deal is."

Boyd made a conscious effort to ignore the excited part of his mind that could only think about Sin and seeing him again. He focused instead on the part of him that had been ingrained as an agent: the ability to step back and analyze a situation no matter the circumstances. The ability to gather information no matter the distractions.

"I just saw his bike out there and I’m new to the area so I was asking him where to get one. He said he'd maybe ask his friend but you know how that goes. People say shit to get you off their back all the time." Boyd shrugged and sat back in his chair. "So I was just wondering what kind of guy he is and whether I'd look like an ass if I ever actually tried to follow up in the future."

"Oh." Delsin relaxed and flashed a brilliantly white smile. He was handsome when his face wasn't defaulting into the severe expression that Boyd had noticed he wore around the diner. Unlike the waitress, Delsin didn't seem to go out of his way to get tips. It seemed to irritate him that he had to talk to customers at all.

"Well as long as you aren't planning to jump him behind the parking lot, it's all good." Delsin pointedly ignored someone waving at him across the room, obviously trying to get his attention. "Danny's a pretty stand up dude.
He wouldn't have told you anything if he was just gonna BS you. He's really straightforward about shit like that. Like, he'd basically just be like fuck you no if he wasn't really going to do it."

"You've known him awhile, then?" It was so strange listening to someone be protective of Sin and even call him a stand up guy. That never would have happened at the Agency.

The guy across the room, who had the burly build of a linebacker, shouted over to Delsin impatiently that he wanted another pitcher. Delsin shot him a death glare and didn't move. The waitress took over Delsin's table without hesitation.

"Yeah. I guess like almost a year and a half? He got hired not too long after he came into town so around there. I didn't think he'd last this long," Delsin said unnecessarily, seeming perfectly fine to stand and chat and not actually do his job. "The Blue Moon usually attracts fucking flakes. Besides me, Kayla, and Danny, we see more turnaround than... than..." He frowned, looking for a comparison.

"Dels, move your ass!" Kayla hissed quietly as she hurried by them to fetch another pitcher.

"Eat me," he replied good naturedly before focusing on Boyd again. "Anyway, he's been here awhile."

"Oh, for some reason I thought he was from around here," Boyd said offhandedly.

"Nah, he came from around DC. He integrated pretty fast, though, so he's basically a secondhand local now."

Kayla rushed past again. "Seriously, Dels? Seriously?"

The tall man just shrugged, grinning at her back.
Boyd nodded, considering that. So if Sin thought he was from DC, he wondered how far back the fake memories went. Did he have an entire life he remembered there?

He glanced toward Kayla and the other customers, guessing that Delsin was going to have to leave soon. "So are there good times to find him here usually? Does he have any kind of set schedule?"

"He's here mostly every day," Delsin replied vaguely, not seeming as quick to give his coworker’s schedule out. "He mostly opens up."

"Thanks," Boyd said, leaning against the table on his forearms. "Sometimes I get really busy so it's good to have a general idea of when to stop by so I'm not wasting everyone’s time."

"Makes sense. Anyways, I should get back. Kayla's gonna flip out on me in a second." Delsin gave a half assed wave and started to back away. "Oh, right. Did you want a drink or anything?"

"No," Boyd said, his mind already far away from this conversation. Delsin nodded and grudgingly wandered back to his patrons.

Boyd stayed at the Blue Moon Diner for awhile, finishing his food and processing everything he'd just learned. He couldn't stop thinking about Sin the rest of that night, even when he went back to his hotel room.

Boyd remembered their time at the cabin, and how Sin had seemed to enjoy their bike ride through the woods. He wondered if Sin had felt drawn to getting a motorcycle for similar reasons; the speed, the maneuverability, the wind in his hair...

Was it anything like why he didn't like houses? He'd said he felt they were constricting. Did he choose a motorcycle over a car because of that or
had it simply been a financial choice? Where did he live? Did he end up with a loft after all?

There had been a time Sin hadn't been able to answer the questions of what he liked and what he enjoyed... Could he answer those questions now? What did he do in his free time? Did he like to read still? Or work out? Did he have a lot of friends?

There wasn't a way to easily process the sudden knowledge that the lover he'd thought was dead for months was in fact healthy and alive. The relief he felt continued to suck away his breath and the tension in his shoulders long after he'd laid down to sleep. His mind continued to buzz non stop with questions, alternating between the whys and the hows and the what nows.

He was barely able to sleep that night, so distracted by excitement about seeing Sin again and analyzing every bit of information he had that he couldn't make his mind stop working long enough to relax. The next morning he woke up early. Finishing the mission took longer than he wanted and he quickly grew impatient, no longer caring to focus on whether or not Janus was recruiting at Annadale University when all he wanted was to see Sin.

As soon as he wrapped up his portion of the mission, he immediately returned to his hotel room, grabbed his bag, and went to the diner. He was on a schedule and had to get back to the Agency in time for a unit debriefing on the mission so he knew he didn't have long.

He ordered some food, sitting as far in the corner as he could so he could keep an eye on the entire place; watching for Sin. But for as long as he sat there and despite discreetly paying attention to every movement, he never saw Sin.
It was disappointing and Boyd lingered in the diner longer than was intelligent, pushing his departure even past the point that he should have left. He kept thinking: one more minute; one more minute and Sin would appear. One more minute, and he could see his partner again.

When he finally left, he had to speed all the way back to the Agency. Even blowing past the speed limit, it took four hours to get there. He barely had enough time to park his car and jog up to the conference room, and ended up walking in late.

Everyone was already there and seated and Boyd kept his expression casual and neutral; as if he hadn’t just found Sin alive and well. He didn’t look at the others that fully, wanting to give himself a little more time, although he did glance past Bex to see if there was anything in her expression to show whether she’d also run into Sin. He didn’t see anything to imply she had but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be hiding it. Although, he didn’t know why she would.

Regardless, he silently took his typical seat, dropping his bag onto the floor beneath the table.

"With all due respect, sir," Bex started off, lips pursed into thin little lines. Her sinewy arms were crossed over a black tank top. She had her usual leather pants and platform boots on as well. "These missions are a waste of time."

Carhart took that into consideration before glancing at Boyd. "I assume you didn’t find anything, either?"

"Nothing concrete," Boyd replied, shaking his head.

"It isn’t surprising," the General replied reasonably. "They’re too smart to strike the same place twice in the same manner. It’s likely they’ve moved on to another location."
Bex released a breath and ran her fingers over her half shaved head.
"Oh thank God, no more of these missions then?"

Boyd's eyes snapped over to Carhart. He felt a moment of panic—what if the assignments stopped altogether? How would he see Sin again? He couldn't find him after all this time and never see him again.

Carhart seemed to consider the question. "I'll send the two of you down again at the start of the fall semester and if there are no signs then, we will give up. There's a larger chance that something will be occurring when the majority of students will be in attendance as opposed to now."

Boyd relaxed as relief swept through him. He had an excuse to go back at least once, and depending on his schedule he should be able to find ways to get down there before then. As long as he went on his free time, he should be able to do it without anyone noticing.

The meeting was short and the rest of it passed with updates on a couple of previous missions. Although there was new information about Janus activity, there wasn't anything particularly damning that they could act on.

They were left in the exact same stalemate as always.

The most pertinent information was never in their reach; they never had solid intel on who the Janus leaders were and where they could be found. The hope was that continued questioning of Aleixo, as well as follow up on regular contacts and leads, would eventually land more solid intel. Aleixo's connections to people in high positions in Janus had been one of the reasons Boyd's more than successful mission had saved him from termination.

Boyd kept a discreet eye on Carhart throughout the meeting, trying to decide what he should do. His mind burned with the knowledge that Sin was alive.
Carhart looked the way he always had since Boyd had returned from his long mission: serious, reserved, and, in a way, tired. He’d taken on a lot of the stress of everything that had happened and, Boyd suspected, much of it had to do with Sin’s death. And there was Emilio, dark and moody and sometimes seeming to lose all hope.

He knew it could make a huge difference to Carhart to know that the man he’d thought of as a son hadn't died. The buzzing, nearly palpable relief and happiness that Boyd had felt could be Carhart’s, too. It could help Emilio as well, to know that the piercing regret of losing his son didn’t have to continue to burrow deep into him.

He wanted to say something.

He wanted to wait until the meeting ended and tell them the incredible news. Tell them so that the weight could leave them as well. He thought about it, watching them discreetly and imagining how he would break the news.

But when the meeting ended and everyone else moved to stand, he couldn’t make himself say anything.

It seemed dangerous enough that he knew about Sin. He didn’t know what would happen if the Agency learned he knew about something that had to be top secret, above even Carhart’s clearance. The risks only grew worse as he contemplated others knowing.

Even if he only told Carhart, the General could be followed or tracked by trying to find Sin. The new regime watched Carhart like a hawk and with how ruthless Marshal Seong was, Boyd was afraid of the possible ramifications. Not to mention there was the very real possibility that Carhart may think he was insane if he started talking about Sin being alive and well out of nowhere, particularly without proof.
Or what if Emilio found out? Even though Boyd imagined it would relieve Emilio to know Sin was alive, the blunt truth of the matter was that Emilio was far too unpredictable to trust with that sort of sensitive information.

Aside from giving Carhart some peace of mind, what would it gain compared to what could be lost?

There were too many what if's with too many possible consequences. When it came down to it, Sin had been fine in Annadale for a year. It seemed the best way to help him stay that way was to pretend he hadn't discovered he was there.

He stood, reaching for his bag with a dual weight on his shoulders. He felt Emilio and Carhart's presence at his back when he turned to leave, wondering if they would hate him if they ever learned of what he was keeping from them. But even if they did, he realized he didn't care so long as he didn't endanger Sin.
Chapter Twelve

It was nearly two weeks before Boyd had two consecutive days of scheduled downtime. Not wanting to draw any suspicion to himself, he spent the day before checking in at the Agency. When he wasn't called in for anything, he spent a couple of hours in the training room and left the compound without appearing to be in a rush.

But he was in a rush. He was in such a rush that he didn't even return home to shower before speeding down to Annadale with a pre-packed overnight bag. Once again it took him a little over four hours but he managed to make it down before nine that night.

Returning to Annadale felt bizarre now that he was coming of his own free will.

The small town was so unlike Lexington that it was at first difficult to get used to it. The air was considerably warmer, it smelled pleasantly of the ocean, and there was a whimsical feel. Music always seemed to be drifting from one direction or another and small knots of young people were found everywhere, looking carefree. He would be hard pressed to find anyone in Lexington who looked like that.

This time Boyd picked an extended stay hotel that was only two blocks away from the diner. The Oceanside Resort was much larger than the previous hotel he'd stayed at and offered two room suites. He didn't actually need the space but if he was going to be coming down on a regular basis, it was convenient to have good accommodations.

Despite the amenities, he didn't do anything more than throw his bag down in the room, quickly change clothes, and rush right back out to the diner.
He wasn't entirely sure what time it closed and, thankfully, it was still open at ten.

The Blue Moon was relatively crowded and they had opened an outdoor patio section that led directly onto the beach. Kayla seated him quickly before dashing over to another table. Boyd looked around casually and didn't see Delsin anywhere. The other waitress on duty was an extremely scrawny girl with bleached white hair in a stubby ponytail at the nape of her neck.

Sin was nowhere to be seen.

Trying not to feel disappointed, Boyd glanced at the menu.

"Hi there! I'm Kelly; I'll be your waitress tonight," the blond said perkily. She had a hint of a southern accent. "Can I start you out with a drink?"

He looked up at her. Kelly's Blue Moon shirt was buttoned nearly halfway down her chest and exposed an indigo bikini top. She wore dangly earrings and bright red lipstick.

"I'll just have an iced tea for now."

She nodded, grinning at him hugely and not hiding the fact that she was checking him out. "Any starters?"

Boyd paused and on a whim asked, "Does Danny have any specials tonight?"

"He sure does!" Kelly looked thrilled that he'd asked about specials without her having to mention them. "He has these totally delicious spicy crab meat empanadas with a side of yellow rice with olives and capers."

Relief that he hadn't missed Sin made Boyd relax back into his seat. "I'll take that."
"Good choice. Danny's creations tend to be real good." Kelly flashed him another flirtatious smile and backed away. "I'll be right back with that tea. Oh. Sweetened or unsweetened?"

"Unsweetened, please," Boyd replied. He smiled slightly in return to stay in her good favor in case he needed to ask her questions later.

"Sure thing." She turned around and hurried across the room.

Once she was gone, Boyd's gaze automatically fell on the Employees Only door in back that provided access to the kitchen. He automatically hid the anticipation he felt as he listened for Sin's voice. He watched for Sin to appear, maybe to go on another break.

But he didn't see him.

It wasn't unsurprising but he couldn't deny the impatience he felt. Every time he saw a glance of black hair near the door he found himself tracking it to see if it was Sin. Every time it wasn't he felt the burn of disappointment and still found his eyes sliding to the next glimpse of black.

All he wanted was to see Sin again. All he wanted was to be by him. To have a second chance at the contented life he'd lost so abruptly.

It didn't take long before Kelly dropped off his iced tea and the special, which he started to eat as he continued to keep an eye on the room. He absently noted that the food was really good and, before he caught himself, thought he should ask Sin to make it for him some day.

As he watched the diner, he automatically assessed other customers. The couple in the corner intensely discussing something with the air of uncertainty and excitement; possibly a baby on the way, or maybe one of them was going to propose. The college student in the corner who spent
much of her time staring into nothing. She'd barely touched her food and looked depressed.

The man who drew Boyd's attention more than any others. There was nothing outwardly suspicious about him but Boyd saw the subtle looks he was giving the women who were in more provocative states of dress like Kelly. It made Boyd distrust him. He seemed the type who would try to corner a woman when she was alone and if she fought back, flee and take his frustration and feelings of impotence out on someone he could pay for sex instead.

Boyd briefly considered saying or doing something to distract him but the man hadn't done anything overt and pushing it could potentially exacerbate a situation that was otherwise harmless so far. Even so, Boyd kept him in his peripheral vision in the event he needed to intercede on anything. He had no sympathy for men like that and would have no compunctions with putting him in his place.

What caught his eye more than anything was a difference in the staff. Kayla had seemed cheerful the times he'd seen her before, or at the very least friendly even when she'd been overworked, rushing from one table to the next. Tonight she seemed agitated and it grew as time passed. She started disappearing for longer periods of time.

Boyd didn't know how long he'd been sitting there but he'd nearly finished his food when he saw Kayla suddenly storm out of the kitchen, heading straight toward the front door of the restaurant. Sin was right behind her and it was a combination of that and their expressions that caused Boyd to throw down a wad of cash and follow them.

He moved quickly without being obvious about it and pulled out his phone as he walked out the door, although he discreetly watched them.
"So all of a sudden," Kayla was saying loudly, her face flushed and eyes narrowed. The pretty red-haired woman looked on the verge of tears that she was clearly trying to keep back. "Just all of a sudden—"

"It's not all of a sudden!" Sin interrupted sharply. He was standing with his back to Boyd, holding one of Kayla's thin arms to prevent her from storming off. "It's been like this for months and you know it. I don't even come over anymore."

Her mouth trembled slightly and she looked away sharply. "You are such bullshit," she hissed furiously, yanking her arm away. "To do this now, now of all times—what, are you fucking Tech again?"

There was a low exhalation of air. "You always have to bring her up, and it has nothing to do with anyone but you and me."

"Then what did I do?" she demanded, her voice louder as she looked at him again. "What the hell did I do to make you turn on me? I love you so much and you don't even care!"

Sin wiped a hand across his face in frustration. He was wearing only a white sleeveless tanktop beneath his apron. Boyd could see that his strong back and shoulders were taut with tension. "Kayla—"

He made to grab for her again but Kayla raised both hands and shoved his chest. "Don't you fucking touch me!"

Sin looked around, visibly annoyed that this was happening in front of the diner. Boyd wasn't the only one in the vicinity but he was the only one making it seem as though he was doing something else. People in the parking lot were openly enjoying the show.

"I appreciate everything you did for me, but this just—" Sin broke off, clearly struggling with finding the words. He had turned to the side, away from
the direction of the parking lot gawkers. Boyd could now clearly see the expression on his face—the frustrated and angry look Sin had always gotten when he couldn’t express himself the way he wanted to.

"Just, what?" she demanded, tears falling now although her face was still twisted and angry.

"I just don’t feel the same way about you," Sin replied finally, seemingly reluctantly. His full mouth was turned down in a frown, his eyebrows drawn together. "I waited because I was hoping I would start to. But it didn’t happen. And I don’t want to keep leading you on."

Kayla looked even paler, and she backed away from him slowly.

"I’m sorry," Sin said, his voice still low but with the ring of sincerity. "I didn’t want to hurt you."

She shook her head slowly, lips pressed together. It looked like she was struggling with something she wanted to say but in the end she just turned her back and began walking away from the diner.

Sin’s face went from guilty to exasperated instantly. "Kayla! You can’t just lea—"

"Fuck you!"

"You’re just going to screw Kelly over like that? You can’t just leave in the middle of your shift!"

"Watch me," Kayla yelled over her shoulder and kept going.

He stared after her for a long moment before turning around stiffly. He looked upset but now the agitation and anger at being abandoned by one of two waitresses in a busy restaurant seemed to be overtaking whatever personal drama he’d had going.
"Goddamn it," he muttered and raked his hand through the strands of black hair that had escaped his ponytail before slapping his cap back on his head backwards. He started stalking back into the diner and only seemed to notice Boyd when he was near the door.

Embarrassment swam to the surface and Sin shook his head, grumbling quietly, "Never fuck someone you work with."

That being said, he disappeared back inside.

Boyd stared at the door for a moment before he thought to flip the phone closed and slide it back in his pocket. His expression closed off; the default neutral that didn't share his thoughts with the world.

He turned, his shoes making soft scuffing noise against the pavement, and walked away.

The world was meaningless white noise.

Sin had a lover.

He'd thought of the possibility in the weeks he'd been unable to return. Still, somehow he'd hoped that there would be a part of Sin that would remember him and the promises they'd made to each other. Part of him that would miss Boyd even if he didn't know who he was—a part that would forge some level of connection between them that could be reignited.

Yet hearing Sin comment about something that could have applied to their own relationship... Sin really didn't remember him at all if he said that so offhandedly to him.

The knowledge was a heavy weight in his stomach.

It may not matter that he'd found Sin again after so long or that he'd been so desperately hopeful at their reunion. It didn't matter that just seeing
Sin filled him with happiness. Sin had an entirely separate life here that he was living disconnected from Boyd. Not only was there no guarantee they would get back together—there wasn't even any reason on Sin's side. He could easily leave Boyd behind for good even though against all odds they'd found each other again.

And if that was the case, what was all this for? Why had he been pulled from his meaningless life into the Agency, thrown into something that had caused him more pain and elation than anything else he'd ever experienced—why had he been turned into an agent, a killer, a valentine, if he couldn't at least have Sin?

The thought was depressing.

Boyd's foot dropped a few inches from the concrete pad of the parking lot down to the sand of the beach. The ocean spread before him; dominating the horizon while birds swooped and rose as small black shapes against the dark sky.

He walked until he stopped in the middle of the beach; people talking and laughing and moving around him, feeling so far away. When he'd realized Sin was here in Annadale Beach he hadn't felt so alone. But now, simple words and a simple fact made him realize he still was.

All those months Boyd had thought only of Sin. All those times he'd leaned on Sin's memory for strength and conviction. All those nights he'd woken in pain and forced himself to keep going because it was what Sin would have wanted...

It hurt to know it may mean nothing.

He dropped down onto the sand, the warmth of it burning through his clothes. It matched the burning in his chest.
Even hundreds of miles away the Agency had found a way to destroy the one good thing he’d found in the last several years. The one relationship he’d treasured above all else—the one person he’d been able to trust without question.

He ignored the depression that threatened to loom and focused instead on the lesson Shapiro had taught him—to redirect his thoughts in a more productive manner.

He tried to look at this objectively.

Boyd was tied to the Agency, which he’d joined because of Sin all those years ago. Yet with Boyd an agent and Sin a civilian who didn’t even remember his past, that life was more of a danger to Sin than anything else now that he’d escaped it. With the enemies that came with the Agency, Boyd's continued presence in Annadale could only increase the likelihood of Sin or others getting caught in the crossfire. Especially with the dangers the mole presented.

If he really wanted to think only of Sin's physical safety, the best thing to do would be to leave Annadale for good. To never return, to never try to get involved. To pretend he never saw Sin.

Strictly speaking, for who Sin was now, it was probably best for his emotional well being too. After all, if he didn't remember Boyd he didn't know to miss him. Obviously he already had people he was involved with here so he wasn't missing anything if Boyd never returned. And here he could be normal.

That was something Boyd could never offer, no matter how much time passed. He would always be caught by the Agency. He would always have blood on his hands and be subject to disappearing for good at any moment. If he really wanted to help Sin, he should take this as a sign and go.
But he didn't want to leave—he wanted to latch onto Sin and never let anyone come between them again for the rest of his life.

It was hard to be logical about something he cared so much about. Someone who was more important to him than anyone else. It was hard to think about finding Sin after all this time and stepping back, just giving in so someone else could take the place he'd fought so hard to be.

He knew the old Sin hadn't wanted to flee to save his life alone—not if he couldn't be with Boyd. He hadn't wanted Boyd to hide it when he was attracted to him or interested in him.

The old Sin wouldn't want him to walk away.

The ocean rolled endlessly; waves rising and falling to become gentle pulls on the edge of the beach. He sighed, dragging his legs in to rest his elbows on his knees.

What should I do, Hsin? You didn't want to be without me because you couldn't forget me back then. But you don't know me anymore. You don't know to miss me. I don't even know if you're in there anymore. And if you aren't, isn't it better that I do what's best for the new you?

The words hung in his mind with no immediate answer.

He grimaced and dropped his head forward with another sigh. His hair tangled in his fingers and his eyes squeezed shut.

His head hurt. His chest hurt. He felt so conflicted and tired.

It hurt to find his lover again and still have to be on guard. To be a world apart in lifestyle now and not even know what he could or should say or do. To have to balance promises of the past with the situation of the present.

To know that he may have to walk away.
To know that it may turn out that the only true happiness he would have in his life after Lou would be those brief moments he got with Sin in the midst of those traumatic years. To know that in the end he’d become pushed so far to the fringes of society that now that his lover was no longer there with him, he couldn’t enter his life again.

To know that there could be someone else where he so desperately wanted to be—someone else who had far less history with Sin but who could talk to him and touch him and be so casual while Boyd had to act the part of a stranger who wasn’t hurt by unintentionally painful words. Even though Sin broke up with Kayla now, how long would it take for him to find someone new? Assuming he didn’t already like someone else.

For all the time he’d thought Sin was dead he’d thought that if only Sin were alive, things would be better. He could love Sin again and Sin could love him again. Sin could tell him it was alright that everything had turned out how it did. That he still loved Boyd no matter what happened while they were apart.

That he still wanted Boyd; that he’d never forgotten him during those long months. That he never would.

But he had.

There was a sharp pain in his chest at the thought and Boyd lifted his head to stare at the ocean.

He couldn't blame Sin for not remembering him, not if the Agency forced that upon him. Yet part of him wanted to shake Sin and tell him to fight what the Agency had done, to fight for Boyd. To fight for them. He wanted to say he’d fought for Sin while he was gone; he’d burned ink into his skin as a reminder, had branded himself with Sin’s name. He wanted to say that Sin
couldn't let the Agency take this from him too, not after they'd taken so much from him over the years.

Hadn't their relationship been important enough? Hadn't it changed both of them? Hadn't it been an integral part of who they were now? So how could it fully disappear from Sin's mind or feelings no matter what the Agency did?

He couldn't help hating the Agency for everything they'd done, for even now being an obstacle that could keep them apart. Yet he was grateful that in the process they'd provided Sin this chance to be free of alienation and the demons he'd spent his life immersed in.

It was so conflicting and confusing, knowing that in the process of his own life being destroyed his lover's was improved.

He sighed, a sharp burst of breath. He pushed himself up, feeling restless all of a sudden. Hands hooking in his pocket, he half turned to look back at the diner.

*What would you want me to do, Hsin?*

If he stayed around Annadale he knew there was no way he could hold himself back. He would want to be with Sin again in any way Sin would have him. He couldn't stand by and watch as Sin hooked up with someone else, potentially for good, without Boyd trying to get closer first.

But even though he was positive the old Sin would have wanted him to interfere, the old Sin didn't have the current information. He didn't know about the increased dangers at the Agency. He didn't know about the circumstances or Danny's opportunity for a normal life.

Maybe the old Sin was right—maybe they'd never had a chance. Maybe Boyd should take a lesson from all those times they'd been thrown
apart. Even though Boyd knew Sin was the best person for him, maybe it wasn't the case the other way around. Maybe there was someone out there who was better for Sin. Maybe, after all those times Sin had worried that Boyd wouldn't love Sin in a domestic setting, it was Sin who wouldn't love Boyd in these circumstances.

And yet...

"Why did it end?"

_A flash of Sin's face, partially in profile with those vivid green eyes taking him in._

"Because he wasn't you."

Boyd turned around fully to look at the diner. The outside lights had turned on, reflecting off the windows and covering part of the activity inside.

It reminded him of the past. Of one of the first times they'd eaten together, when they'd gone to that diner all those years ago and Sin had reached out suddenly and touched his hair. It reminded him of an argument they'd had more recently, when he had worried that Sin only wanted him because of the role he filled and not for himself, and Sin had said he'd been attracted to Boyd from early on.

Something had changed in both of them during their partnership.

Boyd no longer wanted to be with anyone but Sin. And Sin had felt the same. If it turned out he had to give Sin up to this civilian life in Annadale then so be it. He would leave his ability to love with Sin as well and continue his life as an agent until the day that life killed him.

His expression set. But that time wasn't now.
If he left Sin behind it would be after he'd done everything he could to fulfill the promises of the past. No matter what Danny may want now, Sin had once loved Boyd. And Boyd wanted Sin above all else. If he wanted Sin to fight for him, he had to fight for Sin first.

His own desires were aligned with the old Sin's. If he was going to go against both of them in order to protect the current Sin by leaving for good, he was only going to do so after he'd determined without a shadow of a doubt that he was doing the right thing. Otherwise, he was only assuming that Danny didn't want him around or wouldn't come to love him, when Danny didn't even know him well enough yet to make an informed decision.

He was still Sin's partner, no matter what. And to be the best partner he could right now, he had to look at this the way he would a mission.

First, gather the facts. Make a plan and execute it, and adapt along the way as new intel arises. Above all, keep the success of the mission in mind.

In this case, Sin was the mission. And success would be his happiness, no matter what that meant for Boyd.

With that thought firmly in mind, Boyd turned and headed back to the hotel to plan his next course of action.

===

"Man, you sure fucked us," a dry voice observed calmly. "Now we're stuck with Tracy and Kelly. Both hot but not a complete braincell between them."

Boyd looked up to see Delsin standing behind the bar, talking to Sin. He was indicating the dark-haired girl that had seated Boyd when he'd walked
into Blue Moon Diner that morning. Sin had come out of the kitchen and was apparently waiting for Delsin to make him some kind of drink.

"How observant of you," Sin replied flatly, sounding so much like his old self that it was temporarily jarring. "Next time, I'll stay in a bad relationship for the sake of the diner."

"Eh. Wasn't that bad."

"It was going nowhere," Sin replied dully, picking up the glass that Delsin plopped down in front of him. "I waited too long as it was. It just made it worse."

Delsin didn't look impressed and poured himself a shot of tequila. "Yeah? Well my ex used to beat me up."

Sin stared at him.

"It's true. I think it was all of the Asian porn I kept on my laptop."

"You're an idiot."

"Yes."

Sin shook his head and started to turn and head back to the kitchen. His eyes ran across the diner, sliding by Boyd and then immediately returning. For a moment his face was unreadable but then he forced his lips up in a half smile of greeting.

Boyd smiled in return but he didn't want to appear as though he'd been listening to their conversation or watching Sin, so he looked away casually as if their gazes had just happened to meet. The last thing he needed was for Sin or Delsin to think he was the next stalker. Even though, admittedly, that was essentially what he was doing.
He leaned against the table on his forearms and kept a bored expression on his face as he pretended to idly watch out the window. In reality, he watched Sin in his peripheral vision.

Sin had stopped his walk back to the kitchen and hesitantly headed for Boyd. Even in a greasy apron and the same worn backwards cap, Sin looked amazing. The major difference between who he was now versus who he had been was that his expression was completely open. There was no default look of indifference now; Sin just looked slightly embarrassed.

Sin stopped beside the table and reached up to adjust his cap. "Hey."

"Hey," Boyd replied, looking up at Sin.

He made sure he didn't stare too hard into those eyes or run his gaze along every nuance of Sin's expression like he wanted to. This was the closest they'd been in good lighting since the first time they'd run into each other and he was struck even more by how much he missed Sin.

A strand of hair had fallen along the side of Sin's face, near his temple and dangling down by his cheek. Even thinking of this as a mission, Boyd wanted so badly to reach up and brush it aside.

He wanted to feel Sin's skin beneath his fingertips again; to remember the sensation of those silky strands of hair sliding between his fingers. He wanted to follow his hand with his mouth, capturing Sin's full lips in a kiss and reacquainting himself with the taste and feel of his body. He wanted to hear the quiet catch in Sin's breath and experience the vulnerability in that strong body when Sin relaxed fully around him.

He wanted to feel those arms encircle him and pull him close like they'd never been apart.
"I just wanted to let you know that I hadn't forgotten about the bike if you're still interested," Sin said with a shrug, sliding his hands into his pockets.

"Oh." The distance between their thoughts felt like another gulf between them. Sin was still looking at him as if they'd never met. Polite interest for a near stranger. Boyd hadn't expected anything else and yet the yearning he felt for his former lover tripled with their proximity.

Years of training at the Agency lifted the edges of Boyd's lips in a friendly smile that hid his thoughts. "Thanks. I am but it's no hurry."

"Well, that's good because she said she won't be finished with it until at least the fall. It's her current side-side project I guess. She's a little ADD with her hobbies." This time when the crooked smile appeared, it looked genuine. "She told me to ask for your email address or something."

"Of course." Boyd looked down at his messenger bag and pulled it up onto his lap. He absently pulled some hair behind his ear as it started to fall forward, and dug around until he found a scrap of paper.

How inane the conversation was and yet he couldn't deny the thrill that at least Sin remembered him. Not the important parts, but he still recognized him. Better to see that in those unforgettable eyes than the blankness from before.

He found a piece of paper and pen, the tip poised for writing before he paused. He looked up at Sin, trying to ignore the scent of Sin that his overactive mind was convincing him he smelled. In the middle of the diner, he was smelling food and not Sin. He knew that. But Sin's proximity brought with it all the memories the Agency had buried with Sin; made all the more intense for him being the only one experiencing them.

"What does she prefer? Email or phone?"
"Email. Tech is typically glued to her computer."

Boyd nodded and wrote down a secure personal email address he rarely used but knew he would obsessively check after this, just in case Sin decided to email him. When finished, he handed the piece of paper to Sin.

It disappeared into one of Sin's pockets and he inclined his head. "She'll probably contact you with the details to see if you're really interested. She doesn't fuck around with her bikes so she'll probably feel you out to see if you're really interested. She comes across as a humorless bitch via text but she's a cool girl."

Boyd smiled faintly at the description. "Thanks for the warning." He put the pen back in his bag and dropped the bag to the floor. "How fast does yours go, by the way?"

"Not very, but it's fine for me. I like to keep things simple." Sin's broad shoulders rose in a shrug.

Boyd nodded and leaned back in his chair. "Do you know if she can make faster bikes, too, or does she specialize in your model?"

"I'm not too sure. She'll give you all the details, though."

"Danny, the kitchen is on fire!"

Sin made a face and looked over his shoulder at Delsin. He shook his head without dignifying the exclamation with a response, and rolled his eyes. "Well, I gotta go. It was nice seeing you again..."

He trailed off and it was obvious that he didn't remember Boyd's name.

"Boyd," he replied easily, keeping the twinge out of his expression.

"Sorry." A familiar smirk curved up onto Sin's full lips and he arched a brow. "Old age."
He started to turn away but hesitated, and looked at Boyd again. "By
the way... About what you saw yesterday. Or rather, what I said."

"I won't tell anyone," Boyd said, meeting Sin's eyes. "In case you're
worried."

"Thanks. If she comes back to work, I don't want there to be even more
bullshit."

Boyd nodded, his lips lifting faintly on the edges in something that
wasn't quite a smile. "I understand."

Sin nodded at him and walked away, disappearing into the kitchen that
he'd been neglecting.

Boyd's gaze lingered briefly on the door before he made himself look
away.

He had to push himself through the initial emotional reaction to being
near Sin and instead focus on the first step of his mission. The task at hand
was to find more information the best way he knew how. Since Sin hadn't
reacted to anything so far, it was going to take too long to find out through
conversation what exactly was happening and what exactly Sin remembered.

He was better off surveilling.

He asked for his check and paid but remained seated at the table. He
didn't look directly at the Employees Only door again, as if he'd forgotten
about Sin's existence.

Like any surveillance, it was most important to remain discreet. The
second the target or any incidentals knew he was watching, it would cause
problems. He'd determined that there was only one exit to the restaurant; all
the employees and customers went in and out of the same door. To keep
suspicions down, he left the diner just before he would have been noticeable as lingering too long. Sin's bike was in the lot so Boyd knew he was still there.

Satisfied, he moved to a bench halfway down the block and put on a pair of dark sunglasses to fend off the glare of the sun. His location was ideally situated, where he could appear as though he was enjoying the nice day and watching the beach but in fact he could watch the diner.

He had to slather on some sunscreen in the time he waited for Sin. The heat was almost palpable.

He kept his surveillance on the diner but left the bench just long enough to buy a cheap sun hat from a vendor nearby. That worked better anyway, giving him an opportunity to fold his too-noticeable long blond hair back in on itself and push it up under the hat. He also pulled off an over shirt he'd worn and put it in his bag, leaving his bare arms open to the sun with the tank top on underneath. A change of clothing would help detract from Sin noticing him out of the corner of his eye.

One more application of sunscreen, two bottles of water from another vendor, and a car rental later and Sin finally appeared. Boyd sat in the car waiting until Sin was at the exit of the lot, looking around for a chance to pull into traffic. Boyd pulled out onto the street behind him.

On a Friday afternoon, the main drag of Annadale Beach was full of bicycles, buses and cars. As it was, he was easily able to keep Sin's dark-haired form in sight, following just far enough behind that he blended in with the rest of the traffic but close enough to catch the same lights.

Sin didn't live far from work. It was at most a ten minute ride before he pulled to the side of the street and parked his motorbike at an angle. Boyd slowed half a block down and then stopped, parking on the side of the street in front of an apartment complex. He turned off the car but didn't move to exit.
He waited until Sin barely glanced down the street before he disappeared into a small apartment building. Then he got out of the car and headed toward the building.

He wasn't fast enough to catch the security door before it swung shut but he was able to shift and peer in the glass door to the mailboxes inside. He saw the name Danny Cruz on one of them and then memorized the apartment number and address. Next, he walked around the building, checking to see if there were any cues as to the direction Sin's apartment would be facing. From another angle he was able to see a few of the apartment numbers on the first floor and through that calculated that Sin's apartment number probably put him at the back of the building.

He spent some time looking around, finding a place in the backyards of the apartment complexes in the area where he could settle down and watch the upper floors without being seen. He pulled a book out of his bag and leaned back against a tree, the branches shifting lazily in the light breeze and churning dappled shadows across the pages.

It was probably another hour of watching the windows over the top of the book, turning pages periodically to continue the ruse of reading, before he finally saw a glimpse of Sin's face out of one. He seemed to be in a bedroom judging by what looked to be a dresser in the background. He paused briefly by the glass doors opening to the small balcony off the back. He was looking up and out, his pale green eyes likely seeking out the partial ocean view from his place and straying nowhere near where Boyd reclined.

Although it was only a brief glimpse before Sin disappeared again, Boyd zeroed his attention in on that area until he was able to determine which windows were from Sin's apartment and which belonged to someone else.

Satisfied, he packed up his book and left. If Sin found him skulking in the backyard so soon after talking to him, it would be difficult to explain.
That night, he started the first of what would ultimately be a series of discreet searches for information on Danny Cruz. He didn't know what the Agency's plan was or whether they—or even Sin—would have anything flagged. He had to be exceedingly careful, taking his time with masking his presence even on the public searches.

He found a birth certificate that said Daniel Angeles Cruz had been born on March 5, 1991. All the information, from his parents' names to the hospital he'd been born, looked legitimate but Boyd knew to be false. He wondered how thorough the Agency had been. Whether they had inserted fake records at the hospital itself verifying Danny's birth or whether they had purposefully chosen one of the hospitals who had lost their earlier records during the war.

According to Danny's residency placard, prior to Annadale Beach he'd lived in Washington DC. Boyd made a note of the address so he could visit the place sometime. He searched around online and found that the area was known to be a bad neighborhood. When Boyd checked where Danny had been prior to that he was mildly surprised to see they'd listed him as having been in a mental institute.

He paused, his eyebrows raising and fingers resting on the touch screen before he flipped through the records to find the reason. On the public databases, all he could find were convictions. According to the court records, he'd been charged with manslaughter, the plea had been insanity, he'd been transferred to mental court, and they'd committed him to an institution.

The information read close enough to Sin's true history that it made Boyd wonder why they'd done that. If they had the opportunity to make Sin believe anything, why give him a similar history? He made a mental note to look into that further at a later date.
By the time he had exhausted the information he could find in databases that he could be fairly certain would not automatically raise a red flag at the Agency, it was late at night. He moved around the room, interspersing getting ready for bed with getting ready for the next day, and finally laid down in bed, staring up at the ceiling.

The silence of the room was resounding, now that he wasn't focused intently on the mission he'd assigned himself. The empty space on the other side of the bed ate away at his thoughts.

He fell into a restless sleep, thinking of and remembering Sin. The slide of those strong hands along his skin. The quiet smile. Those green eyes, turning on him and understanding even the words Boyd couldn't form. The rise and fall of that warm chest beneath him the last night before they parted for good...

His alarm screeched, feeling like it was only a handful of seconds later.

"—to be another sunny day in Annadale!" A man's voice swarmed out of the radio clock, for some annoying reason going off at the same time as the buzzer. Boyd jerked awake roughly, his eyes snapping open. "Grab your flip flops and get down to the beach, and don't forget to stop by our tent for the promo—"

Eyes burning and face scrunching, Boyd swung a hand over to smack the button to shut off the alarm. For just one moment he flopped back onto the bed, letting out a low sigh and scrubbing at his face. He was starting to wonder whether he would ever get a good night's sleep again.

Despite the low amount of sleep, he was up and out of the room in no time. He swung by the early riser's continental breakfast room off the hotel lobby and left with a croissant in one hand and an unfortunate cup of coffee in another. He wished more places would take to having plain hot water
available as well so he could make tea, but with sleep still gumming his eyes he settled on the bitter-water-taste of coffee to increase his levels of caffeine.

Surveillance tended to be tedious work and this turned out to be no exception.

Typically he could at least be with someone else so he didn't have to worry about needing to look away for a bit to dull a headache or stand up to stretch and walk around. But he didn't want to miss Sin so he settled into the spot he'd found the day before and waited.

Sin had always been an early riser, largely because he had difficulties sleeping. It seemed that was still the case now. Boyd saw movement in the early morning hours; a shifting of shadows in what he assumed to be the main area of the apartment, and a flicking of a light that was shuttered by darkness soon afterward. A door closing into the bathroom?, Boyd wondered.

Not long afterward there was more movement and then Sin was pulling the curtains open at his glass doors. He stood there, bathed in the subtle light of the sleepy town, his familiar features cast in shadows that Boyd couldn't fully read. When Sin moved away from the window and laid down on the bed, Boyd had to move positions so he could just barely see in at his angle. He couldn't see Sin's expression as well as he wanted, but he could see that he was looking out the window to the world beyond.

Was he pensive? Was he just tired?

It was too hard to tell, but in that moment Boyd wished more deeply than he had since finding Sin that his lover would remember him. He overlaid this scene with his imaginings of Sin lying awake wondering about him, worrying about him, in those long months he was gone on his mission. He wanted to believe Sin remembered him on some level; that the longing could still be there the way it had never left for Boyd.
He wanted to believe he hadn’t been completely forgotten. That he couldn’t be, not if Sin had loved him as deeply as he said he had.

But his hopes, as partially selfish as he knew them to be, were no more clearly written on Sin’s face than they ever were. Those eyes were too far away to show the pale green or the framing of thick dark lashes. All Boyd could see was a glint of light off his eyes and the slow rise and fall of his chest and eyelids. It seemed Sin drifted off to sleep briefly, or maybe he meditated—whatever it was that drew his gaze inward, Boyd was transfixed; breath barely moving and gaze unshifting.

He missed Sin.

He felt it as a pull on his heart; an intense desire to break into that building and go up to his apartment and curl up next to him. To be there where he’d once been able to be; dark and light hair intermixing and the warmth of that strong body so close. He could breathe in his scent the way he had before.

In that moment, he wanted Sin for Sin—for the quiet of his breath and the unspoken words in his eyes. It was little of physical attraction and everything of emotional. He wanted to just hold Sin without the body needing to be involved other than strong arms and a comforting heartbeat. The reminder of the peace that was so long gone now it felt a lifetime had passed.

His breath was sheltered in his lungs; held still like the moment stretching out. Taut and complicated and making him miss and love so much it was almost a second heartbeat in his chest. It was a moment that was destined to shudder and, ultimately, collapse.

Outside staring in, the silence of what he could hear in that apartment with the windows closed was countered by the slow revival of the town around him. It had gone quiet in the moments of early morning. But as the sun’s
ascent slowly lightened the sky from black to midnight blues and soon pastels, Boyd started to hear the shift of Annadale Beach from night to morning.

The muffled sound of traffic began to be heard in short bursts from the road on the other side of the building. There was the creaking, quiet shuffling of windows being pushed open and clips of music from people listening to songs as they got ready for the day. Doors began to open and close, with joggers stretching and disappearing down the steps to head toward their favorite spots, while the jingling of tags and the clacking of nails against concrete marked dogs and their owners taking off for a morning stroll.

He sat there for another handful of hours, the dredges of the coffee long gone cold in his paper cup with crumbs of the croissant scattered around him as miniature leftovers for the ants to bring home. He had to shift and stretch and move again a few times, each time more careful than the last to keep hidden, before Sin finally got up.

After that, it was another extended watch through the windows until Boyd realized he could see the edge of what looked to be Sin's main door to the apartment if he moved just so. He kept an eye on that as best he could, since he was unable to get much of a view of what Sin was doing otherwise aside from moving around the apartment in a normal fashion. When he finally saw the main door open he quickly straightened his cramped body and moved alongside the building so he could see which direction Sin would go.

Sin's lean form appeared out the front, his half-lidded gaze glancing briefly down the street before he turned and started walking in the opposite direction Boyd was hiding. Boyd waited a few seconds, pulled the sunglasses on and adjusted his hair under his hat, and then followed at a sedate walk.

He kept a good distance between them, occasionally stopping to look at something on the side of the street or pausing to peer in a store's window in
order to keep in line with the meanderings of most people who were out and about on a mid-morning Saturday.

It turned out Sin's destination was the grocery store, where Boyd shadowed him for a bit. Even divorced from his old life in Lexington, it seemed that while this version of Sin had better choices in food he still bought a lot of sweets. That knowledge brought with it an unexpected wash of affection that had Boyd fighting the trace of a smile.

He watched to make sure Sin would be distracted for a bit and then grabbed a few things off the shelf for himself, partially because he was starving and partially so he didn't stand out. He went through the checkout before Sin, affording himself the chance to put the few items into his messenger bag. He moved to an inconspicuous place outside and then trailed after Sin again on the return to the apartment.

The next wait was far shorter and this time he stayed out front. Less than an hour after disappearing inside, Sin reappeared. He strode across the sidewalk to his motorbike, where he swung one perfectly long and lean leg over it. The low rumble of the bike was drowned out by the surrounding traffic.

Having anticipated this possibility, Boyd got into the car and went after him. The route Sin took brought him through a few of the back residential streets. On a beautiful summer day in a college town known for its beach, there was no shortage of people to hide his presence. He remembered this area of Annadale Beach quite well from when he'd been in the town for Level 10 training. The park Sin ultimately headed to was the same place Boyd had once observed from atop a building, stealing a man's motorcycle not terribly far from where Sin parked his.

The park was as populated today as it had been those years ago. Boyd watched Sin stride across the vibrant grass and head straight toward a basketball court where several men around his age were gathered. The
familiar way they greeted each other made it obvious that they at least knew each other prior to now, and more likely were friends on some level.

Boyd settled down against a tree far enough away where he wouldn’t be noticed, but close enough that he could still see them clearly. He stayed downwind so he could hear whatever words would drift his way.

He pulled out the food he’d bought and opened the water bottle that was already sweating through the plastic. For the moment he set the book to the side that he’d brought as a cover and instead discreetly watched them through his reflective sunglasses as he ate. Although there were several people there, as they started to play he noted three of them in particular.

One was because he was the only one of the seeming friends who was sitting to the side watching rather than playing. He had long silver-blond hair and looked to be in his early twenties. Everything he wore seemed to be brand name and over time Boyd noticed that he had the type of gestures and personality that was obviously gay.

The other two were in the game. One of them was on the same team as Sin and looked to be in his early twenties as well. He had tanned skin and a cocky smile that seemed to perpetually hover on his lips. His hair was dark and cut short. He was loud, his voice carrying farther than anyone else's; to the point that Boyd was able to gather a little bit of intel. Most of what the man said was joking. Through him Boyd eventually found out that the blond man sitting to the side was named Taz. He also learned the name of the other person who had caught his attention.

Gage looked to be Sin's age and was on the opposite team. He was tall, muscular, and, judging by how infrequently his lips moved, intensely silent. He had the sort of imposing presence that reminded Boyd of the way Sin used to be. His blond hair was braided in tight rows along his scalp and
his eyes were narrowed. It was difficult to tell if that was due to the sun or if it was his default expression.

Sin's speed and grace hadn't changed at all. As they played, Boyd found himself wanting to be over there too. It had been so long since he'd had the opportunity to do anything physical with Sin. He missed sparring with him; that mixture of sweat and exertion and the challenge of beating his lover at the game a little longer than the time before. He missed having the ability to rake his gaze over Sin's body without garnering a second glance, and the adrenaline high that so often led to frenzied sex. He missed the elation of it all; the endorphins that had buzzed through him and the fierce grin that had moved like second nature across his lips.

The book in his hands made a quiet shifting noise as it slid slightly down his lap. He sighed and flipped a page while glancing down. It was the same book he'd been pretending to read when staking out the lab on the compound. A book he'd randomly grabbed from his library but coincidentally had been one Sin had given him.

It made his life feel very ordinary and very odd all at once.

He stayed there for awhile, watching his former lover play basketball and seem to truly enjoy it. It was strange, watching Sin interact with so many people while not seeming to mind their presence. Strange to see him so accepted, like he hadn't been since Monterrey. Strange to see glimpses of that smile, still so quiet and reserved in a way but more beautiful to Boyd than ever after so long an absence.

Sin's team won, as Boyd expected.

Gage was surprisingly quick on his feet, possibly even agent material, but no one else could contend. Boyd watched the way Sin was light on his
feet and fast with his hands, but he knew more than anyone that Sin could go much faster.

He was holding himself back.

Whether it was because he didn't want to stand out too much—something Sin had never seemed to enjoy, especially after the idea of experimentation had arisen—or whether it was for another reason, Boyd didn't know. Whatever the case, even with Gage on the opposite team it meant they had no chance.

Although several of them lingered afterward, Sin left not too long later. Boyd wondered whether this was a regular occurrence—maybe a weekly Saturday game that Sin showed up for but didn't want to spend the day hanging around with others. He told himself to check again in the future on another Saturday if he got the chance.

By now Boyd was getting used to the trek back to Sin's apartment. He found another place to linger so he wouldn't be attracting attention, and waited another few hours for Sin to reappear. During that time he accessed some networks to do a few more searches on Danny Cruz but didn't get much more information than he'd already gathered.

He had to put on more sunscreen and settled as far into the shade as he could. Sweat trickled down his skin; a distracting and at times torturous feeling that was steadily soaking places on his tank top.

It wasn't until hours later in the late afternoon as it trended toward evening that Boyd saw Sin again. He'd had to move around several times in the course of that time, at one point sitting a block away in the outdoor seating of a small cafe. Even with the slight change in scenery he'd started to become lulled by the hours dragging out, the unrelenting heat, and the lack of sleep.
So when the familiar long lines of Sin's shape appeared, Boyd perked up immediately.

Sin walked down to the beach where he jogged for awhile. Boyd moved along at a slower pace, keeping him in his field of view while trailing his bare feet through the edge of the water. The rise and fall of the ocean water along his overheated skin felt wonderful, as did the sand digging into toes. He held his shoes with the crooks of two fingers and watched the silent form of his old partner shift in and out of view between small, thinning crowds of people.

The sun made its way toward the horizon, coloring the sky in brilliant purples and reds and pinks that blended so perfectly with each other it was difficult to say where one began and another ended. The shadows grew long and the wind off the sea was a cooling balm against hot skin. The ocean waves were white caps far out to sea; turning gentle and unimposing at his feet.

Eventually Sin slowed and then stopped, cooling down with walking and shaking out his limbs. And then he was sitting down, nestled on the beach in a quiet area separated from most of the other people who had also lingered. He sat there during the sunset, the olive tone of his skin and those pale green eyes only enhanced by the rich lighting.

Boyd sat down away from him, watching him and wishing so many things. Soon, even those wishes fell away and he was able to take a moment to simply sit and breathe. To enjoy these moments he'd somehow managed to find—stolen glimpses of the man he still loved.

They sat there, meters and worlds apart, taking in the same quiet evening with vastly different reasons.
Chapter Thirteen

An appointment with Carhart had Boyd leaving Annadale early the next morning. He paid for the room at Oceanside Resort for the rest of the summer so he wouldn’t have to worry about accommodations no matter how last minute he visited. He swung in Blue Moon Diner for some breakfast and to see if he could get one last glimpse of Sin, but his former partner was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed but not surprised, he left.

As he drove back to Lexington, he went over part of his plan.

He had to devise a strategy for how he was going to hide his trips to Annadale in the future. This time, he’d had known consecutive days off. But even on a day off he could get a call to come in within minutes for a sudden mission. At four hours away on a good day, that would be impossible. If he was late enough times he would tip them off to something happening. Or, a worse scenario, Jae-Hwa would decide he was too unreliable and use that as a reason to have him terminated.

He kept one hand on the wheel and reached into his pocket for his work phone. He checked it, scrolling down the list of recent calls and texts to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. Nothing. No new missions, thankfully. The meeting would still be on for the designated place at the designated time. He flicked his gaze back to the road and tossed his phone to the seat.

Brian remained their go-between on setting up the meetings, contacting Boyd through untraceable or discreet means. They’d taken to switching up the location of where they met, so it was never predictable. They tended to meet around food or other casual settings so they could have a way to blend in and an excuse for the meeting if it ever came up with the administration.
When Boyd got to the city, he headed straight for Jezebel's.

In the years since he'd last visited her, Jezebel had turned her tiny little art into an actual ice cream parlor. Somewhere along the way, a few of her patrons had finally taken the time to help her renovate and move into a previously rundown building.

It was called Sweet Lynette's, named after Jezebel's dead daughter, and the main room was large enough that there were a few small tables with chairs around them. They were scattered around the room in areas to allow for private conversations that weren't easily overheard by others. Boyd suspected Jezebel had done that on purpose. She'd always been especially aware of the privacy needed during times of grief and recovery and she'd likely wanted a place where people could come and relax.

The walls were a warm buttery yellow color and there was a counter along one side, containing a refrigerated area with a plastic window so patrons could look in and see the flavors of the day. She offered free samples with little spoons and all her prices and specials were handwritten on old chalkboard signs hanging on the wall. He didn't even know where she'd found that material; few people bothered with handwritten signs anymore when it was easier to use digital signs that took less effort to change. He knew even less how she got it up on the walls when she was confined to a wheelchair and missing a few limbs.

He got to the ice cream parlor before Carhart and sat down at a table. He decided against getting ice cream immediately, mostly because he got there fifteen minutes early and it all would have melted by the time Carhart arrived.

He had one of his sketchbooks with him and, after sitting doing nothing for a few minutes, he decided to pull it out to pass the time. He absently sketched the people around him and the inside of the store while he waited. It
didn’t take long before that bored him and he thought back on everything Jezebel had ever said to him about her family.

Sin was at the forefront of his mind, the way he had been for months but especially in the last few weeks since Boyd's impossible hope had come true. It made him think about how lucky he was to find out that a loved one was still alive, which led him down a path of wondering what Jezebel's daughter would think if she were still alive and saw the shop her mother had made for her.

He flipped to a new page and started on a drawing of Lynette and her children sitting in the parlor, crowded around one of the tables on the other side nearest the counter. A sign with "Sweet Lynette's" written on it was visible in the background at an angle, and Lynette and her children were grinning as they licked ice cream in their cones and off their hands.

He was just about to finish it when he saw movement at the door and looked up to see Carhart walking in. Boyd set the sketchpad aside as Carhart came over.

He was dressed casually in very dark blue jeans, scuffed work boots and a flannel shirt. His blond hair wasn't combed as neatly as usual and he had on a pair of aviator sunglasses. The General looked youthful and relaxed which was a direct contrast to how Boyd knew him to be feeling on most days.

"Hello, Boyd," Carhart greeted him.

"Hello," Boyd replied. "Did you find the place alright?"

"Yes. It's an interesting choice." Carhart sat down and looked around, removing his sunglasses. Dark circles lined his cerulean eyes. "How did you find out about it?"
Boyd slid his gaze away from Carhart to absently rest on Jezebel as she wheeled back and forth behind the counter, helping a customer. A large, genuine smile lightened her wizened face.

"My friend Lou and I ran across her years ago. This shop was only built recently; she used to have a cart she sat by throughout the year." He looked over at Carhart. "She used heaters but sometimes I thought she’d end up freezing to death, especially at her age."

"She seems like a tough old lady. She looks well past the expected living age of our generations."

Boyd nodded, feeling a wave of fondness for the old woman who had always been kind to him. "She is. She has to be around ninety now." He paused, looking down at his sketchpad before flipping it closed and setting his pencil on top. "To tell the truth, there were times I wished she was my grandmother, and wondered whether my real grandmothers were anything like her."

Carhart turned his level stare onto Boyd. "Do you actually know any of your family other than Vivienne?" he asked suddenly, as if the question had never occurred to him.

Boyd shook his head. "I only ever knew my parents. My dad's family died soon after I was born and all I know about the other side is that one of my maternal grandmothers died when I was young. I think the rest must also be dead."

He thought back to the boxes he'd found in the attic and the albums Kassian had found when he'd helped him sort through it all. "I've never seen Vivienne’s side and only found out I may have had an uncle on my dad's side a few years ago when an old photo album resurfaced in the attic."
"That's unfortunate. My own parents passed away before the war even started. I was raised primarily by my aunt and uncle although we lost touch entirely when I joined the military."

It was interesting what topics seemed to come up in these meetings. Boyd had never heard much about Carhart's family and outside of a setting like this, he doubted he ever would have.

Sometimes, for reasons like that, he appreciated that Carhart had reached out to him with this new mission when he had. Without that and the support from Kassian and Ryan, Boyd thought it was likely he would have gotten caught in a downward spiral. One that would have prevented him from lasting the months it took to steady himself again and find Sin.

"Do you ever keep track of them now?" Boyd asked curiously.

He knew a few agents did that even though they weren't supposed to. For some people, they didn't realize how much they appreciated the connections they'd had until they were in a setting like the Agency where the very act of rekindling them could potentially be fatal for loved ones.

"I used to in the early days. They have long since died, my uncle of cancer and my aunt of old age. They had children but I wasn't ever really close enough to them to warrant looking them up. They were older than me when my own parents died. I barely even remember them anymore. Sometimes it seems like my old life was some long forgotten dream."

Carhart frowned slightly but he seemed puzzled more than upset.

"Why did you lose touch when you were in the military? Were you not close?"

The General focused on him again and a slight smile warmed his expression. "It's hard to say. My parents died suddenly in a freakish tornado. I
was their only child but still a burden to my aunt and uncle when they had to take me in. They were poor people. Alcoholics. White trash, really. They didn't really want me there but they weren't mean about it. Just unable to support me. I only figured it out as I got older that they couldn't wait for me to turn eighteen."

Carhart didn't seem bothered by what he said; if anything, he simply seemed thoughtful.

Boyd nodded. In truth, he could identify with that a little bit since Vivienne had never really seemed to want him either, but at the same time it would be hard to lose both parents out of nowhere and end up with relatives. He supposed they were both lucky that at least someone had supported them until they could support themselves.

"How young were you when the tornado hit?"

"Twelve." Carhart shook his head and rolled his shoulders slightly. "It's strange thinking back on it all now. I haven't thought about my parents in years."

Boyd leaned against the edge of the table, watching the older man thoughtfully. Carhart had been with the Agency for a long time; it had to seem so bizarre to think back on simpler times.

Even for Boyd, it was sometimes strange to think about what his life had been like before the Agency; when he'd been a civilian and he'd been largely oblivious to everything around him. That time seemed like ages ago, before he'd ever hurt anyone let alone killed them. Back when his partner in bed hadn't sometimes been assigned to him and when he'd been able to pick up and leave whenever he'd wanted.

Sometimes it seemed like such a shame that he'd wasted so much of that freedom confining himself to that depressing house. Especially times like
now, when he wished he could move to Annadale and find a way for Sin to include him back in his life.

"Do you ever wonder what it would've been like if you hadn't ended up here? Or do you ever regret joining?"

Carhart smiled humorlessly and folded his sunglasses into his shirt pocket. "I don't know what I'd be doing. But regardless, I now regret it every day."

Boyd watched Carhart and not for the first time wished there was a better retirement plan at the Agency; one that didn't involve death or constant surveillance to the point of paranoia for the person involved. He could imagine Carhart settling down for a normal life and, in that fantasy world, he liked to imagine he could stop by once in awhile to talk. He imagined being able to come to places like Sweet Lynette's without there being a mountain of weight behind all their words and actions.

He drew in a breath and let it out quietly, trying not to sigh. It was always disappointing having to be mindful of the reality they all found themselves tied to, and now his mind was switching to more serious topics. Like finding a way to see Sin without putting him in danger, and talking to Carhart about everything that had been happening at the Agency.

He looked over and saw that there were no customers at the counter and Jezebel was rinsing off the scoop. If they stayed seated for much longer, they would start to stand out as some of the few people in the shop who weren't currently eating ice cream or looking at the signs as if debating from their chair what kind to get.

"I suppose we should get something to eat," Boyd said.

"We do look odd sitting here."
Boyd pushed himself up to a stand. "I haven't been here since she added all the flavors but I can at least attest that the raspberry with dark chocolate is good and not too sweet."

Carhart followed him to the counter and looked slightly dismayed by the assortment of types. "I have no idea what to get."

"So many friends nowadays, little Boyd," Jezebel piped up cheerfully as she rolled her wheelchair closer to the selection of ice cream.

Now that he was closer to her, Boyd saw that in many ways she was just the way he remembered her. White hair that was short and wavy, skin that was so translucent that pale blue veins could be seen through it, and wrinkles on every inch of her. She was thin to the point that her veins stood out in relief and her fingers were bone thin between her knobby knuckles.

Despite that she didn't look frail. It may have been her personality. Or it may have been the layers she wore: the long wispy white shirt over a shapeless black tank top; a long denim skirt that dipped down over her missing leg that ended at the thigh; and one open-toed sandal for a shoe. She'd painted her nails a deep pink on her only foot.

More than anything, although he could tell she'd aged she still had the feeling of being younger than she had any right to be. One of her arms was missing from around the elbow but she still used the stump to hold items against her torso, and when she smiled with her pearly white dentures she seemed genuinely happy. Her hazel eyes twinkled with mischief and seemed as sharp as someone a quarter of her age.

She turned her attention to Carhart, taking him in with those eyes that always seemed to see and understand more than was said. She smiled at him in welcome. "What's your name, son?"
Carhart blinked at her, appearing taken aback at being addressed in such a manner. "Zach," he replied after a moment, smiling at her kindly.

Her smile grew and she nodded sagely. "You look like a Zach. I'm Jezebel but you can call me whatever you like, dear. I answer to it all." She waved her hand idly and chuckled. "I've lived so long I've heard names that'd make the hair curl right on that handsome little head of yours."

"I'll call you whatever you want to be referred to as, ma'am," Carhart replied politely, as if he wasn't really sure what to say in response.

"Oh, bless your heart, you called me ma'am." She chuckled and looked over at Boyd. "You learn something from this one, now, you hear? You used to be such a sweet boy. Always saying please and thank you..."

She trailed off as if reminiscing and he felt a wave of comfort. The familiar way she treated everyone had always felt welcoming to him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said and she grinned at him.

"Now," she said, patting her knee with her good hand and moving her amputated arm as if she had a hand on that as well. She looked at Carhart with an intent, thoughtful manner. "Do you prefer coffee or hot chocolate?" She said it as an either/or question.

He stared at her and shot Boyd a baffled look. "Ah... coffee."

Boyd gave Carhart a slight, encouraging nod. He forgot to warn the General that Jezebel did this with everyone the first time she met them.

Jezebel nodded at Carhart. "Coffee's a real pick-me-up. I prefer hot chocolate, myself. Nothing quite like liquid chocolate warming the soul." She smiled impishly. She watched Carhart with a kind expression and relaxed body language. "What about pie or cake, darlin'? Any kind."
The General was looking more and more baffled by the conversation. He'd likely come with the intention of talking shop about traitors and death plots, not comfort food. "Apple pie."

"Is that so?" she asked, smiling slightly with her eyebrow ticking up just enough to give her an intrigued look. "What about your favorite color?"

There was a slightly longer pause this time before Carhart admitted that he didn't know. "Green?"

Jezebel considered him at length, her eyes taking in every part of him while her lips tilted up in a small, enigmatic smile. After a moment, she nodded to herself and started wheeling backwards so she could turn herself in the direction of the ice cream.

"Well, Zach, you seem like a real solid man. Strong and traditional but sweet and with a kick, just like your favorites. And for that..."

She rolled her wheelchair to the end of the ice cream selections and grabbed the ice cream scoop. She put two large scoops of vanilla ice cream in a paper cup. It had thin swirls of strawberry and a slightly pale yellow in it with pieces of nuts and fudge. She set the ice cream scooper to the side and carefully held the cup against her chest with her amputated arm while she rolled herself back over to Carhart. She held the ice cream up to him with a serene smile.

"Here you go, son. Banana split swirl. A little something to put some pep back in your step. Those kind blue eyes of yours, they need to be smiling more than they're frowning."

Still looking uncertain and slightly uncomfortable, Carhart took the ice cream and thanked her warmly. He seemed to be grateful for her kindness although he clearly had no idea how to respond to it. "How much do I owe you, ma'am?"
Jezebel scrunched up her face and waved her hand dismissively. "That little rascal must not have told you. Don't you go worrying about paying for anything. First time's free for everyone here at Sweet Lynette's. Especially for sweethearts like you."

Carhart opened his mouth as if to disagree but he seemed to sense that it was a lost cause and stopped. "That's very generous. Thank you."

She smiled again and looked at him as though she would have patted him on the arm if she'd been able to reach him.

"It hasn't been my first time for years and you still never let me pay for it, Jezebel," Boyd pointed out, his eyebrows lifting.

"Oh, you." She waved her hand dismissively. "You're like family. You can eat for free."

She rolled herself toward the ice cream again and automatically started to scoop out another type of ice cream without asking him what he wanted.

"Isn't everyone like family to you?" He tilted his head toward her handwritten signs. "Don't tell me; someone else wrote those signs and put them up out of your reach so you'd actually generate some income."

She laughed, her eyes twinkling. "Maybe you're a little right, maybe you're a little wrong," she said lightly. "These old bones will never say."

Boyd shook his head but didn't reply. He waited while she finished scooping out the ice cream and rolled over to the counter where she held it out to him.

"Something a little different to mark the occasion. Black tea ice cream. I made it thinking of you."
Boyd's eyebrows twitched up as he accepted the ice cream. He hadn't seen her since months before he'd left for the mission. It had been around two years by now.

"How did you know I'd be back?"

"Oh, you know," she said with a tricky little smile. "Live long enough and gut instinct starts steering you true."

He gave her a clearly disbeliefing look and she burst out with a laugh that rang through the small shop. A few of the patrons glanced over with small smiles. She shook her head and dropped her hand into her lap.

"So skeptical," she murmured, sounding amused. "If you must know, I thought of strange kids like you who want ice cream that isn't terribly sweet. I was hoping you would show when I had it on trial run and here you are! Wish for it and it will come true."

It was such a positive comment that Boyd shook his head to himself. In a lot of ways, he was too realistic to be optimistic like that. But then, he'd wished so hard for Sin to still be alive and well, and somehow it had happened.

He knew it had nothing whatsoever to do with what he'd wanted or what he'd wished, and that it would have been like this regardless of if he'd ever discovered the truth. But standing in Jezebel's old-fashioned ice cream parlor with her smiling at him kindly, it was hard not to believe that with enough hope, any dream could come true.

"Thank you," he said, and since she watched him expectantly he took a lick of ice cream. It was a strange taste but one he didn't mind; like a slightly sweeter version of the teas he enjoyed. He suspected that once he got over the unexpected taste, he would really like it. He smiled at her more genuinely and answered her unasked question. "It's very good."
Her smile became a beam and she chortled to herself, slapping her hand on her thigh and seeming immensely pleased. "I told Isaac, I said someone would like it and here we are. I was right! I can't wait to tell him..."

Boyd didn't know who Isaac was but he suspected he was one of the people who had helped her create the little parlor.

"My tip for being right, then," he said as he held out more than enough money for his and Carhart's ice cream as well as a generous tip for each. She tried to wave away his attempts like she always did but Boyd wouldn't let her.

They went back and forth in that manner twice before Boyd finally quirked an eyebrow. "You know I'll win if it's a game of wills."

She chuckled to herself and finally relented, letting her hand fall to her lap. When she spoke, it was almost to herself. "Such an incorrigible child. What would your father say?"

Boyd gave her an odd look as he tossed the money on the counter. "I don't know. Why would you ask that? You didn't know him, did you?"

Jezebel smiled and shrugged, glancing down at the money as she picked it up off the counter. "Oh, you know. Just an expression."

She opened the old register that was sitting by her. She put the money in and closed the drawer, looking up at him with raised eyebrows. "Is that better, little Boyd?" she asked with the same bright teasing as always.

"Yes."

He watched her a moment and then decided whatever that had been about wasn't important enough to linger. He thanked her again for the ice cream and looked over at Carhart, meeting the man's eyes briefly before the two of them headed back to the table and sat down.
"I'm tempted to allow myself to be distracted but I won't," Carhart said, shaking his head and sitting back in the chair. He studied the ice cream in his cup, holding a spoon in one hand. "I'm going to have to cut to the quick. I need to be back in thirty minutes."

Boyd nodded, unsurprised by the information. He took a bite of his ice cream, finding that the taste was already growing on him. Ice cream was perhaps an odd choice considering the gravity of the discussions they typically had, and yet in a way that helped provide further cover.

"I need you to keep an eye on Kassian," Carhart said without delay. His cerulean eyes flicked around as he said the words.

Boyd watched Carhart closely. In his mind, he ran through the last time he'd seen Kassian. He didn't remember anything seeming out of the ordinary. "Why?"

"Jordan is becoming an issue."

Boyd's eyes narrowed faintly. His distrust of the twins had grown as he'd come to know them better. Even though Jordan had transferred out of his unit months ago, Boyd had watched her enough to have come to agree with Carhart's sentiments that she could be trusted less than her sister. Bex was a bitch as far as Boyd was concerned but she was predictable to some extent.

With Jordan, he could never fully be certain what the motivations were behind her words and actions. Maybe it was because he'd already been warned about her so he knew what to look for, or maybe it was simply that he'd grown used to seeing more and more manipulative people over his missions and especially during the mission at Aleixo's. To get high enough in that sort of cutthroat hierarchy, a person had to be manipulative on multiple levels; physically, mentally, and emotionally. And Jordan, as far as Boyd was concerned, was the best he'd seen yet.
"What happened?"

"Jae-Hwa assigned him a mission recently. Jordan was his partner on it. The mission is of little consequence—it did not require two rank 10 operatives. The important part is that it required them to pose as lovers for several weeks." Carhart narrowed his eyes slightly, his mouth turning down in a frown. "Originally Agents Liang and Blake were slated to go but it was changed before the order went down the line. Jae-Hwa wanted Jordan and Kassian on it together."

Boyd's eyebrow ticked up. Jordan was probably the best valentine the Agency had and given Kassian's personality and the fact that Carhart thought Jae-Hwa was trying to turn him...

"You think she's using Jordan to seduce him and get him sympathetic to her goals or administration?"

"I think she's trying," Carhart replied, twirling his spoon in the cup with a scowl. "She's exploiting Kassian's two major flaws: his need for companionship and his desire to help people. Jordan is fully capable of providing the first and he only has to glance at a superficial profile of her to learn that she has been a victim for most of her life until she was recruited. Even if he doesn't trust her, he'll pity her and it could sway him."

Boyd's eyes narrowed at that and he let the spoon rest on the edge of his cup. He'd be damned if he let Jordan and Jae-Hwa take advantage of Kassian like that; at least, if he had any say. Kassian was at heart a good person, and after everything he'd done for Boyd there was no way he could stand by the side and let him potentially be hurt or betrayed.

"I'll do what I can," he said seriously. "But it seems particularly ruthless to send a valentine after one of our own. Do you think Seong's that desperate
for him or do you think it simply worked in line with the way Jordan already operates since she seems to target high ranking people on her own?"

"Well," the General studied him, pursing his lips together for a moment. He looked reluctant or at least hesitant to continue. "Well, Boyd, there is a very highly classified portion of valentine operatives who are used for agents in special circumstances. It has always been that way but it's a rarely used tactic."

Boyd stared at Carhart a moment, the ice cream forgotten in front of him. He couldn't entirely be surprised; considering how he thought it was a ruthless thing to do, it was no wonder that the Agency would do it.

Several questions ran through his mind immediately. Was that why Jordan thought he'd tamed Sin; that he'd been assigned him? What relationships had been nothing more than an assignment? What happened at the end of the assignments? Why would they ever do that to someone?

Valentine assignments could be hard enough depending on the mission but having to do it to a coworker who a person would also never be able to leave behind? That was cold. Agents had enough issues with trusting anyone as it was; they should at least be able to rely on their fellow agents. Even if there would likely always be times that an agent had to lie to another agent to protect themselves from termination or breaching confidentiality, the relationships formed between them should never be a mission itself.

A memory resurfaced, from his session with Bridget Monaghan when the new regime had just been putting out its feelers.

"Bridget asked me about Thierry, whether I'd seduce and kill him, and I didn't—I thought it was all theoretical. Do you think—" He cut himself off and frowned, his eyebrows drawing down. Remembering himself saying yes, he
would. "Will I ever have to do that?" It came out more dismayed than he'd intended.

"If I answered with a definite no, I would be lying. But it's unlikely. It's known around the compound that you were with Sin. It's unlikely anyone would buy that you're suddenly romancing random agents."

Boyd nodded, relieved by the thought.

"In any case, Jordan is a very peculiar girl. She was desensitized to sex at a very early age and used it as her primary weapon and means of income until she was recruited," Carhart went on, going back to the point. He didn't seem in a hurry to actually go into detail about her past. "If I believed nymphomaniacs truly existed, I'd think she was one. That is actually why this situation is even trickier. Since their mission, I have heard word of she and Kassian being seen together on more than one occasion. She is impossible to read so I can't tell if she actually wants him or if this is a part of a preconceived plan."

He spooned some of his ice cream and ate it thoughtfully, gaze shifting to the street outside of the small shop. "Another twist is that she and Bex have been at odds regarding her behavior. They got into a heated argument that ended with Bex striking her sister recently. According to witnesses, the cause was Kassian. The twins are very close—I assumed that Jordan would have informed her sister if it was merely a mission but that makes it seem otherwise. Then again, this could all be an act. It's impossible to know which is why I'm asking you to watch out for him. If you have to, you can tell him that they may be watching him closely."

Boyd frowned as he considered that information. Even if it turned out Jordan had the best of intentions and it wasn't really a plot, he still couldn't help distrusting her and thinking that she was bad for Kassian to be around regardless.
As for Bex, she didn't typically seem the type to get involved in acts. Then again, everything he knew of her could be an act. They could have carefully orchestrated it all so that situations like this and fights that were overseen could lend credibility to Jordan's supposed interest or feelings.

He looked down at his ice cream and started eating it again, although it did make him think about how even just a few minutes ago he'd been feeling much more optimistic than he was now. It seemed like every time he thought too hard about the Agency and everything it represented, he got discouraged and disgusted.

"I'll meet up with him as soon as I can, and I'll make sure to keep an eye on him," Boyd assured Carhart.

"Good." Carhart pushed his bowl away and moved to stand. He had finished more than half of his ice cream and a bemused smile crossed his mouth as he glanced down at the bowl. "I suppose it would be odd if I took it to go to my meeting. Such a shame."

"Zach, wait," Boyd said quickly, before Carhart could leave. It was one of the rare times he'd ever called Carhart by his first name. He said it without thinking, feeling urgency and a hint of panic at the idea of Carhart leaving before he could talk. "I have a favor to ask."

The General stopped and glanced at him, looking faintly surprised. "What's wrong?"

Boyd searched Carhart's expression, hesitating only briefly. "Lately, I've been thinking about Hsin a lot," he said, making it sound like an admittance. He didn't like playing on Carhart's sympathy but this was the best way he'd determined to get forewarning without giving away too much information. "I've been spending time at the cabin on my off time but it's a few
hours away. I was hoping, whenever possible, I could get more warning before briefings so I have the chance to get in on time."

Carhart looked down at him for a moment and released a low sigh. He reached up to rub a hand across his face. "I understand, Boyd. But I can't make any promises... you know that things can crop up in a moment's notice. And I can't show such blatant favoritism at this point."

The older man frowned and stared at Boyd for a breath longer before saying, "When is your next session with Dr. Shapiro?"

"In two days," Boyd replied, his eyebrows drawing together. "Why?"

There was another brief pause before Carhart gave him a significant look. "Perhaps you should admit to recurring bouts of strong depression and anxiety. Nothing that affects your missions but something that strikes you when you're in the city and on the compound. Perhaps something that affects you when you're in surroundings that remind you of the past. Commenting on a desire to get away from the city from time to time wouldn't hurt."

Boyd took that into consideration and nodded. If Shapiro thought Boyd was struggling with his issues, and knew Boyd may be leaving town or even recommended it as personal trips, it would be helpful. Then he had a legitimate reason even if he got a mission straight from Jae-Hwa. It was a good solution, especially since even on downtime a mission could come out of nowhere.

The fact that Carhart knew to suggest that underscored how well he knew the system.

Sitting there in the comfortable ice cream parlor shop looking at Carhart, for a moment Boyd really wanted to think of Carhart as his father. As the type of man his father would have been, and as such, someone he could
tell the truth. For a moment, he wanted to confess so he could see what Carhart thought, and so they could work on it together.

The idea lingered in his mind for only a moment before he pushed it away.

This was a mission now and he had to treat it as such.

He couldn't second guess his earlier determination because he knew in truth it was the right decision. Sin's disappearance had been so highly classified that he had to wonder if even Vivienne knew about it. Talking about it to anyone would be the height of stupidity, just opening it up to the possibility of something going wrong. Until and unless he came to a point where he couldn't handle this himself, bringing others into it was a risk he couldn't take.

All it took to reinforce that thought was the memory of Sin's lips lifting in a faint smile and those green eyes being clear of the demons that had nearly destroyed him at the Agency.

Nothing was worth risking Sin's safety. He couldn't let anything interfere with gathering more information and determining what was the best course of action.

Maybe at the end of it he would be in a position to be able to share the truth with Carhart or someone else. But until that time, with the ruthless efficiency of the current administration, it was disturbingly possible that sharing the truth about Sin would be as equally detrimental to Sin's health or life as it would be to his own and the people he told. For all he knew, if Jae-Hwa got wind that he'd told Carhart, she would use that as an excuse to go after Carhart as well. To terminate one of the few people in power who could be trusted to help the agents below him.
Not to mention, until they knew who the mole was and how they gathered their intel, it was even stupider to risk the information somehow being overheard or intercepted. That would only put Sin in more danger as a civilian who didn't even know there was a shadowy underworld let alone to protect himself from it.

No, if the Agency determined that classified information had been breached, if they decided it warranted termination, then he would be the only one to fall. Not Sin. Not Carhart. Not anyone. He would take that burden on himself and weather any consequences that came with it.

He was powerless in so many ways but he could protect them from fallout from his own actions, at least, even if he couldn't protect them from the littler pains his white lies would leave behind.

*Forgive me,* he thought to himself even as determination steeled his resolve.

"Thank you," he said aloud. "I'll do that."

"Keep me informed." Carhart nodded at him and turned away, slipping his sunglasses back on. He smiled at Jezebel and thanked her again before exiting the parlor.

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Boyd leaned back in the car and set the binoculars on the passenger seat. He was starting to get a headache. He hadn't realized how dizzying it could be to stare into binoculars at small points across the street until he'd had his first surveillance.

His comm set buzzed quietly in his ear as Emma's voice came across. "Anything yet?"
"Nothing," Boyd replied. There was a soft breath of frustration in his ear. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose and sighed. He and Emma had been doing surveillance in separate cars for hours now and it was getting tiring. "How long do we have to sit here?"

"According to my CI we shouldn't have to wait more than another hour."

"Assuming we have the right man," Boyd muttered, his gaze absently tracking a woman darting across the street and jogging into a nearby condo building.

"Assuming," Emma agreed and then fell silent.

Boyd stretched as best he could, his back aching furiously. A few pops accompanied the motion. He wished he could get out of the parked car and walk around but that would only draw attention he didn't need. He reached down to pull the lever so his seat could fall back a few degrees. Rolling his neck again, he kicked his feet out in front of him until they hit the pedals.

For several minutes Boyd sat quietly, watching the condo building with the expensive restaurant on the first floor. The upper class area of Maryland's edge had been one of the few areas fully rebuilt following the last bombings. Boyd found it to be ironic that a Janus agent was thought to frequent a place like this, considering they took such issue with the government and its unfair distribution of wealth.

"What was your mission anyway?" Emma asked curiously.

Her voice seemed so abrupt after the extended, nearly meditative, silence that it startled Boyd. He frowned, shifting in his seat and restlessly picked up the binoculars again. His vision blurred as he swung the binoculars around until he could center them on the main entrance to the restaurant. The world came suddenly into sharp focus.
"I can't say," Boyd replied neutrally. There was a short pause before he added, "Sorry."

Although that was partially a lie.

She was working cross-departmentally with him on this after her confidential informant had tipped her off to the whereabouts of Joachim Davis, whose name was on an Intel watch list. She was high enough clearance that she had access to the name, even though judging by the comments she'd made earlier she didn't know who he was. All she knew was Boyd may know the man and that was what needed to be verified.

If he'd wanted to, he could have given her a short, if somewhat vague, idea of what the Aleixo mission had been about. That Aleixo had ties to upper levels of Janus and claimed one or two of the higher ranking people had stopped by his place in the past. At this point Aleixo was proving his worth and the worth of the intelligence he could provide.

There hadn't been any pictures of Joachim Davis, who never seemed to use his real name and instead relied on a laundry list of aliases. Eventually the Agency had been able to determine that a man who may be Joachim had some amount of connection to Janus, and they were now verifying whether that man had a connection to Aleixo. Once that was determined, they would dig into the man's movements further.

Since Boyd didn't feel like getting into any of that or having to field what was and wasn't confidential, he used the excuse of higher clearance.

"Of course," she said easily. She was quiet a second and then spoke again. "I'm sorry for asking; I know rank 10 missions are a secret..."

Boyd frowned slightly as a black limo pulled into the valet area in front. He shifted the focus of the binoculars until he could watch the driver get out and walk around to the back door.
"I've been debating whether I would try for rank 10 again next time it comes up," Emma said thoughtfully.

"Oh?"

Boyd watched the driver open the door. A woman stepped out, wearing a blue dress that screamed money to Boyd even from across the street. The driver shut the door and Boyd sighed, dropping back against the seat again.

"Yeah," Emma said, unaware that Boyd’s attention had wavered from the conversation. "I've been thinking about it. There are some opportunities in Intel that I can't follow at my rank. On the other hand, rank 10 seems like it's very stressful. And some of the things that people give up..."

There was little doubt she was thinking of Pat and his kids.

Boyd was silent at that, debating saying anything that could be construed as being anti-Agency in the event the conversation was overheard or recorded. He watched the limo drive away while the woman walked into the restaurant. After a moment, he spoke into the comm unit.

"It seems like a rank that works best for people who have nothing to lose. Among other aspects, you have to be ready to drop everything at any moment or go on an extended that could potentially last years and could test your resolve..." A red car slowed and started to turn down the valet drive. Boyd turned the binoculars on it. "Your situation may not work well for that. Not to mention your personality."

There was the sound of a bemused release of breath. "I can't decide whether you're being sweet or insulting," she said lightly, amusement in her tone.
Boyd's lips lifted slightly on the edges. He refocused the binoculars as the red car stopped and the valet started to walk over. "You know what I'm saying."

"I do."

The door opened and a man stepped out.

"I have something."

Emma instantly sounded more alert. "With the red car? He does seem to fit the description," she added, answering part of her own question.

The man was turned away from Boyd as he spoke to the valet and then tossed him the keys. Boyd's eyes narrowed and he subconsciously leaned forward, willing the man to turn around. Boyd rolled down his window and set the enhanced microphone just outside, angling it to aim at the man while hiding it from view with the side mirrors. At least he could try to get audio.

"Do you recognize him?"

"I'm not certain. I have a bad angle."

There was a beat of silence. Boyd was going to be irritated if after all this waiting he missed the chance to see the man and would have to risk entering the building.

"Come on. Turn around..." Emma's voice urged quietly in his ear.

As if responding to her wish, the man stopped abruptly and turned around. "If a woman with long hair comes back with the slip, she can take the car," he called out to the valet. His voice was perfectly clear through the enhanced microphone.

The valet paused as he was about to get into the car and nodded. "Yes, sir."
"Wow," Emma's bemused voice was saying through the comm unit. "I wish that always happened."

The short exchange afforded Boyd a perfect view of the man's face. He zoomed in, studying the strong jaw and slightly too large nose; the thick eyebrows and the dark hair swept back from his forehead. He searched the hazy and not so hazy memories of his mission, and vaguely remembered standing back during a meeting or two that Aleixo had had with the man.

It was the combination of his voice and face that made him certain.

"I know him."

"Yes!" Boyd could hear the grin Emma must have on her face. "See? A little good old-fashioned surveillance works wonders even when technology fails us. No DL photo, no booking photos, no photos anywhere? We'll still track you down..."

Although Boyd wasn't as excited as Emma was, her good mood was somewhat infectious. And he had to admit he was glad to not have to sit in the car for another hour or two. He continued to track Joachim and noted that he was about to disappear into the building.

"Orders are still to leave him?"

"Yep," Emma answered absently. He suspected she was sending a notification back to the Agency as she spoke. "Verify and track. Check that your guy didn't lie about the name and who this is, and that my CI didn't lie about his location. That's the third verification for both our people—they're now officially CRIs." She paused and mused, "I don't think I've ever had a double CRI upgrade like this before."
Boyd doubted Aleixo cared that much about being upgraded from a confidential informant to a confidential reliable informant. Then again, since it meant he got to live and his family would remain untouched, maybe he did.

Tossing the binoculars into the back seat, Boyd was glad to be rid of them for the moment. He reached outside the car and removed the microphone before anyone could notice it. Once that was in the back seat as well, he shifted so he could readjust his seat into a driving position.

"Are you going to be okay alone?" Boyd asked her as he reached for his keys.

He was impatient to leave now that his part was over. Although they could have had Emma send him a photograph to verify, since the man had connections to Janus it was determined it was better for Boyd to be there in person. Especially since some of Boyd's memories were still muddled enough that they thought he may need to hear the man's voice.

"I'll be fine, thanks," Emma assured him. "I'm starting to get into the zone. I'll switch off with Jenny later and can call for back up if I need it. But since I'm just tailing this guy for awhile, it should be okay."

"Alright." He started the car. "I'm going to remove my comm. Call my cell if you need me."

"Will do," she replied.

Boyd turned off his comm unit and tossed it onto the seat with the rest of the equipment. He put the car into drive and eased onto the street, merging with traffic. He was too close to DC to miss this opportunity.

He had memorized the addresses in Danny Cruz's fake history so he didn't have to check anything as he navigated his way through the country's capitol. Like many of the larger metro areas in the US, only certain sections
had been fully renovated. As it was in Lexington, New York City, and everywhere else Boyd had seen, it was primarily the upper class and financial areas that had been touched.

He stopped at the hospital first and first hid all the high tech equipment. When he walked inside, he found the waiting area to be half full and the only nurse on duty at the desk to be in the middle of an extended conversation. He stood in line, pulling out his personal phone and flipping it open to check for any messages. Tech hadn't sent him anything. Neither had Sin. He was disappointed, even though there wasn't really a reason for Sin to contact him.

He flipped the phone closed with one hand and put it back in his pocket, turning a bored expression on the room. He had to wait ten minutes but finally made his way up to the desk.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, sounding as though helping people was the last thing she felt like doing at the moment.

Boyd leaned against the counter. "I think so. I'm applying for a job and they need my birth certificate. They sent me here, I don't really know..."

The woman flicked her gaze along him. "Year of birth?"

"1997," he lied easily. There was no point in giving his true birth year.

She shook her head and sat back in her chair. "All our records were lost in the war. We don't have anything earlier than 2000."

Boyd dragged his eyebrows together. "But—what am I supposed to do now?"

"Check the courthouse. They happen to have copies of some of them. You may be in luck."
Boyd sighed heavily and pushed himself away from the counter. "Fine," he said sullenly. "Thanks."

The woman was already turning her gaze from him to the person behind him in line. "Can I help you?"

Boyd walked away with a frustrated frown, carrying the character all the way to the car.

So that explained the hospital.

As he had suspected, the Agency had purposefully chosen a hospital that didn't have the old records so Danny Cruz's existence could neither be proven nor disproved. Boyd left the hospital and headed next to the mental institute that had been listed as where Danny had been sent.

He parked in a commercial parking lot about halfway there and dug around in a bag he'd stored in the trunk. He pulled out a short black wig he'd taken from Unit 16 and put it on, stuffing his long blond hair beneath it. Next he switched out his wallet for one he had hidden at the bottom of the bag. He finished the look by replacing his over shirt and shoes with ones that were much higher quality and brand name and then threw a few extra items beneath the passenger seat.

When he was finished, he put everything back into the bag and put it in the trunk before he continued driving.

It didn't take him long to reach the mental institute or find a parking spot. He walked into the building, checking for a help desk. A sign over an open doorway led him to another room.

A young man sat behind the desk, his short brown hair messy. He glanced up as Boyd walked in with a worried furrow to his brow, his eyes darting around.
The man, whose tag read Joseph, frowned. "Yes?"

"I'm trying to find my brother." Boyd walked closer the desk and stopped, shifting his weight. "I really hope you can help me because I don't know what else to do..."

Joseph's frown only deepened. "Is he a patient here?"

"I don't know." Boyd's voice lifted slightly in frustration. He ran a hand back through his hair and shifted his weight on his feet. "I don't know where he is."

"Shouldn't you check with the police then?"

"No, I mean—" Boyd grimaced and dropped his hand at his side. "All I know is he was institutionalized in DC. I've checked everywhere else and he isn't there. This is the last place he could be."

Joseph's eyebrows dragged together. "That's strange. Why would you know that and not where?"

Boyd sighed heavily. "I'm getting so tired of telling this story," he muttered under his breath. His voice rose back to a normal speaking level. "It's a long, stupid story. Basically there's inheritance at stake and the people in charge in my family don't want him involved. I'm the only one who cares. I need to find him before something can happen."

"Like what?" Joseph asked, giving Boyd an odd look.

"I don't know," Boyd said with a frown. He heard a door open in the distance and distractedly glanced over his shoulder out toward the main lobby area. His frown deepened and he returned his attention to Joseph. "Probably nothing dramatic like I made that sound, but I don't know for sure. My family has too much power for its own good sometimes. And with my brother being the black sheep..." He trailed off worriedly.
Joseph stared at him for a long moment, his expression somewhat suspicious.

"Look, I can show you my ID if it helps."

Boyd pulled out his wallet and tossed a drivers license on the desk. It was one he'd made in the days following his latest trip to Annadale, specifically created for when he would have the chance to look into Danny. He just hadn't expected that opportunity to come so soon. The picture showed him wearing the same wig he wore now.

Joseph looked down at the ID and picked it up. "Travis Cortright?" he read aloud, frowning at the license and then flicking his gaze up to Boyd's face. "Never heard of your family."

"You wouldn't," Boyd said bitterly. "We're West Coast money. That's why they shipped him way the hell over here where no one would know us."

"Hmm." Joseph studied the license intently for a long moment, seemingly debating Boyd's story. In the end, curiosity must have gotten the better of him because he slid the license back to Boyd and reached for his keyboard. "What's his name?"

"I don't know," Boyd said with a grimace.

"What?" Joseph asked incredulously.

Boyd ran a hand back through his hair, looking highly uncomfortable. "Look. I know how this sounds but the thing is, my brother's a little..." He paused, glancing around with his hand lifting in a helpless gesture. His hand dropped as he met Joseph's eyes again. "Well. Crazy. He uses a ton of different names."
Joseph was staring at him like he was an idiot and Boyd rushed on quickly, "But even though he changes up his last name he usually uses a variation of his first name."

Joseph sighed and looked back down at the computer. "Well, that's okay, I guess. I can search first names too. What is it?"

"Daniel."

Looking relieved, probably because there were only so many variations on the name, Joseph nodded and typed something into the computer. "Do you know when he would have come in?"

"Not exactly," Boyd said with a heavy sigh. "This is so irritating. I'm sorry I don't have better information, but I was lucky to even get what I did..."

"Do you have a range at least?"

Boyd gave him longer than the years Danny Cruz’s history listed him as being present at the institute. Joseph frowned and was silent for a few minutes, alternating between typing something into the computer and flicking his gaze along the screen. "There are a few possibilities."

"Really?" Boyd asked in surprise. He straightened and looked at Joseph in relief. "No one else had that. What are the names?"

Joseph hesitated, frowning down at the computer before looking up at Boyd. "I'm not supposed to release private information."

Boyd deflated against the desk, bracing his hands on the edge and dropping his head between his arms. "You're killing me, man. I really need to know this. Please. I need to find him."

There was a pause that made Boyd look up. Joseph was watching him with a calculating quality. "How much is it worth to you?"
Boyd watched him a moment and then glanced around for cameras. He didn't see any and returned his gaze to Joseph, who shook his head minutely as if to verify they weren't being watched. Boyd casually put his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight.

"A lot."

He palmed a wad of cash from his wallet and hid it in his hand as he rested his arms on the desk again. Joseph discreetly took the money and quickly counted it under the desk where it wouldn't be seen. Boyd hadn't paid attention to how much he grabbed and noted as Joseph counted that it was over $300. That seemed to please Joseph immensely, who likely wasn't paid much in this position. He wrote something down on a sheet of paper and slid it over to Boyd.

He skimmed the names Joseph gave him, noting that there were five Daniels, Dans and Dannys who had been admitted during that time. Including Danny Cruz. Boyd read them over and then sighed and shook his head.

"It could be any of them. I can't tell with that alone." He straightened and slipped the paper into his pocket. "Are there any orderlies who have been around that long I can speak to? Maybe who'd remember him if I described him?"

"Hmm." Joseph shoved the money in his pocket and leaned back in the chair. "Rich has been, I guess."

"Where can I find him?"

"Go out front," Joseph said easily. "I'll get him out there for you."

"Thanks," Boyd said gratefully. He discreetly slid more money across the desk. Joseph took it immediately. He was already counting the additional money as Boyd left the room.
Boyd walked out front and sat down on one of the benches that would be partially blocked from the cameras by the landscaping. To make identifying him even more difficult, he casually kept his face tilted away from the cameras. He didn't have to wait long until an older man came out and hovered near the smoking area. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and hit it to get one out. He glanced sidelong at Boyd, put the pack back in his pocket, and pulled out a lighter.

"I hear you're looking for someone," he mumbled around the cigarette he placed between his lips.

Boyd nodded. "If I describe him can you tell me if you've seen him here?"

"Sure," Rich said unconcernedly. Flame erupted from the lighter and turned the end of the cigarette a deep orange-red. "I've been here long enough, I know just about everyone."

"He's tall. Dark hair, green eyes, tanned skin. Early thirties but looks late twenties. He would have gone by Danny or Daniel."

Rich frowned, his entire face folding in on itself as he considered that. He was silent a moment, drawing in deep breaths from the cigarette and puffing it out in plumes of smoke. After a moment he shook his head decisively. "Nope. Sounds like I'd remember him and there's been no one here like that."

Boyd sighed heavily and heaved himself to his feet. "Thanks anyway," he said resignedly.

Rich shrugged. "Sorry kid." Despite his words he didn't sound particularly sympathetic.
Boyd nodded and turned, walking away with his shoulders slumped in disappointment.

In truth, he was thinking intently.

It was as he'd expected. The Agency hacked the database or bribed someone at the institute to add Danny's name onto the roster so a cursory glance would confirm Danny's publicly available history. But Sin was never actually there. It made sense, since he would have had to have been there very recently if they'd actually institutionalized him.

Still, it only begged the question even more of why the Agency had included that in his history. Why bother going to the extra effort of doctoring fake records at an institution when they more easily could have given Danny a clean history?

Were they afraid he would somehow remember parts of his true memories? Was it possible Sin's memories hadn't been completely destroyed but rather were hidden somehow?

Could he regain them in the future?

It made him wonder even more what Sin's memories were right now.

Did he remember being institutionalized in the Agency and misconstrued them in his mind to have been at the mental institute? And if so, why would Sin remember that but nothing of Boyd? Maybe it was harder to cover traumatic memories. Or maybe it was a question of timing—perhaps more recent memories were easier to subvert than older memories? After all, Sin had been stuck on Fourth multiple times over the course of his life but he'd only known Boyd more recently.

That was something he wouldn't be able to determine until he had the chance to talk to Sin more.
Whatever the case, he was glad he'd stopped at the institute. He got back into the car and checked his rear view mirror. Rich was still smoking in the corner and seemed to have forgotten his existence the second he'd walked away.

Even if the Agency had flags on Danny Cruz's file at the institute, Boyd doubted they would be alerted.

He had purposefully given only the first name and a larger expanse of years so Danny's individual file wouldn't be accessed. There was no reason to flag every search that would be run on the computer, especially since Boyd doubted the Agency expected anyone to bother tracking down his information.

And even if they did find out someone looked into him, Joseph's information would lead to an alias that didn't connect to him, a description that would be misleading, and no good shots on the cameras for a positive ID. They could determine it was him eventually but it would take some time.

The last place he had to check was the apartment where Danny had allegedly lived. This was the place he was most curious about, because it was where Danny was most likely to have actually been.

Boyd's work phone suddenly buzzed from his pocket. He pulled it out, glancing down to see it was Emma. He answered immediately.

"Terrence Grey speaking."

"Carrie Farah," Emma responded dismissively, going immediately into: "Your tracker's not working."

"What?" Boyd asked in a surprised tone. He backed out of the parking spot and drove toward the main street.
"I just realized it when I was doing some paperwork, getting ready for the report later. You know how we have to mark our coordinates on surveillance now..."

"I know," Boyd agreed. It was a pain in the ass and one more example of the micromanagement of the new administration's policies. "I was planning to do that all when I get back."

"Well, I figured since I was already doing all the boring stuff I'd help you out. I asked them to pull up your coordinates too but they said something's wrong. It won't pull up."

"What the hell—I had no idea," Boyd said, sounding befuddled.

He'd known. He was the one who had disabled it before he left.

"What do you think happened?" he continued.

"Maybe it was screwed up in the shop?" Emma ventured. "That car was recently reworked in the garage and it's an older model besides."

Which was exactly why he'd chosen it. That sort of thing made a great excuse.

"Maybe," Boyd said doubtfully. He paused and then sighed. "This is going to count against me, isn't it?"

"No!" Emma insisted. "That wouldn't be fair—it's not your fault the shop messed up. Listen, I was near you all that time during surveillance, right? We'll just figure out the coordinates on the computers back home. If they need me to vouch where you were, I will."

"Thanks, Emma," Boyd said in relief. He glanced at the street signs and slowed to turn down the correct street.

"Where are you now?" Emma asked curiously.
"I started to head home but stopped at a diner for something to eat. I was starving."

"I don't blame you," Emma said wistfully. "I'm starving, myself. Beef jerky and soda isn't that filling. I can't wait for Jenny's shift to start. I already asked her to bring me a sandwich."

"When will she start?"

"Another hour." Emma sighed. "I can't wait for a normal mission again. I've had too much of surveillance lately. It's turning me into a couch potato."

"Technically that would make you a car potato," Boyd replied somewhat absently as he slowed to check the addresses.

Emma let out a sudden, melodic laugh. "A car potato, it's true." He could hear her fiddling with something in the background. "A baked one, at that, if I can't get the stupid A/C working again."

Boyd winced in sympathy. It was incredibly hot out when the wind wasn't blowing. "This isn't a good day for that to fail."

"No," Emma said with another large sigh. "It isn't." He heard a sharper sound in the background, as if she had smacked the dashboard, and then a shuffling sound. He wondered if she had dropped back against her seat. "Anyway, I wanted to let you know about that."

"Thanks, Emma. I appreciate it." Boyd parked on the side of the street and turned his gaze to the building with the address he was seeking. "I'll talk to you later."

"Sure thing," Emma said lightly. "I'll let you know if anything exciting happens."
"Alright." Boyd ended the call and put the phone into his pocket without his gaze turning away from the building.

The block was filled with rundown apartment buildings of similar construction: brick boxes with little character and fences that had been half ripped down. Here and there an apartment complex dipped in for a courtyard or had a distinctive angle on its roof but overall it was all the same: forgettable.

Graffiti was scrawled across the walls and garages and anywhere it could fit. He knew enough about graffiti to note it was gang signs but not enough about this area to know which gangs it referred to.

There was a group of people hanging around outside the front of a building two away from Sin's. Boyd pulled off the brand name shirt and shoved it beneath the passenger seat where it wouldn't be seen. He kicked off the expensive shoes and replaced them with some scuffed shoes he'd hidden earlier. He scribbled the address on a scrap of paper that he crumpled to look well worn. When he got out of the car he shut the door at a normal sound level despite his habit of shutting doors quietly after years of working undercover.

The group of people outright watched him as he approached the building, with two in particular tracking his progress with dark stares. He acted like he didn't see them and glanced down at the paper with a slight frown then studied the building again as he approached.

The security door in front opened without a problem; he noticed the lock was broken when he glanced down at it. There was a vestibule with a row of mailboxes along one side. A few of them were half open along the top from where the latch hadn't caught the last time the postal worker had been there. He glanced at the names and saw there was someone living in the apartment where Sin had resided.
The inside security door caught when he tried to open it but after a quick glance around to make sure no one was watching through the main door, he stepped forward and studied it. A strike plate extended past the door to the doorjamb but it was pried out enough that he could access behind it. He pulled out a small crowbar and stepped forward, hiding his actions with his body where the movement would seem like he was just jigging some keys in the lock. It took no time to pry the door open and step inside.

The building was even more rundown inside than it had been outside and as he walked down the second floor hallway he could smell a nauseating variety of odors—from the different cooking styles represented in the apartments, which didn't mix well with each other, to the smell of drugs and cigarette smoke. As he headed toward the back of the building, there was even the whiff of urine.

He stopped outside Sin's old apartment and tried the door. It was locked and he didn't bother breaking in—there would be no point, not with someone new living there. He checked the nearby apartments to see how the apartments were numbered so he would know which names to pay attention to on the mailboxes. After searching around a few more minutes he headed back downstairs and memorized the names of the neighbors, and then headed toward the back.

When he stepped outside, he almost ran into a woman on a smoke break.

She reminded him of one of his roommates on his valentine mission, named Jada. They were both short with slightly curvy builds; a plain face made pretty by large dark eyes, thick black hair, and caramel-colored skin. But while Jada's hair had been long and constantly ratty, this woman's was short and only unwashed. And while Jada had always seemed somewhat distant, this woman looked at Boyd with outright irritation.
"What?" she snapped when she noticed him looking at her.

He frowned, hesitated, and then walked closer. "Have you lived here long?"

Dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What's it to you?"

"I'm looking for someone."

The woman snorted and took a long drag of her cigarette. She crossed one arm beneath her breasts and held the cigarette away from her lips as she blew out a cloud of smoke. "Good for you."

"Listen, I'll get out of your hair in two seconds if you could just answer a question."

She scrutinized him with a heavy stare that bordered on a glare, then flicked along his length as if debating his worth. After a moment she simply shrugged and looked away. "Whatever."

"I'm trying to find my friend who used to live here, maybe a year ago or so. His name was Danny Cruz."

"I don't know people by their names, sweetheart," she said in a completely unimpressed tone. She took another drag of the cigarette.

"If you knew him you'd remember him. Tall, dark hair, green eyes, looks partially Asian..."

"Oh." She eyed Boyd with mild interest and flicked the ashes off the end of her cigarette. "Yeah, him. I knew him. He lived across the hall."

Which probably made this woman 'N. Killsright,' Boyd noted. And which also verified that Sin really had lived at this apartment. "Did he live here long?"
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Fade

She shifted, looking slightly less surly now that Boyd hadn’t moved any closer and only seemed to be wanting to talk to her. It made him wonder if she was used to unknown men harassing her.

"Not long," she replied as she shook her head. "But I remember him. Hard to forget a face like that."

Boyd certainly couldn't argue with that. "What was he like?"

"Stoned," she said promptly. She finished off the cigarette and dropped it to the cement where she ground it out with her shoe. "Always spaced out; seemed real confused. I barely saw the guy—he was either gone a lot or he didn't want to be around other people." She shrugged, unconcerned. "Not that unusual."

Boyd nodded. "So you didn't talk to him much?"

She gave him an odd look. "Why would I?"

Boyd just shook his head. "I don't know, just wondering. Do you know where he went?"

"Like I said," she said flatly, as if he were an idiot, "didn't talk to the guy much. If he was such a great friend why the fuck don't you know where he is?" Her patience with his presence seemed to be growing thin very quickly; she was already shifting her weight and looking toward the building.

"I lost track of him awhile back. Anything else you remember?"

"No." In that one short syllable, he heard the end of the conversation.

"Alright—thanks anyway."

She was already huffing out an impatient breath and walking back into the apartment building before the words had fully left his mouth. When she'd disappeared back inside, Boyd walked around the building and headed back
toward the street. He was just considering whether he should bother asking that group of people when he turned the corner and had to stop.

The two men who had been watching him were standing there, slightly spanned apart to block his path. They weren't doing anything particularly threatening but the unfriendly set to their expressions and the way they held themselves showed a clear warning. For a regular person, it would have been highly intimidating so Boyd made sure to stop and take a step back as if startled. He looked between the two of them with a slight, worried frown but they spoke before he had to.

"Who're you?" one of them demanded. His arms were crossed and his dark eyes were narrowed in a glare.

"Ben," Boyd said, drawing his eyebrows together and flicking a glance behind them before returning to their faces. The rest of the group wasn't visible from his angle but that didn't mean they weren't there.

"Well, Ben," the second man said with an emphasis on his name, "what're you doing here?" He looked him up and down with an unpleasant expression. "You don't live here."

"I was trying to find someone but they've left." Boyd shifted a step back and lifted his hands. "Look, I don't want any trouble..."

"I don't give a fuck what you want," the first one said lowly. He stepped forward into Boyd's personal space and narrowed a hard stare that drilled into Boyd's eyes. There was something dangerous about him; something that felt like violence was only barely held in check behind a thin veneer.

He had perfected his intimidation factor, Boyd noted. It didn't scare him in the least since he knew he could take them both down but he couldn't help the automatic assessment. He also wondered how Sin had reacted to this, assuming they'd confronted him as well.
"I got a problem with piss ant little bitches like you coming in uninvited. You don't come to our territory and act like you own the place."

Boyd kept his body language and expression unassuming and non-confrontational. He didn't feel like getting into it with a couple of gang bangers. It would be easy to take them both out but that would make him memorable, which would be bad if the Agency ever checked in at this location for any reason. Better to act like a kid way out of his element.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend. I'll leave."

The first man snorted and the second one started to say impatiently, "Smokes, let's—"

Before the situation could escalate, Boyd palmed the fake ID out of his wallet and pulled the wallet out of his pocket. "Here, just take it." The two of them looked down at the wallet, caught off guard by the action.

Smokes eyed Boyd but the second man snatched the wallet out of Boyd's hands. He flipped it open and pulled the cash out of the back, raising his eyebrows at the amount. "Fuck, he's loaded."

"It's all I have, man, I swear to God." Boyd drew his eyebrows together and looked at the two of them helplessly with his hands up and fully visible. He made his fingers tremble slightly and put an edge of desperate urgency in his tone. "I took out all I had for this trip. I've got nothing left, I swear. I'll get out of here right away, just please don't hurt me. I just want to find my friend."

With a disgusted scoff, Smokes grabbed the empty wallet out of his friend's hands and threw it at Boyd's chest. Boyd barely caught it before it fell to the ground.

"Get out of here."
Boyd clutched the wallet and immediately ran around them as if worried they'd change their minds. He overheard the friend saying, "What the hell—he coulda had more—" followed by Smokes snorting.

"That kid's too fucking stupid to hide shit. He ain't worth our time. C'mon, let's show this to B."

Boyd saw the two of them already heading back to their apartment building as he got into the car. His mind was already shifting gears as he drove toward the interstate. He wondered what the woman had meant about Sin seeming stoned and spaced out. That must have been an extension of the experimentation, which Boyd could only assume included drugs in some form.

But how had they kept him on drugs here in DC? Had they traveled between the Agency and DC, which could be why his neighbor didn't remember seeing him often, or was it possible someone from the Agency stayed here with him at first?

Whatever the case, he now knew that at least part of Sin's fake past was true—he had been in DC, just not in the institution. Which begged the question even more: what exactly did Sin remember and why?
Chapter Fourteen

The Emperor was the kind of hotel where politicians and businessmen stayed while in town. It was easily the most expensive hotel in Lexington and was well known for its expansive and opulent suites. It wasn't the type of place where one would take a mistress or lover for a night of privacy. Not unless you were a member of the city's rich elite, which was exactly what he and Vivienne were.

Carhart placed his hand at the small of Vivienne's back as they waited for the concierge to check them into the suite they'd reserved. Even after so many months of staging this affair, it still felt strange to be able to physically touch her. Strange and distracting.

It helped when he reminded himself that this was all for the purpose of their cover and not for his own personal enjoyment. But after several afternoons of holding hands on the way to various locations or fake embraces in front of the bay windows of her penthouse, he still hadn't gotten over it.

"I just need you to sign here," the concierge said, indicating the computer pad and stylist that was attached to the desk.

The General signed and a platinum colored keycard was slid to him across the desk.

"Thank you," he said, nodding at the clerk. He gave Vivienne an indulgent smile, leading her to the elevators and dropping his hand as soon as they were inside.

Vivienne stayed near him, as it was entirely possible that the elevator would stop on the way up to their floor and they would need to continue the
charade. Her sky blue eyes discreetly checked the elevator for any surveillance. Apparently seeing none, she relaxed slightly.

Since they were pretending to be on a romantic night together she had dressed for the occasion. Her long blond hair was pulled up off her neck in a twist with a few pieces curled and falling down around her face. The designer black dress she wore hugged her curves and left her shoulders and upper back mostly bare. The neckline dipped just low enough for a glimpse of cleavage but not enough for it to be distracting.

It was the most beautiful he had ever seen her and the most feminine. She was wearing diamond jewelry and holding a silver clutch, accessories she would never wear on the compound. She wore more make up than was typical; her eyes appearing a more intense shade of blue than usual. At the moment Vivienne looked so perfectly made up that it almost seemed as though she’d swung by Unit 16 before arriving although he knew that was not the case.

They entered the room and he immediately began unbuttoning the sport coat he wore. It was too tight for his broad shoulders and made him uncomfortable. After tossing it down onto the table that sat next to the door, Carhart looked around the room.

It was large, with cream colored carpets, sleek furniture and enormous windows that were currently exposing the entire room to the outside world. There was a door leading off to the bedroom and a bathroom that appeared to be triple the size of the one he had in his Agency apartment.

"Next time we meet at a burger joint," he said blandly.

Vivienne ensured that the door was locked and then walked over to a nearby table. She set her clutch down and surveyed the room. "It certainly
would be less of an expense than the locations we have thus far utilized," she replied. "Unfortunately, the credibility of it would be questioned."

Carhart sat down on one of the large couches. He couldn't tell if she was being serious or not but he certainly hadn't been even though that would be a nice change. To make their fake trysts seem realistic, they always met in either her penthouse or high class restaurants or hotels. No one would believe that Vivienne Beaulieu would meet in any other setting.

"Should we order room service?"

"It would be best."

Her high heels clicked across the floor as she walked toward the main control console. A TV screen that had been masquerading as a mirror flickered to life from where it was embedded in the wall. Her hair draped over her bare shoulder as she alternated between looking down at the control panel and then over her shoulder at the TV.

When the room service menu came on screen, she picked up a small remote and sat down on the couch near Carhart. Her dress rode up her thigh when she crossed her legs and she studied the menu thoughtfully.

"Do you have any preferences?"

Dragging his eyes away from the exposed skin, Carhart loosened his tie. "Are we playing at a romantic evening or a quick tumble?"

"Hmm." She leaned forward to pull off her high heel on the leg that was crossed. Her breasts pressed against her leg in the movement, causing a clear glimpse of her cleavage. "Romantic, I suppose."

"Then we should get an actual dinner. And wine." He undid the tie and tossed it over the arm of the sofa, eyes slowly drawing back to Vivienne.
It was difficult not to look at her and it had been that way more and more lately. Although the locations of their meetings had always been strategically chosen, it was hard not to be affected by their cover in a way.

She was probably one of the most beautiful women he’d ever come in contact with and being around her in such intimate settings only made him notice that fact more. There had been times they’d both suspected they were being followed and they’d hugged each other for nothing more than a possible photo op. Some of those times, he’d felt a desire for her he’d never felt before. It had surprised him but it was a testament to how much their relationship had slowly grown since the new admin had taken over. Vivienne had never been quite as cold with him as she’d been with others but now there was a closeness between them, likely due to the unshakable trust they had in each other.

Vivienne put her bare foot down and crossed her other leg. She leaned forward to pull that shoe off and looked over at Carhart, her lips parting to say something. Their eyes met and for a moment she looked caught by something; perhaps simply the fact that he was openly watching her. Her fingers stilled briefly against the strap of her shoe and her gaze tracked his face, her eyebrows twitching down just a hint.

After a moment she looked away, tendrils of long blond hair brushing her shoulder as she returned to the task of unclasping her shoe. "Perhaps the wine-poached salmon."

He nodded, indifferent about what they ate. Fine dining wasn't his preference but that's all they had at The Emperor. "What kind of alcohol goes with that?"

"Chablis would be acceptable if it is available," Vivienne said as her high heel dropped to the floor. It made a quiet clunking noise and then tipped
on its side. She stood and absently smoothed her hands down her thighs to straighten her dress. "I will review the menu and order for us."

Carhart nodded and got to his feet, finally taking his eyes off her and going to the door of the bedroom. The bellboy had dropped their small overnight bags off there and Carhart briefly debated unpacking it just so he had something to do. He felt strangely at a loss for some reason.

Dumping their bags on top of one of the chest of drawers, he looked around and noted that this suite was larger than the last one they’d had. The bathroom was always the most impressive part to him with its magnificent bathtub and jets. He’d never actually used them but it seemed like it would be an utterly relaxing experience. The bed also looked like a place where he could sprawl out and easily sleep for weeks but whenever they had their fake hotel trysts, he slept in the outer room.

Having nothing more to do and not seeing the point in changing his clothes, he walked back out to the main space.

Vivienne was sitting on the couch, her fingers loosely curled against the arm of the couch. She was staring out the window that was still open to the darkened view of the city beyond. Her expression was calm and the light cast her hair in shades of pale golden. She seemed lost in thought but when Carhart walked in she looked over and sat up straighter.

"They estimated twenty minutes."

He nodded and went over to the window, standing against it and slipping his hands into the pockets of his black slacks. He looked out down at the lights of the city before his attention was ultimately drawn to Vivienne's reflection in the window.

"I recently met Michael Katsaros," he said after a moment of watching her. "One of the generals from Europe."
At that, Vivienne's eyebrow rose and she looked at him in assessment. "He is here already?"

"Yes." Carhart leaned against the window and crossed his arms over his chest. The sleeves of his shirt were uncomfortably tight against his broad shoulders and upper arms. "I was under the impression he wouldn't be here until next month but he dropped by my office yesterday. It was... interesting."

"In what way?"

He thought back to the meeting, touching his hand to his chin as he held Vivienne's clear blue gaze. General Katsaros was a formidable-looking man who was a few years Carhart's junior. Despite that his buzzed hair was already completely silver, which contrasted with his deep Mediterranean tan. He was powerful in build and in personality, and the man had obviously seemed to be used to people being cowed by his presence.

"He meant to intimidate me and was a mixture of surprised and irritated that I wasn't very impressed. He informed me that he'd been through my record which was red flag number one because she gave him the clearance to do so and he also informed me that back in EU, he had my position." Carhart's blond eyebrows raised. "Which was red flag number two."

"I see." Vivienne's eyes narrowed in displeasure. "So according to her hopes, he is to be your replacement. I wondered what her intention was with bringing over a general we do not need."

Carhart continued to rub his chin and said calmly, "I wonder when she'll have me terminated."

"She does not have an excuse to do so at the moment and it will remain that way provided we can identify and stop the traitor before anyone is aware of their existence," Vivienne said, her tone a hint cool and her lips
thinning. "If she attempts to do so prior to adequate disciplinary reasons, I will personally see to it that the Director is advised of her intentions."

He shrugged in response, not feeling particularly certain that it would play out that way. When Marshals wanted people gone, they had a way of making it happen. But he didn't say that out loud, not wanting to focus on the foreboding feeling that had stayed with him after Katsaros' visit.

"He mentioned some of what he deemed was past inappropriate behavior on my part. Favoritism amongst the field agents was his chief complaint, with focus on my unit. He stated that I also show unreasonable dislike towards certain other characters, chief of whom is Emilio. He seemed to have done research on Emilio and seemed to think highly of him. Apparently he'd also done research on our past friendship and claimed it is well known on the compound that I've now ostracized the man from myself."

Vivienne studied Carhart more closely, her eyebrows twitching down subtly as her gaze tracked across his face. It was a contemplative but not long moment before she spoke. "Did he state why he thought highly of Emilio?"

Carhart's lips turned up humorlessly. "In the words of Katsaros, he is one of the most highly trained and talented field agents we have with a long tenure and lasting loyalty despite the previous Marshal's attempts on his life and the death of his son. Apparently other than having a hot temper and violent streak during emotional times, he's proven to be a steadfast agent."

"I see." Vivienne shifted, uncrossing her legs and resting one hand on her thigh. Her other arm remained against the arm of the chair. "Did he specifically mention any other agents?"

"No. He seemed to be explicitly using the division of my own unit as an example."
Vivienne nodded, regarding him intently as if she was considering something deeply. From the way her fingers twitched, she almost seemed uncomfortable about something. After a moment she opened her mouth but whatever she’d been about to say was interrupted by a ringing at the door and a muffled voice calling out, "Room service."

Her eyes narrowed and she looked at the door. She frowned and then stood, smoothing her hands down her dress again. "I will answer."

She picked up her clutch along the way to the door. Carhart couldn't see much of the interaction from his angle but he saw her passing some money over and there was a very faint, short conversation. A small cart was wheeled in, covered by an elegant white cloth and a covered silver platter on top. A wine bottle was chilling in a casket of ice and two wine glasses were set to the side.

She shut the door behind her with her bare foot and then locked it, setting the tab to 'do not disturb.' She wheeled the cart over to the table that sat beside the window. It afforded a wonderful view of the cityscape as well as a good opportunity for photo ops in case they were being monitored by anyone in the hi-rises around them. She pulled the covers off the platters and set them to the side. A waft of steam was accompanied by the smell of the wine-poached salmon and black truffles.

Vivienne looked at the food in assessment. "The presentation of the dish is remarkably similar to L'Atelier Rouge," she commented. "Perhaps the rumor that the head chef is considering other positions is truth after all."

A faint smile touched Carhart's lips and he couldn't help teasing, "It'd be a shame if he left, considering we went there on our first... date."

Her eyebrows quirked and she looked up at him with what he'd come to see as faint amusement in her eyes. "I suppose that would entail us renting a
room here again were it the case. Opportunities to indulge in his talents
should not be missed."

"I couldn't agree more. I actually enjoyed eating there and usually my
taste is far less refined."

Carhart walked over to the table and sat down in one of the cushioned
chairs. Picking up the corkscrew, he began pulling the cork out of the wine. It
popped and he poured the pale golden liquid into both glasses before setting
the bottle aside.

"Maybe I should be thankful of the new administration," he mused after
taking a sip and watching Vivienne over the rim of the glass. "According to the
rumors, I managed to use my charm to get under your infamously frozen but
beautiful skin. My reputation is shooting through the roof."

A small, private smile passed her lips, casting another faint hint of
amusement to her expression. She picked up her glass and arched an
eyebrow. "Taking advantage of the situation for our own ego, are we?"

"After my last few embarrassing attempts at dating, can you blame
me?" he asked dryly, shaking his head despite himself as he
picked up a fork. "Morgan, Victoria... both complete disasters."

"I suppose not," she allowed, inclining her head.

She took a sip of wine, her gaze shifting to look out at what could be
seen of the city beyond their window. Lexington was alive with lights and
movement. People walked under pedestrian level streetlamps and warm light
glowed out from the high-rises going into the distance. She seemed to follow
some of the movement; the thoughts in her blue eyes briefly sheltered by long
blond eyelashes.
"Ah," he said after a moment of eating silently. "I got distracted. I forgot to ask you about the update on the kiosk that IT claims was used for the incident where the network was hacked."

Her lips thinned in mild distaste and she returned to her food. She delicately cut a cube of salmon and speared it with her fork, looking up to meet his eyes. "The surveillance was reviewed. However, the timeline was inconclusive. No one was at the kiosk at the time that the network was compromised. It is likely a delay was worked into the virus. However, too many people used it during the time period prior to the attack. Several of the users are on our list; so identification, at this point, is still impossible."

That was disheartening to hear. It had taken awhile to find a trustworthy computer tech who would work for them discreetly. In the end they'd gone with Henry in Data Retrieval. He wasn't explicitly on the networking team but at this point, they distrusted everyone in that section. It was likely that the mole was also an extremely adept hacker but the possibility of him or her working with a tech who created backdoors for him to enter into the system was also feasible.

Henry had scoured the network and verified the location and time the network had been hacked prior to Investigator Monaghan's visit. It showed how brazen the mole actually was to perform the act on Agency grounds. Whoever it was, they were extremely arrogant.

"Was anyone of note on the tape?" he asked finally.

She nodded and finished chewing her bite of salmon before she replied. "Of those with top clearance, Generals Willis and Hughes both used it. As did Captain Mathis. There were others as well with lower clearance."
Carhart made a face. "Helpful. Let me guess—it was the kiosk in the Tower entrance, was it not? The one that everyone uses to load their panels and look at updates for missions and meetings."

"Precisely." Her eyes narrowed and she set her silverware down to reach for her wine glass. "In and of itself, that only serves to emphasize the brazenness of the traitor. Dozens of personnel could have interrupted or seen the act."

An unhappy frown turned his mouth downwards and Carhart sighed, raising his hand to run it through his short blond hair. "I feel helpless, Vivienne. Completely and utterly so. It's impossible to narrow the list down any further than it already is—I'd had my hopes set on this."

Vivienne watched him silently for a moment as she sipped her wine. She set the glass down, her gaze on her food while she calmly cut another piece of salmon. "It is not entirely hopeless. The traitor is arrogant, and arrogance leads to mistakes. I had hoped this would end the hunt but as it did not, we will remain vigilant. I will attempt to expand my circle of reliable contacts. We would be best to watch for any suspicious activity at all at this point, no matter how trivial. Advise Boyd that if he hears of any rumors about anything that seems as though it could be connected, he is to come to you immediately."

"I will." He sighed quietly and picked up his fork again with a nod.

He wanted to feel the confidence she did but it wasn't there. There was a void where that self-assurance would have been. A void that had been there since the events of the past couple of years had begun spiraling down further into the worst possible things he had ever imagined. And he had never been able to stop any of them.
He could feel her eyes on him for a moment before she looked away and continued eating.

They stayed that way for awhile, eating in a companionable silence. It was one of the things he preferred about Vivienne’s company; she wasn’t prone to making inane chatter to fill the silence. Considering the events that whirled around him everyday and the choices and decisions that needed to be made, quiet moments were much appreciated.

They made the best of their position by the window. He reached out at one point and brushed his fingers lightly against the side of her face near her mouth as if there had been crumbs there. In truth there hadn't been but he made it seem like an unconscious gesture between lovers who dined together often.

That was the tricky part about their cover.

The affectionate acts, the quiet moments, the surroundings—it was hard not to become too immersed in it. Temporary disassociation due to abnormal immersion with a cover identity, that was the condition he’d quoted to Emilio so long ago to explain his behavior in Brighton—but this time it wasn't in a sexually and violently charged mission where he felt like he was slowly losing his mind. This time it was with a woman he had actually grown to care for despite who she was and what they were setting out to do.

They finished dinner and moved to the other side of the room where the floor to ceiling windows stretched. Vivienne stood before the window, looking down at the city, and Carhart took up his place behind her. After their first few meetings in which they'd established this cover, they’d mutually decided on moments like this where they would “show” their watchers that they were affectionate together. It typically included an embrace or various other tender gestures that weren't too invasive.
So when he seemingly absently wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, she didn't react. It was something they'd done before and was a relatively chaste act.

But today for some reason, it was different for him. He didn't know if it was the ever spiraling depression that he was falling into or the foreboding sense that his life would soon be coming to an abrupt end. He didn't know if that was driving him to stop hesitating and waiting—to stop holding himself back.

He also didn't know if it was just their proximity. It could have possibly simply been the fact that he could feel every one of her curves pressed lightly against his body—that her hair smelled wonderful and her body was deliciously warm against him despite the coldness she always seemed to exude.

Whatever it was, he found himself lightly nuzzling her neck with his face as he tightened his arms slightly against her.

Her head tilted toward him a hint, showing that she'd noticed the slight departure from the norm. She didn't react further, though, and he could see in the reflection of the window that her expression hadn't changed. As if this were normal to her and she thought nothing of it. Her hands remained resting over his, seemingly absently.

There was no tension in her body and he could only assume that she thought he was still playing the part. Perhaps moving it up a degree to make things more believable. But the feel of her against him was making him ache in a way that was almost alarming. The attraction had always been there but the sudden need he felt was new.

He kept one arm around her waist, his hand resting against her flat stomach as he reached his free hand up to run down the side of her face. It
wasn't more than a light touch of fingertips against her skin, trailing down one cheekbone and brushing against her lips.

Her fingers twitched against his hand and this time she turned her head to look back at him. Their faces were nearly touching; he could feel the faint heat of her breath curling against his skin. She met his eyes questioningly but didn't pull away or tense. To her credit, even at that moment her expression didn't change enough that it would be obvious to hidden photographers that this was something new to her.

Carhart met her gaze squarely, his hand tightening once again so that her back was pressed flush against him. There had been a time when he'd been nearly intimidated by that steady blue gaze—when he'd thought of her as unreachable and untouchable. Someone so far removed from his reality that it had never even occurred to him that they could possibly connect in a way other than trusted colleagues.

But that part of him was absent now and his eyes slowly dropped to her mouth, so close and tempting right in front of him.

There was a beat of silence and her fingers twitched, curling against his hand. "Zachary, what are you doing?" Her voice was low, as if others would overhear them.

He dragged his eyes away from her mouth. "Taking advantage of the situation," he replied quietly, reaching up to brush tendrils of loose hair from her face. He meant to drop his hand afterward, not wanting to keep pushing something she didn't want, but it stayed there almost of its own accord. First simply cupping her cheek but then splaying out to caress her maddeningly soft skin before sliding down to run along the back of her neck.

He felt her shiver at the touch and she shifted as if she was going to turn toward him so they could face each other fully, but she stopped as if she
thought better of it. Her sky blue eyes were subtly narrowed and searched what she could see of his face. He saw wariness in her eyes. Yet he still didn’t feel any tension in her body and she didn’t pull away.

"Why?" Her voice was still low and reflected some of the wariness of her gaze. But along with that he thought he detected a hint of hesitation and maybe even uncertainty.

"Because you’re distractingly beautiful and always have been," he admitted, his mouth twitching up into the ghost of his once boyish smile. "And over these past few months that has evolved into something... more. Something that I don't want to ignore when I feel like our time is running out."

Her gaze faltered, meeting his eyes for a moment before trailing across his face. The wariness had mostly left with his words although not entirely. She searched his expression closely, with some of the strength of her usual scrutiny but without the iciness that could make it intimidating. He had the feeling she was looking for something but he didn't know what it was.

Her fingertips brushed against his hand; a slight, seemingly absent gesture as if testing out the feel of his skin. Her lips faintly turned down on the edges but it didn't seem to be a frown. She seemed contemplative more than anything.

After a moment she relaxed against him with a subtle nod. "Alright."

Carhart leaned forward, his eyes never leaving hers. He brushed his mouth against hers lightly, almost experimentally. When she didn't pull away, he repeated the action but this time his mouth parted against hers. She parted her lips in response, her tongue sliding into his mouth to caress his own.

His hand slid up into the loose hair at the nape of her neck; he deepened the kiss as his heart thundered in his chest. As much as he'd
thought about this during all of their false embraces, he had never actually expected it to happen. But it was and she tasted better than he’d imagined.

He combed a hand through her hair, loosening it until blond waves escaped from the clasp that had held it up. Long blond hair spilled down to her shoulders, partially twisted still in areas. Their lips didn’t part as his other hand splayed against her stomach, slowly moving down. When his fingers reached the hem of her black dress, they slipped beneath it and began sliding back up against the smooth skin of her bare thigh.

The kiss broke for a moment and their eyes locked as he dragged his hand up, fingers brushing against the inside of her thigh as the dress slid up inch by inch in response. His breath was coming faster at this point, his cock hard and pressing against her. He didn’t think he could be any more turned on than he already was until he felt the lace underwear hugging her hips.

For all that Vivienne Beaulieu could shut down and turn ice cold, right now there was no denying that she was burning hot. He slowly dragged his hand up to the warmth between her thighs, sliding his fingers against it through her panties. Her lips parted slowly, a soft barely-there sigh escaping them as Carhart began moving his fingers in a more deliberate circular motion as he massaged her clit through the thin shield of lace.

Her eyelids slid half-shut and she leaned into him harder, reaching up her arms and bending them back to loosely wrap around the back of his neck. Her back arched subtly and he molded against her in response, wanting to slam his hips into her ass to get some friction against his cock but making himself stop before the action could be completed. He wanted to see her face when she came, to hear his name on her lips—just the thought of it made him shudder slightly against her.

They stayed there at the window, Vivienne’s pale features becoming increasingly flushed, her breath increasing at a tempo that echoed the
movement of his fingers. Her hands tightened on him, her gasps more anticipatory.

The photo op was done and now he wanted the chance to explore this further; to not have to keep everything hidden so as not to give any photographers more of a show than they intended. He turned her around and picked her up easily, drawing a half startled, half urgent, "Zachary—" from her lips.

Their eyes met as he carried her across the room. He didn't know who moved forward first but they were already kissing by the time he stepped into the bedroom.

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He let himself fall on top of her briefly before becoming very aware of his muscular form crushing her slender one into the mattress. Rolling to the side, Carhart looked up at the ceiling from half-open eyes and tried to calm his racing heartbeat. His entire body felt hot and his breath was coming in harsh pants. It took awhile for him to come down from the high of his orgasm and only then did he glance over at Vivienne.

She was lying on the bed, her pale face still flushed and lips parted. Her breath seemed to just be stilling and a thin sheen of sweat was drying on her bare skin. There was a moment in which neither of them moved or spoke. They'd had enough time to recuperate by the time she paused and turned on her side to pull her clothes to the side of the bed.

Perhaps feeling the weight of his gaze as she started to get dressed, she looked over her shoulder. Pale blond strands of hair fell against her cheek, tumbling down her shoulders and half obscuring her curves as she pulled on her clothing.
When their eyes met, she paused and quietly searched his gaze.

A crooked smile found its way onto his mouth and he reached out to brush some hair from her face. "Well then."

Her expression seemed softer than usual, perhaps due to the lighting in the room. She watched him for a breath and then finished dressing. He saw her shake her head minutely before she turned toward him fully, sitting on the edge of the bed with one knee bent at an angle.

Her eyes tracked across his face, straying down his body before returning to his eyes. She reached out, running her fingertips lightly along his temple and cheek before briefly brushing through his hair. Her hand rested against the bed, fingers loosely curled as her eyebrows drew together faintly.

"You are a strange man," she murmured.

Carhart’s eyebrows rose, grin still on his face. "Why is that?"

"That you wished to be with me." She shrugged, continuing to study him with a thoughtful air. "You are the only one who seems to see me as a woman."

A low chuckle escaped him and he shook his head slightly. "They're all just afraid of you. I just never let your work ethic scare me off."

A faint, enigmatic smile curved the edges of her lips briefly. She shook her head, lying down on the bed. "That is what makes you strange. I am not a particularly approachable person and gave you few reasons to be interested in me and yet you are."

He leaned over and almost hesitantly placed a kiss on her shoulder. Odd that he was suddenly feeling shy when he'd just had a long bout of intense sex with her but he couldn't suppress it. Even now that they were lying in bed together, he had no idea where they stood.
Even so, he went on after the brief pause. "I don't know if you do it intentionally or if it's because you and I have been on a different, more trusting level for so long but you have never been the same with me as you are with everyone else. You're the same powerful, intelligent and sometimes ruthless Inspector but when you're with me, there's more."

She was silent for a long moment and then looked over at him. Her expressions were so often unreadable on some level, making it seem as though even when she was forthright she was still holding something back. This was the first time her expression was open. And when their eyes met, it was the first time he was certain there was nothing else behind it but honesty.

"You are the only one I trust."

"How did it get to be that way?" he asked, not looking away from her. The moon cast silver light on her pale form in the bed.

Vivienne studied him for a long moment and then pushed herself up to sit. Her blue eyes were narrowed faintly, seemingly more in thought than anything as she looked out the half open door to the rest of the suite. The curtains covered any visible windows but she looked at them anyway, as if she could see the city hidden beyond.

"It would take too long to answer that properly, so perhaps I will fully explain another time if you wish. However..."

Her gaze shifted over to settle on him, her expression seeming serene in the pale light. "The shorter answer is I have had little reason to believe in the intentions of others for a long time. The first person who convinced me that there are those who do not have tainted ulterior motives was my husband, who charmed me until I fell in love. It was not a perfect union but it felt as though it was. When he died, I was young and terrified and accused of being a spy because my country was at war with this one. I felt very alone and
guarded, especially as a woman in a male-dominated profession. For the most part that feeling has only intensified with my position and as the years have passed."

Carhart shifted so that he was leaning against the massive backboard of the king sized bed. His expression was serious as he thought over her words. "Why me?"

She smiled slightly, although it seemed somber. It was there and gone in moments. "Perhaps in part because you remind me of him. You do not have ulterior motives and you remain kind even when you should not be; even when it obviously causes you distress. You seem to see the good in others or you would not have seen past my many personal failings. You are persistent and steady as well, like he was. It is not to say I see Cedrick when I look at you, yet I do see your inherent qualities which are similar. Over the years, it has led me to see that I can trust you."

That half-smile touched his lips again and he ran a hand through his short blond hair. His body felt pleasantly relaxed and languid, especially with the silky sheets beneath him and the soft pillows propping him up. It would have been easy to end the conversation there, pull Vivienne against him and doze off but he couldn't.

"What about Boyd?"

Her expression tightened and she looked away with a short shake of her head. Her long blond hair touched the bed behind her, covering most of the lines of her body. Her eyes narrowed slightly, and combined with the tilted edges of her lips it gave her a pensive air.

"He is different and has been since the beginning. I do not distrust him, yet I would not be able to specifically state that I trust him either. There is still too much between us."
Carhart almost opened his mouth to ask more but stopped himself. It wasn't the time or place for an inquisition and he wasn't going to use their sudden intimacy to gain access to every corner of her mind. So he nodded thoughtfully and looked away from her, allowing his gaze to wander to what he could see through the partially drawn curtains by the window. He also allowed his thoughts to wander back to her words about Cedrick which led to thoughts of his own wife.

"Did you change a lot when he died?"

She was quiet a moment. "Perhaps more accurately, I changed being around him. Once he was gone I went in a direction I may have taken anyway, but further than I would have without the grief. I think, had he lived, I would be a very different person now."

He couldn't stop himself from reaching out again and brushing long tendrils of blond hair away from her face. Once the ability to touch her had been opened, he felt that he wouldn't be able to stop. "You wouldn't have become consumed with the Agency?"

She smiled humorlessly and turned enigmatic blue eyes on him. "I would not have been at the Agency at all."

That was certainly one thing he could relate to. "If my wife and son hadn't died, I likely wouldn't have either," he said.

Vivienne watched him in quiet appraisal and then leaned back against the headboard. She unfolded her legs, allowing them to stretch in front of her. "How did it happen?"

The General's gaze once again strayed to the window, automatically seeking out the darkness that lay southeast of Lexington's skyline where the Wastelands and the old military base lay.
"Before I joined the Agency, I was stationed at Fort Manning. I lived on base with Nancy and Gregory, our newborn son. The day Lexington was attacked and the base was destroyed, I happened to be away although I was due back that night. As everyone knows, nobody in the base or in the areas surrounding it survived."

"Ah," Vivienne said in understanding. She sat forward from the headboard enough to gather up her long fall of hair and pull it over her shoulder. Her gaze remained steady on him the entire time, even after she settled back against the headboard.

"You did not have a body to bury either," she observed. "It is a difficult situation."

"It is," he agreed although somehow, the entire situation seemed so far away that he barely even felt a twinge thinking about it. The boy he had been back then was so far gone that it all seemed like it had happened to someone else.

"Honestly, I don't remember several days after I found out. I couldn't handle it and I completely shut down for a while. But then when I came back out of it, I completely immersed myself in returning to the military and destroying the people who killed my family. I lived and breathed fighting, missions, planning—I let it take over my entire life until I was too busy to feel pain."

"It does not seem as though you continued on that path or you would not be who you are today," she said, watching him thoughtfully. "Did something change that?"

He should have expected the question but even so, Carhart was abruptly thrown off guard by the automatic name that came to his head as an
answer. His lips turned down in a frown and he shifted on the bed, tension building in his shoulders.

"I think it had a lot to do with Emilio. When we became partners, he made it his mission to bring me back to life and appreciate the fact that I still had one."

She nodded, not seeming surprised by this information and yet he could feel her gaze like a weight. "Are you unhappy with the results of his effort?"

There was another brief silence and he glanced at her briefly before looking away.

"No. He... made me realize that it's okay to live again. And care for people again. That there were people who actually cared about me too. Of course his way wasn't nearly so cut and dry or logical but when I thought he was gone, I realized what he'd been trying to do all that time."

"And what of now? With the loss of his son, he is in a position similar to yours years ago."

Carhart shook his head. "No. He's different than I was. With Emilio, he'll surround himself with vices to forget his problems. He'll try his best to not let whatever happened bring him down even if he mourns. He'll keep partying and screwing and being the rock star on the compound. Judging from Katsaros' little speech, it seems that Emilio has already switched gears to ensure that he will always be a valuable asset to the Agency."

Vivienne shifted, sitting up straighter. He could feel her eyes on him; watching him closely. She didn't answer at first. When she did, her tone was more serious. "That is something I wished to address with you. I am concerned that Katsaros immediately singled out Emilio and that as of now we still do not have confirmation that he will remain on our side. It could destroy
all our efforts if he is against us, due not only to his skills but his charisma on compound as well. It is imperative that we can be certain of his loyalty yet when I attempted to approach him myself he remained guarded and did not give anything away even upon my reference to the raid."

The sudden subject change nearly caught Carhart off-guard until he realized that he’d been the one to bring it up. He looked at Vivienne and absently drew his fingers along the sheet. "He doesn't trust you. He doesn't understand you enough to know which way he should go with you. He likely doesn't even know where you stand in the Agency now. Not everyone is privy to the discord between the upper ranks."

"I understand that," she said with a slight nod. "However, that leaves you as our only solution."

The response was unsurprising and he sighed. "We haven't spoken in months, Vivienne. More than a year, in fact. How could I possibly bring him into our fold now?"

Vivienne absently smoothed the dress over her thighs although she didn't break eye contact. She frowned faintly. "I have asked this of you before, Zachary, and I will ask again. You are the only one who can give him what he wants, and thus you are the only one who can ensure his loyalty. If he is loyal to you, he is loyal to our cause. If you were to appear amenable to at the very least interacting with him again it would start the process. However, at this point too many months have passed and now we must push the matter further."

He looked at her blankly. "How so?"

Her lips tightened and she sighed, tilting her head down and pinching the bridge of her nose. After a moment she dropped her hand back to her
side, meeting his eyes. "I am asking you to seduce him. I am attempting to ask this rather than be forced to order it, but I will if it is necessary."

Carhart's mouth fell open and he stared in shock. Eyebrows drawing together, he shook his head and sat up straight. "I'm sorry, what? How would—"

He stopped talking and continued to stare. Every muscle in his body had coiled tight at the words and every instinct was telling him to get up and walk far away from the conversation. One hand was poised flat on the bed to push himself up but he made himself stop. Once the conversation had turned to work, it had stopped mattering that he'd just been inside of her. She was the Inspector and he was her second in command.

"Explain yourself, Vivienne."

"I have run through the situation many times in my mind and this is the conclusion I repeatedly draw," she replied. "Your partnership was noted to be strong yet at times volatile. During your mission in Brighton your cover required that you be sexually involved yet that did not appear to last past that point. The notes state that you spoke less afterward, however. Since his return, it has been clear that Emilio is unusually focused on you. He lived with you immediately, seems overly conscious of your actions, and later interfered with your choice of a woman. The two of you fight repeatedly and yet you are supposedly purely platonic."

She paused for a brief portion of a second before continuing. "Emilio is known to be bisexual and I have observed that he is the type of man who is accustomed to getting what he wants. In the past, when I asserted that Emilio seems to be loyal to you as well as himself, you did not seem surprised. Yet for a simple friendship or partnership, and especially for a man such as Emilio who has no troubles making friends and the fact that you have not been close of late, that assertion should have been questioned. You stated that it was
more of an issue on your side than his. Although I have no doubt that your given reason of the raid is part of it, it seems to me there is more. When I take into consideration your personalities and the discord between you two in the last year, it seems very probable to me that Emilio is interested in you and you have so far largely denied him."

Carhart released a sigh and ran both hands through his hair, brushing them back and forth. "He's had an infatuation bordering on obsession since we were partners," he agreed grudgingly. It wasn't something he had ever talked about out loud with anyone other than Emilio and even then, barely. "He seems to mistakenly believe I am just repressing myself due to ingrained homophobia when in reality, I just am not interested."

"Is there a reason for your disinterest?" Vivienne asked, shifting against the headboard and pushing the pillow at the small of her back into a better position. "In the past, you cited the raid as a reason behind the distance between you on your side."

"It is," he said without hesitation, eyebrows drawing together. "Our people died because of his idiotic plan. I've come to accept that he likely didn't intend for his guy to actually blow up the residential buildings, though. Even in the past, he was fine with collateral damage to places or things but he was never one to cause the death of civilians or innocent people. I can't see him wanting to bomb sleeping agents. Not when Sin could have been one of them, or Boyd or Ryan... or me."

She nodded, watching him in quiet appraisal. "Aside from the raid and the natural interaction of your personalities, is there anything else that you feel is causing friction?"

"What else does there need to be?" he asked dryly.
Vivienne shook her head faintly, although he couldn't tell if it was to say no other reason was needed or whether she was denying his response. Whatever the case, there was another stretched moment of silence before she spoke again.

"I would like to stress that I am not taking my earlier request lightly, Zachary. I have attempted to convince you in the past of the importance of Emilio's loyalty related to our cause so I will not repeat myself on that point. I would, however, ask you what your alternate plan is in the event of our terminations. If we were both to die, what protection remains for Boyd, or Ryan, or anyone else connected to the old regime?"

Her eyes narrowed seriously. "Taking into account that Kassian as of yet does not appear swayed by Jordan Hunt but could be in the future, and assuming Emilio joins Jae-Hwa's side, Boyd would be left alone in his position without anyone to trust in the field. It would be easy for an accident to be arranged on a mission, or for his disappearance to be coded a flee. His anger toward the Agency was not hidden upon his return and Jae-Hwa would enjoy the opportunity to mark his termination. It is only due to his consistently exceptional work since he returned to active duty that he remains alive, yet you know as well as I do that our sudden deaths would affect him. If there is no one with him in the field who he could trust, his first minor mistake would cause his death."

Carhart didn't say anything and pushed himself up entirely, sliding to the edge of the bed where he grabbed his boxer-briefs from the floor. He didn't know if she actually felt concern over the things she was saying or if it was a carefully crafted speech to guilt him into taking this internal valentine mission without a fight.

Vivienne didn't move from her place on the bed, although he could feel her watching him. There was a long enough pause for it to become obvious
that he didn't plan to respond. At length, her voice broke the quiet. "Do you mean to say you feel nothing for him?"

"I feel a lot of things when it comes to Emilio but that doesn't mean it's what he wants it to be," he replied vaguely as he jerked his underwear on over his muscular thighs. He thought about leaving it at that or outright denying anything at all but when Carhart glanced over his shoulder at Vivienne, he knew it wasn't going to happen. He could push things aside in his own mind or deny them all he wanted but once he lied to her, she would know. And once that happened, the trust that they had between them would start to weaken.

He sighed disgustedly and wiped a hand across his face. "I won't deny... that there's something between us. A tension that goes well beyond the borders of normal platonic relationship. It's always been that way even though I ignored it. I didn't understand it or want to and since it had never been that way with a man even now, I pretended it wasn't happening."

The General paused again, eyes focused on the carpet beneath his feet. He thought about the days of their partnership, the strange thrill he'd gotten out of the special attention Emilio had showed him and the voyeuristic interest he'd gotten out of watching Emilio in his many sexual exploits. He remembered too many times when proximity had made him more uncomfortable than it should have been if the thoughts had never crossed his mind.

He also remembered vividly everything that had happened in Brighton and how easily he'd given into his cover persona. How he'd burned to fuck Emilio over and over although he'd never looked twice at any other man or considered it.

"There's something there," he said finally. "I just don't know why. So many things about him repel me... but there is something there."
The mattress depressed behind him when she shifted, her expression largely contemplative. "Is it so terrible to explore, then? Perhaps through the assignment you will find the answers you have not yet reached through denial and avoidance."

A dreary resignation sang through Carhart at the word "assignment." She wasn't asking anymore—this was a mission. Resentment made him want to stand up and get dressed but there was no point. He was obligated to stay the night due to their cover and despite the slow burn of anger, he didn't entirely want to leave her anyway. He felt as conflicted towards her as he did towards Emilio and he wondered dully if any attachment in his life would ever be easy.

"I'll do what you say but I can't guarantee he will believe my change of heart."

"Endeavor to make it as believable as possible," she replied. She swung her feet over the other side of the bed but didn't yet move to stand. Her long blond hair mostly fell forward over her shoulder but some strands could be seen caught against her back.

"I suspect, given the information at hand, that even if he disbelieves your intentions at first he will ultimately be more loathe to deny the opportunity than he will be to accept it. However, if at any point you feel that this becomes counterproductive to our plans, alert me immediately."

Carhart nodded, unable to shake the discomfort he felt at the task. He couldn't deny that it wasn't even entirely due to the fact that he had to seduce the man. No matter what had soured between them, it didn't feel right to manipulate Emilio in this way. The man had often lamented the fact that Carhart was the only person he had ever been so preoccupied with and now that information would be used against him.
But he pushed all of that aside for now. He would save it for later when he was alone and not under the scrutiny of Vivienne. For now he just shook his head and looked over his shoulder at the woman. Despite the bitter pang that had spoiled the mood he'd been in, he couldn't help asking the next question.

"So, did you want this to be one time only?"

Her eyebrows drew down and she paused. She looked over her shoulder, her back twisting and hair partially framing her face. "You wish for there to be more?" She sounded perplexed.

He held her gaze. "I told you, your work ethic doesn't ward me off. I don't like the assignment I've been given but it doesn't change what I felt toward you moments before it was assigned."

She stared at him, searching his eyes until her lips curled the faintest bit on the edges. It wasn't exactly a smile but it lent a bemused quality to her face. When she looked away she let out a soft sound. She stood, pushing her hair back over her shoulder and turning to face him. The pale light cast her face in largely serene lines and sparked along the edges of her hair.

"It does not need to end."

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The music emanating from Emilio's door was already giving him a headache. The driving bass, snarling vocals and grinding synthetics sounded like some kind of metalcore band from hell that was likely made up of demons or aliens or both. Carhart couldn't even understand half of what the singer was saying but it sounded vaguely ominous.
Lips turning down slightly at the side, he lifted his hand and knocked. The sound was drowned out by a new onslaught of synthetic noise which somehow boomed out of the apartment even louder. Gritting his teeth disgustedly, Carhart kicked the door hard. This time, there wasn't much of a delay before a shadow appeared at the crack beneath the door.

A moment passed before he heard locks clicking and the door swung open. Emilio stood there as the music and an alarming amount of hot air poured out of the apartment behind him. He was wearing only ragged paint splattered jeans that hung off of him dangerously, revealing jutting hipbones and a bit of dark pubic hair. He was barefoot and wore no shirt; his tattoo-stained chest and arms were slick with moisture. Judging from the heat coming from inside, it was likely sweat.

"Hi," Carhart said simply, keeping his eyes locked with the piercing green ones that blazed out from beneath messy black hair.

Emilio just looked at him blankly with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his well-formed mouth. After a few seconds he turned away and walked back into the apartment without a word. At least he left the door open behind him.

Carhart entered and nearly winced. The place was like a sauna. He shoved the door closed and tugged at the collar of his t-shirt as he trailed further inside, slowly following his former partner. It was surprisingly easy to allow his eyes to drop to Emilio's ass and the expanse of flesh that was visible beneath his loose jeans.

Gaze sliding up slowly over the planes of a well-toned back and inky tattoos, Carhart couldn't deny that Emilio was an exceptionally beautiful man. It had always drawn his attention, sometimes almost against his own will. When they'd first met he'd often found himself studying those exotic eyes and high cheekbones—the full lips, cocksucking lips as Doug had called them,
and wondered what it would have been like to have been born with such a perfect face.

Now, years later, Carhart was just as intrigued by the other man’s dark beauty. He always found himself staring in the exact same way. But it had never been a sexual thing—or he’d never thought it had been. Not until Brighton had those feelings come about. And not until this assignment from Vivienne had they made a reappearance.

It was peculiar and he didn’t think he’d ever understand what exactly he felt for the other man. Maybe he repressed it so deeply that it only came to the surface when there was a guise of a mission or cover. Mildly annoyed by the thought, Carhart forced himself to break the silence.

"What are you doing?" he asked finally, finding his voice.

Emilio didn’t respond. In fact it seemed like the other man had completely forgotten that he was in the room. He stood in front of an expanse of exposed brick wall and stared at it contemplatively. Still idly sucking on his cigarette, he selected what appeared to be a can of spray paint from a rather large selection. They were strewn all about the floor with crumpled bits of paper and various other paint-covered items. Sponges and what appeared to be dishes were included in the mess.

Carhart made a face and looked at the wall again. It was obviously the beginnings of some kind of graffiti mural but he couldn’t make out exactly what it was meant to be yet. There were various shapes in muted greys and dark blues but a blazing crimson orb had been roughly shaded in on one side.

"I didn't know you still did that."

For some reason, the comment earned him a scathing look before Emilio went back to ignoring his existence.
Starting to get irritated and more than a little exasperated, Carhart moved closer. He’d expected a harsh reception after so many months of wintry silence but the fact that Emilio wasn’t talking at all wasn’t a good sign. Usually the man couldn’t shut up. Sweat beaded on his forehead and Carhart looked around in irritation.

"Why is it so hot in here?"

His only answer was the clicking of Emilio shaking the can of spray paint as he selected a portion of the wall to begin working on.

"Why in the hell did you let me in if this is the way it's going to be?" Carhart practically yelled over another booming song that exploded from the sound system. Between the loud music, the heat and the chemical smell of paint, this was turning out to be a really unfortunate visit. The irritation was building steadily now and Carhart strode over to the stereo with the intentions of turning it off. Before he could even touch it, something smacked against the back of his head.

Turning, Carhart stared at the paint covered sponge that had assailed him. "What the hell?"

"Don't touch my shit," Emilio snapped, jerking his head at the stereo.

"It's loud and annoying and sounds ridiculous, anyway."

"Build a bridge."

Carhart glared at him. "What?"

"Get over it," was the snarled response. "Whining little bitch. Why'd you come over here? To cry and complain over every fucking thing?"

The General opened his mouth to reply as a flare of anger soared through him. He wasn't given the chance.
"You've gone soft, bro. You're a climate controlled field agent. It's real pathetic."

Flushing red, Carhart sneered. "Well sorry some of us aren't used to the fucking tropics."

Emilio raised an eyebrow at that. "Was that a racist comment?"

"Wha—"

"So, what, you're calling me a spic now?"

Frustrated, Carhart shook his head. "I didn't even—"

"Us lowlife spics down in Mexico and South America are too poor to afford an air conditioner, eh? We just sweat it out while cruising in our low rid—"

"I didn't fucking say any of that! Why do you always have to—"

Emilio smirked and turned away. "God, you're easy. One accusation of not being PC and you shoot your fucking load in a panic. Such a little bitch."

Grinding his teeth, Carhart closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was supposed to help calm him but he just felt his body warming as irritation turned into anger that wasn't helped by the hateful sounding music that blared all around him. He was having the same reaction he always did to Emilio's scathing insults.

He could feel the violent, aggressive, and sometimes irrational burning hot fury soaring through him. It never changed. He'd never been able to let Emilio's condescending words, his insults and name-calling, roll off of his back. It always ate at him and made his hands tremble with an unceasing need to shut the other man up by force.
"So what the fuck do you want, anyway? Let me guess—you need something from me, right?" Emilio exhaled slowly and smoke billowed around him. He dumped the rest of the cigarette in the neck of a beer bottle and it fizzled out. "Why else would you be here?"

"Maybe I just wanted to talk," Carhart said flatly, not bothering to mask the glare on his face.

"Well, I couldn't give a sweet goddamn if you want to talk. Why even bother, sugar? I'm done running after you. I'm done trying to get some useless hypocrite to see—"

"Useless hypocrite, am I?"

Emilio smirked coldly, running a hand through his hair and combing it away from his face. He paused, shrugged and then just said, "Just tell me what the fuck you want, bro. I don't have time for this shit."

A humorless laugh escaped Carhart's mouth and he swept his gaze around the apartment. Emilio had once taken so much pride in where he lived but obviously that had changed. It was messy and barely furnished. The bar was strewn with empty bottles and the place smelled of stale cigarette smoke. He spied a small mirror with a few Pandora capsules sitting on the coffee table and two glasses with different colors of lipstick smudged on the rims.

"Too busy getting doped up and fucking anything with a hole between its legs?"

The question was met with a careless shrug. "Yeah, kinda like how you're too busy thinking you're so much more superior to anyone else. Well I got news for you, sweetheart. You ain't. So fuck you and the horse you rode in on."
Carhart flexed his fingers, trying to calm himself. Trying to stay focused on his task, the mission. But it was impossible. He didn't know how Vivienne had expected this to work. There was too much bad blood between them—too much hostility.

"I never said I was superior to—"

"You don't got to say shit," was the quick retort. As usual, Emilio didn't give him a chance to speak. As usual, he swiftly broke in to rip Carhart to shreds. As usual he did his best to batter the man's dignity as much as he could.

"The shit you do makes it obvious, bro. You judge me and what I did while you do what? Plan your little missions, send your little toy soldiers out to fight a war they don't give a shit about? Blow up this building, smash this base—how many of them rebels were sleeping in their beds before they got burnt to a crisp? How many civilians get fucking caught in the crossfire—how much acceptable collateral damage is okay before your blond bitch starts harping on PR issues and cover ups?"

Carhart bristled at the words but he wasn't surprised. By now he and Vivienne's alleged, and now real, affair was well known on the compound. He didn't know if Vivienne had let it slip to her admin with instruction to let it bleed to the rest of the compound or if the Marshal had done it in an attempt to make Vivienne look unprofessional. Whatever the case, it had obviously reached the lower ranks.

Emilio's mouth twisted scornfully when Carhart didn't respond. "Yeah, that's right—don't respond because you ain't got shit to come back at me with. You think I'm some piece of shit because I stepped up to save my own ass and yeah, people did get fucked over and I wish they hadn't. I didn't want no one to get hurt but Connors. But you do the same shit every day, Zachary, and don't fucking tell me it ain't true."
"Are you done?" Carhart asked acidly, staring at the other man from narrowed eyes.

"Not by a fucking long shot."

"Why?" he demanded roughly, dragging his eyes away from Emilio again to glare out the window. "Why does it always have to be a contest of who can hit the fucking hardest with you?"

Emilio laughed out loud at that, an incredulous look coming over his face as he shook his head in dismay. "You have the balls to talk about hitting hard and low? Really? After you let my son die and didn't even have the balls to come and tell me?"

The anger finally manifested in the way that it always had in the past. A vivid mental image of himself slamming his fist into Emilio's face over and over until those pretty green eyes were pain-filled instead of mocking. The desire to do it was so strong that the General had to restrain himself from lunging forward as he balled his hands into fists.

But even that didn't help. His breath was coming harder now and the sudden desire for violence, a desire he only ever felt around Emilio, was intense. He wanted nothing more than to wipe that cocky look off Emilio's perfect face. He wanted to rip every ounce of self assurance from his body.

"I let him die?" he asked, quiet rage making his voice thick. "He wouldn't even be dead if it wasn't for you."

If he'd expected shock or hurt with those words, it didn't show up in Emilio's face. Instead the hard, mean mask that was firmly in place didn't even budge as Emilio narrowed his eyes. "You might be right about that, Zachary. Don't be thinking it didn't cross my mind. If I'd have never took Connors out, that dyke bitch wouldn't be Marshal. And Connors was always too pussy to kill my boy. I doubt he ever would have. Even before the experiments got real
intense. And according to my dude on the inside, old Jacob had a near obsession with his pet project—he was real proud that he'd fashioned himself a perfect agent."

Disdain ebbed into the wall of anger that Carhart felt but it didn't have time to saturate before Emilio was shooting barbs at him again.

"But you?" The scoff that escaped Emilio's mouth was full of loathing and disgust. "You, who's fucking third in command of this shit hole—who was second in command for a while, you don't do shit but sit up in your awesome office with your awesome fucking view of this fucked up city that this Agency had a hand in destroying while you judge people but you don't actually fucking make a move to save my boy. What, you wasn't keeping tabs? You didn't have no people keeping an eye out? You don't got your own spies—I know sure as fuck that you do. How'd you miss it, Carhart? How the fuck did you miss it? I could have gotten him out—I always had a plan to get him out and you know I did. And you fucking let him die. Maybe if you climbed out of ole Vivienne's pussy for more than a few minutes at a time, you'd have fucking paid more attention to when my boy got murdered."

By the end of it all, Emilio's was shouting at the top of his voice as his eyes shone with unshed tears. He was practically shaking with anger and it was all aimed at Carhart, who mirrored the emotions one for one.

"Fuck you," Carhart snarled. "I hate you, I really just fucking hate you."

"Yeah? Good. 'Cause I hate you too, you pathetic little bitch."

For some reason the words, those repeated hated words, the words that Emilio had always used against him to demean him as a man and talk down to him—it brought everything to a head. Suddenly all of the anger, the frustration, the feeling of being helpless to help the people he loved as well as the feeling of being helpless to stop his own termination—all of it combined
with the fury that was aimed at Emilio. It consolidated under one scope that was currently focused on the other man.

And he snapped.

With a snarl of fury, Carhart threw himself at his former partner, his former best friend, with the speed of someone completely consumed by hateful adrenaline. Even Emilio was caught off guard, giving Carhart the opportunity to slam a fist into the side of his face before following it with an uppercut that sent Emilio skidding backwards on the wood floor.

He tried to roll to his feet but Carhart was on him again, crushing him to the floor and pinning the other man’s arms beneath him. Surprise was more evident on Emilio’s face than anger but Carhart didn’t even see it anymore. He didn’t even hear what Emilio was saying even though the man was clearly moving his now blood-stained lips.

Sound was muted beyond the roar of pent up rage and hatred that had been buried in Carhart for so long. He was blind to everything; deaf to anything. All he could do was keep hitting as every word, every action, everything that had been done against him, the people he loved that he’d been helpless to stop, flitted through his mind.

He was still shouting but later, he wouldn’t be able to remember what the words had been. The malevolence that was consuming him blocked out all rational thought, all awareness of the consequences of his actions. He didn’t even feel the blood that was now slicking his hands or feel the way Emilio’s struggled beneath him frantically, obviously panicked by what was happening. The way he was unable to get away from the hate-fueled thirst for violence that was making Carhart more deadly and powerful than he’d ever been in one of their fights.
It wasn’t until a spray paint can slammed against the side of Carhart’s head that he faltered.

Emilio scrambled out from under him, blood covering his face and blinding him as it flowed freely into his eyes. He was panting and seeming more like he wanted to get away than actually fight back, which should have stood out to Carhart; should have made him pause, but didn’t. It didn’t click in his mind at the time. Nothing did but the frenzy, the berserk need to inflict pain on someone. On Emilio.

Emilio, who was always in control, who always pulled the strings. Emilio, who had him on a line that Carhart had always hated and always wanted to escape from but never could no matter how he tried to fight it. No matter how much he hated the attraction for the other man, how much he hated the sickening pleasure he got from the other man’s attention and how much he hated the way Emilio could control his feelings regardless of how much he tried to ignore it.

“You’re fucking insane,” Emilio was saying but it sounded like he was talking underwater. It was muffled, garbled.

Carhart kept stalking forward until Emilio finally did start fighting back. He picked up another spray can and threw it, nailing Carhart in the temple with the nozzle. He stumbled slightly, bringing his hands up, and Emilio took advantage of the opening. He tackled Carhart to the floor, trying to pin the larger man as he said words that were once again muted to the General.

They rolled on the floor, wrecking the already carelessly tended to apartment. The thumping beat of a song raged in the background as the singer howled furiously over the hard packing sounds of flesh hitting flesh.

Emilio gained the upper hand more than once, fighting dirty like he always did—biting, kneeing, gouging and doing anything that came to mind.
But it didn't stop anything or even bring the fight to a halt no matter how much pain he inflicted or got inflicted on him. It was getting bad—really bad, and when it became evident that it really wasn't going to end with the usual stubborn rumbling, Emilio started backing off.

"Zachary, fucking, STOP!"

A loud shout of pain followed the yell as Carhart rammed into Emilio, slamming his back against the edge of the bar. Emilio rocked with the motion but fluidly pushed himself back, using the momentum to lift his lower body up at the waist. He wrapped his legs around Carhart's neck and twisted, bringing the other man down to the floor and falling himself until they were tangled together.

A choked gasp filled the air and Emilio hesitated at the sound. But then Carhart was staggering to his feet, his face swollen and bleeding as bad as Emilio's by now, and ruthlessly jabbed two fingers down into Emilio's collarbone. Green eyes widened and a pained gasp escaped him as he fell to his knees almost instantly. He reached up to grip the edge of the bar, attempting to drag himself up again but before he could, a fist was slamming into his solar plexus and he fell backwards on the floor.

Carhart was on him again, staring down at him seemingly blindly as Emilio coughed and hacked. His dark eyebrows were drawn together as he sluggishly tried to slide away but Carhart grabbed his neck under the chin with one hand and squeezed. Emilio gagged again, eyes shutting as he shook his head back and forth. They only snapped open again when the pressure released and a savage kiss was being pressed to his mouth.

Emilio turned his face away instantly. "What the fuck—"

It was cut off by another insistent kiss, an angry one—nearly violent in its intensity. Carhart was panting against his mouth, breath coming out in
harsh wheezes at times from the violence that had been inflicted on his torso, but his tongue continued to violate Emilio's mouth hungrily. But it wasn't like the adrenaline-driven passion that had fueled their first time in Brighton. Now Carhart's face was a hateful mask, even as his dick got hard under his jeans.

"Get off me, you fuck," Emilio gasped, struggling to get away, not recovered even remotely from the blow to his side that seemed to be paralyzing him with agony.

The only answer was Carhart standing up in one fluid motion as he simultaneously flipped Emilio over effortlessly. Emilio was being dragged backwards before more words could be formed. His fingers scrabbled uselessly across the floor as low gasps of pain erupted from his mouth. Carhart jerked him up unceremoniously and tossed him into the bedroom, where he was slammed onto the bed and crumbled down.

Carhart flipped him over onto his hands and knees, and between the space of two breaths, Emilio's already loose jeans were being ripped down and Carhart's were unzipping. Emilio's eyes popped open as Carhart spit into his hand, slicking himself with saliva.

"Don't, you better fucking not," Emilio growled, eyes still watering with pain as his fingers dug into the bed. His knees buckled and he went down even as he tried to support his upper body but that failed too. Every motion likely inflicted sharp daggers of pain from his solar plexus and he shouted wordlessly, helplessly, as Carhart's arms lifted him again. His thighs were yanked back, up and spread as the slick head of Carhart's cock pushed at his exposed opening.

"Zach—fuck you, don't do—"

A cry of pain filled the room, cutting off any further coherent words. It was followed by agonized shouts, pained moans and harsh gasps for breath.
as Carhart began pounding into him ruthlessly. Cerulean blue eyes narrowed at Emilio's tattoo-covered back and his lip curled as he fucked the other man hard, almost cruelly.

Half crouched on the bed with Emilio's muscular thighs extended back and clenched around him, Carhart grabbed a handful of Emilio's inky black hair and yanked back as his hips snapped harder and more furiously. Emilio turned his head, glazed green eyes focusing on Carhart as his swollen lips fell open. The muscles in his ass had stopped tensing in an attempt to reject what was happening, and now Emilio was pushing back on Carhart's cock, even as the other man hate-fucked him wildly.

He slid his hand down around Emilio's sweaty neck and squeezed slightly as agonized cries turned into higher, needier ones. Slurring, guttered insults turned into needy, filthy pleas to be filled deeper, harder, as Carhart's cock slid in to his core.

Even when strong fingers began closing against the sides of his neck harder, digging into his jugular, Emilio only shook his head slightly. He didn't seem capable of trying to get away anymore, not when his cock was swollen and trickling pre-come as each angry thrust angled just right. Even when a slightly panicked look began creeping into his pleasure-stricken expression, he kept slamming himself back on Carhart as if he couldn't help himself.

Carhart's fingers tightened as his cock drilled in and out, his own face twisting with undeniable pleasure as harsh primal grunts dripped from his slack mouth.

"Do it—I don't even fucking care, just please—" Emilio choked out, finally managing to reach up to grip the headboard as he slammed back hard enough to rock Carhart with the movement. His screams of pleasure, screams that were now accompanied by the staccato knocking of the headboard
against the wall, slowly morphed into strangled gasps and strained keening
noises as Carhart's fingers squeezed harder.

Emilio's sweat-covered chest was heaving violently, hoarse agonized
sounds filling the room as Carhart's hips met his ass in a harsh, constant
smacking motion. Still gripping Emilio's neck, Carhart grabbed one of his
shoulders and rode him with a vicious intensity that sent the other man into a
frenzy.

Even as his face went red from lack of air and his pupils dilated,
Emilio's choking gasps still betrayed his desire and he kept pushing himself
back mindlessly, greedily. Ragged breaths tried to escape his mouth but
came out as muted, cut-off gasps. Carhart's fingers continued to jab into his
jugular and when the orgasm consumed Emilio, he came violently—hoarse
screams finally erupting from his mouth and tears welling in his eyes as his
ass clenched down on Carhart's thick cock. He dropped down to the bed in a
heap and Carhart drove into him for only a moment longer before he came as
well, flooding the other man thoroughly.

He collapsed on the bed as the release made pain-filled exhaustion
come crashing down in a crescendo. His eyes slid shut and the next time they
opened, pale light was streaming into the room from outside.

Pain radiated throughout his body and for a moment Carhart only
stared blankly at the unfamiliar ceiling that loomed over him. But then the
previous night came rushing back to him and he jerked upwards, darting his
eyes over to the other side of the bed.

Emilio was sprawled on his stomach, face slack and long eyelashes
resting against his bruised face. One hand was dangling over the side of the
bed limply.
"Oh fuck," Carhart uttered, a rising feeling of panic overwhelming him. "Oh goddamn me."

Emilio's face was battered—more than battered. One side of it was almost unrecognizable. His lip was busted, eye swollen shut and the rest was completely black and blue. Blood stained the sheets that lay beneath him.

Breath coming faster, Carhart looked down at himself and saw that he was in a similar state although Emilio looked considerably more abused. There were blood stains on his side too and with a sick feeling, Carhart realized that there were thin streaks of dried blood on his dick.

The sick feeling got more intense and he shifted on the bed as horror consumed him. What was wrong with him? What the fuck was wrong with him? How could he have snapped so badly?

A low sound escaped his throat and he looked at Emilio again as guilt washed over him in thick waves. He reached out to brush his hand against the other man's bruised face. As soon as his fingers grazed it, vivid green eyes snapped open.

Carhart snatched his hand back and stared, wide-eyed. Emilio's face was guarded and he sat up and backed away defensively, eyes untrusting.

"I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry—I don't know what happened. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me." Voice thick and trembling, Carhart pressed his hands over his eyes as he tried to calm himself by taking ragged breaths. "I'm so fucked up. I can't believe I did this—"

Emilio shifted on the bed but he didn't get up.

"I never meant for—"

"Oh shut up."
Startled, Carhart looked over at the other man. Emilio was making a face and reaching for his box of cigarettes.

"Did you miss the part where I didn't even care that you was choking me ’cause I was so thrilled to have your dick in my ass?"

"But—"

"I haven't come that hard in years, bro. It knocked me out for the rest of the night."

Unable to properly respond to this unexpected comment, Carhart just shook his head wordlessly. The panic and guilt wasn't any less intense despite Emilio’s nonchalance. If anything, it made him feel worse.

"Wipe that look off," Emilio said, voice rough and hoarse from the screaming. And, likely, the strangling from the previous night.

"Your face is—"

"Fuck off," the other man snorted. "I've had worse. Besides, you ain't exactly the prettiest picture at the moment neither."

Carhart looked over at the mirror that hung on the back of the closet door. It was true—his cheek was swollen and there was considerable bruising on his jaw.

"Emilio," he said evenly, taking another breath. "I don't understand—"

"Oh, I understand," Emilio cut off, still sounding ridiculously calm about the whole thing. He'd stuck a cigarette in his mouth but didn't seem to be able to find a light so he flicked it onto the floor. "It's basic human nature, baby. You wanted to show me that I wasn't holding the cards for a change. It was your show and violating my ass proved it."

"I didn't plan—"
Exasperated, Emilio rolled his eyes and then winced. "Yeah, I know you didn't plan it. You weren't even fucking like, there, when it was happening. You were blacked out—it was like you were having your own fucked up episode like Hsin used to or some shit when he flipped out. I ain't never seen you that way before."

"I don't know what happened," Carhart said again, raking his hands through his hair disgustedly. The churning self-loathing hadn't diminished but he felt calmer in the face of Emilio's skewed logic. "I just snapped. I've been so angry lately over everything and I took it out on you. And I'm fucking sorry, Emilio. Everything you said was true, anyway."

"Bullshit," was the sharp reply. There was so much vehemence in the word that Carhart lifted his eyes again, meeting Emilio's blazing ones. "Don't pull this poor-me pity party. You know that shit I was spewing was garbage. I just wanted to hurt you, and that's why you flipped. 'Cause you always let shit build up and build up and let me go off on you until you just snap."

"It's no excuse," Carhart said harshly, narrowing his eyes. "I know you've been abused since day one on this fucking planet but that doesn't mean you should accept something like this."

"Oh please, spare me the white knight routine—you're even trying to fucking save me from you. Do you have to always have the weight of everyone's shit on your shoulders? This chick flick confessional business needs to end now."

Carhart bristled. "I feel bad, damn it. I never would have wanted to harm you no matter what nonsense you said."

Emilio scoffed and brought his knee up, examining it. It was swollen and bloody. "I beat you down mentally and you beat me down physically. I didn't even know what to do, bro. I thought you was like, I dunno—I thought
you wanted to actually finish me. I couldn't even fight you back, you were like super fucking hulked out LSD fucker all of a sudden. It was like mad skills out of nowhere."

The ridiculous comment actually caused Carhart's mouth to twitch up into a smile. He shook his head and reached down to grab his jeans from the floor, sliding them on as he replied. "I always had mad skills. You just never take me seriously. You always remember me the way I was before you disappeared."

"Yeah, maybe."

Their eyes met and Carhart couldn't ignore the surge of shame that went through him as he looked at Emilio's mangled face. He reached out without hesitation and ran his fingers lightly over the swollen bruised flesh.

"You really do bring out the worst in me, Vega."

For the first time, Emilio didn't grin proudly at the comment. Instead his gaze dropped and he gave a brief shrug. "I know, man."

Carhart's thumb rubbed along Emilio's jaw and he tried to fight the overwhelming desire to pull the other man closer. It was strange but his hands twitched as he fought the urge. "We're a mess. It never gets easier with us. I just get more psychotic and you just—I don't even know. You just accept it."

"'Cause it don't bother me. I just wanna know..." Emilio looked up at him again, lips pursed and eyes narrowed. "Do you really hate me?"

"No." It was surprisingly easy to say and Carhart wiped a hand over his face. "But you wouldn't know it by how I treated you last night. And you need to understand how fucking sorry I am for it. I let everything just... come out. Everything I repress and not just from you. Just the feeling of being helpless in every goddamn thing I do. I can't stop anything or help anyone. I'm likely
going to be terminated soon and all I can do is sit on my hands and wait for it to happen. It's so fucking pathet—"

"What?"

Carhart focused on Emilio again and stopped abruptly. Emilio's eyes had opened wide, his face aghast.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

With a low sigh, Carhart shook his head and began explaining. He started with Katsaros' visit and ended with a description of how the man had lauded Emilio. During the entire explanation, Emilio's face went from pissed off to confused to pissed off once again. By the end he had leapt off the bed, slapped on some briefs and was pacing the bedroom, limping slightly on his knee.

"Well ain't this a load of bullshit," he snarled. "If I'd have known my fucking reformed agent act would be that believable I would have stuck to being an asshole. He had the balls to use me as an example of how you're bad at your job? Is he fucking shitting me? That bull dyke boss of his murdered my son!"

Carhart sighed wearily, spreading his hands. "It's not necessarily a bad thing that they think you've gotten past it. It means you're safe."

"Fuck that!" Emilio snarled viciously, rounding on Carhart with a sneer. His eyes were blazing and his face was taut with rage, lips curled back over his teeth. "If they try to terminate you I swear, Zachary, I'll kill every fucking one of them. I'll fucking do it now, if I have to."

The General stood and crossed the space between them, putting his hands lightly on Emilio's stiff shoulders. "Just calm down, you're not going to do anything stupid."
"It's not stupid! Shut the fuck up—you can't tell me what to do!" Emilio shrugged Carhart off and turned his head, face twisted as he planned murder. "They ain't getting you, Zachary. No way in hell."

"There's nothing that can be—"

"Bullshit!" The shout rung out in the empty room, making Carhart's already pounding head pound more intensely.

"That's fucking bullshit. I'm not—you're not—" The words stumbled over each other as Emilio's mouth trembled and he turned away abruptly. "They have to go through me first. And I'll give them a fucking fight they won't be expecting. You know I will."

"Just stop for a minute and think."

Carhart took a deep breath and rubbed his hands over his sore face. His mind scrambled to find something to calm Emilio down from the destructive path he seemed determined to take.

"It won't be—it won't be as sudden as with Sin," he said finally, latching on to Vivienne's words from several nights ago. "I'm the highest ranking general and well respected on the compound. To avoid questions from the Director and trouble amongst the ranks, she'd have to find a way to cast me in an ill light—set me up for something, somehow. When we see something like that in the works, then we'll know that it's time for red flags."

Emilio was still tense but he relaxed somewhat at the words.

"But for now you have to use your head, Vega," Carhart said sternly, meeting Emilio's gaze directly. "It's good that they think you're their guy. You should use that—get in close if you can. Keep your ears open and if you hear anything or any implication that something is in the works for me, or Boyd, or Vivienne, you can give us a—"
He broke off at the look on Emilio's face. His expression had morphed from one of intensity to the familiar dark look that Carhart had come to equate with jealousy. Emilio's eyes cut away before slowly sliding back. His jaw set and his lip curled but he didn't say anything yet. It gave Carhart pause and for the first time, he realized how it must have been like a kick in the balls for Emilio having to see and hear about Carhart's lovers. It was no secret between them that Emilio wanted him fiercely and flaunting it had likely seemed cruel.

If Emilio drove him to near insanity, then it was fair to say that he drove Emilio to the devious extremes he often went to. They went round and round in circles so often but never got anywhere other than taking turns hurting each other.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Carhart scowled. "Emilio."

The other man shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring moodily around the room. "So you're really fucking her and it ain't just some scam?"

Picking his words carefully, Carhart nodded. "We've started sleeping together."

"So what, you're like fucking in love?" Emilio demanded, eyes glittering beneath his messy hair.

The question was so absurd that Carhart couldn't help laughing. "It isn't like that with us. There are no expectations. There isn't a relationship. Just companionship. I do care for her, though."
Emilio scrutinized him for a long moment before he relaxed somewhat. He turned away slightly and looked down at his discarded cigarette before hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his underwear. Carhart watched as Emilio looked everywhere but at him before finally mumbling, "So what about me?"

"What about you... what?"

Another shrug and Emilio awkwardly bent to pick up a t-shirt from where it lay in a careless pile by the closet. His movements were stiff and he didn’t bother to hide the pain that flashed in his face. "Do you care about me at all?"

Carhart stared at him silently and Emilio looked over before adding, "And I ain’t asking because of last night. That wasn’t... that wasn’t like you wanting me. That was you wanting to punish me. I get that. I get hate fucking. But you be playing head games with me, bro. Even without sex. I just wanna know where we stand. Just be straight with me for once."

The silence on Carhart’s end stretched and Emilio’s face darkened again, tension building in his muscular frame. He tossed the t-shirt over his head and turned entirely.

"It’s not as easy as that. It’s complicated and you know it."

"It’s complicated ’cause you make it be," Emilio retorted.

"It's complicated because—" Carhart cut off and sighed in frustration. "Because it goes both ways with you and me. We bring out the darkest sides of each other and there’s so many different sides of you that I never know what's real and what's not. There’s so many parts of you that every part of me screams to stay the fuck away from—you're impulsive, reckless, selfish, destructive—you're a fucking sociopath—"
"Well Jesus, forget I asked then."

"Shut the hell up and let me finish." Carhart ran a hand through his short blond hair and walked closer to Emilio. "I didn't resist you for so long because it's ingrained in me to be homophobic. I've known I was attracted to you from the start and I know you're the only man I ever will be attracted to. I resist because you turn me off from you in so many fucking ways—you're so arrogant and—"

"Seriously, just forget I asked," Emilio snapped, glaring.

"—and you just piss me off every chance you get." There was a pause and Carhart struggled with what to say. He didn't even entirely know what he was getting at. It was the first time he was being frank with the other man and it left him off balance and unsure of what to do. But he was sick of the games. He was sick of the tug of war of power. The violence of the night before had put everything into perspective and he knew that if they didn't figure out what was between them once and for all, something bad was going to happen. Something permanent.

"All I know," he said finally, evenly. "Is that you mean a lot to me. And no matter how many fucked up things you do, I keep coming back for more. So that must mean I care for you a lot."

The confession was met with a look of suspicion. "Really?"

"Must be. That's my only explanation."

Emilio snickered. "Well damn, don't get all mushy on me now. A simple 'You're my moon and stars, Emilio' would have sufficed."

Carhart rolled his eyes. "Get over yourself, Vega. It's never going to be simple with us. Deal with it."

"I don't have a choice, do I?"
"No. You don't."

They looked at each other for a long moment and as a faint smile made its way on to Emilio’s face, it belatedly occurred to Carhart that he’d accomplished his mission. Guilt washed to the surface again but the knowledge that he’d almost completely forgotten about his assignment since the previous night kept it at bay.
Chapter Fifteen

The Blue Moon Diner was peacefully slow, with Boyd one of three people who had chosen to sit indoors on the beautiful day. Kayla was doing the rounds at a leisurely pace for the first time that he'd seen. He'd noted on his previous trip down that she'd returned to work but judging from her lack of enthusiasm, he assumed her relationship with Sin was still finished.

She smiled faintly at him when she took his order, then refilled his cup of iced tea. He waited until she walked away before he tried to get back to work.

Ryan had procured him a tablet that was completely secure, safe from the Agency and hackers. The R&D agent hadn't asked why Boyd had needed it and Boyd had felt grateful for that; he didn't want to lie to Ryan but he was still under strict orders from Carhart not to tell a soul about the traitor within the Agency.

He opened a writing program and stared thoughtfully at the blank page. What he had to determine was what shorthand to use for his notes in case this was found.

After a few minutes of contemplation, he settled on something based on his usual shorthand but modified for secrecy. No one would know what he was writing. Not even Sin, had he remembered anything of his past life.

The thought interrupted his attempts to write a preliminary list of suspects. His fingers stilled on the on-screen keyboard and his gaze drifted to the kitchen of its own accord. Sometimes it didn't seem possible that Sin didn't remember the adrenaline rush of his past, that the memories were completely erased from him when they had been such a large part of who he was.
He looked over at Kayla, wondering as he absently down set the tablet what it was that had drawn Sin to her in the first place. She wasn't particularly intriguing other than the innocence she seemed to exude.

Was that it? Sin had always been drawn to innocents so maybe that hadn't changed. His need to protect those who couldn't protect themselves could have made her catch his eye. Maybe it was also that she seemed so uncomplicated; a word Boyd could never have used to describe his own relationship with Sin.

In this simpler life, maybe Sin had simpler tastes.

He saw Kayla swing by the counter near the kitchen and pick up a plate he thought may be intended for him. Flipping the program on his tablet to a browser window, he set the tablet upside down and to the side. Kayla smiled faintly at him as she walked over and set the plate down with a faint clink.

"Do you need anything else?" she asked, stepping back and absently adjusting the notepad she kept in her pocket.

"No, thank you," he said, flicking his gaze up to meet hers. This much closer, he could see the flecks of color in her eyes; the faint freckles that dotted her skin.

She nodded, pulled some hair behind her ear and left, already on her way to another table. He watched her go, remembering the emotional break up he'd seen between her and Sin.

It was difficult to think about Sin's relationship with her logically, because every time he saw her he couldn't help putting it in context of his life.

He thought about how Sin could have been running his hands gently through her hair while Boyd had been searching for evidence on Aleixo's
compound in the brief moments when he wasn’t required in someone’s bedroom or watched by the guards. He thought about how she and Sin may have been lying in bed together while he’d been screaming at his empty house—ripping apart his childhood bedroom like he’d wanted to rip apart his life. He thought about the two of them having a mundane conversation at work while he’d lain on his stomach, head cradled on his arms while Jaz had slowly burned Sin’s name into his back.

He thought about them smiling and kissing while he’d forced himself to shut down his emotions so he could move forward in a life of killing and deceiving because his lover had made him promise—and had then forgotten that promise himself.

It was impossible to think of those things and not feel left behind, but it was tempered by a kind of fascination about what she meant for what Sin wanted now.

With a faint frown to himself, he cut into his omelet and started eating.

Without thinking, his gaze once again landed on Kayla again. It was while he was watching her that her expression suddenly changed. Something by the door had caught her attention. The smile evaporated from Kayla’s face as she dropped her eyes and tensed visibly.

Thinking Sin had possibly come out for the first time since Boyd had arrived, he looked over but only saw three new people at the entrance. Two women and a man, all attractive and eye-catching in their own ways.

The first woman was black with distinctly tilted eyes and chocolate-colored curls that hung down her back. She was tall for a woman, at least six foot, and wore a red swimsuit beneath a gauzy cover-up. Next to her stood a woman in stark contrast; very pale, no taller than 5'2", and rail thin.
Androgynous and with her black hair in a boy's cut, she could have passed for a man if her small breasts weren't visible beneath her wife beater.

The short woman stood near the hostess' booth with her arms crossed and stared directly at Kayla. There was nothing particularly intimidating or menacing about her expression but for whatever reason, Kayla very deliberately avoided meeting her eyes.

"Girlfriend is hating hard," the man who accompanied them said loud enough for Boyd to hear. Boyd recognized him from the park—the man who had sat to the side watching Sin and the others play basketball. His white blazer and slim-cut linen trousers were all fitted to flatter his lithe body. They looked tailored, well made and likely designer right down to his flip-flops.

"Shut up, Taz. Don't be such a dick," the tall woman said, rolling her eyes.

"She's the one with the ice grill," Taz replied in a sing-song voice, smiling mischievously over at Kayla. She looked up at him with a glower and he pouted, tossing his silvery blond hair over one shoulder. "Mean ass."

"Whatever," the short, dark-haired woman said flatly and turned toward the kitchen. "Danny!"

Boyd absently turned the fork over in his fingers as his attention zeroed in on the three once he realized they knew Sin.

The kitchen door stayed shut but Sin appeared near the counter where the ready orders sat. His eyes fell on the group and that brief half-grin flashed across his face before he disappeared again.

It wasn't more than a few short minutes before he came out into the main area and stood with the group. It was immediately clear that he was friends with them. He appeared pleased to see them and Taz actually leaned
in to give Sin a hug. The same faint smile appeared on Sin's full lips but he didn't seem in a rush to return the embrace.

Boyd discreetly eyed them, Taz in particular. He had to look away before he could let himself think about the way part of him twinged to see that casual intimacy.

The iced tea was quickly becoming his way of trying to keep himself distracted. He took a long drink, feeling the cubes of ice crowd against his lips before he set the glass down with a clunk. He looked outside, noting the sky had grown a bit darker since the last time he'd paid attention.

There were some days he could watch Sin in his new life with minimal feelings of pain or loss, and other days he couldn't. He suspected it was Taz's physical similarities to himself and Ivan that was making it more difficult today. That, and uncertainty at work.

His lips ticked down on the edges at his own melancholic thoughts. The stress at the Agency had become even more pronounced lately, making him crave these days in Annadale all the more. Rather than spend his time depressed about his equal happiness and sadness for Sin's new life, he needed to focus on enjoying this chance to be around Sin.

Fingers curling against the cold dampness of the glass, Boyd discreetly returned his attention to the group across the room.

"—fucking intense!" Taz's exuberant voice floated over. He seemed to be the loudest of the trio now that they weren't talking deliberately loud enough for Kayla to overhear. "It's been what—two months since the last one?"

Boyd watched as Sin replied but his voice wasn't loud enough to carry across the room. Now that Boyd had observed this new version of Sin for a
more extended period of time, he'd begun to note that not everything about him was different.

He was friendlier but he still carried the same reserved qualities that had always been present in him. His smile, while more frequent, was still fleeting and slight and he still spoke in the same low smoldering tone. Even now that he was seemingly surrounded by his friends, he was relatively quiet. There were times when his attention strayed from Taz completely, as if he wasn't entirely interested in the conversation.

At one point the tall woman looked away from the group and stared across the room. Her brown eyes fell on Kayla and a distinct frown puckered her plump lips downward. She seemed unhappy about something and kept looking until Kayla finally met her eyes. There was a moment when they just looked at each other until Kayla finally ventured a small smile.

The tall woman grinned back and mouthed very distinctly, "Call me."

Boyd found that to be curious and wondered about the dynamics of the group for a short period of time before he looked away. He returned his attention to the tablet, not wanting them to notice he was watching them. He couldn't hear anything they were saying, anyway, and their interaction didn't seem to change much once they got into a conversation.

He started to finish the list of suspects while he kept his attention half on the group surrounding Sin. In his peripheral vision he could see their reflections in the window and he watched that, taking in every shift in Sin's expression.

So far of the people in high positions, the one who seemed most suspect was General Hughes. Even then, Boyd didn't have much to go off. Hughes was in charge of Special Operations, so he had access to classified
data and could show up in other units without anyone batting an eye. Not to mention Boyd had seen him with Jordan months ago.

On the other hand, there wasn't much that Boyd had to work with when it came to the man. There were a few comments here and there about him being strange lately but so far nothing had been substantiated. When Boyd had tried to gather more information, the best he got out of anyone was that Hughes was being harder on agents who failed their missions.

Being a general, Boyd didn't see Hughes very often. It was possible that the connection to Jordan and thus the new administration was the only thing that made him feel so suspicious.

He wasn't supposed to be paying much attention to the brass, anyway. That was Vivienne and Carhart's domain.

He flipped to another page and continued with the notations of fellow agents.

The first names he had to by rights put down were those with the highest clearance. All the Rank 10s —Kassian, Emilio, Jon—as well as Owen, Jeffrey, Ryan, and a handful of others.

Emilio, Kassian and Ryan were exempted from suspicion as far as he was concerned. They had all worked too hard to help Sin and none of them had reason to go against the Agency like this.

Well, he amended to himself, frowning slightly at Emilio's name, one of them did. His finger tapped against the screen thoughtfully. He didn't believe Emilio was the mole. Even so, until he was told otherwise he had to suspect everyone, even those he trusted, so he jotted down anything that was suspicious with them.
Thankfully, there wasn't much to write. Emilio had been on surprisingly good behavior for the most part.

Even Boyd's relationship with Emilio, whatever it could really be called, had slowly returned to how it had once been. They interacted now and then, had no problems on missions together, and occasionally talked about something other than the topic at hand for the latest mission—but Sin had always been what had tied them together more than anything, and with Emilio believing he was gone forever there was no reason for that topic to arise again.

Jon's entry had more notes but even then it wasn't anything particularly worrisome. There had been some rumors about Harriet and him having some troubles. On its own that didn't mean much but Boyd still diligently noted it. In addition, Jon was intelligent and a damn good agent, to the point that he was highly adaptable and a strong fighter as well as adept with computers.

While those were all good aspects of an agent, in this context it didn't do him any favors.

But aside from the possibility of infidelity, there wasn't much to note. Any suspicious activity could, in fact, be tied back to Jon sneaking around behind Harriet's back. Which, given his love of women, wouldn't necessarily be too surprising despite his devotion to Harriet.

Boyd stared at the entry a moment and then, with an inward sigh, flipped to the next.

Jeffrey.

Since Bex and Jordan's addition to the unit months ago, something had seemed increasingly off about him. Even after Jordan was gone, it hadn't changed. He'd become more standoffish than usual and Boyd had seen him occasionally hovering around known sympathizers of the new administration.
More worrisome than that was the way Jeffrey had lately seemed to be watching Boyd particularly closely. There were times Boyd felt like his stare was distrustful; times when it seemed like he was watching Boyd too much.

Given that Jeffrey had never liked Sin and he had access to high clearance information, it couldn't be ruled out that he had some sort of connection to the mole. It didn't seem probable that he was the mole himself because he wouldn't have been able to attack Sin undetected, but that was only assuming that the mole operated alone or had been involved in that.

Aside from that oddity, there wasn't anything too worrisome to note.

He flipped past Jeffrey's entry to Owen's, which was lightly populated. Owen was too strange of a person in general for Boyd to be able to note suspicious behavior, and lately the R&D agent hadn't been doing anything more bizarre than usual.

Although Boyd had noticed Owen seemed especially tired lately, like he was getting less sleep than normal. There were even a few times Owen had almost seemed depressed before he realized someone was watching him. Those times he'd immediately perked up and went into some convoluted topic that worked as a distraction from the dark circles under his eyes and the way his smile didn't seem genuine.

Boyd was just making a note about that when he realized Sin and the others were looking over at him. He didn't give any indication that he'd noticed, his fingers flying across the on-screen keyboard as he finished a thought. Still, his attention was fully on the reflection now and only secondarily on what he was typing.

Sin and the dark-haired girl approached him. Before they could draw nearer, Boyd closed the word program and opened a browser without looking up, setting the window to a news feed. He opened a few more tabs to make it
look like he had been in the middle of something innocuous, then glanced up as if startled when Sin stopped next to the table.

"Hey," Sin said. His hair was tied back in a loose ponytail and his apron was cleaner than usual due to the slow day. "This is my friend Tech that I was telling you about."

"Hey," Boyd said, looking first at Sin and then shifting his gaze to Tech. He realized this was the woman Kayla had been referring to when she'd mentioned that Sin had slept with her. He had to stop himself from doing a once over to assess her and instead pushed the tablet to the side. "Nice to meet you."

"I heard you're looking for a bike," Tech said bluntly. Her voice was lower pitched than the average female and scratchy sounding, nearly hoarse. "If so, we should talk. I have three projects I'm working on."

Boyd nodded and leaned back in the chair. Now that she was closer he couldn't help glancing between the two of them, wondering about their relationship in the past and present.

"What's the difference between the three?"

Sin glanced over his shoulder and started to step away. "Tell Roz and Taz that I don't know what I'm doing later. I need to get back to work."

Boyd glanced past Sin. In the span of a few minutes the entrance had filled with people who were showing up for lunch. Delsin had also just walked in and was fixing his uniform as he stood near the Employees Only door.

"Okay." Tech leaned up and planted a chaste kiss on Sin's cheek.

Boyd's fingers twitched. Between Taz and Tech, it was becoming impossible not to feel a mixture of jealousy and pain. Years of literal blood, sweat and tears to get to a point of mutual love and trust, and it ended with
strangers offhandedly kissing and touching Sin right in front of Boyd's face while Sin looked at Boyd like he was nobody.

That's because you are nobody, he reminded himself harshly. You're nothing to him. If you disappeared today, he'd probably never even remember you were here. You'd be forgotten again in seconds, as if you never existed.

He nearly had to drag his eyes away at the pain that shot through him at the thought. It wasn't anything new and he couldn't help feeling frustrated with himself for being unable to stop these automatic feelings.

He knew the game when he came down here. He knew watching Sin sometimes hurt more than it helped, but he did it anyway.

Maybe he really was a masochist, like they'd joked so long ago. That thought only reminded him of Monterrey: the way he'd been the one able to kiss Sin so easily; he'd been the one Sin had smiled at and touched sometimes gently.

Did Sin pull any of these people down into bed after a nightmare too? Did he hold them as closely as he'd once held Boyd, as if he could protect him in his sleep?

Did he whisper in Mandarin when he was especially scared or aroused? Did he tell them he loved them, using words he'd never even used for Boyd?

"We're probably gonna take off soon anyway," Tech was saying as the world continued to move on around Boyd, uncaring of his thoughts. "Taz has to get to work and Roz is only on break anyway. Call me later."

Sin nodded in assent and headed back to the kitchen. Boyd's gaze trailed after him briefly, taking in the movement of his long dark hair as he
walked and the strength of those broad shoulders. Once, that back had protected him. Now it only walked away.

His fingers curled around his iced tea glass, letting the shock of the cold wetness against his palm return him to the present.

He shook off the nostalgia and sense of loss, thinking darkly that he may be more affected by the stress from the Agency than he'd thought. He couldn't help feeling on edge lately.

He felt pressured by time, knowing that even as he wanted nothing more than to enjoy himself here and watch Sin without expectations or hopes, he also realistically knew that back at the Agency it was only a matter of time until he was killed or terminated. Every day counted him closer to death.

Maybe what he wanted, he realized, was for that death to not be nameless. For Sin to remember him even a little when he was gone.

The scraping of the chair against the floor across from him made him look over. Tech was just sitting down, looking at a wide, slim cell phone she had pulled from her pocket. She didn't seem to have noticed Boyd's brief distraction, for which he was grateful.

She flicked on the phone and began thumbing through windows on the touch screen. Boyd pushed the glass of iced tea to the side so he could see better and leaned forward with nothing but mild interest staining his features.

"They're all old as fucking hell," she said, picking up on the conversation as if they'd never been interrupted. "Two are almost fifty years old. They're both British bikes—Triumphs. The newest is a Honda. That one is from the late 1990s."

She leaned across the table and gave him the phone. "You can scroll through to see the pics. I'd planned on restoring all of them so if you actually
like one, I'll work on that one first. I sell them pretty dirt fucking cheap, honestly."

"Hmm." Boyd scrolled through the pictures.

The Honda was the most modern-looking of the bikes, but Boyd preferred the two older British ones. Although all three were standard, the Triumphs had completely naked engines and lacked the half-fairing that was on the Honda.

He flipped between the two Triumphs briefly and then handed her back the phone. "I like the 1971."

"That's my personal favorite too." Tech slid the phone back in her pocket.

Up close she seemed even thinner, almost to the point of it looking unhealthy. Her face completely lacked feminine characteristics other than long black eyelashes. What did Sin see in her that he couldn't seem to see in Boyd anymore? Where was the attraction that had once sparked in Sin even before it had sparked in Boyd?

"Are you really interested? I don't want to waste my time thinking I'm putting in the extra work to do it faster if you're bullshitting me."

"Yes, I am," Boyd assured her. "I can put money down if you want."

She shook her head, black bangs shifting across her forehead. "Nah, that's fine. I don't know how much money I'm gonna have to sink into it to get them in working order so it's better off just waiting until I have an estimate for the parts. That's basically all I charge anyway, with maybe like a hundred bucks extra."

"Why don't you charge more?"
Tech shrugged her thin shoulders. "I get them for free from the junkyard anyway and I'd rebuild them for fun on my own. I do the same with computers and shit. It's just a hobby of mine. Besides even if I'd sell them for more, most of these kids go for the new electrics so no one would probably buy them."

"That's true," Boyd had to agree. "Not a lot of people appreciate the classics anymore, or older technology."

"Or can afford the gas." Tech opened her mouth to say more but a particularly loud crack of thunder suddenly interrupted her. She flicked a startled gaze out the double doors that led to the beach. "That was random."

Boyd looked outside as well. The pure white clouds that had dominated the sky when he'd entered the diner hours ago were now more ominous looking, and the sky wasn't quite as blue. His eyebrows drew down slightly and he shifted so he could get a better view. From what he could see around the buildings, in the far distance the sky was dark grey and the clouds had the distinct smudged look from when rain blurred the lower edges.

"Huh," he said, as if this were of mild interest. "I didn't realize it was going to rain today."

"Wasn't supposed to." This change in the weather seemed to irritate Tech. She rubbed her hands over her pale arms and stared morosely out at the ocean. The sky was steadily darkening. "Well, I guess I have to jam then. Taz isn't one for lingering in the rain and he's my ride. I'll start working on the '71 and email you updates. Danny gave me your addy."

"Thanks. Let me know if you need anything from me." He paused, golden brown gaze returning to her, and added, "Not that I'm in any sort of hurry, but do you have a general idea of when it may be finished?"
"If I can get all the parts and shit in a good time, it shouldn't take more than a month. But that's only if I can get the parts. When I did Danny's bike, I couldn't find half the parts anywhere nearby. We had to drive up to Carson for one of them."

"You and Danny both drove up?"

Tech nodded. "Yeah. It would have been a fun day trip if Carson wasn't such an ass town."

Boyd nodded easily but inwardly he felt a spike of alarm, his fingers twitching out of her view. Carson was too close to Lexington. Too many missions had happened there—it definitely wasn't out of the Agency's reach.

Any number of issues could occur if Sin wandered up there again with Tech and was seen. What would the Agency do if they saw him? Would they ignore it or would they consider him to be a liability by straying too close to where agents could run into him? What if someone like Jordan saw him? Someone who wouldn't be sympathetic to his cause.

The thought scared him more than anything had in a while.

"I'm in that area so if you ever need anything up there from any of those towns you can tell me and I'll bring it down for you." Boyd leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "It's easy enough for me and could save you a trip."

"That'd be awesome," she said, nodding her head. "It would make shit a lot easier if it comes down to it."

Roz approached their table before any more could be said. She flashed Boyd a grin in greeting before poking Tech's shoulder. "Come on, girl. Taz is getting antsy that his hair is gonna frizz up in the rain."

Tech made a face and stood. "I think me and him should have had our genders switched. It's not right for a man to be so fucking womanly."
"Whatev." Roz flipped her own long mane of chocolate curls. "My hair is frizz-proof so a little drizzle doesn't bother me none. I do have to get back to the beach, though. Lane is covering me and that blind bitch will probably leave a bunch of kids in the water before closing the beach."

At this, Tech simply snickered and looked over at Boyd. "Okay, dude, I'll keep in touch."

Boyd nodded. "I'll talk to you later."

Tech turned to walk away and Roz crinkled her fingers in a little wave before leaving as well. Sin had already disappeared into the kitchen so they left the restaurant without pause.

Boyd watched for Sin at first but unsurprisingly he didn't return.

For a moment he lost himself in imagining how it should have been, with Sin remembering him. The way Sin's face would have lit up when he'd seen him, more than it did when he saw his new friends. The smile that would have spread across his face. The jerk of Sin's arms against Boyd's back as he tugged him closer. The crush of their bodies in a fierce hug, Sin's cheek pressed against his hair, Boyd's face buried in Sin's neck.

The world disappearing around them as Boyd finally got out the words he'd waited so long to say:

'I missed you so much."

It would be like he'd imagined over and over during rehab—that hope that had been so intense it had become a waking dream. The wish for everything to be alright again. The wish to have the person he loved at his side, protecting and supporting him as much as he did in return.

For a moment he reveled in the imagining but then there was the distant clink of a plate clattering on the counter and the rush of an employee
past him. The susurration of voices spread around him as the diner and real world came back in focus.

   He glanced around and sighed.

   Great. Now he was just depressing himself. Again.

   He scrubbed briefly at his face and then dragged the tablet in front of him. He had more pressing things to think about than a reunion that would probably never happen.

   Pulling up the window with the notes, he considered the entry he had been about to fill out when Tech had interrupted him earlier. Although he felt as though he was betraying Sin somehow he had to have Ivan on the list.

   It was his name that now hovered on the screen in Boyd's shorthand.

   Ivan was becoming increasingly paranoid, and he'd started behaving more erratically in the past few months.

   At first it had just been him disappearing from the R&D floor out of nowhere when Boyd was visiting Ryan or Owen. After that Boyd had begun tailing the man to nondescript buildings in different parts of the city while Ivan hunched in on himself and speed-walked the entire time. It was clear that he was hiding something and judging from his zigzagging paths all over the city to get to his destination, he was trying to hide who he was meeting as well.

   Not to mention the most damning aspects—Ivan's outright distaste for the Agency, his contempt for fellow agents, and his own admittance that he was planning something.

   Boyd paused, his fingers resting on the screen while his gaze flicked along the last few notes.
No matter how he looked at it, Ivan was a strong suspect. He was highly intelligent, had high classification and access to intel, and generally seemed to hate everyone else. Boyd didn’t think that Ivan would even blink at the idea of selling Boyd out and getting him killed on a mission. And he didn’t think that had as much to do with Sin as would have been preferred, which led him to believe Ivan would do the same for other agents.

And yet...

His golden brown eyes swept up, shifting between the window for the food and the Employees Only door.

And yet, Ivan wouldn’t have set Sin up. Assuming that was the work of the mole, Ivan wouldn’t have risked Sin being killed. Right? Sin was the only one Ivan seemed to care about. He wouldn’t have done that, would he?

Unless there was more than one person involved. But it was quite an understatement to say Ivan didn’t trust or work well with others.

But if he was involved, what if he framed Sin to throw others off so they wouldn’t suspect him, and he’d had some plan to protect Sin? Had that whole debacle been about trying to kill Sin or had Sin been merely a diversion? Was it possible something else had happened in the background?

Boyd sighed and pushed the tablet forward to rest his elbows on the table. He rubbed his temples, squeezing his eyes shut.

This was so stressful. Having to doubt everyone around him. Having to second guess the meaning of every innocuous little comment. Knowing that behind every smile, there could be a traitor. Knowing that every mission he went on, he could be the one who didn’t come back.

He let out another sharp breath and scrubbed briefly at his face. He still didn’t know whether he should tell Carhart about Ivan. If he said something,
he could potentially be sealing Ivan's fate and he'd be going against his promise to Ivan not to get involved. But if he didn't say something and Ivan was the mole then he was potentially putting everyone else at risk.

With this sort of search, he supposed there wasn't really place for loyalty to past promises or ties to loved ones and yet he couldn't help feeling hesitant to name Ivan outright. Not until he had proof that Ivan's plans involved agents being hurt.

It wasn't long before the sound of rain pattered against the windows and eventually became a downpour. When he dropped his hands to the table and glanced out the window he saw the beach was completely abandoned as were the streets. The diner was subdued, with most of the patrons having left before the storm. The ones who remained seemed content with quiet conversations or silent reveries.

Boyd was nearing completion of notations on one of the agents in Intel when he noticed the Employees Only door swing open and Sin come out with his jacket already on. All thoughts of the traitor instantly shot to the back of Boyd's mind at the sight of his former partner.

Every time he saw Sin again he infinitesimally relaxed. There was a part of him that was always a little afraid this whole thing was a maddening hallucination and he'd never really left rehab or Aleixo's. A part that was afraid that maybe this was all a horrible dream and he would wake up, still caught in the nightmare he'd fought so hard to escape.

Sin left, the door swinging shut behind him, and Boyd made himself stay behind for several minutes so it wouldn't be obvious that he only came for Sin. He finished the notes, saved the program, and shut the tablet down. He slid the thin tablet into the innermost pocket of his messenger bag where it would be protected from the elements. As usual he left a generous tip so they wouldn't take issue with him sitting there often for hours on end.
The smell of fresh rain assaulted his senses when he stepped outside. The breeze was warm and it was raining hard. The concrete was pale grey; the blacktop a shiny black from what could be seen beneath the raindrops splashing up like countless miniature puddles.

Rivulets of water became small rivers, winding their way down the parking lot to the gutters, and running down the edges of the street. The sea had become a murky grey-blue, the waves crashing and spiking without a single square centimeter in the wide ocean looking as though it were still.

Boyd paused beneath the awning, wondering how drenched he was going to get walking the two blocks back to Oceanside, when he noticed movement in the parking lot. Sin was bent over his bike, apparently trying to get it to start to no avail. Boyd hesitated, not wanting to push anything and yet at the same time feeling a thrill of victory that he had an excuse to talk to his former lover alone.

After a moment, he held his messenger bag over his head to shield his eyes from the rain and jogged out to Sin's side.

"Hey," he greeted, talking a little louder over the backdrop of the rain hissing down around them. He flicked his eyes toward the bike and back up at Sin. "It won't start?"

Sin stood up, his face sketched in a frown as he glared at the bike. His black hair was drenched and plastered to the sides of his face, green eyes glittering with irritation. "It almost did and then choked. Now it's completely dead. I don't get it—I've left it in the rain before."

Boyd frowned down at the bike, as if he could discern what was wrong with it at a glance. He couldn't help being pleased with the bike for failing when it did.

"Do you have a ride coming?"
"I'll probably just walk it. I used to walk all the time before I got this bike anyway." Sin adjusted his backpack and looked up at the sky. The rain was starting to come down harder.

"I could give you a ride if you want," Boyd offered, squinting up as well. "It doesn't look like it's going to let up any time soon and there's no point in getting soaked if you don't have to."

Sin looked up at him with surprise evident in his handsome face. He hesitated as if he had been automatically going to say no but instead asked, "You sure?"

"Of course. As long as you don't mind waiting a minute in the diner for me to go get my car."

This time the smile that ventured onto Sin's face was more genuine than Boyd had seen so far. Half of his lips turned up at the side. "Thanks."

Boyd couldn't help smiling more fully in return. "I'll be right back."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and started jogging toward the resort. Once he was out of sight of Sin, he broke into a run. For some reason, he would have felt stupid letting Sin see how important this was to him and how intent he was on making Sin wait the least amount of time necessary.

He made it to the Oceanside in no time and only stopped in long enough to drop off his messenger bag in his room and grab some towels before he headed into the parking ramp. He quickly dried his sopping wet clothing and hair as best he could as he jogged. He tossed the damp towel in the back seat of his vehicle and left two dry towels on the passenger seat.
It didn't take him long to get back to the diner and when he saw Sin underneath the awning he drove up next to him so he wouldn't have to go into the rain.

Sin climbed in the passenger seat and arranged his backpack in the space between his knees. He immediately towed himself off although it seemed that he was more concerned with getting Boyd's seats wet.

"This car is pretty bad ass," Sin noted, running a hand through his wet hair to get it out of his face. He left it loose instead of retying it in a ponytail.

"Thanks," Boyd said, glancing over.

He was briefly caught by how amazing Sin looked. How much he wanted to kiss Sin; breathing words held back for far too long against his skin. How much he wanted to park and find shelter and just be with Sin without any expectations or awkward tension.

He dragged his gaze away. "Don't worry about getting anything wet, by the way," he continued offhandedly. "It's inevitable whenever it rains like this."

Sin nodded and adjusted his seat belt, frowning out the windshield at the onslaught of rain that was coming down. The sky had blackened again with angry storm clouds hovering over the small college town.

"I live at the end of Ocean Drive, on the other side of the beach."

Boyd nodded and peered out the windshield as he turned onto a main street. Even with the windshield wipers on high, the rain was coming down so hard there was hardly any visibility.

As he pulled into the low level of traffic, he glanced over at Sin. "Do you like it there?"
Sin leaned back in the seat and seemed to be trying to relax. He rolled his shoulders, twisting his neck from side to side and grimacing. "It's okay. Small but it has a decent view of the ocean. It's also in the quieter part of town." Sin glanced over at him. "Why, where do you live?"

"I don't live here at the moment," Boyd replied with a shrug, glancing out the driver's side windows as he went to merge into a lane. Even with lights on, the other vehicles were barely visible. With everything blurred and dark outside despite the time of day, it made it feel more intimate in the car.

"I'm staying at Oceanside Resort for now but eventually I may be looking for a place and I thought Ocean Drive seemed like it was a decent balance between price and location."

Sin's dark eyebrows rose and he gave Boyd an assessing stare. It was an expression that wasn't unfamiliar as his green eyes narrowed slightly. "Where do you actually live then?"

Boyd glanced over. He was hesitant to mention the city due to its connection to the Agency, but he also realized that remaining evasive would do nothing for him in this situation.

Sin had good reason to wonder about him already. His car was obviously expensive, which was atypical in a town filled with poor college students, and when he came down to Annadale he sat all day in the diner. It begged the question of how he could have so much money and appear to do nothing. There were any number of possible explanations Sin could be coming up with, some of them more unsavory than others.

"Lexington."

"Oh." The name didn't seem to mean anything to Sin; he just nodded in response. "Are you a teacher?"
"No," Boyd said, his lips lifting in amusement. "Why?"

Sin actually smiled back, one side of his full mouth twisting wryly. "A lot of young teachers who have summers off come down here for vacation during this time and I only noticed you being around so much just a couple of months ago."

"Ah." Boyd's smile grew a hint teasing as he looked at Sin sidelong. "And here I was hoping you thought I had a good temperament. What a shame."

"Well I don't know enough about you yet to judge that," Sin replied with a shrug. "Maybe I will eventually."

Boyd met Sin's eyes and for a moment their gazes locked. At least Sin seemed interested in potentially being around him more. He smiled more genuinely. "I hope so. It would be nice to know some people down here."

He turned his attention back to the road as he navigated the poorly visible streets. The traffic lights were the only thing that seemed to shine through the rain with any usefulness.

"To answer your question I come down here to relax," he explained as he slowed to a stop at a red light. "I had a lot going on for awhile and I needed a place to get away."

"A lot of people do that." Sin's gaze shifted to the window where he looked out into the pouring rain that blurred their surroundings. It reminded Boyd of a watercolor painting: colors seeping together to become indistinct smudges on a grey-black canvas.

Sin tilted his head back against the seat and for the first time Boyd noticed how tired he looked. While he physically looked healthier than he ever
had at the Agency, there were faint circles under his eyes. "Most people like the atmosphere. That's partially why I moved here."

Boyd nodded absently, not taking his eyes off of Sin. "How long have you lived here?"

Sin reached up to rub the back of his neck, long fingers squeezing absently. His eyebrows were still drawn together and Boyd couldn't help remembering that expression and those actions—it was what Sin had always done when he had a headache.

"A little over a year. I moved from DC and was originally going to move to Richmond but changed my mind at the last minute and came here instead. I hate big cities, all the fucking people."

Boyd nodded and eased his foot off the brake when the light turned green. That made sense to Boyd, as Sin had felt so on edge in Lexington around crowds. Although that made Boyd wonder how much of it was by Sin's choice and how much had been determined by the Agency. Had Sin really chosen to come here or had that been yet another twisted memory?

That made him wonder how the Agency had dealt with people who should have been in Sin's past but who he wouldn't be able to contact now because they didn't exist. Did the Agency make him think everyone he'd ever known was dead or did they have some sort of high level ruse in which an agent pretended to be someone for him or an automated message could be generated if he called the number of someone he thought existed?

And, once again, the overarching question of what was the reason for any of this?

"Do you like it?" was all Boyd asked instead.
This time all Sin did was shrug and his gaze remained fixed on the stormy ocean that raged on the other side of the beach. It didn't seem like he would answer directly at first and his mouth turned down slightly. His expression turned serious, eyes narrowing in thought. But after a moment he just shrugged.

"It's alright. Can't complain."

Boyd wondered about that response. It wasn't the kind of answer Sin would have given back in Monterrey, when he'd expressed regret about having to leave.

Maybe without the Agency as the other option, a place like this wasn't enough to hold his attention. Although, part of what Sin had liked in Monterrey was that they'd been together. Then again, that likely wouldn't factor into this answer because Sin didn't know Boyd so he couldn't be missing the intimacy they'd once had.

"That's good," Boyd said as he turned onto another street. The rain wasn't letting up at all, which made him wonder how long it was going to last. "I like Annadale but the tourist attractions don't make it an ideal place to live."

"That's why I live on the other side of the main beach," Sin agreed. He turned slightly in his seat, gesturing to the west of them. "Down where the diner is, you have the strip with all of the bars, the amusement park not too far away, full of the fucking college kids—up Ocean is where most of the locals live. I'd rather just stay on the beach with a beer then party with all of the goddamn tourists on the boardwalk."

Boyd nodded easily. "I can't blame you for that." He paused as he stopped at another red light that hardly glowed through the storm. Honey brown eyes turned to study Sin. "So what else do you like to do in your free time?"
"I dunno." Sin glanced over at Boyd briefly, eyes still slightly narrowed. "Read. Work out. I'm not some exciting person."

Boyd smiled slightly at the knowledge that Sin's hobbies, at least, hadn't changed. "Reading can be exciting," he said lightly. "Do you have any favorite genres?"

"Mostly crime stuff. Apparently I like reading about people getting killed." Smirking slightly, Sin smoothed a damp hand over his face again.

Eyebrows quirking, Boyd gave a wry smile. "Should I be worried, stuck alone in this car with you where no one will hear my screams?"

Sin raised an eyebrow, mouth twisting. "Maybe. I haven't been too keen on strange people lately, and you ask a lot of questions so who knows what will happen by the end of this car ride."

Boyd couldn't stop an amused smile. "Alright," he said blandly. The light turned green and he turned down another street. "Bury my ashes at sea when you're done with me and I'll be a good victim."

"You can't bury stuff at sea, but if it makes you happy." Sin smirked again, and let his eyes slide out to the darkening sky. "Why the sea and not a nice ditch somewhere?"

"I don't know," Boyd said thoughtfully, his eyebrows drawing down at his own words. He looked over at Sin. "Honestly, I'm a hydrophobe so I couldn't say why I'm assigning myself such a dire afterlife with my own request."

"Maybe you're one of those religious fanatics that beat themselves," was the helpful suggestion from Sin. He looked over at Boyd again. "Do you have a guilt complex?"
Boyd's lips lifted humorlessly as his gaze slid away. "You could say that."

Sin's gaze rested on Boyd for a moment and one eyebrow ticked up, but then he just shrugged slightly and looked out the window again. "You shouldn't have driven all the way up here. It's getting worse."

"It's alright."

Even so, Boyd had to drive slowly down Ocean Drive. The rain came down in such heavy sheets that he hardly had any visibility even with the wipers flying across the windshield.

Although Boyd considered himself to be a very good driver, despite his penchant for excessive speed on the open road, it was a relief to see they were alone on the road. It was getting dangerous to drive even for someone who was highly trained. The last thing he needed was to get into an accident due to someone else's stupidity and draw the Agency's attention down to Annadale.

It felt like they were inching their way through town, with deafening cracks of thunder and blinding flashes of lightning adding an ominous undertone. He nearly drove past Sin's apartment building, which only underscored to him how little he could see. After having spent the day outside this building previously, it shouldn't have been hard to find.

"I'll see you later," Boyd said when he found an empty spot to stop.

Sin started to put his hand on the door but then paused. He frowned slightly, looked at the steadily flooding street and then at Boyd again. His lips parted, closed, and then he said finally, "Maybe you should wait out the storm inside."
Boyd hesitated, looking in assessment out the windshield. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's fine." Sin was already opening the car door and stepping out into the downpour.

The invitation came both as a relief and a quiet thrill of excitement for Boyd. He parked his car and followed Sin, jogging as his gaze centered on that strong back. First the bike and now the rain—it was as if the universe was conspiring to give him a chance to be with Sin. He silently thanked whatever weatherman had missed warning everyone about this storm.

The rain soaked them in seconds even though they quickly headed inside the building and up the echoing stairs.

Boyd looked around once they were inside Sin's apartment, taking in the place that Sin called home. A small kitchen was to the side. It was kept clean, although a few dishes were drying in the sink. The living room had a television and a digital music player dock. A dark red sofa sat to the side with a wicker table in front. An open door off the living room led to a bedroom that Boyd could partially see inside. He saw a bed and part of a dresser from his angle but not much else.

There didn't seem to be any sort of consistent style but there wasn't much furniture in the first place. It made Boyd wonder why. Did Sin just not want a lot of clutter or was it for financial reasons?

The apartment had hardwood floors and Boyd didn't see a rug anywhere nearby to stand on to protect the wood. He didn't want to track water everywhere so he stayed near the door even after he closed it behind them.

"It gets wet in here all the time after I go swimming so don't worry about your shoes or anything," Sin said, looking over at him after dumping his book
bag on the floor beside the couch. "I'll find something for you to change into so you're not soaked the whole time, though."

"Thanks," Boyd said, and walked further into the apartment.

He stopped in the living room. He casually positioned himself so he could glance into Sin's bedroom again but he didn't see anything in there aside from the two pieces of furniture he'd seen already. From this angle he could see the balcony he'd seen from the outside the day he'd tailed Sin.

He wondered how often Sin used it. He imagined how relaxing it could be to wake up in a town like Annadale, step out of the bedroom and sit outside with a partial ocean view. He imagined what it would be like if he could leave the Agency; if he could move down here and be around Sin in whatever manner he would allow.

Sin appeared again, still wet but holding some clothing. He returned to the living room and handed the bundle to Boyd. It looked like a pair of black cargo shorts and a grey t-shirt. "I don't think we're too far off in size."

"Thanks," Boyd said again.

He saw a door off the main room that led to the bathroom. He went in there and was about to change when, on a whim, he held the clothes up to his face, closing his eyes and inhaling.

The clothes were clean so they didn't smell as much like Sin as he wanted but there was still a scent there. He was suddenly reminded of the night in Monterrey when he'd watched Sin masturbate, Boyd's tank top held to his face while he breathed in his partner's scent.

He felt at once embarrassed and nostalgic, and automatically glanced at the door. He felt like he was going to be caught doing something too odd to
explain—and that it would end significantly less pleasantly for them than it had in Monterrey.

The door was still thankfully closed and Boyd was still alone.

Breathing an inward sigh of relief, he mentally berated himself for doing something so stupid and wasted no further time in changing. His skin was still slick from the rain even with the dry clothing on. He took a moment to wring the excess water from his clothes and his hair into the tub, then lay his clothes over the side so they would dry a little faster. He twisted his hair back into a knot to keep it off the shirt as much as possible while it was still wet.

When he was finished, he paused and listened but didn't hear Sin outside the door.

He hesitated and then opened the medicine cabinet. He was undeniably curious to see if he would find anything that would point to evidence of Sin still actively seeing a woman. There was nothing unusual aside from orange pill bottles. Checking the labels told him that one was an SSRI and the other a benzodiazepine.

They were the same anxiety medication that Sin had taken at the Agency.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. Was Sin still suffering from depersonalization even without his memories? Was it possible Sin still remembered some aspects of his former life, but the reasons in his mind were now changed? Or did it mean that his mind knew something had been taken from him and still wouldn't let him release the guilt?

It didn't seem fair that so much had happened to Sin and when he finally had a chance to leave that darkness behind, it still followed him enough to require medication.
Then again, he thought with narrowed eyes and his hand tightening on the pill bottle, this could be a ruse. What if these drugs were some sort of extended pharmacological therapy, continually suppressing his old memories? Was that possible or had they done some sort of surgery on him instead?

He considered stealing a pill from each bottle to have them tested somewhere but he didn't. The only place he currently knew to try to get that tested would be at the Agency itself and he would have to enlist someone else's help. If it really was some other drug masquerading as a benzodiazepine and an SSRI that would be a great way to get the Reapers' attention.

Besides, if Sin was good about the meds he would know exactly how many pills he should have left. It wouldn't do to have some of the pills mysteriously disappear the first time he allowed Boyd access to his apartment.

He sighed and replaced everything the way he'd found it. His hand lingered on the cabinet once he'd closed it and he glanced toward the door. He really hoped Sin wasn't suffering even now. He hoped the demons were as free from him as it seemed whenever Boyd looked into his eyes.

After a moment he went back out into the living room. Sin had disappeared into his bedroom and the low muffled sound of a conversation on the phone floated out.

Boyd took the opportunity to look around the living room more closely. There was a small wire rack against the wall near the television where books were stacked as well as what looked like old magazines and a few movie cases. There was also an open closet next to the front door that was likely meant to be used for coats but was full of work-out equipment.
Boyd couldn't stop a brief, fond smile at that. First sweets at the supermarket and now evidence of exercising at home.

In those ways, Sin hadn't changed at all.

"I never gave a definite answer one way or the fucking other," Sin was saying flatly into his phone as he came back into the kitchen. He'd changed into grey cotton shorts and a white t-shirt. His black hair hung down his back, reaching almost to his waist now that it was wet.

It was almost criminal how good he looked.

He looked over at Boyd, moving the phone partially away from his face. "The rain is supposed to keep up for another hour."

Boyd nodded and walked over to the wire rack, curious about what books and movies Sin owned and needing to give himself something to focus on other than the way that white t-shirt was starting to cling to Sin’s skin in a few dampened places. He crouched, skimming the titles. The books were similar to the ones Sin had preferred when they'd been together; primarily non-fiction about the war, centered on facts rather than the abundance of opinions in other books, although he did see a number of the crime books Sin had mentioned.

The cases turned out to be a series called Grayson, named after the fictional town the post-war series was set in. The series centered on a number of characters struggling after the bombs had hit, and was as close to the reality of life as either of them had seen. It even included a character who was fast on the track to becoming a Feral.

He and Sin had watched the first season together, so seeing the series here caused a trill of happiness in him. It was like finding a ghost of Sin—yet more proof that he hadn't entirely changed if he still gravitated to the same genres.
The first season had recently finished when Boyd had left on his mission and he hadn’t realized the second season was already out. He was genuinely intrigued and sat on the couch to read the description on the back.

Sin’s conversation continued quietly across the room and he seemed to be growing agitated with someone. Whoever it was had apparently been asking about who he was hanging out with and was irritated that Sin wasn’t coming to a party.

"In case you missed it," the familiar sarcastic drawl rang out in the room. "There's a tropical depression sized storm right outside my window. Excuse the hell out of me if I'm not rushing out in it to see your face."

Boyd glanced over at Sin and saw him leaning against the kitchen counter, looking irritated. He held the phone up to his ear for a moment longer before making a face and snapping it shut, tossing it carelessly on the counter.

He turned to Boyd. "Sorry. My friends are pushy."

"Was it one of the people from the diner?" Boyd asked, resting the case on his knee.

"No, but they did want me to go to this party too. My friend’s girlfriend is throwing it—she has a big penthouse down near the college. I was pretty noncommittal when they brought it up earlier. I don't know why he's acting like I'm blowing him off."

Boyd nodded. Sin hadn't ever particularly enjoyed groups so it was strange to see him with so many friends and talking so casually about parties. "Do you party a lot?"

Sin shrugged his broad shoulders and pulled himself up onto the counter. Long, tanned legs thumped against the counter as he let them
dangle. "I work a lot. Maybe a couple of times a month I'll go have a few drinks, pop a cap, whatever—but not really."

He seemed to think about that and shook his head, frowning slightly. "Me and Tech and Roz are pretty low key."

Boyd nodded again, noting that Sin had changed a little if he was using drugs occasionally now. It was the first time Sin made him think of Emilio's habits since they'd met. He dismissed the thought and made himself not linger an appreciative stare on Sin.

Now that they were sitting there talking to each other, he noticed even more details that distracted him.

Sin was dressed casually for the first time since they'd met again in Annadale. It looked good on him, especially with his muscular legs partially bared. Sin's slowly drying hair looked so long and perfect that Boyd wanted to run his fingers through it.

He was suddenly hit with a memory of Sin hovering over him in bed, his black hair curtaining his expression for only Boyd to see. Those green eyes burning into him, those lips parted and reddened still from kissing only moments before. The feeling of Sin's cock moving inside him; a slow torture that had Boyd arching up and tangling his fingers in Sin's hair at the base of his neck. His own husky voice urging Sin on, wrapping his arms around Sin's broad shoulders and pulling them even closer as their bodies undulated together.

The way their breath was caught between them along with the whispered moans of each other's name. The way their eyes locked the entire time Sin moved Boyd to completion.

"That seems to fit with what I saw of them," Boyd heard himself saying mildly.
Despite Boyd schooling his expression into only casual interest in the conversation, the Sin from the past probably would have seen through it and would have given Boyd a knowing look. He had been the only one who had ever been able to read Boyd so well.

He felt a moment of loss to know that looks like that were gone.

"Roz lives in this building, actually. She's one of my closest friends." Sin pushed himself off the counter and landed on his feet. His movements were as graceful and silent as they'd been before. "Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

Sin opened the refrigerator and extracted two bottles of water. He walked over to where Boyd was and sat down beside him, handing one of the bottles over. He finally seemed to notice the case Boyd was looking at.

"Do you watch that show?"

"I do but I didn't know the second season was out." Boyd set the case on the couch next to him.

Sin's eyebrows rose and his lips lifted in that faint smile. He twisted completely on the sofa so that one leg was drawn up while the other stayed over the side. "Most people don't. It's depressing and a lot of people die. Which is why I like it, but I'm strange."

"It's more realistic than depressing, I'd say," Boyd replied with a thoughtful frown.

"Reality is depressing for most people," Sin said bluntly, eyes not leaving Boyd. "And people who aren't near it don't want to hear about it. It's easier to pretend it doesn't exist. Especially for people who live in a place like this."
Boyd nodded. "I've noticed the same mentality where I live, dependent on the neighborhoods. You'd think living in a city that's been half destroyed would make it impossible to be in denial but with enough money to get the right views out your window, I suppose any mentality is possible."

He paused, his eyebrows drawing down. "Still, I think it's especially important for people who live in areas like Annadale or wealthy neighborhoods to watch the show. It could inspire some of them to actually do something about it in a constructive way."

Sin made a vague hand gesture as if agreeing but then tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing. "Yeah, but people are stupid so that won't ever happen. Even the idealistic kids with a plan to change the world—I've met so many of them and 98% are full of shit. It's just trendy in some crowds to act like you have a cause. And the ones who are really into it get sucked into all of that radical rebel crap."

Boyd let out a humorless breath as he shook his head. He certainly couldn't deny the truth of that statement. "True. Which brings it down to the wealthy. But the few who do acknowledge that there's a problem come up with excuses like—it's been over fifteen years; those people have had plenty of time to get themselves out of their rut. It's clear that they want to be there or they just aren't trying hard enough."

"Well that's the mentality of capitalism so it isn't really surprising." Sin's eyebrows rose slightly and his lips twitched up in a slight smile. "Like I said, people are stupid."

A small, wry smile spread across Boyd's face in return. "They are," he said in agreement. "Some of us seem to have escaped the idiot area of the gene pool, at least. I'd say that the world would be better off if people like us were in charge but I suspect that's what everyone thinks and most of them are wrong."
"Most likely," Sin agreed, a low laugh escaping his full lips.

Boyd's smile lingered briefly as he studied Sin. He'd almost forgotten the sound of Sin's laughter and the way his face lightened when he was amused. It was interesting to see that, even far removed from the indoctrination of the Agency, Sin's opinions hadn't changed.

"You seem more cynical than most of the people I've run into in Annadale," Boyd observed. "Don't take that as an insult—but it does make me curious why you don't have similar views that it sounds like many of your friends have."

Loud thunder cracked outside and the lights in the apartment flickered but stayed on. The sound of rain pounding against the windows and rooftop emanated through the room, sounding more like rocks than raindrops. A glance at the window showed that the sky had all but blackened. The lights that lined the boardwalk just outside the beach had flickered on as if it were night.

"Most of my friends were born here," Sin said as he stood and walked back into the kitchen. "It's a different environment to grow up in. It breeds generally laid back and optimistic people. I lived in a city where shit was fucked up on a massive scale."

Sin pulled out a white and blue package and walked back over to the couch. The package was full of oatmeal cookies with white icing on them.

Boyd noted the sweets with faint endearment but his attention was mostly on Sin's response. "Ah," he said in understanding. He twisted the cap off his water bottle, the little plastic pieces cracking until the cap pulled free. "Where were you born?"

"I think DC, but I'm not really sure."
"You don't know?" Boyd asked, giving Sin a curious look.

"No. A lot of my childhood is a blur." Sin set the package on the couch and resumed his half turned position. He rested his arm along the back of the couch again, extending it. "When the bombs hit, my head got pretty scrambled."

So that was how the Agency dealt with a life of memories, Boyd mused; they gave him reason to believe he had partial amnesia.

"That must have been difficult," Boyd said aloud, his eyebrows drawing down. He knew how old Sin would have been but didn't want to be accurate, since Sin looked younger than he was. "You couldn't have been more than thirteen."

Sin raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "Sixteen actually. I'm old."

The crunch of cookies made the conversation appear a lot less serious than the subject matter was. This version of Sin appeared a lot more unaffected by his past or at least this portion of it. As if to verify this notion, he went on in a calm tone as if they were talking about someone else's life.

"It was pretty hard and I don't remember a lot of people from before the bombing but—Well, whatever. That's enough of this segment of over-sharing my life story."

"You're not over-sharing," Boyd replied, shaking his head. "But we don't have to talk about it if you don't want. I'm sure it's not the most pleasant of topics for you."

"It doesn't matter." Sin shook his head and looked ready to change the subject. He shoved the package at Boyd. "Cookie?"
Offering food as an obvious subject change was such a Sin thing to do that Boyd's lips lifted into a smile. "Sure," he said and grabbed part of a cookie that had been broken.

Sin didn't say anything and they fell into mutual silence. Sin turned on the television and one of the more recent comedy sitcoms came on screen. Boyd didn't recognize the series but it seemed to follow the typical routine of an unattractive, sometimes imbecilic middle-aged man with his supermodel of a wife and the crazy antics that ensued in their household.

The two of them watched the television for a bit, although Boyd kept Sin in his peripheral vision and he noticed Sin watching him thoughtfully from time to time.

"Do you always come down alone?"

Boyd looked over at the abrupt question. He hesitated and then decided that it probably wouldn't hurt to get his preferences out in the open.

"Yes. My boyfriend and I ended up separating awhile ago."

The comment didn't seem to surprise Sin or if it did, he didn't show it visibly. Instead he said casually, "Well there's a large gay community down here. A lot of my friends are gay or bisexual."

"Is Tech?" Boyd asked curiously.

The question seemed to catch Sin off guard and he looked at Boyd with surprise. "No. I used to mess around with her. I mean she experiments some but most people around here have been a little bi-curious- especially at the kind of party they wanted me to go to tonight."

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding. His gaze remained trained on Sin's green eyes. "What about you?"
Sin didn't hesitate before saying matter-of-factly, "I like both men and women. I wouldn't say that I experiment, though. I've been the way I am for a long time."

Boyd couldn't deny that he was relieved to hear Sin still had interest in men. "So you've been with men as well, then?"

"Yeah. I haven't really dated anyone here, though." At that, Sin made a face. His mouth twisted to the side, green eyes rolling as if whatever he was thinking about was annoying. It wasn't an unfamiliar expression, and was one usually reserved for exasperated irritation.

Boyd's eyebrow raised slightly. "What do you mean?"

Sin's gaze slid away as he seemed to think on whatever the answer may be. He looked out the window for a moment before saying, "There was a complicated situation with a guy I nearly got involved with. It was stupid and dramatic. My two favorite things."

"What happened?"

"It's really not worth talking about."

Boyd nodded, letting the topic drop since Sin obviously didn't want to discuss it. Still, now he was very curious. Knowing Sin as well as he did and yet not at all anymore was especially frustrating now, when the Sin he knew may have trusted him enough to answer.

"Well, thanks for letting me know about the community here. You never know how friendly some of these cities will be and it's a pain having to hide everything."

"Is it that way in Lexington?"
"Hmm." Boyd took a moment to consider that, his eyes narrowing faintly in thought. "It's not really one way or the other. In some areas, being openly gay is accepted and some establishments encourage it. In other areas, it's not a good idea. On the one hand, I have a neighbor who I'm fairly certain thinks I'm the devil, but on the other hand most of my gay or bi friends have never run into issues in the city."

Then again, most of his gay or bi friends could kill anyone who looked at them the wrong way. But he didn't say that aloud.

Sin nodded, thoughtful green gaze focused on Boyd steadily.

Boyd couldn't deny the comfort and pleasure he felt with the weight of Sin's attention focused solely on him. It had been too long—far too long.

Butterflies danced in his stomach and even though he knew there was nothing behind Sin's gaze he couldn't help reading into it. His hand shifted on the couch and he almost reached out to him, almost laid his palm on Sin's thigh, almost leaned over to pull Sin closer with a gentle touch sifting in his hair so their lips could meet—

He realized what he was about to do just in time, continuing the motion of his hand up to pull a few strands of hair behind his ear that hadn't made it into his knotted ponytail. His heart ached and he had to break eye contact.

"Danny..."

He looked down at the table in front of him, his fingers twitching against the rough fabric of the shorts Sin had lent him. Even the clothing touching him was making it more difficult to stay silent; that simple gesture of giving him something dry that meant nothing now but could have spoken to their casual intimacy before. Everything he wanted to say ran through his mind before he cut it off sharply.
His eyes fell half-lidded for a second before he could return his expression to mere amiability as he met Sin's gaze again. He smiled mildly.

"Thanks for letting me stay inside while the storm recedes."

There was a nod and a shrug as Sin watched him with thinly veiled curiosity, and another brief silence fell between them.

After awhile Sin tilted his head to the side and said slowly, "Well if you really want to meet people or hang out with people when you're here, you could chill with me if you want sometime. You're an okay guy, and you like morbid shows so we might get along. You could watch the second season with me sometime or something."

Boyd's eyebrows lifted in surprise. He hadn't expected to get anything near to an invitation any time soon. A genuine smile lifted his lips. "That would be great, Danny, thank you. After last season's cliffhanger I've been dying to know what happens."

There was a burst of crinkling as Sin stood up and grabbed the now empty cookie package. He walked over to the trash can in the kitchen, tossing it out and saying, "Next time you're in town let me know and we can hook up. I'll give you my number."

"Sounds good," Boyd said. "I'll give you mine too."

Like most agents, he had two phones; a work and a personal. Since most people he dealt with on a regular basis were related to work, he hadn't gotten much use out of the personal. But he was glad to have it now.

They exchanged numbers and the rain didn't last much longer. Boyd changed back into his still damp clothing, thanking Sin one more time before he left.
When he stepped out of the building he took in the pleasant smell of fresh summer rain. The streets were still slick and wet with puddles but the sky was already starting to lighten. Pale shafts of light were beginning to break through the clouds.

He got into his car and drove back to the hotel. The town recovered quickly from the storm, with people opening their windows and stepping out of their homes. Traffic picked up around him. Cars cruised down the street, splashing puddles far up onto the sidewalks and occasionally resulting in indignant pedestrians shouting after them.

With the lightening sky and the memory of Sin's smile and invitation, Boyd couldn't help feeling happy. It was clear Sin didn't mind him being in his life in some fashion and that was so encouraging it helped lift his spirits and balance the stress of his life at the Agency.
Chapter Sixteen

Boyd trailed behind Kassian as they wandered through the furniture store showroom. They had been looking at options for half an hour already, but although Kassian had invited Boyd he was looking increasingly bored.

"What made you decide to redecorate, anyway?"

Kassian sat on the edge of a metallic platform bed as his eyebrows drew together in consternation. He bounced up and down slightly and shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. I guess since I've started trying to get out of the funk I've been in since Russia, my house became kind of depressing. All it does is remind me of crap I don't want to be reminded of anymore. And it doesn't represent me as a person at all. I debated selling for awhile."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I like the neighborhood," Kassian replied simply. He stood and the two of them resumed their meandering course through the showroom. "I'm going to install a sound system through the house, I think."

Boyd nodded, absently eying a platform bed as they passed. "Honestly, with the way you love music I'm surprised you haven't done that already. If you need help with any of it, let me know."

Kassian nodded and the two of them went through the room, looking at a few of the items more in detail while Kassian took tags of the items he would want to buy. They fell silent for a bit until Boyd spoke again, his tone casual.

"So aside from all this," he indicated the room around them, "how have you been? It's been awhile since I saw you."

"I could reverse that question easily, kid."
“You could and I'll answer later if you want,” Boyd said with a shrug. He looked over at Kassian and lifted his eyebrows. "But I asked first."

A couple wandered into the area where they were and stopped to look at the set-up. Kassian watched them for a moment, his gaze lingering before he got up from the chaise lounge he'd thrown himself down on.

"I've been alright."

The answer was very simple and very vague considering the things that Carhart had recently filled Boyd in on.

Boyd waited a beat for Kassian to elaborate and when he didn't, he asked, "Just alright? Nothing interesting has happened at all?"

Kassian shrugged and they began walking away from the couple who were happily chatting about the love nest they were so giddy about decorating. The two agents began walking idly, not really going in any direction. Kassian seemed temporarily distracted from his redesigning mission.

"Well, first of all—I don't know if I told you that I'm off Harriet for good."

"No, you didn't," Boyd said, looking over at Kassian in surprise. "Last I knew, you were spending more time with her. Did something happen?"

"We're still going to be friends but I'm just not going to try to go after her. I think we expect too much from each other to ever keep it real."

They stopped walking in front of the elevator that led to the other showrooms but Kassian didn't press the button to go up. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, looking at Boyd. "I could just see it now, kid. We'd both be sitting around trying to figure out how to impress each other the whole time. Her with work and me with everything."
Boyd considered what he knew about each of them and had to nod. He slid his hands in his pockets. "You're probably right. You would never be able to live up to the other's expectations."

"Exactly. So that was a fun little epiphany. Not much else happened after that because I was sent on an extended."

"What was the mission?"

Kassian finally pressed the elevator button and made a face. "It was pretty stupid honestly. It didn't seem to really call for me to be there. A pretty basic infiltrate and locate mission. It lasted awhile because we were stuck on a cruise for almost three weeks and we didn't even have a picture of the target to go on. Also, we couldn't exactly take him out discreetly if we did it right off the bat."

"A cruise isn't such a bad thing to be stuck on, at least," Boyd said lightly with a shrug. "Who were you with?"

"You're going to love this." Kassian smirked and raised his eyebrows. "Jordan Hunt."

"It must have been a valentine," Boyd said, watching Kassian's expression for any shifts.

"Oh, believe me it was."

With that cryptic comment, the other man stepped into the newly arrived elevator. There was nobody else inside, which was good considering the conversation Boyd wanted to have. He nodded and leaned against the wall of the elevator as he idly studied Kassian, his arms crossing and legs kicking out in front of him.

"So, what did you think of her?"
"Hard to say... It was a long three weeks and we definitely went in phases." Kassian paused and scratched the back of his neck. "It's a long story."

"I have time," Boyd said mildly. He shifted to get more comfortable against the wall.

The doors opened and they entered a large area that was full of fabric samples for different purposes. Kassian automatically headed over to the carpet section as he seemed to struggle with whatever this long story was.

"Basically, we were posing as a couple on a swinger cruise. Sex was definitely going to be involved but she wanted to start 'practicing' as soon as we met to talk about our covers. It was strange, kid. When the mission started, we argued a lot. She didn't get why I didn't want to take advantage of all the free sex. I think she was offended, and then she was confused, and it finally turned into her thinking I thought something was wrong with her. She is seriously one messed up little girl."

Boyd nodded, mulling that over. He wasn't particularly surprised to hear any of that about Jordan but it also didn't make him feel pleased. He couldn't help thinking that Carhart was probably right and if that was the case he wanted her to stay away from his friend.

He glanced over at a variety of carpet in tones of grey that they paused near. "What terms were you on when you parted, then?"

Kassian shrugged. "Okay, I guess. She isn't so bad."

Boyd nodded again although this time his lips turned down on the edges as he debated whether he would say anything. In the end, the best part of Kassian as a friend was that they'd always had the ability to be bluntly honest with each other.
He stopped and turned to face Kassian fully.

"Kass, I think you should be careful around Jordan."

The other man arched an eyebrow. "Okay?"

Boyd discreetly looked around them to make sure no one would overhear before he returned his gaze to Kassian. He stepped a little closer and dropped his voice. "Do you know about internal valentines?"

The other eyebrow raised and Kassian frowned. "I'd heard a rumor awhile back, but it was just one story. What, you think Jordan is being sent to seduce me?"

"Yes. She's in with Seong, who's been systematically getting rid of anyone who doesn't fit in her agenda. I think she's trying to see who will side with her and who won't. You're one of the few upper tiers who she may think she'd have a chance to sway. And Jordan..."

He paused, a frown marring his features as he shook his head. "I found out that the reassignment of you and Jordan to that cruise was last minute. Neither of you were supposed to be the assigned agents originally."

"And how do you know that?" Kassian asked, although he was starting to look more irritated than skeptical.

Boyd ran a hand back through his hair. "I'd been warned about Jordan. I should have told you at the beginning of this conversation that I knew about your mission but—" He stopped and grimaced faintly as he realized how this sounded. He glanced apologetically at Kassian. "I wanted to see if she'd gotten to you first so I knew how best to bring up the topic."

"If she'd gotten to me?" Kassian's blue eyes narrowed into slits as he glared at Boyd, crossing his arms over his chest. "Next time, just be up front."
Boyd opened his mouth and then closed it, looking away. "Okay."

"It really pisses me off," Kassian said, shaking his head and looking away. He started to say more, stopped, and then moved to sit at one of the benches that were set aside from the show areas. "That you wouldn't inform me of this inside information as soon as you found it out. What, do you think you have to feel me out?"

Boyd sighed and sat down next to him. "I'm sorry, Kassian. I mean it."

He scrubbed briefly at his face and then dropped his hands, his arms resting on his knees. He searched the hard lines of Kassian's face. "I wasn't trying to be insulting—I did meet with you as soon as I could after finding out. As for the rest..." He waved a hand vaguely and then sighed. "Honestly, Kass, sometimes I still..." He trailed off, grimaced to himself, and met Kassian's eyes as he changed what he'd been about to say.

"After my extended I realized even more that it doesn't matter how good of an agent a person is; if their vulnerabilities are targeted by manipulative people, they can be used no matter how hard they try to avoid it. Anyone can be hurt if you make them trust you and then use that against them. And Jordan..." His eyes narrowed and he shook his head, his hands curling into fists.

"I think she's worse than any of the people I saw on that mission, and that was in an environment designed specifically for people to gain power through manipulation and sex. I was worried that she may have targeted the best parts of you and if she'd succeeded in twisting that to her advantage, then my going into the conversation by implicating her right away could result in you ignoring anything I had to say. Maybe you'd feel defensive or protective of her and not listen to me."
He sighed, looking down at his uncurling fingers. "But that made me manipulate you in my own way, it seems. So, I'm sorry, Kassian."

There was a tense silence and Kassian sighed, raising a hand to rub over his face. His shoulders slumped slightly and he shook his head, finally sliding his hand up to run through his short blond hair.

"I need to know I can trust you. And if you have information about someone's plans for me, or... you think they're watching me, and you don't tell me, it means I can't."

"You can trust me. Your friendship means a lot to me, Kassian," Boyd said sincerely. "And no matter what I'm always going to have your back, especially in this administration. I promise."

There was another silence and then Kassian nodded slowly. His eyes were cast down to the floor, his lips set in a grim line.

"I hope it's true. I don't want to think you'll hold important things like that back from me. With the way things are..." The senior agent shook his head. "Everyone is different. Everything has changed. When you were gone, the only person I felt safe telling anything to was Ryan."

Guilt was a heavy weight in Boyd's stomach at those words. He almost wanted to say something but the mention of Ryan sidelined his thoughts. "I noticed you two seemed closer. Did you start hanging out more?"

At that Kassian looked briefly surprised and then finally looked at Boyd fully. There was another extended pause and then he frowned slightly. "I just realized, we never talked about a lot of things that happened while you were gone."

"No, we didn't," Boyd agreed, his eyebrows drawing together. "Why? Did something happen aside from the terminations you both told me about?"
"Yes." Kassian frowned slightly, his eyebrows drawing together. He reached up to rub a hand across his jaw, closing his eyes briefly and then clearing his throat. "But not with the Agency. I was—I had scheduled downtime to visit my family in California, and on the night I arrived, my sister went missing."

"What?" Boyd said in surprise. He straightened, looking at Kassian with concern. "Which one?"

"Leighton." Kassian cleared his throat again, shifting on the bench as his blue eyes began to flit around the room.

Boyd watched Kassian, feeling a growing sense of unease with the way Kassian was acting. "Kass, I want to talk to you about this but if you'd rather we wait until we're somewhere else..."

"It's fine. It doesn't matter." Another shrug. "Anyway, she's dead."

Even having been dreading bad news, that simple sentence hit Boyd like a punch in the gut. He took that in, unable to look away from Kassian.

He'd met Leighton before; she'd been pregnant at the time and she'd been kind. He'd enjoyed her company. She'd made him feel welcome even in the awkward situation he'd found himself in when Kassian's family had suddenly appeared.

Imagining her gone...

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"Just... one of those things." Kassian frowned, eyebrows drawing together as he looked at something in the distance. "My parents were out of the country, but it was my only downtime so I didn't want to waste it and not get to visit anyone. It was Leighton's idea. She was supposed to pick me up
from the airport, and she never showed up. Eventually I just took a cab to the house. Kim was there with the kids. It just—"

He wet his lips and tilted his head back against the wall. "We knew something was wrong. She never came home. She was just gone. Her phone just rang and rang until it eventually just went to voice mail. The local police didn't really take it seriously. I don't blame them. There were weird... coincidences. She and her husband had just separated and she'd just taken a lot of money out of the bank. It was for the kid's daycare, well over two thousand a month, but the timing just—I guess they figured she was a grown woman and maybe just took off."

Boyd shook his head, wishing that had been what had actually happened. "They must have found her eventually." It was somewhere between a statement and a question.

"That's where Ryan came in." Kassian frowned slightly and rubbed his hands across his jeans. "I was freaked out. I knew she would never just leave the kids. I called Carhart and demanded he use Agency resources to fucking find her. I went insane on him when he told me he couldn't. We hung up, and five minutes later Ryan called. Apparently Carhart had suggested that he get in touch with me, we were both on downtime, and I needed some assistance."

At that point in the conversation a salesman walked by and looked at them curiously, although he didn't seem invested enough to actually offer assistance.

Kassian's eyes followed the man as he walked away, clearly waiting until he was out of earshot.

"Ryan really came through. He took the first flight he could find in, he must have spent a fortune and wouldn't let me pay him back. And we weren't even really friends back then."
Boyd's lips tilted somberly on the edges. "Ryan's a good man. He's always there to help."

"Yeah. He did. He really... really. I'm just so grateful to him." Kassian looked over at Boyd finally. "He ended up somehow hacking into... something, and tracing her cell phone through the towers. He pinpointed a certain location, and we knew either her phone or her body was there. That's the only reason we found her. Without him... she would have laid out there in that field for weeks, months. Maybe forever. It was hard enough that we couldn't go right away. It would have looked too suspicious if I suddenly found her body. So we waited, he did something else—rerouted a call, made a phony tip..."

His eyes cast down again, and he swallowed hard. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, and seemed to be having trouble gathering his voice. "Fuck, this is hard," Kassian admitted after a moment. "It's still so hard, that's why I try not to talk about it. She was so amazing. And we all just fell apart, kid. I was so wrecked, I couldn't even keep it together. Courtney and Kimberly were at each other's throats, everything was a mess. And Ryan really tried to take care of all of us. He was just—I don't know. I can't even explain how fucking grateful to him I was after all of that shit. It's so strange."

Boyd reached over and squeezed Kassian comfortably on the shoulder. "It's not strange at all. I'm glad he was there for you, I just wish I'd been there too—to help you, to pay my respects—" He had to pause because thinking of anyone harming Leighton filled him equally with sorrow and anger. She'd been one of the few truly good people out there. It never should have happened to her.

"I'm so sorry, Kassian. I really liked her. She made me feel like family. It was—" He stopped and shook his head. "She had a gift."
"She did. She was the best. I still don't understand how someone could do that to her." Kassian's eyebrows drew together, his fingers flexing against his thighs. "I had to identify the body. I got so wrecked that night."

"Jesus," Boyd said quietly. "Where were your parents through all this? Were they still out of the country?"

Kassian nodded. "They weren't able to come back for another week. It was hard for them to find a flight to come back on. It was bad for everyone. But yeah, that's basically what happened with me while you were gone," he said with a crooked smile.

Boyd shook his head. "Did they ever find who did it?"

"No. That's the really fucking hard part." A bitter scowl found its way onto Kassian's handsome face. "You'd think something like this wouldn't happen to... I mean you'd think, I could have somehow found out, or used the Agency but it's unsolved. No suspects. Just... nothing. I thought it was her husband for a while but not anymore. You can't fake that kind of grief."

Boyd's eyebrows drew together at that. "No suspects at all?" He wondered how that could be but didn’t want to push for details on such a difficult topic. Instead, he asked, "How long ago did this all happen?"

"A little over a year. Last spring, not too long after Vega died. That's part of the reason I'd been wanting to go on the trip so badly. I wanted to get away from the Agency for awhile. I really wanted to see them, because I felt like things at the Agency were getting so bad. I wanted to see them while I could, before something maybe happened with me for some reason. But it isn't just the Agency. People are just sick everywhere."

Kassian shook his head, once again combing both hands through his hair as he gave a low sigh. "Some psycho butchered my sister it seems, for nothing. They didn't even take all the cash that had been in her car when they
found it. He just raped her, and murdered her, and dragged her out to a field. She'd never even made it to the daycare to drop off the money. Somehow between her house and there, something went wrong. And it fucking kills me that I don't know what."

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he looked away, gaze falling automatically on the sleekly displayed furniture and decorations. The setting seemed too normal to be considering the violent and senseless end to someone who'd been such a good person.

Anger and disgust warred within him, making him wonder why someone like Leighton had to have been the target of anything like that. Why someone so good had to meet such a violent end. And why Kassian and his family had to endure that knowledge for the rest of their lives.

"Is there anything I can do?" Boyd asked, turning a serious stare onto Kassian's profile. "Additional research, following up on clues if I'm ever in the area on a mission..."

Kassian's broad shoulders rose in a shrug and he gave Boyd a helpless stare. "I wish I could ask but I don't think there's anything. We tried so hard, me and Ryan hacked into the local LE's computers, even Carhart tried to exploit some resources but he couldn't be too obvious... it's just one of those things. One of those unsolved... random things."

He affected a faint smile. "Thanks, though. I wasn't lying before, when I told you I feel like you're the closest person I've been to in a long time. I thought about you a lot in the weeks after it happened. You were the only Agency person who'd ever met any of my family."

Boyd smiled slightly in return and reached up, pulling Kassian in closer for a brief one-armed sideways hug. "You know I'll always be there for you, right? I'd give anything to have been there to help you through that."
He squeezed Kassian's shoulder and, mindful of being two men in public, dropped his hand onto the bench. "But I'm here now so if anything comes up in the future, I don't care if you have to show up at my door in the middle of the night—I hope you'll let me know and let me help. I'll drop everything for you."

"I will. And you should know by now, it's the same for me."

They looked at each other for a moment before Kassian leaned back in the bench. He rolled his shoulders, lips twisting to the side as his eyebrows rose slightly. "So, I'm going to tell you something to kind of lighten up this conversation. You game?"

Boyd's eyebrows tilted up in return. "Sure," he said, watching his friend curiously.

The slight twist of lips turned up further into a wry smile and Kassian rolled his eyes at himself. "So maybe me and Ryan kind of had a brief thing."

The comment caused Boyd's eyebrows to raise higher. "Kassian Trovosky," he said in a mock scandalized tone. "Do you ever have friends you don't fuck?"

Kassian actually paused to consider that, eyebrows drawing together slightly. After a moment he grinned and sounded vaguely pleased with himself as he said, "I never got to fuck Harriet. Or Vega."

Boyd laughed. "Keyword 'got'—you would have, if they'd let you."

Laughing, Kassian looked completely unashamed. "What can I say, man? I like sex. It's normal. It's like, why we're made the way we're made or something, right?"

Shrugging a little, he tilted his head back. "And it wasn't some big deal. When we were in California, when I was really messed up, he was staying in
my room, babysitting me—some stuff went down. You know how it goes. I wanted to maybe follow up here but he wasn't interested. Little brat."

    Boyd snorted faintly but couldn't help smiling. "He knows you too well," he joked. He paused, shrugged, and leaned back against the wall with his head tilting toward Kassian. "Maybe it's better anyway—your friendship seems to have improved by going through all that together but trying to keep that part going out of context may have pushed back on what you'd gained."

    Nodding in agreement, Kassian glanced around the room as if finally remembering where he was. "Yeah, that's why I wasn't too persistent about it." A frown touched his face and he sighed long and loud. "You know, I probably could have hired someone to do this for me."

    Boyd shifted his gaze to take in the furniture nearby. "The infamous Trovosky, talking about giving up some modicum of control," he observed dryly, teasing him to keep the conversation light. "You know someone you'd trust to make those decisions for you?"

    "People get interior decorators to do this stuff all the time." Kassian looked around again, eyes moving over the large expanse of the floor they were on.

    Boyd sat forward, resting his hands on his thighs. "So you want to keep looking around?"

    Kassian's gaze drifted across the carpets but he appeared to have lost interest in the entire endeavor. "Nah. I'll just buy this stuff and come back later. I don't even know if I want to put down carpet anyway. I may just do rugs or something."

    "It may be better to wait, anyway," Boyd replied, eyeing a particularly shaggy carpet pile that looked like it would suck up anything that fell on it.
"You may change your mind about what you want once you see the place with the new furniture."

Kassian's response was a vague sound followed by him looking utterly uninterested in staying in the store any longer. "I'm tired of being here. I'll just arrange delivery for this stuff."

He looked at the variety of tickets in his hand. "I may go to the electronic store and get my sound system instead. I warn you, though, if you come I will be there for an ungodly amount of time."

"I'm not doing anything else today," Boyd said with a shrug. "If I get bored, I'll leave early."

In the end, Boyd lasted about an hour at the next stop before he found his attention wandering.

He'd planned to spend as much time as possible with his friend since he rarely saw him anymore. But with Kassian so focused on finding the specifics of a sound system he wanted, and with the sunlight warming the clouds outside while the wind rustled the trees, Boyd found himself realizing he had a day off that he could spend doing the things he hadn't done in awhile. Things he'd been too stressed or upset to do.

He told Kassian he'd see him later and left. When he stepped out of the store it was still early morning. He slid his hands in his pockets and tilted his head up toward the sky. White clouds with periwinkle shadows faintly glowed from behind with the sun. The breeze was warm and the unblemished buildings of Glass Town surrounded him with reflections of the world around him.

He ended up taking a taxi home because he and Kassian had carpooled and he didn't want to waste his entire day walking home.
When he watched the taxi leave he saw Mrs. Hensley peering through the blinds across the street. He lifted a hand in a silent wave and the blinds instantly snapped shut. He shook his head to himself and turned, walking up to his front door. She had been watching a little more often in the past several months, perhaps wondering why he kept disappearing for great lengths of time.

Or, more likely, why he kept coming back.

When he got inside he headed toward his bedroom.

The place was still a mess from all those months ago when he'd wanted to destroy everything. He'd left it alone; too depressed and tired to want to change it. Now, the room felt lighter and the reminder of his anger and depression no longer felt necessary. Now, he could look at his room and the memories within differently again.

He went into his living room and turned on Lou's old CD player, remembering all the times he and Lou had sat in the living room with it playing in the background, and the time Sin had been over when they'd done the same.

It had been Boyd's attempt to help Sin determine what kind of music he liked but in the process they'd ended up making love and relaxing against each other on the couch. That strong chest had risen and fallen against his back slowly; those powerful hands had been a gentle caress against his bare stomach and the scars scattered across it.

Intertwined with Sin's body, he'd felt complete and content, and the love he'd felt then still burned in his chest now. Knowing that Sin was out there and safe made Boyd feel like he could relax for the first time in a year and a half.
He spent a little over an hour cleaning everything, even the second floor he hadn't touched in nearly two years. Almost everything was dusty like a tomb but there were places where it looked like someone had touched this or that; had moved an item or had opened a box. Boyd was using one of the bedrooms as secondary storage from the attic so he could more easily sift through some of the boxes.

He didn't think he'd touched any of this for a long time so he could only assume the places where he saw smears in the dust were due to Sin when he'd stopped by the house. He searched around the room until he found the hidden area where he'd put the box with his father's journals.

For some reason, he'd felt the need to keep it out of sight in an area no one else would find. He had been half paranoid that his mother would visit the house unexpectedly and discover Cedrick's journals. He hadn't wanted her to take away the only legacy of his father that he had.

He brought the box back downstairs and settled on the couch sideways, his legs stretching out in front of him so he could lean back against the arm. Trip hop music crooned in the background, reminding him once more of that night with Sin.

He paused for a moment, fingertips passing across the cover of the journal, then looked over at the entertainment center.

He'd been in this room with Lou before, and before that he'd been in this room with his dad, and other times with his mother. At the moment the memories weren't painful the way they usually felt; underscoring how alone he was. At the moment, they were comforting.

He sighed, wondering to himself when he had become so nostalgic, and sifted through the journals until he came to the last one he'd been reading. So far it seemed that most of his father's journals were a mixture of
personal entries, excerpts and ideas for articles, and jotted notes for research. He seemed to have created his own shorthand that was all but unreadable to Boyd and there were entire pages he could hardly understand, while other pages were written normally.

The curiosity that burned in him in general, that made him want to poke and prod until he understood the world more fully, made him want to break his father's code even though it was probably not important. Most likely he was noting information from protected sources to be included in future articles. But there was a mystery to it, even so small of one, and it made him wonder what his father was saying in that incomprehensible scrawl.

One journal in particular, the one Boyd had been reading recently, was dedicated solely to him. He flipped to the last entry he'd read, his eyes finding the place he'd left off.

_Do you know why I got into journalism? It's because the truth is important. Never let anyone tell you differently, Boyd. Even if it hurts to say, even if it's painful to hear, even if you wish you could run the other way—it's important. It separates the people with integrity from the deceivers. It's what makes a person trustworthy. Somebody to believe in._

Cedrick went on to describe how he felt that Boyd had an inquiring personality and the different scenarios he'd considered for what Boyd would be when he grew up. It was the end of the entry that made Boyd smile to himself.

_So maybe you'll be an artist. You could be the next van Gogh or da Vinci. Your name could be written in history books for centuries to come. You'll become another well known last name that doesn't require a first name to differentiate you from anyone else. In the future, there will be art school students learning about Beaulieu's style, and others trying to copy it. Maybe you'll create an entire new movement in art._
You'll make enough money that someday your mother and I will retire and live in a nice house by the beach, where I can brag about you to every passerby.

That may be my favorite of the futures I envision for you. But whatever your future, whatever talents you later discover, I know you will be the best at anything you choose.

It isn't only a father's pride saying that. I like to think of it as my journalistic spirit, drawing conclusions from the facts at hand.

His gaze lingered on those last words for a moment before he shifted his attention to the next entry. It was short, only two paragraphs, and was written in a less legible scrawl than the previous few entries.

I wonder what you'll think when you read this someday, Boyd. I've thought a lot about what I want to tell you when you grow older. I think you'll have a lot of questions — why wouldn't I always let you into my office? Why did I sometimes disappear for long periods of time?

There are many things I can't put down on paper, as much as I wish I could. But I promise someday we will talk. I look forward to the day you'll be old enough to understand everything. It may be selfish, but I admit that I hope someday you'll continue my legacy.

He paused, fingers brushing the page, and was just about to flip to the next entry when his phone suddenly buzzed loudly. His heart skipped a beat. He was off the couch in seconds, nearly falling over the coffee table in his haste to reach his phone.

It wasn't until he saw that it was a call from Carhart that his excitement fell as quickly as it had come. With a sigh, he realized he'd been hoping it was Sin.
"I'll get right to it," Carhart announced the second Boyd sat down in his chair. "You're going to Annadale University for a follow-up mission."

Boyd felt a thrill of excitement before he realized Carhart had looked at Bex as well. Boyd glanced at Bex and saw her pinched, unhappy stare. "Both of us?"

Carhart nodded and activated the hologram in the center of the table. The machine had finally been fixed after a few months of languishing, following Boyd and Bex's fight. A man's image appeared before them; his light brown hair was cut short and stylish and his pale eyes appeared smaller behind his sleek black glasses.

"This is Jed Veira." Carhart flipped to another holographic image, this one of the sort of large-scale rally that was infested with Janus operatives. "You have probably heard of him. He's a highly controversial activist who has been involved in several high profile, highly political protests in the past five years."

"What's he have to do with Annadale?" Bex asked, frowning at his image. Boyd imagined she was looking for a reason to not have to go back; she hadn't exactly enjoyed the first time.

He had to admit he wished she wasn't going as well. Even though they'd been down there at the same time before, he hadn't realized Sin was alive then. Now that he did, he was filled with alarm at the idea of her somehow running across Sin. He didn't know what would happen if that occurred but he was worried that it wouldn't end well for his former partner.

"Every summer, Annadale University invites a highly decorated speaker to a large event," Carhart explained. "Their original speaker canceled
due to a sudden and severe illness. We've just received word that the last minute replacement will be Veira. Given his reputation, his presence is drawing a huge and diverse crowd."

Carhart settled his stare on Boyd and then Bex. "We believe Janus representatives may try to recruit from the attendees. You will attend the speech and keep watch for any activity. Check your panels for dossiers on the most likely operatives."

When Bex and Boyd both only nodded their assent, Carhart straightened his back and turned off the hologram. "Visit Unit 16 for your disguises and head down as soon as possible."

Bex left the meeting immediately. Ryan caught Boyd's eye and opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by Carhart.

"Ryan, come with me to my office. We need to discuss another mission."

Pulling a face, Ryan complied. "Call me later," he told Boyd before walking out. Jeffrey left at the same time.

Boyd was the slowest to leave, his mind racing ahead to the mission. He pulled out his phone to see if Sin had contacted him since they'd last seen each other. He hadn't.

He couldn't stop the disappointment at that even as he knew better than to expect anything to progress more quickly between them—assuming that he would be lucky enough for it to progress at all.

Eyes still on the phone when he opened the door, he realized abruptly that someone was in the hallway watching him. He looked up and was surprised to see Jeffrey leaning against the opposite wall, his black eyes trained on Boyd.
"Distracted with something lately?"

If it had been somebody else it was possible the casual question and impassive stare wouldn't have made the hair on the back of Boyd's neck lift. But after years as an agent he'd learned to listen to his instincts and right now his instincts were telling him to be suspicious. Jeffrey had never shown interest in Boyd before, and coupling that with the way he'd been watching him lately...

"Not really," Boyd answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You check your phone more often lately." Jeffrey's dark gaze flicked down to Boyd's phone still held in his hand at his side.

Suspicion caused Boyd to shift slightly even though he kept his expression impassive aside from his lifted eyebrows.

"Do I?" Boyd glanced down at his phone with mild curiosity, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. He closed the phone and shrugged as he slid it in his pocket. "I hadn't realized. With missions coming more frequently but irregularly, I've been checking to make sure I'm not missing anything. I don't want to be caught unaware. You know how that goes," he added, giving Jeffrey a commiserating look. "I imagine it's even worse in Analysis."

Jeffrey's eyebrows furrowed as he frowned. "Well, yes." It wasn't an obvious tell but Boyd was used to reading people and he saw the slight confusion and uncertainty in Jeffrey's dark eyes. "It has been busy."

"Now that I think of it," Boyd said thoughtfully, nearly immediately to throw the analyst off and give him no time to think. "Is there a way to make my phone give a special noise or alert when I receive messages from certain people?"

"Well..." Jeffrey paused, appearing to consider that. "I imagine so."
"Maybe Ryan will know," Boyd mused. He glanced down the hallway distractedly. "I have to go." He flashed a reserved smile at Jeffrey even as he took a few steps back. "Thank you for the help, Jeffrey; it's good to know you're looking out for me. If I find out how to do it, I'll let you know. I'm sure you need that function as much as I do in your line of work, if not more." His smile quirked briefly. "With luck, we can make sure neither of us ends up in trouble for missing something important."

He raised a hand in a brief wave, which Jeffrey distractedly returned with drawn together eyebrows. Boyd thought he may have seen a flicker of guilt in the cast of those dark eyes but he didn't wait to verify. It was imperative that he turn the conversation around, give Jeffrey reason to doubt himself, and leave on a friendly note so the doubt would only increase when Jeffrey thought about this again later.

As he strode to Unit 16, he ran over the interaction and wondered who Jeffrey was reporting to and why. And what, exactly, Jeffrey may have been hoping to coax from him.

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It was a busy time of year in Annadale Beach, with the tourist season seeming to be at its peak and the number of visitors only rising due to the event at the university.

Boyd mingled with the students, checking for any follow up on the updates of the student groups that were possibly related to Janus. Unsurprisingly, there was no solid intel but he hadn't yet heard anything to imply they would be resurrected again.

The entire time he walked around the university he found himself automatically looking toward every flash of black hair; every tall man. While he
had once done the same thing in Blue Moon, wishing to see Sin, he was now hoping he wouldn't. Not while Bex was around.

He saw her once or twice in the distance but they'd each continued their separate roles and hadn't acknowledged each other.

As the event drew nearer, the campus became almost overly crowded. A wide variety of people began to trickle in among the students; from men and women who had dressed up to young adults who would have blended in at protests. Boyd moved around, listening to conversations and getting involved in a few as well.

He kept an eye out for any of the Janus agents or associates. So far he hadn't seen anyone and nothing was raising any red flags.

The crowd gathered outside the entrance to the auditorium as people started to filter in to take their seats. Boyd was cutting between a group of animated college students when he heard a vaguely familiar voice call out behind him:

"Tyler!"

He looked over his shoulder and saw Azalia. She grinned when she saw him notice her and raised her black fingerless-gloved hand to wave him over. He turned around and threaded his way through the crowd until he could stop next to her.

She was wearing a similar outfit as before, only this time she had on black pants that were extremely wide-legged and filled with zippers and strips of red tartan fabric. Her long sleeved shirt was filled with holes beneath the tight t-shirt she wore with some sort of cartoon-like character on it. The dog collar she wore had wide silver spikes and hanging rings that glinted from the black leather.
Behind her were two girls who looked to be her age. One girl wore very similar clothing and had hair that was dyed a violent green, with a round face and eyes that were a deep brown. The other girl looked strangely out of place next to them in earth-toned clothing. She wore a conservative tank top beneath a shrug and a fitted skirt that went just past her knees. Her shoes looked like what Boyd had once heard Unit 16 staff refer to as "Mary Jane" for some reason. Her long brown hair was straight and pulled back on the upper half.

"Hey, you're back," Azalia greeted him with a grin, putting her hand companionably on his shoulder. "I didn't know if I'd see you again."

Boyd adjusted the glasses he wore for the Tyler cover and smiled with a shrug. "I couldn't resist the topic tonight."

"I know, right?" Azalia said keenly, her eyes lighting up. "I've been excited about this all day. We read about Veira in one of our classes last semester and I never thought I'd get to actually see him in person."

"She's been obsessed about it," her goth-looking friend put in with a roll of her eyes.

Azalia made a face but then seemed to remember they hadn't all been introduced. "Oh right. This is Anna," she pointed to the girl with the green hair, "and this is Jaime." She pointed to the brunette who smiled and lifted a hand in a wave. Azalia looked at Anna and Jaime while gesturing to Boyd. "This is Tyler something-or-other. He's thinking of going poli-sci like us."

The girls nodded in understanding while Boyd glanced between them and the crowd that was filtering into the auditorium.

"So, you planning to sit with someone already?" Azalia asked.
"What?" Boyd looked back over and shook his head. "No... I was just going to try to find an empty spot."

"Why don't you sit next to us, then?"

Jaime watched Boyd intently and smiled wider when he said with a shrug, "Sure." The four of them joined the crowd siphoning into the auditorium.

"So," Boyd said idly, "heard anything new on whether any of those groups will start up again next year?"

Azalia grimaced and shook her head. "Nah. These things seem to pop up last minute sometimes."

"Too bad," Boyd said, casually glancing away to skim the crowd once more for any of the Janus affiliates.

They were able to find four seats next to each other but for that they had almost at the very back of the auditorium. Although Anna complained about it and Azalia looked unhappy, Boyd liked the position. There were fewer people in the vulnerable space behind his back and he could see more of the people below him which meant he may be more likely to see anyone related to Janus. Although it wasn't that easy to tell from the backs of everyone's heads.

He didn't see any of the targets but he did see Bex, scowling as she had to practically crawl over a couple making out in order for to get to her seat. He couldn't help smirking slightly at the scene before he looked away. She was much closer to the stage so at least she would get that end of the auditorium.

It wasn't long until the lights went down and he could no longer see anyone. The stage lit up and the president of the college came out to give his
address about why it was so important to be involved, and so on. Boyd listened to the speech while simultaneously listening to whispered conversations popping up and disappearing around him.

When Jed Veira took the stage everyone’s attention turned fully toward him, except, Boyd suspected, for him and Bex. He paid even closer attention to the crowd, the little that he could see, and subtly shifted in the direction of any conversations he heard around him. Azalia, Anna and Jaime occasionally whispered to each other, noting things Veira said or explaining something that one of them didn't get.

Jaime was sitting next to Boyd and more than once she glanced at him shyly from the corner of her eye or touched him lightly on the arm to gain his attention. Every time that happened, it turned out she was dutifully explaining what was being said between the three girls so he wouldn’t feel left out. He had to admit he appreciated it for the bits of small intel he was getting from her regarding what the classes had taught at Annadale University—while simultaneously he wished she would stop doing that so he could concentrate more fully on everything else around him.

The keynote speech seemed to drag on forever to Boyd, who after a point felt like it was little more than a propaganda speech for activism. On its own that was well enough, but this was the sort of thing Janus used to inspire people to join them in the first place.

Although the Agency had long ago considered whether Jed Veira was related to Janus, there was nothing to connect them aside from their ideals. Which, in and of itself, was not uncommon in the years following the wars. There were plenty of people who felt similarly and even participated in things like protests, who never stepped over into terrorism.
Still, he listened for any keywords and figured he’d note in his report the possibility that this could have been a recruiting practice through the speaker itself rather than through affiliates sent in to recruit from the crowd.

When the speech was finally over and people started to disperse, Boyd watched Veira move toward the back of the stage and get into a short conversation with the president. They shook hands and the president placed a hand on Veira’s shoulder to lean in and say something into his ear. Veira smiled and nodded and said something in return.

It was impossible to read lips from this distance but for all intents and purposes it looked like nothing more than a self-congratulatory conversation between two men.

After Veira stepped off the stage, Boyd watched who moved up to hover near him. He saw Bex doing something similar, being much closer to the man than Boyd was a room away. So they weren’t both watching the same person, he turned his attention back to the girls.

The three of them were discussing what Veira had said. They kept throwing out terms Boyd only vaguely knew from reading up on the political science major so he would be able to converse with students as if he knew what they were talking about. He got drawn into a few short debates but nothing that interesting was happening. He didn’t learn or overhear anything important and didn’t see any of the Janus affiliates they were hoping to see tonight. When he glanced down to look for Veira, he saw the man in the midst of a conversation with a group of girls while a few other people still waited around to talk to him.

Nothing looked suspicious or out of the ordinary at all.

He was just wondering whether he should go talk to Veira after all when he felt movement at his side.
"Well ain't this a cozy quartet," Bex drawled, all British twang and heavy sarcasm as she crossed her arms over the front of her torn up black Sex Pistols t-shirt. She honestly wasn't dressed that differently than she normally did which could either be due in part to the fact that she had refused Unit 16's attempts, or she already fit in as an unruly youth. "Not your usually types, though, mate."

Boyd was surprised to see Bex anywhere near him. They hadn't come up with any sort of cover story for a connection between them. The last thing he had expected was for her to approach him in the open.

He rolled his eyes and absently pushed up his glasses. "Like you'd even know. You always spent more time telling me what I liked rather than asking."

Arching an eyebrow, Bex's lips twisted up to the side although it wasn't obvious whether it was a look of amusement or disgust. It was hard to tell when the rest of her expression barely moved. "Way to not turn down the whining wanker attitude even in front of others."

"And kudos to you for not wavering in being a bitch," Boyd replied mildly. He leaned back and crossed his arms. "What're you doing here anyway, Akiko? I'd think the topic may be a bit too intellectual for someone of your caliber."

Unfazed, Bex's black eyes swept from him with disinterest to focus on his companions even as she replied blandly, "Aw, I'm hurt, Tyler. And here I came to see if you'd fancy a cuppa."

Boyd snorted, making it clear he didn't believe her. Azalia leaned forward, raising her eyebrows and running an appraising eye along the length of Bex.

"So," she said, looking over at Boyd. "Who's this?"
"Oh. Akiko and I broke up a few months back." He glanced at Bex pointedly, flicking his gaze along her as if he was displeased by her presence. "I didn’t expect to see her again any time soon."

Bex already appeared to be losing interest fast now that other people were apparently going to be talking to her. She rolled her shoulders, the muscles in her arms flexing as she focused on Boyd once again. "All the intellect in here is makin’ me a bit antsy. You lot have fun with it. I'd rather take another turn around the campus and head out. But."

Gaze swinging back to the three girls opposite her, Bex inclined her head. "Have fun with this one while you can. Be prepared to share your tampons, though."

Boyd rolled his eyes again. "And my dad wonders why we're not together anymore," he said sarcastically. He looked away from Bex and in the process caught his gaze on a large clock on the wall. He grimaced and pointedly turned his back on Bex, making it clear he planned to ignore her presence completely.

"I hate to admit it but I have to go soon too," he told Azalia. "I promised someone I'd meet up with them later tonight."

Azalia frowned, glanced briefly at Bex who was already turning to walk away, and nodded. Jaime looked outright disappointed. "Have you decided yet on whether you'll be attending in the Fall?"

"No," he said with a frown. He shifted back in his seat and looked around the auditorium broodingly. "I like the facilities but some things came up. I may not have the money."

"There's good financial aid," Anna put in, leaning around Azalia. "That's how I'm here."
"I don't know if I'll qualify for enough," Boyd replied doubtfully. "We'll see."

Azalia nodded again and leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed. "Well, we'll see you around if you do, then."

"Where will you go if not here?" Jaime asked, pulling a few strands of hair behind her ear.

He focused on her, watching the way her cheeks flushed slightly at his attention. "I'm not sure yet. This was my first choice but there are some cheaper places around." He shrugged and looked away with a faint frown. "There are community colleges, too."

"Eh, but they suck," Azalia said with a wave of her hand and Anna snorted her agreement.

"Yeah, well." Boyd fell silent and then abruptly pushed himself to a stand. He slid his hands in his pockets and looked around a bit awkwardly. "Anyway. Good to see you, Zale." He shifted his gaze from her to Anna before settling on Jaime. "Thanks for giving me a seat and keeping me in the loop."

Jaime smiled and blushed a little deeper before dropping her eyes. "My pleasure."

Azalia smirked at Jaime and then cast a knowing look toward Boyd, as if to ask if he was interested. He grimaced faintly and glanced in the direction Bex had left. When his and Azalia's eyes met again, she nodded subtly and then suddenly smacked Jaime on the thigh.

"Okay girls. Well, if our token dude is taking off then we have some things to do too, don't we? I want to make a stop by the cafeteria first, though. I'm starving. Thought my stomach would growl loud enough to cut right through his speech."
Anna snorted and stood, pulling down her shirt from where it had bunched up while sitting. "Me too. Hey Jame, you wanted to try that new cake again, right? It should be out by now."

"Oh yeah," Jaime said, brightening. "I still want to know what they use in the frosting..."

Seeing that they were suitably preoccupied, Boyd raised a hand as farewell and said an idle, "Later," before turning and walking away.

He glanced at the stage and saw that Veira had disappeared somewhere during Boyd's conversation with Bex. He checked around for the speaker inside and outside of the auditorium but didn't see him or any of the Janus affiliates. With nothing else to do, he decided to head to the hotel where the Agency had booked him a room.

The lobby was full of people, which was unsurprising considering the large draw of the keynote speaker and the number of tourists he'd seen crowding nearly every street he'd passed.

The Agency had only been able to book them one room, given how last minute their trip was, and he'd nearly forgotten the fact since he and Bex hadn't run into each other earlier in the day. As the elevator ascended, he thought about how he was going to be stuck in the room with Bex overnight.

When he got to the door he paused and listened for any sign of movement. He knocked first to let her know he was entering and then slid the key card through the reader. Opening the door, he looked around as he walked into the room.

Bex was in the process of dismantling one of her guns and cleaning it methodically. She barely glanced up although she didn't hesitate before saying, "Girlfriend. Really?"
Boyd smirked. "You liked that, did you?" He walked further into the room. "Maybe next time you'll give me more warning before you suddenly break protocol."

"Fuck protocol. This mission is bollocks." She gave him a withering glare before she started to reassemble her weapon, long fingers gliding over the parts without hesitation. "Any of them birds actual suspects or do you just like attention?"

Boyd walked over to the nightstand between the two twin beds and took off the glasses. He winced and closed his eyes, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He hoped he never had to get glasses for good; they were uncomfortable and irritating.

"One of them had a possible connection to UFC," he said as he dropped the glasses on the nightstand with a clatter. "But it doesn't seem like it's going to go anywhere. I'm crossing her off my list." He opened his eyes again and looked over at her. "Did you get anything?"

Bex held up the fully re-assembled weapon and looked down the sight at him, mouth pursed before she clattered it down to the table again. "The phone number of this great big dykey girl in the tech lab."

Boyd held back a smirk and sat on the edge of one of the beds. "Should I be leaving the room so you two can have some alone time tonight?"

"Nah. Not my type." She stood up all in one lean stretch and glanced at the window again. "These trips are a waste of goddamn time. I'd much rather be hunting."

Boyd was unsurprised by the comment; Bex had seemed from the beginning to prefer the missions where they tracked down targets for a kill or recovery rather than intel gathering like this sort.
"That's probably why I'm usually assigned these," he said with a shrug. He leaned over to start untying his shoes. "You could head back tonight if you want, rather than waiting around."

At that, she gave him a skeptical look as her black eyes skimmed him briefly. She tapped her fingers against the table as if considering the offer, and then jerked up one sharp shoulder. "That's bloody fine with me, then."

"Alright." Boyd toed off his shoes and sat up straight. He glanced at her as he reached back to pull the tie out of his hair. "If he sees you just tell Carhart I'll head back at the predetermined time. I can run down one last possible lead tomorrow before we give up on this case for good."

"Huh." Bex was already grabbing her pack and stuffing her meager belongings in it, apparently set to head out as soon as possible. "That's a right good idea, mate. You're not quite as stupid as you look."

Boyd snorted quietly and set the hairband on the nightstand next to his fake glasses. "Thanks for the compliment," he said dryly.

"Not a problem."

Without saying anything else, Bex zipped up her pack and threw it over her shoulder. She hardly even looked at him before she left the room.

Boyd watched her leave, feeling rather pleased with the way this had all turned out. Now he didn't have to worry about her getting antsy and somehow running across Blue Moon.

After she left he set the extra lock on the door and returned to the bed. He was now wishing he'd brought the secure tablet with him so he could have worked on his projects a little more. He thought about heading over to the Blue Moon but a glance at his watch told him that it was closed.
He sat back down on the edge of the bed, arms braced forward while he glanced around the room with a frown. He was just trying to decide what he should do when his phone suddenly rang. He pulled it out, half expecting it to be Bex telling him something for the mission.

A thrill of surprise moved through him when he saw it was Sin instead.
Chapter Seventeen

Boyd paused in front of Sin’s door, feeling a flutter of excitement in his stomach. It was the first time Sin had invited him to his apartment on his own, without extenuating circumstances like a near-hurricane overwhelming the town. His hand lifted and he knocked.

When a woman opened the door he nearly raised his eyebrows in surprise. He kept his expression casual even as his gaze flicked to the apartment door number, behind her, and back, to make sure he was in the right place.

He was.

Disappointment moved through him.

He reminded himself that Sin had mentioned Boyd could meet new people by hanging out. When Sin had called earlier he'd only invited him over and hadn't specified they'd be alone, even though Boyd had been hoping they would be.

"Hi." He realized after a second that he recognized her. "Roz, was it?"

Roz's full lips turned up in a smile. It was the tall woman from the cafe, except this time she was wearing faded jeans and an old sweatshirt that hung off one of her toned shoulders.

"I half expected you not to come," she said, grabbing his arm and tugging him inside. "I thought he was making this up."

Boyd let himself be pulled into the apartment. Absently pushing the door shut behind him, he glanced at her with his eyebrows drawn together. "Why wouldn't I have come?"
"I didn't believe that some randomly attractive city slicker wanted to veg out and watch Grayson with us," she said with a laugh in her low pitched voice. She moved deeper into the apartment. Her bare feet slapped across the floor, her hips moving slightly as she walked.

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding. He glanced around and saw that at least there weren't even more people there to watch the show. His gaze automatically sought out Sin, who was currently in the kitchen, even as he responded to Roz. "I was pleased with the invite, to tell the truth. I don't know many people who watch it, let alone own it."

"Well," she said reasonably, sprawling herself on the couch and throwing a smirk at Sin's back as he stood by the stove. "It's all dark and intense. Hence why Danny Boy is into it, right?"

Sin looked over to give her a flat look before letting his gaze linger on Boyd. His expression was mostly unreadable although his mouth pressed together briefly before he said, "Hi."

"Hi," Boyd said in return, wondering at that expression.

Why did Boyd get the feeling Sin may be slightly displeased when he was the one who had invited him over in the first place? Was it possible Roz was a last minute addition and Sin had wanted to be alone?

As much as Boyd wanted to believe Sin felt the same burning desire to be alone with him as he felt, he doubted that was little more than wishful thinking.

Roz flipped her long black hair over her shoulder, watching them from under bangs that she did not have the last time Boyd had seen her. Her eyes were focused on him curiously as her fingers idly twirled a few tendrils of black hair.
"I don't remember introducing you two," Sin said, flipping the stove top off. He'd apparently been preparing homemade french fries. He dumped a large portion in a bowl and crossed the room, giving it to Roz who dug in greedily.

"Yum. And you didn't. I think Tech did or something." She paused around a fry. "Hey maybe Tech would want to..."

"She wouldn't," Sin interrupted blandly. He looked over at Boyd. "Help yourself, by the way."

"Thanks."

When Boyd took a bite of a fry, he was taken back for a moment to when Sin used to make food for the two of them. He remembered the sight of Sin in the kitchen, hands taken up with the ingredients laid out before him—giving Boyd the opportunity to come up behind him and run familiar hands along his lover's body.

He remembered the catch of Sin's t-shirt against his fingers and the flicker of a smile across Sin's lips when he glanced over his shoulder. The certainty of knowing they would always have that moment no matter what else happened.

He missed that. He missed Sin.

Realizing that his eyes had lingered very briefly on Sin, he raised his eyebrows and quirked his lips. "These are good," he said, and partially to distract from his pause he added not entirely seriously: "You should start a restaurant."

"No." Sin opened the refrigerator. "I do—"

"He doesn't even like cooking," Roz piped up from the couch. She had a remote in her hand and was flipping through a menu on the screen.
Sin threw her a chilly look but then rolled his pale green eyes, softening the expression slightly. Roz didn’t seem fazed although the typical person would probably be thrown off guard. Even with a different life, Sin was still capable of the same cutting arsenal of glares.

"He's just good at it. Like everything else," she continued offhandedly, a hint of a leer in her tone although she didn't glance over. She appeared to be looking at the extras that had come with Grayson Season 2.

Boyd headed around to the front of the couch. He wondered what exactly Sin's relationship was with Roz or had been in the past, and whether Sin had disliked cooking before. He'd seemed somewhat ambivalent about it but had never definitively said either way.

It may have had to do with Sin saying in the past that he didn't know what he did and didn't like. Maybe as Danny he had a better idea.

"Why don't you like cooking?"

"Because people expect too much when you have a skill that can benefit them," was the dry reply.

Roz raised her hand lazily, putting her feet on the table that sat in front of them. "Me."

Sin sat next to her and she scooted over, looking at Boyd with large chocolate eyes. "Wanna be in the middle?"

"Sure," Boyd said, watching her briefly before sitting down between them.

The size of the couch made it so they were close enough to feel the rise of their body heat on either side of him. The faint smell of Sin was distracting. Boyd leaned back in the couch, stopping himself from turning his head to take in Sin's features.
“So neither of you have seen the second season?” he asked as a way to get his mind off the urge to touch Sin. He was entirely too aware of how he could brush his fingers along Sin’s thigh if he only moved his hand a few inches to the left.

Roz shook her head, leaning close to him with a wicked smile curving her wide mouth. "Nope. I’m glad we waited now, though."

Boyd glanced over at her. Her face seemed especially close with their arrangement; he could even see the lighter flecks in her eyes. He still wasn't entirely certain what to make of her but he remembered the cafe, when she'd been the only one who had seemed nice to Kayla.

A sly smile spread across his lips. "The pleasure's all mine, I'm sure."

Roz looked surprised for a moment, leaning back, but then shrugged and curled up closer to him. "How about we ditch the cook and spend some quality time alone?"

Sin gave a low scoffing laugh and shook his head.

Boyd chuckled. "I'm afraid that arrangement wouldn't be as intriguing to me as you'd think."

"Her either considering she's a huge dyke."

Roz glared at Sin over Boyd's head. "What do you mean—huge?"

"She just likes leading men on."

Boyd glanced at Roz, feeling a bit of tension he hadn't realized was in his shoulders dissipate at the information. So there really wasn't a more significant reason for her being there than watching the show with her friend.
"Is that so?" Boyd asked lightly, affecting a thoughtful air as he flicked his gaze along her. There was no question that she was a beautiful woman. "You'd better be careful. You could break a man's heart."

"That's the plan," she said with a wink. "Men are filthy dogs. Well. Straight ones anyway. I don't care what gay men do together."

"How noble," Sin added blandly, in a tone that was not unfamiliar.

Roz gave him a sideways glance and then leaned closer to Boyd conspiratorially. "Take this one here. Breaking that poor ginger's heart like that."

"Kayla?"

"Yeah." At the sound of her name, Roz's good humor dimmed a bit and she seemed to lose interest in whatever joking banter she'd been about to stir up. "Poor thing."

Sin tensed next to Boyd and his muscles gathered as though he were about to get up. Roz must have noticed the shift because she shook her head.

"She's just a really messed up girl. It ain't really Danny's fault. She's always been like that. He was the longest—"

"I don't know why you think a stranger has any interest in this pointless dramatic spiel."

This time, Roz actually looked hurt by the rebuke and she pouted. "Fine." She started to turn her attention to the TV, paused, and then winked at Boyd. Clearly she'd be telling him all of the gossip later.

Boyd didn't stop a quick smirk her way. She may turn out to be useful for gathering information.
They started the show soon afterward and for that time period, Boyd almost forgot about how many things had changed in his life. The show started out strong, continuing the cliffhanger that had ended the first season and throwing in a multitude of new plot points immediately. Roz had her own commentary to the show, talking out her theories and making observations. Sin was quiet, the way he always used to be; an intense shadow at his side.

As the episodes progressed, Boyd settled further into the couch. Even with Roz’s voice shifting in and out of his attention, even when he responded to some of her comments, Boyd fell into a feeling of familiarity.

Sin’s presence was comfortable next to him. It felt right. It felt like they were back where they’d always been, only this time watching the show with someone new they’d met at the Agency.

At one point, a plot point was revealed that he and Sin had repeatedly disagreed on in the first season. It was an intense scene and when Boyd saw that he’d been right all along, for a moment he forgot where he was.

He hit Sin on the upper arm and started to say triumphantly, "I told you—"

Sin looked at him with raised eyebrows. "What?"

The blank look was like ice crashing through his veins. Boyd dropped his hand and for a second could only stare back, feeling a crushing weight.

Even though they had debated that plot so many times, Sin didn't remember. He had no reason to. He didn't remember any of it.

Why did such a small, stupid thing feel like such a loss?

"Nothing," Boyd said, recovering quickly. He turned his attention back to the TV, his eyebrows lowering slightly. "Sorry."
Roz gave him a strange look but seemed to shrug it off. Sin's gaze lingered.

The show continued but Boyd couldn't get into it as much as before. He was more aware of Roz's comments and of the changes in Sin. Now Sin's profile was distracting him from the plot. Now he couldn't help watching to see the fluctuations in his expression, and now he wondered who had watched that first season with Sin. Whether Sin had thought the same thing about the possibility of that plot point or whether he hadn't noticed it without Boyd at his side giving his theory at the end of the episode.

Now, all he could think about was how wrong all of this was; how they weren't at the Agency and they weren't at his house. How this series may not have been as impactful to Sin anymore; not the way it had been to them in the context of agents knowing exactly how many conspiracy theories Grayson played on that weren't that far from reality.

Amidst those thoughts, he was even more aware of Sin's presence next to him. The heat of his body; the press of his shoulder against Boyd's when he shifted his weight. The way his fingers absently pulled at a loose string on his shirt hem—the sort of absent movement he used to do before. The way those full lips occasionally parted; the dusting of his green eyes by his long black eyelashes. The way the flickering light from the screen played shadows across his features.

He was so beautiful.

Boyd's chest ached. He crossed his arms and settled more fully back into the couch, his legs unfurling in front of him. He turned slightly narrowed eyes onto the screen, trying to focus on the show again, but all he could think about for twenty minutes afterward was the way Sin flicked a sidelong glance at him at the movement. The quiet burn of that brief gaze on the side of his
face and the way Boyd wanted so intensely to turn and kiss him that he dug his fingers into his palms and nearly glared at the screen.

*Stop looking at me,* he wanted to tell Sin. *You're only making it worse.*

They’d been too distracted to watch an episode of Grayson once before, he remembered abruptly. It hadn’t had anything to do with the series and instead had been a result of them trying to watch an episode after one of them had gotten back from a several-day solo mission.

Back then, Boyd had found it as difficult as now to focus on the screen, but unlike now he had been able to run his hand down Sin's thigh and lean against his side. That time, Boyd had teased Sin playfully, emboldened by the obvious way Sin couldn't concentrate on the show either, until Sin had suddenly yanked Boyd onto his lap. They’d started kissing before either of them had planned it and, somewhere along the line, one of them must have absently turned off the show because an hour later when they were able to concentrate again the screen was blank.

The theme song at the end played and Boyd refocused on the screen in the present, mildly irritated with himself for his distraction. This reminiscing wasn't helping anything and he really was curious about the series, so the fact that he'd basically missed a full half of the latest episode was frustrating. His jaw flexed briefly and he made a concentrated effort to pay attention only to what was happening on screen.

They watched another few episodes, with it getting steadily later at night and the plot growing thicker. A particularly suspenseful scene ended one of the episodes, and when Sin made a move to continue to the next episode Boyd felt Roz shift at his side.

"I have to jam, guys," she said reluctantly, full mouth drawing down in a frown.
Sin glanced over from where he was sprawled, his long legs extended. "Work?"

Roz nodded, standing and stretching until her back cracked. "Early, when the beach opens."

Sin stood and she gave him a brief hug, kissing him on the cheek.

"Don't keep watching without me," she warned, pointing at Sin and then Boyd in turn. "I'll know if you try to fake it next time."

"I'll try to tear myself away."

Roz rolled her eyes at Sin. "Smart ass." She looked over at Boyd and smiled. "See you later."

"Bye," Boyd said, raising a hand in farewell.

She smiled again, gave Sin a lingering look, and let herself out.

There was a brief pause and Sin's gaze switched to focus on Boyd directly. There was a subtle shift, one that would have been unrecognizable to anyone else, but Boyd knew Sin. He knew his mannerisms—and that gaze went from unreadable to hawk-like and intense instantly.

"Hanging around?" Sin asked.

"If it's alright." Even with the change in Sin's demeanor, Boyd was reluctant to leave when he had an excuse to be alone with Sin. He glanced at the door before refocusing on those intense green eyes. "I'd just be going back to sit around my hotel room at the moment."

He got a nod in response but Sin didn't break eye contact and leaned against the counter in the kitchen, observing Boyd calmly. It wasn't an intrusive stare but he lacked the self conscious awareness that most people had about keeping extended eye contact.
"Why do you come here if you don't know anyone," he said after a brief pause. "If all you do is sit around, what's the point?"

Boyd studied Sin for a moment. All the answers that immediately came to mind couldn't be spoken aloud. He couldn't even admit that this was reason enough; being here, in his presence. Knowing he was alive.

"It's a nice change of pace," he said with a slight shrug and stood so he could see Sin better without craning his neck. Even so, the vibe he was getting from Sin kept him in the living room area, half sitting on the back of the couch rather than moving closer. "Although I'll admit, the first time I came down here I didn't expect to become so intrigued."

"Why don't you bring friends with you so you aren't sitting around by yourself in the diner or hotel?" Sin asked, still giving Boyd the same steady stare.

"It's not really possible with my friends. It would take far too long and cause too many issues to schedule times when we could visit together. I'm appreciating the spontaneity of visiting when I want and doing what I want." Boyd shrugged again, his own gaze steady on Sin; discreetly gauging his reactions. "And it's giving me a chance to meet new people."

"Makes sense." Sin pushed himself away from the counter and let his green eyes flick over Boyd briefly before he opened the fridge.

Boyd was about to open his mouth to ask Sin a question when he felt his Agency phone vibrate in his back pocket. He pulled it out and recognized the caller ID as Carhart.

Shit.

"Sorry, I have to take this," he said, walking into the bathroom as quickly but casually as he could. He swung the door shut to give himself some
privacy and walked as far into the bathroom as he could to put more space between him and the door.

"Terrence Grey speaking," he said quietly into the phone to avoid being overheard.

"Can you wrap this up tonight?" the general asked bluntly. "I need you here if you've gathered all the intel you can."

Boyd paused and shifted a little further away from the closed door. "I can head out early tomorrow morning if you'd like."

"Good. Bex and you have just been reassigned and I need you at a debriefing first thing." Carhart hung up without waiting for a reply.

Boyd sighed and flipped his phone closed. He supposed it had been too much to hope he could spend a whole day here around Sin. Disappointed, he returned the phone to his pocket and then walked out of the bathroom.

"Sorry about that." He glanced around the living room and then turned his gaze onto Sin. "Do you need any help cleaning up?"

Sin was still leaning against the counter, arms crossed over his chest as he stared at Boyd. There was another of those subtle differences in him, the muscles in his arms standing out taut in his shirt where they'd been relaxed before. His eyelids were slightly narrowed, pale green visible through his long lashes.

"No. But I have a question."

Boyd kept walking until he paused on the edge of the kitchen. He took in Sin's body language, thinking that nothing was boding well at the moment, and met his eyes.

"Of course. What is it?"
Sin closed the short distance between them in a blink, standing right in Boyd's personal space. This close, Sin seemed to tower over him.

"How many names do you go by?" he asked flatly.

Boyd's heart skipped a beat and he resisted the urge to step back. "What?" he asked rather than answering the question immediately. "Why would you ask that?"

Holding up a hand, Sin raised a finger for each as he spoke, "Boyd. Tyler. Terrence."

Boyd felt his stomach drop. Damn the Reapers for Sin's abnormally sensitive hearing. It was bad enough if Sin overheard any of Boyd's conversation with Carhart but if he had seen Boyd as Tyler, glasses and new mannerisms and all...

There was no way to explain that easily.

The way Sin loomed over him was the same intimidating way it had once been, all those years ago when they'd first met and Sin's intrusive stare had nearly been a glare. This time Boyd couldn't help taking a step back to put more distance between them to stall.

He raised a hand palm up toward Sin. "Look—My name is Boyd, like I told you. The rest—" He stopped, grimaced faintly, and dropped his hand to his side. "The rest I can explain."

Sin's mouth twisted into a scowl and he was at Boyd a heartbeat. He wrenched Boyd off his feet by his shirt and spun them both, slamming Boyd violently against the refrigerator. The breath was nearly knocked out of Boyd, who barely stopped himself from cracking his head against the door.

"Who the fuck are you?" Sin demanded dangerously.
Surprised by the sudden change, Boyd's eyes widened and he gripped Sin's wrists. Deja vu hit him as powerfully as Sin's hold and for a second it was like staring into his old partner's eyes. The tension; the fire that made the green burn into him.

This was the way it had been when they first met—the way it had been when Sin had seemed one step away from killing him.

"Jesus, Danny," Boyd hissed, forcing his mind back to the moment. "My name's Boyd Beaulieu, I told you. I—" He paused, searching Sin's dark glare, and knew what he had to say. "I work for Murphy Corps."

Sin's eyes narrowed further and one hand snapped up so fast that Boyd didn't even slip closer to the floor before a strong hand gripped his neck. Long fingers tightening, Sin gave a light squeeze. "Tell the truth or I'll end you right now, kid."

Boyd's breath caught beneath the pressure on his throat. His eyes locked on Sin's fiery green glare. That hand around his throat, this quick temper and paranoia...

"I'm telling you the truth! If you don't believe me—"

Boyd tensed, considering breaking free of Sin's hold but that show of aggression may only work against him in the end. It was possible he would lose any chance of gaining Sin's confidence if he turned this into a fight.

"If you don't believe me," he continued more reasonably, his muscles subtly relaxing, "reach into my back left pocket. You'll find my wallet with my ID."

There was a pause as Sin eyed him distrustfully but he complied, leaning in until they were nearly flush against each other. He slid his arm around Boyd and into the close fit of his pants.
There was a moment when Sin's eyebrows puckered, a strange expression flicking across his face that had nothing to do with anger or skepticism. He looked directly into Boyd's eyes as they drew closer together. At the press of Sin's body, Boyd's breath sucked in and his fingers tightened on Sin's wrist. He was overwhelmed by Sin's scent; by the familiarity of the hard lines of Sin's body pressed against his. He wondered if Sin could feel his heart thundering wildly in his chest. If he noticed the way Boyd's breath subtly quickened.

Gaze burning into Sin's, for that short moment Boyd couldn't have moved even if the world ended around them.

Sin extracted the wallet and quickly put distance between their bodies although he didn't loosen his hold on Boyd's throat. He flipped the wallet open with one hand. Boyd's Pennsylvania ID was side by side with his Murphy Corps ID, the names matching and descriptive information identical, although the pictures were years apart.

Sin looked at it for a moment, glanced back up at Boyd, and then eased up his grip a bit. Still, it was several long seconds before he released Boyd entirely.

"What do you want with me if you're Murphy Corps?"

Boyd caught himself before he stumbled and ran a hand along his throat. He looked up at Sin through the fall of his blond hair for a second before he straightened and met Sin's gaze with all the honesty he could give him in the circumstances.

"This—" His eyes narrowed and he shook his head with a gesture at Sin's living room. "My being here isn't about Murphy Corps. I don't even want you involved in that. It's..."
He paused again, wondering briefly whether he should stop there but knowing that wouldn’t be reason enough to believe. He hesitated, not wanting to push Sin away by lies or the truth, and knowing each was equally likely to do so. But if he had to choose, he wanted to tell Sin as much truth as he could to balance out all the lies he knew he couldn’t avoid.

"I like you, that’s all. If I alienated or bothered you somehow because of that, I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention."

The words pulled a frown at Sin’s mouth and he dropped the wallet on the counter before backing up entirely. His lips parted as his eyebrows drew down, but then he hesitated and rubbed a hand against the back of his neck. His gaze never left Boyd’s face as if he was waiting for something to show through—some crack in the lie, some indication that he was being dishonest.

After awhile Sin shrugged stiffly.

"I saw you on campus. You told me you weren’t a student, but you were acting like one. You were with friends, dressed differently, going by a different name. And now you’re making covert calls about secret assignments and going by another name."

There was a short, tense pause. "And I have reason to not be the most trusting at the moment."

Boyd sighed, realizing Sin had heard Carhart’s side of the conversation too. He wondered if his time with Sin was going to end up being as brief as all this. The thought was depressing.

Picking up his wallet, he looked down at his own face peering out from the Murphy Corps ID. It was still the original picture from all those years ago—back when his stare had been as dead as he’d felt inside. Back before he’d cared about anything.
Back before Sin.

His thumb ran across the blank stare of his own, younger face before he suddenly flipped the wallet closed and returned it to his back pocket.

"There are a lot of things related to my job that I can't talk about in detail," he said carefully. He looked up at Sin. "Regardless of whether I want to. It's to protect everyone involved." He started to cross his arms but didn't leave it that way for long before he released them and, feeling restless, curled his hands around the edge of the counter top behind him.

"You did see me there earlier. I was," he paused, fingers flexing. "On an assignment and no one was supposed to recognize me. It's important that you don't tell anyone about that—it could blow my cover."

His gaze didn't waver from Sin's. "Part of that is my fault. If I'd followed protocol when I met you, I probably should have lied to you about my name but I didn't. I told you the truth. I know you have little reason to believe me but I promise you, the last thing I would ever want to do is endanger or harm you."

Sin's skeptical expression didn't change and the tension didn't ease out of his broad shoulders. "You don't even know me. Why would you break protocol?"

Boyd watched Sin for a moment and then sighed. He half turned away from Sin and ran a hand back through his hair, feeling agitated as his gaze darted around the kitchen. He knew his answer may make or break this brittle relationship they had.

After a pause he crossed his arms and faced Sin seriously. "Look... I'm going to tell you something I shouldn't so you know why I'm here. You cannot, and I mean cannot, tell anyone else this or we're both in a phenomenal amount of trouble. But—you were the one who called 911 a few months back
on suspicious activity, weren't you? When you saw those people follow Leenah—the woman whose body you later had to identify."

"Why are you asking if you already know the answer," was the flat reply. Sin's expression hadn't changed, and his flinty eyes grew more suspicious.

"I came to Blue Moon to look at the site of her disappearance," Boyd explained, unperturbed. He took a step closer to Sin and dropped one hand against the counter. "I was here to investigate what happened to her."

Dark eyebrows drawing together, Sin rocked back on his heels and pursed his lips together. Fingers flexing, he pushed away from the counter and surveyed Boyd before turning his gaze to the window. "Why is Murphy Corps interested in that?"

"I can't tell you that. All I can say is one of my employers watches for that sort of activity."

"Uh huh."

Shaking his head, Sin walked out of the kitchen and into the main area by the door. "Whatever the case is, I don't really buy everything you're selling. There's something weird going on and I don't trust you worth a sweet goddamn at this point. It'd be better if you just take off for now."

Boyd wasn't surprised by the response. He felt even better for his decision to not try to tell Sin about his own true past. Even aside from the fact that he still thought it would only damage Sin's chance for happiness at the moment, it was even more obvious to him that if Sin had such a hard time believing Boyd when he was telling almost entirely the truth about himself, there was no way he would have listened to Boyd about anything else. He probably would have called the cops on him by now and demanded they never see each other again.
Even so, as he nodded and walked to the door he felt an icy lump in his stomach. Was this the last he would ever be able to interact freely with Sin? He could never leave him alone but would he have to hide his presence from Sin too in the future?

At the thought he paused with his hand on the doorknob. He turned and met Sin's eyes, wanting so desperately for him to be safe and happy that he couldn't stop himself from speaking again.

"I understand your skepticism, Danny, but please listen to me on this much: the people you saw are very bad." He watched Sin gravely, wanting him to believe at least this. Even if Sin had trusted him, there would be times Boyd couldn't be there to protect him. "If you ever think they're after you, get the hell out of there and run somewhere safe. What they did to Leenah they will do to you without hesitation—or worse. Don't trust anything they tell you."

"None of these warnings are any good to me without any fucking information to back it up, Boyd. And I can take care of myself." Exhaling slowly, Sin looked away as if trying to hide how stormy his expression was becoming before he gestured at the door.

Boyd hesitated but knew there was nothing he felt safe saying that would make this any better. If anyone knew he'd said even as much as he had, they were both in danger. He'd never felt such a gaping hole between their positions as he did at that moment.

His gaze dropped and he nodded, opening the door and walking into the hallway. He turned around to get one last glimpse of Sin.

"Goodnight, Danny," he said quietly before the door was shut in his face.
Chapter Eighteen

Nathan Lofstedt was surprisingly light on his feet, given his size. And surprisingly quick to start a chase, Boyd thought as their feet pounded down the alleys, leaving echoes in their wake. He kept the target in sight and both his gun and tranquilizer at easy access. He was in no particular hurry to pull out either when they were still in a semi populated area of Jamesport.

Once a lesser known suburb of Lexington, Jamesport had been devastated by the wars but in the past few years had started to rise in Lexington's shadow once again.

Boyd had been mildly intrigued by the city, particularly since this was one of the first missions in its city limits. Although the rebels seemed to prefer Carson as a hotbed of activity, Boyd figured that defectors of those rebel groups likely had to choose new ground to haunt.

When Nathan made a flying leap to catch the end of a fire escape and shimmied his way up to the roof, Boyd felt silent gratitude for the change in scenery. The shuffling and clanging of their feet and hands on the rusted metal was muffled by the distant squeal of tires and someone slamming on a car's horn.

Boyd could hear the harsh panting of Nathan's breath; the sound of his shoes hitting the roof and his footsteps immediately pounding away. Only seconds behind him, Boyd swung his legs over the edge. The soles of his boots scraped against pebbles dotting the hard rooftop as he sought for purchase and took off again.

This area of Jamesport was filled with apartment buildings crowded against each other with skinny alleys or no space in between. That was the only saving grace as Nathan led Boyd on a fast chase across the rooftop and jumped off. Boyd didn't even pause in his pursuit.
The wind caught his clothes and hair, yanking at them in the short free fall with nothing but an alley floor ten stories beneath him. His feet hit the surface hard a foot into the next building’s rooftop. He rolled to disperse the impact and was back up immediately, sprinting after Nathan who looked over his shoulder with eyes widening in alarm. Boyd’s expression hadn’t shifted from impassivity once and that only seemed to unnerve Nathan further.

Nathan jumped off the next roof, aiming for a fire escape. He nearly lost his hand hold and Boyd slowed his pace enough to let Nathan catch himself and scramble up. It wouldn’t do to have the target turn into a pile of meat on the sidewalk—he was supposed to bring him in alive.

When Nathan made it back up onto the roof and continued running, Boyd followed. He couldn’t get a good aim on Nathan to tranquilize him but judging by the stumbling steps and slowing pace, Nathan was wearing down. Soon they would be in a section of Jamesport where Boyd could afford to pursue Nathan more aggressively.

He kept half his attention on their surroundings, noting whether civilians were in the area. They were nearing the end of the civilized section when Boyd noticed movement below.

A teenager was walking down the street and stopped beneath a fraying awning to peer into the window of a shop that was closed for the night. Landscaping forced passersby onto one possible walkway with only a short area in front for window shopping.

Boyd dismissed her presence as they landed on a rooftop with an immense garden. He kept running, following when Nathan ducked around a corner of a roof access point. As Boyd rounded the corner, he saw the barrage of heavy gardening equipment Nathan had just pushed over. The obstacle would have been awkward enough to avoid but it was the aftermath
of the rain barrel tipping and rolling that caused Boyd's attention to snap to the side.

The barrel slammed into a wooden shelving unit on the edge of the roof. Large rocks, glass jars, and other pieces presumably used for gardening or decoration all tilted with the impact.

The unit groaned and toppled over the edge, right over the storefront.

A massive clattering filled the air followed by a shrill scream. Boyd ran to the edge of the roof and saw the fabric of the awning about to rip on one frayed edge. The teenager was trapped beneath, with half the items blocking her in and the other half about to crush her.

Snapping out his gun, Boyd shot the awning's fabric on the opposite side from the girl. Bracing himself with one hand and holstering his gun with the other, he leaped over the edge of the roof. The fabric split and the heavy load started to roll in that direction. The wind crashed against his body as he snapped his hands out, his fingers catching on a tree branch that nearly ripped out of his grip before he redirected his weight into an angled jump.

The awning ripped open on one end as his feet hit the ground. Grabbing the teenager roughly around the waist he yanked her through a less dense section of the bushes. They fell on the other side of the landscaping just as the entire awning collapsed and the space in front of the window was decimated.

There was a resounding crash that was more than merely sound; he could feel the impact through his ribs. The ringing silence that descended was stark in comparison.

The teenager was trembling in Boyd's arms; her eyes dilated and darting. Her breath was quick and unfinished, as if she were hyperventilating.
Boyd squeezed her upper arms and shifted until he could look her straight in the eye.

"Hey." At first she didn't react but when he repeated the word with a light shake, her eyes suddenly snapped over to meet his. "You're okay. It was just an accident. Go home and forget about this. Understand?"

Her hands curled around his arms and tears started to gather at her eyes but she nodded. It seemed she was still too shocked to question anything.

"Good," he replied, then dropped his hands from her. She held onto him for a moment longer but he disentangled himself and pushed her lightly on the shoulder. "Go."

She scrambled to her feet and, as if the adrenaline was just hitting her and fusing with vestiges of fear, she suddenly took off running. He only watched long enough to make sure she didn't stop before his expression turned remote as he surveyed the rooftop.

He didn't see or hear Nathan anywhere.

A short sigh escaped him. It had been too much to expect this mission to be completely free of annoyance, he supposed.

He glanced around the street as he considered the route Nathan had already taken and where he was likely to be headed. He would be arrogant now, thinking he'd stopped Boyd. Thinking his hunter had lost his trail.

Too bad for Nathan he didn't know his pursuer.

Boyd replaced the magazine on his gun with a full one and slid the gun back in its holster. After he jerked his jacket over the gun again he started walking at a fast but steady pace. His sharp eyes swept his surroundings.
while he cut through alleys and passed across streets both empty and crowded.

Although it was possible Nathan would double back once he'd lost his tail, Boyd doubted it. In the direction he'd been heading, there were a few obvious choices. Most people would assume Nathan would take a bus or subway out of the city because it would be quicker. But it would also be more noticeable.

Most likely, Nathan had intended to fake Boyd out at the terminals anyway—go into the stations and leap onto a busy subway train only to run through and out another side. Nathan had most likely expected Boyd to search the crowded subway trains and terminals for someone who wasn't there anymore.

But Boyd had done his research before he went into this and he knew that beyond the bustling terminal for modern transportation was a relic of old. Past a few blocks of an industrial wasteland were cargo trains that were still in use.

In this day and age, who would think a fleeing suspect would take a rumbling, uncomfortable train; sneaking on in the back where they had to stay hidden and they had no control over where they went? The intel on Nathan implied he was creative enough to think of this solution but arrogant enough to believe no one else would.

Boyd's theory was proven correct twenty minutes later when, hidden in the shadows, he watched Nathan stride confidently across the railroad yard.

There was a self-satisfied smirk on Nathan's face and he hardly bothered looking over his shoulder. Apparently his fear of his pursuer hadn't lasted too long when he'd no longer seen that stone face over his shoulder.
He crossed one set of tracks and headed for a cargo train that was aimed in a westerly direction.

Nathan's good humor froze with the press of Boyd's gun against his head.

"Going somewhere?" Boyd asked quietly from the shadows.

There was the shortest pause before Nathan abruptly jerked and spun, hitting Boyd's gun hand. Nathan likely planned to fight but Boyd was faster. He let his gun be pushed out of the way and used Nathan's own momentum against him as he stabbed Nathan with a tranquilizer dart held in his other hand. Nathan jerked and looked down in shock.

"Wha—No..." His tone sounded almost questioning, as if in his surprise he wondered how this could happen.

Nathan stepped back and looked up, possibly ready to fight. But the tranquilizer in the dart was enough to knock out even a large man like Nathan. He wavered and Boyd stepped up to his side.

"Sorry," he said without inflection as Nathan's legs suddenly collapsed and Boyd caught him. "But you're coming with me."

Nathan made a noise deep in his throat—a groan, a protest, Boyd didn't know. In moments, his entire weight buckled onto Boyd, who lowered him to the ground. He stood, surveyed the surroundings to ensure no one was around, then spoke into his comm unit.

"Target is secure. Request transport, old train yard."

There was a beat of silence and then a voice murmured in his ear, "ETA 15."

"Understood."
Boyd dropped his hand from the comm unit and sat next to Nathan to wait. He spent the time in stasis, listening to one of the trains take off with a rumbling of sound that echoed in the air and vibrated through his chest.

All he could see when he stared into the darkness was Sin's green eyes; flashing at him the way they used to. He couldn't help wondering what Sin was doing... if he was okay, if he was angry still. If he had told Delsin to kick Boyd out the next time he showed up at the diner. If he was watching out for himself when Boyd wasn't around. If he would still call Boyd when they watched more Grayson or if that little bit of nostalgia was lost now, too, and maybe for good.

He sighed, thumping his head back against the metal post he leaned against and turned his stare up to the sky. He couldn't see anything but a ghostly grey-black.

Did Sin look at the clouds sometimes? Did he ever wonder who else may be watching that same sky from elsewhere in the world?

Why would he, when he had no idea there was someone out there who had loved and missed him so deeply when he was gone?

Stop it, he admonished himself with a faint grimace.

True to their word, the vehicle showed up almost exactly fifteen minutes later. It was a quick hand off and Boyd's part of the mission was over. He sent his comm unit and tranquilizer gun back with them; the comm because he wanted to head straight home and the tranquilizer in case they needed it for Nathan during transport.

After he watched the tail lights of the Agency van disappear into the night, he turned and started walking. Jamesport was close enough to Cedar Hills that he had taken public transport out while he charged his car back home.
Lately he’d been taking his own vehicle to these types of missions more often because it allowed him the opportunity to work on side missions in secrecy or leave for Annadale if he had the chance. But the battery had been running low after so many long trips to Annadale and back, combined with smaller trips for the side missions. Despite his excuse of allegedly visiting the cabin, he didn't want the Agency to know how often it happened or when. It was easier to continue the ruse of using his personal vehicle for a close mission like this so he could follow a routine to keep the Agency from questioning anything he did.

The bus stop was a good mile or two from the train yard and, having nowhere to be immediately, he didn't bother hurrying. The bus only came once an hour at this time of night anyway.

The night was shadowed and dark, with few lights as he strode through the abandoned section of the city. The sky seemed to grow only darker and he wondered briefly whether it was simply that cloudy or if instead the darkness was a portent of things to come.

For all that the thought was offhanded even in his own mind, it seemed the universe conspired to prove him right five minutes later.

He cut through an alley, passing through veils of shadow that appeared between bands of light thrown from apartment windows. He was just about to the end of the alley when he slowed, his body automatically shifting deeper into the shadows.

Someone was ahead of him.

He couldn't see it yet but he could feel it.

He moved closer to the alley wall, reaching for his gun. His fingers just brushed the weapon when a silhouetted figure detached itself from the wall.
and stepped into the main opening. The figure's hands were lifted to show that
he or she was unarmed.

Even so, Boyd drew his gun and aimed it at the stranger.

"Whoa," a man's voice rumbled from the shadows. "No need for
weaponry. I just want to talk."

"Who are you?" Boyd demanded, shifting his weight for better stability
in case of attack. He jerked his chin shortly. "Come into the light."

The man hesitated. "I will but first—"


There was another brief hesitation before the man moved. The heavy
fall of his footsteps echoed in the alleyway moments before a pool of light fell
across him. The sharp contrast of shadows left him only half exposed but
even so Boyd saw it—the tall, lanky build; the fall of short, messy brown hair
above deep brown eyes; the strong nose and jaw line...

A face right out of Boyd's photo album.

"You—" Boyd started to say, his grip on his gun faltering briefly. His
own eyes darted across that familiar face and body in surprise and confusion
before returning to the steady gaze.

Full lips quirked up on the edges and brown eyebrows lifted. "So you
do know me," the man mused. He nodded shortly, his fingers crinkling in an
aborted wave. "I'm your uncle, kid. Riley. I'd shake your hand to make it
official but—well." He looked pointedly at the gun still aimed at him, although it
had been lowered slightly and now threatened his abdomen rather than head.

Suspicion darkened Boyd's face. He shifted half a step back. "It can't
be. I understood all my family to be dead."
"Obviously not," came the droll reply.

Boyd only gave him a cold look.

Riley stared at Boyd a moment and then sighed. "Listen, kid. I know this is a lot to take in at once but I really need your help. I had nowhere else to turn."

So many disbelieving questions thundered through Boyd's mind. He opened his mouth; wanting to ask them, wanting to press for details about a family he'd never known. Wanting to know why an uncle he'd hardly known existed suddenly decided to come into his life now.

It was that last question especially that burned, echoed by the suspicion and paranoia of the agent side of him. It was that part of him that pointed out this could easily be a trap.

He shut his mouth, his grip tightening on the gun as his expression darkened. He glanced around quickly, searching for any other people ready to attack him. But the two of them were alone in the alley and, at the moment with the way Boyd felt so thrown off, it felt like they were alone in the world. Like Riley was a ghost straight out of Boyd's photo album, here to haunt him after all.

He dismissed the thought impatiently and returned a cool stare to Riley's eyes. "I don't see why I should help."

Riley's expression twisted. "This is serious, kid." He dropped his hands and started forward but stopped the second Boyd's gun realigned with his head. Expression tightening, Riley turned a heavy stare from the gun to Boyd's eyes. "I really need you to listen—just for a bit. Here's no good anyway, you're right to stop me. It isn't safe. But there must be some neutral ground we could go..."
Sweet Lynette’s flashed into Boyd’s mind immediately. He frowned at his uncle for a long moment. Although Riley was taller and probably weighed more, he held himself in untrained manner. Boyd thought he should be able to disable Riley even without the gun if necessary.

And if he was in Jezebel’s sight, she would watch over him to make sure he was safe.

"Fine." Boyd holstered his gun. "I choose the location. I'll give you fifteen minutes to convince me why I shouldn't leave you right then."

Relief flushed Riley’s face and relaxed his shoulders. He held up a hand gratefully. "Fifteen. Brilliant. That’s all I ask. Lead on, grasshopper."

"No. I will walk behind you and direct you."

Riley eyed Boyd but then shrugged. "Verbally lead the way, then."

Boyd jerked his chin. "Take a right down that street. We'll be walking a few blocks and will have to take a bus."

Their walk was silent for the first fifteen minutes, although Riley kept glancing over his shoulder at Boyd. "You look a lot like your ma," he finally commented after the third time it seemed he was about to speak. "But I can see Ceddy boy in you too."

Boyd's heart pounded. For a moment he was overrun with the questions from earlier. This was someone who had known his father, actually known him and not just heard of him. Someone who could tell him answers to all the questions he’d been too young to ask. Someone who knew about the family that was almost entirely a mystery to Boyd.

But although his lips parted briefly, although his jaw shifted, he stayed silent. He didn’t want to appear too eager or give away what he did and didn’t know. Not until he knew the reason for this sudden appearance of the dead.
"But mostly your ma," Riley added thoughtfully as they turned down another street. "None of us on the Beaulieu side looked like they came straight off a runway. Right ridiculous, you are. Did you ever model?"

"No," Boyd said, glancing down the street. He didn't see the lights of the bus lumbering down the road so they weren't too late. "Walk toward the bus stop across the street. The one down the block."

"Ever consider it?" Riley asked as he idly strolled according to Boyd's directions.

"No," Boyd said shortly.

"Hmm." Riley slid his hands into his pockets and looked over his shoulder, running an assessing eye along the entirety of Boyd's body. "A shame, really. You'd make a lot with the right contract."

"Why are you so obsessed with this modeling idea?" Boyd asked, an edge of irritation creeping into his voice.

"Why are you so irritated I'm giving you compliments?" Riley countered, frowning at his nephew.

"Because in my experience, people who seem especially enamored of my appearance also want something out of me I don't want to give," Boyd replied flatly. "So if it turns out you're a modeling agent and you've tracked me down to make you money or something equally ludicrous, I suggest you give up on the idea now and go home without wasting my time."

Riley stopped and turned around, his brown eyes seeming even darker in the poor lighting. He studied Boyd seriously, shifting a heavy gaze across his features to settle, finally, on his eyes. He stepped forward and started to reach out, fingers aiming for Boyd's pale blond hair, but Boyd jerked back and snapped a hand around Riley's wrist. He squeezed hard, feeling the pulse of
his uncle’s veins beneath his fingertips. Despite the fact Boyd's grip was powerful enough to slow circulation in Riley's hand and had to be uncomfortable, the older man only frowned slightly.

"You're, what now? Twenty-three?"

"Twenty-four. What's your point?"

Riley's frown deepened, drawing down his eyebrows. "You're too paranoid for your age."

Boyd nearly scoffed aloud at that but held it in. He released Riley's wrist with a shove. "Move."

"Bossy, too,” Riley muttered under his breath but turned and complied anyway.

When the bus arrived five minutes later they still hadn't spoken. They didn't say anything the entire ride and transfer to another bus. Riley glanced at Boyd a few times, even opened his mouth looking as though he planned to start some new unnecessary commentary, but Boyd's stare seemed to stop him every time.

He didn't know what it was, but being around his uncle put Boyd on edge. He leaned moodily back in his seat, watching his uncle stare out the window as the city flashed by. Boyd thought they were going to make it all the way to Sweet Lynette's without a word but Riley interrupted his thoughts one time with a contemplative, "The city never really changes, does it?", when they rode through a broken down area of Lexington.

Boyd didn't respond and that line of thought seemed to keep Riley occupied the rest of the way.

When they stepped down from the bus' bottom step, their footfalls echoed as harsh snapping sounds on the quiet street. The light from Sweet
Lynette's poured out onto the sidewalk; a warm, buttery glow welcoming them in. The door jingled when they stepped inside. Jezebel looked up from behind the counter, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of Boyd and then jumping over to Riley briefly before returning.

"Little Boyd," she greeted warmly, a smile spreading. "You surprised me. I don't usually see you, this late at night. Hankering for a midnight snack, are you?"

"Something like that," Boyd answered, glancing around the shop. He and Riley were the only ones in there. "Are we interrupting? You haven't posted your closing hours."

"Oh pish," Jezebel answered, waving her hand dismissively and scrunching her face. "Rules like that don't need to be made. Someone wants ice cream or a place to rest day or night, I have a space just for them."

She looked over Boyd's shoulder, watching Riley. She didn't say anything but sometimes she did that, staying silent so her visitor had the chance to determine how much they did or did not want to say. A small smile remained caught on her face. Boyd glanced over at his uncle and saw the man was looking around the shop.

"We'll order something later," Boyd said, returning his attention to Jezebel.

"Of course." Her smile widened when she met Boyd's eyes. "But how's about I bring you some tea in the meantime? On the house."

Rather than argue with the woman about taking money, Boyd only said "Thank you," and led his uncle over to the most secluded spot. White noise machines had been installed at each table since the last time Boyd had visited; presumably to mask a low conversation when there were no background conversations to do the same.
At the moment, he appreciated it.

When they sat down, Boyd activated the machine and then pulled out his phone. He set the timer for fifteen minutes and laid the phone on the table where Riley could see the countdown.

"I'm listening," Boyd said simply, meeting Riley's eyes.

Riley glanced down at the timer and grimaced. He shoved himself back in the booth, his long legs unfurling beneath the table. "You're unexpectedly serious, you know that? Seems you got a bit too much influence from that bitch ma of yours."

"So you'd like to reminisce and make observations even now?" Boyd lifted his eyebrows slightly. "Because if you think I'm joking, I'm not. I will leave once this timer is finished unless you give me reason to stay."

"Why are you being such an ass about this?"

"Why did you let me believe you were dead for twenty-four years?"

Riley sighed heavily and looked distractedly at the front counter where the ice cream was displayed. "Right. Well, if you're going to be so unyielding about all this I'm at least getting my sugar fix." He pushed himself up and glanced down with a gesture at the phone. "Pause that for a bit, would you? Just long enough for me to order. You haven't gotten your tea yet anyway, right? Let's start this off the right way."

Boyd considered telling him no but he really did wonder about Riley's sudden presence and, more than that, he wondered about his family. So he paused the timer for a few minutes while Riley chatted with Jezebel about the flavors, ordered and paid. He brought the tea and his ice cream back to the table on a tray and poured Boyd a cup before sliding the small mug over.
time, Riley took a bite of ice cream and looked pointedly down at the timer, obviously waiting for Boyd to start it before speaking.

"I imagine you'll have questions so I'll leave some time in your deadline for that." It was said mildly, just on the edge between insulting and accommodating. Riley took another bite of ice cream and leaned forward to rest his arms on the table. He held the spoon loosely in his hand. "But to answer your first question—do you know how your grandparents died?"

Boyd frowned, his hands wrapping around the warmth of the mug. "Not exactly."

Riley nodded curtly, as if he'd expected that answer. "You were born a few days before Thanksgiving. We all flew in to see you. My parents were near hysterics with joy at having their first grandkid. You'd think they'd won the lottery and a half."

He shook his head drolly to himself and took another, smaller bite of ice cream. He studied Boyd while he worked the ice cream around his mouth, presumably keeping the coldness from his teeth. During the pause, Boyd found himself remembering the photograph of his family in the hospital room that he'd found in the attic years ago. If his grandparents had been that happy at his birth, he couldn't help wondering what his life would have been like had they lived to spend any time with him.

"You were born on a Saturday so you were only a few days old when Wednesday came up. With the timing and all—Viv still in the hospital and your dad useless to the world except to show you off—Ma had decided to make Thanksgiving Day dinner for everyone, and Dad had it in his mind to buy a load of gifts for you." Riley's expression tightened slightly and he looked down at his slowly melting ice cream. "Sentimental git," he muttered, shaking his head to himself.
"Wednesday..." Boyd repeated, his heart clenching in his chest. "You mean—"

"Right," Riley said heavily, stirring the ice cream around a bit. "They were in Lexington when it was bombed."

"What..." Boyd said, his voice turning hushed but harsh. He remembered Crater Lake; right in the heart of Vickland where he'd spent so many hours feeling comforted by a hole left by a bomb. Or the video he had watched during training of the people near the bridge in the Theater District.

Riley frowned, eyeing Boyd. "You look like you saw a ghost."

Boyd looked down at the golden brown hue of his tea. Back then, the attacks had felt a little removed—not directly affecting him. Something he could find a way to distance himself from despite the impact the war had on his life.

But if his grandparents had been in Lexington during the bombs, if they'd perished in those attacks, then he might have watched exactly what had happened to them in their last moments. He might have sat on their graves.

He felt sick to his stomach.

"Hey." Riley reached across the table, grabbed Boyd by the arm, and shook it lightly. When Boyd looked up, he saw his uncle's frown had grown, hooding his eyes now too. "I can't say I know you but Ceddy boy used to do this thing where he took on the responsibility of everyone around him. Acted like he could protect everyone and was disappointed in himself when he fell short of the goal. Right now, if you were my brother, I'd be saying you think it's your fault they died." His grip tightened briefly, his tone firming. "But that can't be, right?"
"But if you'd all been home instead of here—"

Riley scoffed. "If we'd been home, something else could've happened. We could've died of carbon monoxide poisoning for god's sake." He released Boyd's arm and waved his hand dismissively as he sat back. "It's useless to worry about that sort of thing. It's not like you started the war or forced my ma to be obsessed with Thanksgiving or my dad to suddenly go shopping. You weren't even a week old, kid. You had no control of your bladder, let alone humanity."

Boyd let that sink in before he spoke again. "So—Why did I get the impression you were dead too?"

Riley's stare drilled into Boyd for a long, uncomfortable moment before he abruptly looked down at his ice cream. "That's because as far as anyone knew I was there with them," he said evenly. When he looked up again, his eyes were mild and his eyebrows were raised slightly. "I was supposed to be out getting you a presie too but I got pulled away on some urgent business. Next thing I knew, the place was lighting up with bombs everywhere, mass hysteria hit the streets, and I took off."

"You took off?" Boyd repeated incredulously. "You didn't even tell my father you were alive?"

With a faint, scrunched face Riley took a large bite of ice cream. He chewed contemplatively. "Listen, kid." He waved the spoon toward Boyd. "There were some things going on that required delicacy on my part. None of that is your business. The point is, a few years later I tracked my brother down to talk to him."

Eyeing Riley suspiciously, Boyd took a sip of the hot tea. The steam billowed up, warming his cheeks and lips. "I don't recall my parents ever talking about this."
"I didn't say I spoke to your parents, I said I tracked down Cedrick. He wasn't too happy with me, as you can imagine," Riley's added drolly, "so I doubt he took the time to tell a seven-year-old about his deadbeat uncle."

"And?"

"Well, I found him at work and like I said, he wasn't thrilled. He didn't want to talk to me at first so I kept coming back all week. Finally I followed him and caught him when he was staking out some place. He didn't know I was there at first and I caught part of a phone conversation—something about Vanguard Industries and information, I don't know." He waved a hand dismissively.

"Whatever it was," Riley continued, spearing the ice cream with his spoon, "when he hung up and saw me there he acted real strange at first before he cooled down. We spent all night catching up and he decided maybe things would be fine in time, but told me to stay away from you and your ma 'till he'd figured out how to break the news."

Riley looked up at Boyd from beneath his eyebrows, his lips curling to the side. "Can you believe it? 'Break the news'? Like it was worse I was alive than dead..." He shook his head to himself. "Anyway, I stayed away like he asked and a month later I went to see him again. Found out he'd died a week after I talked to him. And that's the story of how this country apparently has it out for my family," he concluded as he took a giant bite of ice cream.

Boyd rested his elbows on the table, holding the warm mug in his hands and watching his uncle. He wasn't certain what to think of this so far—he wanted to believe in this man, he wanted to feel excitement at the idea of finally having a family member who didn't seem to hate him on sight. Someone he could ask all the questions he'd always wanted to ask.

At the same time, he couldn't trust him.
Even in this story the time gap and strange reaction to the deaths in his family was causing suspicion to be an undercurrent to every word Riley spoke. Still, there was more time on the clock so he simply nodded. Let the man think he believed everything he was being told; it was easier to get to the truth when a person was being underestimated.

“So why are you showing up now?”

Riley grimaced. "You and your ma seemed to be getting along fine when I swung by your place next—"

Boyd wondered exactly Riley's definition of 'fine' could have been for that statement to be true but he didn't bother commenting.

”—so I stayed away like Ced wanted and never said anything to Viv. But I'm in some trouble now and I needed a place to run." He ate the last bit of ice cream and dropped the spoon with a clatter into his bowl. His dark brown eyes didn't move from Boyd's face. "Like I said. I didn't have anyone else to turn to, so I came to you."

Boyd stared at Riley for a long moment before he set his mug down; a careful slide of porcelain against wood. "So, let me get this straight. You let my parents believe you died with my grandparents, showed up in time for a cryptic conversation with my father only to have him die within the month, didn't bother contacting my mother or me either time to let us know you were alive, and are only coming to me now because you want me to, what? Give you money? A safe place to stay?” His eyebrows furrowed. "Are you kidding me?"

A frown dragged down Riley's lips. He leaned back in the booth, kicking his legs out in front of him and crossing his arms. "Look, kid. I'm not saying I made the best choices or anything in my life but we're still family. And even if I
didn’t do right by you in the past, it doesn't mean I don't mean to do right by you now."

"Do right by me,'" Boyd repeated and leaned forward. "What the hell do you take me as? We're only family by blood. I know nothing about you other than this strange story you've presented me. I don't even have a way to verify anything you're telling me is truth—"

"There you go, being paranoid again."

"Don't patronize me."

Riley eyed Boyd. "Look, I just meant you're only twenty-four so what could you possibly—"

"What could I possibly what?" Boyd interrupted sharply. "What could I know about having to make difficult decisions? What could I know about pain or loss or reasons to be paranoid?" He shook his head to himself and crossed his arms. "You know nothing about me so stop expecting me to roll over for you based on blood alone."

He stood and reached for his phone but Riley snapped a hand across the table, gripping Boyd's wrist. Boyd glared down at him but Riley met the hostility head-on, his own dark brown gaze even and his expression serious.

The tension between them mounted.

"I still have three minutes," Riley said at last.

Boyd's jaw shifted and for a moment he considered walking off anyway but he stopped himself.

"So you do," he agreed flatly and pulled his hand from his uncle's grasp. His shoulders and back were hard, angular lines when he sat again; his eyes frozen through blond eyelashes.
Riley watched Boyd evenly for a long moment before he sighed and slouched forward, his forearms crossed in front of him and braced against the table. In that movement, the offhanded air fell, making him appear a decade older and two times less certain of the outcome of this encounter.

"Listen, kid—" he started to say heavily.

"I have a name."

Riley grimaced faintly. "Listen, Boyd," he continued without missing a beat. "I deserved that response, all things considered. But as much as you don't know if you can trust me, I don't know if I can trust you. But I believe I can, based on the sort of person you seem to be. All those times I watched you—"

"You watched me?" Boyd demanded. But while Boyd was merely putting that information in context of the times he'd noticed eyes on him, Riley mistook his expression as displeasure. The older man raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

"Just on and off! I wasn't doing it to be a creep. I just... wondered how you were doing..." He scowled and trailed off as he looked away. There was a long moment of silence and then he suddenly pressed his hands to the table. "You know what? Forget it. This won't go anywhere good no matter what I say."

He pushed himself to a stand but Boyd snapped a hand out, catching his arm and causing the older man to stop and look over his shoulder, startled. Boyd watched him.

"You still have two minutes."

Riley's eyebrows lifted in surprise. His dark gaze darted to the phone, still counting down the time in large white font, before returning to Boyd's
eyes. The moment stretched, as unreadable as Boyd's expression, before the edges of Riley's lips lifted.

"So I do," he said as he sat down again.

Once he had settled himself in the booth, he eyed Boyd before starting to speak once more.

"I don't feel comfortable going into this too much but I have some... addictions, and they caused my family a lot of stress when I was younger. Ced was always the perfect son even though he was younger than me and it caused me a lot of grief. Even so, he was always dependable. Always the one who would be there for someone no matter what. I messed up a lot over the years and because of my lifestyle I never got into the sort of relationship that lasted more than a month or landed me with a kid. I suppose..."

He trailed off again, this time his gaze shifting away to peer out the darkened window across the store. "I suppose, lately, aside from the issues I've been having I've also been feeling a bit lonely. Blame it on a mid-life crisis, I don't know," he said with a faint grimace, "but..."

He looked at Boyd again, this time seeming to truly study him. His dark brown gaze traced Boyd's features; from his pale blond hair, past his eyes to his nose, his full lips, his jawline, and back up to meet his eyes. "But when I really needed help, I thought of Cedrick. I thought of you."

Boyd studied his uncle, feeling a pull deep inside at the mention of his father and the idea that maybe he could have become someone similar to him. Someone who would have made his father proud. He hesitated, the agent side of him still uncertain about the timing and story while a deeper part of him wanted to hold onto the only relatively friendly family he really had right now.
He was still uncertain of a response when his phone suddenly buzzed and vibrated. He jerked, his hand brushing up against the cooling mug when he looked over. The timer had reached zero.

The two of them watched the phone for a moment before Boyd reached over and shut off the notification. He didn't meet his uncle's eyes as he slid the phone back into his pocket and stood. He pulled his wallet out and tossed money on the table. From his peripheral vision he could see Riley watching him tensely and, when Boyd started to walk away, Riley slouched and dropped his head dejectedly into his hands. Boyd paused a booth away and looked over his shoulder.

"Well?" he asked.

Riley straightened and twisted, looking at Boyd with drawn down eyebrows. Boyd met his questioning gaze evenly and jerked his chin toward the door.

"Aren't you coming?"

Riley was up and out of the booth in a flash, the light returning to his face and a bounce to his step. He suddenly seemed much more youthful, possibly younger even than Boyd, when he loped over and grabbed Boyd in a side hug that became a shake.

"I knew I could count on you! Even if he wasn't around nearly long enough, I knew my brother couldn't produce anything but a good kid." He leaned forward and, seeming in the spur of the moment, kissed Boyd on the top of the head.

Boyd nearly rolled his eyes at that. "You can tone down the flattery," he said mildly even as he felt a rush of pleasure at Riley's praise and the offhanded affection.
Was this what it felt like to have a father? Was this how it would have been if Cedrick had lived? Maybe they could have met at Jezebel's on Sunday mornings, to eat ice cream and talk about nothing in particular. Maybe Cedrick would have also said kind things so easily to him rather than words calculated to tear him down and make him feel inferior, like Vivienne did.

Maybe... Maybe with Riley it would be possible to have an uncomplicated relationship, like the family he'd seen others have. Like he knew would never really happen with the people he'd substituted as father figures now: Carhart and, to an extent, Emilio.

He looked away but couldn't bring himself to pull away from Riley's friendly half-hug. The decision was taken from his hands when Riley dropped his arm half a block later and slid his hands into his pockets, looking around curiously.

Boyd eyed his uncle sidelong. He had to remember not to let those hopeful emotions get the better of him when there was still a lot he didn't know.

"We should probably tell my mother about you," he observed and was met with a startled glance and eyebrows that climbed up the older man's forehead.

"What? Oh, no." He pulled one hand from his pocket to wave it in a negating manner while he shook his head. "No, that wouldn't be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because your ma and me..." Riley looked to the sky with a frown and shoved his hands back into his pockets; balled fists that stretched the leather jacket out slightly in front of him. "Well." He looked down at Boyd mildly. "Let's just say we never got along."
"Why not?" Boyd repeated, more suspiciously.

Riley's eyebrows raised drolly this time, his lips stretching to the side. "Have you met your ma?" he drawled. "She's a bit hard to handle. And a lot harder to please."

Boyd watched him for a moment and then looked away. Sliding his hands into his own pockets, he tilted his head in a mild form of assent. "I can't say I disagree..."

"Right," Riley replied firmly. "She probably celebrated when she thought I was dead—she always acted like the world would be better off without my presence and I can't say I haven't felt the same in return."

Boyd didn't answer him so the two of them continued in silence for another block. The summer wind was warm, lifting the ends of Boyd's hair and ruffling his clothing. He wondered briefly why his uncle had chosen to wear leather in the middle of summer but determined he seemed the sort who would choose it as a fashion statement even when it was inconvenient.

"So I can give you money for a safe place to stay," Boyd started to say but Riley stopped suddenly and grasped Boyd's shoulder. Boyd came to a halt, startled, and looked around as his senses automatically went on alert. Was there a gunman Riley had seen or—

A heavy hand falling on his other shoulder made him return his attention fully to his uncle, who was leaning down to look him straight in the eye. His eyebrows were drawn together; his expression earnest.

"I know you've every reason to tell me no, but I don't trust hotels tonight. I don't trust random places I've never been. I'd really like the opportunity to stay with you—even for a night, even for a day; whatever you'll allow me. I just—" He stopped and frowned, looking away with hooded
eyebrows and frustration tightening the line of his jaw. "I know it sounds stupid but right now I'd like to be as near my brother as I can."

Riley seemed genuinely troubled but once again, dual thoughts moved through Boyd's mind.

*This is classic subterfuge*, he thought in the cold analysis of an agent. *I would do the same to a target. Play on his emotions. Make him want to believe. Make him weak.*

At the same time, the part of him that didn't distrust everyone on sight and remembered Riley's same face peering out from a dusty photo album thought: *And what if it's true? I've regretted too; I've wanted a chance to make up for past mistakes. I've wanted to reconcile with people I've lost. I've wanted a second chance at family and I've run to people I may not have known well when I needed help.*

He hesitated, considering the options. The second Riley stepped foot on Boyd's property he would be on camera. If he was truly trying to hide from everyone then Boyd's place wasn't exactly safe. Then again, it wasn't like he was trying to hide from the Agency. And the surveillance meant that if Riley tried anything Boyd would have definitive proof to help him decide which was the accurate read on his uncle.

There wasn't anything dangerous at his house for a civilian. Anything with direct ties to the Agency was at the Agency itself or was coded so it wouldn't make sense to a civilian and was always on Boyd's person anyway. And anyone who might show up unexpectedly at his house would have a cover story as a friend or coworker.

There really wasn't anything to lose. If anything, this might give him a chance to get a better idea of his uncle's motivations.
"Alright," Boyd said, "just for now." He was rewarded with a sudden jerk forward into a hug.

"Thank you," Riley said into the fall of Boyd's hair. Boyd hesitated, his hands staying at his sides even as Riley's arms tightened and he whispered again, muffled: "Thank you."

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Riley slept in the spare room upstairs while Boyd tossed and turned downstairs. He felt highly aware that there was someone else sleeping in his house for the first time since he and Sin had parted. It was an odd feeling, knowing he wasn't alone and yet still feeling like he was.

He couldn't sleep and it was due to that he heard the quiet creaking of the floorboards in the middle of the night.

He rolled silently out of bed and crept upstairs. Faint rustling came from the second spare room; the one where he had placed all the assorted boxes he had dragged down from the attic ages ago. When he peered around the corner into the room he saw movement. Half-hidden by the piles, Riley was opening and closing drawers slowly so as to quiet the action, and carefully lifting the edges of the interwoven cardboard box lids to see inside.

A weight settled in Boyd's stomach and, after a moment of watching his uncle, he crept silently back downstairs to his room.

What was Riley doing? Looking for items to pawn to make some money? There was nothing particularly of value in that room aside from some old silverware and jewelry. The only thing of value to Boyd was due to sentimentality: the journals his father had left him, which he had long since relocated to his bedroom.
This time when he laid awake staring at the ceiling, he couldn't sleep for an entirely different reason.

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The next morning when Riley came downstairs, hair awry and clothing askew, Boyd looked over from the stove with the mild curiosity of someone none the wiser. A huge yawn stretched Riley's face and caused tears to gather at the corner of his eyes as he ambled into the kitchen.

"Sleep well?" Boyd asked as he pushed the lid down on the tea kettle and flipped the stove's range to medium high.

"Like a baby," Riley said happily and dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. "I didn't wake up once! Thanks again for this, Boyd, you've no idea what it means to me..."

"All night?" Boyd asked in the questioning tone of a host pleased to hear his guest had a good stay. He glanced over his shoulder as he reached to open a cupboard. "I've had guests say it's a bit uncomfortable up there and they needed to take a walk in the night. Something about ghosts, if you'd believe it."

Riley smirked. "Sadly, can't say as I had a visit from the supernatural." He laced his hands behind his head and tilted his chair back. "No—I was out nearly the second we got back and just woke up now."

There was nothing in his face to show he was lying. Boyd nodded and turned back to the cupboard, although his hand tightened on the oatmeal container briefly.

So he'd been right to distrust this man.
That simple thought felt like a knife cutting straight into his stomach, with a worse feeling than when he’d been stabbed in the past. He drew in a quiet breath before he turned with a mild smile.

“What’s family for?” he asked, and answered himself: *Deception, apparently.* He held up the container. “Oatmeal?”

“Love some, thanks,” Riley replied, dropping back to all four legs on the chair.

Boyd nodded absently and went to pull some bowls from another cupboard. He wondered whether he should even bother asking Riley what he’d been looking for, since clearly the man would lie anyway. Still, it hurt. If Riley had wanted money, Boyd had offered to give him some. And if he was looking for something else, he should have asked.

The fact that he hadn’t...

As Boyd set the bowls on the table and sat down, he reflected that it was his own fault for letting himself be pulled into the story anyway. He just missed his father so much he gravitated toward anything that seemed it might fill that void from his childhood.

Riley was looking around the kitchen idly and Boyd was just considering saying something regardless of the futility when his phone suddenly buzzed in his back pocket. The Agency phone.

He stood, pulled out his phone, and waved a hand at the stove. "Keep an eye on the kettle, would you? I have to get this—My friend’s calling me about some plans we’re finalizing for the weekend. It should whistle when ready."

Riley nodded and watched him leave the room. As Boyd walked down the back hallway he checked the caller ID and saw it was Carhart. Eyes
narrowing faintly, because it would be just his luck to get a mission now when he had an untrustworthy guest in his care, he walked outside into the backyard where he could get some privacy.

"Get on compound," Carhart said bluntly the second Boyd verified his identity.

"What?" Boyd said in surprise. He automatically glanced at his house, even though he couldn't see his uncle through the walls. "Now?"

"Yes," Carhart said curtly. "I expect you here in thirty minutes."

Something about his tone made it obvious this wasn't a normal mission alert. Boyd felt the chill of alarm spread from his stomach outward.

"Yes, sir." He hesitated and asked, "Did—something happen?"

There was a stretch of silence before Carhart said flatly, "Yes."

He hung up before Boyd could say anything further.

Worried, Boyd stared at his phone for a moment before returning it to his back pocket and going back inside. His uncle was in the same place he'd been before, slouched in the chair looking like he didn't have a care in the world. Boyd paused in the archway to the kitchen, staring at him until Riley twisted to meet his eyes and, upon seeing Boyd's expression, straightened with a frown.

"Did something happen?"

"My friend's grandma," Boyd said, gaze darting away and arms crossing. He furrowed his eyebrows until they hooded his expression and, after a hesitant moment, he crossed the room quickly and turned off the stove.
"She's—There was—" He stopped, busied himself with setting the kettle onto another burner, then braced his hands against the stove and dropped his head down. "They don't know if she'll make it," he finished quietly.

"Oh," Riley said, already starting to rise. "That—" He cut himself off and stayed, hovering, near the kitchen table. "That's terrible."

"Yeah," Boyd said softly, staring down at the kettle. "It is."

There was a long moment of silence before Riley asked, "So... your friend called to tell you...?"

Boyd let out a low breath and then shook his head and turned. "I'm sorry but you're going to have to leave after all. He wants me to come help him out with everything and I don't know how long any of this will be. It could be days..."

"Of course," Riley said, although he didn't sound entirely happy about it. Still, he didn't argue as Boyd walked out of the room toward his messenger bag. He leaned down to swipe it off the floor of his bedroom and then pulled a wad of cash out of his wallet. "Here." He held it out to Riley, who stared with raised eyebrows at the amount.

"Good God, kid, who did you blow to get this much?"

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Thank you for the vote of confidence."

Riley grimaced. "I was joking, I didn't actually mean—"

"Just take it," Boyd said, shoving the money against his uncle's chest. Riley automatically reached up to catch the bills before they floated out of his grasp. He stared down at the money in his hands and for a moment he seemed caught off guard by the gesture.

"Thank you, Boyd..."
Boyd shook his head. "Don't mention it." He didn't even know why he was giving the man money when Riley had clearly been intending to steal from him. With a sigh, Boyd turned. "You'd better grab your things. I'm just going to pack some clothes in case I'm gone awhile."

Without looking, Boyd had no idea if Riley nodded but he did feel his uncle's presence disappear, followed shortly by the creaking of the steps as he jogged upstairs. Once he knew Riley wasn't in sight, Boyd moved the stack of books, sketchbooks, and assorted junk from the corner of his room to access the small hidden compartment he'd made in the wall.

He reached in, feeling around by touch alone while he watched over his shoulder for his uncle's reappearance, and grasped the small box filled with his father's old journals. He immediately placed it into his messenger bag and hid the compartment once more behind the cover and books. He grabbed some random clothes to throw atop the box so it was less obvious what was inside his bag, and then walked into the hallway just as Riley took the steps two at a time down to the first floor.

"Here's my number," Riley told him, handing over a piece of paper obviously ripped from the corner of an envelope with a phone number scrawled in black ink. "Call me when you're available. I'd like to talk more. Maybe next time we can even reminisce a bit, what do you say?"

"Sounds good," Boyd answered as he stuffed the paper into his pocket. He sent Riley out ahead of him and set the alarm on the house before jogging out and locking the door behind him. "Head to the Mayborn hotel," he told Riley as they both started down the front steps. "Cliff and Western. It's a good place to lie low until you can find somewhere better."

"Thanks, kid." With a smile, Riley reached over to ruffle Boyd's hair. While the affection had felt flattering the night before, now Boyd didn't know what to think of it. "You're alright."
"Like I said," was all Boyd said as he dug his car keys out of his bag. "Flattery..."

Riley smirked and raised a hand in an idle wave. "I'll see you around." He started toward the sidewalk and then stopped and called over his shoulder just as Boyd was getting into his car. "Hey. Where's the best place to pick up a cab from here?"

"Third and Forrest," Boyd called back, pointing in the direction Riley would need to walk. He pulled his messenger bag strap over his head and set the bag in his passenger seat. "Or, barring that, catch the train," he added. "Get off at the Crandall Park stop by Theater."

Riley made a short salute with two fingers to his forehead and out. "Roger," he said and started southbound on Magnolia Lane's picture perfect sidewalks.

Boyd waited until Riley was out of view before he pulled out of his driveway and drove northbound toward Sixth Avenue North. He made only one stop on his way to the Agency, to relocate his father's journals to a more secure place outside of his home. He didn't know why he felt the urge to hide them, but after seeing his uncle digging around in old boxes he couldn't help feeling like Riley might steal the only unbiased references Boyd would ever be able to gather of what his father had really been like when he was alive.

When he drove on compound, he was stopped at the gate by the guards, who checked his identification. They seemed more alert than usual; gazes darting around at every movement and glares hooded by heavy eyebrows. Boyd wasn't quite sure what to make of any of it but didn't bother asking. He would just get the answer from Carhart anyway.

He parked in the lot and grabbed his bag. As he was starting to walk away he heard other cars pulling in behind him. One of them paused, idling in
the middle of an emptier area of the parking lot. Boyd glanced over his shoulder and saw Aisha was driving the car Vivienne used and had paused before parking. The two of them appeared to be in the middle of some sort of tense conversation, which was confirmed when Vivienne opened the back door suddenly and stepped out, looking down at her watch.

"I have no time for this," Vivienne was saying shortly. "I must be ready in fifteen minutes."

She shut the door firmly and stood next to the car while Aisha leaned over to peer out the open window.

"Would you like me to run and get it for you?" Aisha asked and Vivienne's lips tightened while she glanced between her assistant and the Tower.

"Hurry," she ordered Aisha and turned to walk toward the nearby sidewalk. Aisha eased off the brake and started to back up the car. She stopped when Vivienne looked abruptly down at her phone and called out, "Aisha." The aide looked out the open window questioningly and Vivienne made a curt, impatient gesture. "There is no time. Now she wishes for more information; I will need you inside with me."

Aisha nodded and put the car back in gear to ease it into a parking space. Vivienne was watching her phone as she walked between some cars toward the sidewalk. Boyd started to look away, losing interest in the interaction even as he briefly wondered what had his mother so upset.

The explosion was completely unexpected.

Heat and light ripped through the air violently, throwing Boyd down to the pavement. He reacted automatically, bracing himself to minimize the damage and rolling with the momentum. He found himself on the concrete with shadows flickering around him. His ears buzzed faintly.
He pushed himself up and looked over his shoulder immediately to see his mother lying half on the sidewalk with her car completely immersed in flames.

The compound had gone still with surprise; agents and guards turning to look at the bomb. Boyd shoved himself up, his fingers brushing bits of glass that had flown that far, and ran over to Vivienne's side.

She was scratched and bruised, with pieces of glass embedded along her back and side. Her clothing was ripped and her jacket was ruined. One of her shoes remained from where she'd been thrown out of it, blood leaked down one side of her face, and her hair had started to come loose from the french twist. Still, glancing back Boyd could see that the majority of the damage appeared to have been stopped by the vehicles partially protecting her from the explosion.

She groaned when Boyd touched her shoulder.

"Are you alright?" he asked her.

Vivienne sat up, her jaw shifting and clenching; her face dirtied and expression for one moment caught between surprise and pain. She looked over at the car completely engulfed in flames, with Aisha not even a shadow to be seen within.

There was no question that Aisha was dead.

Vivienne's expression immediately closed off and became cold and remote.

He saw her fingers curl against the pavement; her shoulders stiffen. Then she was pushing herself up, her ice blue eyes flicking up to Boyd's face. Their eyes met and for a second he saw more than the cold; he saw a
warning. Her expression was sheltered between dirty blond hair falling free and his body blocking her from the rest of the compound.

"Be careful, Boyd," she said quietly, her lips barely moving. He could hardly hear her over the roar of the fire and the people now approaching.

Before he could react she was already pushing herself to a stand. She jerked her arm out of his grip and leveled him with a scathing look. "I can help myself," she said icily, then turned a commanding stare on the guards who were just arriving.

"Put out that fire this instant. Lieutenant, begin an investigation immediately. You—Officer Thorsen. Send Samuel to my office. As for the rest of you," her icy blue stare swept the group of people who had gathered, her tone flat. "Remain on compound. You have work to do."

She stopped only long enough to retrieve her fallen shoe and pull off her other, half-broken high heel before she continued her power walk as if she hadn't been interrupted by a car bomb and the death of her assistant. She was already pulling out her phone to call someone as she strode away.

People nearby muttered about Vivienne being an ice bitch and how her assistant was forgotten immediately even after putting up with all of her crap for years. A few seemed to think it was too bad Vivienne hadn't been in the car after all, while others wondered who did it. Even the people who would have loved to see Vivienne die sounded worried by this turn of events and the audacity of it. He heard a few agents wonder if this had something to do with the sudden call to return to compound.

Boyd barely paid attention, his gaze shifting from his mother's retreating back to turn and watch the fire burn.
Chapter Nineteen

The room Boyd walked into was enormous—far larger than any meeting room he had seen in the Tower elsewhere. With stadium seating, a stage at the base, and what had to be a capacity of over five hundred people, it seemed like it would fit in better at a large-scale university than Johnson's Pharmaceuticals.

A podium had been pushed to the side of the stage and six chairs ran along the back. Large screens dominated the wall but it didn't appear that they would be in use.

Standing on the stage, Seong Jae-Hwa was scouring the room with a dark-eyed glare. She stood with her back straight and arms crossed.

Four people were arrayed behind her.

Vivienne sat on the far right, looking as composed as ever despite the fact she had nearly been killed in a car bomb half an hour earlier. She had fixed her hair and must have had extra clothing at the office, as her silver tweed skirt suit with black piping and black heels was not the same outfit that had been destroyed earlier. Whatever wounds she had seemed to have been temporarily covered by makeup, most likely the work of Unit 16. Although he did notice her holding herself particularly still and slightly angled, as if her side was aching. She stared straight ahead and didn't seem to be paying much attention to the people around her.

Carhart sat nearby, his eyes skimming across the agents who were filling the room. When his gaze finally fell on Boyd they paused briefly before moving on. Despite the fact that he was trying to appear as stoic as possible, Boyd noticed that he looked paler than usual and his hands were slightly
balled into fists. His eyes continued to search the sea of faces before him but for what, Boyd didn't know.

Next to Carhart were two men Boyd hadn't seen before.

One was a striking man with skin so dark it seemed he could easily blend into the shadows. His hair was buzzed short to the point that he was nearly bald and he had to easily top 6'5". He wore the grey and black of the guard uniform and even from the back of the room Boyd could make out the stripes that denoted his high rank.

The man's lips were pulled down and his eyes were narrowed. He stood at attention in a pose that was reminiscent of Jae-Hwa, but while she looked angry he simply looked alert and ready to respond at a moment's notice.

There was another unfamiliar man on the stage who stood nearer to Jae-Hwa. He had a deep tan, silver hair, and looked to be in his mid thirties. He was handsome, but the way his eyes narrowed and lips pressed together gave him a slightly menacing air.

Boyd looked at Vivienne again, running another glance over her to make sure she was okay before he took in the rest of the room. The place was abuzz with muted conversations and packed with people already. Every agent he had ever seen working at the Agency was sifting into the room. He had never before seen a mandatory meeting that required every agent to attend at once, from field agents to analysts to R&D.

But considering what he'd witnessed in the parking lot, he couldn't be surprised. The only thing that was more alarming than that was the fact that Carhart had called him in before the car bomb occurred, and he'd already said something had happened. Was it possible someone had directly attacked Carhart too?
What the hell was happening if someone, presumably the mole, was getting so brash he or she would attempt to kill Vivienne in the middle of the compound?

Boyd watched Carhart again but he couldn’t read anything in his expression so he turned away.

When he saw Harriet’s dark head leaning forward, he navigated through the crowd toward her. As he approached, he saw that he recognized others near her as well. Harriet, Jon and Kassian were in one row, with Emma and Blair seated right behind them. Even as Boyd sat down in Kassian’s row he saw Archer heading in their direction.

"What the hell is going on?” Boyd asked them lowly, narrowed eyes darting around.

"No idea, kid." Kassian frowned slightly, looking around. "I've never seen anything like this."

"Doesn't seem like it's good news, though," Harriet observed, her eyes focused on the front of the room.

"I can't imagine it would be," Emma put in, leaning forward so her face appeared between Harriet and Kassian's shoulders. She turned worried blue eyes onto Boyd and reached over to place her hand on his shoulder. "Boyd, I know she's up there and seems fine, but—is your mother alright?"

Boyd shook his head and couldn't help trailing his gaze back to her stoic face. "I don't know..."

Emma squeezed his shoulder lightly, causing him to return his attention to her. Her eyebrows were drawn together, her lips turned down in sympathy. "And you? Are you okay? I heard you were right there when it happened..."
"I'm fine," Boyd said. His shoulder ached a bit and he had found pieces of glass caught in his clothing and hand but he was still alive. That was a lot more than could be said about Aisha. As if reading his mind, Emma murmured:

"Poor Aisha... She seemed so nice..."

"She may have saved the Inspector's life," Blair commented and Boyd looked away.

Despite the severe differences between Vivienne and Boyd, it scared him to think of how close he had come to losing her too. Right in front of him. She was his family. If she was gone, he didn't have anyone left except a suspect uncle who had appeared out of nowhere and seemed more likely to take advantage of Boyd than anything. And, on top of that, as cold as Vivienne had been for most of his life, she had also always seemed bigger than life. Like she wasn't human, so it was impossible for anything to really cut her down.

Remembering her lying lifelessly on the sidewalk, covered in dirt and blood and glass, sent a chill down his spine.

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat, broodingly trying not to think about the disturbing timing of his uncle's appearance, Riley's clear dislike of Vivienne, and the sudden attack on her life. It couldn't have had anything to do with Riley, right? It had to be the mole...

In the background the others seemed to have continued a conversation while Boyd wasn't listening. He came back to the present as Emma was saying:

"Everyone's getting really nervous. I heard some people on the way over talking about different scenarios. It could be about another raid..."
"Or mass termination," Blair put in, eyebrows lowered and lips twisted in a frown. He crossed his arms and sat back in his seat, his long legs pressed in between the backs of Jon’s and Harriet’s seats. "You know how easy it would be to take us all out right now?"

Boyd couldn't help thinking the same thing. Knowledge of the mole only made the comment more ominous, making it feel like a rock formed and churned in the pit of his stomach.

An even worse scenario: Had Jae-Hwa found out about the mole? Would this be the last time Carhart and Vivienne were seen? Would she publicly announce their termination as a means of showing everyone how serious she was about clearing house? She certainly looked aggravated enough and the uncertainty he thought he read in Carhart's expression was making him nervous.

Archer arrived, stopping next to Blair without making a move to sit. "This is a terrible place to sit." His hawk-like gaze swept the room. "I could have killed you ten times over on my way here. Who picked this spot?"

Emma leaned back, looking up at him with parted lips. "Well. The acoustics..."

Archer stared at her flatly. "I'm sure you'll appreciate the clear sound quality when you get a bullet in the back of your head."

Kassian opened his mouth to likely respond to this but before he could, a slim arm encircled his and the diminutive form of Jordan appeared beside him. He froze in place and stared at her before struggling to get his arm free. He was unable to do so without causing a scene; her nails were practically digging into him.
She peered around Kassian to see the others. Her pink glossed lips were spread in a smile and she had on a skin tight red corset matched with what looked like a black tutu.

"Hello everybody."

Harriet just stared.

Archer raised an eyebrow at her and then turned his stare in assessment to Kassian before it flicked away. He went back to looking around them. Boyd couldn't tell if the older man was searching for something in particular or watching for anything suspicious. He didn't pay much attention to Archer and instead turned his even stare onto Jordan.

"Where's Bex?" Boyd asked Jordan, glancing past her.

Jordan's petite face screwed up into a scowl and she tossed long tendrils of her jet black hair over one shoulder. "Dunno."

Kassian was still trying to discreetly disentangle himself as Harriet shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes were narrowed at the stage.

When Jon reached up to put a hand on her shoulder she visibly cringed, although Jon didn't seem to actually notice that part. He seemed distracted himself. Boyd looked more fully at Jon for the first time and saw that he was injured. Several stitches were dark against his forehead and his wrist was wrapped in a brace.

"What happened?"

"Me and Jenny were on a mission that went ass up." Jon finally pulled away from Harriet and smoothed a hand over his injured forehead. "Went to do a wipe on some wankers in Russia and looked like they knew we were coming. It was bollocks."
Boyd ran an assessing eye along the injuries. Another leaked mission? "When did that happen?"

"Week back. Jenny got it worse than me, but she's out of the infirmary now." Jon's eyes flicked around the room as if searching for his injured teammate, and Harriet's mouth tightened a hint as she moved away from him a bit more.

"Hey guys," a new voice called out and Ryan came into view as he made his way through the seats. He paused briefly to scowl at Jordan.

"Ryan, hi." Kassian used this as an excuse to turn around entirely and wrench his arm away from Jordan's grasp. The sleeve of his shirt was wrinkled beyond repair from her clinging.

"Have you seen Owen yet? I hope he doesn't sleep in and miss the meeting," Ryan fretted, sitting behind Boyd and next to Emma.

"I haven't," Boyd said, glancing around the room for Owen's telltale mop of red hair.

He didn't see Owen, but he did see David Nakamura sitting toward the front row of seats. His expression was unusually drawn. Even though a few people passed by and clearly commented to him he didn't acknowledge them; he simply stared blankly at the stage. The agents gave him strange looks and then walked away. Boyd wondered what was bothering him.

"I have a lousy feeling about this," Ryan said, shaking his head and sitting his large backpack on the floor by his feet. "Look at Zachary."

Harriet looked over at Ryan with slightly raised eyebrows. She never seemed to approve of anyone addressing authority figures in such a casual way but didn't comment on that. Instead she said, "He looks the same as always to me."
"To you, maybe." Ryan's mouth pulled down into a worried frown. "But I can tell something's up."

Blair's intent stare was centered on the stage. His gaze didn't waver even when he spoke to the others. "I'm more worried by the Marshal. Look at how she's glaring at everyone. She's putting evil eyes on all of us."

Archer made a quiet noise of assent but didn't comment.

"Who are the men next to Carhart?" Boyd asked, noting the way the taller man hadn't stopped scouring the room as if searching for specific activity.


"With those credentials why didn't he become an agent?" Emma asked curiously, looking up at Archer again for the first time since he'd seemed to reprimand her.

Archer shrugged unconcernedly. "He must like his job," was all he said.

"I like him," Jordan piped up, leering at the Guard Captain even as she hung on to Kassian's arm again.

"Is anyone surprised?" Ryan muttered just before he leaned forward. "Oh I see Owen. Thank God."

Owen was just pushing his way through a group of agents when Boyd looked over. The R&D agent perked up when he saw them. He rushed across the room even as most people were finishing being seated.
Archer looked at the back of the room with narrowed eyes. For a moment it seemed like he would leave the rest of them to go to a better vantage point. But just as he started to turn, the room quieted down in the way it did when an important speech was about to start. Looking highly unhappy, Archer reluctantly lowered himself into a seat, although his glare swept the room even more often now.

Owen hurriedly threw himself into the seat next to Ryan just as their superiors on stage straightened at attention.

"Safe!" Owen hissed triumphantly even as the Marshal stepped forward.

"Shh, Owen," Ryan mumbled, shaking his head and poking the other man's leg.

"Turn off all phones, panels, tablets, recording devices, and whatever else you lot may have smuggled in," Jae-Hwa ordered, her voice carrying through the room with the use of an unseen microphone. Her dark eyes swept the room with a hard stare. "If I hear even a beep from any of you I'll have you singled out and sent to Fourth until you remember how to take orders."

There was a flurry of activity as those who hadn't automatically silenced their devices quickly did so now. Boyd checked to make sure his phones were both on silent. She paused, giving a moment for the agents to comply before she spoke again. As always, she didn't mince words.

"We're here because there's been a leak."

She glared at the gathered people as if she could determine who exactly had caused the issue. The quiet whispers of people wondering what she meant created a backdrop in the room.
For Boyd, he felt the pit of his stomach tighten and his breath still. He subtly checked on Carhart and Vivienne. Now that Jae-Hwa obviously knew, now that it was becoming public knowledge, and with the outright attack on Vivienne, the heart-stopping possibility of this being the last time he saw Carhart and Vivienne alive was a heavy weight in his throat.

"At ten past midnight this morning, Captain Morgan Chase was gunned down. Snipers from a nearby building shot her as she was entering her house." Jae-Hwa's eyes narrowed gravely. "It was a professional hit."

A few murmurs went through the room and Boyd saw surprise flash across many of the agents' faces. Everyone on stage remained straight-faced, including Carhart, who had once dated her.

Jae-Hwa continued over the susurration, "She's the third agent to be killed on their personal time, and the second near their home."

Kassian's eyes narrowed and Ryan inhaled audibly. "Someone hacked the directory?" he whispered, almost to himself.

"Added to that, as you've all no doubt heard, Aisha Patel was killed earlier today in a car bomb on compound. It was affixed to Inspector Beaulieu's personal vehicle at her home sometime overnight." Jae-Hwa gestured to Vivienne but didn't turn her dark, sharp stare from the audience. "We consider this to be a clear attempt on the Inspector's life, as it was a fluke she wasn't in the car at the time. It seems evident the perp wanted this to occur in a public setting, likely on compound, as it was set to detonate when the ignition was turned off rather than on."

Quiet conversations erupted at the information. Most people had likely heard of the attack already but even Boyd hadn't realized the bomb had been placed on the car at her own home.
"Clearly we've a breach of security," Jae-Hwa continued flatly. Her lips thinned into a hard line that turned down on the edges. "Everyone who could potentially be involved will be questioned. Until I'm satisfied we're secure, I've called a state of emergency. Homes off compound could be compromised. As could, clearly, vehicles."

Boyd looked at Carhart and Vivienne but didn't see their expressions so much as stir. He returned his stare to Jae-Hwa, worry coursing through him. Since learning of the mole and especially since finding Sin still alive, he'd become hyper vigilant. But if it was possible there was a hit out on agents of any rank and their homes could be found or their vehicles turned into weapons...

He could be bringing groceries home and end up with a bullet in his head at his front step. He could drive down to Annadale to see Sin and end up blowing himself up in the hotel parking lot. Even worse, he could hurt Sin in the process.

The thought was chilling.

For all that field agents had a dangerous job, they'd always had some level of anonymity. The weight of the Agency had always been behind them. Although the Agency was ruthless, they protected their own. Even after he'd learned of the missing agents it hadn't been like this.

At least those agents had been on missions. At least their one place to feel safe and normal hadn't been taken from them.

"The dormitories can hold all of you," Jae-Hwa continued curtly over the crowd. "Talk to Captain Siegel if you've a need to make permanent arrangements." She swept a narrowed, piercing stare across the room. "Take this seriously. We can't say how many of you could be watched."
She paused a moment to let that sink in and then strode a few steps to the right. "You’re to be assigned arrangements at the end of the meeting. No one’s to leave compound."

"For how long?" a deep voice asked loud enough to carry over the din. Boyd followed the words and saw that it was Emilio who’d asked. His green eyes were narrowed at the stage, displeasure clear in his face.

"For as long as we’d like," Jae-Hwa returned, arching her eyebrows and turning her flat stare onto him. She shifted her gaze to take in the sea of dismayed faces as she started to walk a few steps back in the other direction. "Until then, all missions and downtime are canceled. Guards are lining the compound to ensure not a one of you tries to leave." Her eyes narrowed. "If you do, you’ll answer to me directly."

"Bullshit," Kassian muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

Next to him Jordan looked up with a smirk. "You can stay with me," she told him in a stage whisper. He gave her an unreadable stare before flitting his eyes back up to the stage.

Uneasiness shifted within Boyd—if the Agency was looking for traitors, they may be digging up every suspicious act any of them had done in the past few weeks. He’d been careful to hide anything related to Sin or Annadale but he worried about them tracking incoming or outgoing calls during this time. For the first time, he was thankful for the way things had ended on his last trip; at least Sin would be too distrustful of him to make any contact at this point. Even so, he made a note to turn off the phone later so nothing could be compromised.

"General Carhart and Captain Siegel will answer questions. You'll all be alerted when we've lifted the lock down." Jae-Hwa swept her stare across
the agents one more time before she turned and disappeared through a door in back with Katsaros not far behind.

As soon as she was gone, mutters and whispers moved throughout the room, some of them obviously annoyed and quietly vehement.

Vivienne had been staring silently throughout the briefing and only once Jae-Hwa was gone did she shift and look across the room. Her gaze moved past Boyd, stopping on him subtly enough that no one was likely to notice it if they weren’t looking for it. Her ice blue eyes moved on almost before they’d stilled.

Siegel stepped to the front of the stage with his hands behind his back.

"Anyone have any questions?"

Although it was likely there were many questions running through everyone’s minds, no one spoke them aloud. At least not in the public setting. Captain Siegel looked unsurprised by this and nodded curtly.

"Everyone’s already been assigned a room; if you haven't received the message yet, look for it in the next few hours on your panel. If you have other accommodations you prefer, take it. Nobody's going to babysit you. Your supervisors have been briefed on the basic procedures for all level three lock downs. I'll be in my office for anyone with pressing questions not answered here."

With that being said, Siegel left as abruptly as Jae-Hwa had. Vivienne and Carhart left at the same time, their faces unreadable.

"Poor Zach," Ryan said immediately, his face drawn. "I can't believe Morgan is dead... She wasn't even a fieldie."

"Why poor Zach?" Jordan asked, looking genuinely serious as she peered out from around Kassian’s muscular frame.
Ryan made a face, as if she was incredibly stupid for not knowing the history of compound romance. "They used to be in a relationship."

"Oooh." Jordan looked back at the stage, black eyes going round. "He didn't look too unwrapped about it, if you ask me."

"Oh what do you know about how normal humans—"

"Naw but it's true," Jon piped up after being silent the whole time. "Even if Harriet and me were through, I'd be on the piss every night if she died."

Harriet stared at him, looking unmoved, and walked away without another word. Kassian's eyes followed her before focusing on Jon accusingly.

"Don't look at me like that, mate," Jon snapped, giving Kassian an irritated look. "In fact just mind your bloody business. Fucking hanger on."

This earned him a scoff. "Blow me, Logan."

Jon turned to stalk away but not before saying, "Yeah, I'd heard you like that sort of thing."

Face reddening, Kassian started to move forward but Jordan wrapped her small hands around his arm. "Don't! He's just being a wanker and the Marshal will be pissed if her star agent starts a brawl here."

Kassian yanked his arm away from her moodily but didn't attempt to follow Jon again, although his dark glare followed the man until he disappeared.

"And in any case," Jordan said brightly, smiling at the remainders of the group. "Ain't Carhart shacked up with the Inspector these days? I'd heard someone saw a pair of her knickers in his office and everything."
Boyd gave her a sidelong look. "You can't actually believe those rumors."

"I dunno, little Beaulette," Owen said with a shrug. "I heard the same thing as her. Supposedly they've been seen together outside the Agency, too. Little glimpses here and there, at places like upscale restaurants and whatever."

Boyd shook his head. "I've heard what people are saying but I have a hard time believing the validity of it. Exactly how many people removed are these alleged sightings?"

"Well, I didn't do a genealogy chart on it, jeez," Owen said in mild exasperation. "Next time warn a guy before there's a test."

Ryan frowned slightly and gave Boyd an apologetic look. "I think it's true, Boyd. I asked Zach about it and he didn't deny it."

Boyd looked over at Ryan in surprise. The fact that Ryan was serious left Boyd at a loss.

He'd never considered his mother's love life, partially because it seemed impossible for her to have one, given her personality.

He couldn't imagine Carhart and his mother together and didn't particularly like the idea. Carhart was special to him—the closest person to the father he'd lost. He felt like he could trust the general but he still didn't trust his mother. Then again, the sudden appearance of Riley coupled with nearly losing his mother threw even those truths off kilter a bit for him.

He shook his head and looked away with a frown. His gaze lingered with preoccupation on the stage. "It seems strange," was all he could think to say.

"It is strange," Ryan agreed.
Jordan just rolled her eyes and glanced up at Kassian again. "So do ya want to stay with me? Bex won't mind, I'm sure."

Kassian gave her a skeptical stare. "Somehow I doubt that."

"Well let me know what's what after you see your assigned quarters, yeah?"

Kassian nodded in agreement and Jordan glanced at the others. "I'm gonna go catch up with my sister." She gave a small wave and walked away. Kassian's eyes followed her briefly before she disappeared into the crowd.

"You can stay with me if you want," Owen said unexpectedly as he watched Kassian. He looked at the others to include them as well. "Any of you can. I have some extra space."

"I'll see who I'm supposed to bunk with. If it's someone unfortunate I may take you up on that," Kassian replied.

Owen nodded and then stood, looking around with a slightly exaggerated frown. "Anyone else feel like Big Brother's watching too much in here?"

"I do," Blair muttered under his breath, standing and turning his intent stare across the agents who hadn't yet left. Most of them were in small groups, quietly talking to each other.

Archer grunted but didn't say anything.

"Well, anyone who wants can come chill at my pad. I have some leftover soda and all that from the last time I visited family." Owen's eyebrows drew together. "I don't even remember why I brought it all back with me..."

Boyd swiped his messenger bag off the floor and stood. It was a good thing he'd brought his bag, since it had his secure panel in it. If he needed to
do any searching or communication that couldn't be tracked even in this state of lock down, it would prove invaluable.

"I'll go," Boyd offered.

"I'll pass," Archer said, nearly running over Boyd's words. His sharp stare was still surveying everyone in the room and only paused briefly to drill into the others near him. He settled his gaze on Kassian. "Contact me if you need me."

"Will do. Keep in touch, man."

Archer nodded and disappeared into the crowd.

Blair frowned. "I should go too. I may stop by later, though."

"Sounds groovy." Owen turned to the others. "Well, whoever wants to come can. But, hey! Does anyone want to stop by the cafe on the way over?"

He looked hopefully at Boyd and Kassian.

"Maybe later," Boyd replied.

Owen sighed but didn't look surprised. "Alright... Come on."

On their way over, Boyd discreetly powered off his personal phone. As they entered the courtyard, Emma got a phone call and lagged behind the others, her eyebrows furrowing in worry when she looked at the name on the screen. Boyd heard her saying with relief, "I was wondering where you were," before her responses drew too quiet to be heard.

Owen slowed his walk but when he glanced over his shoulder she waved them on. None of them said much, all lost in their own minds considering what this lock down and the potential threat to their lives would mean. Emma jogged to catch up when they were halfway across the
courtyard. Her eyes seemed especially blue in the light and her cheeks were flushed.

"Sorry," she said in a rush. "Gotta go. Pat couldn't make it over by us and he's worried about what this means for his kids. I'm gonna meet up with him. See you all later—and stay safe."

She turned and started running back toward the Tower before anyone had the chance to respond.

Owen watched her go, glanced at Ryan, Kassian and Boyd who remained, and then shrugged and kept walking. He led them to Residential Building D; the one most hidden in the grove of trees that sheltered the Agency walls.

"I got the manic happyface apartment," he said as he led them upstairs. "I've thought about naming it. Like, newest member of the Justice League—Sugar Rushania. Able to quell enemies with the power of hyperactivity alone." He stopped in front of 8D and swiped his card on the lock pad. The light flashed green and he opened the door.

As they walked in, Boyd saw that Owen's apartment was surprisingly normal. He had a desk with a laptop on it. The screensaver was going; it was a marquee of a sentence in what looked to be Gaelic. There were books and a few piles of paper covering the desk, with his touch panel tossed on top precariously. Empty glasses, crinkled wrappers, and the ergonomic chair showed that he likely spent most of his time at the computer desk.

An open door was in the back of the room, showing a bedroom with little in the way of furnishing. There was a bed with crumpled sheets and a dresser with a half open drawer.
Overall, the place had the feel of a bachelor pad. Most of the furniture was Agency-issued and the few pieces that he’d gotten to complement it were low to the floor and cheaply made.

Aside from the paper scattered around, and some dishes resting on the counter waiting to be washed, the place was actually quite clean. There were several bookshelves lining the walls; not quite to the extent that Boyd had seen in Kaspar’s apartment but certainly closer than most agents’ places seemed.

The shelves were shoved full of books and there were some more piled on the floor in front of a few of the bookcases. A lot of them seemed to be references for different languages, including grammar, vocabulary conversion, character guides, verb books, dictionaries, and more. Entire shelves were filled with books in foreign languages. The rest of the selection seemed to range considerably, from tame classics to a few with titles that made it obvious they were likely filled with conspiracy theories and pipe dreams.

In the main room there was a couch that hardly looked used, with a low coffee table in front. Owen gestured to the couch as he shut the door behind them.

"You guys can all sit there if you want. Anyone want anything? I get curious in grocery stores so I bet I’ve got pretty much anything you’d want."

Boyd was going to shake his head but then he paused. "Tea or water for me, if you have any."

"Beer?" Kassian asked hopefully. Ryan glared at him and Kassian rolled his eyes. "Come on kid, it's a stressful day. Cut me some slack."

Owen nodded and looked over at Ryan. "Anything for you, Ry-meister?"
"No, I'm fine." Ryan shook his head and sat down on the sofa, mouth turned down into a frown. "Unless you have an explanation as to what the heck is going on around here in your fridge."

"Nah, I chucked the oracle last week," Owen said as he turned toward the fridge. "She was getting old."

"Did anyone have any idea this would happen?" Boyd asked, looking at Ryan and Kassian.

"Which part?" Kassian asked dryly. "Officers getting assassinated or the lock-in?"

Glass clinked in the fridge as Owen dug around.

"Anything," Boyd said, shaking his head. "I know I certainly wasn't expecting the day to start with a car bomb and a meeting like that."

"I don't think any of us were." Kassian frowned and walked over to the windows, looking out at the compound below them. "I hope this lock-in nonsense doesn't last. I'm not living on compound."

Ryan looked at him, worried. "Does Peaches have plenty of food? What if they make us stay for a long time?"

Kassian shook his head, fending off the worry. "She knows how to get out of the house to find food. If anything, she'll go hang out with the neighbor's kids. I just don't want to stay here. I hate being on compound, I always have."

There was a beat of silence and then Ryan blurted out, "Don't stay with Jordan and Bex! They're bad news."

This earned him another irritated glance. "I wasn't planning to because Bex hates my guts."
"Good. Her sister is a hobag," Ryan replied flatly, not leaving very much room for argument in his tone. "She's spread for just about everyone of rank. Men and women. She's obviously on some mission to seduce everyone over here."

"I dunno," Owen said doubtfully as he came back into the living room. He set two beers on the living room table and glanced at Boyd. "Kettle's going."

Boyd nodded and leaned back in the couch.

"I just don't like how she looks at people," Owen continued as if he hadn't cut himself off. "You can never tell what she's thinking and nothing good ever comes from that. And then she's suddenly nice? You know how many serial killers pull in their victims that way? Plus she's got the whole evil twin thing to consider. I'm just sayin'..."

Kassian just rolled his eyes, not going into any of the details of her allegedly spying on him for the Marshal.

Boyd leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Regardless of that, we should all be careful. It ultimately doesn't matter who seems nice and who doesn't. There's something big happening at the Agency and we need to be on guard."

"I can't believe Morgan is dead," Ryan said, shaking his head. His mouth drew down into a frown as his indigo eyes drifted away. "I wonder if Zach is okay... They were together for awhile. He looked so blank."

"I don't know," Boyd said with a frown. "Whatever he felt, he probably didn't want to broadcast it to everyone."
The tea kettle started rumbling, signaling that the water was hot enough. Owen jumped up and moved into the kitchen to pull the kettle off the stove.

"I'm still worried," Ryan replied with a frown. "He's already lost Hsin and Emilio, pretty much."

"I know..." Boyd's expression darkened, his worry mirroring Ryan's own.

Except Ryan didn't know the half of it. Boyd couldn't help wondering if there was anything he could do to help Carhart. Even if it seemed that for the moment Carhart wasn't in danger of termination due to the leak, who knew what would happen during this lock-in. Adding to that the loss of Morgan on top of everything else...

The quiet slide of a plate against the wooden coffee table made Boyd look over. Owen set the mug down, the string from the tea bag hanging over the side. His dark eyes held that same serious cast that had been there so often of late, lending an enigmatic air to his formerly perpetual silliness. When he spoke, his tone was as light as ever.

"Hope black's okay."

Boyd nodded and leaned forward to pick up the mug, although at first all he did was hold it in the air near his lips. He could feel the heat wafting off the porcelain like steam.

"I wonder who the others were," Owen mused as he sat down.

Kassian shook his head, rubbing the beer between his palms. "Nobody that I know, unless it's been covered up until now."

"Why would they do that?" Boyd asked, wondering what information may be out there among the general population.
"Maybe to try to keep it under wraps that they know someone is up to no good. Now whoever it is will be more careful," Kassian replied. He shook his head and took a swig of his beer.

"It's gotta be IT, someone ninja good, or some big wig don't you think?" Owen said with a frown. He tilted his beer bottle between his hands but hadn't yet taken a drink. "How else would they access the directory?" His dark eyes were on Ryan at the question.

"It could just be a really good hacker." Ryan frowned and crossed his thin arms over his chest. "I mean if I wanted to, I could probably try to do it too."

"Wouldn't it leave a trail?" Boyd looked at Ryan and sipped his tea. It was a little weak and a little hot but it still tasted good. "Or would you be able to avoid any detection?"

"A good hacker doesn't leave a trail. And whoever did this is a damn good hacker."

"Do we have that many people at the Agency who are that good?"

Ryan shrugged, frowning slightly. "I would think not but then... if someone has an agenda like that they wouldn't make it all known what they are capable of, you know?"

Boyd nodded. That was true enough.

"We may get some clue about the bad guys when we see who she interrogates," Owen said as he popped open his beer. "Some'll probably be obvious, like IT, but maybe she'll do others. But then, even that info will probably be so on the down low it won't even make it into rumors."
There was a low sigh as Ryan stood and walked over to the window, peering out with his arms still wrapped around himself. "I can't believe this is happening... I used to feel so safe here..."

Kassian's lips pursed together in a thin line as he nodded in agreement. "I have to admit, I've seen a lot but these past few years have been surreal. The raid, Connors, now this. It almost seems like..." He trailed off with a frown.

Ryan looked over at him. "Like what?"

Their eyes met and Kassian said finally, "Like the Agency is starting to fall apart."

Boyd turned a quiet gaze on Kassian. He had to admit that it did feel that way, and hearing the words spoken aloud were almost disturbing.

"It does," Owen agreed, staring with a frown at his beer. "There've been defections before but it seems like whoever's at it this time is way more skilled. And ruthless. I've never heard of here or Euro where agents are targeted at their homes. If you had a problem with the Agency, why not attack The Powers That Be rather than us peons?"

"We may be the peons," Kassian started with a shake of his head. "But without soldiers, the Agency is worthless. Connors died and what did that do? He just got replaced. Maybe whoever is doing this wants the Agency torn down brick by brick, you know?"

Boyd's eyes narrowed and shifted, turning to look out the window. He wondered if that was the case. And if so, why? Could it be someone who harbored as much hatred for the Agency as he himself had when he'd first returned from the Aleixo mission? Yet he'd been unstable and incapable of such calculated efforts. And with how long this had been going on, whoever it was had to be very committed.
He couldn't help thinking about Ivan and the plan he'd referenced. He wondered whether it was related to any of this. Then again, Ivan wouldn't have targeted Sin and he wasn't the sort of person to work with others as far as Boyd knew. But then, how much could truly be known about a person like Ivan, who seemed to have as many secrets as he did notes on his wall?

Owen’s thoughts must have been running partially along the lines Boyd's did. He frowned and leaned back against the couch. "Okay so let's say that's it. Who's that anti-Agency? Most of us have something once in awhile that makes us wish we’d never joined but, man, that takes dedication."

"And calculation," Boyd added. "I can't imagine it wasn't part of the plan to strike fear in the general populace at some point. Why else have agents be targeted at their homes? Why have the Inspector's car explode on compound? Unless the fear is a byproduct and aiming for agents at home was simply a way to catch them off guard."

"They could have been turned by someone else," Ryan suggested with a thoughtful frown. "Like, went double agent and now they're being given orders by someone who wants us taken out."

"True," Boyd said as he rested the mug against his thigh. "There are certainly enough groups and people we deal with on a daily basis who would want the Agency to collapse."

"Or someone could've infiltrated straight from the group," Owen said contemplatively.

"Gross," Ryan replied, making a face.

"Just sayin' it could happen," Owen said lightly with a shrug and took a long drink of beer.
Boyd frowned to himself and sipped his tea. Of all the theories so far presented, Owen's somehow seemed the most worrisome of all.

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By the time they left Owen's a few hours later, they had received their assignments. Kassian was assigned a room in Residential Building B with Emilio. Boyd ended up being assigned a room in Residential Building A, with Adam Blake. And Ryan was assigned in Residential Building C with an R&D agent named Wilkes.

It was strange, since he had barely seen Adam aside from when they'd both vied for the position of Sin's partner, and later when Adam had been on the retrieval squad to pick up Sin and Boyd from the cabin. At least Adam seemed like he was quiet enough. It was probably better to be assigned someone like him rather than some of the other rank 9's who had the attitude that they were better than the captains.

Boyd didn't go immediately to his room; he walked around the compound a bit first. He didn't do anything in particular but he felt too troubled to hole himself up immediately. He was glad he had his sketchbooks with the drawings of Sin in them but at the same time he was paranoid the Agency would do some sort of check.

He kept an eye out for a good hiding place on compound but in the end he trusted that solution less than keeping the book with him at all times. He kept his hand firmly but casually on his messenger bag and thought about all his options, including burning the evidence if need be.

By the time he stopped at Residential B, it was already getting dark. He walked up to his floor, wondering idly whether Adam would even be there. His
ID card had been given access codes to the residential complex and the room for the duration of the lockdown.

He paused at the door to the apartment and considered knocking but decided it would be stupid when it was as much his room as Adam's. They both lived off compound so it wasn't like he was walking into Adam's home without warning. He swiped his card on the lock by the door and walked in, already looking to see if his roommate was around.

Adam was leaning against the kitchen counter, cell phone in one hand and face marred by a scowl. When Boyd entered, Adam's black eyes flicked over to him.

Boyd wondered what caused such an expression on an otherwise impassive face. He nodded in greeting and shut the door behind him. "Hello."

"Hi." Adam looked down at his phone again before sighing in disgust and tossing it on the counter. "I didn't expect you to actually come here."

"Where else would I go?" Boyd asked as he glanced around the room.

It was typical Agency fare; everything was clean and looked comfortable enough but there was no personality to it. There was a living room off the kitchen, and two doors that were shut that he assumed went to a bedroom and a bathroom. Everything, from the carpet to the walls to the furniture, was bland shades of neutral colors.

Adam shrugged and pushed himself away from the counter, sliding his hands into the pockets of his black jeans. "Most people stayed with friends who already have quarters on compound."

"It seemed like an imposition," Boyd said with a shrug that mirrored Adam's. He also hadn't wanted to be around anyone who may think to start asking too many questions about where he'd been lately on his down time. He
set his messenger bag on the floor against the end of the couch and turned to look at Adam.

"What about you?" Boyd asked curiously. "You didn't have anyone you wanted to stay with?"

"Not particularly but I didn't put in much effort. I'm not much for slumber parties." Adam's expression didn't change and he looked around the apartment with apparent distaste. "Not exactly thrilled to be in one of these apartments again."

Boyd nodded and sat down on the couch. "I'm hoping it isn't a long stay."

"I count on being here for two or three weeks."

Boyd grimaced at the thought but he couldn't deny that it was entirely possible. Even so, he wondered if Adam knew something he didn't. "What are you basing that on?"

"Common sense," was the morose sounding reply. Adam unzipped the black jacket he was wearing and glared in the general direction of the window. His attitude hadn't gotten any brighter in the past few years. He still had a gloomy expression etched into his pale, handsome face.

"I don't count on them finding the perpetrator of this mess. Whoever did it, wouldn't be sloppy enough to leave traces. And it wouldn't be someone obvious—like the networking team. Whoever it is, is a relative ghost hacker most likely. So unless they start torturing and interrogating everyone computer literate, they won't find squat in a realistic timeframe that would allow them to keep shutting down all missions. But they will be too stubborn to admit this quickly. So two weeks of hunting and one week of pigheadedness. That is my estimate."
"Sounds about right," Boyd had to agree.

He dropped his head back against the couch and stared up at the ceiling. It was too bad everything had happened the way it had; three weeks of down time and being stuck on compound when Sin had been here would have been like a small vacation. Aside from the worrisome aspect of this all, he doubted they would have minded. He could have stayed at Sin's apartment the whole time. It could have been a trial for when they would move in together.

He sighed and looked over at Adam.

"Did you hear any of this was coming or did it blindside you like a lot of people?"

Adam opened his mouth to reply but before he could say anything, his phone began ringing and he turned away abruptly. He flipped the phone open. A man's voice could immediately be heard on the other end, talking loudly and in an obviously annoyed fashion.

"Stop bitching at me for two seconds and let me speak." With that, Adam disappeared into the bedroom as if he hadn't just been in a conversation with Boyd and shut the door behind him.

Boyd watched the door for a moment, his eyebrows shifting up, then decided to look around the apartment. He didn't see any bugs, cameras, or other discreet surveillance. In the course of searching the apartment he overheard part of Adam's conversation and learned that the person on the other line was named Gordon. Since he didn't know any agents named Gordon, he was curious but didn't eavesdrop.

Finally, he settled down on the couch and stared up at the blank white ceiling.
It was the first chance he’d gotten to stay in one place and think. Too many recent revelations came to mind—but for the moment he ignored everything to do with his family and focused instead on Sin.

He couldn’t get out of his mind the way Danny had been so reminiscent of Sin. The aggression, the way he’d grabbed Boyd by the throat and pinned him, the threats that Boyd wasn’t so certain Danny wouldn’t have followed through on doing... It seemed that when he was angry he flashed back to who he used to be.

But it wasn’t only that.

When Boyd had looked into Danny’s eyes, he hadn’t seen the Sin he’d left at his house over a year and a half ago, before he’d gone on his extended mission. The eyes glaring at him had been the ones of the man he’d first met over five years ago—the one whose mental illness had left him unstable at times, and whose violence had sometimes been a danger to those around him.

Boyd covered his face briefly, letting out a low breath. What did that mean? Was it possible that there were more consequences to the loss of Sin's memory? Without the memories of his life, that also meant he wouldn’t remember the lessons Emilio had taught him, the counseling Ann had given him, the friendships he’d gained, and if there was anything Boyd himself had done for Sin that also would be gone...

Without all that, he may have lost his coping mechanisms. Without all that, he may be back to where he had started.
Chapter Twenty

The summer wind was warm on Boyd's cheek, pushing his hair against his face. He rolled up the sleeves of his grey, fitted twill shirt and adjusted the messenger bag's strap on his shoulder. If they were caught in stasis for an extended period of time, he hoped the Agency planned to provide some clothing for everyone because he doubted any of the off-compounders like him had thought to bring change of clothing for what they all assumed would be a quick mandatory meeting. It was pure luck he had thrown some random clothing in his bag at all.

He wondered how many places would be torn apart while the owners were away and unable to hide any damning evidence.

With more people sequestered within the Agency's walls than ever before at one time, the courtyard was more crowded than usual. Some of the people seemed to be making the most of the time, huddled in groups or heading toward the training centers. Boyd had decided to get out of the apartment and get some fresh air.

Adam was an unsurprisingly quiet roommate and although the couch could have been more comfortable, Boyd found he didn't mind sleeping on it too much. Since everyone he knew on compound had one-bedroom apartments as well, it would have been couch surfing anywhere so it was nice to have an option where his roommate was largely unconcerned with his business.

As Boyd passed different groups, he overheard snippets of conversations. Most of the people were wondering about what this all meant, who could be at fault, and whether this had anything to do with information that may have been stolen after the raid. There were more questions than
answers, and with the extra knowledge that Boyd had courtesy of Carhart, he felt there were even more questions that most of the population didn't even know to ask in the first place.

Kassian's comment that it seemed like the Agency was falling apart had stuck with him. Walking toward the second courtyard, sequestered in the back corner of the compound, Boyd found himself wondering briefly if that really was the case.

If the Agency failed, what did that mean for all of them? If the mole couldn't be found, how many agents and officers would be killed before another lock-in was called? Until Carhart and Vivienne's knowledge and inability to stop it was found out and they were killed, and even more of the European Agency came in to seize control of the operation?

Boyd pulled some hair behind his ear, suppressing a sigh. Rather than focusing too much on everything that was far out of his control, he idly listened for any new information and instead tried to enjoy the day.

The leaves of the trees rustled with the wind and birds chirped cheerfully from the branches. He saw a few squirrels darting from tree to tree, pausing occasionally to rise on their haunches and twitch their tails while they peered down at the humans passing below them.

He was heading into a quieter area of the second courtyard, where very few people were, when he saw a familiar figure ahead of him. Ivan was shaded by the canopy of a large oak tree as he leaned against the tree trunk. He was bent over a beat up old notebook and seemed to be writing something quickly with a pen.

Boyd hesitated and then adjusted his route. He automatically quieted his steps, a habit he'd acquired as an agent over the years, but Ivan must
have been paying close attention to his surroundings. He glanced up before Boyd had reached him and closed the notebook.

Without pausing in his approach, Boyd stopped next to Ivan and then crouched down after a moment, feeling awkward staring down at him from a standing position.

"Hi," Boyd greeted him.

"What do you want?" Ivan demanded quietly, his eyes flitting around immediately.

Boyd shrugged and sat down next to him. "I just wanted to talk. I hadn't seen you around for awhile and I'm bored, stuck on compound like this." He glanced down at the notebook. "Working on anything interesting?"

Ivan leaned so far away from Boyd that it was a wonder he didn't topple over. The sunlight reflected off his glasses as he hugged the notebook to his narrow chest. His face went into an almost convulsion of differing expressions before his pale eyebrows drew down. "I don't hate you enough to incriminate you."

The comment caused Boyd to meet Ivan's eyes, his eyebrows furrowing slightly. He studied the other man and then leaned back just a shift, to give Ivan more space so he would feel more comfortable. "Is this about what you mentioned when I was looking for Hsin?"

There was a moment when Ivan looked confused, as if he didn't remember what Boyd was referring to. After a beat of silence the clouded expression cleared, and Ivan leaned forward abruptly even as his eyes once again slid around them. "Yes. But it's all over soon. The Agency won't know. What hit them."
Ivan held Boyd's gaze for a long, hard moment before he climbed to his feet and strode off in the direction of the residential buildings.

Boyd stared after Ivan. What was that supposed to mean? Any way he looked at it, that was an ominous statement.

He'd been hoping Ivan would seem less suspicious as time passed. Months ago he had told Ivan he wouldn't interfere with anything he did and he didn't want to go back on those words. At the same time, while he didn't care what Ivan did to the Agency, he did care if someone was hurting his fellow agents. If he thought of Kassian or Emilio gunned down outside their homes and if he could have stopped it if only he'd said something...

At the same time, Sin had truly cared for Ivan so would he forgive Boyd for relaying something that Ivan had said only in confidence, especially if it endangered Ivan? He thumped his head back against the tree trunk hard. He felt the sting against the back of his head and appreciated it as a way to clear his mind. Far above him, the leaves shifted gently in the breeze, speckling warm sunlight down onto him between the changing shadows.

The conflict of loyalties was only growing stronger each day, it seemed. He didn't know what he would do if someday he had to choose.

With a sigh, he pushed himself up to a stand. For now, he would continue to watch Ivan. The R&D agent wouldn't be able to do anything during lockdown anyway, and he had said the Agency and not the other agents. Maybe whatever he planned wasn't the same thing as what the traitor was doing. Or maybe he was the mole and Boyd's hesitance based on Sin's past relationship with him was going to cost even Carhart and Vivienne their lives.

The thought was suitably disturbing and the renewal of his suspicions of Ivan made him abandon any hope of peaceful relaxation out in the muted
sunlight. He turned around and headed back toward his apartment, deciding to use this free time to do some research he probably should have long ago.

When he opened the apartment door, he didn't see Adam anywhere but the bedroom door was closed. He dropped his messenger bag on the floor and dug around inside until he found his panel. If he was going to look up semi-sensitive information, he determined it was better to do it in the residential buildings where everyone shared the same connectivity and there were no cameras to determine who exactly had made the search.

He sat down in the corner of the couch, sitting sideways so he could pull one leg up at an angle, and started flipping through programs on the panel until he located the Agency database.

He was typing in his password when he heard a door open and glanced up to see Adam entering the room. The other man was holding two large canvas bags and a bottle of water.

"Hi," Boyd greeted him.

Adam flicked him a mildly disinterested look, walked over to the kitchen table and set the bag down. He paused, seemed to debate something, then looked at Boyd again.

"Hello."

The idea that it may have taken a debate for Adam to even say hello or start a conversation made it seem like the man was even more introverted than Boyd used to be. Turning his gaze back down to the panel while he flipped through the database to the search function, Boyd said, "I hope you don't mind that I came back here. I planned to spend some time away from the apartment but decided against it after all."
"It's fine." Adam began taking items out of the bag. "I took the liberty of procuring items from the supply facility."

Boyd paused with his thumbs on the screen over the digital keyboard. Adam had gotten the essentials; toothbrushes and toothpaste, paper plates, and a manner of other items to get them through with the barren apartment. With so many people shoved on compound at once, no doubt it would have taken days to get any of that had they waited for the supply people to bring it on their own.

"I've just now determined you're the best roommate on the compound."

Adam smiled slightly. "I probably am. Apparently everyone else is too moral to steal. They were standing there arguing with the clerks about deliveries. You wouldn't think these people are sent to kill on a regular basis."

Boyd chuckled. "So to them it's only acceptable to use our powers for evil in the outside world?" He shook his head to himself and looked down at the panel again. He input Ivan's name. "I must have missed that day during indoctrination."

"Maybe they think she'll terminate them for stealing hard soap."

"Might be worth it for a shower," Boyd muttered, watching the database open.

Ivan Theodore Andel was born in Chicago and was an only child. There was nothing of significance about his childhood. His mother was dead and he'd been estranged from his father for years even before the Agency came into his life. Ivan had worked as a computer technician in the CIA until he was caught embezzling money, sending it to fraudulent charity accounts. He was known as the Robin Hood Hacker in the paper for awhile. He was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison at which point the Agency recruited him.
He’d always exhibited anti-authoritarian attitude and was reprimanded multiple times. It also said that he was currently on medication for paranoid personality disorder and that according to documentation he had a history of the illness even before he’d joined the Agency. It also noted that he typically worked in Counter-Terrorism with General Willis’ unit.

Boyd kept his expression bland even as he scrolled through the information, looking for anything more specific. Ivan must have been a damn good hacker for the Agency to keep him on and as such a high-level R&D agent despite his sometimes obviously anti-Agency attitude. Boyd didn’t see anything in Ivan’s file to indicate why exactly he seemed to hate the Agency and, it seemed to him sometimes, the world so much. Maybe it was a byproduct of his illness.

Whatever the case, Boyd didn’t have high enough level clearance to get to anything more detailed. What he saw didn’t help him discount Ivan as a suspect at all, although it also didn’t make him much more suspect than he already was.

Now that he’d searched Ivan, though, he didn’t want any reviews of his search history to be too suspect. He figured it would be better to search a number of people so it would seem like he was simply bored. If it turned out Ivan was the mole, he first of all didn’t want Ivan to become even more paranoid seeing Boyd targeting him, and secondly he didn’t want the administration to think he knew something he shouldn’t. And then to wonder why or how he knew, and connect that with the covert meetings with Carhart.

Boyd thought for a moment and decided to input Emilio’s name.

There was a clank as Adam unloaded something heavy from the bag and Boyd glanced up.
It was strange to consider all the twists and turns that had gotten Boyd to this moment; sitting in a living room with a man he barely knew, researching the father and friend of his former lover and partner. He thought about how it had all started, back when he’d first joined the Agency. Back before he’d even expected to live longer than a handful of days.

Even after having joined the Agency, his life easily could have gone in an entirely different direction. If Adam hadn’t backed down, he probably would have become Sin’s partner. With his panel whirring in his hands and potentially weeks ahead of being stuck away from Sin once more, he found himself curious.

"Can I ask you a question?"

“You can do what you want but I don’t know if I’ll answer,” Adam replied calmly. He’d somehow managed to pilfer a small container of colorful looking cereal.

“When we were both vying for the position of being Hsin’s partner, why did you withdraw?"

Adam peeled the top off of the cereal container and sat in the chair. He studied the colorful puff for a moment before popping it into his mouth. "It seemed like more trouble than it was worth."

"How so?" Boyd rested the panel against his knee at an angle that kept it away from Adam’s view.

"He seemed difficult to deal with and I didn’t care enough about the position to even try."

"Then why did you go for it in the first place?" Boyd asked curiously. "His reputation must have preceded him."
"I was nominated. I didn't want to go. I have better things to do with my time." Adam popped another colorful corn puff into his mouth and raised his eyebrows.

"Like what?"

"Sleep."

The comment, said so seriously, startled a laugh out of Boyd. "Well, I suppose I have your narcolepsy to thank," he said mildly.

Adam chewed slowly, still staring at Boyd. Only after he swallowed did he say flatly, "It's not like it worked out so well for you."

Boyd paused. "Which part are you referring to?"

Adam shrugged his broad shoulders and dusted his hands off. He stood and moved over to the sink. "I'm not going to dance around the elephant in this conversation. I'm talking about Sin being terminated. Everyone knew you two were together. It isn't as though there was a happily ever after."

Boyd looked pensively back down at the panel. Emilio's profile had loaded but he didn't read it yet; just looked blankly at the words. He was silent, a frown touching his lips and drawing down his eyebrows.

"I won't deny that I was devastated at first," he admitted. "Furious, in fact. But over the months I had more time to think about it. I realized that I won't ever get over him but maybe because of that, I know it was worth it to have been with him in the first place even with the ending we had."

"Huh." Adam opened his bottle of water, gave Boyd a thoughtful once over, and then was distracted by his cell phone beeping.
Boyd returned his attention to the panel. He saw that there was quite a bit of information in Emilio’s directory and opened the main files.

Emilio Alvado Vega, son of Yaritza Aguilera and Christian Vega, was born in California. Yaritza had been the daughter of a rich entrepreneur from Brazil while Christian’s family had been in Mexico for generations. There were a few pictures interspersed and Boyd saw that Yaritza’s captivating features that had been passed down to her son and, later, to Sin. Although for all her beauty, Yaritza had been unstable. She’d been a suspect in the murders of two women in California, and had later murdered Emilio’s younger, twin sisters. According to the police reports, Christian Vega killed her and disappeared from the United States with Emilio.

After that, the tragedies in Emilio’s life only continued. He appeared to have lived alone on the streets of Brazil not too long after the murders. There were records of arrests for theft and prostitution.

There was a picture included in the file that gave Boyd pause. A very young Emilio was in a hospital room, his face bloody and injured. He’d obviously been severely beaten and he was looking over someone’s shoulder with a disturbed, worried expression. He was obviously malnourished, and his green eyes huge in his gaunt face. The image was scanned from a magazine article about homeless children in Rio. The picture had likely been chosen randomly, and Boyd wouldn’t be surprised to find out if the journalists had simply dumped him back on the street after.

The young Emilio reminded Boyd of Sin; of what he must have looked like at that age when he’d also been fending off the effects of the abusive life he’d been given.

He lingered on that picture for a moment before he returned to perusing the information. At some point Emilio had reunited with his father in Mexico. He became involved in drug and weapon smuggling and gained a
reputation as not only a criminal protege but a master at business. He’d convinced his father to put aside brewing rivalry with the Triads over turf in California, and work together to capitalize off the chaos of the economy in the years before the war. Emilio became a major player in the cartel and eventually started traveling to China on business. Eventually, he broke off from the cartel and started the gang *Mara Tres* which later evolved into 4FF.

Boyd looked through more of the pictures and found that the resemblance to Sin was especially prominent when Emilio had been younger. He flipped through a few more screens and saw the notation that Emilio had two known sons; Hsin Liu Vega and Damian Perry. Boyd’s curiosity was piqued and he moved back through the folders until he found one dedicated to Damian.

Damian Austin Perry, aka Chance, was born in Las Vegas. His mother was Gemini Perry, a showgirl, and according to the notes, Chance didn’t know about Emilio or Sin. After a fling with Emilio, Gemini lied and told him that she’d aborted their child. Damian was initially given Emilio’s last name but she later legally changed it to Perry. She died of cancer when Damian was thirteen years old, at which point he was sent to live with his wealthy grandparents. For unknown reasons he ran away as a teen. Despite this, Damian eventually inherited the estates of both his mother and grandparents.

Damian was listed as being the CEO of Skyn, a pornography company based out of Lexington. Despite being wealthy, for years, Damian had been immersed in the drug trade of post-war Lexington. He was the sole distributor of Pandora in Lexington, Carson and surrounding areas, connected to various law enforcement officials, politicians, and ties in both Outlaws and South Side Boys.

There was a notation that he was somehow connected to Auroura Whitecap, a chemist who was on several government watch lists. Auroura
was linked to various other experimental drug labs, and had connections to black market groups and rebel organizations. Through a chain, she was believed to be related to Janus and other terrorist groups due to her widespread research and scientific experiments with drugs and bio-weaponry.

There was a note that Damian appeared to be unaware of this indirect connection but that he may be utilized in the future if there was need. He was currently on a high level watch list.

There was a picture of Damian. Boyd could see the resemblance to Emilio and Sin clearly. Damian wasn't a carbon copy of Emilio like Sin was, but he had the same high cheekbones and a similarly formed mouth. His skin tone was much fairer than his father or half-brother, making him appear to be more Caucasian. His eyes weren't the striking green of his family but they were hazel with flecks of orange that stood out from his dark eyelashes. He had that same peculiar quality of near-beauty that made his face seem unforgettable.

Boyd studied Damian for a moment, eyes narrowing as he ran his gaze along the brother that Sin never knew he had.

He was deep in thought about that when his bag suddenly made a buzzing sound. He jumped, startled out of his reverie, and tilted the panel up as he looked down at the end of the couch. The whirring noise came again, insistently. He dragged the bag over, digging inside until he found his Agency phone. Two texts had come almost on top of each other.

The first was from Ryan, telling him his roommate Wilkes planned to move to another room tomorrow and inviting him over to hang out sometime afterward if he wanted. The second was from Owen and was more incoherent.

'dd u get this 1st?' it read. 'context! btw at cafe, crnbrd rulz.'
It took Boyd a moment of staring blankly at the text to realize that Owen and Ryan must be at the cafe eating together and apparently there had been some sort of contest to see who could text him first. Since Ryan actually had something meaningful to say in his, he could only assume Owen had lost a self-appointed race.

Shaking his head to himself in bemusement, Boyd texted Ryan to say thanks and he’d let him know later. He then informed Owen that he’d lost.

’damn!’ Owen texted back immediately. ‘all or nothin nxt time.’

Ryan just wrote back, ‘cool.’

A small smile passed over Boyd’s lips before he dropped his phone back into his bag. He felt a strange affection for the R&D agents at that moment, who were both rather odd in their own way but who kept going out of their way to include him even when he was avoiding others.

He returned his gaze to the panel and found that he’d lost much of his attention for in depth research on anyone else. He checked out a few things, including visiting Skyn’s website to see what it was. It turned out that was an adult video business, which made Boyd's eyes narrow as he settled back into the couch.

He couldn’t say that he was too impressed with Damian. The man had been given an option for a better life, unlike Emilio or Sin, and he’d chosen not to take it. Although, what actually bothered him was that Damian had later used his wealth and influence to capitalize on sex and drugs.

It put Boyd too much in mind of the way Aleixo had operated, which left a bad taste in his mouth. A flash of a memory hit him; warm winds, brilliant blues and whites stretching out beneath the balcony, a blinking light and that man’s voice. ‘If I expand my enterprise...’
Boyd abruptly shut off the panel and tossed it on the other end of the couch with tightened lips and a cool glare. That was all meaningless now. He was the one in control now. None of that could hurt him anymore.

Now that Boyd wasn't looking at the panel he realized he could hear Adam's voice faintly coming from the open bedroom. He seemed to be talking on his phone.

"I already told you," Adam was saying quietly, his tone annoyed. "I can't leave."

Another pause. "You can do what you want."

The last sentence was said coldly and there was an audible thump as Adam dropped his phone on whatever surface it landed. He exited his bedroom shortly after, stopped, looked at Boyd, looked back at his room and frowned.

Boyd watched Adam thoughtfully. From the sound of it, he was talking to someone outside of the Agency.

"Was that the person you were talking to yesterday?" he asked idly.

Adam gave him one of those looks where it seemed that he was debating not even bothering to answer and just walking away. He flexed his fingers idly and studied Boyd before finally answer. "Yes. Why?"

Boyd shrugged and swung his legs over the side of the couch to sit up normally. He rolled his shoulders to release some of the kinks. "Just wondering. You seem to argue with him a lot. Who is he?"

"How do you know it's a he?"

"Because I don't know many women named Gordon." Boyd picked up his panel and slid it into his bag. "I wasn't eavesdropping, in case you wonder."
I just happened to overhear it yesterday when I was doing a sweep of the room for bugs."

"Ah." Another pause, then. "He's my boyfriend, I suppose."

"And he's a civilian?"

Adam crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes. I prefer civilians."

That caused Boyd to consider Adam more closely. "Why?"

"I think most Agency people are full of shit. Civilians in general are more straight-forward, and less neurotic." Adam paused and quirked an eyebrow. "Most of them, anyway."

"What about the secrecy? Doesn't that put a strain on your relationship?"

There was another beat of silence and then Adam just said simply, "No."

"How? What do you tell him when you suddenly have to leave on assignment, or for instance at a time like this when we're incapable of leaving for an indefinite period of time? Does the Murphy Corps cover work well enough on its own?"

"I don't have a Murphy Corps cover."

"What cover do you use?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Adam observed.

"I'm a curious person," Boyd replied with a shrug.

Adam's mouth quirked slightly although it wasn't really a smile. "I have a civilian cover. One that necessitates a vast amount of travel. And to answer your other question, he knows better than to question me."
"Ah," Boyd said in understanding. "Have you known him long?"

"A few years." Adam stared at him oddly. "Why are you so interested?"

"You're the first person I've met at the Agency who's said that a civilian relationship has worked and that the secrecy doesn't create a rift between you," Boyd replied with a shrug. "I find that to be interesting."

"Ah." And with that, Adam took a towel out of one of the bags and walked toward the bathroom without another word.

Boyd's gaze tracked him briefly before sliding away to settle on thin air. He leaned back against the couch and wondered whether Sin would ever trust him again, and even if he did would they ever get to a point where the secrecy didn’t come between them?

===

The tell tale sign of Ryan approaching was the combination of his huge backpack thumping against his narrow back and the thick soles of his sneakers squeaking across the floor in a fast pace. It wasn't too surprising when he appeared in front of Boyd, dropping his bag to his feet and plopping himself down in one of the chairs opposite Boyd.

"Man, this place is packed," he said, looking around the cafeteria with a little grimace. "By the time I wait in line, anything worth eating will be gone. Oh by the way, I invited Bree. She's meeting us here in a minute."

Boyd's eyebrows lifted. "Bree?" he echoed. "Why?"

Ryan twisted his mouth to the side, indigo eyes widening slightly. "Can you believe I failed at researching? I think it's the first time I haven't been able to dig something up." There was a beat as he let that sink in before rolling his shoulders in a shrug. "I stayed up for two nights trying to find something on Vanguard Industries like you asked and it's like... buried so deep or just not
listed anywhere on the Internet that I couldn't find even a mention. Not even in an old periodical. It's weird."

Lifting a hand to gesture vaguely, Ryan dropped it almost instantly to grab at his backpack. "So anyway, I asked Bree to come so I can pick her brain about my fail researching."

A mote of unease shifted in Boyd's stomach. He braced his forearms on the edge of the table and leaned a little closer. He hadn't told Ryan why he was looking into Vanguard Industries because he hadn't thought it would be this difficult and he didn't even know for certain what he expected to learn.

Riley's offhanded comment about Vanguard Industries had bothered him. Although Boyd had never heard of the group, his father's described behavior seemed suspicious, especially knowing he had died soon afterward. At first Boyd had thought maybe he could find out more about the sorts of topics his father had been doing research on but if it was actually so difficult Ryan needed to pull someone else in on it, that seemed even more suspicious.

"Do you think that's wise?" he asked quietly, glancing discreetly around the room.

They'd chosen the cafeteria because it was one of the few places on compound they could be almost certain they wouldn't be overheard by surveillance; with so much background noise the Agency wouldn't have audio on the cameras here, and with so many conversations they wouldn't have the ability to zero in on every face to read lips. As for regular eavesdropping, that was easy enough to avoid by choosing the right table and speaking at the correct volume.

"If it's buried that deep it may be dangerous to talk freely about it. Can she be trusted?"
"Bree is the only higher up I trust other than Zachary," Ryan said without hesitation. "She's covered up a ton of shit that I did when I was first starting out. Mistakes and stuff. She's helped Owen too sometimes. Don't worry, I wouldn't ask for help from just anyone. She's always had my back."

"Alright," Boyd said, relaxing minutely back into his chair. "If you trust her then I do too."

"Cool." Ryan dug around in his backpack and pulled out a laptop and a granola bar. The wrapper crinkled as he booted up his computer and looked around. "How's rooming with Adam?"

"Interesting." Boyd leaned back in his chair and glanced around the cafeteria, absently looking for his roommate. "He's fairly quiet and doesn't offer up much information freely but if you know what to say he'll get into a conversation." He shrugged and returned his attention to Ryan. "I wonder if that's how I seemed to others when I first came here. I've been told I seemed a bit standoffish."

"Uh. Yeah." Ryan smirked at Boyd, moving his index finger around the track pad. "Most people think you just had a snotty stick up your ass."

He opened his mouth to say more but before he could, his eyes fell on someone. Sitting up straighter, Ryan waved and his mouth stretched into a wider smile. Jenny White was hobbling down the aisle between the tables with crutches propped under each arm as she gripped a protein shake in one hand. When she spotted Ryan, she stopped by their table.

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Like an invalid. Hey Boyd."
"Hi Jenny." Boyd glanced down at her injuries. It certainly seemed genuine which so far made Jon's story seem legitimate. "I heard you ran into trouble on a mission. What happened?"

She leaned against her crutches, the cast going all the way up her leg and ending at the upper part of her thigh where a pair of cutoff jeans ended. "Me and Jonny Boy were shutting down a rebel nest. We did recon for a couple of days and things were fine, but then on the day of the raid all of a sudden it was like they knew we were coming. It was insane, we barely got out."

Boyd frowned slightly. "Strange... I'm glad to see you both made it. Did you go in together? It seemed like Jon was a little luckier."

Jenny paused for a moment, tilting her head and giving him a slightly strange look before answering. "Yeah. The plan was for us to split and set up the detonators but we both got ambushed. I doubled back to the van to get the hell out of there and picked up Jon just before the charges were about to go off. That gorgeous face of his was already gruesome though. Poor thing."

Ryan made a low sound at that and Jenny raised her eyebrows at him.

"What was that?"

He flashed her an innocent smile. "I didn't say anything."

"Uh huh." She made a face. "For a compound full of deadly trained assassins and hackers, you all gossip like a bunch of old women."

Boyd spread his hands and asked dryly, "What else are we supposed to do to pass the time? Especially now that we're all stuck here..."

"Clean your guns and practice your hand to hand," she suggested. When Ryan opened his mouth with a smirk, Jenny waved her hand to cut him
off before he could dispute the suggestion. "I'll see you guys later. I have a protein shake to down and some hand weights to squeeze."

Snickering, Ryan waved as she walked away before turning his attention back to Boyd. "She banged Jon, by the way."

Boyd shifted his gaze from Jenny disappearing into the crowd to meeting Ryan's eyes. "How do you know?"

Ryan took a massive bite out of his granola bar and shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Everyone knows. I dunno how. I heard it from someone in R&D who was on a team with Jon on some mission. I think that's why Harriet is back to being grimface."

"Hmm." Boyd glanced after Jenny again but couldn't see her. "I can't blame her."

He pulled out a protein bar from his bag and unwrapped it thoughtfully. He wasn't surprised to hear the news—he'd recently been able to follow Jon to see if he was the traitor and he'd ended up seeing Jon together with another woman.

But it made Boyd wonder. With Jon's mission being compromised like other agents' missions, Jon and Jenny both being hurt, and another case of Jon sleeping with another woman behind Harriet's back, the only thing Boyd could prove was that Jon was an adulterer. Was there anything else going on despite a lack of any evidence or should Jon be crossed off the list? With so many other people to investigate he had to spend his time wisely but he was also hesitant to dismiss a name completely until he was positive.

Boyd pushed the wrapping down and took a bite of the protein bar, glancing across the room. He realized he was absently looking for Harriet's dark head of hair and wondered how she was doing. When he'd seen Jon with another woman he'd wondered if he should say anything but there hadn't
been a way to admit to witnessing that without having to come up with a reason for why he’d been following Jon in the first place. It seemed it was no longer necessary to worry about warning her; with the whole compound knowing he was playing her, it was a wonder she hadn't broken up with him already.

As he was contemplating that, he saw a shock of pale hair and noticed Bree heading toward them. Her face was pinched, lips flattened into a tight line and skin paler than usual. She stalked towards them with sharp, angry movements and didn’t stop to joke with people or shout out random nicknames like she usually did. When she finally reached their table, she slid in next to Boyd and put her hands flat on the table.

Ryan stopped in mid bite when he saw her, eyebrows drawing together. "What's wrong?"

The question earned him a disgusted scoff and Bree ripped her tinted glasses off her face, wiping a hand over her eyes roughly. She shook her head, lips pressing together tighter, and then glanced at Boyd. There was a brief hesitation and then she just slapped her hand down on the table again.

"That little cunt got me demoted."

"What? Who?" Ryan demanded, voice going from loud and alarmed to low and hushed almost instantly.

"Jordan," Bree growled, thin hand balling into a fist. "That fucking little twat. I'm such an idiot."

"What?" Boyd asked sharply, dropping his voice as well. "What happened?"

Bree shook her head, delicate strands of blond hair moving around as she did so. There was a flash of anger in her face that was completely
different from her usual grins and easygoing expressions. "The sum of it is, I let her climb into my bed and she snooped around my apartment after and got enough dirt on me to get me demoted. Or up for review. Whatever the flying motherfuck that means in this administration."

"Shit," Boyd hissed quietly. "Why do you think she targeted you?"

"I should have seen this sooner," Bree said, shaking her head angrily and raking a hand through her hair. She exhaled noisily, eyes rolling in disgust. "It's a known thing in the upper ranks that she's a honey trap. It wasn't always known but, all she does is try to fuck Instructors and Generals and Captains—and then after what happened with General Hughes it was for sure. He said a couple of things in front of her about the new Marshal and the old admin, and then he's up for review and his clearance was downgraded. But fuck, I'm not a risk. No one bothers me and I don't bother anyone, I just do my job. I didn't think letting the little skank go down on me would have repercussions other than a good time. Who knew she was smart enough to hack into my shit."

"When did that happen with Hughes?" Boyd asked.

Bree exhaled noisily, causing her bangs to stir as she sat back in the chair with a thud. "A month ago or so. Not that far back. I just didn't think it would matter if I messed around with her since I've never been red flagged for anything, but I guess she's looking into anyone of authority."

Ryan stared at Bree, mouth drawn down. "I'm really surprised at you. She's so obviously a bad idea. Like, what did she even get on you?"

"Stupid shit. Or shit that I didn't think would be that big of a deal." Bree shrugged her shoulders, scowling. "Well, I guess I knew it would be. I had it encrypted but she's an amazing hacker apparently. I was following a couple of
agents who are under review for termination. Apparently they don't like me snooping."

"Damn it," Ryan said, eyebrows drawing together.

Boyd's eyebrows shifted up slightly. "If you can answer, why were you looking into them?"

Bree rolled her eyes at him. "Why do you think, Double B? To make sure they didn't get themselves dead. I was giving my people a heads up when they got red flagged. Stupid, risky, but whatever. I didn't think it would get me red flagged since I don't change anything or touch any records. I just... watch. Fucking bitch Jordan."

"Ah, it was your own people..." Boyd said in understanding, leaning back in his chair. His half-eaten protein bar sat laxly in his fingers until he thought to set it down on the table. "I thought you were watching anyone up for termination in the entire Agency and had chosen a select few to track more closely."

"Well... I thought about it," she said slowly, looking down at the lenses of her glasses with a frown. "But there's been so many that I didn't want to make myself obvious when I start shadowing files."

Ryan was still shaking his head, frowning at his mentor and looking more than a little disappointed in her. He sighed, rolling his shoulders before hunching them forward. "So what happens now?"

"Fuck knows." Bree ran her fingers through her hair again, frustration evident on her youthful face. "She didn't mention termination, but she was obviously not happy and she said she was having my file analyzed and reviewed. There's going to be a whole goddamn investigation and then I find out if I get my clearance back."
"Not as bad as it could be," Ryan conceded, relaxing a bit and reaching out to pat her hand.

She looked at him incredulously, but after looking into his wide blue eyes her mouth twisted into a tiny smile and she inclined her head reluctantly. "Yeah. I guess. Anyway, what did you want to ask me about?"

Boyd sighed and pushed the protein bar out of the way as he leaned forward. He crossed his arms against the table top and studied Bree briefly. "Well, I hate to ask now, especially since you likely don't have the clearance to do any necessary research. I was going to ask if you knew what the background is on Vanguard Industries."

Bree's eyebrows shot up and she looked from him to Ryan in surprise. "Vanguard Industries? That name hasn't been used in a couple of decades, kiddos. What brings that up?"

"So you have heard about it?" Boyd asked, feeling equal parts relieved and surprised. Apparently Ryan had been right to call her in. "I heard the name mentioned in relation to an old incident but I'd never heard of it so I grew curious."

Ryan kept his eyes on his own laptop as Boyd spoke. He'd made it obvious during their initial conversation that he didn't entirely buy this explanation but he didn't seem to be in a rush to go over that in front of Bree. She, however, didn't seem to be in the mood to push it and just shrugged.

"I don't even have to look anything up about that, boys. Vanguard was the Agency's Murphy Corps of the 90s and early 2000s."

"The Agency?" Boyd said in surprise, straightening in his chair. His hands curled into fists and although his attention focused solely on Bree he made an effort to keep his expression neutral to keep from drawing attention to himself.
He felt a pit grow in his stomach. What had his father been doing, mentioning anything related to the Agency? "If that's the case, why haven't Ryan or I heard about it? Why are we using Murphy Corps now?"

"I dunno. They switched it up. After awhile these alleged black ops merc group covers get too noticed and get a bad rap and I guess they change things up so the heat dies down. Vanguard was around during the peak of war time so shit was always hot, and the Agency had a lot to cover up." Bree twisted her mouth to the side, eyes still distant even as she spoke.

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "Do you know what year it changed over?"

Her thin shoulders rose but some of the distracted disinterest faded as Bree picked up on his intensity. "I'm not sure. Maybe fifteen years ago? More? It was right around the time your boy joined up or a couple of years after. I remember because we talked about him not needing a civilian cover since he was batshit insane."

Ryan wrinkled his nose. "So why don't I remember it then?"

"Because you were too busy running after Ann and Lydia." There was a pause. "Okay, so you were probably too busy hacking into government computers for fun or something ridiculous like that. It was before they noticed your talent."

Leaning back in his chair, Boyd only half paid attention to their conversation as he calculated the timing. Sin had joined around 2005, so if Vanguard disappeared within a few years of that it put it right around the time his father had died in 2007.

Or had been killed.

The conversations in the room suddenly seemed very far away as Boyd looked blindly down at the table. His father had mentioned Vanguard
Industries and a week later he had suddenly died in the bombs? His limbs felt like they were tingling, his throat heavy with even the effort to breathe easily.

Was it possible there was a connection between the two? Was it possible his father had somehow become involved in the Agency or learned something in regards to the cover story and, to protect itself, the Agency had reacted?

But he'd been killed in the bombs. That was the one truth Boyd had always known. His father had been the one person taken from his life unexpectedly but in a manner that was beyond anyone's control. It was just bad luck, bad timing, being in the wrong place...

Unless it hadn’t been.

It was bad enough hearing that his grandparents had been killed in the wave of Lexington bombs, which had occurred because Connors had gotten their city targeted as they tried to take out the Agency, but with this unexpected connection between the old Murphy Corps and his father, and on top of that his own suspicions about Sin's abrupt disappearance and sudden loss of memory... Had everyone he had ever loved or might have loved, other than Lou, been taken from him at the Agency's hands?

For a moment he wanted nothing more than to run off the compound; to get as far away from these cameras and the oppression and the paranoia as possible. He felt like every truth he had thought he'd known in the past several months was being questioned and, more often, turned on end. Every time he caught his balance, every time he thought he knew what to expect, something new occurred which made him have to question everything all over again.
The cafeteria light shone dully off the silver wrapper of the protein bar. He latched onto that, focusing on it to the exclusion of all else just long enough to get his spiraling thoughts under control.

*Think*, he urged himself.

His mother would never have worked at the Agency if they'd had anything to do with his father's death; that much, at least, he felt he could be certain about. As certain as he could be about anything. If the Agency had been involved, there would be record of it. Every mission was recorded and reviewed religiously. That was one more certainty Boyd felt fairly confident having. Which meant there must be some way to verify whether he was going in completely the wrong direction out of paranoia.

Or to verify he was right.

After a moment of debating, he decided he had to trust *someone* in the Agency who had access to the secure databases—and if he couldn't trust Ryan and who Ryan trusted, then he couldn't trust anyone.

"I know you're under investigation," Boyd said, glancing briefly at Bree before turning his gaze to Ryan as well to include him when he continued. "But do either of you have a list of agents and their ranks for years past? Or have a way of accessing past mission assignments?"

They both stared at him for a moment before Bree gestured. "Sure, there's tons of archives. If a mission wasn't considered super duper top secret they can be accessed for training and studying purposes on the database. Anything else can of course be hacked. Same with agent lists. But uh," she raised her eyebrows far above the top of her tinted glasses. "Any particular reason why?"

"There is, but..." Boyd hesitated, looking away from the other two to take in the other agents surrounding them.
The cafeteria was packed more than ever; likely because there had never been so many people stuck on compound at one time. Even though so many people provided good cover, it also made him more paranoid. He didn't feel safe saying anything about his father until he knew for sure. Because if it turned out he was right, then he suspected no one was ever supposed to have learned this truth. Otherwise they would have put the information right in his profile, the way they linked any Agency-related tidbit to the background checks of all staff.

He sighed, grimacing faintly before turning honey brown eyes back onto Bree. "I can't give you specifics right now. I'm sorry; I know it's terrible of me to ask so many questions without giving you any answers, but it's not safe to say anything further right now. I just... think something happened and want to verify it."

Bree and Ryan exchanged a long look. They seemed to have some kind of unspoken language down pat, because when they turned their gazes back to him they both nodded in agreement.

"I'll help in any way I can," she said without hesitation. "My clearance is a little fucked right now, and I don't know how deep Ryan can honestly dig without red flagging himself but there's hard copies of all of that shit in Chandler."

At that, Ryan's head whipped around to stare at her again. "Chandler Heights? Say what?"

A smirk found its way onto Bree's petite features, and she gave them both a haughty look from over her glasses. "You darlings can't know everything. And I have no reason to keep their top secret secrets anymore. Especially not ones that don't require internet access."
"And?" Ryan demanded, clearly impatient to get to the point. It was rare that Ryan did not know something about the Agency since he'd been born and raised on the compound. Judging from the pucker in his brow, he wasn't pleased by this development.

"Calm down, grasshopper. I just happen to have found out over time that there's an off compound site where data is stored. After the compound was bombed the first time, the big ups decided that keeping all of our files and data on experimental weapons in one place was a big no-no. They lost a ton of intel back then, and the scientists who designed it had died. And keeping it all on a network that could be crashed wasn't that promising either." There was a brief pause. "You really can't tell anyone that, though. I doubt even Zachary knows. Well, he might. But, I only know because top secret info is kind of my thing."

Ryan's lower lip was actually sticking out at this point. "It's my thing too!"

"Oh, don't be a brat," she groused.

Eyebrows raising slightly, Boyd rested his forearms against the edge of the table to lean closer. "Where is this site?"

"Locked down. Crazy security. Impossible to break into, probably." Bree ticked each thing off on her finger before giving him a slight smile. "Unless you know someone who is good at breaking in and out of places that should be impossible to break into. Places with crazy security. Compounds, even."

Boyd's lips almost lifted on the edge before he stopped himself. He knew exactly who fit that profile and Bree did too. He met her eyes to silently let her know he understood and then nodded. "Thank you."

She gave a sarcastic little salute, but the smile hadn't left her lips.
Chapter Twenty-One

It was one of those mornings when the sun was shining brightly. Beams of light were streaming through the windows, casting a golden sheen on the wall. The sky was bluer than Carhart had seen it in ages, and birds were singing in the trees that had grown in full and vibrantly green near the windows.

It was a beautiful morning.

He stared blankly down into the pan of sautéing vegetables, attention drawn by the sizzle. The tomatoes, peppers and onions were softening in the olive oil. They could probably be stirred, but he just stood there and looked. His arms dangled at his sides, shoulders pushed forward slightly and his head tilted.

His mind was on autopilot. He was wondering how it felt to be incinerated, and if they truly killed a person first or just burned them alive. He wondered what they had done to Sin. He remembered a flash of bloodshot green eyes looking at him and the cloud of misery that had rolled off of that long lean body in waves. He remembered doing nothing, and being selfish.

He wondered what Morgan had been doing when the bullet had penetrated her skull. What Aisha's task had been that had saved Vivienne but obliterated the young woman who had been a constant at her side for the past two years.

A sharp rapping on the door jolted Carhart out of the reverie he had fallen into.

He blinked and shook his head, rubbing the back of his hand across his face and flicking off the burner. The smell of the cooking vegetables had
begun to have a faintly burnt tinge. He looked around the kitchen and wondered why the hell he was even bothering to cook other than there wasn't anything better to do. Weeks of no incoming or outgoing missions had finally cleared his desk.

He padded across the apartment barefoot, wondering who the hell it could be. He wasn't dressed appropriately for company. His jeans were beltless and hanging off of him due to recent and unfortunate weight loss, and his flannel shirt was open over his bare chest.

Looking through the peephole, Carhart scowled and swung the door open quickly. He opened his mouth to shout at Emilio, shut it, and then dragged the other man inside forcefully.

"Easy on the merchandise," Emilio drawled, shaking him off. "Cojelo suave, boss man."

"What the fuck are you thinking?" Carhart demanded, kicking the door shut and turning on the other man. "Are you an idiot?"

A flash of irritation darkened Emilio's expression and he looked Carhart over, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why don't you get your head out of your ass and stop assuming shit?"

Carhart opened his mouth to yell again, bit his tongue and took a deep calming breath. He closed his eyes briefly, inhaling and exhaling again.

"Why are you knocking on my front door?"

"That's better." Emilio grinned again, letting his gaze move over his former partner more deliberately. He wet his lips absently, eyes hanging on the dipping waistband of Carhart's jeans, before he looked away and walked over to the kitchen.

"I just had a meeting with Kattyros."
Carhart stared at him, translating. "Katsaros?"

"Yeah. Whatever." Emilio shrugged and took off his leather jacket, tossing it over a chair to expose a nearly skintight black t-shirt that hugged his biceps and chest. "What you cookin'?"

"I was going to make an omelet. What did he say?"

"Can I have some?"

"Emilio."

Emilio sighed and leaned against the counter, rolling his eyes. "Relax, man. He wanted to make it clear that he likes my style, and my work, and that even if some Generals don't appreciate it, he ain't like that. Gave me a big talk about unprofessionalism and people who be holding personal grudges and shit."

Carhart grimaced and turned away, dragging the carton of eggs over. "I told you this would happen. But why would that make you think it's okay to make it obvious that we've reconciled?"

"Is that what you call it?" Emilio asked, his gaze burning into Carhart's back.

"Get to the point, Vega," Carhart growled, staring at the carton of eggs without touching them. He felt tension seeping into him which only intensified when Emilio moved closer.

"’Cause he also recommended that I try to make nice with you and fake apologize for whatever he thinks you think I did so I can keep an eye on your ass." There was a hint of a laugh in Emilio's deep voice as he moved a step closer.
Carhart nodded, cerulean eyes narrowing in thought. Katsaros was playing the same game that Vivienne was. It wasn't surprising. "Why does he need you to do this when they have Bex in my unit?"

Emilio scoffed at that. "I asked the same shit. He made it sound like she ain't the best at keeping an eye out. She's too into like, her actual job. And from the way he said it, I think they think she respects you too much. She's too fucking thick to play spy games, not like her sis."

"Hmm."

There was a beat of silence as Carhart stared into space, his mind churning with this new information. On one hand, it made it obvious that Vivienne had been right all along about getting Emilio on their side. He didn't truly think Emilio would have betrayed him before but it also didn't mean the other man would have gone out of his way to bring him information. On the other, it was disconcerting to know that Katsaros was making moves against him already and so boldly. It made the icy pit in his stomach spread, and he closed his eyes again.

Strong hands slid up his back and squeezed his shoulders, massaging slowly. It felt good and it would have been easy for Carhart to lean into it, but it just made him tense up again.

"Just chill out," Emilio said, his voice close to Carhart's ear.

"I'm fine."

"Bullshit. You're paranoid."

Carhart turned, facing the other man with a frown. Emilio didn't back up and if anything he leaned forward, bracing each of his hands on each side of Carhart on the counter.
"I am paranoid. I didn't think my number would come up for such a bullshit reason."

Emilio's eyes narrowed. "Your number ain't up yet. Stop talking stupid."

Carhart shook his head, blond hair brushing against his forehead. "It's just a matter of time. We can delay it but it's inevitable. She wants me gone, he wants me gone, and they can do it easily en—"

"Shut the fuck up, Zachary."

Carhart stopped talking, refocusing on Emilio. The other man's brows had drawn together and his mouth was curved down into a frown. He was shaking his head and glowering, shoulders hunched forward.

"Looking at this through rose tinted glasses isn't going to change a thing. You of all people should know what's what," Carhart said emotionlessly.

Emilio flinched at the words, looking away sharply. "Just fucking stop. I don't want to hear it."

"Why? Why not be ready for it? So it won't be like with Si—"

Emilio's grabbed the front of his shirt and jerked him forward before slamming him back against the counter hard. The edge dug into Carhart's lower back.

"I told you to stop."

Carhart's eyes narrowed. "Deal with it," he growled back. "Because it's the fucking truth. I won't be around for much longer. Get used to the idea, Vega."

Emilio's fingers clenched in the fabric of Carhart's flannel shirt. He shook his head, lips pressing together briefly as their eyes met.
"You get off on this. Don't you?"

"On what?" Carhart asked flatly, not bothering to pull away even when their noses brushed and Emilio's mouth came close to his own.

"On doing shit, on saying shit, that you know..." Emilio trailed off, his jaw clenching as he looked away briefly. He exhaled and returned his gaze unflinchingly. "You get your nut off by seeing me react to all of the fucked up shit you say to me."

There was a moment when Carhart thought about denying it. He thought about denying that he got a perverse thrill from seeing Emilio hurt over something he himself had inflicted. That he got satisfaction out of seeing the raw pain on Emilio's face at the idea of them being separated forever. It was twisted, but he'd reconciled with that fact long ago. So he said simply, "You're right."

"Why?" Emilio demanded. "I thought we was—I thought you were—"

Carhart shook his head. "It's not about that. I just like the effect I have on you."

"You mean the power you fucking have over me," Emilio said bitterly.

"Yes."

"Man, and people think I'm a sick fuck."

Carhart shrugged in response. "Get your hands off me."

"What if I don't want to?"

A low sigh escaped Carhart's mouth. "What's your problem now? You wanted to know why and I told you why. It's always been fucked up between us, and you know this. It's always been a game of who's in control when and
where. You can beat the shit out of me physically and I'm probably the only person in this world who can hurt your feelings."

"You don't hurt my fucking feelings," Emilio snapped, lips still curled down in the same frown of displeasure.

"Right."

Carhart reached up to untangle Emilio's hands but it was like trying to unbend steel. He swore and wedged his fingers beneath Emilio's but Emilio responded by twisting his arms back and pinning them against the counter.

"What I don't get is why you even give a shit about the effect you have on me," Emilio said in the same bitter tone. His eyes flashed as dark hair hung in his face. "You don't give a fuck about me. You don't even really want me all that much."

The automatic reaction to agree with that just to dig deeper was swallowed almost instantly. Carhart allowed himself to be pinned against the counter, and didn't say anything at all.

"Since that night I ain't seen you but a handful of times. And even then, you never..."

Emilio trailed off and Carhart could finish the sentence easily enough on his own. He had never really shown the same aggressive desire for Emilio again. It was always Emilio making the first move, showing the most interest, wanting to see him.

"But like, you somehow find the time to take her all the fuck over town, right? To fucking stay the night?"

"That's different," Carhart said quietly, looking away. "And I don't want to talk about it with you."
"Why? 'Cause she's so fucking special? Well if that's the goddamn case then why did you ever start this shit up with me? To mindfuck me some more so you can get off knowing you have the power to break Emilio Fucking Vega down?"

Emilio's voice was rising now and there was the kind of fury in it that meant an impending beat down. He was working himself up to a violent mood, a dangerous mood, and his breath was coming fast.

"I think you need to calm the hell down. You're being ridiculous."

"I fucking hate you."

"You say that a lot."

Emilio released him abruptly and turned around, stalking across the room and towards the front door. There was a moment when Carhart really debated letting him leave. He knew Emilio would be back once he cooled off. But even so, he found himself trailing behind, reluctant to see the other man go.

It was a strange, paradoxical situation he often found himself in. Pushing Emilio away but then wanting him back. Ignoring any attraction but then the smallest thing could set him off, and the desire would flame up hot and fast. Resenting the situation and Vivienne's orders, but then forgetting that they even existed once Emilio's mouth was on him and their bodies were crushed together.

Emilio jerked the door open but Carhart came up behind him and slammed it shut. He pushed Emilio against the door, his chest flush against Emilio's back and leaned close. There was so much tension in the other man's body that it was like touching a brick wall. He was wound tight, and he was prone to snapping abruptly and violently.
"Fuck off," Emilio snarled. "I'm tired of your shit."

Carhart pressed the palms of his hands flat against the door, trapping Emilio. "Stop being angry for nothing."

"Drop dead, motherfucker."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about that."

Emilio stiffened even further and his hand shot out for the doorknob again but Carhart grabbed it and crushed the other man between himself and the door.

"Stop."

"Let me go or I'll rip your fucking head off."

Carhart leaned his forehead against the back of Emilio's head and sighed. He closed his eyes and shook his head slowly. He shifted after a pause and moved one of his arms, lifting his hand to turn Emilio's face. It was one of those moments where there were dual desires warring inside of him. Wanting to stop this, wanting to recoil, but wanting to follow through nonetheless. Wanting to let Emilio go but relishing in the shudder that wracked his powerful frame when their mouths came closer together.

Someday, he thought absently as Emilio crushed their lips together, he would figure this all out. Hopefully before it was too late.

All coherent thought left as Emilio began kissing him with violent ferocity, teeth nipping at his lips and tongue entering his mouth impatiently. Carhart didn't even hesitate to respond. Once it started, all hesitation was gone. Kissing Emilio was like falling into a bottomless pit. It was easy to get lost in the sheer onslaught of passion that poured out of the other man. It was really no wonder that people craved him once they'd been with him once.
A feral growl escaped Emilio’s throat and he turned around, tangling his fingers in Carhart’s hair and gripping him like a lifeline. His other hand slid down into the back of Carhart’s loose jeans, clutching his ass and flexing his fingers against it. He wrenched their lips apart, panting against Carhart’s bruised mouth and said something low and rough, completely inaudible although the meaning was clear when he abruptly reversed their positions and slammed Carhart’s back against the door.

One moment the back of the General’s head was slamming against the door and the next his jeans were down and a hot wet mouth was enveloping his swollen cock.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head and his mouth fell open, a low groan escaping as he gripped a handful of Emilio’s thick black hair.

"Yes," Carhart breathed, arching his back and supporting his weight with his shoulders pushed against the door. His eyebrows drew together, lips hanging open as he forced his eyes open to look down and watch Emilio deep throating him with ease. Those full, beautiful lips wrapped around his girth, taking it in and sliding off with the perfect measure of pressure and speed to make Carhart nearly go into convulsions.

He panted harshly, fucking Emilio’s mouth viciously, wanting badly to just explode in those perfect lips but wanting even more to bend Emilio over and fuck him until he begged for it. These intense, desperate thoughts hurtled through his mind at full force. All possibility of stopping, all notion of not wanting Emilio, as usual, was gone.

Emilio pulled back, his tongue sliding along Carhart’s wet cock as his eyes rose to meet the blue ones that were staring down at him heatedly. Carhart’s lips curled and he jerked Emilio up by a fistful of hair. He was ripping off Emilio’s shirt and spinning him around to shove him unceremoniously towards the couch before he’d fully thought the actions through.
"You're so fucking easy," Emilio said, his voice low and thick with lust.

"Shut up."

Carhart shoved Emilio forward on the couch so that he was chest down. He yanked Emilio's dark jeans off impatiently, dragging the red boxer-briefs down with them and tossing them aside.

Emilio looked so perfect in that moment that Carhart couldn't do more than stare down at him hungrily as he lubed himself with saliva and the pre-cum that had started leaking from his dick. His breath hitched as he jerked himself, eyes focused on the caramel skin that poured over Emilio's broad shoulders, the toned, tattooed back and the perfect globes of his ass.

How was it possible that this raw, needy attraction wasn't present any other time except when they were about to fuck?

"Do it," Emilio demanded.

Carhart speared his cock into Emilio, relishing in the low gasp of pain, the way Emilio's back arched and the way he scooted his knees up to give better access. A choked gasp turned into a carnal growl as Carhart's pelvis began slapping against Emilio's ass as he began to fuck into him brutally.

He planted his hands flat on Emilio's back, pressing him down into the couch as he rode him. His eyes focused on the long fingers that were digging into the couch, stomach tightening as Emilio's grip went white-knuckled. He was so good at taking it, and so fucking sexy when he got needy, that Carhart found himself moving faster and harder so that Emilio would completely lose it like he always did.

Emilio swore, his voice pouring out of his mouth huskily as pain mixed with pleasure. He raised his hips to meet Carhart's thrust for thrust as his groans and demands for more steadily rose in volume. Carhart yanked Emilio
up until they were pressed flush against each other again with Emilio only slightly bent, with his hands supporting him on the arm of the couch.

He shoved his cock into Emilio ruthlessly, eyes nearly rolling back when Emilio released a desperate, ruined groan of pleasure.

"Shut up," Carhart panted despite the fact that he wanted to hear it.

He wanted Emilio to beg him, to tell him how good his dick felt, how much deeper and harder he wanted it. The other man always moaned complete filth when they fucked; he begged Carhart to pound him, to come in him, or to pull out and come all over him, to hit it just right until Emilio was nearly incoherent from being completely full and stretched open. It drove the General insane. It made him want to make it messier and more obscene because that's how Emilio liked it. And that's how Carhart wanted it when they were together.

He pressed his mouth against the back of Emilio's neck, balls seizing up when his name rolled off Emilio's tongue.

"God," Carhart hissed, digging his fingers in harder as his eyes slid shut. Emilio was clenching around him, working his dick even as he fucked the other man with increasing intensity.

"Yes," Emilio panted, riding back harder as sweat slid down his bare skin. "Fuck, fuck, fuck yes, fuck me." It turned into an incoherent chant, his voice getting louder and louder until he broke off with a loud moan when Carhart shifted his hips and changed the angle.

A shudder went through Carhart as he shoved his cock into Emilio again, nailing the same spot. "There?" His only answer was a strangled gasp, and he reached up to rip Emilio's head back harshly. "Tell me," he panted, mouth pressed to Emilio's ear.
"Yes!" Emilio growled, eyes shut and lips parted. "Zachary, please. Just shut the fuck up and make me fucking come."

Carhart snapped his hips harder, and the sounds of skin smacking against skin got louder in the apartment. He was panting harder, his own gasps raising in volume, but Emilio was reaching a fevered pitch.

Carhart reached out, clamping his hand over Emilio's mouth. There was a muffled growl before teeth sank into his hand.

Pain ricocheted through Carhart's body but he didn't stop, even when Emilio kept biting him. He fucked him harder, faster, explosions of light going off behind his eyelids as Emilio's muscles clamped down onto his dick. He was vaguely aware of Emilio tensing up, of sobbing breaths and incoherent swears as the other man came hard, but he couldn't focus on it, or on the way Emilio was guttering out his name.

A hoarse cry escaped Carhart's mouth and he dragged Emilio back on him at a frenzied pace as the feeling in his gut started to ache and get more intense. He didn't even feel the pain radiating up his arm anymore from Emilio's teeth. His vision whited out when he came, filling Emilio completely as his orgasm seemed to go on forever. It wasn't until he hunched forward, spent and feeling like he was about to melt into the couch bonelessly, that he realized Emilio had broken skin on his hand.

Emilio rolled onto his side, lips stained with blood and green eyes narrowed.

"Ow," Carhart said belatedly, still breathless.

"Well, don't cover my mouth then," Emilio groused, shifting to look down at himself. He was sweating, breathing hard, and somehow despite the fact that he'd come, he was still hard. His eyes shifted to Carhart lazily, his lips curling up. "How 'bout that."
Carhart opened his mouth to reply but before he could get a word out, there was another knock on his door. He froze and Emilio pushed himself up on his elbows, annoyed.

"Goddamn it."

Carhart got up and walked silently across the room, looking into the peephole again. His eyebrows drew together and he looked again before grabbing his jeans from the floor. He stepped into them, yanking them up and shot Emilio a glance.

"Get dressed," he said sharply. "It's Boyd."

Emilio had already sat up and was sullenly fixing his own clothing. Even so they both looked disheveled, damp in some places that couldn't be fully wiped, and Carhart in particular couldn't hide the flush to his pale skin. Much to Emilio's dismay, the general hurriedly used his leather jacket to quickly swipe at the mess on the couch.

It would have been nice to have a mirror handy but there wasn't one nearby. His mouth still felt swollen and he hadn't even entirely caught his breath yet. Even so, he opened the door, not wanting to have Boyd standing outside in the hallway for long. Not when anyone could be watching.

"What happened?" he asked upon opening the door, standing aside to let the younger man gain access.

Boyd opened his mouth to respond as he walked in but the second he saw Emilio, his eyes narrowed and shifted back to Carhart in assessment. What little expression had been on his face shut off and he half turned toward the door.

"I can come back another time."
"Just tell me what you wanted," Carhart said, shaking his head. "Cameras already have you coming up here. It's not a good idea for you to be coming in and out or us meeting in other places."

Boyd stopped, tension clear in his shoulders before he nodded and turned around. He eyed Emilio once again before shifting his stare onto Carhart. "Then can we talk in private?"

Emilio scoffed and extracted a box of cigarettes from his pocket. He threw himself down on the couch and stuck one between his lips.

Rolling his eyes, Carhart nodded and led Boyd away from the living room and towards his bedroom. He felt very conscious of his state of dress, and felt like it was more than obvious that something had been happening only moments before. His flannel shirt still lay crumpled in the middle of the other room.

"What's going on?" he asked again, once they were in his room and the door was shut behind them.

"Are they lying?" Boyd demanded once the door was shut, turning on Carhart with a sharp stare. "They say you're with my mother now. Is that just misdirection on your parts?"

Carhart stared at him blankly for a moment before irritation swarmed to the surface. "This is what you came to my apartment to ask me?"

"No, I came with information but then I walked in and found the man who's supposedly fucking my mother obviously just finished getting into it with Hsin's father," Boyd said flatly, crossing his arms. "And then I had to ask myself what the hell was going on."
"It's none of your business so you might have to keep asking yourself," Carhart replied flatly. "And if you want to speak to me that way, you can leave my apartment and I will see you at the next briefing."

"What, is it all about convenience to you?" Boyd asked angrily, as he took a step toward Carhart. "You act like a father to me when it's useful but then pull rank when it's not. You want me to trust you and believe in you and play along with all your games but the second I start asking questions in a tone you don't like you tell me to shut the fuck up and get out?"

"Yes, that is basically right." Carhart started to grab the doorknob, fully ready to escort him out of the apartment. "I don't disrespect you, you have no right to disrespect me. Especially when it comes to some ridiculous protectiveness of a woman you haven't spoken to in months."

"Goddamn it, wait," Boyd snapped, putting his hand on the door to stop Carhart from opening it. His shoulders were still taut with tension but his tone was much less aggressive when he looked up a Carhart and said, "Will you just—wait?"

Carhart dropped his hand from the doorknob.

A muscle in Boyd's jaw twitched and he stepped back when it was clear Carhart wasn't going to leave. He turned his back on Carhart, tilting his head down toward the floor and dragging his hands harshly back through his hair.

"I'm—angry," he said grudgingly, then turned toward Carhart and gestured vaguely. "I don't even know exactly why or with who. It's just—"

He stopped, stared at Carhart and then sighed. The leftover tension in his shoulders deflated. "You've always seemed to make good decisions and I want to be able to trust that about you. You're the closest thing I've had to a father since mine died. You even remind me of him sometimes. It seems
bizarre to me to imagine my mother with someone but if it were anyone, it would be you. And Emilio..." He trailed off and shook his head. "So it doesn't matter to me if you're with my mother or if you're with Emilio. But if it's both at once—"

He stopped again, seemed to work something through in his mind, and frowned. "In some ways it may be none of my business but in other ways—you're all like a fucked up family to me and right now I can't even tell if someone is being hurt and doesn't know it."

Carhart sighed and crossed his arms over his chest, feeling very weary and very old all of a sudden. "I appreciate your concern for Vivienne, but it's unfounded. I'm not going to say anything more. What's going on involves two other people, and I'm not going to speak for either of them."

Boyd studied him for a long moment and then sighed again, looking away and raking his hand back once more through his hair. "Alright." He shifted on his feet, his lips turning down faintly, and then he gestured toward the door. "And Emilio? Is he in on the mole? I initially came over with some suspicious information."

"Emilio is fully aware of everything that is going on," Carhart confirmed with a nod. "He's been brought up to speed recently, and is also helping us. You should also know that—well, maybe we should include him in this discussion unless for some reason you don't want him to be."

"I don't care," Boyd said with a shake of his head. "I just didn't want him there when we talked about—" He gestured vaguely, as if to encompass the situation. "This."

"Well." Carhart made a face. "That is likely better off."
He opened the door and walked back toward the living room, rubbing a hand over his forehead tiredly. As if the situation wasn't uncomfortable and confusing enough, now Boyd thought he was doing his mother dirty.

It was tempting to inform him that it had been Vivienne who had suggested he started fucking Emilio while the two of them had still been in bed naked together, but he didn't think anyone would get anything out of that information. Except Boyd possibly getting an even worse view of his mother. And Emilio possibly overhearing it and ripping his throat out.

"Done with all your secret talk?" Emilio asked when they re-entered the living room. He'd gone into the kitchen and appeared to be making himself food as his cigarette dangled from his mouth, ashes drifting to the floor.

Boyd nodded and bypassed the sofa, walking to the armchair. He sat down on the edge and pulling his small messenger bag around from behind his back to rest on his lap. He pulled his panel out and then dragged the strap of the bag over his head and dropped the bag onto the floor.

He glanced at Emilio across the room. "I've been told I can say anything in front of you."

"Uh huh." Emilio dumped the vegetables that Carhart had sauteed into a pan of eggs, and began scrambling them.

Carhart watched for a moment, shook his head and looked at Boyd. "Is this about Kassian or Jordan?"

"Some of it is. I had a number of updates." He shifted his fingers across the screen on his panel and then rested it on his knee as he looked over at Carhart. "I warned Kassian about her and what her ulterior motives may be. I don't think he's likely to fall for any of her manipulations, but she has been hanging around him still. She invited him to stay with her during this lock-in."
Emilio looked up from his egg stirring. "Well he didn't buy that shit 'cause golden boy's been shacking up with me."

"What do you mean?" Boyd asked, looking over at him.

Carhart looked at Emilio, his mouth twisting to the side. It had been his own interference long ago which had resulted in Kassian and Emilio going on a mission together. Kassian had needed a watcher for a probation period when his drinking had been bad, and Carhart had had his own reasons for choosing Emilio. A misguided notion that perhaps Emilio would take interest in the tall blond senior agent and lose interest in the general himself.

It had worked to a point, but Emilio had been furious when he figured it out.

"Well I could probably bang him easily enough if I wanted to," Emilio mused, stirring the eggs around idly. Carhart frowned slightly at the words. "But I haven't so far. No reason to yet."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly would be a reason?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

Boyd made a soft scoffing sound under his breath and shook his head. "Just don't fuck with his head, Emilio. He has enough going on as it is and doesn't need any extra confusion."

"Don't no one need you babysitting them." Emilio turned off the stove and looked over his shoulder. "You really like being all up in people's shit."

"I'm just looking out for my friends," Boyd replied unrepentantly.

"Oh that's what they call nosy bitches. Good to know."

Carhart sighed, unsurprised that Emilio had likely eavesdropped the conversation in the bedroom. He'd hoped that hadn't been the case, but
obviously it was, and obviously he'd taken some offense to Boyd's interference.

"What did you find out?" he asked Boyd.

Boyd looked over at Carhart. "Well, like Emilio said, Kassian turned Jordan down and will be staying at his assigned quarters. And there may still be some disturbance between Jordan and Bex. Jordan seemed irritated when I asked where her sister was."

"It's not surprising. They both had disciplinary action not two days ago," Carhart replied shaking his head.

"For what?" Boyd asked, his eyebrows canting up slightly.

"Fighting. Each other. Bex beat Jordan up pretty seriously, although most of it was cosmetic. But obviously for someone like Jordan, that's serious enough since her looks are a large part of her job."

Emilio walked into the living room with a plate full of food and sat down on the couch. He obviously hadn't bothered to make Carhart a plate even though it was his kitchen, his food, and his pre-sauteed vegetables.

"Golden boy actually mentioned that to me. I think he was there whenever it happened."

Carhart raised his eyebrows. "Interesting. They kept that part out when she went to the med wing."

"Did he say what started it?" Boyd asked Emilio curiously.

"Pretty sure Jordan stalked him into the showers at the training rooms late one night and Bex tracked her down. She don't like her sis getting so much cock." Emilio looked at Carhart with intrigue. "Did you know those two girls fuck each other?"
Carhart made a face. "I had a notion." There was a pause as he blankly watched Emilio eat, and then he shook his head with a sigh. "It's really not promising that Kassian is a cause of the twins fighting. Everything is going to shit. And with General Katsaros here now, I think they're going to start making moves to replace key players a lot faster than we thought."

Boyd looked over at Carhart sharply. "So anyone who may be a thorn in the side or possibly under review for termination is in more danger now?"

He gestured vaguely. "Maybe. Who knows? Now that this thing with the mole is out, I'm sure anyone who crosses them will be in danger. And I'm sure they'll need scapegoats sooner than later."

Boyd's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned as he looked down at his panel. He was silent for a tense moment before he sighed and with a faint grimace squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Damn," he muttered almost too quietly to hear. He dropped his hand and looked up at Carhart, a heaviness casting weight to his features that wasn't entirely hidden by his neutral expression.

"Then there's something I should tell you. Do you know Ivan Andel?"

The question was unexpected and Carhart frowned. He glanced over at Emilio who looked blank at the question. He likely had no idea who Ivan was.

"He's a brilliant R&D agent with paranoia and anxiety problems," he told Emilio before looking at Boyd again. "What about him?"

Boyd paused again, seeming to debate something in his mind before he sighed. "It may be nothing, but when I first heard about Hsin I tracked down everyone with information. I was told he spent a lot of his time with Ivan and I ended up at Ivan's apartment. He was incredibly paranoid about my presence. He's—"
He frowned, his eyebrows drawing together. "Disturbed and hates the Agency. When I was there, I noticed he had a board filled with what looked like code. He referenced that he planned to go about things his own way, which I took to mean he had some sort of plan for the future."

Carhart frowned, turning to Boyd further. He pictured Ivan and his eyebrows drew together slightly. Other than the fact that Ivan was a known rabble-rouser on the compound to a certain degree, he didn't have any specific information on the man. While Carhart knew every field agent inside and out, the R&D agents were Bree's specialty.

"Be more specific. What do you mean he has a plan for the future?"

"I don't know exactly," Boyd said, shaking his head. "He doesn't like me and he seemed especially paranoid when I visited him so he didn't give details. But yesterday I saw him on compound and tried to talk to him, to see if I could get more information. He told me he didn't want to incriminate me, and that it would all be over soon. That the Agency wouldn't know what hit it."

Carhart stared at him, unable to reply for a moment. The information speared through all of the other thoughts crowded into his brain as he tried to assess what he knew about Ivan.

"Oh wait, that's the kid Hsin used to fuck," Emilio said randomly, eyebrows lifting. "I remember him now."

Boyd nodded, glancing over at Emilio. "Which is why I didn't suspect him for the longest time, and honestly why I was hesitant to bring him up even now."

"I don't see him settin' up Hsin, though," Emilio replied doubtfully. "He used to puppy trail my boy."

Carhart frowned at that. "I don't know much about their relationship."
"They dated for awhile," Boyd explained. "It was during the time when I'd broken up with Hsin. Ivan was protective of Hsin and to be honest they got along very well. Even after Hsin and I got back together they stayed in touch and Hsin spent a lot of time with Ivan at the end."

Carhart looked at Emilio, frown deepening. "So then Emilio has a point, would he play a part in setting Hsin up? Or do you think he's unrelated to that?"

"I don't believe he would hurt Hsin so unless he was one of several people involved in the framing and he was positive Hsin would be saved, I don't think he was related to that. But—" Boyd shifted on the edge of the seat and frowned as he looked between Emilio and Carhart.

"I think Ivan honestly cared for Hsin, and he was already a bit unstable before any of this happened. You remember what it was like when we lost him," his gaze lingered especially on Emilio. "I know I wanted to tear everything down when I found out. So for Ivan—my worry is that Hsin was one of the few people he trusted here. With the Agency terminating Hsin, with the hatred Ivan already felt toward most of the agents, and if there's even more pressure on the termination of anyone in the way, it seems like he has nothing to lose. I didn't want to betray his confidence but given recent events I couldn't ignore his comment."

Carhart looked over at Emilio for his opinion but the other man just shrugged, not seeming to have anything to add.

Mulling this over, Carhart frowned slightly before focusing on Boyd once again. "I'm going to discuss this with Vivienne. Some of this are at odds with the way we have already been thinking so we have to revise our strategy based on the possibility that this guy is involved. And I do not want you following him. She and I will follow up on this. If he notices you hanging around, he will almost definitely get suspicious of your intentions."
"In the long run, it'd probably just be easier to terminate him and see if shit stops," Emilio said with a shrug, finishing his food and setting the plate to the side. "If he don't seem to be in cahoots with no one else anyways."

Carhart nodded. "If his record is actually deemed worthy of termination, you may be right and it may be the best solution if he does seem suspicious enough."

Boyd frowned and pulled the panel back closer to himself. He looked down with a slightly troubled expression at Ivan's face, staring back out at him from the screen. "Well—is that necessary?" His gaze moved to Carhart. "As suspicious as his comments are, it could be a manifestation of his illness or he could have nothing to do with the mole. I'd hate for it to push along a termination order."

"What did you think was gonna happen?" Emilio asked him, arching one dark eyebrow.

Carhart picked Emilio's plate up from the sofa and walked the short distance to the kitchen to put it on the counter. He was actually somewhat curious about that himself. If it came down to speeding up an inevitable termination in order to possibly weed out a possible mole or traitor, he knew Vivienne would give the order without hesitation.

Boyd set the panel down next to him on the seat, turning golden brown eyes onto Emilio. "Just because he won't talk to me doesn't mean he may not talk to someone else. He specifically doesn't like me because Hsin chose me in the end. I hoped we could study him more—and unless there's enough proof of his actual involvement we could detain or ignore him while we focused on finding the mole again."

"It's your mother's call," Carhart said. "But it's a distinct possibility that if we study him and cannot prove something concrete, she'd have him
terminated just to be sure. And if he's planning something against the Agency, that puts all of us in danger."

Boyd nodded, his eyes narrowing pensively as his gaze lingered once again on Ivan's face. "That's true..." After a moment he sighed again and leaned back in the couch. "I realize how serious this is and that, with a wide and practical enough view of the situation it could be argued that it's best to be preemptive. But I still can't help thinking of Hsin."

"Yeah?" Emilio asked as he stood up. "Hsin's dead. And whoever the fuck is behind this shit had a hand in it. Them fucking with him over that Inspector bitch was one of the nails in his coffin. If this numbnut is even possibly in on it or dealin' with the fuckers who did, who gives a shit?"

"And if he's not and we get him terminated, we were instrumental in killing one of Hsin's best friends over a misunderstanding," Boyd replied. "The same way it almost happened to Hsin."

"I could give two shits about him being Hsin's little friend. Cut the noble shit already. If you didn't know this was a possibility, you're just plain stupid and naive. You can't fucking rat someone out and then try to play the righteous card," Emilio said with a scoff.

"Then I'm an idiot because I would like one more chance," Boyd said, meeting Emilio's eyes head on before shifting his gaze to Carhart. "Will you give me until the end of the lockdown before you report him to my mother? He can't start anything with such high security and if he already had something planned then it must be automated and we can't do anything about it now. But with more time maybe I can stop him or at least verify his involvement."

Shaking his head, Carhart sighed slightly and rubbed a hand over his face. He didn't really know what Boyd expected from them. With his and
Vivienne’s own termination warrants looming, it was difficult to care about the moral aspect of this.

"I'll agree to that," he said finally. "But if nothing is concrete by the time the lockdown is over, it's up to your mother. And even then, nothing is set in stone."

Boyd nodded in understanding. "Thank you." He turned the screen off and slid the panel into his bag. "I probably shouldn't be seen staying in here too long," he said as he stood and swung the bag strap over his head. "I'll alert you if I find out anything else of note."

Carhart nodded. "Good work. Thank you for coming, Boyd."

Boyd nodded again, although there was the faintest draw on his expression, lending him a slightly distracted look. He hitched the messenger bag strap diagonally across his chest and glanced at Emilio. His expression was unreadable and his gaze lingered briefly before shifting to Carhart. In the end he didn’t say anything. Soon after, he checked the hallway for anyone watching and then left.

Carhart looked at the door for a moment before turning his gaze to Emilio. "What was that all about?"

Emilio gave him a flat look. "What?"

"You were pretty harsh," the general noted dryly.

"And that's something to note? I'm always fucking harsh."

"Not usually with Boyd."

That earned him another look and Emilio got up, seeming to have lost all traces of the former heated mood he'd been in. "Yeah well that was before he barged in here and ruined my good time, and then came up in here with
his holier than thou self righteous attitude and shit. I don't need some fucking kid telling me what to do and who to fuck and preaching on morals, okay? I don't got no motherfucking morals."

"Fine." Carhart looked at the clock. "I'm going to contact Vivienne."

"Aiight. Just take a shower first. I'm sure she don't want spic residue in her twat."

Shaking his head, Carhart made a face. "You're disgusting."

"I'm just keeping it real, bro." Emilio gave him an unfriendly stare and grabbed his jacket. "Next time, you owe me. My ass hurts."

"I don't owe you anything," Carhart replied calmly, raising his eyebrows. "You like getting it well enough. You're not doing me a favor by bending over."

"How about I shove my dick down your throat and see how long it takes you to gag?" Emilio asked in the same almost joking but clearly unfriendly tone.

"We can see how long it takes for me to bite down."

"And for me to knock your fucking teeth out."

Releasing a long suffering sigh, Carhart shook his head. "Goodbye Emilio."

"Yeah, whatever."

Emilio left with the door slamming more loudly than usual behind him.

===
The sound of the door slamming echoed loudly in the hall, and a service clerk gave Emilio a startled look as he strode away. His movements were sharp with tension and impatience which was emphasized when he didn't react at all to the greetings and flirtatious smiles he elicited on the short walk to the Tower.

Rolling his shoulders, Emilio sidestepped a couple of overly enthusiastic agents in Bermuda shorts and yanked out his phone. It took one jam of his fingertip against the touch screen to get Doug's ringback tone to begin blaring out of the tinny speaker, some awful house music, and then the mop of black curls and permanently bloodshot blue eyes appeared on the screen.

"Hey faggot," Emilio greeted him, scrounging up a sharp smirk. "Meet me in the training room in thirty so I can smack you around for awhile."

"Oh baby," Doug drawled. He looked inexplicably like he'd just woken up despite the fact that he seemed to be in his office. He sniffed, blinking at the phone. "I like it when you rough talk me. Unfortunately I'm way too hungover for your brand of foreplay, love. Bring me liquor instead."

Scoffing, Emilio jogged up the stairs to the Tower and barely missed a step as he turned around to walk backwards to get a good view of a long legged R&D agent in a miniskirt. He switched off the video chat and held the phone to his ear instead.

"No thanks, sweetheart. I don't get tanked until at least three p.m. I got standards."

"Who said anything 'bout sharing?" There was the sound of Doug striking a match and a deep inhale. "I got some pretty prime chronic too. And if I get fucked up enough, I'll let you suck my cock."
Emilio’s mouth twisted up into an actual grin. "Must be my lucky day. I spent years dreaming about that awful fucking sound you make when you come."

Doug's laugh turned into a wheezing cough. "I know. You dreamt about my uncut dick every night."

The elevator was empty when Emilio stepped in, and he swiped his card to get to the exec floor. "Keep telling yourself that, asshole. I'll see you in a half."

Emilio’s stride eased into a more casual stroll as he stepped out into the exec suites for the second time that day. And for the second time that day, he stopped in front of the admin’s desk with a sugary smile.

"Hello again, sweetheart," he drawled, leering at the Marshal's absurd French assistant. "Seong in?"

"Marshal Seong is in, yes," Gabriel replied, frowning. "I'll announce you—"

Emilio ignored the rest of the sentence and resumed his stroll around the desk and further down the hall. He tapped out a rhythmic beat on her door and waited until she buzzed him in.

"Hey, chinita," he said, dropping down into the chair opposite her desk. The fast, automatic inventory of the items in her office turned up the same things as it had two hours ago: gun holstered on her shoulder, the sharp edge of a desk or bookcase, paintings with breakable glass, an ancient sword in a display case, black box with unknown contents.

His mouth curled up again, and he kept his eyes on her. "Anything special happen in the past two hours?"
"No," Jae-Hwa said, looking completely unperturbed by Emilio's sudden appearance. Dark eyes shifted back down to the panel she'd been perusing before Emilio's arrival. She finished typing something short and then set the panel upside down, turning her attention fully onto him. "Do you have an update?"

Emilio tilted his head back, resting it on the edge of the chair. Looking at the ceiling through his hair, he considered the question and rested one ankle on the opposite knee. "A half assed one. I'm back in General Zachary's good graces for now."

Jae-Hwa nodded and leaned back, the chair squeaking slightly. She laced her hands together in front of her. "You're sure of it, then? He isn't playing you for the fool?"

"Well, he thinks he's playing me. Him and bitchface both do. Pretty sure it wasn't his idea to all of a sudden start trying to get in my ass again. They prolly think I'm the biggest fucking idiot the Agency ever spit out, but it's better off that way."

Her cell phone buzzed on the desk. "Well, I can't say as I'm surprised." She reached forward, activated the screen, and read what it said as she continued, "Beaulieu is a bit shortsighted that way. Loads of arrogance, that one." Her lips thinned briefly before she flipped the screen off and tossed the phone back on the desk.

"So," she met Emilio's eyes, "had he anything of interest to say?"

He shrugged one shoulder, taking out a cigarette and flipping it between his fingers. After a moment he brought it up and tapped it against his lips instead.

"Well he's pretty fucking convinced you're about to off his pretty ass. I think your Greek dude being here is making him nervous."
"Good," Jae-Hwa said briskly. Light glinted off the chunky silver ring she wore when she intertwined her fingers again. "If he’s liable to make mistakes, better he feels the pressure now and gets it over with so I can cull the unnecessary elements. Now," the chair squeaked as she leaned forward and rested her forearms on the desk. "Kassian Trovosky. I took the liberty of seeing to it you’d be roomed with him. Tell me what you’ve learned."

The tapping against Emilio’s lips paused briefly but his expression didn’t change. He shifted and pain radiated up his spine as he let his boot drop down to the floor. Zachary was gonna have to start lubing his dick better than that.

"Golden boy is a moron, but we already knew that shit." He arched a dark eyebrow. "And a real miserable fuck. All he does is bitch and moan all of the goddamn time. I was tempted to shove my dick in his mouth so he'd shut the fuck up. He's got his balls all knotted over the twins. Don't think Jordan's gonna be able to tap that source anymore."

"Oh? What did he say?"

His cell phone started ringing in the tight confines of his jeans, and he silenced it with a click of his finger. "Well, he knows she's an in-house valentine, and just seemed to be over the whole damn thing. He didn't stop bitching about you sending some crazy Jap bitch to spy on him until he started laughing over how all it did was break up the dynamic dyke duo."

Emilio's mouth curved up slightly. "Which is pretty goddamn hilarious when you think about it. You probably would have been better off sending his ass on a noble mission where he saved burning orphans and got to smoke warlords in Africa or some shit."
Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I see." Her dark stare remained unwavering on Emilio’s face for a short moment before she looked down at her phone again.

Fuck.

"Is there anything else to report?" she asked as she typed something on the screen.

"Nope. But seeing you twice in one day sure is a thrill, beautiful." He pushed himself out of the chair in one fluid movement, and paused. His eyes swept around the office again briefly, and this time he tried not to focus on the feel of the hunting knife strapped to his boot.

She shook her head and waved a hand. "You're dismissed. Keep in touch on any updates. I expect you'll hear more from General Carhart in the future."

"Sure thing, boss lady." He smiled at her and thought about prying her fucking eyes out with his knife. It rallied him into turning around and walking out of the office before it got too tempting.

The meeting did little to calm him down, and if anything the tension had set in more. Smoking some ganja with Doug seemed like a pretty solid plan, and Emilio made his way to the training center to find the wayward training instructor. His feet pounded down the stairs, and by then he was already on his third analysis of the conversation with Seong so he nearly ran directly into Harriet.

"Watch where you're going," she said flatly, dark eyes boring into him.

"I was, that's why I nearly wound up on top of you, sweetheart."

Harriet's eyes narrowed, and her jaw set. She moved to elbow by him, and he readjusted his stance instantly to block her. "Goddamnit, Vega."
"Ah ah ah, Senior Agent Vega," he corrected with a wide grin.

"Get the hell out of my way, Senior Agent Asshole."

"I love it when you get sassy."

Harriet sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "Do you actually want something, or is it just a convenient time to show how immature you are?"

Emilio tilted his head, considering. "I want us to make gorgeous little mulatto mutt babies."

"It can't be mulatto unless you're actually white."

"Untrue."

"Jesus fuck, whatever." Harriet reached out and pushed his shoulder impatiently. "This has been a stunningly racist conversation but—"

"It ain't racist if we're both brown, baby."

Apparently this was the last straw because she nearly knocked him over in her effort to squirm by. He laughed and for the second time in the past twenty minutes, got a nice view of hot agent ass.

Emilio finished his stride down the corridor, and found Doug slumped by his desk idly repacking the bowl of a water bong. The office was a complete mess—empty food cartons, wrappers and beer cans everywhere. The air was also smoggy with smoke, and the smell of marijuana.

"Jesus Christ, Douglas." Emilio threw himself down into the armchair across from Doug's desk. "You look like you've been on a fucking bender instead of locked down."

Doug smirked, running a hand through his wild black curls. "What the hell else am I gonna do?"
"Gee, I dunno. Get off your fucking ass and train someone?"

"Piss on that. I'd rather celebrate this holiday in Ferguson style." Doug picked up his lighter and arched an eyebrow. "No one else has got to do any work, so why the hell should I? These numbnut baby agents can fend for themselves for a while."

The response rubbed Emilio the wrong way, and his fingers flexed. The image of cutting Seong was replaced by an image of himself snuffing Doug in the face. "Then what was Harriet doing here? You let people see you like this, you dumbass? No wonder you've stayed demoted for-fucking-ever."

Doug had started to drag the bong closer to him, but paused at the string of questions being aimed at him from across the desk. He blinked as if he'd never seen Emilio before, eyes bloodshot and expression bemused. "To wax poetic about paranoid delusions and women's insecurities. What in the hell is up your ass, Vega? Carhart's semen working into your bloodstream and turning you into a good little trained puppet?"

Emilio leaned forward and smacked a hand against the side of Doug's face. "No, you dumb motherfucker. You—"

"Jesus, Emilio!" Doug exclaimed, rubbing his head with a frown.

"—clearly are too retarded to understand how the Agency works these days. Do you fucking think that bitch is going to let you get a free ride while she's shipping in dudes from Eastern Europe to be new instructors? She got her panties in a wad over one throwaway comment that Trovosky made while you sit here acting like you're a motherfucking college kid in Annadale. You're going to get your monkey ass shot in the head."

Doug didn't start looking interested in the rant until Kassian's name was thrown into the fray. This fact did little to calm Emilio down and he leaned
forward, intent on knocking his dumbass friend upside the head again. Doug dodged this time and pushed his chair further away from the desk.

"I'm not bloody stupid, Vega. I know I'm not too far from the shit list."

"Oh. Fucking dandy. You and dumbass blond Zachary share the same fatalistic bullshit. How the *fuck* did two such pathetic losers survive the bombs?" Emilio scoffed, tugging another cigarette out of his pocket and shoving it between his lips. "Darwinism is a myth."

Grimacing, Doug edged closer to his desk again. He looked at Emilio warily before setting his elbows down. "Now, what's this about my boy Kassian?"

Emilio paused with his lighter halfway up to the end of his cigarette. "She was quizzing me on his bullshit with Jordan. And... Well, I apparently fucking said the wrong damn thing."

"Wrong thing, like which thing?"

"Oh, all alert now, are you?"

Doug's face darkened, and his blue eyes narrowed into slits. "I like Kassian. He's a good agent, and a good man. Don't fuck around, Vega."

The words did little to improve Emilio's mood, and he flicked the zippo. The flame shot up too far to be necessary, and he gave a belligerent shrug. "Well, I doubt Mr. Good Man will be burned alive like my kid, but he ain't gonna be her golden boy no more neither."

The instructor opened his mouth to likely demand more specific answers but before he could, Emilio's phone started ringing again. Casting Doug a baleful glare, Emilio tugged the phone out and saw that it was Boyd calling. Emilio frowned, staring at the little bastard's picture and wondered why in the hell he was calling.
The call went to voicemail, and Emilio saw that Boyd had been the one to call during the meeting with Seong as well. Why he felt the need to call ten minutes after they'd parted ways was a mystery that Emilio didn't really give a sweet goddamn about solving. Well, not really anyway.

Maybe.

"Huh."

"What?" Doug asked, already all intent on his bong again.

Emilio shrugged again, thumbing out a text message and asking Boyd what the hell he had to say that couldn't be said in front of Zachary.

The answer wasn't long in coming: *It's better to talk. Can you call or meet me later?*

It was tempting to say no just to give the kid a hard time, but curiosity got the better of Emilio.

"Who's that?" Doug asked as smoke poured out of his mouth.

"No one," Emilio drawled as he replied to Boyd to meet him in an hour.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chandler Heights had once been a premier destination in Lexington. Nestled amongst the trees with Silver Lake not far away, it had boasted a small-town feel in the middle of urban sprawl. The neighborhood for the new rich.

At least, that was what Boyd had been told. The war hit within days of his birth in 1999, obliterating sections of Lexington and leaving Chandler Heights lost in time.

Unlike other areas of the city, Chandler Heights wasn't destroyed; it was mostly intact but had been the site of possible radiation. Immediately following the bombings, those affected had been quarantined and everyone else had been evacuated—never given a chance later to return to reclaim their items. The place had been a no trespassing zone since, and with the possibility of fallout lasting well into the future the neighborhood remained largely untouched even by the bad elements of the city.

It was unnerving to walk through streets, seeing doors still open, keys still left in ignitions of vehicles abandoned on the roadside, and food long since decomposed on plates dotting the tables of the restaurants. There were shopping carts still filled with items in the grocery stores and even some wallets and purses that appeared to have been dropped in the panic. Old newspaper boxes were still filled, back when people didn't rely so heavily on digital versions. As he passed one box he saw a bold headline standing out against the yellowed paper: 'Storm of the Century to Blow In; NFL Fans Panic.' He remembered that same headline on a marquee showing in the background of a video he'd watched for training, just before they'd watched everyone on screen be vaporized. The day that had changed everything in Chandler Heights was the day that had changed everything for his family.
It made the neighborhood feel eerie and reminded Boyd of the zombie apocalypse movies he'd seen with Ryan.

Dotty's Bar & Grill was ahead, on the corner of James and Windmill. With Chandler Heights abandoned, he had to be even more careful to move unseen through the streets. He'd had to avoid being seen on multiple cameras along the way but one of the reasons they'd chosen this location was it was one of the sections of the neighborhood far enough into residential that it wasn't under surveillance. He pushed open the dusty, dirty glass door of Dotty's, with the 'Open' sign still hanging at an angle to welcome customers, and walked into the small establishment. The bells jingled as the door swung shut behind Boyd.

Sitting in a booth half hidden from view, Boyd saw the familiar shock of Emilio's black hair and headed toward him. The older man was hunched over the table, frowning down at a blueprint of some kind. His steady gaze didn't even flick up as he traced his finger along something.

"Did you find anything?" Boyd asked as he approached.

"Yup." Emilio frowned at the paper and sat back finally, looking up at Boyd. "There's a bunch of ways to get your narrow ass in that building. It ain't even manned by that many actual bodies on the outside. But there's a fuck load of sensors and booby traps that I gotta take out first."

"Hmm." Boyd slid into the booth opposite the senior agent. "Not just on the building. I found surveillance up to eight blocks in all directions."

Jerking his thumb at the blueprint in front of him, Emilio just raised an eyebrow. "Yup. So basically, you're fucked. I could do my thing and get this shit taken care of with a small window for you to go in, but I don't see what's in it for me, chico."
Boyd hesitated. Originally he had told Emilio this was about Vanguard Industries, and curiosity alone seemed to have led him this far. He couldn't blame the man for being uninterested in going further with these odds, but since there was no way Boyd could do this alone that also meant he would have to tell Emilio something.

His gaze dropped to the blueprint, his lips thinning slightly before he sighed. He leaned forward, arms crossed with forearms braced on the table, and met Emilio's eyes. "Do you remember when Hsin pulled up that bar top on that mission? How he threw it like it weighed nothing?"

Emilio's gaze sharpened at the question, and he tilted his head. "You mean after y'all went AWOL in the bathroom to fuck? 'Course. How could I forget?"

Boyd nodded and glanced around. Although they had specifically chosen the location because it was free of surveillance and bugs, he couldn't help making sure they were alone. "Well, I'd wondered about Hsin's strength for awhile but that made me certain I couldn't be imagining it. After that mission, I started doing research into the Reapers. To see if I could find what had happened to him."

There was a soft rustle as Emilio dragged a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket, not taking his eyes off Boyd as he did so. "I think it was pretty fucking obvious that they was juicing him up some kinda way." There was a pause as he flipped a cigarette between his fingers. "I knew somethin' was up as soon as I first saw him and we had that fight."

Boyd nodded again and leaned back in the booth. "I'd wondered what exactly they were doing, how often, if it could be dangerous for him..." He waved a hand as if to encompass more. "So I researched through the Journalist Guild and old Agency files first but I couldn't find anything concrete. Then I had my extended and when I came back he was gone. Ivan said he'd
been acting strangely the last few months; sudden headaches, getting sick... I thought maybe the experiments had something to do with his termination so I broke into the lab."

Emilio flicked his lighter and inhaled deeply. Smoke drifted between them as he asked, "And?"

"They called it Project Zero. It was an attempt to genetically modify super soldiers. He wasn't the only one they experimented on but everyone else died or didn't take to the modifications. Connors started it when Hsin was locked up for killing the civilians and they had him in their full custody for several years. By the time I came, they were only monitoring him. But after Monterrey, they induced a coma so they could increase experimentation on him. Afterward they followed up occasionally but deemed the project successful and the trials stopped when Vivienne was in charge."

Throughout the explanation, Emilio's expression had changed very little. He stared at Boyd as the cherry of the cigarette burned in the dimness of the room. After a long stretch of silence, he wet his lips and raised the cigarette again.

"Seems weird they'd terminate their only success story." He watched Boyd, green eyes intense and steady on the younger man. "Don't it?"

"Exactly." Boyd leaned forward, his eyes narrowing seriously. "When I hit the lab, I did it alone. I found the office based on Hsin's description and grabbed what I could from their computer. As I left I saw a locked room nearby. I didn't have time to break in but I thought there may be more information there—something to explain the behavior Ivan mentioned. But that would be extremely classified information, and later I learned those kind of files are kept here." He touched the blueprint, his honey brown eyes not shifting from Emilio's face. "In this lab. I knew I couldn't do it alone this time so that's why I asked you."
Emilio’s gaze didn’t waver until long after Boyd finished speaking. It almost seemed as though he were weighing the words, or turning them over in his mind, to see if Boyd was holding anything back. In the end he nodded, taking another drag from his cigarette before flicking it onto the damp floor.

"I wanna know what they did to my boy as much as you, blondie. So yeah, I'll help you." There was another tense pause, and Emilio shook his head slightly before speaking again. "But after this, you gotta knock this shit off before you get yourself dead. Don't no one understand better than me, kid. But he ain't coming back, and now you gotta look out for you."

Boyd's gaze caught on Emilio, his eyebrows shifting up in mild surprise. "Are you worried about me?"

The enigmatic expression on Emilio's face instantly vanished, and he rolled his eyes although his mouth turned up slightly at the side. "No," he scoffed.

Boyd couldn't stop a grin that spread across his face. He rested his forearms on the table and barely resisted the urge to prod Emilio. "I knew I'd wear you down, given enough time. It only took two years for you to say you like me."

"I ain’t never said no shit like that," Emilio retorted, reaching over and pushing the side of Boyd's head with his hand. Despite the words, his mouth had turned up entirely into a grin by then. "All I meant was, you should probably stop being a fucking troublemaker because next shit I know, Zach gets involved trying to help you, and then I have to help him, and it's too early to fucking start a war at the compound. Aiight?"

"Yeah, yeah, I love you too, Emilio," Boyd replied, the grin remaining for a moment before it slid into a smaller smile. He reached across the table and briefly squeezed Emilio’s wrist. "Hey, seriously though—thank you for
helping. I'm glad you aren't still angry with me. I really do care about you so
back when I was talking to Carhart and inadvertently pissed you off, I was
angrier with him because of you, not Vivienne."

    That earned him a confused stare, and Emilio's dark eyebrows drew
together. "What? Why because of me?"

    "Because..." Boyd trailed off briefly, his expression scrunching. He
leaned back in the booth and crossed his arms, studying Emilio. "You'll
probably want to hit me for saying this, but it's because I think you love him
and I felt like he might be playing you. And that made me angry." He dropped
his head back against the vinyl seat. "Especially if the third person is Vivienne,
since that throws everyone I see in any parental capacity into one strange
situation."

    Emilio had grimaced at the word love, but by the end he seemed to
have forgotten to be indignant. "Well," he drawled. "I hope you ain't including
me in that parental capacity thing, seeing as how I railed the fuck out of you
not too long ago. Unless y'all French types get down like that."

    Boyd rolled his eyes. "One night, when we were drunk and I thought
you were Hsin. If we're talking getting down like that, you're the one that's
been unusually interested in your son since I met you. First you watched him
fuck me, then you tried to get us into a three-way, and next thing I heard you
were making out with him on a mission. I can't tell if it's narcissism or incest
that drives you..."

    "Wouldn't you like to know." Emilio smirked and slid out of the booth,
snagging Boyd's sleeve and hauling him out. "Let's get the hell out of here. I
need to pick up something before we meet at my place."

    "Alright. I can stop and pick up some food on my way over if you'd like."
“Sounds good. But get me something healthy, and I'll punch you in the face.”

Boyd smirked. "Organic protein shake and large pile of lettuce it is." Emilio smacked Boyd in the back of the head and walked off, causing Boyd to laugh.

They split off in separate directions. Boyd wove his way through the streets, avoiding the cameras but in some areas having to be incredibly roundabout in order to do so. It took him three times longer than normal to finally get to his car.

He pulled out his phone and went to power it on to order some takeout at Killian’s Pub, then frowned when he saw the dead battery. He had saved some battery life on his personal phone when it was powered off during the two-and-a-half-week lockdown but when he’d returned home he had been unable to find the charger before the battery had gone dead. He'd briefly forgotten that fact since he'd planned to keep the phone off during his time in Chandler Heights anyway.

He made a quick stop first to pick up a car and outlet charger. Once he had the phone plugged in called Killian's Pub to order takeout. As soon as he hung up with them, he saw there was a notice for two voicemails. Curious, he pulled up the messages.

The first was from a few days into the lockdown. Sin’s familiar voice came across his phone, saying that he wanted to talk about what had come up that night and that if Boyd was going to be in Annadale any time soon, he should call him.

A strange mixture of excitement and worry moved through Boyd at that. Sin was reaching out to him and yet what was going to be at the end of that conversation?
He deleted the message and moved to the next, which turned out to also be from Sin but a week and a half later. This time he seemed to sound less like Danny and more like the man Boyd remembered; more curt and serious, with the deep rumble that soothed Boyd to hear.

This time it sounded more ominous: "We need to talk. Something strange is happening and I need to know what you know."

Worry fully winning over the excitement, Boyd wasted no time in deleting that message and calling Sin. The phone rang a few times before it went to voicemail.

"Danny, it's me," Boyd said, slowing at a stoplight. "I'm sorry I didn't call earlier—something happened and I just got your messages. I'll be down in Annadale as soon as I can but it won't be for a few days at the earliest." He hesitated and then added, "If something urgent is happening, call me back and I'll figure something out." He hesitated briefly once more before he finished: "I'll call you as soon as I know more. Please be careful."

He was distracted thinking about Sin and what may be happening in Annadale all the way to Killian's and over to Emilio's. But there was nothing he could do about it now other than wait for Sin to respond. He tried to push the preoccupation to the back of his mind and focused instead on the task at hand. He was let in the building soon after he buzzed Emilio's apartment.

Emilio opened the apartment door a moment after Boyd arrived. He'd stripped off his shirt and was already scrolling through a palm computer. He'd refrained from bringing anything into Chandler Heights so that he wouldn't broadcast signals.

"Food?" he asked, not looking up as he sat on the arm of the couch.
Boyd locked the door behind him and walked over to set the bag of takeout on the coffee table. "I got you a burger and fries so you wouldn't hit me again."

"Good." Emilio frowned down at whatever he was looking at.

The wrappers crinkled loudly as Boyd started to unpack the food. He didn't pay much attention to Emilio, although he did wonder what he was doing on his computer. It wasn't until he had everything laid out that he realized Killian's hadn't sent any packets of ketchup.

Boyd was already standing as he started to say, "Do you have—"

The buzzer interrupted him. Boyd looked over at Emilio in surprise.

Emilio didn't seem overly concerned about a random visitor, but he did slide off the arm of the couch and approached a large tablet that was sitting on the coffee table. He sat down and clicked a couple of things on the touch screen, bringing up an image of the outside of the building. It wasn't very surprising that he'd installed his own security cameras considering how paranoid he'd been, even when he lived in Mexico.

Snorting, Emilio glanced at Boyd. "Who invited Red to the party?" he asked, indicating the tablet.

Boyd peered past Emilio's shoulder and saw Owen shifting his weight in front of the address. The R&D agent glanced down the street and held a canvas bag against his side.

"Not me," Boyd said, mystified by the man's appearance. He looked over at Emilio and sat down on the edge of the couch. "Is it normal for him to visit you?"

"Nuh uh." Emilio got up, wandering over to his door to press the buzzer. "Maybe he's gonna take me up on that blowjob thing."
Boyd snorted and moved from the couch's arm to sit in the couch normally. "Is there anyone you haven't propositioned?"

Emilio pushed his shoulders against the wall, lolling his head back towards Boyd. His mouth twitched up into a filthy smirk. "Only your ma. I even kissed Ryan one time. With tongue and everything. The little minx was loving it before he started stuttering over 'b-but Za-zach.'"

Boyd shook his head to himself as he leaned forward to unwrap the chicken sandwich he had ordered for himself. "I'm not even surprised by this information but if you start mocking Ryan I'm going to be the one smacking you."

Before Emilio could answer, there was a knock on the door to the tune of shave and a haircut.

Emilio quit making exaggerated leering faces at Boyd and opened the door. "Hey sexy," he drawled, grabbing Owen's shirt and hauling him into the apartment. "Boyd is here, so I'll have to teach you about dick sucking another time. Actually, I dunno, maybe he wants to watch."

Owen looked startled while Boyd rolled his eyes.

"I could probably teach you pointers on that one," Boyd drawled to Emilio. "I don't need to watch anything."

Emilio shoved Owen in another step and kicked his door closed as he released what had once been his typical loud, charismatic laugh. "Believe me, baby, I sure as fuck know that," he said with a wink. "But I was talking about pointers for Owen here. I'm no joke at the trade myself."

"Whoa, whoa," Owen said, lifting his hands. "Information to place in the 'deleted' folder and recycled, man. Give a guy some notice." Even so, he didn't seem too bothered by the topic as he immediately perked up when he
saw the coffee table. "Oh! Score, is that food? Well, obviously it is. Hey, can I have some?" He was already walking over as he asked.

"Unless Sir Sucks A Lot is sharing his shit, you better back off mine or I'll shoot you in the face," Emilio said as he flipped the locks to his door. "And why the fuck are you here, anyways?"

Boyd silently pushed half of his fries over in front of Owen as the R&D agent dropped onto the couch next to him. A happy grin lit up Owen's face as he set his canvas bag down with one hand and started grabbing a handful of the fries with the other.

"Oh, right." Owen glanced at Emilio reproachfully. "You ruined the cool speech I had planned. I want to help. Or—I want in. Or the eagle has landed and I'll be the nest, or whatever phraseology you undercover peeps like to use." He shoved several fries into his mouth and started to chew.

"You want in on what?" Emilio asked suspiciously, standing above Owen and not making any moves towards his own food. He looked around his apartment before settling a glare on Owen's freckled face and then turning it to Boyd. "Is everyone in on this little op you got going? 'Cause I need to be seriously on the fucking downlow, and you telling the whole world is gonna fuck my shit up."

"I didn't tell anyone," Boyd protested, looking over at Owen with narrowed eyes. He leaned away from the R&D agent, suspicion and alarm growing at the idea of the Agency having learned of this before they'd even started.

Owen looked up at the two of them, his eyes widening slightly at the tension in the room. He dropped a handful of fries and leaned back, lifting his hands in a peace gesture for the second time. "Hold up, no one told anyone
anything. I found out on my own. And it wasn't your guys' fault," he added firmly, looking between the two of them.

"I've been watching the lab in Heights for a long time now so I had some super sensitive flags set. There's a few places they used this new technology camera that's invisible to the naked eye—no way you'd know about it, no one knows about it in the States. I only do 'cause I translated docs about it back in the day when we first acquired them. Anyway, you guys showed up super shortly on one but I intercepted the feed and deleted any trace of you having ever been there. So the Agency doesn't know, trust me. I made sure of it. And I know how to fix it so you aren't seen on it again." He paused in his explanation and added, dark eyes taking them both in seriously. "So I want in."

Emilio stared at him, not bothering to hide the completely baffled look on his face. After a moment he just scoffed, grabbed his burger and sat on the arm of the sofa again. "I got absolutely no comment on all of that shit. I'm just here to jack up power grids and make a scene."

Owen looked hopefully at Boyd, who studied him closely.

"Why are you so interested in the lab?"

Owen grimaced. "Well. That one's kind of a long backstory. But I guess the too long/didn't read version is I think the Agency did some shit that messed up my little sister's life and I want to find out if it's true." A glare shadowed his eyes and thinned his lips, lending an unusually dark cast to his typically carefree face. "Because I'm pretty sure it is."

Boyd's eyes narrowed faintly and he glanced at Emilio.

"The Agency fucks up everyone's life, my dude," Emilio said with a one-shouldered shrug. "We should probably blow the shit up one day, but that's beside the point."
"Yeah, well," Owen muttered, leaning over to open his canvas bag. "Can't argue with you there."

"What will you do even if you do find out it's true?" Boyd asked, still feeling wary at the idea of letting anyone else in on this. It was going to be dangerous enough for two people to be involved. On the other hand, Owen could prove incredibly useful if it turned out he wasn't lying.

Owen pulled out a sleek black tablet from his bag. It was similar to the one Boyd had gotten from Ryan, that was so encrypted and protected it was safe even from the Agency's eyes.

"I dunno yet, honestly." Owen set the tablet on his lap and looked over at Boyd. "But I've been wanting to get into that place forever and didn't know who I could ask or trust who would actually have the skills to do it. It's been real harsh on compound lately, you know? Sometimes it feels like there's no one to really rely on."

He glanced down at his tablet, running his thumb over a button that flashed white and turned on the device. "But we gotta start somewhere, right? So I set those flags hoping some day I'd be able to find someone I could trust to even mention this to and then I saw you guys who I already kind of felt were kosher anyway, and I knew I had to jump on this chance."

Boyd watched Owen, scrutinizing everything from his body language to his expression to the tone of his voice to determine if he was hiding anything. To determine if they really could trust him after all. Owen met his gaze head on and sincerely, without even a flinch.

In truth, Owen hadn't done anything in the years they'd known each other to prove himself to be untrustworthy, and it was for that and because he could understand Owen's motivation that Boyd ended up relaxing back against the couch and nodding.
"Alright."

Owen straightened, his fingers clenching the edge of the tablet while his wide gaze darted from Boyd to Emilio. "Really?"

Boyd glanced at Emilio again.

Emilio licked ketchup from his finger. Apparently he had gotten himself some at some point but had failed to provide any for anyone else. "I don't fucking care. You people can do whatever you want." Emilio paused to meet Boyd's eyes. "I got it on good authority that Red is trustworthy though, if ya know what I mean."

Relief swept through Boyd. That must mean Emilio had it from a safe source, like Carhart. "Okay," he said with a nod and then looked over at Owen. "Okay," he said again.

The relief that Boyd had only shown on the inside was clear all over Owen's face and the loose way he flopped back against the couch. "Thank god, man. I was scared shitless coming up here. Like maybe you guys would turn me away after all and then decide you had to silence me for knowing or something else equally mafia-like."

Emilio scoffed and didn't comment on that.

Boyd leaned forward and picked up his chicken sandwich again. "So, what's on the tablet?" he asked, nodding toward it.

"Oh." Owen perked up. "I'm glad you asked, Sir Sal. Maybe I'll make that your codename on this heist, by the way. You can be SAL, Emilio can be Crabs, and I'll be Watchman. What do you think?"

"I'm too beautiful to have STDs."
"So then no one will think it's you," Owen said cheerfully. "Unless you have a better name."

Shaking his head, Emilio shoved Owen over so that he bumped into Boyd, and sat on the cushion of the sofa instead of the arm. He'd only finished half of his burger, and seemed to have lost interest in it. Sprawling his long legs in front of him, Emilio rested his head against the back of the sofa as he pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. "I got no idea how my boy managed to be in a unit with you. He was an impatient motherfucker on a good day."

"Yeah," Owen said, deflating suddenly as he looked down at his tablet. "It was brutal some days..."

"Can we get back to the tablet?" Boyd asked around a mouthful of sandwich.

"Right!" Owen said, straightening. "Okay, first—" he glanced over at Boyd. "I just need to make sure you'll look for what I want too, if I help you."

"What do you want?" Boyd leaned forward to uncap a bottle of water while he watched Owen.

"I want anything on Nightshade or it might be under Nightshade Trials. If you don't see that it might be designated something with Terra."

"Terra?" Boyd echoed in mild surprise, his eyebrows raising. He paused with the water bottle in front of his lips. "You're talking Ethan Bruce? The man I brought in during my rank 10 training?"

"Yeah," Owen said, dark eyes narrowing and broad shoulders tensing. "Remember he was former CIA? Bio-weapons coordinator who decided to start his own evil little group instead? Well he was working on this Bad News Virus when you guys caught him. He must've been kicking around plans to sell the virus at some point because I remember translating documents talking
about it. Anyway, that's all connected to Nightshade somehow, I just don't
know exactly how yet. I need all the files to see."

"But what exactly is Nightshade?" Boyd asked, setting the water bottle
down on the coffee table again. "If you don't mind my asking."

"I think it's connected to a sickness. Or, more like, I think Nightshade
was the trial to create the sickness." Owen stopped, frowned, and then shook
his head sharply. "But I can't really say more at the moment 'cause I don't
know enough. Everything's all conjecture based on different things I've
translated, you know? That's why I need more info." He looked at Boyd, his
tone a statement while his expression was half a question.

Boyd met his eyes evenly and nodded. "I'll get it for you."

Owen relaxed and reached over to squeeze Boyd's shoulder. "Thank
you, man. Seriously. I don't have any other way—" He almost seemed ready
to say more when he abruptly stopped himself with a firm shake of his head
and dropped his hand on Boyd in favor of picking up his tablet again. "Okay,
back to the plan. So I have blueprints inside the building. But also, I have
some other ideas...

"Alright," Boyd said as he picked up his sandwich again. "Let's hear
them."

===

Boyd crouched beside an SUV in the parking lot, letting the fall of
shadow hide him. He shifted further down, gloved fingers braced lightly
against the pavement while he carefully peered beneath the vehicle to the
surrounding area. Night had fallen two hours ago but the ground still held
some vestiges of heat from the summer sun.
"Don't move an inch, stealth-san," Owen's voice murmured into Boyd's ear through the comm unit. "I've got you covered on the lot cameras but there's a guard just about around the southwest corner..."

Nearly overlapping Owen's words were the measured steps of the guard's footfalls echoing in the abandoned neighborhood. Boyd stayed perfectly still as the man slowly approached.

"Tortilla should be—"

Sudden darkness fell over the entire neighborhood, starting in grid blocks that turned black one after another in a domino effect as the power grid failed. Boyd darted out from behind the vehicle and sprinted toward the building.

"First of all, I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about with these gay ass code names. Second of all, why the hell is mine Tortilla?" Emilio asked dryly through their comms, not at all commenting on whatever he'd done to wipe the electricity in two large neighborhoods of the city. "Don't get me started on the race thing, cabrón. I could make Irish jokes all night."

The guard's radio blared with chatter while he fumbled for his flashlight in the sudden darkness. Night vision glasses gave Boyd perfect sight to avoid another guard coming out of the building from a side entrance and slip in behind him before the door had fallen shut.

"Man," Owen said in exasperation, "don't question the genius of a brilliant mind! Just accept that I'm playing God right now with surveillance and also I'm hungry and didn't get to order anything before we started this." There was a short pause and then, "Also, if you do make Irish jokes, please do so in an appropriate Irish accent. I'd like to hear that from you."

There was a beat of silence, and then: "You're fucking ridiculous, kid."
"Thanks," Owen said cheerfully.

Having studied the blueprints ahead of time, Boyd's infiltration was as simple as darting through doors, hiding beneath stairwells, and ducking behind desks as the lightly guarded facility was abuzz with activity.

"What's going on?" Boyd heard one of the guards demand into his radio as he strode down a hallway. "Everything's down."

"We're waiting to hear," the answer came scratchily from his radio.

Another person's voice chimed in, "James said failure in Silver Lake—"

Boyd moved quickly down the hallway once the guard was around the corner and continued the trek through the building to the sub-basement where the servers were stored. With the power down the security locking system was useless. Boyd was inside and hidden in a back area within seconds, crouched behind the main server with his memory stick ready.

"You have a minute and a half before the power goes up," Emilio said. There was the sound of him exhaling slowly as he spoke, as if he were smoking a cigarette. "I can run interference with the sensors for five minutes, maybe seven tops before they start getting suspicious that someone is fucking with them. So haul your ass, blondie."

"Got it," Boyd said quietly into his comm. "In position."

"How are they labeled?" Owen asked, all sense of joviality missing for the moment.

"CHL01 and CHL02," Boyd said in the same whisper, looking at the two servers mounted in front of him.

"Just two servers and NAS?" Owen inquired.

"Yes," Boyd murmured, keeping an eye on the door to the room.
"Okay cool," Owen answered. "So it's probably like how they do it at base. 02 should be backup."

Boyd didn't answer; he just inserted his memory card into CHL02 and ducked back around the metal structure. Within a minute the lights flickered and came back on. The servers near him beeped then whirred to life. Boyd waited a moment to ensure the guards weren't coming by and then moved back in front of the servers to pull out the compact screen and keyboard.

He quickly mounted the card and executed the pre-written query stored on it. Owen had helped develop it and Boyd had finalized the specifics on his own. It would search for three separate projects: anything with Sin's name set in the time period following the Project Zero trials to date; anything marked Vanguard Industries, focusing in particular on main folders and anything in the date range of 2000-2007; and anything marked Nightshade, Nightshade Trials, or Terra during a specific time period for Owen. When finished copying all related files to the memory card it would erase his tracks on the server.

They had timed the break in according to the assumed daily backup from the main server to the backup server, based on the timing of similar routines at the Agency compound servers. Even if any traces were left of Boyd's activity following the query finishing, the automatic backup which would take place within ten minutes of him leaving would completely erase his presence. And even if there were any glitches left over, it could be attributed to the sudden power outage.

He kept glancing at the door as the query started working.

"So Owen," Emilio's voice came across sounding bored. "What are you doing later?"

"Probably not learning blowjob techniques from you but I'd be up for watching horror movies." Owen's tone went from a responding drawl to
excitement in the span of one sentence. "I just got this cool new one that's old school but supposed to be real violent. Blood and body parts flying everywhere..."

"Totally straight and a motherfucking geek. I don't know which is worse."

"If you asked my sister, it'd be the straight. If you asked my brothers, it'd be the geek," Owen replied idly. "Pick your poison, I guess." There was a pause and then a mildly indignant, "Man, wait. Way to not use our code names, Chile Relleno."

"Fuck a code name," Emilio replied, sounding as bland and unimpressed as Sin would have.

"Bah," Owen said in a puff of breath like a cranky old man. It sounded like he was drawing breath to say something else when he suddenly said, "Smoke and Shadows—incoming, hide the screen."

Boyd flipped the screen mostly closed and pushed it back into the rack, darting out of view of the closed door and crouching down.

"Nice hustle," Owen said approvingly. "It's a guard. He's coming up on you... Okay now he's looking in the window but doesn't... Yeah, he's leaving already. Stay hidden a sec, though. He's been wandering around like a drunken Scotsman so I can't say yet he won't come back."

"Says the Irishman," Emilio drawled. There was a pause before he said a little impatiently, "You need to move your ass faster. If time runs out, you can guarantee I'm ducking out of this bitch without y'all."

"The query has to search decades worth of information and download separate files," Boyd answered quietly. "I can't make it go any faster."

"Guard went upstairs, you're clear," Owen put in.
Boyd immediately returned, pulling out the screen again and checking the progress. The second task was nearly half finished. The estimated time was two minutes.

"Three more minutes," Boyd murmured into the comm.

"No one heading downstairs again," Owen said. "Should be good."

Boyd impatiently watched the time count down, wishing it could go faster. He kept glancing at the door even though he knew Owen would alert him if anyone was coming.

He returned his attention to the screen and pulled up the card while he waited. It had identified the locations of the different projects and was starting to pull the files. He checked the hierarchy for the one that he guessed was about Sin, and navigated until he found the folder itself. It turned out to be filed under 'ghost research' and the project was named simply 'HM.' An overview of the project was the first file he found.

His heart pounded while he quickly skimmed the information.

The project had apparently started as research in the Euro Division. The purpose was to keep "upgraded operatives" in abeyance as an alternative to permanent termination. They were considered too expensive to permanently dispose of, so various methods had been researched to put them out of commission while still remaining functional if need for their abilities should arise. Previous attempts at abeyance, including confinement and stasis, proved to result in permanent mental damage on the operatives.

The Agency had developed a new system, HM, and had begun the trials in Europe. There had seen several failures before one operative seemed to take to the procedure. The operative had only partially taken to her fabricated memories the first time and had gone through multiple incarnations until she was ultimately deemed a success. However, when they attempted to
return her memories three months later they had only found partial success. There had been minor tweaks of the system before Sin had been determined to be the ideal candidate as a test subject; the first attempt in either Division at a long-term study in an uncontrolled environment.

Boyd's jaw shifted and his eyes narrowed as he quickly scrolled down.

A section further down marked questions they hoped to answer with this and future research subjects. Among them were how long they could keep the subject in abeyance, how the suppressed memory functioned under varying levels of stress, whether there would be any issues upon attempts to return memories, how often memories could be suppressed and returned in cycles before it degraded the mental capacity of the operative to the point of no longer being viable, and so on.

Boyd's hands tightened on the edge of the keyboard.

The disgust he felt toward the way the Agency played with the lives of their operatives was only mitigated by the confused mixture of relief and concern. This meant Sin wasn't gone—not for good. The memories of the man Boyd knew and loved were there, still—hidden but not removed. At the same time, if Sin was part of his project was he still considered an active test subject? Were they still watching him as closely as they had all those times they'd been watching Sin in his apartment—even when Boyd had been there and not known?

Did they know Boyd had been down there? Had they seen him in Danny's apartment? If they had, what would that mean?

Paranoia was a cold rush through his veins.

"Attention ladies," Emilio's voice broke through the silence suddenly. "We've got ourselves a problem."
"What?" Boyd asked at the same time Owen drawled, "What's the deal, daddio?"

"Party crasher. Seems like another little R&D agent was feeling daring tonight." There was a pause, and then a rustle of movement. "Motherfucking Ivan is sneaking his dumb ass in. Boyd, get moving. Now."

"What?" Boyd said again, more sharply as he automatically looked toward the door. "Shit." He immediately started shutting down the query even though it hadn't finished.

"What the hell is he doing," Owen demanded, sounding genuinely alarmed. "He's going to get himself killed. I'm watching him right now and he's just sneaking around but, Boyd, you need to jet. If they see him they'd as soon catch you thinking you're him."

"I know," Boyd hissed, doing a hack job of erasing his presence and yanking out the card. He shoved it into his pocket with one hand and flipped the screen closed and shoved it back into the unit with the other.

"You got like one minute to get the fuck out of dodge," Emilio said sharply. "We need to be moving out before that moron trips a sensor and they swarm."

"Hallway clear," Owen's voice muttered into Boyd's ear. In the background Boyd could hear the faintest clicking as Owen presumably typed quickly. "First floor okay southeast end but don't touch southwest right now; two guards, milling about..."

"Is he working with anyone, Owen?" Boyd asked under his breath as he slipped into the hallway and started running toward the southeast stairwell.

There was a pause as the clicking increased, followed by, "Looks like no. Emilio—SUV coming down the street west of you, a block away. Take the
back alley. Boyd, those guards are starting toward you now. There's a hallway to the north, should take you to... Fuck, I need more screens."

"I remember the blueprints," Boyd muttered and paused at the door to the stairwell. He peered out the corner of the window, saw the coast was clear for the moment, and darted out. He moved as quickly but quietly as he could down the immediate north hallway.

"Damn it," Owen was muttering. "I hope he knows what he's doing. Boyd—right hallway. Ahead's blocked. You're otherwise good."

Boyd took the right hallway he was about to pass and rushed down it as he recalibrated himself in terms of the blueprints. He ran the final few steps to his predetermined escape route.

"If he was at least using a comm I could try to ping him," Owen continued, sounding as though he were talking aloud to himself.

"Your luck is about to run out, kiddo," Emilio cut in over Owen.

Boyd paused at the door just long enough to see if anyone was in the vicinity and then darted out, hugging the perimeter of the building for a few steps before he broke off toward the parking lot.

"I'm out," he said as he sprinted toward the next building.

"I've got you covered on cameras," Owen said. "But if they get worried I might have to shut down early. The loops will only protect you both from view for five minutes tops if that happens."

"Got it."

Boyd didn't stop running until he was free from the surveillance zone, at which point Owen said he was packing up and the three of them went radio silent. Boyd made a quick stop at the building they'd used as their secure
base. He pulled out the items he'd left hidden, including his secure tablet, and loaded the memory card.

His hands shook from adrenaline and exertion as he checked over the files; his panting as he tried to catch his breath the only hushed, harsh sound in the empty room.

The Nightshade folder appeared to have copied fully, but the HM folders were only partially populated. There had to have been more information than that, but he hadn't had the chance to read anything further on the servers before he had to leave. He didn't have time to read the files now so he buried the information deep on his tablet. The folders on Vanguard Industries appeared to be completely corrupted. It was a crushing disappointment to consider the possibility that he hadn't been able to get full information on either of the topics he'd wanted, but he didn't have time to think about it.

He quickly parsed the information to separate memory chips. He transposed Project Zero information onto one of them and doctored it so it looked corrupted, on the second put the full information regarding Nightshade, and on the third he put everything he'd gathered about Vanguard Industries. He put everything with HM solely on his tablet. When finished, he encrypted the original memory card, removed any trace of them having been in the room, and left.

Once he was out of Chandler Heights and back at his well hidden car, he quickly changed out of the clothing from the break in and shoved it in a hidden compartment in his trunk. With a clean, short-sleeved pinstriped black button-up shirt and a pair of fitted grey-washed black jeans on, and his hair pulled back into a ponytail, he looked as composed as if he hadn't done anything more strenuous than reading a book that day.
Half an hour later found him at the front of Emilio’s building where he buzzed for entrance.

He was let in barely a minute later, and Emilio answered his apartment door shirtless once again. He’d changed into a pair of dark jeans that were unbuckled and undone, seeming as though he were in the middle of getting dressed. When Boyd stepped into the apartment, he saw that Owen was already there.

“ivan is a fucking retarded idiot,” Emilio said automatically, shutting the door. He began fixing his belt and glared at both of them. “I bet you didn’t even get to finish the shit, did you?”

“No,” Boyd admitted, walking over by the couch. He set his messenger bag on the coffee table with a quiet thump and then pulled out one memory chip and palmed the other. “Here, Owen—As far as I can tell I got everything for you.”

“Really?” Owen strode over and took the chip from Boyd's hand. He stared down at it a moment, his hands curling around it, before he turned and booted up his tablet. He started muttering to himself as he accessed the project information.

While Owen was distracted, Boyd walked up to Emilio and handed him the corrupted chip with the Project Zero information. He spoke quietly into Emilio’s ear so as not to be overheard by Owen. “I was interrupted. I can't say whether there was more I could have gotten, but at least I got you some details on the first project.”

Emilio pocketed the chip, not doing anything to mask his aggravation. “Waste of fucking time,” he said acidly. “I'm glad that stupid kid got caught.”

“What?” Boyd said, stepping back and looking at Emilio. “We know that for certain?”
"Yes," the older man said, uncaring. "Who cares? He's an idiot, anyway. Who the fuck told him to play secret agent and try to sneak into a highly secured facility? The only reason he got as far as he fucking did is because I happened to have been there and happened to have knocked out the sensors."

Boyd sat on the arm of the couch, his eyebrows drawing down. Emilio was right, and especially without knowing what Ivan's true plan was he didn't know whether it was better or worse for everyone else that he was caught. Still, he couldn't help feeling like it was a mild failure on his part for not being able to convince Ivan to open up more, even though it had seemed evident the very reason Ivan had refused to do so was to protect Boyd.

"So what's going to happen with him?"

Emilio gave Boyd a flat look. "Duh."

Boyd sighed again, unsurprised. He rubbed a hand over his face briefly, wondering what Sin would say about all this if he ever found out.

"There was nothing we could've done." Owen's sudden entrance to the conversation caused Boyd to look up. Owen was watching Boyd solemnly. "Seriously, man. No jokes for once. Ivan's a loose cannon and as good as he is, he always did his own thing and didn't let anyone get involved. And he was way too obvious about hating on the Agency. You have to be stealth about that sort of thing—not doing that is what got all those people terminated when Seong took over."

He shook his head, his face drawing tight as he looked down at his tablet. "He had to have known he may not be able to pull off an infiltration on his own—hell, that's why I've been sitting on the lab for months now. I knew better than to run in alone. So he planned for something. I don't know what it was or whether he was successful, but Ivan's not an idiot. He would know
going into it that termination is a possibility and he chose to do it anyway." He shrugged and typed something into the tablet. "People have the right to make those decisions for themselves, even when it sucks to be on the periphery for the consequences."

Boyd studied Owen for a long moment before he moved off the arm of the couch and settled onto one of the cushions. "You're right..."

"And this is the reason why R&D stay with the computers, and fieldies stay in the fucking field," Emilio muttered. He looked at Boyd and Owen with little sympathy, almost appearing annoyed that they were so down about the development. "Alright, enough of this shit. I'm going out drinking and unless y'all are gonna come with me, get your morose asses out of my apartment."

Owen glanced down at his tablet with a distracted, dark stare. His jaw shifted and then he abruptly turned off the computer. Sliding it into his bag, he looked over at Emilio through a fall of curly red hair. "So is that an actual invite for drinks? 'Cause I'm down with that right now."

"Yup yup." Emilio picked up a grey shirt that had been thrown over the back of the sofa. He slipped it on and buttoned it. It was tight and had detailing that looked vaguely militaristic. "I won't even hit on you none. Straight boys always change their mind after a few, anywa..."

Owen snorted and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, 'in your dreams.'

Emilio winked at Owen before cuffing Boyd in the back of the head. "What about you, faggot?"

"Ow," Boyd said, putting a hand to the back of his head and eyeing Emilio sidelong. "I might consider it if you'd stop abusing me."
That earned him a scoff and Emilio shoved Boyd's head forward. "Don't be a little bitch." He paused, looked at Owen and then rolled his eyes. "And find that dude some shit to wear in my closet. I can't be seen with him like that."

"What the hell," Boyd muttered, leaning forward to flip his messenger bag closed. He almost told them he couldn't go. He was worried about Sin and knew he might be preoccupied. But there was nothing he could do about it anyway. He couldn't take off in the middle of the night for Annadale and had to verify he had time off before he left or he would cause even more problems.

Maybe it would be better to have something else to focus on aside from all the other questions plaguing him: what his uncle had been doing; where he had disappeared to because Boyd hadn't heard from him since that one day; whether there would be anything he could get off the Vanguard Industries files to tell him what connection his father had, if any, to the Agency; who did the mole have information on and, if Ivan wasn't involved, who would be targeted next... And behind it all, wondering if Sin was okay, if he was angry with Boyd for disappearing for weeks right when he needed him, if he still wanted Boyd's help...

He sighed and pushed his hair back as he stood. "It's your closet," he said aloud instead. "Why don't you find him something?"

"Cause I need to call Trovosky's fine ass and get him to come out too." Emilio finished buttoning his shirt.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Really. He's on your shortlist now, after the lockdown?"

Emilio raised his shoulders in a rolling shrug, and wandered over to a mirror that was hanging from one wall. He adjusted his shirt and began running his fingers through his hair. "Nah. He's still a dumb fucking blond with
a hero complex. But I got something to discuss with him that I couldn't discuss in an Agency apartment, and he'll bend over for me, so why the fuck not."

Boyd rolled his eyes. He resisted the urge to again warn Emilio not to unnecessarily mess with Kassian since, when it came down to it, it was their decision. Kassian was the sort who liked casual sex and, if he agreed to any of Emilio's advances, hopefully wouldn't be as put off by the aftermath as he had been the first time. Boyd was trying to make more of a concentrated effort to stop his automatic protective urges toward friends, especially when it concerned other friends.

He was about to turn away when he noticed how seriously Emilio was considering himself in the mirror. "Are you seriously primping right now?" he asked incredulously. He crossed his arms with a shake of his head. "I can't believe everyone gives me such shit for being a valentine when you're the very embodiment of it even on your offtime."

"It's hard being this fucking pretty." Emilio turned to the side, eyeing his profile in the mirror before reaching down to the crotch of his jeans to adjust himself. "And being a valentine ain't so bad. I always liked it."

Boyd shook his head to himself. "Why don't you take all my assignments from now on, then?"

"'Cause no matter how hot I am, I can't transform into a fairy-looking blond ho when the need arises," Emilio said casually. He glared at his reflection for a moment and then nodded before turning to Boyd and Owen again.

"Thanks, Emilio," Boyd said sarcastically with a roll of his eyes. "You always make me feel so good about myself."

"I try."
Boyd shook his head to himself and walked into the bedroom. As he left the room he heard Owen lamenting:

"Ryan's gonna feel like leftovers. Maybe somebody should invite him too. And by 'somebody' I mean 'me.' And by 'maybe' I mean 'probably, unless it means you're gonna smack me too..."

"Do what you want. Jesus, you is one rambling ass motherfucker."

"It's one of my charms," Owen said blithely.

Boyd stopped paying attention as he closed the bedroom door behind him. He went to the far corner and pulled out his personal phone, checking quickly for any missed messages. When he didn't see any, he turned to keep an eye on the bedroom door while he dialed Danny's number. Every time it rang his heartbeat seemed to increase, followed by a shot of disappointment and worry when Danny didn't answer.

When he got the pre-recorded message again, he said quietly, "Hey, it's me again. I won't be able to check my schedule until tomorrow but I'll call you when I know. Call me if you need me, no matter what time it is."

He closed his phone and slid it into his back pocket, turning distractedly toward Emilio's closet. He could hardly concentrate on the variety of colors and styles. He absently shoved some shirts aside, looking blankly at a dark blue fitted shirt while he tried to figure out why Sin hadn't responded yet. He could be working late. Or he might be at a party...

"Hey Boyd!" Owen's voice called, muffled, through the door. "Ryan's—"

There was a rattle and then the door suddenly burst open as Owen said, "Whoa, what's with the barrier, dude? Doing the hanky-panky and turning yourself around?"
Boyd nearly jumped and looked over, his fingers curling into the black fabric of some sort of long-sleeved shirt. "No. Just trying to find something for you without getting distracted by your phone calls..."

"Oh," Owen said, accepting the explanation easily enough as he loped inside. "Okay, so Ryan says he's golden, plus—whoa, are these my options?" Owen stopped at Boyd's side and started pushing clothes around with an expression of interest. "Is there anything in here that will make me look like a harlot?" he asked hopefully.

"Hurry the fuck up before I come dress you myself," Emilio shouted impatiently from the living room.

"Mister Vega," Owen called back in a scandalized tone, drawing himself up and placing a hand over his heart in the style of old-movie-heroines. "Such a tease, to make such promises and never follow through."

Boyd snorted out a soft laugh and shoved aside a range of black shirts. "He's probably serious, you know..."

"Oh," Owen said, eyes widening and darting toward the door. All of a sudden he was nearly shoving Boyd aside in his haste to select some clothing. "Nevermind!" he called immediately. "False alarm. I'll be out in, like, five, so please don't undress me. You wouldn't want to see me naked anyway. All sorts of gangly limbs and freckles everywhere, I swear."

Boyd snorted again but a small smirk curved his lips as he pushed aside more clothing.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Even with the sun still hovering below the horizon, the sky a deep blue that wasn't yet starting to pale, there were some people milling around on the beach. Boyd pulled into the Blue Moon Diner's parking lot, his headlights flooding the front of the diner where Sin's motorbike was parked and Sin himself was just starting to open the shutters.

As Boyd strode quickly toward Sin, he let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Even though they'd already spoken to set up this time, every second it had taken to drive down had felt far too long to be away from Sin when he might need him.

"Hey," Boyd said a bit breathlessly when he was at Sin's side.

The shutters clanked as Sin shoved them upwards, and he turned around. His lips parted but then shut as Sin's gaze swept over Boyd once, and then again. His eyebrows twitched together slightly, and for a moment his gaze was as hawk-like and intense as it used to be. Then the moment passed, and he gave a rolling shrug of his broad shoulders that was less Sin-like.

"I didn't think you'd be here for another hour."

"I hurried." Boyd raked a gaze along Sin, checking for injuries but unable to stop himself from lingering slightly on Sin's toned arms and calves showing through his sleeveless shirt and cargo shorts. He didn't see anything worrisome but still found the strange messages and lack of an explanation worrisome. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. For now, at least." There was a healthy pause as Sin looked around them. He reached out to wrap his long fingers around Boyd's arm and
pulled him forward. Sin's voice dropped to a low pitch. "You disappeared as soon as shit got strange."

Boyd's breath drew in and stilled, from Sin's touch even more than his words. "What happened?"

Sin dropped his hand almost as if it was an afterthought, his thumb sliding against Boyd's wrist. "Someone's been following me. Watching me."

Alarm swept through Boyd. He discreetly checked their surroundings for anything unusual but didn't see anything suspect. Even so, he grabbed Sin by the upper arm and half pushed, half led him back into the doorway, shifting in front of Sin for better cover.

"Give me details. Where have you noticed them? Is it one person or more?"

The corner of Sin's mouth twitched up as if somehow, even in this civilian alternate reality, he'd recognized what Boyd was doing. He leaned back against the door. "It started here. Sometimes I have to cover tables when we're short, and I felt it then. People watch all the time—stupid kids, admirers and whatever. But this was different. It felt different."

There was a pause but Sin didn't move his steady gaze from Boyd's eyes. "It's mostly around the diner or the beach that I feel it. But recently it's been near my apartment too."

Those green eyes watching Boyd seemed more alert than in the past. The timbre of Sin's voice, the way he held himself and moved—it was the way Boyd had felt the last time they'd seen each other before the valentine. This felt more like Sin than Danny. The magnetism that had drawn Boyd to Sin in the first place, the reason he could never forget Sin no matter the passage of time, felt like an electric spark that buzzed just on the other side of their conversation.
Unable to stop himself, Boyd shifted closer. Sin placed a hand against the jamb of the doorway and leaned down slightly.

Boyd dragged his gaze away to check the reflection in the nearby windows, taking the chance to draw in half a breath and focus on what Sin was telling him. His mind raced with the possibilities when his eyes met Sin's again.

"How long ago did you feel them near your apartment?"

"That was only a few days ago," Sin said with a dark scowl. He shook his head and sighed, his breath close enough to stir some of Boyd's hair. A shiver passed down Boyd's spine. "That's when I left you that other message. I don't know what the hell is going on but I have this feeling it has something to do with that girl who got murdered."

That would be all they needed: Janus showing their face in Annadale after the Agency had finally turned away. And what if something worse had happened when Boyd had been unable to leave compound? He nearly leaned his forehead onto Sin's shoulder in relief before he stopped himself. He turned the motion into a nod but even then he was entirely too aware of the proximity of Sin's body.

"It's good you called me. Can you give me a description of the people or have you only felt them?"

Sin shook his head, dark hair loosening slightly from the rubber band knotted in it. "Nah. They stay away from me and watch from a distance. Or else it's in a crowd, and I can't pick whoever it is out." He stopped talking for another of those long stretches, and his eyes narrowed further as he stared down at Boyd.

Unexpectedly he said, "I kept thinking about you. Not just because of this."
"Me?" Boyd asked, drawing back just enough to search Sin's expression. "Why?"

"I don't really know." Sin frowned slightly. "You just kept coming up in my mind. And then I thought maybe you weren't coming back. So. Sorry for before. For the last time you were here."

Boyd's lips lifted faintly on the edges and without thinking he reached up, absently brushing some strands of Sin's hair over his shoulder that had started to fall between them. His hand paused to rest on Sin's shoulder and slide down, lightly, before dropping away.

"It's alright. You're right to be paranoid—I'm only sorry I incited that in you myself."

The comment seemed to have the opposite effect of what he'd intended. The guarded expression returned to Sin's face, or Danny's face, and he straightened. Distance was created between them but still, those green eyes focused briefly on Boyd's mouth. The dark brows drew together again, and Sin finally looked away entirely.

"Like I said on the phone," he began finally. "I need to know what you know. And if you want to protect me or whatever you said that night, then you need to tell me what's going on."

Boyd sighed and took half a step back. "I'll tell you what I can but speaking about this out in the open isn't a good idea. Can we go inside?"

The word 'yes' started to form on Sin's lips but then he stopped, and shook his head. "Kayla will be here soon, and I have to get to work. You should probably just come back after closing." There was a flash of irritation in those familiar eyes. "I work a double today. I figured this wasn't a good time, but I wanted to see if you would come." The last part came out reluctantly, as if he was loathe to admit it.
"I'll come back at closing," Boyd said. "I might check in before then but I haven't slept so I'll have to swing by my hotel room at some point."

He took a step closer and leveled Sin with a serious stare. "But if anything happens before that," he emphasized the word by gripping Sin's upper arm, "especially if you feel them watching you again, call me immediately. I don't care if you wake me. If I am at all able to I will always come if you need me, however large or small the problem may be."

Sin pulled away and turned, keys jingling as he unlocked the doors. When he spoke, it was impossible to read his thoughts coming from this new and constantly shifting personality. "Like I said before, I can take care of myself. All I want from you is information." There was a click as the door unlocked. "See you later."

Boyd watched Sin's back. It was hard to tell where they stood, because one moment Sin was reaching out to Boyd and the next he was pulling away. Then again, it was probably Boyd's own fault—any time he saw even a flicker of the way Sin used to be he got too close; acted too familiar. And that sudden closeness might be making Danny's wariness increase.

Maybe he kept remembering that he didn't know Boyd and, truthfully, still had no concrete reason to trust him.

Repressing another sigh, Boyd took a step backward to put more physical space between them. "Alright. I'll see you tonight."

Sin nodded shortly, paused very briefly after unlocking the door, and then disappeared inside.

Boyd stayed outside, checking the slowly-gathering crowd in the area and then doing a circuit of the building to ensure nothing seemed unusual. Even when the diner opened and customers started filtering inside, even
knowing Sin had been alright all this time and likely would for the rest of the day regardless of Boyd's presence, he couldn't bring himself to leave yet.

He ordered a drink and settled into the outside seating where he could most discreetly and effectively watch all those coming and going from the establishment. Janus operatives could look like, act like, anyone; but after years of dealing with them he'd come to recognize some telltale signs and those were what he watched for.

It occurred to him that with Sin predisposed he could have gone to his apartment and looked for cameras. Knowing now that Sin was still considered an active experiment by the Agency it seemed even more possible that they were under surveillance somehow that Boyd or Sin hadn't yet detected.

But he knew in the end it was pointless no matter the outcome. Either the Agency had been watching all along at which point they were already well aware of Boyd's involvement, or they hadn't been watching and all he would do is give Sin cause to feel betrayed if the first thing he did upon gaining some measure of his trust was break into his apartment.

And even if he did find cameras in Sin's apartment, what could he do? Destroying them would only see them replaced as he knew full well from the past. It was possible that his not being overt about the possibility of being watched was all that had kept the Agency from interfering so far, believing they were getting pure data on the way the two of them interacted.

Better, then, to take more subtle precautions they may not catch in time.

He was halfway through his iced tea when movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He looked over and saw Roz, who was jogging along the beach and, in her glance toward the diner, alighted on him with a sudden grin. With such genuine-seeming good cheer directed at him, it was
impossible to do anything other than smile back and wave. She adjusted her
direction and jogged over to stop by him.

"Hey!" she greeted him, voice warm and friendly.

"Hey Roz," Boyd replied, standing up.

She stopped in front of him, still grinning as she wiped a hand across
her sweaty face. "I thought I would be seeing more of you. Where'd you get
off to?"

Boyd made a face. "We're getting killed at work so I couldn't get away
for awhile," he said casually and then shrugged. "You know how it goes.
Intensely busy one month, dead bored the next."

She nodded in understanding. "Yeah, I get it. I figured you ran out of
vacation days or something,

and Danny didn't say much about it." Roz glanced at the diner and then
at Boyd before her lips slid into a sly smile. "What are you doing here so
early? It just opened. Did you come in together? Did you get reacquainted
last night or something?"

"I wish," Boyd lamented with a roll of his eyes. "I was in the area so I
thought I'd stop by to see if he was around."

"He's always around this place. He opens the diner like all the time.
People quit that place like crazy except him. He stays even though it sucks." Roz scrunched her face up and began tying her hair back in a ponytail. "I was
hoping he'd gotten laid so that he could chill the hell out."

"What do you mean?"
One of her smooth shoulders lifted in a shrug. "He's just been in a mood lately. Like... real hot and cold. Normal Danny one minute, and then tense, impatient Danny the next."

"Did something happen?"

"Not really..." Roz seemed to think about that, but after a moment she frowned and shook her head again. "No, I can't think of anything. I mean there's been drama with our friends, and Tech has kinda gone AWOL since it all started, but that has nothing to do with him. He's just like, really moody lately. That does remind me though—Tech has been trying to contact you about that bike you were interested in. E-mailed you a couple of times, I think she said."

"Oh." Between the lockdown, Sin's cryptic messages, the lab break-in, searching for the mole, his uncle's sudden appearance, and his regularly assigned missions, he had completely forgotten to check his personal email for awhile. "Thanks, I'll check later."

He reached back to pull off the loosening band that held his hair back. Even this early in the morning, in the middle of the hottest months of summer in Annadale Beach it was already growing unbearably warm for someone who had been dressed for a stakeout and infiltration. He had thrown off his long-sleeved overshirt on the way down but the dark grey t-shirt and black pants were hardly an improvement. He ran his hands along his hair and pulled it back into a ponytail higher off his neck where the heat didn't get caught as easily.

"What's been the drama with your friends?" His eyebrows ticked upward along with the edges his lips. "If you don't mind my asking. After the week I've had, hearing about drama in Annadale sounds like the sort of distraction I need."
Roz laughed. "You don't know most of them. There's gay dramas with my friends Gage and Taz, and then another girl is being a diva, and Tech is unfortunately remaining strictly dickly and hanging out with some new guy." She sighed tragically, making a face, and making it more than obvious that she'd prefer if Tech hung out with her. "Annadale people have nothing better to worry about than who's fucking whom."

"Perhaps you should start your own reality show," Boyd suggested with a grin. "I might know a guy."

"I'll pass on that one." Roz glanced at the watch on her wrist and made a face. "Okay, I have to jam. But it was so awesome seeing you again, Boyd. My friend Edie, also known as the diva, is having one of her infamous parties tomorrow night. You should come. Maybe get Danny to come too."

"I'll try. Where is it?"

Enthused by the response, she gave him the address and the directions. It was near the university and the strip where most of the city's nightlife was.

"I really hope you come. It gets pretty crazy, but if you're with Danny that should be a good thing." Roz gave him another wicked grin before jogging off.

He stayed at the diner for a while longer but finally acknowledged that it was highly unlikely he would run across any useful intel and, to be especially thorough, he would have to stay there all day. While he would have had no qualms with it, he couldn't. There were steps he had to take before the night and, most importantly, he was exhausted.

He hadn't lied to Sin—he hadn't slept in two days, and the longer he sat overheated in the blazing sun with too many layers, the more he could feel nausea growing in the pit of his stomach and the back of his throat. He took
one last, meandering circuit through the diner and around the area, with all the aimlessness of someone wandering destinationless on a free day. Satisfied that nothing seemed suspicious or amiss, he left.

A quick stop at some stores on his way back to the hotel gave him the chance to buy some rations for the next few days as well as some more clothing. He had taken to keeping a ready bag in his trunk in the last few months, when it had become apparent he was always one phone call away from racing off somewhere, but some of what he had needed replacing.

Instead of going to the Oceanside Resort where he had a prepaid room, he drove to another hotel further down the block. It had fewer amenities and a less dramatic view of the ocean but it was suitably more expensive than the other hotels in Annadale, which meant the staff would still be discreet and it would be more likely to have an open room even at the peak tourist season.

Until he could verify whether the Agency knew he was in Annadale and whether they were watching him too, he didn't feel safe at the room they may expect him to use.

The Presidential had a wide open lobby with inlaid designs on the floor and a clean-cut decor. There were only a few people around; everyone else was likely still asleep or out at the beach. He didn't have to wait in line, which was fortunate because he was exhausted.

"I'd like to rent a room," he told the man behind the counter.

"Of course." The man paused as he checked the computer, his eyebrows drawing together slightly. "We're nearly full. The only two rooms available are courtside, not oceanview."

"That's fine." Boyd drew out his wallet. "Can you put me down for a week?"
"Yes, sir. Would you like to pay with credit?"

"Cash. And upfront, if you don't mind."

The man's gaze flicked up at Boyd briefly, questioning. He started to look away, perhaps realizing how it could be considered intrusive, but Boyd smiled easily.

"I know I don't look it but I'm an author. I have a tendency to follow my inspiration and I've angered some hotels in the past by taking off on a whim and forgetting to pay." He chuckled and shook his head. "I've learned my lesson."

The man's lips lifted faintly in return but the slight furrow in his brow disappeared at that. He returned his attention to the computer, typing at length before he finally said: "And the name?"

"Claude Eckhardt."

"Hmm. I can't say I recognize it." The man glanced up. "What do you write?"

Boyd waved a hand idly. "Fiction, mostly. Sometimes mysteries. Depends on what pays the most. I use a pseudonym so you wouldn't know it. And before you ask—sorry, if I told you it I'd have to kill you." He winked so dramatically that the man flashed a smile before settling back into neutrality.

He handed the room key over to Boyd. "Here is your key, Mr. Eckhardt. We hope you enjoy your stay at The Presidential. Do you have baggage you would like us to carry in?"

"No, I travel light." Boyd pocketed the key and readjusted his messenger bag and duffel bag on his shoulder. "Thank you."
The room he had rented turned out to be much smaller than the one he had at Oceanside, but it was equally nice and was still large compared to normal hotel rooms. Although the windows didn’t face the ocean, the courtyard was impeccably maintained. As he passed toward the bathroom he noticed a gift basket the hotel had left for incoming guests on the end table. He glanced inside and saw a small bottle of suntan oil, some snacks, maps of the nearby area, and other complementary items. As he suspected, he found even more free items in the bathroom.

After he’d thrown off his grungy clothing, closed the curtains to block the sunlight and dropped onto the bed, he found the bed itself was quite comfortable. He kicked the comforter until it was at the foot of the bed and then drew the sheet up and nearly over his head.

When he closed his eyes, he was asleep nearly immediately.

The buzzing of the alarm on his phone woke him later as much as his stomach did. He groaned and rolled onto his back, blearily reaching for his phone until he could pull it over. Even the several hours spent on a luxurious bed didn’t feel like long enough when placed against two days of no sleep. He wondered if he was ever going to get a good night’s sleep in Annadale.

With closing time for The Blue Moon Diner drawing near, Boyd didn’t want to leave Sin alone any longer than he had to. He rolled out of bed, his bare feet thudding onto the carpet. The plan was to get to the Blue Moon before it closed and walk Sin home, maybe even stay the night on the couch if Sin would let him.

He was tying his hair back when his phone rang. He rushed out of the bathroom and grabbed his phone off the nightstand, expecting Sin—

Ryan’s name flashed on screen.

Boyd picked up immediately. "Hey. Is everything okay?"
"Yeah, everything is fine," Ryan said. "Wanna grab a bite and chat?"

"I can't—I'm busy for a few days. How about next week?"

"Okay, I just wanted to tell you some stuff that I don't wanna blather on about on the phone," the R&D agent said lightly. "Our friend isn't going to give us the goods without a lot of prying. Also, Jacob stopped by my desk to make random small talk but I chickened out of doing much about it."

Boyd stopped in his tracks as he translated what Ryan was telling him. "Really?" he asked casually. "I thought our friend wasn't going to speak to us at all. You'll have to tell me later what Jacob said."

"Definitely," Ryan said cheerily. "It took awhile to soften him up, but I think we can get some stuff out of him. Someone like Jeffrey would relate to him better, but I think I can give it a shot."

"I can't say that surprises me," Boyd mused. "Jeffrey's always been better with the guarded type. But you can tell me about it over lunch—I'll even buy, since I was the one who set you up with him."

"Awesome. Call me whenever, I'll be around." Ryan ended the call cheerfully.

Boyd hung up the phone, his mind racing. He had thought the information on Vanguard Industries had been corrupted but he'd given it to Ryan anyway to see if anything could be recovered. Apparently it wasn't corrupted at all; it was just so heavily encrypted that Ryan couldn't access the information yet.

Maybe Boyd would be able to find out more about his father and his connection to the Agency after all.

Ryan's call served to distract Boyd shortly so that he was a few minutes later leaving than he had intended. Between that and the slightly
longer trek from The Presidential to Blue Moon, when Boyd arrived at Blue Moon he saw the place was already closed. He did a circuit around the building, looking for Sin.

He wasn't there but his motorbike was still parked in the lot.

Suspicion rising, Boyd peered in the door. He didn't see any movement inside. He didn't see any movement anywhere.

The worry he'd felt earlier increased. Where the hell was Sin?

He called Sin's cell phone but was unsurprised when it went to voicemail. Eyes narrowing, Boyd assessed the surroundings. Although Sin could have been kidnapped, Boyd doubted such a thing would happen without some sort of indication that there had been a fight or struggle. Even as Danny, Boyd didn't imagine Sin would let himself easily be taken away in a vehicle.

Which meant they were probably within walking distance in a secluded area. The only place he could think of was the nearby pier, unless they'd hauled him indoors somewhere.

His instincts told him to check the pier so he ran in that direction. The sounds were completely silenced when he moved out to the sand, slinking along the brush and shadows to duck behind one of the broad columns that supported the pier above. As he got closer, he could hear the sounds of low voices, and quiet demands. He heard just enough to realize that these people were definitely related to Janus, and they were definitely targeting Sin because of what he had seen months ago.

Boyd shifted around a column and was finally able to see them.

There were five men surrounding Sin, and the one speaking was aiming a gun at Sin’s head. Despite this, Sin didn't appear frightened. He was
looking at them with cold indifference that seemed to be throwing the leader of the group off guard.

Boyd had his gun out and shot the man in the head in seconds. Blood sprayed his colleagues and they jumped in surprise. The shot was so unexpected that it took a second for everyone to realize what had happened, but as soon as they did chaos erupted.

One of the men immediately threw himself behind one of the columns. "Kill him!" he shouted from behind his new vantage point. A shot rang out, the bullet ricocheting off the reinforced metal of the column behind Boyd's head as he dove out of the way.

"Get fucking rid of him now!"

The remaining three men turned to Sin, still unarmed and not seeming to expect much resistance from a lanky, short order cook. Their misconceptions were quickly corrected when Sin snatched one off his feet with one hand. His expression was still blanketed in indifference as he spun the man around and snapped his neck in two clean movements.

A low swear echoed from the direction of the second shooter, and then there was the sound of scrabbling as the man began to run.

Boyd hardly took the chance to be surprised by Sin's reaction. Seeing that Sin was able to handle himself for the moment, Boyd automatically took off running after the escaping operative. The man dodged around the concrete pillars, keeping Boyd from a good shot while simultaneously shooting back at Boyd when he realized he was being followed. The sharp crack of bullets hitting concrete echoed underneath the pier.

The Janus operative clearly had an escape plan on the other side of the pier so Boyd gave up on trying to aim and instead ran faster. The columns
flashed by as pale markers of his speed until he saw the man darting across an open space.

        Boyd aimed in the brief second he had, clipping the man in the knee. The man fell with a pained shout, the weight of his body crashing to the sand. Boyd didn't slow his sprint and the seconds it took the man to flip onto his back and start to aim were all Boyd needed.

        Boyd kicked the gun out of the way and dropped onto the man, his own gun pressed against the man's forehead.

        "Move and I'll kill you," Boyd said lowly.

        Sweat glistened along the man's skin and his face was pale even in the poor lighting. Boyd could see the whites of his widened eyes before bravado caught up with the moment and the man's eyes narrowed, his body tensing.

        "Why don't you, then?"

        "I have questions," Boyd answered, his tone emotionless but the threat behind it real. "If you don't answer them I'll kill you and ask one of your friends. I suggest you stop planning an escape. You won't get far. But if you cooperate with me I may let you live."

        The moment stretched, the man remaining tensed while he studied what he could see of Boyd's face, then flicked his gaze to the gun that was too far out of reach. He dropped back against the sand, apparently resigning himself to temporary capture.

        Narrowing his eyes, Boyd stepped off the man and holstered his gun. He dragged the man to his feet, ignoring the way the man cried out and his injured knee crippled beneath his weight. Hauling the man with him, Boyd quickly returned to Sin so he could help with the remaining attackers.
When they broke into view of the fight scene, the man at Boyd's side stilled at the sight. There was blood splattered around, darkening the sand and staining the columns. The three men that had attacked Sin were dead. Out of the two that had remained behind with him, one looked as though his face had been crushed in and the other's throat had been cut open brutally.

Sin looked up at Boyd when they came back. His face and clothes were splattered with blood as well, and he was using the hem of his shirt to wipe the handle of a knife clean. When he was done, he tossed it down amongst the bodies.

As shocking as the scene was, Boyd didn't react. He wondered if Sin'd had an episode, but he looked normal. That seemed almost more alarming than if he'd seen the detached expression Boyd remembered from so long ago. But he didn't have time to consider it immediately.

Boyd could feel him struggling to get away the closer they drew to Sin but Boyd's powerful grip didn't let him stray. Boyd turned away from Sin to throw the man back against a column, Boyd's body weight holding him still with one forearm pressed against his throat.

"How many did they send?"

The man's gaze wrenched over Boyd's shoulder, darting between the bloody bodies and Sin's impassive face. Boyd shoved his arm forward, causing the man to gag and choke, his wide eyes snapping back to Boyd's cold glare.

"How many?" he repeated dangerously.

"F-five!" the man stuttered, his voice breaking from restricted air. "Just us!"

"And how many more do they plan to send?"
The man's wide eyes and silence were all the answer Boyd needed. The anger that had been growing in him since he'd first heard of Sin being followed turned cold and sharp. Without a flicker of expression, Boyd violently slammed the man's head back against the column. A dull crack sounded before the man fell limply to the ground. He searched the man's body for a cell phone and turned it off then put it in his own pocket before letting the man flop back to the sand.

"Give me your phone," Boyd ordered Sin, who eyed him but ultimately complied. Boyd powered off the phone and separated the battery before handing it back. "Watch him," he jerked his chin toward the man. "I have to get something." He started to turn then paused and looked over with a firm, "And I don't care if you can handle yourself—you're unarmed and covered in blood. If someone shows up in the few minutes I'm gone, hide. Let me handle it for once."

Sin looked at him for a long moment and he opened his mouth to say something. He paused, and his lips twitched down slightly before he seemed to shake off whatever he was about to say. His eyes ran over Boyd again briefly before he turned his attention to the man.

Boyd didn't wait for Sin to change his mind; he ran between long patches of shadow back to the Blue Moon Diner. He grabbed the emergency clean-up kit he kept in his trunk and an old black hoody that had fallen out of his ready bag at some point.

When he got back he was relieved to see Sin hadn't moved and the man was still unconscious. He knelt next to the man and glanced up at Sin through strands of fine blond hair that had fallen out of its band.

"What happened anyway? I told you to call me."
"They were watching me when I closed up," Sin said calmly, wiping his arm along one blood-spattered cheek. It smeared across his face more, but he didn’t seem to notice. His eyes were focused on the dead men around him before they flicked over Boyd. "I saw one of them waiting, and it was the first time they made themselves visible so I knew they’d stop hanging around and do something for a change. I figured they’d follow me, so I led them here so civilians wouldn't get involved."

Boyd paused at that, looking at Sin more closely. ‘Civilians’?

As much as he wanted to ask, now wasn't the time to get into a discussion on his choice of terminology. As he started to unzip the emergency kit, he glanced over his shoulder in the direction he’d run after the insurgent. He was fairly certain he remembered seeing large concrete blocks as he ran past.

"If you want to get out of here I can clean up. I'll find you a safe place where you can wait until I'm done."

"Why would I leave you to get rid of them?" Sin shrugged and gave the area around them an assessing stare. "I'm the one that killed them."

The comment drew a sidelong glance from Boyd. He was starting to get worried by how calmly Sin was taking everything. He needed to get Sin away and safe as soon as possible, to figure out what was happening and to keep him from being discovered as a civilian covered in blood next to a pile of bodies.

"Then go bring me some of the larger rocks or pieces of concrete from over there." Boyd pushed his hair back from his forehead with the back of his hand and nodded in the direction he’d seen them. "We'll need at least two per body."
Once again Sin looked like he was going to say something, but in the end he simply turned and walked away in the direction Boyd had pointed.

Boyd removed a syringe from the kit, and a dosage of the powerful sedative the Agency used in its tranquilizers. He shot the man with enough to keep him unconscious for a few hours, then pulled out some zip-ties and secured the man's wrists and ankles. When he was finished he pulled the man deeper into the shadows beneath the pier.

The next several minutes passed in tense, rushed silence. While Sin finished gathering the rocks, Boyd started preparing the bodies. Boyd kept glancing up at every breath of noise in the night. When all the bodies were tied to enough concrete to weigh them down, they checked to make sure there were no witnesses and brought the bodies up one at a time to dump at the end of the pier.

They had finished dumping the bodies and Boyd was just starting to unpack the blood-cleaning component of the kit when Sin's hand suddenly closed over Boyd's mouth and he yanked Boyd back. Boyd let out a quiet, harsh breath, startled by the movement. Sin's other arm snapped around Boyd's chest at an angle that put Boyd in mind of the first time they'd touched each other in Monterrey. Sin pulled him further beneath the pier, hiding around a column with Boyd crushed against his chest; their bodies flush to one another.

Sin's hot breath stirred the hair near Boyd's ear. Boyd didn't have to ask why Sin had pulled him back; he knew how good Sin's hearing was. His assumption that Sin had heard someone was confirmed seconds later when the scraping of footsteps could be heard above them. Judging by the meandering footfalls, the people had no idea they were walking above a crime scene.
Boyd rolled his eyes around, trying to see Sin's expression, but Sin only held him tighter. The minutes seemed to drag by agonizingly slowly as the people above them chatted about nothing in particular. Being held up against the hard lines of Sin's body after so long apart, it was impossible for Boyd to not respond. His hands gripped Sin's wrists, his heartbeat increasing as he felt hyper-aware of every minute shift of Sin's muscles.

Throughout it all, Sin didn't let go; even when he could have. His breath stayed ragged against Boyd's ear, and at some point he could feel Sin getting hard. Boyd's breath quickened and he felt his own arousal grow, his pants starting to become uncomfortable. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his head back against Sin's shoulder, teeth grit as his fingers dug into Sin's skin.

There was something going on, something more important than the feel of Sin's body against his own, but he couldn't focus on it at the moment. All he could focus on was the fact that this felt like so many missions when they'd been high on adrenaline and lust, and wound up fucking despite the gory scene they'd just left behind or the fact that one or both of them had been injured.

A voice at the back of his head kept trying to remind him that Sin was a civilian now. He had just killed three people, and he shouldn't be able to refocus his attention so quickly. But instead, all Boyd could do was press himself back against Sin and try to keep from rolling his hips back, as Sin panted against his neck with damp, hot lips touching his skin.

It felt like some sort of rapturous torture to be held so close to the lover he'd lost for nearly two years, knowing at the same time he couldn't do anything about it.

It seemed like forever but was likely closer to ten minutes before the people above them finally decided to wander off. Sin kept Boyd close for an
extended time even after Boyd no longer heard anything, possibly ensuring the people were well out of range.

Sin's fingers released him slowly, sliding along Boyd's skin. There was a slow exhalation of breath that stirred Boyd's hair before Sin finally took a step back. When Boyd turned around, Sin's eyes were focused on him with rapt intensity. The green eyes skimmed his body, focusing on the area between his thighs before moving up again.

Boyd tried to still his breath but the sound remained, strained and quiet. His heart pounded so violently he wondered if Sin would be able to hear that too. He couldn't turn from Sin's gaze once caught, and the silence felt charged with electricity that passed, unspoken, between them.

"Let's finish this," Sin said finally, his voice low.

Boyd nodded distractedly, drew in a deep breath that he let out slowly, and then nodded more resolutely as he turned away. They cleaned the scene in silence that felt even tenser than before. Boyd felt Sin's gaze burning into him more than once, particularly when Boyd accidentally brushed against him at one point.

When they were finished, Boyd packed up the cleaning kit and then grabbed the black hoody from the sand where he had dropped it earlier. He tossed it over to Sin with a quiet, "Put this on."

"Thanks," Sin said, pulling it on without question. He yanked the hood up and let it dip down to cover the top part of his face. "What now? I doubt going to my apartment right now is a great plan."

"I wouldn't have let you," Boyd said, shaking his head and straightening. "It might not be safe. You can stay at my hotel room until we figure this out."
"Alright."

Satisfied that Sin wasn't going to argue the decision for any reason, Boyd hiked the strap of the emergency kit bag higher on his shoulder and nodded toward the unconscious Janus operative still crumpled on the sand. "Can you grab him? I'll need my hands free for the keys."

Sin leaned over and grabbed the man with one hand, throwing him up over his shoulder as if he weighed nothing. With one last check to make sure the area looked undisturbed by anything suspicious, Boyd started quickly toward the parking lot with Sin falling in line next to him.

They didn't speak until they got back to the parking lot. Boyd put the kit back in the trunk and unlocked the back doors so Sin could place the man inside. With the door shut and the man secured, Boyd paused and glanced at Sin's motorbike.

"Leaving that overnight may seem suspicious."

Sin glanced over at his bike with a nod. "Okay, I'll follow you to... wherever it is you're staying."

Boyd shook his head. "They could have tampered with it." His narrowed stare swept the bike. He had first intended to check the bike or ride it himself to keep Sin safe. The problem was, if Boyd was injured or killed then Sin would be left without backup and it would draw unnecessary attention to them.

The oddity of the bike being left overnight was soon outweighed by Janus' threat.

"We may have to leave it for the night after all. Are you opening tomorrow?"
"No, I'm off tomorrow. If anyone asks, I'll just say I had trouble with it tonight or something."

Fingers curling around his keys, Boyd nodded and shoved his phone and wallet into his back pocket. "Don't leave without me tomorrow, then. I want to be there with you just in case."

Sin shrugged and didn't disagree.

The drive was spent in silence, with Boyd paying close attention for any tails or any other sign of Janus not giving up on Sin's life. He stopped only long enough to drop the man off at an untouched, foreclosed business he had scouted out long ago as a safehouse. He made sure the man was tied to something immovable and properly drugged before he returned to Sin who sat waiting in the car.

It didn't take long to get to The Presidential. They made it through the hotel lobby without incident, the black hoody serving to cover the blood staining Sin while Boyd had turned his shirt inside out to hide the blood that had gotten on him while transporting the bodies. Even so, it wasn't until the door was closed and locked behind them that Boyd finally relaxed. He started to move toward the bathroom, intending to clean up, but a hand clasped his wrist.

When he looked up, Sin had pushed his hood back and was staring at him. His jaw was clenched, and for the third time that night it seemed as though he was going to say something only to stop himself. His fingers started to slide away, but at the last second they closed on Boyd again and tugged him back.

"Is it weird that I really want to fuck you right now?"

Anything else Boyd had intended to say or do was completely lost the second Sin uttered those words.
"No," he said automatically. His gaze sharpened on Sin, flicking between his lips and eyes; desire briefly overrunning him after having wanted to hear those words from Sin for so long. His mind belatedly caught up to the moment. "Yes. I don't—Why are you asking me this?"

Sin tugged him closer, head tilting down so that they were closer to eye level. "Because I just killed three men, and I'm covered in blood but all I can fucking think about is pressing you up against the wall."

"Shit," Boyd hissed, face tilting away and eyes briefly shutting even as he gravitated closer to Sin's body heat. He couldn't focus on anything else, couldn't feel anything else, other than the electricity that buzzed along his skin at Sin's every touch and burned in his stomach at Sin's every word. "Don't talk about it if you're not going to do it, Danny."

Strong hands with an iron grip settled on Boyd's shoulders, digging in and drawing him closer. The touch, the intense and hungry look on Sin's face, the eyes like green fire—it was all so familiar.

It was hard to remember that this was different than any other adrenaline-based, post-mission encounter until Sin's lips brushed his hesitantly. Before, there had been no question that Boyd wanted lips and hands on him after the heart-pounding action or violence of a mission. There had never been a doubt that he was ready to be stripped and fucked hard after watching Sin display the fullest extent of his power.

But this new Sin, Danny, didn't know that.

Despite the fact that Boyd's hands clenched the hoody with barely concealed need, the first kiss was almost uncertain. Boyd returned it forcefully, pressing into the hard, lanky body, and flicking out his tongue. Their eyes met again and Boyd nodded thoughtlessly, not even really knowing why except to try to convey that he wanted this—he needed this, he craved it.
The hesitance vanished and in a blur of movement, Sin was shoving Boyd against the wall in a full body press. They began to tear at each other's mouths impatiently as staggered breaths and half-stifled moans filled the air in the otherwise silent room.

The feel of Sin, the taste of him—all of it came together in an explosion of want that had Boyd ripping off the other man's hoody impatiently. His hands skittered over the shirt beneath, yanking at it as he tried to touch more, feel more, get more. There was still blood drying on their skin, stiffening it in some places and flaking off as they clawed at each other.


All that mattered were the hands yanking open his belt, and the tongue exploring his mouth.

Boyd arched his back against the wall, grinding against Sin in harsh, impatient movements. He sucked Sin's tongue into his mouth hard, relishing in the groan of pleasure and the fact that Sin still liked it mixed with pain. The knowledge made him harder, needier, and he slid his mouth down to the junction between Sin's neck and shoulder before digging his teeth into the flesh.

"Fuck," Sin groaned, hands tightening with no regard to the strength in them. Boyd hissed in pain but shoved his shoulders against the wall anyway, using it as leverage. He arched his back, trying to get more friction, and growled when Sin pulled away briefly. He instantly grabbed at the taller man again, but Sin shoved him back against the wall with a low, "Get your pants down."

It took a moment for the words to process but when they did, Boyd began stripping his clothes frantically. His gun and holster were just hitting the
floor heavily as he reached out and finished ripping Sin's shorts open. They fell down to his knees, but that was all they needed and Boyd couldn't wait for more. With his back against the wall, he wrapped one leg around Sin and budged his heel up against the back of Sin's knee.

"Oh God," Boyd moaned, thudding his head back against the wall and squeezing his eyes shut as Sin rutted against him. The feel of their bare cocks pressed together, of Sin's hands on him, Sin's lips sucking a bruise into his neck—it was making Boyd burn, his gut tightening dangerously as he began rocking faster. His cock was leaking now, steadily, and he knew he could only take so much before he exploded.

"I need you to fuck me," he panted, voice low and thick with need. "I want you inside me."

Sin groaned, fingers clenching tighter against Boyd's ass. "I fucking want to."

"Then do it," Boyd demanded, frustrated because he needed this.

He needed Sin inside of him, stretching him open and filling him to the core. He needed to be fucked hard by his lover and filled with his come. He needed that proof, that reminder, that Sin still wanted him—that everything they'd fought for hadn't been lost to him forever. That after everything he'd been through, someone like Sin could still want him just to be with him.

His thoughts ran into each other, incoherent and scrambled and all focused on Sin's body, his cock, his strong hands, that burning green gaze, the two of them being connected... When Sin didn't move immediately he reached down and grabbed the stiff, hot length of Sin's cock. The size of it made him moan, and he pressed the sticky head against his opening impatiently.

"Wait—Stop," Sin grit out, and backed off again.
"I don't fucking care, I can take it! Please, Hs—" he broke off desperately as he caught himself from saying the name.

"Fuck." Sin looked around the room, his breath coming hard. His gaze fell on something, and then he was jerking Boyd around with impatient violence. They stumbled backwards, tongues twined again as Sin shoved him towards some unknown destination.

The backs of Boyd's thighs slammed into something hard, and there was an abrupt crashing sound. Sin shoved him back to sit on the end table in place of the now-fallen lamp. Boyd hooked one leg around Sin again, drawing him near even as Sin fumbled with the gift basket that was dangerously close to joining the lamp on the floor. He yanked the suntan oil out of the basket and shoved the rest of it away, flicking the cap open.

"Yes," Boyd panted. "Hurry."

Sin slathered the oil on his cock and pressed against Boyd's entrance, pushing through the tight ring of muscle almost immediately. Boyd let out a ragged groan and threw his head back, his hands spasming on Sin's shoulders. With a few thrusts, Sin was seated deep inside of him.

The loud moan that filled the room came from both of them. Boyd felt stretched wide, the sharp ache of pain mingling with the pleasure of being able to touch Sin again. Their eyes met and Boyd hissed:

"Move."

Sin's hands slid down his body, brushing against his scars and making the sounds pouring out of Boyd's mouth grow louder. Sin pounded hard and deep into him, powerful thrusts that shoved Boyd's upper back against the wall and made him shout. His hands scratched across Sin's back before clenching in his long hair.
"Yes—yes—fuck me—" Boyd pleaded shamelessly, his breath coming ragged and fast.

Sin swore, something incoherent and grit out, before he suddenly shifted his angle, piercing up and making Boyd's body jerk with every movement. Fingers digging painfully into Boyd's sides, Sin slammed Boyd back down onto his cock.

"Oh Jesus—fuck—"

The end table was pushed back and Boyd's head almost slammed into the wall with the frantic way they moved against each other. He arched his back, rising off the end table with one hand braced against the wall and both legs wrapping around Sin. His body clenched around Sin in the movement, muscles a hot, tight squeeze that made Sin cry out loudly.

Within seconds they were tearing at each other again; Sin grabbing Boyd with no regard to his strength and fucking him so hard that Boyd's voice rose in a desperate, near-endless scream. He met Sin's thrusts with frantic rocking of his own, his arm quaking with trying to keep his head from cracking against the plaster, his other fingers digging into Sin's shoulder. The slapping sound of skin against skin became a hard and fast counter-beat to their moans.

Every sound Sin made went straight to Boyd's cock until it was a constant ache between his thighs. He dropped his hand from Sin's shoulder and started frantically jerking it, fingers clenching as he did it rough and impatient. When their gazes met, those green eyes burning with fierce intensity, the white hot knot in Boyd's gut suddenly exploded.

With a wrenching scream, Boyd came hard, his eyes flying wide open as hot ecstasy rolled through him. He lost the strength in his arm and crashed back against the wall. Without pulling out, Sin slammed Boyd down flat on the
end table and held him in place with a strong hand on his stomach. Boyd arched his head back and howled in pleasure as Sin started slamming his cock into him more violently.

Boyd's passionate shouts of, "Yes—don't stop, just like that—fuck me, baby, please—" and Sin's harsh, escalating groans overwhelmed the rattling sound of the end table thumping against the wall. Boyd's entire body was alight with sensation, his skin tingling beneath every shift of Sin's fingers; every reminder that this was Sin touching him. Sin's hair fell down around them and Boyd arched up even as he grabbed Sin at the base of the neck and jerked him down.

Their lips met with fervid intensity, tongues shoving into each other's mouth in a mimicry of Sin's cock driving into Boyd in quickening thrusts. He began slamming himself on Sin again, trying to increase the pressure almost deliriously. Sin's cock brushed his prostate with every violent thrust, and Boyd's still-hard dick began to ache again as his gut clenched.

The moans coming from Sin started growing in intensity and he broke away from the kiss. Boyd breathed harshly and dragged his lips down, licking and biting hard into Sin's smooth skin. It roused another raw groan from Sin, just like it had in the past.

"Fuck, Boyd—"

Heat crescendoed inside Boyd with Sin's increasingly erratic thrusts. He was intoxicated on the thrill of knowing he was the one making Sin lose it like this. Of knowing it was Sin pounding deep into him, wanting him so recklessly and laying claim to him as passionately as ever.

"Come inside me," he growled hotly into Sin's ear.

The words tore another ragged moan from Sin and he began to pound into Boyd with bone-jarring thrusts that rocked both of them. Boyd's body
thrummed wildly in time with the rhythm, nearly burning with even the air against his sensitized skin. He barely had to squeeze his inner muscles before Sin's voice faltered and, briefly, broke.

Sin's hands spasmed and suddenly he was coming. As heat flooded Boyd's insides, Sin crushed Boyd in his grip. He dropped his forehead against Boyd's shoulder as he rode out his orgasm and released a string of incoherent swears.

The short glimpse of Sin's euphoric expression was enough to make Boyd come again without touching his erection. His orgasm wasn't as intense the second time but he was exhausted when he came back to the moment and felt Sin collapsed on top of him with his cock still inside of him.

Sweat was a fine sheen across both of them, their chests rising and falling rapidly against each other. Boyd could feel Sin's toned stomach pressing against him and the staccato pounding of his heart.

Suddenly he felt overwhelmed. Without thinking, he threaded his fingers through Sin's silky hair and licked a thread of sweat off Sin's temple, followed by kissing the same spot.

Sin made a low sound deep in his throat and rubbed his nose against the side of Boyd's neck. He mumbled something nonsensical and pulled back just enough to brush his lips against the side of Boyd's mouth. There was a flash of a half smile as they made eye contact, but then Sin blinked and the affectionate expression was gone.

He pulled out finally, dick still slightly hard and leaving Boyd feeling strangely vacant. There was a moment when they just looked at each other, and then Sin pulled his shorts up.

"Jesus," he said, voice slightly hoarse.
Boyd pushed himself up on his elbows, his gaze passing across Sin's features. He wanted to drag Sin close and kiss and touch him into the night, especially following that brief glimpse of the Sin he had known, but Sin's expression stopped him.

He didn't know whether Danny was going to pull away again, feeling like they had gotten too close.

Boyd sat up, his back aching powerfully in the movement, and slid off the edge of the table. His heartbeat was still coming down from its high and his knees felt weakened by what they'd just done. The happiness he felt at being wanted by Sin still, the buzz of sated satisfaction from passionate sex with Sin, was tempered by the not-quite-right mood in the room.

Having intended to gather his clothing, he paused when he noticed the faint indents on Sin's neck where his teeth had sunk in. He lifted his hand to touch the bite mark but, not wanting to push his luck, redirected the motion smoothly to pushing hair off his own face instead.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah." Sin raised his eyebrows, raking a hand through his hair. "Just pretty fucking intense."

"Yeah." Boyd's lips curved faintly on the edges. "Sorry. I get that way sometimes."

The corner of Sin's mouth twitched up into a smile that faded as his eyes moved over Boyd again. He seemed to focus on the reddened skin he could see on Boyd's neck and hips. The areas that would most likely have angry bruises in a few hours.

"Apparently I do too," he said after a brief pause.
"Adrenaline will do that," Boyd said as he picked up his discarded clothing from the floor.

His lower back felt like it was on fire. It was probably a good thing Sin had insisted on using some form of lube or he'd likely be a mess of torn skin and blood. In the time since they'd last been together, Boyd had nearly forgotten how intense and violent Sin could be. And how quickly it made him lose his own inhibitions to have Sin want him so powerfully that he briefly lost his sense of control.

"Yeah," Sin was saying. "Sorry if I hurt you, though." There was a pause and then Sin's eyes dragged away from Boyd slowly. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Okay." As Sin started toward the bathroom Boyd called out, "Danny." Sin stopped and looked back at him. "You didn't hurt me. This—" He gestured to the red marks. "I liked it. I wanted it that way."

Sin stared at him and paused briefly before his mouth curved into a smirk. "I'll keep that in mind."

He was half turned towards Boyd, shorts sliding down his narrow hips, splattered in blood and looking thoroughly disheveled. So many things had changed since Sin had become Danny, but somehow the look on Sin's face in that moment washed all of it away. The slight upturn of his mouth, narrowed eyes nearly hidden beneath long black lashes, the arch of one brow:

It was like looking at his Sin again.
Chapter Twenty-Four

soundtrack song: David Guetta ft. Nicki Minaj - Turn Me On

When Boyd left the bathroom following a hot shower, he found Sin wearing the same shorts as before but without a shirt. He was seated in one of the chairs by the window looking blankly at the wall. The heavy curtains were drawn, leaving the only illumination as the glow from the overhead light.

Boyd walked over to his duffel bag to pull out one of his new shirts, this one a pale grey, and picked up his gun from the floor where it had fallen earlier. Even in an enclosed room he felt safest with it within reach.

His footsteps padded softly across the carpet until he paused at Sin's side.

"Hey," he said and held out the shirt.

Sin looked over at him distractedly, but immediately grabbed the shirt. "Thanks."

Boyd sat down in the chair near him, setting the gun and holster with a faint clunk on the small table beside them. "I have clean clothing if you want."

"I'll change before I go to sleep." Sin paused as he drew the shirt over his head. "If I'm even able to sleep. I'm still all wired. From the adrenaline, I guess."

Boyd drew his legs up onto the chair, his arms loosely resting on his knees. His back ached painfully but he ignored it in favor of watching his former partner. "Do you want to talk about it?"
The broad shoulders lifted slightly, and Sin’s mouth drew down into a frown. His lips parted, closed, and then he wet them before attempting to talk again.

"It seems like I should be upset. Freaked out. But I'm not. I wasn't even freaked out when I was killing those guys. I just felt calm."

Boyd was quiet a moment. "Has that ever happened in a fight before?"

The frown drew down more, and Sin gestured vaguely as his green eyes focused on the wall again. "Not really. I mean, I lose my temper sometimes. Sometimes it's hard to calm down once I've gotten mad. I used to take medication but even then, I'd react." He stopped, raising a hand to run through his hair.

"Used to?"

"Yeah." Sin's mouth twisted slightly to the side, and he flexed his hands. "For anxiety and other stuff," he said vaguely. "I stopped taking them when I started being followed. They made it hard to focus, and slowed me down."

"Has anything changed since you stopped?"

Sin shrugged. "No. Not really. I guess I'm less patient and nice according to other people, but I don't give a shit about that anymore. Either they want to be around me or they don't."

Boyd nodded. At least that explained Sin's shifting moods—and possibly explained the comments he'd made at the pier. It might even explain how easily Sin had fallen back into his old behaviors. He still didn't know exactly what medication they had Sin taking and would have to wait until he could get into his medicine cabinet to check again. He put the thoughts aside.
for the moment and focused instead on what he might have liked to hear, back when he still felt like a civilian and everything seemed so new.

"I know it feels strange to you right now but everyone reacts differently in situations like this. The first time I killed someone, it didn't fully hit me until hours later. Since you were reacting in self-defense, you may find you never respond the way you think you're supposed to respond."

Sin's eyes had switched back to Boyd quickly as soon as the words 'killed someone' left his lips. One dark brow raised, and he didn't move his gaze even when Boyd finished talking. The side of his mouth twitched up slightly and he said, "Maybe."

Boyd's gaze traveled across Sin's features; taking in the quirked eyebrow, those green eyes focused solely on him, the stretch of lips that had not long ago been exploring his mouth... He pushed away from the wall and stepped over by the table, his fingertips resting on the smooth surface of the wood.

"You wanted to know about the men following you."

"I do want to know. Whatever you can tell me."

Boyd nodded, his eyes finally drawing away from his former partner's face to rest on the blue-black sheen of his gun and the worn leather holster. During the months he'd thought Sin was dead, he had taken to subconsciously brushing his fingers against the gun as a source of comfort. Even now with Sin in front of him, his hand gravitated toward it.

He took a moment to decide exactly how much he could afford to tell this civilian version of Sin. Golden eyes raised again, this time accompanied by an unreadable expression. "Have you heard of Janus?"
"Yeah." A pause. "Is that the group that girl and her friends were involved with?"

With another nod, Boyd leaned against the edge of the table. "As I said before, I came here originally because of her. Because of you and your phone call. Their specialty is recruiting idealists into terrorism and this area," he gestured toward the window to encompass Annadale Beach in general, "is a target-rich environment for their propaganda. People here have no concept of what war really is; they think of it in terms of tv shows and history books. It makes them easier to convince but, as you saw, if someone questions Janus' intentions too much they're willing to kill to keep their faces and intentions a secret."

Sin didn't really react to the words, or seem surprised. He just looked at Boyd with his head slightly tilted and his lips pursed together. "Makes sense for them to want to kill me then since I'm the one who saw the whole thing."

There was a low, disgusted sigh as Sin pushed himself up and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well this is a fucking mess. I should have stayed out of the whole damn thing. And it's not like they're going to decide to say nevermind just because this little hit squad failed." He frowned, looking toward the window as if he too could see outside. "Until your people get involved and they have bigger problems than me, I guess."

"Don't worry. I already have a plan for that."

"Aren't your people after Janus, anyway?" Sin asked. "You said that's why you're here. Well, now you know they're here for sure."

"We do," Boyd agreed. He pushed himself away from the table, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. "I'll have to leave for awhile tonight. I'll leave some measures in place to protect you but don't leave the hotel room,
don't let anyone in, and don't call anyone while I'm gone. I'll give you a spare cell to use only to call me in emergencies until we get this figured out."

Sin was giving him the same stare, but when his lips pressed together briefly it was clearly tinged with impatience. "I don't like the vague bullshit you give me. If you don't tell me what's happening and what you're doing, I'll deal with this on my own. I'm not going to sit in a hotel room while you leave 'measures to protect me' and hope some blond kid can save the fucking day."

"I'm going to make sure that man doesn't say anything and then I'll check in with my people," Boyd answered evenly, but the idea of Sin running out on his own and getting killed over a stupid, civilian mistake wouldn't leave his mind. Heart clenching, he stepped into Sin's personal space with narrowed eyes.

"And if I think you're going to run off and play the hero on your own I will fucking tie you down. I realize the situation you're in but keep in mind you're in this deep because you took action without knowing the consequences. I'm not trying to placate you or piss you off if I don't give details—I'm trying to keep you safe."

"You couldn't tie me down if you tried," Sin said without hesitation. He crossed his arms over his chest and didn't look very impressed. "I want the information you have, but I'm not going to sit around while you supposedly go fix things and I don't know what the fuck is going on. I'd rather deal with it on my own. When it comes down to it, you're just another strange person suddenly popping up in my life around the same time as things started getting weird."

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "So you can be straight with me from now on, or you can go fuck right off if you're going to treat me like some helpless moron."
For a moment, Boyd wanted to punch Sin. His eyes narrowed briefly and his fingers twitched into fists. "Stop acting like I'm not telling you anything—I've answered every question you've asked. If you want more information, just ask me. But if you run off alone without knowing anything—"

He cut himself off and shook his head sharply, his arms crossing. "You're going to get yourself killed if you try that shit, Danny. I'm serious. You're acting tough and I'm not denying you could do some major damage but you don't know what the fuck is going on. You didn't even know who they were until I told you."

Sin made a face, although he didn't look particularly angry. "You don't want me to act tough, then don't threaten me. You can't stop me from leaving any more than those Janus people could take me out. I'm not some trained whatever the fuck you are supposed to be, but I can take care of myself."

He paused then, eyes sliding away and head tilting to the side slightly. It seemed like he was going to say something else, but he shrugged and continued. Somehow it seemed like he wasn't saying what he'd started to say.

"If you have a plan, I want to know what it is, not some vague crap. This is about my life, not yours. I'm not going to twiddle my thumbs in ignorance like your damsel in distress."

Boyd's narrowed stare rested on Sin in slightly irritated assessment for a long moment before he suddenly turned and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Fine. You're right that I shouldn't have threatened you but when you keep throwing out that you'll take care of things on your own it makes me worry about your safety. I can help you so I wish you would just let me." He continued before Sin could comment. "I already told you what I plan—I'm going to stop him from reporting the incident and I'll see if there's anything else that can be done. Possibly bringing in backup. It depends on a lot of
factors. As for the rest, I told you to stay here because no matter how much you can take care of yourself, you can be taken down if the circumstances are right. I don't want that to happen so I'm adjusting plans as we go to prevent that."

"I don't see why you care what happens to me so much," Sin said bluntly. "We had some awesome sex, but other than that you don't really know me."

"I told you before, I like you," Boyd said. "But since that may not seem enough on its own, it's also because you remind me of someone who was important to me who I lost. I wasn't able to help him and I never wanted to feel helpless like that again."

"Who?"

"My partner." Boyd's gaze slid away from Sin's familiar-but-not features and settled on his gun. "But to be honest, it happened to me more than once. With him, I wasn't even there for it. With someone else who was very important, he was killed right in front of me and I couldn't do a thing. It's... a shitty feeling."

His lips lifted slightly on the edge, humorless, before he met Sin's eyes again. "It makes you not want to let anyone else you care about be hurt again. Even if you're a jackass in the process of trying to meet that goal."

The corner of Sin's mouth lifted in a smile, and he shook his head. "You're not a jackass. Well, not with me yet, anyway. I can be an asshole though, and a real skeptical one at that. Guess we'll have to figure it out as we go."

A pleasant thrill moved through Boyd's stomach at those simple words implying Sin wanted to keep seeing him. That he wasn't pushing him away for now.
A faint smile curved Boyd's lips. "Seems so."

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The stoplight burned a bright red in the night that made Boyd's eyes ache. In the stillness that followed him stopping the car, he couldn't ignore the headache that was pounding harder with each second; making it feel like his brain itself was vibrating.

Not enough sleep, probably. Not enough water.

After interrogating the Janus operative he knew he couldn't do this alone but he also knew he had to remain careful how he enlisted help.

Somewhere between seeing a gun aimed at Sin and stepping out of the shower to see Sin looking so weary and pensive, he'd realized what he had to do.

In Annadale, Sin couldn't flee Janus or the Agency's hold, but maybe Boyd could find a way for him to escape them both. He didn't know anymore what was best for Sin—but Boyd knew he couldn't try to make choices for him anymore. If he could find a safe place for Sin to go, a real chance at being able to escape and stay gone, then Sin could truly have the kind of freedom that he'd always wanted if he chose that option. It would be up to Sin; leave everything behind and find a life on his own, or gain knowledge of the life that had been taken from him.

Either way was dangerous, either way had some chance of happiness and some chance of hell. Either way, it was no one else's right to decide for him.

On the way back to The Presidential he stopped at a 24-hour internet cafe. Surprisingly, given the time, he wasn't the only one there. It appeared that several people were in the middle of a gaming party that had them high
on caffeinated soda and sugary snacks. Their triumphant shouts when one group gained advantage over another were loud and unpredictable, often followed by indignant shouts or groans in return.

Aside from them he saw several college students—some trying to work but most of them clearly checking emails and in the middle of instant messaging conversations. He suspected that, like him, just about all of them had stayed up this late rather than waking up so early.

It worked to his advantage to have this be a haunt of college students and for his own age to leave him an unremarkable visitor among the crowd.

At one of the computers out of view of others, he logged on and quickly set about sending an untraceable message to Ryan's account; one he knew the R&D agent used for CIs that sometimes needed to send information anonymously. He relayed the important facts he'd learned from the interrogation; namely, that a number of Janus agents planned to join Annadale University in the coming weeks with the intention of recruitment.

To keep Ryan from having to lie about the source of the intel, he didn't give any indication it was him who sent the message. Even if the Agency was watching Boyd, Ryan could be kept clear of any charges of misconduct.

When Boyd got back to The Presidential he saw that the fail-safes were still in place when he entered the room. An almost palpable wave of relief hit him when he saw Sin asleep on the bed.

Exhaustion from the last couple of days hit Boyd at once and after he'd ensured the place was protected and no bugs or surveillance had been installed in the room since he'd left, he approached the side of the bed.

It was still dark outside but soon the sky would be shifting from deep blue to pastels. In the shadows of the room, Sin's features looked softer. At ease. Boyd's hand splayed above his former partner, centimeters of air...
between them. Such a simple, small distance, but spanning within it so much more.

As much as he wanted to run his fingertips along that smooth skin and trail them across the fall of black hair, he didn't want to disturb Sin's slumber. It had probably taken him a long time to fall asleep. And even as his body yearned to fall into bed next to Sin, he remembered how easily Sin had been to wake in the past.

Padded footsteps brought him to the small sofa in the corner. It was too short for him to properly stretch out on but it did provide him a better view of the door and window in case anyone tried to break in. He curled up on his side, body aching and head pounding so hard he could nearly hear it. He closed his burning eyes and left one hand resting on his gun for quicker access.

It wasn't long until the quiet sound of Sin's breathing lulled him to sleep.

It felt like no time had passed when he felt someone touch him. Instinct took over and he reacted automatically. His eyes snapped open, cold and emotionless, before he realized his hand was gripping Sin's twisted wrist and his gun was against Sin's head. A jolt of alarm swept through him and, eyes widening at the same time he released Sin suddenly as if he burned, he dropped back against the cushions.

"Fuck, Danny," he groaned, his hands pressing against his face. He could feel his fingers shaking. "Be careful how you wake me."

"How am I supposed to wake you, then?" Sin asked blandly, sounding enough like his old self that it was momentarily jarring. "Saying your name repeatedly didn't do the trick."
Kissing me is a start, came Boyd's first response but he didn't bother saying the ridiculous thought aloud. "I don't know. Normally I'd hear you but I was too tired, I guess. Is everything alright?"

"Considering last night's events, no." Sin raised his eyebrows, lips twisting up slightly in an amused smirk. He looked like he'd already washed up which wasn't surprising given his habit for getting up early. "But, I want to check the diner and make sure no one else came back. Also, I was thinking about some things last night that I wanted to get your opinion on."

"Okay." Boyd pushed himself to a stand, his limbs popping in the process. The clothing he'd fallen asleep in was wrinkled beyond repair and speckled with blood.

He didn't bother going into the other room as he stripped off his pants and started to pull on a new pair of shorts. His hair fell forward and he pulled it behind his ear as he looked sidelong at Sin.

"What is it?"

Sin didn't bother averting his eyes as Boyd changed or hide the fact that his green eyes were moving along the length of him as he spoke. "It doesn't make sense to me how all of this time has passed, and now all of a sudden they know that I saw something. Why would there be a lag? You've known for a long time, and they would have been keeping an eye out for longer. I just think there's a link somewhere between me and them. A link that developed between that girl's murder and when they recently started following me."

Boyd straightened and nodded. "That's a reasonable assumption." He stripped off his shirt and dropped it next to him on the carpet. "Have you noticed anything different lately? Before they started watching you."
"Not really. There's been a lot of new people around, but that always happens right before the semester starts. Lots of new faces with freshman and their families coming to town." Sin paused briefly, his eyes still on Boyd. "Nice scars you have there."

"Thanks," Boyd said mildly, lips twisting humorlessly on the side. His hand automatically splayed across his stomach, brushing the scattered webwork of scars. "Suicide attempt when I was sixteen. Mostly, anyway," he amended as he bent to swipe a new shirt from the floor. He caught Sin raising an eyebrow but was already continuing, "I've gotten a lot on assignments too. So nothing unusual, then? What about people who would know you better than random strangers? Maybe regulars at the cafe, coworkers, friends..."

"No. Or I would have said so." Sin looked away finally, a frown darkening his face. "I think maybe someone I know is involved with them."

Boyd pulled his hair out from beneath his shirt and watched Sin for a moment. He'd been thinking the same thing. "I ran into Roz the other day. She mentioned a party tonight. It might be a good opportunity to check your friends..."

Sin's eyebrows rose slightly, but he just nodded in agreement. "I was about to suggest that. Not for my friends—I can do that on my own. But you can see who else is hanging out with them, and get some people talking. You're usually better at that type of thing."

The offhanded remark reminded Boyd of the other comments Sin had made the night before. Comments that made him wonder exactly how much "Danny" remembered.

"What makes you say that?"

"Say what?"
"That I'm better at getting people to talk." Boyd leaned back, his gaze steady on Sin's face. "As you keep reminding me, I'm a stranger you hardly know. How would you know what I'm good at doing?"

"Oh." Sin frowned slightly, staring at Boyd. "I guess... Because it seems like part of your job."

Boyd's gaze remained unmoving on Sin for a moment longer before he decided to let it slide with a nod. "That's true." He pushed himself to a stand and looked around for a band to pull back his hair. "So. This party tonight..."

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There was no question where the party was. The music could be heard down the hallway even before they entered the loft. The bass vibrated through the floor faintly at first but it only grew more prominent the closer they came. When Roz opened the unlocked door and Boyd followed her into the loft, the rush of sensation overload put him sharply in mind of the Aleixo mission.

People crowded the room, most of them obviously high already as they writhed against each other. The lights were low and an expensive sound system was in the corner, blasting out the music at a loud enough level to be intoxicating. Windows lined the outside wall, showing off a stunning view of Annadale at night. Lights burned lowly outside; faint reflections of color against the yawning black. The loft was modern-looking and had a number of high end features, including a built in bar across the room that was one of the center points of group activity.

Most people seemed to be in their twenties, sweat glistening on their skin and clothing half off. He and Roz had arrived over an hour late to the party, which seemed to have been just enough time for most of the partygoers to lose their inhibitions.
He searched for Sin's tall form even as he shut the door behind him. He didn't see Sin immediately, but then with the low light and number of people it was difficult to even see how many other rooms there may be off this one. He stepped up next to Roz, his gaze shifting across the crowd.

"Let's get a drink," she said over the music.

Boyd nodded and followed her. They wove their way across the room. More than once Boyd ended up pressed up against someone or felt a hand running along him when he got too close to a person high out of their mind. It took some maneuvering but they made it to the bar. While Roz ordered a tall long island iced tea, Boyd went for vodka and cranberry juice. He had a mission tonight but standing out wouldn't do him any good.

Roz grinned and lifted her glass. The metallic gold of her tank top glittered in the light. "To hopefully getting some ass in the next hour. Cheers."

With his lips lifting wryly, Boyd raised his glass and clinked it against hers. "Cheers."

When he took a sip of the drink, the vodka was a strong note on his tongue. At least that meant they had a good bartender.

"I don't see Tech or Danny," Roz observed, chocolate eyes sweeping the room.

"I don't either." He looked over the bobbing heads as best he could but at this angle there wasn't a good view of the layout. He tried to keep an eye out for Sin's other friends but it was nearly impossible from this viewpoint. "Are there other rooms?"

"Yeah, but—"
Before Roz could finish her sentence, a tall, thin girl with long black hair sidled up to them. She was paler than anyone Boyd had seen in Annadale and had deep blue eyes that were enhanced by the blue minidress she wore.

"Rozlyn," she said, her voice low and throaty. She leaned forward and kissed Roz's cheek. "You look hot as usual."

"I know, right?" Roz smirked. "Where's the man?"

The dark-haired girl shrugged one thin shoulder. "Babysitting his brother, probably. Eli is already puking his brains out."

"Already?" Roz asked incredulously.

"Are you surprised?"

Roz scoffed. "Not really."

The girl's eyes slid over to Boyd and she looked him up and down coolly; clearly measuring his worth. "Who are you?"

"My name's Boyd," he told her. "I've been meeting some of your friends lately so Roz invited me."

"Interesting." She stared at him, looking him over again. "Have you met Oliver?"

"Not yet."

She nodded, digesting the information and then stepped away from them. "Well, enjoy. Someone will share the goodies since I gave them out for free."

With a half-hearted wave of her fingers, she turned away.

Roz looked at Boyd and smirked. "First impression?"
"Not much to go off," he replied with a shrug. He watched her walk away for a moment before turning back to Roz. "I don't think she was too pleased to see me, though. Was that Edie?"

"Yup. Oliver is her boyfriend. She tries to keep him on a short leash because he has a uh... pretty infamous roving, bisexual eye." Roz snorted, sipping her drink. "That roving eye landed on Danny pretty fast when he moved down here. But then again everyone's eye landed on that guy. Good thing I'm not into dick or I would have been sucked into that hot mess too."

"Hot mess?"

She rolled her eyes, lips playing in a half-smile. "Everyone fell in love with Danny a little bit when he first came down. But Oliver went after him no holds bar, and didn't stop to mention that he had a girlfriend. It wasn't a good scene when Edie found out."

Boyd's eyebrows lifted. He remembered Sin mentioning a guy he'd nearly gotten involved with and that something complicated had come from it. That must have been Oliver, then.

"How did that go for Danny?"

"Edie tried to run him out of the scene, and he didn't put up much of a fight or seem to even give much of a shit, but everyone liked him anyway." Roz wrinkled her nose, and finished her drink. "That girl has major diva 'tude, but she doesn't have as much power over the scene as she thinks she does. Even with her free Pandora."

"Free Pandora?" Boyd echoed in surprise. Judging by the enormous size of the loft and its location right in the middle of prime real estate, he supposed it made sense Edie had enough money to give out drugs like candy.
"Yup, that's what she meant by free goodies. These parties turn into nothing but PD-laced orgies." One of her dark eyebrows arched as Roz gave him a wicked grin. "So you better go snag Danny before someone else tries to. Although I guess I should give you the who's who first."

"That would be helpful," he agreed as he took a sip of his drink. His gaze shifted across the people he could see near him. "I only vaguely know names of some of them..."

They walked around the perimeter of the loft, and Roz playfully avoided grasping hands of people she knew. It seemed like most of her group of friends had sprawled out on long, low sitting lounge chairs that sat in the center of the room. For all that this was where Edie lived, with the lighting, surround sound system playing music and style of furniture, it looked like a real night club. Even the winding staircase that led to the upper level only served to remind Boyd of the club Lunar in Monterrey.

"The super fag and his Prada clothes is Taz," Roz said with a smirk, pointing to the slight man with long blond hair. "He's an adjunct at the university and super chill. I bet he'd shit kittens if he got a load of you, though. He likes being the only pretty-boy blond in the group. The lurking muscle-bound MMA fighter behind him is Gage."

The man in question was someone Boyd had observed playing basketball with Sin in the park. He was tall, formidably built, and was staring intently at Taz as Taz studiously ignored him.

"He very obviously has a major jones for Taz, but Taz ain't having it. Gage was in the military for awhile and it kind of made him nutty. He has like, zero social skills or filters."

Boyd's gaze lingered briefly on Gage. A military background could go either way; it could make him especially loyal to the government, or
disillusioned and more likely to be swayed by Janus' propaganda. He made a note to engage him in conversation later, if possible. Danny was in charge of checking out his own friends but Boyd wanted to see if anything stood out to him.

"You know Tech already," she said, gesturing at the slender dark-haired girl sitting on the floor. Tech was wearing a black wife beater and faded jean shorts, and looked as androgynous as she had when Boyd had first met her. She was looking down at another guy who appeared to be half passed out on the floor.

"Who's that next to her?"

"Oliver’s drunk ass brother Eli." Roz’s gaze was focused entirely on Tech, and the way one strap of her wife beater had slid down. "He’s a major lush. I have no idea where his brother is. Or Kayla. Or Danny. But those guys and Edie are the crew. With the exception of Edie, all of us are pretty regular, typical Annadale kids. Small time jobs, drink a lot, party a lot, you know."

She snorted and dragged her eyes away from Tech to focus on Boyd again. "Do you even get down with parties like this?"

Boyd finished off the vodka mix and glanced over at her. "I've been known to," he said with a shrug. "Depends on my mood."

"Well pick a mood, kiddo, because someone's gonna offer something soon." Roz winked and pushed her shoulder against his. "Now go find Danny."

"Oh, I'll find him alright," Boyd said significantly, flashing her a roguish grin. "I'll find plenty of him."

She laughed and gestured around the packed space. "Better hurry up then."
Boyd wandered off, looking around so that Roz would see him seemingly attempting to find Danny, but he let his feet meander him closer to the lounging group of friends. He’d ended up wearing dark wash denim shorts and a dark grey deep v-neck shirt with a partially unbuttoned, collared white shirt beneath. It seemed to be an appropriate choice, based on the obvious once-overs he got on his trek over.

He dropped off his empty glass at the bar and automatically accepted a vial a passerby dropped in his hand. He glanced at it and was unsurprised to see Pandora inside. He discreetly set it on a table as he passed by before he wandered over by his targets.

"Hey Tech," he said as he drew close enough to speak over the background reverberations of the music.

Tech had stood up behind the lounge chair, and was facing a group of teenagers that looked like they were barely out of high school. She paused in mid-sentence to them at the greeting, and looked over at Boyd with a raised eyebrow. "Sup. Still interested in that bike?"

"I am. Sorry I didn't get back to you, I got really busy and missed your emails." He glanced over at the teenagers then back to Tech. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No." She turned away from them, and gave him an assessing stare. "You sure? I don't want to waste my time."

"I'm sure. I know you planned to wait for me to pay but I can still give you a down payment if you want."

Tech shrugged, and looked him over warily. "Maybe we should. You dropped off the planet, and I don't want to waste my time. I never do that type of shit, but it is what it is as long as you don't mind."
"I don't," Boyd said easily. He crossed his arms and maneuvered so he could lean against the wall, his gaze briefly swinging over to a woman who yelled something abruptly then broke into laughter. "I'd even be fine with paying the expected full cost up front so neither of us has to worry about it if that's what you'd prefer."

"We'll talk about it later," she said with a nod. "I'm not gonna get into the details now or whatever, but that works for me."

"Alright." Boyd pushed himself away from the wall. "Just let me know."

He didn't want to press Danny's friends since he had made it clear he wanted to take care of that aspect. So Boyd only kept watch for any suspicious people he didn't recognize. Nothing seemed particularly out of the ordinary—but then, he hadn't expected Janus to be that obvious. He passed by Edie talking to a group of partygoers and Eli stumbling into a bathroom before he headed to the second floor where it seemed it might be a little less crowded.

He heard hushed voices ahead of him, tinged with the unmistakable huskiness of arousal, and turned the corner to find three people hunched against the wall. Two of them were watching the third with rapt intensity, or rather, they watched the syringe that looked filled with something that looked suspiciously like Slide. The needle pressed into the crook of the young man's elbow.

The unexpected sight combined with the rush of sensation from the party threw Boyd suddenly, violently, into another state of mind.

It was dim lighting but he felt like he could see the mix of blood and liquid in the syringe so crystal clear and with it, so vivid it was like it was happening right now, he remembered too the sensations—ecstasy beyond imagine, that rush of power and need that overcame all else. The
recklessness and confidence of knowing he was invincible, that anything
could happen to him and it would feel good, so good, he never had to be hurt
again...

   Mindless, aimless, so perfect—When he heard the hitched intake of
breath and the satisfied, jagged groan of the man it echoed all the times
Boyd's own voice had made that same sound. It reminded him powerfully of
how he had felt in those moments, how it hadn't mattered that he was under
anyone else's power like he still was now, it hadn't mattered how much
emotional or physical pain he could be in, because when he was high he was
free...

   His feet shifted him in that direction but something inside him fought
back as violently as the memories had overtaken him. He wrenched his gaze
away from the people; felt his attention land on his inner arm.

   The color of Sin's eyes in the leaves of the tree tattooed on his skin.
The promise of a forever he may still be able to regain.

   The light shifted, the man's groans became unimportant, and the music
resumed.

   He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, accompanied by a
shakiness in his limbs that had nothing to do with the congested heat of the
loft. He let out an equally shaky breath.

   A sudden need to see Sin rushed through him—to touch him, to be
near him, to hear his voice. In that sharp, private moment he felt a fierce
sense of vulnerability and wanted to immerse himself in the comfort of Sin's
strength.

   But he didn't have anything to tell Sin yet and there were still places he
needed to check. He wanted to prove he could still be an agent, still be a
good partner, even after everything. Even if sometimes he faltered. Even if the Sin he’d known was no longer there to feel proud of him.

Even if the new, civilian Sin would never know about this moment.

When he took the stairs leading up he felt an enormous sense of relief to find an open roof. There were a few people up on the roof, although most of them seemed to be using the pool or recently out of it. He started to walk forward when he noticed Gage and Kayla talking to each other on the other side of the pool. They were some of the few guests who seemed to be up there without intentions of swimming.

Wanting something to focus on, he decided to move closer.

He meandered over to stop by the railing just close enough to overhear their faint conversation. Kayla seemed to be assuring Gage that there was nothing wrong with him, that 'he' was just picky. Boyd wasn't surprised when Taz's name came up right afterward.

Forearms resting on the railing, he looked out over the serene view of Annadale Beach at night. It was so much darker than in Lexington; here, it was an expanse of black broken by lights that glowed here and there like fireflies. In the distance, he could just see the ocean; pale glints of black-blue-gold, moving in the gentle pull of the wind.

He stayed there a moment, tilting his head back with eyes sliding closed, enjoying the warm brush of the breeze along his face and rifling lightly through his hair. Letting a sense of peace overcome him; so hard to find in his profession and, especially lately, his life.

He turned his face to the side, drawing in another full breath of clear Annadale air, before sliding his eyes open and glancing at Kayla distractedly as if he'd only just noticed her.
"Hey, you’re that waitress," he said with the suddenness of a person who hadn't thought to filter their words.

Kayla and Gage stopped talking and looked at him. Kayla's face relaxed into a friendly smile, but Gage stared at him with a slight frown. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Chill, Gage," Kayla said, poking him in the side. Her long, red hair glimmered in the lights around the pool. "He's a customer at the diner."

"Oh." Gage kept staring at Boyd, his brown eyes narrowed. "What are you doing at this party if you're just a customer."

"Jesus, Gage." Kayla rolled her eyes, and grimaced at Boyd. "Sorry."

Boyd turned around, his lower back and forearms leaning against the cool weight of the railing. He met Kayla's eyes first with a smile and a, "It's no problem," before shifting his gaze to Gage. "Roz invited me."

"How do you know Roz?" Gage asked automatically, eyes still narrowed.

"Gage, seriously, relax. He's fine."

"How do you know? There's too many new faces around," the ex-soldier said with a scowl.

Kayla hooked her arm through Gage's, fanning her fingers out on his forearm. She shot a wan smile at Boyd. "He's just overprotective, don't worry about the inquisition."

Boyd quirked a smile in return, marking Gage's name from his mental list of possible Janus sympathizers. He seemed too overtly paranoid for Janus to talk him into their propaganda. "I'm not the only interloper on this party?"
"No. Everyone has new friends lately." Judging from Gage's tone, the big man didn't think this was a good thing.

Boyd gave Gage a mildly curious look. "Oh right," he said with an abrupt nod. "Roz said Tech had a new boyfriend or something."

"Not just her."

Kayla shook her head, and elbowed Gage without bothering to be discreet.

Boyd glanced at Kayla and smiled, his hands lifting in front of him with his palms out in a gesture of peace. "Sorry. I guess neither of you know me that well. Roz makes a person feel like they're one of the fold right away so I forget I'm a complete stranger to you. I was just glad to see a familiar face."

"It's okay," she said, lips turning up slightly. "I just didn't even know you knew Roz like that."

"I'm not around a lot but the times I have been, I seem to run into her a fair amount. I've gotten the chance to spend some time with her and—" He stopped as if catching himself, a quick and slightly apologetic glance at Kayla as he ended, "others."

Kayla didn't react at first, but her face changed the moment she understood. The smile evaporated and her face went blank. "Oh."

He'd thought if he mentioned his closeness to Danny without warning it might generate a startled, honest response from her. Maybe give him an idea if she was still upset or angry enough with Danny to turn him over to Janus.

But the second he saw her blank face he knew he wasn't going to get anywhere with her, not without a lot more time than this one party allowed. With no options left to gather intel for Sin, Boyd suddenly couldn't stand to be apart from him any longer.
It was pointless, it was stupid—all of this. Everything in the world that kept him apart from Sin, everything that came between them... He just needed to find him. The piece of him that would always be left unfinished without his partner felt like a gaping hole that needed to be filled.

"Sorry," he said, pushing away from the railing and running a hand back through his hair. "I didn't mean to..." He trailed off, glancing away with a faint grimace. He met her eyes again. "It was good to see you. I should probably see if I can find Roz again."

"See ya later," she said faintly. Kayla turned away and Gage looked briefly confused before giving a short shrug and nodding at Boyd.

The walk down to the second floor reintroduced the thrumming of bass that vibrated in his chest. But this time he could handle it. This time when he saw the three Sliders they were meaningless to him, they were pathetic. They didn't even have the willpower to break free from a single drug they'd willingly taken. What did they know about suffering—what did they know about being forced into hell and needing a drug like that just to endure it?

Knowing Sin was in the loft, knowing he could go find him now, changed everything.

There weren't as many people in the hallway but his gaze swept each of them in search of Sin's familiar features. He glanced in the doors as he passed, his attention drawn by multiple, muffled voices coming from an open door down a hallway he hadn't passed before.

The master bedroom opened up before him; one giant, expansive room with floor-to-ceiling glass windows covering two walls. One of those walls had large sliding glass doors that opened onto a large balcony overlooking the ocean from afar. Couples were scattered around the room, all obviously high.
with some in the midst of frantic sex and others lost in simply kissing each other.

But Boyd hardly saw any of that. His eyes immediately went to the balcony, where Sin's form drew him like a magnetic force.

Sin was leaning against the railing, his tall figure drenched in the combined low lighting of the bedroom and the moon. A man was leaning close to him, his face tilted just enough for Boyd to see the rugged line of his jaw and cheekbones. His hair was short, a deep brown in the light shadows, and he had a hand on Sin's hip. His lips nearly brushed Sin's ear as he seemed to say something, while Sin remained relaxed against the railing.

Boyd didn't see or hear anything else; didn't even care about the other man.

All he saw was Sin.

His stomach clenched at the sight of Sin; a heated mixture of relief and desire spreading through him. It was fine now, everything was fine. The world was right again and all he needed, all he craved with a power even stronger than Slide had ever gripped him, was to be with Sin.

He moved through the bedroom predatorily, his burning stare not once shifting from Sin. As if feeling the weight of his gaze, Sin looked over as Boyd approached the balcony. When their eyes met, Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and a faint smirk drew his lips up on the side.

The clenching in Boyd's stomach jolted at the look, his own eyes narrowing in return and lips parting. The hunger he felt from so simple a movement was nearly overwhelming.
He strode right up to the two of them, barely registering that the man next to Sin looked over at the new arrival. Without breaking the heated stare he was giving Sin, he ordered the man:

"Leave."

"This is my party, man. Who the hell are you?"

The side of Sin's mouth turned up further, and he didn't even look at the man next to him. "I'll talk to you later, Oliver."

Oliver frowned and he glared at Boyd before scoffing quietly. He pushed himself away from the balcony, and walked away with a grumble. If he said anything scathing, Sin didn't react or seem very interested. He just continued to look at Boyd as he stood in the same relaxed manner.

Boyd walked up to him and pressed their bodies together, his hands braced on the railing on either side of Sin's hips. He met Sin's eyes until he leaned in, his breath hot against Sin's ear.

"You think it's funny?" He tilted his head slightly, his cheek rubbing against Sin's as he let out a ragged breath. "All it takes from you is one look and I forget everything else."

One of Sin's hands caught in the back of Boyd's shirt. He fist the material, making it draw tighter against Boyd's chest. He didn't hesitate before sliding his other hand down to grip Boyd's ass, bringing their hips more tightly together. "Apparently all you have to do now is walk in the room and I want to fuck you."

A husky hint of voice made it into Boyd's exhale and he rolled his hips against Sin's. He kissed Sin's jaw and then the edge of his lips, his tongue flicking out briefly, before he drew back just enough to meet Sin's eyes. "Then it seems we want the same thing."
Sin's gaze never left Boyd's face before he leaned in and pressed their lips together. When his grip tightened in Boyd's shirt, when his tongue slid into his mouth—he never once looked behind them, or seemed to care about the people who could easily see them from inside.

Boyd deepened the kiss, his body almost languidly rolling against Sin's and pressing him back against the railing.

Their tongues twined together, their jaws working and heads tilting for better angles as the kiss grew hotter. The shirt strained at Boyd's chest as Sin's grip tightened; pulling them so close together Boyd could feel the folds of Sin's jeans as their hips ground against each other.

When their lips parted it came with a drawn breath on both their parts, sharpening on Sin's into a hitched groan when Boyd immediately turned his attention to the spot on Sin's neck he had always liked.

He kissed, sucked and licked down Sin's throat to the place where his shoulder met, where he had bitten hard just the night before. This time he ran a hot, open-mouthed kiss along the skin, running the hard ball of his tongue piercing along it in a rolling motion. Sin's hands twitched on Boyd and he cursed something under his breath that Boyd didn't even try to understand. All he focused on was the way he could feel Sin growing harder against him; the way his hips jerked seemingly of their own accord.

Sin suddenly grabbed Boyd's arm and seemed ready to flip him around, ready to fuck him, but Boyd resisted, pushing Sin back against the railing with a firm press of his hips. He rocked slowly against Sin, enjoying the way Sin's chest started moving even faster against him; the loud catch of his breath and ragged groan when Boyd murmured hotly into his ear:

"Not yet."
When Boyd looked up he saw wild green eyes burning into him; felt Sin breathing harder. A slow smile drew across Boyd's lips and he turned his attention to kissing and sucking along the other side of Sin’s neck. Sin gripped Boyd's ass with one hand and ran the other up beneath the back of Boyd's shirt, calloused fingers catching and sliding on the expanse of skin. When his hand brushed the brand of Sin's own name, Boyd's breath hitched and his grip tightened.

Sin's hand moved then, a groan falling from his own mouth to answer Boyd's. He skimmed it up Boyd's back and tangled in his hair, tilting his head back before crushing their lips together again. The kiss was bruising, harsh, and becoming sloppier the harder they ground together. It digressed into licking, biting, and barely muffled the ragged sounds escaping them both. Sin's hand moved between them, and his fingers worked over Boyd's belt easily. The zipper slid down, and then Boyd's jeans were rucked down around his hips as Sin palmed the bulge in his underwear.

A sound escaped Boyd that was caught between a growl and a gasp. Fire coursed through him, but then the pressure was gone and Sin followed through on reversing their positions. He had Boyd crushed between him and the railing, underwear shoved down and torso half pushed over the side.

There were other sounds rushing around them—traffic far below, and the moans and whispers of people not even fifteen feet away in the bedroom. It didn't matter though, none of it mattered. The fact that anyone could see them now didn't matter. All that mattered was that he could hear Sin's belt clinking as it was undone, the rustle of fabric, and felt Sin's bare cock nudging against the cleft of his ass.

Boyd moaned, his hands spasming against the railing and his hips jerking back. Sin leaned forward, his hard cock sliding against Boyd's entrance, pressing up between Boyd's ass cheeks and making Boyd's moan
grow into something louder, more ragged. Boyd rocked back, feeling the hot catch of bare skin against bare skin, wanting Sin to reposition so he could press inside.

Then he felt a strong hand at his mouth, fingers sliding between his lips with no resistance. He groaned, muffled and aroused, and rolled his tongue around those fingers the way he would have Sin's cock. He felt his own erection straining in the warm night air, precome gathering at the tip and only growing as he felt Sin's hips jerk briefly; heard the hissed moan that accompanied Boyd's substitute fellatio.

With his fingers coated in saliva, Sin removed his hand as abruptly as it had been presented. Within seconds Boyd felt Sin's fingers tracing the ring of muscles at his entrance. He let out a loud, dragging moan and shoved his hips back, his head falling down as he breathed heavily. Sin's fingers disappeared again but this time Boyd could hear the sound of him preparing himself before the hard head of Sin's cock pressed against Boyd's hole and shoved inside.

Boyd threw his head back and cried out in a near-shout, his voice intermingling with Sin's heady groan, and within seconds time flashed forward again. Sin started thrusting deep inside Boyd, stretching him with his thick cock. One of Sin's hands clutched Boyd's shoulder while the other gripped his hip, as he dragged Boyd back against his thrusts. It wasn't frantic and violent like the previous night, but Sin was fucking him so thoroughly that the intensity had Boyd panting as he released ruined, keening groans.

At some point he could feel a third presence on the balcony; he faintly heard a voice and a laugh, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the press of that cock inside of him, the feel of Sin's hands on him, the way that low, deep voice was guttering out desperately as Sin began pounding him faster.
"Fuck." The word ripped out of Sin, and his voice was so agonized and raw that it made Boyd slam back on him harder, faster, taking it to that frantic, urgent place where he needed to be thoroughly taken by Sin until he came. "Boyd, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Sin shouted when he came, helpless moans filling the air between them. He filled Boyd until come started leaking out and even then, he kept ramming the still-hard length into Boyd.

The combination of heat flooding him and Sin unable to stop made Boyd's hands clench the railing. He rocked back frantically, his body half bent with the building falling away in front of him and Sin's grip unrelenting on his body. The fall beneath him combined dizzyingly with the orgasm he could feel quickly approaching.

He let out a near wail, his voice twisting breathily as he came. Pleasure rushed through him as hard and fast as Sin fucking him. His head dropped forward, blond hair swinging over his shoulders and rocking with their movement. Even then his fingers couldn't release the railing; his body couldn't stop slamming backward.

"Hs—" He barely caught himself, voice husky and yearning. "Danny—Danny, don't stop... Oh God, don't stop..."

Despite Boyd's pleading he felt Sin pull out soon afterward, but before he could protest he felt Sin's cock replaced by fingers sliding inside and fucking him open again. He groaned loudly, eyes squeezing shut and mouth falling open for harsh, heavy panting that filled his entire chest. He felt the fingers crook and suddenly brush his prostate.

A jolt of electricity crashed through Boyd, his vision flashing white and eyes flying open.
"Oh fuck—" wrenched out of Boyd, his body quaking between equal needs of slamming back against Sin's hand and his knees nearly buckling beneath him.

"I want you to come again." Sin's voice filled his ear, low and smoldering and intense. He was hunched forward, his mouth pressed against the side of Boyd's face. "You're going to fucking take it until you come again."

Boyd couldn't answer, couldn't even think of one aside from an agonized groan, as wordless sounds dripped from his mouth. The only coherent thoughts that spun through his mind were a chant of: fuck me, use me, I don't care just don't stop, I need you, I need you, don't leave me.

It was all he wanted—all he'd dreamed of for months, for over a year. Moments like this, memories of moments like this; Sin wanting him so bad that nothing else mattered, nothing but the two of them. Modifications and experiments didn't matter, the Agency didn't matter, Janus didn't matter—All that mattered was them.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Boyd."

Their clothes were twisted up, sweaty, and Boyd's hair was clinging to his face to mix with Sin's. He rode back on Sin's hand unashamed and uncaring of who saw, focused only on being filled, on his prostate being pounded until he was nearly delirious, and then he felt his jeans being kicked the rest of the way down. They tangled with his flip-flops, and then Sin was manhandling him with ease. Long fingers dug into Boyd as their positions reversed again. Sin's back was to the railing, and he was crushing Boyd's back to his chest as he lifted him up.

Boyd arched against Sin, muttering pleading nonsense as his half-naked body was exposed completely to anyone who may look out onto the balcony from the bedroom. His eyes focused on the figures in the bedroom.
sluggishly, feeling drugged by the feel of Sin—by the way Sin seemed just as
drugged by Boyd. Hands cupped the undersides of Boyd's knees, spreading
his legs open and holding him up before Sin's erection impaled him again.

A near-scream wrenched out of Boyd and he threw his head back, one
arm wrapping behind Sin with his hand gripping Sin's hair, the other clutching
at the hand holding up one knee. Sin bent his own knees and started rocking
upwards, gravity aiding him as he slammed Boyd down harder and harder on
his cock. With the floor and railing out of reach, Boyd could only take what Sin
gave him.

The thought was nearly enough to make him come again.

His entire body felt like it was on fire; every point where Sin touched
him, every time he heard a harsh groan or rattling breath from Sin, was like a
flame that made him burn even hotter. He could hardly breathe, his open
mouth pouring endless words. His hands tightened against Sin; his head
falling forward and back again as his entire world became consumed by Sin.

Knowing Sin wanted him so bad that he would fuck him in front of
everyone made Boyd's body clench around Sin, dragging from him a ragged
groan of, "Fuck, Boyd—"

At the sound of Sin's voice, the need became unbearable and with a
moan that mangled a helpless warning, Boyd came violently without touching
his cock once. His body snapped against Sin's hands, his sight greying out
completely for a moment, and he felt Sin slam into him even faster as Sin
jerked him up and down.

Boyd hardly heard himself as he cried out, didn't hear Sin's frantic,
"Yeah, yes, God—". His entire existence was devoured by Sin and the feeling
persisted even after he heard Sin's harsh moan and felt the second flush of
heat fill him as Sin came again. Sin continued to rock into him a few times,
wringing his orgasm out fully until his grip shifted and he slowly let Boyd back down.

When Boyd's feet hit the balcony his legs nearly gave out beneath him. Sin's strong grip around his chest caught him, and Boyd hung there a moment with his hands clenching Sin's arm. The world buzzed around him; he was nearly sightless with his vision still sparking from the aftereffects of his orgasm.

Soon he'd regained enough strength to turn around and pull Sin down into a kiss. Their lips met and parted and met again, urgency and satiation rising and falling with the rolling of their tongues. Sin's arms wrapped around Boyd's back and pulled him closer as Boyd tightened his hold around Sin's shoulders. Their chests rose and fell against each other heavily, both their bodies flushed and slowly cooling in the open night air.

Boyd moaned, muffled, into Sin's mouth and felt Sin's arms spasm against him, nearly crushing him to his chest. Sin tilted his head, breaking the kiss and staring into Boyd's eyes as he murmured, "Why don't we just go back to the hotel?"

The shuddering breath and slight nod was all the answer Sin needed.
Chapter Twenty-Five

The reception area was spotless and designed in a distinctly contemporary manner. The receptionist's desk was a curved half-wall, a row of sleek, metallic chairs set to the right for guests, and the main office opened behind her to the left. Boyd couldn't see inside the closed door but he saw the name Damian Perry emblazoned in clear lettering. Skyn's logo stretched across the blank wall behind the receptionist's desk. There was a hallway to the right that seemed to lead to a bathroom and some other rooms.

There was nothing scandalous or alarming about the lobby; it looked like any other corporate office and had no indication that it was the headquarters of an adult film company.

He didn't get the chance to do more than glance around before the receptionist gave him a clearly disgruntled glare.

"Did you even make an attempt at setting up an appointment?" she asked sharply.

"I did but the options were far into the future so I thought I'd stop in too."

Marla, according to the nameplate on her desk, rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and there's a reason for that. But whatever. You can just wait. Mr. Perry has a meeting scheduled in twenty minutes, so you'll probably be waiting for a long, long time."

"Thanks," Boyd said easily and took a seat.

Marla made a face, and jabbed her pen at a clipboard. "Forgetting something?"
"Oh, right."

Boyd picked up the clipboard and returned to his seat. He flicked his gaze down the job application. It was fairly standard, with the exception of questions more specific to the adult film industry, including inquiring about his previous experience or qualifications.

He wrote the name 'Cam Jansen.' He'd thought about using Cameron Whittaker; it might make him more intriguing to Damian since Skyn almost certainly would have received promotional materials a year ago before the Aleixo mission had ended.

Aleixo had just been starting a company, Zenith, with the plans of lending slaves to pornography companies like Skyn for collaborations. Actors cost money and might balk at certain acts even in porn but Aleixo would have given his Sliders for free, providing even more enthusiastic pornography—until it was popular enough that he could charge exorbitant fees. Boyd had been one of three slaves planned to have the most exposure, with each of them representing a different look that was popular in pornography. Each of them had been featured in some way in all the promotional pieces.

But referencing it might gain the Agency's attention if the names were still flagged. Instead, Boyd went with a cover he made up on his own, knowing he could always bring it up later and say he'd been trying to change his persona. He wrote down vague credentials that only implied amateur works and referenced videos he'd seen when researching the company.

When he was finished, he brought the application to the desk.

Marla reached out to grab it but before she could, a loud voice boomed across the lobby: "Sup Marls."

The man that walked in was about about Boyd's height, fit, and had a head full of crimson-colored hair that was spiked into a faux hawk. He had on
a slim-cut charcoal button-down shirt and suspenders with an expensive, tailored look that completely contradicted the ragged jeans and scuffed boots he wore. He stopped next to Boyd and leaned across the reception desk, lips twisting up into a big grin.

"Nothing much," Marla said in the same monotone. "Chance is in but the meeting isn't scheduled for another fifteen, and your favorite person isn't here yet."

"No bigs." The man looked at Boyd, eyebrows hiking up as he gave Boyd a quick once-over. "Who's this?"

Boyd recognized the man immediately. Gordon Frost—the primary spokesmodel for Skyn. Gordon wasn't present in any of the actual pornographic videos or photos and seemed to act primarily as the brand ambassador, using his face and persona to spread the company's reach virally and at events in the industry. Boyd had run across the name and face several times when researching Skyn.

"Cam," he answered. "I came to see if I could get an interview with Mr. Perry. I have to say," he added, "It's nice to meet you. It's no wonder you've become the face of Skyn."

Gordon raised an eyebrow, and his grin widened slightly. "Yeah, I'm pretty awesome, it's true." He boosted himself up on the desk to sit down, and snatched the clipboard from Marla.

"He doesn't have an appointment," she said darkly.

"Who cares? He's fucking hot. And we're short godly blond types so Chance will jizz himself when he sees him," Gordon said as he perused the application.
"I guess." Marla frowned, eyes narrowed at Boyd in irritation. "Maybe Marquis will quit the queen bee routine."

"Marquis will always be a queen." After a moment, Gordon dropped the clipboard onto the desk with a clatter. "So Cam, what amateur stuff did you do?"

"What, are you pretending to be Chance?" Marla asked, her tone scathing.

"No way, babe. I'm nowhere near that big of a douche." Gordon smirked, and raised his eyebrows at Boyd. "Did you do like, home videos and upload them on the Internet and stuff?"

"Well..." Boyd glanced sidelong at Marla with a slight frown and turned a questioning look to Gordon. "Does he only interview people who have been in professional works?"

"Nah, Chance talks to noobs too. But like, usually—"

The door to the office opened, and Damian Perry, or Chance as they all referred to him, stepped out. In person, the similarities to the Vegas was noticeable but not nearly as stark as Sin and Emilio. He had the same bone structure and jet black hair, but his eyes were hazel instead of green and his skin was several shades lighter.

"Why are you talking to an applicant?" Chance asked Gordon without even looking at him. His eyes were trained on Boyd.

"'Cause I can, and it's a free world." Gordon made a face at his boss, and slipped off the side of the desk. "Where's the man?"

"The meeting isn't for fifteen minutes," Marla said again.
It was strange having yet another variation of Vega staring at him. It seemed Chance hadn't missed the 'intense stare' part of the Vega gene pool. Boyd went on the assumption Chance had a similar personality as well and got straight to the point.

"Hello, sir," he said, stepping forward so Chance could see him better without the desk in between. "I was just asking Gordon what it would take to get an interview with you."


"Bring your application and come in," Chance said curtly. "You have ten minutes."

He turned and went back on his office, with Gordon following behind. The redhead winked at Boyd. "This is his version of jizzing himself, dude. Don't take the stone cold face thing personally."

Boyd smiled in response and grabbed the clipboard but inwardly he wished Gordon wasn't going in with them. It would have been easier to get a feel for Chance without a third party but it was no use trying to comment on it now, not when he had such a short time period.

He followed the two of them into the office and automatically glanced around for egress points, disguising it as taking in the office itself.

Gordon sprawled out in one of the chairs, and looked at Boyd expectantly. Chance stood next to his desk and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked over Boyd again, slower this time, and went directly into a line of questioning.

"What brings you in?"
"I'm looking for a job and I'm familiar with Skyn's works," Boyd answered as he took a seat. "I always liked the way your videos are shot more realistically—it makes your films stand out above the rest—so I came in hoping there might be a position open."

"Position for what?" Chance asked, a hint of impatience working into his tone. "Photos or movies?"

"Whatever you want," Boyd replied with a shrug. "I've done both."

"What have you done in movies?"

"A lot," Boyd replied easily. Since he couldn't rely on Zenith or talking to Chance one-on-one, he had to rely on being intriguing enough in his experience to be called back. The most uncomfortable part was that he didn't even have to lie but he kept his tone light, like none of these things had ever mattered to him.

"Obviously people look at me and think twink," he said, gesturing at himself, "so I primarily have gay experience with the sorts of themes you would expect with that—daddies, bears, other twinks. That sort of thing. But I've done straight, bi, gang bangs, different kinks..." He trailed off. "If there's anything in particular you're wondering if I've done, I can tell you."

"Mostly bottom then," Chance said, not even blinking at the list. He glanced over at Gordon, and then focused his attention on Boyd again. "I can tell you now that I like your look. That gives you an in to audition automatically, since actual attractive androgyny is difficult to find."

"Yeah, androgynous shouldn't automatically equal like, weird featureless alien," Gordon chimed in. He'd slumped down in his chair and was leaning on his hand as he watched Boyd.
Chance gave him another flat stare before continuing. "It also helps that you have experience in gang bangs. People like to see pretty blonds get fucked by a group, or in rape fantasies. The less convincing I have to do on that angle, the better. Now, do you have a sample or do we need to do a demo?"

The parallels of Chance and Aleixo talking business were uncanny; they were both confident, to the point, and unbothered by the topic. Boyd ignored the wave of memories of Aleixo and reflected that this was exactly why he'd never wanted to go anywhere near an adult industry again. It felt like anyone in the industry would look at Boyd and see similar ways to use him. The difference was Chance sold the illusion of such scenes while Aleixo simply made it reality.

He was more glad than ever that he hadn't mentioned Zenith; the idea of watching it with them while they took notes made his skin crawl.

"I don't have a sample with me but I could bring one back," Boyd offered.

That could give him an excuse to return, to maybe see Chance one-on-one. And he wanted to avoid doing anything valentine in Sin's name if he could at all help it.

"Then we'll do a demo."

Gordon wiggled his eyebrows at Boyd, the corners of his mouth lifting as he leered. "Good times. I'll watch."

The door opened before anyone else could comment, and Gordon's eyes flicked over to it automatically. "Hey handsome," he greeted amiably. "Just in time for the show."
Adam Blake stopped in the doorway. At the sight of him, Boyd's heart leapt in his chest and he tensed, certain that the Agency knew his plans—that they'd sent Adam to take him in and he'd be terminated before he could even find Sin a way to escape. But even as paranoia shot through him, his mind caught up to the moment.

Just as Boyd realized Gordon seemed to know Adam, he registered Adam's eyebrows snapping together, black eyes narrowing, before he looked over at Gordon automatically.

Gordon.

Boyd looked over at Gordon too, other pieces falling into place. *Gordon Frost* was the Gordon who Adam had said was his boyfriend?

"Problem?" Chance asked, staring at Adam oddly.

"Yeah boss, what's the problem?" Gordon echoed.

Boyd's mind worked furiously. That must mean Adam's civilian cover had something to do with Skyn. Shit, he'd walked right into an active undercover mission.

He'd seen that Chance was on a watchlist but it hadn't said anything about any current or active assignments. He'd taken precautions against a watchlist but hadn't expected an agent to walk into the damn room. Even if he could still spin a story to the Agency, Adam seeing him ruined any chances for this lead.

Still, why had Adam looked so perturbed? Why look at Gordon immediately? What did it matter if Boyd knew who his civilian boyfriend was? It wasn't like Boyd cared if Adam dated a porn star...

"What's this?" Adam asked finally, his voice coming out with an icy edge.
"Walk-in," Chance said slowly. "I'm going to have him do a demo when Marquis gets here. You and Gordon will oversee it since I have a meeting."

"What?"

"We've been getting requests for more torture porn, and I like his look." Chance was staring at Adam as if he'd lost his mind. "What is wrong with you?"

"Gordon is not overseeing his demo," Adam said in the same tone, his gaze never leaving Boyd's.

Chance scoffed and leaned back against his desk. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Feel threatened on your own time, Blake. This is business. He's watched other demos before. Be lucky I keep him as a promoter. I've had thousands of requests to put his ass in a video."

He looked over at Gordon with a sneer, but Gordon barely reacted to the words. He was looking between Adam and Boyd, his face etched in confusion. His gaze met Adam's again, and then something must have passed between them because Gordon's eyebrows arched up to his hairline before he sat up straight.

Boyd watched them and realization hit. This wasn't about a blown cover; this was about Gordon.

He turned back to Chance. "I've run into this before at other jobs. Do you mind if I see him alone for a few minutes?" He ran his eyes significantly along Adam, pausing briefly at the area between his thighs before sliding back up to his face. "See if I can't persuade him?"

An incredulous scoff escaped Chance but he just gestured at the door. "By all means."
Adam’s hand locked around Boyd's arm, and he practically dragged him out of the chair and out the door. It was kicked shut unceremoniously behind him, and Marla actually yelped in surprise at the sound. Not breaking his stride, Adam crossed the lobby and entered one of the rooms across from it quickly.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Adam demanded as soon as they were alone in one of the studios.


"What are you doing here?" Adam's voice cut across the studio in a dark growl, his fingers balling into fists. There was a flash of panic in his face, and his eyes cut to the door again as if he could see through it.

"Relax," Boyd assured him immediately, hands lifting in a calming gesture. "I'm not here to hurt him. There isn't a clean up crew out there waiting for him. No one knows. I didn't even know. He's safe."

Adam stared at Boyd with his jaw clenched and eyebrows drawn together. There was nothing relaxed or trusting about the expression on his face, and he grit the question out again:

"Then why are you here? If you're lying and something happens to him, I'll cut your mother's throat and send you a video of it. Don't fuck with me, Boyd."

The threat had the opposite effect likely intended; hope stirred within Boyd at the words.

"Would you?" he asked intently, scrutinizing Adam. "You would be terminated immediately. Would you go that far to protect or avenge him?"
"Yes. Without a moment's fucking hesitation. If the last few months have shown me anything, it's that all of you are as easily taken out as Gordon could be when it comes down to it."

"So you would do anything for him?" Boyd pressed. "You care about him that much?"

Impatience darkened Adam's expression and he took a step forward. "If you're not here for him, why the fuck are you here? I'm not going to ask again before this turns into a problem for us both."

Boyd's stare hadn't shifted from closely studying Adam's face. He didn't see anything other than dead seriousness in Adam's expression. Already, his mind was reworking the plan; adjusting for new information. Planning his next move.

"I'll tell you why I'm here but I want a fully secure location first. It will work in your favor to hear what I have to say. Will you come with me somewhere else?"

"Where?"

"Somewhere random so it won't be anticipated. I'll choose after we leave." He paused. "I realize I sound overly paranoid even for people in our profession but you'll understand why."

The tension didn't leave Adam's posture but he seemed to consider the words. When his lips finally parted, there was a loud, rhythmic knock on the door and Adam's attention jolted to it. He exhaled slowly and grabbed the door handle, pulling it open.

Gordon slipped in, eyebrows raised and looking calm. He looked his boyfriend up and down before cocking his index finger and thumb at Boyd like a gun. "We all cool, sweetness?"
Boyd raised his eyebrows somewhat incredulously, stared at Gordon, then looked at Adam. The other agent gave Gordon an unimpressed stare.

"Did it ever occur to you to not follow me in a potentially dangerous situation, or are you that anxious to potentially see him naked?" Adam asked Gordon acidly.

"I have the dangerous situation thing down to a science, baby, relax. But yes to the second one." Gordon flashed a grin at Adam, leered at Boyd, and then stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Adam so that he could twine their fingers together. "Seriously, though."

"I have to go out for awhile—"

A flash of anxiety wiped any traces of humor off Gordon's face. "Dude—"

"I'll be fine," Adam said flatly, although his fingers squeezed Gordon's before he pulled away. "Tell Chance... that it turns out me and this person—"

"Cam," Gordon drawled.

"Me and Cam know each other from the past. He just didn't want to make it obvious in front of you and Chance without discussing it with me first because he didn't expect me to be here. We're going to go have a talk so I can figure out if he really has interest in the company, at which point I will bring him back in."

Boyd glanced at Adam and felt a wave of relief. Adam was covering for him already with Chance, even without knowing anything. It made him feel like he'd made the right choice, even though he knew the tension wouldn't leave him fully until everything was finalized.

"Fine," Gordon said. He clearly was not pleased that Adam was going off with Boyd without telling him where things stood. "Call me soon."
Adam nodded and jerked his head at Boyd as he started to leave the studio. "Let's go."

Boyd followed behind him without another glance Gordon’s way, but once they were out of Skyn’s area into the main building, he led the way. He had rented a truck atypical to his style and had parked it a block away, leaving his own vehicle outside Grover Books in case anyone had tailed him. He’d thought someone was following him briefly when he’d first gotten back to Lexington and although he had lost the tail it had made him take extra precautions.

The two of them didn’t speak again, which gave him time to think as he drove around the city to lose any tails he might not know of and find an appropriate place.

It was possible he was overly paranoid but he’d become convinced there was no way the Agency had been unaware of his presence in Annadale; they were leaving him alone for a reason. More studies, perhaps, or waiting for him to slip up.

He had to assume every moment he could be watched. If his years as an agent had proven anything to him, being predictable was often a person’s downfall. The Agency probably wouldn’t expect him to suddenly try to find an escape for Sin months after finding him and playing along with their brainwashing. He’d spent hours thinking about the plan, plotting it out in his mind, but he needed outside help.

Emilio was the obvious choice but that was exactly the problem. The Agency would expect him to go to Emilio first. And with Emilio working as a double agent, Boyd would put him in a difficult, potentially deadly, situation.

Boyd had already determined he would tell Emilio and Carhart about Sin before they disappeared, should that be Sin’s choice, but at that point it
would be less of a risk. Sin could immediately go into hiding and gain freedom, and Carhart and Emilio could know the truth while also having had plausible deniability that would protect them in the ensuing fallout. Seong would have nothing to use to go after them. And if Adam helped, the Agency would never suspect it. As far as they knew, Adam had no connection to the Vegas or Boyd except for being randomly assigned to be his roommate.

Boyd’s mind whirred through the plans as he drove, and he glanced now and then at Adam whose expression hadn’t shifted the entire time. His drive eventually led them to a seedy motel in the Industrial District. The place was so run down it didn’t even have a name; just a half broken sign proclaiming 'motel' in lights that flickered even in the middle of the day.

Boyd parked the truck a block away outside a restaurant and when they checked in at the motel he used cash, a fake name, and was pleased to see there wasn’t a single camera anywhere in view. Even so, the second they got in the room and it was secured, Boyd checked around every piece of fabric, every door, closed the blinds and curtains, and unpacked an arsenal of anti-surveillance devices he used to clean the room of any potential bugs and block any chance of their conversation being overheard or recorded.

When he was satisfied there was no way anyone would overhear them he turned to Adam.

"I'm only here because I think it's unlikely that you're in a big rush to sell someone out to the Agency," Adam said bluntly. He crossed his arms over his chest, his black t-shirt straining against his biceps. "And obviously you're not on a real mission. So what the hell is going on?"

Boyd dropped into the rickety chair pushed in the corner of the room. He leaned forward, forearms balanced on his knees.
"I need to find a solution for a problem. I'll tell you more but first I need to know something—I will promise not to say a word about Gordon or you to anyone at the Agency, not even under duress. In fact, I will help you cover anything up if you need it and Gordon can come to me if he ever needs an agent's help when you aren't around. But in return I need to know that you won't repeat what I tell you here to anyone. It's incredibly important. And—I need your help with some information."

His lips curled down slightly and he added, "I realize I'm asking for promises before you know the context but it's imperative I know I can trust you."

There was a moment of silence as Adam digested the information. The only sounds were the faint buzzing of the AC unit, and a bug flying around and knocking into the bulb of the lamp.

"What if you tell me and I don't want to be involved?" Adam asked. "Keeping my secret only goes so far if the alternative is me getting killed by the Agency for some other reason."

"You don't have to be directly involved," Boyd said with a shake of his head. "I just need to know if my plan is viable based on information you already know. And if it is, you don't have to do anything other than omit that you know anything about any of this. It shouldn't come back to you."

Boyd paused, thinking about the worst case scenario. If the Agency caught on somehow, even if they leaned on Adam, Sin would already be free.

"If it does come back to you then it's all fucked anyway and you should blame me for everything. Make something up and sell me out on any point you want so their attention shifts to me. Just, don't get anyone else involved."

"That's all well and good," Adam said slowly. "But what if I just said no and walked out now?"
"Then you walk away," Boyd said simply with a shrug. "As long as you don't tell them even the little I said, it doesn't matter. I still won't say a word about Gordon even if you don't help me. Frankly, I'd rather know you're one hundred percent into this before I tell you anything, anyway. It's safer that way."

Adam sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. His expression was more morose than usual.

"As long as it's not something that's going to fuck my own situation up, I'll help you. I don't really like helping people, but it's the least I can do since you're being a decent human, for some reason, about this Gordon thing."

Boyd felt the knot in his shoulders unwind at that and he let out a low breath. "Okay..."

He couldn't stay seated anymore and stood, his long legs pacing the room. Now that the time was on him to finally tell someone the secret that had been plaguing him the last three months, he almost didn't know how to say it. In the end, he decided to be blunt.

"Sin is alive."

Adam stared at him blankly. He blinked once, then again, and raised his eyebrows. "I'm confused."

"They did something to him—messed with his memories—and shipped him off to another city. He's been living there having no clue about his real past."

"Wait—" Adam stood up from the bed, and stared at Boyd like he'd lost his mind. "So. You're saying that... the Agency wiped his memories and moved him instead of terminating him."
"Yes." Boyd turned. "Look, I know I sound like I'm crazy. Maybe you're thinking I was so distraught over his death I've created some alternate reality, I don't know—but the thing is, I checked into it. This is a new program they're testing to find a way to shelve still-useable agents until they can be pulled back in."

He gestured. "Think about it. Sin is one of a kind and cannot be replaced. If they could just wipe the memories of an agent who was always useful but just had insubordination issues—why wouldn't they do it"

"And they can't replace him because he's Modified, right?"

"He isn't Modified. Not illegally the way you're thinking," Boyd replied with a faint frown. He'd never thought about anyone thinking such a thing and the way Adam said it so certainly made him wonder what other assumptions people made about Sin. "But he is genetically engineered. That's what makes him valuable to them."

Adam's expression had changed very little throughout the conversation. He still had his customary expression of gloom, except now he looked like he may be regretting agreeing to get involved after all. Despite that, he latched on to the comment as if it had some interest to him.

"It's a common thought process in some circles that Emilio Vega Modified him as a child, tweaking him out on blackmarket gene-splicing drugs. Some people think that's why he's bizarre."

Boyd's eyebrows rose at that and he stopped, giving Adam a sidelong look. "People actually think that?"

"Some people. There are plenty of theories about Sin." Adam shrugged. "It's less bizarre than your genetic engineering story since blackmarket Modification is fairly common now."
"Well. They're wrong. Emilio never did that to him. All things considered, he wasn’t a terrible father to him growing up."

"Who cares about that? Get to the part where I'm supposed to be helping you do something for your genetically engineered boyfriend."

Boyd frowned. "Janus is after him for unrelated reasons and I have no idea what the Agency ultimately plans to do with him. I doubt they'd go to all the trouble of experimenting like this if they never plan to use him again, or do something even worse. He's fucked either way right now and I don’t—"

He stopped abruptly and stared at the curtains as if he could see anything through them. As if he could see Sin. "I just want to find him a way to get away. From all of this. If he wants. I just—I want him to be able to be free for once in his life. To actually have a say in his own future for once."

"Oh Jesus." Adam rolled his eyes. "Look—" Adam’s cell phone chimed, but he ignored it. "If you start getting emotional, I'm leaving. What part can I possibly play in all of this? What does his brother have to do with it?"

Boyd looked sidelong at Adam but didn't bother responding to the emotional comment. "He has the sort of connections that might be able to make a person disappear," he explained, "and he's not someone the Agency would think to check at first. There are no links between us. I was going to feel him out, but you might know him better. Is he a viable option at all?"

The phone chimed again, and this time Adam pulled it out of his pocket. He thumbed over the screen as he responded. "He has money and he has connections. I've seen him make people disappear in more ways than one, so yes he can certainly make that happen."

Adam looked up at Boyd again. "But why would he care? What are you going to do to make this worth his while? He cares about family almost as much as he cares about human decency. Not very much at all."
"I was planning to pay him as much money as I can. Is there something that might sway him more?"

"I don't know," Adam said. He smoothed the pad of his thumb along his phone absently. His eyes were focused on Boyd, even when the device chimed again. "Sin's brother is peculiar. It takes a lot for something to draw his interest, but the appearance of an insane, on the run brother would likely pique that. Him helping is another story. He has to be handled in a particular way."

Boyd considered that, his lips turning down on the edges. "Do you have intel you'd be able to leave me on how to handle him?"

"No. I've been working with him for years for this assignment. It's not something you're going to be able to study quickly." The phone went off three times in quick succession, and Adam grimaced. "He's insanely rich, so the money would have to be phenomenal. It will take some time. But I suppose I could act as your go-between."

Boyd relaxed and nodded. He'd been hoarding his money for years. He should be able to pull an exorbitant amount out without it catching the Agency's attention.

"Thank you, Adam."

"Don't thank me yet. He might still say no." The phone chimed again, and Adam sighed. "Gordon wants to track me down."

"Tell him to come if he wants," Boyd said unconcernedly. "As long as he isn't around when we're discussing Hsin, I don't care."

"Hmm." Adam considered that before thumbing out a quick message to the red-haired man. "I'll let him come briefly. It will placate him somewhat I guess."
Boyd nodded and fell silent briefly even as he continued to watch Adam. There was a faint fluctuation in the man’s expression whenever Gordon seemed to be the topic of conversation or his attention; just the smallest draw of his lips that Boyd translated as vague, fond exasperation. He wondered if Adam realized he did that.

"What's the story with you two, anyway?"

"He's an idiot." Adam slid his phone back into his pocket, and looked around before dropping into the chair. "But disgustingly enough, I love him."

Boyd's eyebrows ticked up slightly. Considering Adam's rather morose nature and comment about expecting Boyd to become emotional earlier, he hadn't expected Adam to outright say that.

"Did you meet through your cover?"

"No. I—" Adam broke off, frowning. "Technically, I'm a pretty terrible agent. Fighting and killing is all well and good, but I loathe this job and don't carry things out as well as I could if I cared more. As a result, I rather idiotically got him mixed up in something when I needed a last-minute safehouse several years ago."

"That's how he found out about the Agency?"

"No. Well, in a sense." Adam paused, and arched a brow at Boyd. "Do you really want to hear this or are you just being polite? I'm fine with not talking at all."

"Don't you remember?" Boyd's lips quirked in a smile. "I'm a curious person."

"You're a pest," Adam said, although a hint of humor made it onto his pale face. "If you must know, I didn't tell him for a long time. He's an idiot, but he's not stupid. He figured the vast majority of it out on his own. Somehow he
made the connections between me, my mission the night I met him, Johnson’s Pharmaceuticals, Murphy Corps being a cover for a government organization…"

The dark-haired man trailed off. "It’s ridiculous, and I still have no idea how he did it. I’m assuming it’s a combination of his ability to believe far-fetched things, and the fact that he was a drug-dealer with ties to all kinds of people in this city."

Figuring all that out seemed impressive to Boyd, although he didn’t know the specifics so it was hard to say. Gordon’s actions earlier had made it seem like he wouldn’t be that savvy, but that could be the persona he showed so he would be underestimated.

"Did he confront you with it?"

"No, not for a long time. He was more concerned with alternatively despising me for stalking him, and getting me in bed." There was a pause, and Adam made a face. "I wasn’t stalking him because of some deluded infatuation. Not entirely. My compromise for not killing him after using him for a safehouse was keeping an eye on him. I became fond of his foul-mouthed, ginger ass for some reason, and after multiple near-death experiences of his that had nothing to do with me, we ended up… where we are now."

"If you keep being so emotional about him I’m leaving," Boyd said mildly, faint amusement curling his lips.

"It’s more like exasperation and disgust."

"Right. I’m sure those are the reasons you’re risking your life for him and threatened to kill my mother before you even knew what I’d do with the information."
Adam sat back in the chair, resting his arms on the sides. "I could be disgusted by my own affection."

"Why?"

"I'm not very affectionate or loving as it is. As shocking as that must be. But the situation is complicated."

"Does it have anything to do with him working in the sex industry?" Boyd asked curiously.

Adam's lips pursed. "Sometimes."

Boyd continued to watch Adam for a moment before he said, "It's a shame that things can never be easy for people like us."

Adam shook his head and stood, pulling his phone out again. "I can't complain since it was me who suggested it. But it's in Gordon's best interest to stay connected to someone powerful in Lexington considering some of the enemies he's made over the years. Things were not easy at first, but we've made it work. And he's spectacular in bed." There was a pause, and Adam gave Boyd a narrow-eyed stare. "He's not watching you do a demo. I know how those things turn out. It's never just all looking and no touching."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Marquis hadn't even arrived. And even if he had, there was maybe five minutes left in the time I'd been given when you showed. If anything, he'd have found out how fast I can get a guy off with my mouth. And," he added, "it isn't as if I wanted to do anything. I just planned to talk to Chance but Gordon followed us in."

"The three of us had a meeting." Adam walked over to the door. "And don't say that in front of Gordon or he'll want to have a contest. He once bragged to me that he could make me come in under a minute."
He jerked the door open as he said: "Or maybe you should say it. He can demonstrate on me."

Gordon walked in, his thumbs hooked into the pockets of his jeans. "Demonstrate what?"

"Your blowjob skills."

"Oh." Gordon frowned slightly, looking between Boyd and Adam. "Why? Are we having a threesome?"

"You're such a moron."

"Well, dude. Context or whatever would help." Gordon rolled his eyes and waved his hands in front of him. "Forget it, I don't even want to know."

"Gordon," Boyd commented once the door was shut. "You should be more careful about how you react with agents. I'm sure Adam has told you in the past, and rest assured, he was not exaggerating. It could end badly if anyone found out that you know things."

"Yeah, thanks for the tip, twinkle toes." Gordon threw himself down in the spot that Adam had just vacated. "I know I'm supposed to be careful but that was some random shit. You were all ready to ride Marquis' dick while I jerk off and then I find out you're an agent? And now you're trying to be all serious and intimidating."

"Shut up," Adam said good-naturedly, cuffing Gordon on the back of the head.

"No, seriously, it is. You should have seen Adam before I started turning him out regularly. All super-serious face, and trying to scare me. Do they try to teach you dudes that as a tactic or something?"
"Well, first, you haven't seen me try to intimidate anyone," Boyd said with a shrug. "So you don't know whether or not it would be successful on you. But more importantly, Adam and I both aren't the types of agents you need to worry about. The ones you need to worry about won't even bother trying to intimidate you at all, they'll just tell our employers, or kill you. And Adam would be in a world of trouble."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard the spiel. So what are you guys doing? Just hanging out in a hotel? Gabbing about blowjobs?"

"Of course. Didn't Adam tell you? That's in the agent handbook—Sleepover Topics 101."

"Why are you encouraging him?" Adam asked, shaking his head.

"Because he's enthralled by me, obvs," Gordon said. He winked at Adam, and cocked his fingers at Boyd again. "So, what happens to you dudes when you fuck up? What constitutes a world of trouble?"

"Depends on the severity of it but tortured first, usually, and sometimes killed," Boyd replied. "Some mistakes warrant skipping the first step."

"Huh." Gordon leveled Adam with a long look. "Interesting. I never got a real answer about that from certain people."

"Well," Boyd said, looking back at Gordon. "Sometimes when we care about people we worry about what we say to them more than a stranger would."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Don't listen to him. He has a lot of feelings."

"At least someone does, Mr. Roboto," Gordon muttered, slumping down in the chair and crossing his arms over his stomach. "So what's the deal with you people, anyway? Why join some dumb organization that makes you do all kinds of lame ass shit and then fucks you up if you make a mistake?"
Boyd nodded at Adam. "I have no idea why he joined. As for me, I had no idea what it was or what would be expected of me but I wanted to die at the time and it seemed as good a place as any."

"Geez. You must have been some emo kid."

"Yes, well. That seems to happen when you have a lot of feelings," Boyd said mildly.

"It's cool, no judgment here. I used to spend my days getting stoned so I could deal with all of my feelings."

"And fucking 250lb, bodybuilding serial killers," Adam added flatly.

"Yeah, well. Shit happens." Gordon grinned at Boyd. "So, what's your name?"

"Boyd."

"Does that mean you're not really going to be the new Marquis, and were only there for, like, covert motives?"

"I won't be working there, no."

Gordon actually looked disappointed, which wasn't lost on Adam at all. He made a face and grabbed Gordon by the back of his neck.

"Okay, that's enough. We need to actually go have our meeting with Chance, and Boyd has to go do whatever Boyd has to go do."

Before Boyd could speak he felt his Agency phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulled it out immediately, his sense of ease cutting off as sharply as his face went blank. He saw Carhart's name, glanced at the other two in the room, and answered the phone.

"Can you be in within the hour?" the general asked immediately.
"Yes."

"Good. Be here." Carhart hung up without another word.

Eyebrows drawing together, Boyd returned the phone to his pocket and wondered what that was about. Since it was Carhart, it was most likely a briefing but it could be anything else. He didn't bother thinking about it too hard since the answer would come soon enough.

"And now he really does have to go do something," Adam said. He pulled Gordon up by the arm and nudged him toward the door.

"Wait," Boyd said before they could leave. He turned his gaze on Gordon as he stood. "I don't know if it will come up, but if you ever need an agent to help you for any reason—protection, cover, a place to hide, anything—and Adam isn't available, you can come to me."

Gordon's eyebrows shot up and he looked between Boyd and Adam, and back again. "Really? Why?"

"Because Adam is doing something for me so I want to do something for him. Besides," Boyd added as he crossed the room, "it isn't really your fault you're involved with the Agency in the first place so you shouldn't have to worry about the consequences of it."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Gordon said, shooting Adam a small smirk.

Something about Gordon's attitude had been tickling at the back of Boyd's mind. As he pulled out his phone and started thumbing through his contact list, he realized abruptly that Gordon reminded him a little of Lou.

They weren't very similar except for the way they seemed to go through the world; not seeming to take seriously the things everyone else did and seeming so certain it would work out alright in the end anyway. He supposed that was a good counterbalance to Adam's naturally pessimistic nature but the
connection only served to underscore to Boyd that he didn't want anything to happen to Gordon in the future.

"I'll give you my cell number," Boyd said. "You can call me if you need anything but, obviously, don't give the number out." He glanced up. "Equally obviously, don't tell anyone what I am."

Gordon just stared at him in surprise and for the first time seemed incapable of forming a reply, which Boyd took to be assent. They exchanged numbers and soon afterward Adam and Gordon left.

When Boyd got to the Tower he found that the summons had been for a briefing. The anonymous tip Boyd had left regarding Annadale had made its way through the system and was now resulting in a mission. The mission would start in the coming weeks, with one of them enrolling in the university. Boyd volunteered to take it, much to Bex's apparent relief.

The briefing didn't take long and Ryan had to run out afterward to a previous engagement, so Boyd couldn't follow up on the phone calls.

As he headed back toward his house, he noticed a message on his phone and listened to it. In the background he could hear what sounded like a gambling establishment, with machines pinging and people cheering and the occasional louder voice of what sounded like someone calling out a bet.

His uncle's muffled voice seemed to be addressing someone else.

"No, I told you I want—oh shit, wait." Riley's voice suddenly became much clearer as the background sounds grew dimmer. Boyd translated it in his mind as his uncle walking to a quieter corner or perhaps even outside. "Hey. Uh. Just wondering how you are."

Riley sounded slightly distracted and his voice moved further from the phone for a moment. "Something came up and I can't be around for awhile
but I want to meet with you again. The twenty-eighth? Mayborn Hotel. I'll call you with the room number when I have it." There was a pause and then, "Anyway. You don't have to call back... I'll just track you down when I'm back in town if I don't see you at the hotel."

The background sound grew loud, abruptly, and almost as quickly quieted again. Riley sighed heavily and his voice arced away as if he were pulling the phone from by his ear. "No, I already told you—"

The voicemail abruptly ended.

Boyd deleted the message and made a mental note to remove anything of any sentimental or monetary value from his house before his uncle could return. He also knew he would be showing up at Mayborn Hotel, if for no other reason than to figure out his uncle's angle.

Remembering abruptly that he had to check Tech's messages and needing a place to hide his valuables, he turned back into the thick of town. After he'd eventually located a suitably secure storage facility that he paid for with cash and used a fake name, he stopped by a 24-hour internet cafe. His personal email account was untraceable but he still took several precautions on the computer before even accessing it.

Since he rarely used the address, the inbox was nearly empty with the spam folder boasting only a few messages. He saw several emails from Tech and dismissed them after skimming them. There was nothing new in them that he hadn't already learned from his last Annadale visit.

It was the email from an unknown address that caught his attention. He hadn't given the email address out to anyone other than Tech and Sin, so there was no reason anyone should know it.
There was no subject and when Boyd opened it he saw a compressed attachment with a name that seemed to be a random combination of letters and numbers. The email itself was simple:

*if you receive me, it means my owner did not set back the timer and has already been taken care of by mutual friends. open me if you are prepared to die, be hunted, and endanger the people you care about*

Boyd stared at the message, his fingers twitching on the keyboard.

Ivan.

He’d nearly forgotten he had given Ivan this address during the lock in, as a way to contact him when he had been trying to find a way to prove or disprove Ivan’s innocence. He’d half expected Ivan to throw out the email address, as he had very reluctantly accepted it at the time.

When he looked at the date it had been sent, he saw it had arrived in his inbox the day before; a week after the break in at Chandler Heights. No one had seen Ivan during that time and although Boyd knew the Agency had him, what he didn’t know was whether Ivan was still alive or whether they had already terminated him without advertising it.

He surreptitiously glanced around but, as before, no one was anywhere near him let alone paying any attention to him. He had specifically chosen this cafe for its lack of cameras and its terrible set up for discreet surveillance. If someone was watching him, he would know.

He reread the message, stared at the attached file for a long moment—and thought of Sin.

For all of Ivan’s paranoia, Boyd didn’t doubt the veracity of the email’s claims.
It wasn't safe, not right now. He still needed time to get everything ready for Sin before he could risk getting involved in anything else.

His lips thinned on the corners but in the end he closed the message and signed out, leaving the attachment untouched for another day.
Chapter Twenty-Six

When Boyd walked into the Blue Moon Diner he could tell something was going on.

Tech was just leaving, her lips pinched and eyes focused straight ahead while Sin's shoulders were all hard lines and his movements sharp. Tech pushed past Boyd without seeing him and just as Boyd turned around he saw Sin disappearing into the kitchen. Kayla and Delsin were in view but neither of them seemed to be paying too much attention, as the crowd was especially heavy in the early afternoon of a particularly gorgeous day.

Boyd's gaze hovered briefly on the kitchen door swinging shut. Delsin, in one of his rare moments of being an attentive waiter, seated Boyd in a small table shoved in the back. He was caught between a table of college girls laughing uproariously over something they were watching on a small vidscreen and a large group of people who, judging by their conversation, were some sort of book group analyzing the literary genius of a book Boyd had never heard of.

The background chatter was enough to drown out any solitary thoughts a person may try to have.

Delsin's brief bout of attentiveness waned the moment he got into a conversation with someone across the diner, and after shooting him increasingly strongly-worded requests, Kayla finally picked up the slack and came over to Boyd's side of the room for orders.

She was as polite as she had ever been, even in the past two and a half weeks since the party, although she didn't go out of her way to be as sweet as she had been previously. After Boyd ordered his usual iced tea, she disappeared without another word.
While he waited, Boyd kept an eye on the clientele. There was no one who raised a red flag in his mind and there hadn't been in the two other times he'd been able to come down to Annadale.

Lately, his ability to get away wasn't as consistent as it had been. He had gotten halfway down to Annadale a week and a half ago only to get a call for a briefing and have to turn around. The second time he'd come, he had only been able to stay for one night.

Missions were heating up back at the Agency, with the backlog of cases put off by the lockdown only now starting to be finalized in the Intel and R&D divisions and assigned to agents.

Just as he was checking his watch to see how much longer it would be until Sin got off he heard raised voices near the register at the front of the diner. Kayla was next to the register, and there were two customers standing beside her.

Both were tall, muscular men in their mid to late thirties, and judging from their attire it appeared as though they were part of a sports team. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about them other than the fact that the man standing a few paces back from the register had greyed prematurely despite the fact that he looked to be the younger of the two, and the man standing closer to Kayla was exceptionally muscular and had full tattoo sleeves. Neither of them fit the description of the men who had attacked the girl from the parking lot, and they didn't fit the Janus profile, so Boyd had not paid them much attention until now.

Although Boyd couldn't hear precisely what was being said over the din of the other customers, it was pretty clear from the overtones that the tattooed man was complaining about something to Kayla aggressively and that she was shaking her head in denial of whatever he was saying. He jabbed a finger
into her face and leaned closer, crumpling a paper in his hand and tossing it at her rudely while his friend looked on with disinterest.

Boyd frowned at the scene and watched as Delsin finally realized what was going on and approached.

"This fucking girl overcharged me," the man snarled loud enough to be heard clearly over the din.

The noise level lowered at the exclamation, and Kayla looked around in embarrassment. Delsin appeared to be saying something in his usual sarcastic manner and gestured at the man. Boyd couldn't hear what was said but whatever it was, it didn't sit well with the customers. The man gave Delsin a sharp, mean shove that sent him slamming back into the hostess' counter.

"Jesus, what the hell is wrong with you!" Kayla demanded, turning to go to where Delsin had fallen over.

"Fix the charge you put on my fucking credit card or I'll wreck this dump," the man shouted, and grabbed her arm to pull her back to the register.

Boyd started to rise from his seat just as the doors to the kitchen opened. He'd honestly been waiting for Sin to come out, and was surprised he hadn't sooner. There was no way that he hadn't heard the entire exchange from the kitchen, especially not with his hearing. Regardless of the reasoning for the delay, if Sin had looked irritated earlier he was flat out angry now.

He put his backpack on the floor with a thunk, let his apron drop next to it, and stalked over to the group in two, impatient strides. Kayla had already snatched her arm back, and the two men turned to Sin.

"Are you the fucking manager?" the tattooed guy demanded.
"Yes," Sin replied, looking from one to the other. His teeth were grit and his hands clenched, although he looked more aggravated than anxious for a fight. "Now back off before we have a problem."

"Wow, that's how you treat customers, bro?" the grey-haired man asked with a scoff.

"Is that how your friend treats women?" Delsin demanded hotly. He'd gotten back to his feet and marched back over to the men. "You fucking asshole, I could call the cops and have you arrested for grabbing her like that. Why don't you both just go back to the bath house and give us a damn brea—"

The tattooed man cocked his fist back and looked fully prepared to cold clock Delsin in the face, but Sin grabbed his hand and twisted it backwards before he could follow through. Two things seemed to happen almost simultaneously: the guy's friend lunged at Sin but wound up being yanked off his feet and slammed face-first into the counter with such force that the screen for the register toppled over, while Sin used his grip on the tattooed man's arm to jerk him around with a distinct cracking sound filling the air.

The screen fell to the floor with a loud slam, Kayla cried out in alarm, and the tattooed man shouted in pain. He made an effort to jerk out of Sin's grip and confusion filled his face when he was unable to do so. Confusion turned to apprehension as his eyes met Sin's, and Boyd moved quickly toward the front of the diner as soon as he focused fully on his lover's expression.

It was almost as if the violence had activated something in Sin that hadn't been there before. His face had that blank, cold look that he only got when he was about to dismember someone. Three punches slammed into the tattooed man's face in the seconds it took Boyd to run over, and they'd turned his face into a bloody mess. As everyone in the diner looked on, Sin lifted the
man clean off the floor with one hand gripping his neck despite the fact that he must have outweighed Sin by sixty or so pounds.

"Danny," Boyd said as he closed the distance between them, one hand raised in a calming gesture. "It's okay. Calm down."

Kayla and Delsin didn't even seem to register that Boyd had spoken; their eyes were fixed firmly on Sin with identical looks of shock. Sin's fingers flexed around the man's neck, and his eyes narrowed further as the man began to gag. But then Sin's green eyes flicked over to Boyd, and his grip loosened slightly.

"Come on," Boyd said calmly, slowing his approach and stopping just within reaching distance. "We can go outside, get some air. These guys won't bother anyone anymore."

"Let me go, you fucking psycho," the guy wheezed out as his toes skimmed the floor.

Sin's mouth quirked slightly and he released him, letting the larger man fall to the floor next to his friend. "Get the fuck out before I put you through the wall."

The guy growled something about lawsuits and Sin being a modded out freak, but he and his grey-haired friend hustled out without much of a delay. Delsin and Kayla were still staring at Sin as he grabbed the crumpled piece of paper from the floor. It was likely the guy's receipt and after looking at it for a moment, Sin scoffed and balled it up in his hand.

"And you did fucking overcharge him."

Kayla flinched and Sin shook his head, grabbing his stuff and stalking out of the diner. Boyd was close behind him but didn't speak immediately.
"Goddamn fucking everything," Sin hissed as soon as they were further away from the restaurant. He stopped next to Boyd's car and raked both hands through his hair. Releasing the strands, Sin paced for a moment before releasing another frustrated growl and punching the hood of Boyd's car. It caved in beneath his fist, denting considerably and causing the edge of the hood above the headlight to crunch and pop up at the side.

Sin stared at it blankly for a moment, and his expression darkened further. He flexed his hands and looked at Boyd. "Jesus fucking Christ. I'm sorry."

Boyd didn't even look at the damage; his eyes were trained only on Sin. "It's okay. Let's just go to the hotel."

"Fine."

Sin yanked the passenger's door open and got in without another word. His jaw was clenched as he glared out the window.

Boyd drove them to the hotel, watching Sin in his peripheral vision. He had checked in at a different hotel this time than the times before. It was even further from Blue Moon Diner and not as luxurious but equally secure. Neither of them spoke even after they were in the room with the door locked behind them. Boyd activated the jamming devices he kept on him to protect his conversations from any potential Agency surveillance.

Sin started pacing the room while Boyd watched him, unsure at first of what to say. "What happened?" he asked at length.

"I'm turning into a goddamn psycho apparently," Sin said. He shook his head, and narrowed his eyes at the floor. "I wanted to crush that motherfucker's throat, and I have no idea why. It wasn't even that serious."
"Did anything pass through your mind first—anything that angered you—or did you just react?"

"What?" Sin stopped pacing and gave Boyd a confused look. "What are you talking about?"

"Did something upset you about what was happening and that's what made you react that way?" Boyd continued to watch Sin and, after a moment, sat down on the edge of the bed. "For instance, the way they were attacking Delsin who wasn't even doing anything... Or did you just automatically react to their aggression?"

"I don't know, Boyd. I don't really know what you're talking about." Shaking his head, Sin looked away. "I'm just pissed off. I tried to talk to Tech, and I got so angry that I had to walk away before I choked the shit out of her."

"Why, what did she say?"

Sin scoffed, and leaned against the wall. He crossed his arms over the chest, and focused on Boyd again. "I can't figure out who may have said what. Everyone in that group with the exception of Gage and Kayla have been hanging out with this random, new group of people. They're friends of this man that Tech was seeing, but she isn't seeing him anymore."

He paused, dark eyebrows knitting together. "That's why I thought it was her at first. All of these new people appeared during the summer, and that's when things got strange. So I just said fuck all of the cloak and dagger shit, and asked her straight out if she'd told anyone about the incident in the parking lot with that girl and she said it had come up at a party a while ago."

Boyd nodded, his lips turning down slightly in thought. That made sense as to why Janus hadn't reacted for so long. The Agency had wiped the police report the moment it had come to their attention so the local police department wouldn't try to get involved and interfere with any Agency
investigation. If Janus hadn't been aware in time they wouldn't have been able to find any identifying characteristics of the witness, or find out that there was a specific witness at all.

Still, even if they didn't know exactly who had said what, this was the first lead on Janus operatives who might have been involved. The operative Boyd had interrogated had been too loyal to the cause and hadn't given up anything else—or honestly hadn't known more than the minimal details he'd been provided.

"Did she say who asked or give a description?"

"No." Sin's lip curled into a sneer. The expression was identical to the way he'd looked in the past when he was particularly unimpressed or disgusted with someone. "She said she didn't remember. I wanted to fucking kill her. I had to walk away before I completely lost it."

"Does she know there was an attempt on your life?" This time the question came out with more of an edge.

"No. She doesn't know shit. Not from me, anyway."

Boyd nodded and sat back, only slightly mollified. Anyone who claimed to have ever been Sin's friend didn't deserve the title if they not only could have gotten Sin killed but then also refused to give him any information when he later asked about it.

"Did she at least say what other friends of yours were there?"

"All of them except Kayla," Sin said sourly. "Which narrows it down not at all. It's so frustrating. And I don't even know if she was really lying, because she didn't know everyone at the party. Just, whatever. I'll get her to talk some other time when I'm not losing my damn mind."
"What about the others?" Boyd paused. "I know you wanted to cover your friends but it could be faster if we split them up. I could help. Maybe one of the others will say something Tech didn't."

Sin shook his head, and finally sat down with a weary sigh. "They're not going to tell you anything, Boyd. They don't even know you. It will just look weird if you start asking people questions. Everyone is already being shady. Besides—do you really want them knowing it matters to you one way or the other?"

Boyd sighed, conceding the point. "You're right. I'm just—" He raked a hand back through his hair and dropped his hand with a shake of his head. "I'm worried about you."

"All of this Janus stuff isn't even what's really getting to me, to be honest." There was a pause as Sin slumped down further in the chair. He extended his legs in front of him, and raised a hand to press against his head. "I can't even sleep."

"Why not?"

"I've been having all of these... weird dreams."

"What makes them weird?"

The question was met with a brief silence. Sin shifted in the chair, and rubbed his hands together as he seemingly thought about the question. After a moment, he looked up at Boyd. "I don't really know. I've always had them... I guess. But lately it happens more. They're usually fragmented or I don't remember everything, but it's always me acting like a psycho."

"What are you doing in them?"

"Killing people usually."
Boyd paused a moment, his gaze unwavering on Sin's face. "Do you ever remember anything else? Why you're doing it or if anything's happening in the background?"

Sin's eyes narrowed, and he sat up slightly in the chair. The look on his face took on a wary quality, but he only said: "There's always different things going on, but I can never remember enough for it to make sense. But sometimes you're in them."

Boyd realized that he was asking too many questions about the dreams. At the same time, he wondered exactly how much Sin was beginning to remember. How long would it be until the possibility of Sin making his own decision about choosing to recover them or remain without them would be taken from his hands entirely?

"I am?"

Sin nodded. He'd leaned forward in the chair with his forearms pressed against the sides as he watched Boyd intently. It seemed like he knew Boyd was picking deliberately, but didn't know what to make of it.

"Pretty frequently. It's just flashes of different things but... you're around. Those dreams are the strangest."

"Why?"

Instead of answering, Sin pointed at Boyd. "I realized recently, I don't know a damn thing about you."

"Well." A faint frown was accompanied by the draw of Boyd's eyebrows. He wondered how long he would be able to keep up this delicate balance of truth and omission. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything. I know nothing except that you work for Murphy Corps, and even that seems like... you're not telling me much. I mean, does anyone even
know you come down here? Do you have any family or friends? It never seems like you're on a real assignment so who the hell would I contact if Janus blows your fucking brains out one day while you're down here with me?"

Boyd paused. He'd come down to Annadale with the knowledge that Chance was potentially curious, and might potentially help, but Adam hadn't done anything other than allude to the idea of Cam possibly needing to go off the grid entirely. They needed more time to finalize it, to ensure Chance would help.

His plan had been to tell Sin anything he wanted the moment the plan was finalized, so that even if the Agency was listening Sin could still escape before they caught him. But the spiral Danny was getting caught in of Sin's memories and Sin's reactions was making Boyd unsure of what he should do. It seemed no matter what choice he made someone would be upset with him, and no matter what he did there was the possibility it could be wrong.

"I'm not exactly supposed to be here," he admitted after a moment. "There are some people who know I'm not always home but I haven't told them where I really am. But I do have family, just my mother. And I have friends." He realized belatedly he'd forgotten Riley and added, "And I suppose there's an uncle I recently discovered too."

"You never talk about anyone. You could be a random, pathologically lying creep with PTSD from some Murphy assignment for all I know."

"Well," Boyd said, his lips quirking up slightly on the edges. "If that's the case how would you know no matter what I tell you?"

Sin rolled his eyes, and collapsed back against the chair again. "I guess I wouldn't. Are you seriously going to keep giving me the big runaround?"
Boyd's smile faded and he shook his head. "No, of course not." He watched Sin for a moment before shifting and moving back on the bed so he could face Sin more directly. "My best friends are Kassian and Ryan. I work with them both, although Ryan's in a different division. I end up leaning on them for support more than they do me. Sometimes I wish they would ask more from me so I could pay them back for all the times they've helped me out."

A flicker of something crossed Sin's face at the mention of the names. It was there and gone so quickly that Boyd couldn't identify it, but Sin was quiet for a stretch after. His brow puckered, and his gaze grew slightly distant. After a moment he shook his head slightly, and his attention sharpened on Boyd again.

"Do you have friends that aren't in Murphy Corps?"

Boyd's lips turned up again, self-deprecating this time. "Not really. I've been known to seem like a condescending asshole to other people because I was never very good at opening up to others. I was always the quiet kid in the corner who was teased for being different. The one person who stood up for me was the person who was later killed in front of me and then," he gestured to his chest, the scars hidden beneath his shirt, and shrugged.

"Things got kind of fucked up for me for awhile and after that I joined Murphy Corps. It took awhile for people to like me there too, and since I don't have too much interaction outside of it I don't really have outside friends."

"Oh." Sin pushed himself up and out of the chair before crossing the room. He sat on the side of the bed, turning sideways to face Boyd. "Do you even want any?"

"I don't know," Boyd said honestly, tilting his head to watch Sin. He ran his gaze across his lover's face, catching on every feature that was so familiar
even while their conversation wasn't. "I never really thought about it before, I guess."

"I used to want friends." They looked at each other, and Sin gave a one-shouldered shrug. "When I first moved here, I was lonely. I wanted some kind of connection, I guess."

A faint smile curved Boyd's lips, although it was slightly sad. "Are you happier now? Aside from the current situation with Tech—if it turned out tomorrow that she was the only one involved and all the Janus issues disappeared, if you could just go back to how things were before any of that—would you be happy?"

Sin rubbed a hand across his jaw, eyes still intent on Boyd. "I don't know. No, not really. I was never really happy, I guess. I wasn't unhappy but, they never felt like enough." He frowned. "It always seemed like there should be more."

The somber smile grew and Boyd couldn't resist reaching out and running his fingers along Sin's temple, brushing back a few strands of shorter hair that had fallen from the knotted ponytail.

"Then what would make you happy, Danny? Truly happy?"

"I don't know." Sin didn't lean into the touch, but he didn't pull away either. He just watched Boyd, somehow seeming detached even though he was saying more than he ever would have in the past. "Sometimes things seem right, but it's always off somehow. Even that night when we left the party. Everything seemed right, but, I don't know. I can't explain it."

Sin shook his head and reached up to grab Boyd's hand. He squeezed it, and then released it. "Whatever the case is, I think I should leave town."
Boyd was silent a moment, debating what he should say. He’d thought Sin was happy in a civilian setting as Danny but maybe it wasn’t meant to be. It even seemed possible Sin meant that being with Boyd felt right, that it was only this other life that made everything seem wrong to him even when they were together. Or it was possible Boyd was interpreting that the way he wanted to believe: that somewhere inside him Sin still loved him enough to want him at the expense of all else.

He turned to face Sin completely. His hand fell on Sin’s thigh. "Have you thought about what would come next? People like Janus might never leave you alone."

"I've thought about it, but I won't know until I try living somewhere else."

"Would you be okay with leaving everyone you know behind?"

"I told you, I don't really have a connection with them like that. I'd miss Roz, but not to the point that I'd stay here." Sin glanced at the window, at the direction of the beach. "I'd miss living by the ocean mostly."

Boyd opened his mouth, almost asked if Sin would mind never seeing him again, but stopped himself. He glanced at the jamming device in his bag and then returned a more resolute stare to Sin’s eyes. "I can help you... If you just give me a little time, I can make it so... I can—"

He stopped, and frowned. It had seemed like different circumstances when Sin had been Danny completely, when Danny had seemed settled and content with his life, but now that the man Boyd had known for years was coming out more and more Boyd felt caught by the very decisions he was trying to avoid making for Sin. And now, more and more, he couldn't help remembering Sin demanding in a past argument that he would have wanted Boyd to tell him if he was interested in being with him, even if Sin was with someone else.
The Sin he'd known, the Sin who had loved him, would want him to say something. When Sin had been acting more like Danny it hadn't seemed fair to Danny to say anything but now Boyd didn't know anymore where his loyalties were supposed to lie when this was all the same person who he loved regardless. But it seemed likely Danny's and Sin's wishes might be aligned on this point and with that knowledge Boyd couldn't stay silent. He had to bring up the topic somehow.

He reached out, grasping Sin's hand in his and squeezing. His eyebrows drew together and he stared Sin intently in the eyes. "Danny, what if—What if there was something else and—" He stopped again, lips twisting, before he started over. "There's something we should talk about but I want you to under—"

Boyd's Agency phone rang, piercing through his words. He snapped his eyes away, his hand spasming on Sin's even as he burst out in frustration, "Seriously?" His gaze darted back to Sin, he even considered ignoring the call, but knew he couldn't. He jumped off the bed and made it there just before the third ring.

He had the phone open and at his ear before he even registered Carhart's name on the display.

Sin was looking at him incredulously, and stood. "Just hang up."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the phone before Carhart spoke. "I need you here by eleven."

Boyd glanced at his watch. That was barely over three hours away. "I'm," he met and held Sin's eyes, "not close and kind of in the middle of something. I might be late."
"That's not an option. Not today. Katsaros is coming for a meeting." There was another pause before Carhart added: "He wants to see how the unit is run."

Boyd's eyebrows rose in alarm and with a hissed, "What—" he immediately turned and quickly started throwing his things back into his bag. "Is this—is it just ours?"

"Yes. Don't be late."

The phone went dead and Boyd was in such a hurry he nearly tripped over his bag. "Shit—"

The alarm he'd felt before sharpened his voice and movements. He had no idea why Katsaros was coming to a briefing, but it clearly wasn't good. This could be Seong's attempt to have more evidence against Carhart to terminate him.

Boyd looked around for anything he'd left behind, already calculating whether he would be able to make it on time. Even if he risked getting caught by the cops speeding all the way there, it wasn't a guarantee. And his absence or tardiness would directly count against Carhart as a supervisor.

How little or much would it take for Seong to have all the information she needed to go after Carhart?

"I have to go, I'm sorry," he said urgently even as he grabbed his bag.

"Boyd, you've got to be fucking kidding me." Sin grabbed Boyd's arm, and held him in place. "You're going to start a conversation like that and then bail?"

"I'm sorry—" He tugged at his arm automatically but Sin's grip didn't change. There was no point in struggling; Boyd's arm would probably rip from its socket before Sin's hand loosened.
Worried and in a hurry to leave, Boyd met Sin's eyes. "I swear to God, Danny, nothing but an emergency would keep me from staying here with you. But if I'm late it could be disastrous. I'll call you later and I promise next time I'll finish what I started. You can hold me down, tie me down, anything you want. I'll do it, I'll tell you anything, I swear. But please let me go for now. Please."

Sin shook his head, and released Boyd's arm with a scoff. "Fine. Go."

"Thank you," Boyd said meaningfully. He felt an urge to pull Sin into a quick kiss but Sin's angry expression stopped him, so he settled on squeezing his hand. "I promise," he repeated firmly, then gestured quickly to the end table as he already turned to leave. "The hotel key's there; the room's paid for two days. You can stay here if you want. I'll come back as soon as I can."

Sin didn't say anything and Boyd didn't have time to patch anything up between them for the moment. Hopefully Sin wouldn't be too furious to listen when he got back later.

The drive to Lexington felt like it took forever. Even going over 100 miles per hour on the highway and driving recklessly in town, with him constantly looking between his watch and searching for any cops in the vicinity, he barely made it to the Agency with enough time to rush into the Tower.

The elevator was busy so he sprinted up the stairs. When he made it to the correct floor he was nearly run over by Owen, who burst out of the elevator doors.

Boyd darted out of his way but Owen's startled surprise might have been comical in other circumstances, with a, "Good god, man!" erupting from him even as he tripped over his own feet. His long arms windmilled briefly before he caught himself and ran at Boyd's side.
"You too?" Owen asked smoothly, as if he hadn't just nearly fallen. His eyes were still a little wide and his eyebrows hadn't quite crawled back down his forehead, although he seemed to be making a concerted effort to appear unruffled. "What did they, time it when we were all busy?"

Boyd shook his head, his expression dark. It made him feel a little less paranoid to see that he wasn't the only one who had been indisposed. Still, the timing couldn't have been worse.

When they got to the door, Owen reached for the doorknob but Boyd threw a hand out, palm splayed across Owen's chest as he stopped him. Owen looked over in surprise for the second time in under a minute.

"Were you supposed to be wherever you were?"

Owen's eyebrows drew together, a quizzical look crossing his face. "Well, I dunno, I mean it's not like it was on my approved recess schedule. But why's that even—" His eyes widened and darted to the closed door. "Oh. Questions... Yeah, man. I didn't even think of that."

Boyd nodded, his palm still strong on Owen's chest for a second longer before he dropped his hand. The two of them took just long enough to compose themselves so it was less obvious they had run flat out to get there.

When they walked inside, they saw that the rest of the unit was there: Carhart, Emilio, Bex, Ryan and Jeffrey. Katsaros was sitting at the head of the table and looked over at their entrance. Although Boyd couldn't read anything in Katsaros's expression, he was intensely grateful to know he had walked in before the time had changed from 11:00 to 11:01 pm.

Without speaking, Boyd took a seat. Owen eyed Katsaros and then shuffled over next to Ryan. When he pulled out his chair, it made a loud squeaking noise that caused Owen to wince dramatically and Jeffrey to tense.
Carhart didn't even glance in Boyd's direction. He was sitting next to Jeffrey instead of in his usual spot, which made it clear that this was not a typical briefing. His face was expressionless, although there was tension in his shoulders that Carhart had never been good at hiding.

"So, what's up?" Emilio asked finally. He was leaning back in his chair, one arm thrown over it as he gave Katsaros an expectant look. "I have shit to do, so can we get this show on the road?"

"Don't talk to—" Bex began, but Katsaros intercepted her reprimand smoothly.

"No." He looked at her and shrugged. "I enjoy Agent Vega's directness. Anything else is a waste of time."

Bex made a face, and Emilio puckered his lips at her.

"This is not a briefing, and there is not a mission." Katsaros threaded his fingers together, and looked from face to face. His eyes lingered just briefly on Boyd before moving on. "The reason I have called this meeting is not much different than what I just stated about Agent Vega's directness. I do not like wasting time, and this unit has wasted a lot of the Agency's time."

Carhart didn't so much as twitch at the comment. He continued staring at some point on the wall, and appeared relatively unmoved.

"The directors have long considered Janus to be the greatest threat to the American nation. Their ideologies are popular if not radical, but their ways have attracted many. They continuously absorb small factions worldwide, and are amassing an army to depose the government leaders. In the past five years, they have grown stronger."

Katsaros' gaze focused on Carhart, Ryan, Owen, and then Boyd. The original members of the unit.
"Today Jeffrey will lead a presentation in which we analyze the unit data and pinpoint why so much time has been wasted while a threat to the nation has grown—with the exception of a brief span of time when Janus had little activity—only stronger."

Boyd didn’t move his eyes from Katsaros even though his automatic reaction was to glance at Carhart. Had he known this was coming? Was this how they were going to take Carhart down—they couldn't get anything on the man himself so they went after his unit instead?

Dread pooled in the pit of Boyd's stomach.

Jeffrey pulled out his presentation while the room was dead silent, and the holographic center along the table bloomed into view. As Jeffrey analyzed the data, Katsaros commented on the significance behind it.

It basically boiled down to the fact that the success rate of the Janus unit when initially formed was not up to Euro Agency's standards, and showed productivity was below other units in the Agency. Janus itself had only grown in numbers in the past couple of years despite the fact that the unit's success rate was nearly perfect during that time.

The presentation broke everything into numbers and graphs, showing how ineffecutual the unit had been against the rise of Janus as a threat. It also compared the Janus unit numbers to other units in the Agency.

No one spoke during the presentation. Katsaros continued to make direct eye contact with everyone while Jeffrey didn't look away from the screen, at times a slight furrow appearing in Jeffrey's brow before he moved on to point out the inefficiencies. Even when the presentation was over, Jeffrey continued to look at the screen and, when it disappeared, he looked down at his tablet.
Although Katsaros wasn't outright saying they were blaming Carhart for this failure, it was implied that they didn't feel his leadership was adequate.

"Seems a bit queer that the analyst gets to criticize the team when he was the one creating the sims and analyzing data for them and whatnot," Bex said abruptly.

Emilio's head turned, and he stared at her with raised brows. His mouth twitched, and he burst out laughing.

"What?" she demanded.

Jeffrey's lips thinned but he didn't look up from his tablet. His thumbs moved across the screen swiftly but when Boyd glanced down, it didn't seem like Jeffrey was doing anything in particular.

"I'm more curious about the numbers themselves," Boyd said, keeping his tone respectful. His gaze settled on Katsaros, and he made an effort to keep his expression merely curious. "Our productivity might seem low comparing straight numbers to higher staffed units but we have near perfect individual success rates in the past couple of years. If the Agency's objective is to shut down Janus for good, is it possible in the future we will see a collaboration with other units? Regardless of our success rates, we are still three field agents and three R&D agents against a worldwide organization numbering in the thousands."

Katsaros' eyes moved to Boyd. "It is surprising and disappointing that you would recommend collaborating with lower ranked field agents and analysts. However, the lack of adequately ranked agents is the fault of the previous Marshal, and the interim-acting Marshal." There was a pause, and Katsaros' gaze turned cool. "You were recently... promoted. I assume you are knowledgeable about the length of time training takes. Adequate training takes even longer."
"They didn't need no more anyway," Bex chimed in again. Her mouth was twisted into a frown as she looked from Katsaros to Carhart. "Sin was strong enough to be ten agents, yeah?"

"Yes," Katsaros confirmed. There was an edge in his tone, and Emilio started snickering again. "And their use of him in the field and on the compound led to his eventual termination. It seems as though the leaders of this Agency have not quite learned how to temper high expectations of the body by understanding the needs of the mind."

Emilio's laughter tapered off, and Carhart's eyes had finally lifted to meet Katsaros' but he said nothing. After a beat of tense silence, the general stood up and walked out of the door without waiting for Katsaros to dismiss the meeting.

The corner of Katsaros' mouth twitched slightly, and he stood up as well.

Boyd's eyes narrowed before he could stop himself but almost immediately his expression shuttered blank again. He felt a sudden burning anger toward Katsaros for the implication that Sin's termination was partially Carhart's fault. Boyd knew how much it had hurt when Bex had said that to him so he could imagine how Carhart felt now.

He considered following Carhart, telling him what Katsaros implied was unfair and untrue, but he knew it wouldn't mean anything to Carhart until he could tell him the full truth.

The meeting only resolved to Boyd even further that he had to go back to Sin as soon as possible. The sooner they could talk, the sooner he knew what Sin wanted, then the sooner he could also tell Emilio and Carhart that Sin's death wasn't on any of them.
He stood up, planning to head out immediately, but Ryan cleared his throat quietly.

Boyd glanced over surreptitiously and saw Ryan moving some things around in his backpack. He remembered abruptly that he had promised to meet with Ryan, but in the meantime they'd been too busy at work for them to be able to follow through.

Sliding his hands in his pockets and keeping his shoulders loose, Boyd commented to Ryan, "Did you get the chance to eat before this?"

"Nope," Ryan said, popping the P. He grinned at Boyd, and stood up. "I have a date, though."

"Too bad," Boyd said lightly. "I'm in the paying mood." He glanced at his watch. "Need a ride anywhere? I can drop you off on my way."

"Sweet." Ryan slung his backpack over one shoulder. The R&D agent smiled as they walked out, but it looked strained. Given the way his eyes had stayed trained on Carhart for the entire meeting, it wasn't surprising. "Can you take me home? I need to change. Emilio took me shopping so I have actual cool clothes."

Despite the serious situation, the comment made Boyd let out a truncated chuckle. They stepped into an empty elevator. "I don't know if I'm more amused by imagining Emilio shopping or intrigued by wondering what he thought would be good options for you."

Ryan snorted. "Does it surprise you that he goes shopping? Look at the dude. He's like, super awesome looking all the time."

A small smirk grew on Boyd's lips. "Not exactly but it's amusing to imagine. I have it in my mind that he would be as particular as he is when he's checking himself out in the mirror before going out."
"He totally was. It took like, hours." Ryan hooked his thumbs in the lower part of the backpack straps. "He had a little too much fun in the dressing room though."

Boyd looked at Ryan sidelong as the elevator doors opened on the ground floor. "Now that you mention it, I may have heard something about this."

Ryan looked at Boyd with surprise, but then he rolled his eyes. "Oh God. What did he say?"

Boyd waited to respond until they were out of the Tower, away from anyone who might overhear. "Mostly just that you kissed but it sounded like you may have stopped him, worried about Carhart."

"Ohhh. No, that was another time. I was pretty bummed, hanging out in a private training room and he showed up. I was in the middle of this total snooze-worthy whine-fest about my life, and he just laid one on me. And then, yeah, what you said."

Ryan shook his head. "He put the moves on me again when we went shopping. I think he was mostly joking with me but it's hard to say when he's like, causing all kinds of inappropriate erections in a public place."

Boyd laughed at that and then shook his head. "It's hard to tell with him no matter the context. He excels at inappropriate behavior, particularly when a person isn't expecting it."

"Uh yeah, a lot. Boyd, it was like—okay. He was being all, adjusting my jeans because he was really unimpressed that I wear stuff two sizes too big, and then suddenly he was like. Pressing his hand against my crotch, and it took amazing amounts of willpower to not accept a handjob from that dude. I just kept thinking, you know, that Zach would roast my liver and eat it, and
then I put the brakes on. But resisting him is hard, even when he's probably just doing it for a laugh."

Boyd thought about that as they neared his car. "I don't know if he would blame you for anything if it had come to that, since Emilio started it." He pulled out his keys and unlocked the car with the fob, looking over at Ryan curiously. "But what do you mean he might be doing it for a laugh?"

"Just to see me turn all red like how I do when he hits on me or anything. I think he thinks it's funny." Ryan snorted, and got into the passenger's side. "Although I guess he actually was kind of grinding up on my ass. Oh brother. Why am I thinking about this? Say something to distract me from my embarrassing memory of stammering about not getting in the way of their love triangle with your mom."

Boyd laughed again as he got into the driver's seat, more at the mental image of Ryan commenting about that in such a situation than anything. He still hadn't figured out what to think about Carhart with Emilio and Vivienne but he'd stopped trying to understand it. After Emilio hadn't seemed upset when the topic had come up later, Boyd had stopped caring. Sin took much greater precedence in his mind than whatever those three decided to do.

"Well. I read a book the other day..."

The drive to Ryan's apartment wasn't long and was filled with meaningless conversation. Even though Boyd was in a hurry to get back to Sin, Ryan clearly had important information for him to be so subtle about asking him over—most likely about Vanguard Industries. And that was a topic neither of them felt safe discussing outside of a secure area.

When they got to Ryan's apartment and walked inside, Boyd was surprised to see Kassian there already. His eyebrows rose and he glanced over at Ryan.
"I made him a key," Ryan explained as Kassian simultaneously said:
"He wants to make sure I can slip in and cuddle him during the night."

"Oh, shut up. I gave it to him so that he could water my plants when I went away for a few days. Now he just stalks me."

Kassian smirked up at them from where he was sprawled on the couch. There was a bag of chips sitting on his stomach. He looked at home in the small apartment. "How was the meeting?"

" Fucking awful," Ryan said sourly. He let his bookbag thump to the floor.

"According to Katsaros and his numbers, we're an incompetent unit that can't seem to do much of anything right when it comes to Janus," Boyd added.

"That's about what I expected them to say." Kassian set the bag of chips aside, and rubbed his hands along the sides of his jeans. "They'll say anything to make General Carhart look bad."

"Unfortunately," Boyd agreed darkly.

He hovered in the middle of the room, glancing at the couch before darting his eyes down at his phone to check the time. He wondered what Sin was doing right now. Whether he would be livid by the time Boyd returned and whether he would understand the reasons for everything once Boyd got the chance to explain.

The idea of finally being able to talk to Sin about everything was stirring a particular anxiety in him he hadn't felt for years, since the time they'd been broken up and he hadn't been certain they would ever get back together.

It felt like even the four hours it would take to get back to Annadale was an eternity away.
“Ryan—I hate to cut this short but I have a previous engagement I should get to as soon as I can. What did you want me for?”

Ryan and Kassian exchanged looks, and there was a brief silence. After a stretch, Ryan cleared his throat and walked over to his desk. “I finished decoding that file.”

Boyd’s attention turned fully on Ryan, his hands tightening around his phone. “You did?” His tone reflected an equal stirring of relief and dread. The more he’d thought about it, the more he thought he knew what the file might say. “Was it—What did it say?”

“I didn’t read it. I... didn’t feel right reading it before you. It seems really important.”

“It is,” Boyd said gratefully. He shifted his weight between his feet, his hands clenching and unclenching against his phone until he worried he might break it. He shoved it back into his pocket and looked between the two of them before distractedly turning his eyes back on Ryan.

“Can I read it now? I’ll tell you what this is all about afterward, I just need to see if I’m right first...”

“Of course.” The flash drive was in a small box that was amongst the variety of other items on Ryan’s desk. It was clearly put aside for safekeeping, but the casual observer wouldn’t have noticed the box at all. He plugged the drive into the side of a palm-sized tablet, and handed it over to Boyd as Kassian looked on silently.

Boyd took the tablet and sat down at the desk, immediately flicking through the screens. He focused so completely on the tablet that everything else fell away around him. The information turned out to be a folder with a number of files but the one that caught his attention was a mission report.
dated a day after his father’s death. When he pulled it up he saw it was from a rank 10 valentine named Anya Malakhova.

He read it quickly, the tension growing in his shoulders and his eyebrows drawing down further. He tried to get through the whole thing but the mounting anger and pain that grew from the simply stated words was even sharper than he’d expected.

"Goddamn them!"

He nearly threw the tablet to the desk, his elbows hitting the desk harder than he meant to when he dropped his head into his hands. He heard something clatter but it was meaningless to him. Even with his eyes closed he still saw the words he’d dreaded he might find. A headache grew with the pounding of his blood and his fingers tightened in his hair.

The same anger he’d felt toward the Agency in the past rekindled and turned his muscles taut; the hatred toward the faceless organization that had sent him to Aleixo, that had taken Sin from him, and had now taken even more.

Lately it felt like every truth he ever thought he knew kept turning out to be a lie.

Kassian stood up while Ryan simultaneously took a step back. "What is it?" the blond agent asked, putting an hand on Boyd’s shoulder.

Boyd was silent for a moment. He’d had time to consider this coming but it still hurt to have it verified in such frank, uncaring words. He could remember all too clearly the happier memories of his childhood: his father’s booming laugh, the heavy comfort of large hands holding him close the way Kassian’s rested on his shoulder now, and vague memories of his father’s wide, open smile as he told ghost stories crouched beneath a ratty old blanket in the attic.
And he could remember all too clearly how his life had started a slow downward spiral from the moment his father died.

He drew in a deep breath and dropped his hands from his face with a hard thump against the desk. He stared down at the tablet for a second longer before shaking his head and holding the tablet out for either of them to read.

"The Agency assassinated my father," he said dully. "They used a valentine who looked enough like my mother so he would sympathize with her, so she could get close enough to—" He cut himself off, fingers tightening on the tablet and jaw setting as he looked away.

"What?" Ryan demanded. His eyes widened behind his glasses.

"What the fuck—why?" Kassian's fingers dug into Boyd's shoulder. "Are you sure?"

Boyd nodded, his jaw setting before he looked over at them. "I'd started to wonder, but it was even—" He stopped. "He started the Journalist Guild but he just wanted—"

He paused briefly again. "He just wanted people to know the truth. Even in the journals he left me, that's all he talked about—he said he wanted to make a world that was better for me, for my generation..."

Ryan sat on the edge of the desk, and dug his fingers into the edge of it. He opened and closed his mouth several times, but nothing came out. As usual, Kassian picked up the slack. He slid both hands up to Boyd's shoulders and squeezed.

"Calm down and take a breath. You've handled a lot worse than this recently, kid. Your father has been gone for years, but now you know the truth about why. He'd be pretty proud of you for figuring it out."
Boyd let out a harsh breath of a laugh and shook his head but still made an attempt to take a deeper breath. He dropped the tablet onto the desk and looked at them. He felt like he was being steadied by Kassian’s touch.

“I didn’t even do anything. I just thought it was odd what my uncle said...”

“Uncle?” Kassian glanced back at Ryan and then at Boyd again. “I thought your uncle was dead.”

“I did too, but then...” He groaned and then scrubbed briefly at his face. “Everything has been so hectic lately. I’m sorry I’ve been so secretive.” He dropped his hands and looked at them earnestly. “I trust you both completely—if there’s ever a time I don’t tell you something, it’s not because I don’t trust you.”

“If this is one of those times, tell me and I’ll stop asking,” Kassian said after a lengthy pause.

“No, it’s not.” Boyd sighed and leaned back in the chair. He looked around distractedly and noticed some discs and flash drives that had been stacked up on the desk but were scattered on the floor. That must have been the clatter earlier. He leaned over to pick them up, saying:

“Right before the lockdown, I was on a solo mission in Jamesport. I was walking through the city after I finished and a man showed up out of nowhere.” He straightened and set the items on the desk. “He said he was my uncle, that he needed my help. I recognized him from the photo we found in my attic,” he glanced at Kassian. “Then he started talking about my family...”

He gave a short shake of his head. “He gave me some stupid story about why he’d let everyone believe he died with my grandparents in the war but then he said he tracked my dad down. He didn’t have the date but it sounded like it was around the time he died. He said he overheard my dad
say something about Vanguard Industries into the phone before he noticed my uncle was there. It sounded like a cover group to me so that's why I wanted to look into it."

"Your father must have found something huge," Ryan said quietly. He'd moved closer again, and crossed his arms over his narrow chest. "They don't—I mean they always watch journalists, especially Journalist Guild people, but to kill one of them? That's insane. It's the type of thing that Inspectors hate, because it brings so many more questions. He must have dug way too deep..."

Kassian nodded in agreement, his eyes still on Boyd. "You're not going to do anything drastic with this information are you? The people who issued that order—Marshal Connors or Inspector Archibald... they're dead."

"Archibald—that's the name I saw in the report. So he was the Inspector..." Boyd's lips curled down and his narrowed stare fell on the tablet again. Ryan was right; there must have been something big at stake or the Inspector of all people wouldn't have gone after the media. His thumb ran absently along his gun holster.

With a shake of his head, he met Kassian's eyes seriously again. "The last thing my dad would have wanted was for me to endanger my life on revenge or anything useless like that." He paused. "But I do want to know what got him killed. In the journals he left me, one of his hopes was I would continue his legacy. Maybe he meant the Guild but maybe he meant whatever it was he found..."

"Maybe..." Ryan trailed off, his face troubled. "What if your mother knows about this?"
"I don't know." Boyd's eyebrows drew together. The thought was equally troubling to him. "I hadn't even considered that possibility. It seems like she couldn't but I don't know anything anymore when it comes to her..."

"Just be careful if you try to find out," Kassian said. He reached out to squeeze Boyd's shoulder again. "Please promise me you'll be careful. If your father got killed over this, you can too."

"I will be," Boyd promised. He squeezed Kassian's hand in return and then stood.

He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time again. 12:08 am. Just over four hours since he'd left Sin angry in the hotel room. If he stopped home for some food and clothes, he should be able to get back to Annadale by 5 am—6 at the latest.

His fingers tightened on his phone before he returned it to his pocket. "Besides," he added, a grim not-quite-smile crossing his lips when he looked up, "judging by the report my dad's biggest mistake was trusting the wrong people. And since I only trust people like you I should be fine."

"I hope so," Kassian said. His brows drew together, and he seemed reluctant for Boyd to go. "Call me if anything happens."

"I will." Boyd reached for the flash drive but then paused and glanced up at Ryan. "Can I take this? I want to see what else was on it."

Ryan nodded automatically. "Yes, I kept the original though. I always make an extra copy just in case something gets corrupted."

"Good." Boyd grabbed the drive and headed quickly for the door. "Sorry, I have to go. Thank you. I'll let you both know what I find."

He didn't listen for their replies as he rushed out. His mind had already shifted to Sin and what he was going to say when he got back to Annadale.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

It had taken Danny exactly one hour to go from irritated to anxious after Boyd raced out. Danny had paced the hotel room, walked home, and then resumed pacing in his apartment.

Boyd leaving was a source of anxiety in general; Danny never knew when he would see the other man again. It could be days, weeks, or months for all he knew.

Before, the long absences had just served to emphasize that there was something shady about the blond. There was something off about him, something that had put Danny on edge even if he couldn't identify precisely why. Now he knew that Boyd was hiding things and had this whole bizarre covert lifestyle, and not knowing when he would see Boyd again just emphasized how deep he was in it for the kid.

Sometime over the past couple of weeks Danny had tried to figure out when his feelings had shifted from annoyed to infatuated. He'd told himself that it had been that night under the pier; it had been the adrenaline. That was why he'd become completely needy and desperate to get Boyd out of his clothes, blood and murder be damned.

But that night hadn't satisfied the need, and if anything it had gotten more intense. He wanted to fuck Boyd, but he also just wanted to see him, to talk to him, to just be near him, and a few stolen hours here and there weren't satisfying those desires at all.

But this time it was worse. Whatever Boyd had been getting at with all of the questioning, whatever he'd been about to say—it was different than his usual evasion and vagueness.
So Danny had cycled between pissed off and resentful, all the while trying to tell himself that Boyd most likely had a good reason for taking off. He’d told himself that Boyd would be able to explain himself, he’d have answers to all of the questions that continuously crowded Danny’s head after every conversation they had.

It would make sense eventually.

Danny had told himself these things while he glared into space, but there was no denying that Boyd was hiding something from him. It was something important, and it had something to do with why Boyd was so invested in him in the first place.

Trusting Boyd to have his back with the Janus situation was something that had come surprisingly easy, but trusting him to be honest was a different story. A lot of pieces of the puzzle that made up the blond Murphy Corps agent just didn’t fit together, and it was starting to become more obvious.

Boyd had been fishing during the conversation about the nightmares; asking pointed questions, waiting for specific answers... Danny had no idea what he’d been looking for, but it was clear that Boyd was getting at something, and he’d finally been about to say what it was.

All of those things took precedent over Tech and Janus in Danny’s mind. He had a feeling that what Boyd knew had nothing to do with that.

What Boyd knew had something specifically to do with Danny himself.

All of the distrust, resentment and confusion built up until Danny said fuck discretion, and found himself going down to his bike before it even registered that he’d made the decision to go to Lexington.

The unbalanced reality of their friendship, or whatever it was, had made it so Danny had absolutely no qualms about going through Boyd's
messenger bag and wallet. He'd done it the first time they'd spent the night in
the hotel, but had found nothing of interest except for Boyd's various forms of
ID and a tablet computer that he hadn't been able to turn on. But the
Pennsylvania license and residency card had been useful. It had been
surprisingly easy to remember Boyd's address.

It was a long ride, even longer since Danny's bike barely hit 60 mph,
and he didn't make it to the destroyed suburbs around the city until a little after
two in the morning. He zigzagged through debris and broken buildings like it
was an obstacle course, barely enjoying the exhilaration of such a long ride
because of the anxiety that had steadily built the entire time.

His gloved fingers tightened as he steered the bike, eyes narrowed into
slits as the wind whipped his hair back wildly. The anxiety was making him
angry, and the anger was making him reckless. He wanted to go faster; push
the bike until the engine gave out. Because every minute that ticked by felt
like too long, and Danny couldn't shake the feeling that that was important. He
couldn't explain it just like he couldn't explain a lot of the weird feelings that
Boyd brought out.

During the year that he'd lived in Annadale, Danny had started thinking
he could actually be a laidback person. He didn't care about the drama his
friends tried to drag him into, and hadn't ever responded to it. He barely
reacted to conflict until someone took it a couple of steps too far.

Not getting involved had been easy. Keeping his head down had been
easy.

And then Boyd had come along, and everything had changed.

He couldn't keep it cool around Boyd. Everything about the guy evoked
an irrational reaction from Danny. Anger, impatience, suspicion, but also so
much fucking desire that Danny couldn't even explain it. He couldn't begin to
understand why his mind and body reacted to Boyd in such a strong, needy way.

But he couldn’t explain a lot of things about his mind and body anymore, and he didn’t want the parts that responded to Boyd to change. It had felt good to want someone that much, and was nothing like the throwaway relationships and flings that had only grown wearisome after a while.

The bike rolled to a stop once he’d ridden to the center of Lexington. Danny had only been to the city once before, but somehow the name of the neighborhood popped into his head: Lincoln Square. The name of Boyd’s neighborhood also populated in his mind, and Danny rode north-west to Cedar Hills.

It was weird. Weird like the nightmares, and the daydreams, and weird like the way he knew all of the right places to touch Boyd to get him to scream. Weird like the muscle memory that had come with breaking a neck and crushing bones, and his own total lack of reaction to it all.

By the time Danny parked his bike on the curb in front of 508 Magnolia Lane, the tension in his body was almost painful. He threw one long leg over the side of his bike, and yanked his helmet off. The house looked dark, but Boyd’s car was in the driveway.

The house that loomed before Danny was larger than he’d imagined, and the neighborhood was way more residential. Despite that, as soon as Danny touched the gate, a flash of something went through his head that rooted him to the spot.

The same house, the same gate, just as dark as it was now but with the lawn overgrown and a different, black car in the driveway.

Danny’s fingers flexed on the gate, and he stared at it blankly.
It made no sense. He was losing his fucking mind.

His jaw clenched, and he shoved the gate open. Without really knowing why, he began moving silently to the side of the house. The tension spiked as he moved towards the back door but he wrote it off as anticipation. There was nothing remarkable about the backyard, other than that it looked as if it was barely used. Weeds and grass had grown tall which wasn't surprising given how little Boyd even seemed to be home.

There was a dim light above the back door that was surrounded by windows on either side. The curtains within the home were drawn, and even though he couldn't see inside, Danny knew no one was inside. He knocked anyway, and waited for a moment before knocking again. He let two minutes tick by before impatience won over, and tried the doorknob. It opened but instead of feeling relief, wariness began to spread.

Lips curling down into a frown, Danny paused just inside a short hallway.

"Boyd?" he called out.

He let another twenty seconds pass before he shut the door behind him quietly, and moved further into the house. The kitchen stood directly opposite from where he stood, with a hallway to his left and a dark, open space to his right.

Something felt wrong about the situation, but Danny couldn't figure out what it was. He stood in the kitchen and looked around but there were no signs that anyone had been there recently except for a bottle of water that sat unopened on the counter. The kitchen lacked any real personal touches except for a couple of colorful pieces of mail that had been stuck to the refrigerator. A closer look allowed him to see that one was a menu from a
diner in the neighborhood, and the other was obviously some kind of junk mail. The envelope was addressed to Kassian Trovosky.

Reaching out, Danny dragged his fingers along the envelope and hesitated just briefly before removing it from the fridge. Even if Boyd didn't think he needed a contact person in case something happened with Janus, Danny wanted one. And apparently this Kassian person was a close friend. Something about that rubbed Danny the wrong way, and he couldn't do more than attribute it to his continuing, ridiculous dreams.

Tucking the envelope into his back pocket, Danny moved back to the hallway. He ignored the dark living room, and moved further down the hallway. He skipped the bathroom, and stopped just inside the doorway of what looked like an office. A cursory glance turned up an ancient-looking computer, some dusty shelves, and a lot of books. The computer was tempting, but Danny turned away and continued down the hallway.

"Boyd?"

The call received no answer, but by that point Danny was positive that he was alone in the house. Chemical imbalances and anxiety aside, there were some things that Danny was certain of about himself, and he knew without a doubt that sometime in the past he'd allowed himself to be Modified.

The traumatic brain injury that he'd gotten during the bombings had fucked up his head. There were grey areas in his memory now from the occasions when he'd drifted in and out of fugue states. It was undeniable that during one of those episodes he'd allowed himself to be illegally enhanced. He didn't remember when or why but it was the only explanation for the things he could do. If someone had been in the house, he knew that he would have been able to hear the nuances of their breathing, muffled footfalls, or the faint shifting of a bed.
Frowning, Danny went to the end of the hall and entered what appeared to be a master bedroom. It was fully furnished but the room had a strange, musty smell to it and the surfaces were covered in a sheen of dust. Danny frowned, and shook his head as he backed out of the room.

What the fuck, did Boyd never go in certain rooms in his own house?

He'd almost decided to bypass the room next to the bathroom and find the stairs that led up, but Danny stopped just as he started to walk by. There was another flash of something unexplainable, and Danny closed his eyes briefly with his hands braced against the frame of the door. Deja vu hit him hard, and for a second Danny was sure that he'd been here before.

Here in the doorway to this room with shadows cast along the floor and the bed.

Anxiety was mixing with a strange sense of dread, but Danny shook it off and opened his eyes. The bedroom before him without a doubt belonged to Boyd. The bed was made, but not perfectly. There were clothes discarded, and an open duffel bag sat on the floor next to a closet. A pair of black boots were sticking out of the closet, and a black trench coat hung off the back of the doorknob.

Danny stood in the middle of the room and rolled his shoulders absently. This was Boyd's room. This was where he slept. These were his random personal belongings scattered around here and there. It felt wrong being there without Boyd, but Danny's moral compass didn't torment him for too long. He knew nothing about Boyd, and sometimes it seemed that Boyd wanted it that way despite being so involved in Danny's life.

Pushing aside the momentary discomfort, he saw a laptop sitting on an end table and some art supplies on top of a chest of drawers. The sketchpad that he'd watched Boyd hunch over in the diner was stacked with several
others, half hidden by other supplies and a blank canvas propped against it. It didn’t seem like many people might have noticed it but Danny spotted it immediately, something familiar in an unfamiliar place, and automatically gravitated toward it.

The pictures of Annadale didn’t surprise him, but the quality of the art did. Part of Danny had always wondered if the quiet artist thing had been nothing more than a front so that Boyd had an excuse to sit in the diner for hours and spy on him.

Even if it was a front, at least the kid actually had talent.

Danny began flipping through sketches of the beach, the diner, and several of Danny himself. He paused on them, eyes narrowing slightly at the detail and care put into each drawing. One long finger dragged across the page slowly to circle the date that was scrawled in the corner. There were drawings of him that dated back as far as early summer. There were sketches in different media like charcoal, pencil, pen, a few watercolors, and although there were drawings of other diner customers and even Roz, the majority of them were of Danny.

He skimmed through the sketches of the college’s campus before shutting the book. He stared down at it for a long moment, fingers pressed into the cover. There was something about the sketches that put him on edge. The idea of Boyd watching him for that long, before they'd even really talked much, and intently enough to draw so much.

Wetting his lips nervously, Danny focused on the next sketchbook and opened it. Once again, his own face stared back at him. The hair was different, shorter, and the angles of his face were sharper but it was a nearly perfect rendition of him. It was another pencil sketch done at an angle that focused on his sleeping face.
"What the fuck..."

Dark brows snapping together, Danny shifted and began flipping through the sketchbook faster. The sound of him exhaling shakily filled the room, and Danny shoved the sketchbook out of the way before grabbing another. It was more of the same, and his movements became sharper and more violent as he turned the pages.

Sketches of him in a kitchen, smoking in some kind of alley, looking off into space, of his hands, him with tattoos on his arms and fingers with a sharp, roguish smile. Danny’s breath was coming faster as confusion took over completely, and it just got worse when he finally started looking at the other people Boyd had drawn.

There were people who sparked a sharp recognition in Danny: a man wearing a button-down shirt and a wearied expression, a younger looking guy with unruly black curls, and another man with short golden hair and clear, blue eyes. Danny froze when he saw that one, because it was the man who had been in several of his dreams; the man who had popped into his head the first time Boyd had said the name Kassian.

Danny’s eyes jerked to the corner of the page. It was dated in the late winter of 2022. Chest tight and hands starting to become unsteady, Danny flipped back to the pictures of him. They were also dated 2022. The third book’s sketches were dated 2020. Four years ago.

He dropped them as if they burned, and backed away from the dresser. He stood that way for a long moment before exploding into motion again.

It didn't require a second thought for Danny to start ransacking the room. He pawed through drawers, the closet, Boyd's duffel bag and the pockets of his pants. He didn't come up with much until he jerked open the
narrow drawers in the end tables. The one to the right of the bed was clearly
dedicated to sex. Condoms, lubricant, two different kinds of vibrators—

"Oh god!" Boyd's voice cracked on the last word, and he canted his
hips up. He was covered in sweat and come, golden eyes wild and expression
strained as he threw his head back with a strangled moan.

For the third time that night, Danny froze in place as the mental image
flashed through his mind and disappeared as quickly without context. It was
so vivid and startling that it took him longer to shake it off this time.

The table didn't have anything else of value, so Danny impatiently
moved to the next. This one had random papers and envelopes, pens and a
flash drive that Danny immediately pocketed. There were several Journalist
Guild magazines stuffed inside as well. He'd nearly shut the drawer again
when he noticed something sticking out from beneath the magazines.

Pictures.

Any traces of uncertainty in his growing suspicions were dispelled.
There was no more fucking doubt.

The pictures were of Danny, of them together. Not many, but enough to
make it real. Danny stared at his own face, so familiar but yet so different.
Thinner, schooled into a stoic expression, eyes narrowed, hair shorter, and
looking pissed off that he was caught off guard in a picture.

Danny stared at it, and moved to the next. One of himself stretched out
on a swinging bench somewhere with sunlight streaming down on him. The
last was the only one of he and Boyd together, the camera too close to their
faces as Boyd likely took the shot. Boyd was grinning mischievously against
the side of Danny's face as he glowered at the camera.

No, there was no more doubt. They'd known each other.
Danny stared down at the pictures as fragments of pieces melded together in his mind.

Somehow, somewhere, they'd known each other, and he didn't remember. There were so many things that were blurry and confused about his past, but this was certain.

They knew each other, and Boyd hadn't told him.

The anger came fast, and his fist was crashing into the wall before he could stop himself. It caved in under his fist, creating a hole in the plaster but this time he didn't care. He didn't give a fuck. If Boyd had been here, Danny was almost positive it was his face that would have been on the receiving end of the punch.

"Motherfucker," Danny hissed.

He looked around before grabbing an empty backpack from the closet. He shoved the pictures inside, some of the sketchbooks, and the laptop.

His feet moved silently as he left the hallway, and headed out to what he assumed was the living room. Not bothering with the light, Danny started to the staircase on the opposite side of the room but stopped when something crunched under his feet. Eyebrows drawing together, Danny paused and looked down. There was the faint glimmer of glass on the carpet, and he felt along the wall to flip a light switch.

Danny froze with his hand on the wall, eyes focused on the scene in front of him.

The room was destroyed. Broken lamps and shelving, toppled furniture, blood splattered across the wall and pooled on the floor in different spots. Discarded casings on the floor. The curtains were ripped, partially pulled down in one area with a smear of blood. There were so many broken
items that he could only pick out a few recognizable items amongst the wreckage: Boyd's cell phone which was crushed, the gun he'd always carried discarded by the wall, and a photo album that had been flung open with the pages askew.

Traces of the fight were all over the room, but the bloody handprint smeared on the floor by a pool of blood and another skidding down the door made Danny's heart seize in his chest.

Anger and betrayal forgotten, he turned and sprinted up the stairs. A mental picture flashed in his mind: Boyd dead somewhere in the house. Golden eyes open and staring blankly, body abused and covered in blood, fingers lax.

He shoved open the doors in the upstairs but only found a couple of empty guest rooms. No signs of life, no signs of a fight. It had all gone down near the front door.

Boyd wasn't dead, he'd been taken by someone. The knowledge didn't exactly bring relief, but some of the panic dissipated and Danny felt steadier. If someone had taken Boyd, that meant they had use for him alive. It had to be. When Janus had come for Danny, they'd planned to shoot him right there on the beach.

Unless it wasn't Janus.

Danny paused toward the bottom of the stairs, and stared at the blood again. He had no idea if it was Janus. He had no idea what else Boyd was mixed up in. He had no idea where to start. The racing of his pulse matched his breathing, and Danny jerked the envelope out of his back pocket. Before he could focus on the address, a sudden, faint sound filled the house.

Beeping.
It could have been anything. It could have been a timer on something, but it triggered an automatic reaction in Danny. He leapt down the rest of the stairs and sprinted through the house, stopping only to grab the photo album and gun from the living room before he ran out the back door. He'd just thrown himself over a gate into a neighboring yard when flames exploded from Boyd's house.

The explosion sent a shockwave through the house and yard that sent debris flying. Glass shattered, and there were pops and booms as the flames grew wilder. The backyard was cast in the orange glow of the fire, heat warmed his skin, and the light danced across his face as he stared.

_He wasn't inside_, Danny told himself as he forced himself to turn away. _He wasn't inside._

He repeated the mantra as he ran to the front of the house and grabbed his bike. He hopped on it, and quickly zipped down the street as shouts of alarm filled the neighborhood and, soon afterward, sirens sounded in the distance. He only went two blocks before stopping the bike, and getting off again. His hands were still shaking when he looked at the envelope that had crumpled in his hand.

Danny forced himself to calm his labored breathing, to close his eyes and try to still his hands, but horrible images kept filling his mind.

Boyd lifeless, lips blue, blond hair red with blood, body cast aside somewhere. Dead and mutilated.

Squeezing his eyes shut tighter, Danny shook his head. No. There was no fucking way. They wouldn't leave the house a mess of evidence and then dispose of the body. It made no sense. But then blowing up his fucking house made no sense either, unless they wanted to get rid of the evidence they'd left. But then why take Boyd at all? Why not leave him there to burn?
Danny exhaled evenly several times as fire trucks screamed past him on the street. He forced himself to leave the bike and turn onto Fifth Avenue again.

Boyd was alive. He'd fought them hard, and they'd still taken him, and that only made sense if they wanted him alive.

It was 3:32 in the morning, and Danny didn't give a shit. He opened the gate to the big house at 524 Harkey Street and didn't even hesitate before ringing the bell. The house was dark, silent, but there was a truck and a motorcycle in the driveway. No one came to the door and Danny rang the bell again.

He looked over his shoulder, and he could see the clouds of smoke in the sky five blocks over. Judging by the intensity of the flames and the power of the explosion, by now Boyd's house would be nothing but a burning shell.

The knowledge made his stomach clench, and he didn't know why. It shouldn't matter to him. Boyd was alive. The house wasn't important. But the sinking feeling still didn't go away.

The sound of footsteps on the other side of the door filled Danny's ears, and he looked at the house. There was the creak of steps, a louder shuffle of footsteps, and Danny looked over his shoulder toward the smoke again. He wondered if anyone had seen him leave Magnolia Lane.

Locks clicked behind him after a brief pause, and the door jerked open.

"You have the wrong house, ma—"

Danny turned around to focus on the tall, blond in front of him and the words died in the man's throat. The clear blue eyes widened, mouth dropped open, and the guy actually leaned away from Danny in alarm. He looked
exactly as he had in Boyd's sketches, and in those stupid dreams. Same face, same eyes, same tattoos.

"You know Boyd, right?"

Kassian stared at him, and shook his head but it didn't seem like he was answering the question. He raised a hand and pressed it against his eyes, before dropping it and gaping again.

Impatience ripped through Danny and he fought the urge to shake the guy. "Do you know Boyd?"

"What—I—what the fuck is this?"

"What the fuck is what? I know it's late but something happened and I'm looking for someone he knows," Danny said in frustration. He looked over his shoulder again before turning to meet Kassian's eyes. The guy was still staring at him as if he was from Mars.

"You're not. No." Kassian shook his head, looking resolute in whatever he was thinking. "This is either a fever dream, or I'm drunk. Or you're a fucking clone or a twin, which is possible. Because this is fucking insane."

Danny's eyes narrowed at the rambling. "Get it fucking together, Trovosky. I don't have time for this shit."

Kassian's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Vega? What the fuck?"

"What the hell are you—"

A strong hand gripped Danny's forearm and hauled him inside of the house. The door slammed behind him, the locks clicked into place, and Kassian rounded on him incredulously. The guy was acting strangely, and Danny had no idea how to handle it. One part of him wanted to beat the shit
out of Kassian for being useless but the other part of him was trying to figure out how he was even going to explain.

"Sin, how are you alive? I don't—" Kassian stared at him, eyebrows drawing together. He broke off again, and reached out to rest a hand on Danny's shoulder. He did it hesitantly as if waiting for Danny to recoil, and when Danny just stared at him with a puzzled expression on his face, Kassian shook his head again.

"Lift your shirt up."

Danny did recoil this time, and he shoved Kassian's hand away. "What? No. What the hell are you talking about?"

Kassian grabbed his forearm again, jerking him closer. "If you want me to fucking deal with this freak show, you better do it."

Confused and aggravated, Danny jerked his shirt up so that Kassian could apparently inspect him. Hesitant fingers traced the scars on his abdomen and torso, and Danny dropped the hem when Kassian released a long, shaky exhale.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Vega, how are you alive? Does Boyd know? How are you—where have you been?"

Danny's brows snapped together and he threw his hands up in frustration. "I have no idea what the hell you're talking about! I only came here because Boyd said you were a close friend and I found your address. I needed someone he trusts and—"

"Wait, what? You—" For what seemed like the hundredth time, Kassian broke off in the middle of a sentence. "You asked me if I knew Boyd. And you don't... Wow. Wow."
"What?" Danny practically shouted. The urge to punch Kassian was getting stronger. "Wow, what? You clearly know something I don't fucking know, and there's a lot of that going around lately, so please just fucking tell me WHAT. Who the hell is Vega, and why do you people know me?"

"I—" Kassian licked his lips, and ran his hands over his short hair. "You don't remember either of us." He stopped again and took a deep breath, clearly trying to gather his wits. "Who do you think—what's your name?"

"Danny."

"Where do you live?"

Danny's hands twitched, but he answered anyway. "Annadale Beach."

"For how long?"

"What does this have to do with—"

"Just answer!" Kassian snapped, grabbing Danny again.

"Since last spring. Like... May 2023."

"Oh my fucking God."

The alarm that Kassian was clearly feeling was starting to seep into Danny, and the panic he already felt because of Boyd heightened. This time it was he who grabbed Kassian, and his fingers dug into the man's skin hard.

"Please just tell me what's going on," Danny said, not bothering to hide the desperation in his voice. "Boyd's in trouble, and I have no idea what the fuck is going on with anything."

The words snapped the man out of his daze, and Kassian's eyes narrowed. "What kind of trouble?"

"It's bad. Someone... abducted him and blew up his house."
Kassian froze, and his own hands rose to clamp down on Danny's forearms. "Are you—"

"Yes, I'm fucking serious! He's in trouble, damn you."

The blond man's lips parted but no sound came out at first. Then he narrowed his eyes, and nodded shortly. "Tell me everything. Don't leave out a detail."

The next half hour was spent retelling the story of what had happened since Danny had rode into Lexington three times. He and Kassian went back to Magnolia and stared at the smoking remains of Boyd's charred, hollowed out house, blending into the crowd of onlookers and emergency personnel still in the area, before returning to Harkey Street where Kassian questioned him all over again. They hadn't been able to get close enough to see if there was any evidence anywhere left on the property, and Kassian told him that Boyd had had a surveillance system but it streamed and uploaded to a computer that was now destroyed.

Neither of them calmed enough to sit down until Kassian came to the same conclusion that Danny had: whoever had taken Boyd had definitely wanted him alive.

It was 4:29AM, and they were sitting at the island in Kassian's kitchen as he poured them both a drink. Kassian mumbled something about 'fuck sobriety,' and they both drank in tense silence for several minutes.

"What do we do now?" Danny asked after the second tumbler of Jack Daniels burned down his throat. "How do we find him?"

"I have to contact the Agency," Kassian said. He frowned and looked at Danny. "They probably already know. They have to already know. I need to find out what the hell they're going to do about him, but there's a problem."
"What?"

"You."

Danny stared at him, and frowned. "I'm missing a fuck ton of information, Kassian. I'm missing so much information that I don't even know what to make of all of this. I just know that I need to find Boyd."

Kassian nodded slowly, still staring. Then he poured himself another drink, and slid off the stool. "I'm going to make a call. And then... I'll explain everything."

When Kassian padded out of the room, it only then occurred to Danny that he was still wearing the backpack. He slid it off one shoulder as Kassian's footsteps disappeared upstairs. The faint sound of numbers on a cell phone dialing reached Danny's ears, but he was too weary to try to hear anything else.

He unzipped the backpack instead, and took the photo album out. There was a slight surge of disappointment that none of the pictures were of he and Boyd; a drastic difference from Danny's earlier reaction. He tucked it away carefully behind the gun, and took out the three photographs he had found in the drawer.

Danny stared at the image of he and Boyd. Nothing could be seen except for their faces and the tops of their shoulders, and judging from the flush of Boyd's skin it was easy to figure out that they were likely naked. The grip Boyd had on him in the picture was easy, possessive, and despite the glare on Danny's face his lips had turned up subtly into a half-smirk.

Danny looked at the picture until his brain unconsciously picked up on the end of a conversation and returning footsteps. Only then did he put the picture away, not ready to share it with anyone else just yet.
"So what's happening?" he asked tiredly.

"I couldn't get in touch with my first two choices," Kassian said wearily. He sat back on the stool and poured himself another drink. "But I spoke to the third."

"And?"

"And... she'll be here in the next few hours. The Agency knows about Boyd and she won't be able to get away for awhile."

Danny nodded, and slumped forward on the counter. He braced his head against an open palm, and combed his fingers through his hair. Even if he didn't know what to do, maybe they would. Murphy Corps or the Agency or what the hell ever it was that Boyd was involved in.

"Why do you know me?"

"Before I answer you, I think it would be easier if you filled me in on what you do know."

"Sounds fair."

A half-laugh, half-scoff escaped Kassian's mouth as he tilted his drink back against his mouth. "You really must not remember me."

"Why do you say that?"

Kassian thumped the glass down to the counter and hiked his eyebrows up. "Because you would never say that to me if you did. We get along now, but we have an... interesting relationship."

Danny just shook his head, too drained to question that at the moment, and launched into the whole, confusing tale. He told Kassian about the girl's murder, Boyd's appearance in Annadale and the weird way he'd acted when they first met. He told him about Boyd becoming a regular, going out of his
way to make a connection with Danny, and all of the suspicions and weirdness that had followed. He talked about Janus, the killings, and Boyd's vow that he would explain everything. He summed it up, leaving out the sex and their connection, and then watched Kassian expectantly.

The man looked paler after all of it was said and done, and his expression was grim. But he nodded anyway, and stared directly into Danny's eyes.

"Murphy Corps is a cover for the place where me and Boyd actually work. It's... there's no other way to explain it, really, except that it's an underground organization that carries out the kind of assignments that the government can't officially get involved with. It's a secret from almost everyone except the people involved, and Murphy Corps is a front for it."

Another lie.

"And you work there too."

Danny shook his head. "No."

Kassian leaned forward, and once again put a hand on Danny's arm. "Yes. You do. Or you did. But you got on the bad side of the people in charge and we were told that they had terminated you. Me and everyone else thought you were dead for the past year and a half. Boyd less than that, obviously."

"That doesn't make any sense. Then what about..." Danny trailed off, staring at Kassian. "Are you drunk, or what? Because that seriously doesn't make any sense."

"Believe me, Vega. It takes a long time for me to get drunk. And that's another thing." Kassian knocked back another drink. "You're name isn't Danny, it's Hsin Vega. Everyone calls you Sin because they can't pronounce your name."
Danny opened his mouth to deny this yet again, because he was getting frustrated and annoyed, but Kassian just kept going on. "Listen, I know this sounds crazy but how is it any less fucking crazy than everything else you just told me? You were supposed to be terminated but they did something else to you instead. Wiped your memory, replaced your memories, shit dude, I have no idea. But you are Hsin Vega, and you and I have hated each other since you were just a punk ass eighteen year old, and you've been in this... dramatic, and fucking intense relationship with Boyd off and on for the past four or five years."

"That's insane."

Shaking his head, Danny stood up and began to pace the kitchen. He clenched and unclenched his hands, trying to remember the month before he moved to Annadale. It was after one of his weird prolonged blackouts, the fugue episodes his doctor had told him about—temporary dissociation and amnesia. It was why he didn't remember so many things from his past, since the war.

It was what they had said. His doctor.

The first thing Danny remembered after one of the "episodes" was feeling drained and confused and coming out of it in a dingy apartment building in DC. It had taken a couple of weeks to snap out of it, and the first person who'd contacted him had been his doctor.

Dr. Stein.

It was Dr. Stein who had encouraged him to move somewhere more peaceful, somewhere that wouldn't stress him enough to go into the dissociative states so frequently. Somewhere he could actually form relationships, and finally have a life.
And somehow Danny had been able to do so in Annadale. Somehow, he'd never had an episode again despite the fact that his memory was littered with missing spots and confusing muddled images. He remembered violence, lots of doctors, being locked away, and pain. Fragments here and there, all scattered and having to be pieced together like a puzzle with missing parts.

As Danny digested what Kassian was telling him, and as he stared into that sympathetic face, he realized that the dreams and nightmares and flashes were those missing parts.

"Why would they do that?" he asked woodenly. His gaze fell away and he stared at the floor.

"I don't know, man. You're like..." Kassian trailed off, frowning. "You're like this incredibly fucking strong, incredibly resilient science project for them. You can handle so much mentally and physically that they fucking just won't let you go."

"And that's why I'm Modified."

Kassian gestured vaguely, seeming at a loss.

Danny wiped a hand across his face. "I want proof. Show me something. Anything. You're telling me all of this stuff but it's... It's fucking fried."

"I don't have any proof," Kassian said. He stood as well, hovering near Danny and watching him intently. The way the taller man was pacing seemed to be putting Kassian on edge. "Hey man, I hate to be this way but before you left you were on a bunch of medication. Are you still on it? I don't think mental problems disappear like that, and right now I can't deal with you having a meltdown and beating the shit out of me."
Taken aback, Danny stopped pacing and gave Kassian a surprised look. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you're... Because the Vega I know likes breaking faces when he gets mad," Kassian corrected himself. "You're oddly nice, and it's alarming. But answer the question anyway."

"What was I on medication for?"

Kassian shrugged, and took a moment to reply. "I'm not sure. I know one thing was psychotic depression, but you also were diagnosed with a dissociative disorder that I don't remember."

It was getting to be too much, and Danny turned away from the intrusive stare. Dr. Stein had mentioned psychotic depression, and had attributed the nightmares and insomnia to it before upping his anxiety dosage.

"Let's just focus on Boyd," he said finally, voice grating out low.

"Soon," Kassian said. "And... And one thing I know is that he's a survivor. He's strong. He'll make it through whatever this is."

There was barely any hesitation before Danny said softly, "I know. I don't know how, but I know."

The sky was starting to lighten when Kassian showed Danny to a guest room and told him to try to lay down for the hour or two they had before things got more intense. To Kassian's credit, he didn't seem capable of going back to sleep. He looked as strung out as Danny felt about Boyd, and long after the door to the bedroom shut, Danny could hear the other man pacing the house.

He was worried about Boyd. The thought was comforting.

But Danny couldn't sleep. Sleep would bring nightmares about Boyd being dead or tortured, and his mind kept churning and made it impossible to
even try. He took out the pictures, and the sketchbooks again and tried to work out memories from the flashes he’d seen over the past few weeks.

Somehow he knew the picture of him on the bench was from a cabin in the forest somewhere. The sketches were harder, but there were clues that sparked something here and there. Recurring themes that popped into his mind were Mexico, Boyd's house, and missions.

Missions.

He put the pictures and sketches away and took out the laptop. It was lightweight and relatively small, and blinked on nearly instantly. It asked for a password and Danny's fingers moved over the keyboard before he even stopped to puzzle it out. @04vEr19m0nt.

At this point, he wasn't even surprised.

What he found on the laptop changed that. Amongst the random files, he found a folder that simply said "Hsin." Danny stared at it for a long moment before finally clicking. It contained background information about Hsin Liu Vega. Videos, pictures, evaluations. Sexual abuse, torture, violent episodes, and so much fucking death.

Danny spent the next two hours learning why killing three men had felt normal.

By the time the woman arrived, Danny's head felt like it was going to explode. But somehow after reading about himself, about... his life, if it could be called that, all he felt was numb.

Killer, animal, and, according to Kassian, science project. That's what he was. That's what he'd been.

He wished the fucking laptop had burned in the house.
When Danny went downstairs he found Kassian standing in his kitchen with a woman who looked like she belonged in a fashion magazine. She was blond and beautiful, but her expression was frozen. She looked over when he walked into the room and she suddenly went very still. Danny saw a brief flicker of her eyes widening subtly before they narrowed, and the aborted flexing of her fingers.

She stared at him, and he stared at her.

"Hello," he said finally, dully.

Kassian just looked awkward, and stood next to the counter uncertainly.

The woman didn't speak but he saw her lips pinch. Her stare was like a force all on its own; utterly unreadable and burning into him like she could see through him.

She strode up to him and without saying a word she gripped the collar of his shirt and pulled down. Danny didn't react; apparently the scars that marred him were some kind of proof of his identity and he didn't care enough anymore to be offended by it. Her eyes narrowed further at what she saw at his throat before her hands shifted to the hem of his shirt and lifted up. Her knuckles briefly went white on the shirt before she dropped it and rounded on Kassian with blue eyes even colder than before.

"What is this?" she demanded.

"That's what I started to tell you," Kassian said with a slight frown. He shot Danny a look that was almost apologetic. "It turns out that Seong never had him killed. They wiped his memory and shipped him off to Annadale for some new experiment but... he and Boyd somehow found each other anyway. He still doesn't remember anything."
She turned to Danny once again, narrowed eyes turning slightly challenging. "If you are or were Hsin Liu Vega, then answer me this: what do you think of Boyd?"

Danny shrugged, and met her stare evenly. He paused only briefly before saying: "He's the most frustrating person I've ever met, but for some reason I can't get him out of my head and I don't want to."

She didn't look away for a long moment and although he couldn't read anything in her expression, he did notice a slight thinning of her lips, and the force of her stare relented subtly.

She turned her gaze on Kassian again. "The Marshal will not authorize a search."

"What?" Kassian straightened, hands pressing down against the counter. "How can that be? He's one of a fucking handful of level 10 agents we have."

"Yes, however she had planned to terminate him the moment she took office. It was only due to his successes in the Forakis mission and that he has been above reproach on all missions since that he was given a chance."

Her lips curled down in clear contempt. "She was clear on the point that she had informed him that should he ever cause her a moment of trouble, she would terminate him. She considers expending any energy on retrieving him to fall within this category. In addition, because she feels I am biased she ignored any arguments I made in his favor and stated in no uncertain terms that henceforth I should consider my son dead."

Kassian stared at her in dumbfounded silence but Danny took a step forward, and looked from Kassian to the woman. "Well to hell with this Marshal. Can't we look for him ourselves?"
She glanced over at Danny in assessment, then shifted her eyes to
look him up and down. "Are you as mentally stable as you appear to be or
would you be a detriment on such a mission?"

"Considering I took out three Janus people a couple of weeks ago, and
I'm modified in multiple ways, I think I can handle myself," Danny replied. He
focused on her briefly before looking at Kassian as he swallowed some of the
irritation that rushed forward. Apparently condescending bullshit ran in Boyd's
family, although this woman was a lot more direct about it.

She waved a hand dismissively. "Your physical prowess has never
been a question, it is your emotional. In the past, you have acted psychotically
when emotionally unbalanced, and my son's presence has helped immensely
at times and at other times has proven to be catastrophic. As I have no
knowledge of your current status, I am inquiring whether you feel any vestigial
emotions you may have for him might be a danger to yourself or others during
the course of searching for him. Particularly if you do find him and all that is
left is a mutilated body."

"Lady, I don't even know what you just said."

Kassian cleared his throat, and walked over to move closer to Danny.
"He's fine, Vivienne. He was clear-headed and resourceful enough to escape
the bomb and track down a contact person after seeing the scene of the
attack, and apparently... it was pretty bad. Sin—Danny, whatever, has been
calmer than me almost this entire time."

Vivienne's eyebrow ticked up faintly at that. She eyed Danny again and
then nodded curtly. "Very well." She addressed Kassian again. "It was my
plan to suggest a covert search for him. Hsin Vega would be an asset on such
a mission. I will also inform Zachary and Emilio Vega. Discuss with Emilio
whether he wishes to join."
Danny's straightened at the name Emilio Vega, and his eyebrows drew together.

"I'll... explain later," Kassian told him quickly before nodding at Vivienne. There was a brief pause before he rolled his shoulders, and exhaled slowly. "Inspector, there's something else. Something you need to know."

She had been about ready to leave but paused at his words. "Yes?"

Kassian's hands balled into fists. He looked uncertain about what he was about to say, but eventually went on anyway. "It's possible that it wasn't just Janus that was after Boyd. He found out something today, and I doubt that he compromised the information but you should know—He found out something about your husband. Something to do with the Journalist Guild, and the Agency. And it may have made him a target."

Vivienne stared at him. "Your statement is incomprehensible. What does Cedrick have to do with the Guild? And what relation does this have to Boyd being targeted?"

"Cedrick was in the Journalist Guild, and he found out something about the Agency." Kassian paused, and glanced at Danny's baffled face before focusing on Vivienne again. "The Agency had him killed for whatever it was. Boyd just found out about this today."

For the second time that night, Vivienne went completely still. What little expression had been on her face closed off completely. There was a long, tense silence before she stated icily, "No. This is not true. He was mistaken."

"No, he wasn't," Kassian said sharply. "He did something crazy and got hold of the data. Ryan spent weeks decoding it because it was so heavily encrypted. I made Boyd promise he wouldn't do something crazier to find out
whatever had gotten his father targeted, but right after he left... all of this happened. I don't know if it's related, but it could be."

Her face was like stone as she straightened to her full height. "If you have such data then I require to see it as well," she replied equally sharply, a forcefulness in her tone that hadn't been there previously. "I searched—"

She stopped, looked at Danny and then Kassian, and turned her back abruptly on the both of them. When she spoke again, it was as coldly aloof as she had spoken before. "I will consider involvement from all angles, including the Guild and the Agency. Speak of this theory to no one else and provide me the proof you claim exists. If Zachary or Emilio do not contact you, I will. That will be all."

She strode out of Kassian's house without waiting for a response. The door shut firmly behind her.

Danny looked at Kassian blankly, and couldn't even work up enough energy to care about any of these damn people to ask what that had all been about. Despite that, the blond man tiredly reassured him that he'd explain everything later.

But if it couldn't lead him to Boyd, Danny didn't even care.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was the second time that Kassian was hiding Sin in his house, but this time it was more disturbing. The Agency wasn't actively hunting the man down, he wasn't on the verge of death and in need of medical support, and Kassian wasn't strung out the entire time, but it was disturbing nonetheless. This new version of Sin was completely different, but somehow Kassian still couldn't get used to thinking of him as Danny.

This Sin was quiet and thoughtful, he brooded but without the menacing glare, he apologized and said thank you, and he didn't even attempt to hide his worry and fear for Boyd. This Sin actually took the time to explain what he was thinking, and that was completely unexpected and bizarre.

It was two days since Boyd's disappearance and they'd already fallen into a routine. After the first false blip of hope from Ryan and Vivienne tracing the GPS on Boyd's second cell phone, tense silences were common and frequent. After the trace had led to nothing more than the phone itself and no sign of Boyd, they both waited in anticipation for a new lead.

When one of them started going too stir crazy, the other would break the silence. When Sin's constant pacing began to put Kassian on edge, the other man stopped. And when the pounding bass of Kassian's music started to amp up Sin's adrenaline and restlessness, Kassian would cut it off without having to be asked.

It was weird, but weirdly comforting to have someone else around. So many terrible things had happened in the past few years that Kassian almost felt numb to the situation now. However, the stress still caused him to pick up the bottle almost as easily as if he'd never stopped drinking. Being helpless when a friend was in danger was something that would never become easier.
to cope with, and he was in need of a distraction. Drinking was the distraction he fell back on just as he had in the past.

It had been the same when Leighton died, but he still felt more together now than he had back then. When she died, he'd almost completely lost control. Now he drank, but he was still functional, still planning, and still trying to figure out what their next move could be. He defaulted to mission mode because it was easier to think about things with that mindset. It also helped that he and Sin reminded each other constantly that Boyd wasn't dead. It didn't make sense for him to be dead. They wouldn't have bothered to take him at all if they just wanted him dead.

There were so many unknowns in the situation that it was driving Kassian insane. There had been complete radio silence from Vivienne on the subject of Sin. Kassian had no idea whether Carhart or Emilio even knew since neither man had returned his calls, and he also didn't know if it was safe to tell Ryan yet.

"Do you ever sleep?" Kassian asked as he watched Sin mechanically chew a stale bagel.

"No. But neither do you."

Raising one shoulder in a shrug, Kassian took a long sip from his coffee. "You pace the whole night, man. How do you know I'm up?"

"If I tell you, you'll think I'm weirder than you already think I am," Sin said dryly. He shoved the plate away from him and hunched forward on the counter.

"I already think you're pretty weird, Vega."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."
Sin's lips twitched up slightly, and Kassian shook his head. He didn't think he'd ever get used to this easy companionship they had going, but it wasn't bad.

"Do you want me to try to call you Danny? I mean I can, but it's weird."

"You don't have to. It's not even a real name so what's the point?"

"Does Boyd call you Danny?"

Sin nodded, but at the mention of Boyd he began fidgeting. His hands went back to the plate, and he began slowly ripping the remainder of his bagel apart. "He did but now that I think back, I can tell he would slip sometimes. Like when he first met me, and... other times."

Kassian watched the other man for a moment, taking in the unhappy, downturned lips and miserable, green eyes. "Are you two... together? I know you were before you disappeared but, are you now?"

The question seemed to snap Sin out of whatever depressed fog he'd started to slip into, because suddenly those eyes rose to meet Kassian's with the hawk-like intensity that was incredibly familiar. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. No need to get tense."

"Uh huh." Sin brushed the crumbs from his hands, and studied Kassian. "Why did you say that we don't like each other, again?"

Lips twitching, Kassian picked up his coffee cup. "I didn't say."

"So say now," Sin suggested.

It was one of those moments where Kassian was blown away by how such a subtle thing, the simple intonation of a three word sentence, could show the drastic difference between this Sin and the old Sin. The old Sin would have said it like a command, and with a lot less patience.
"Well..." Kassian said slowly, pausing with the cup against his mouth. "We never really got along because you're typically a mean bastard, but then you and Boyd broke up, and I started sleeping with him."

Sin nodded, somehow lacking any sort of surprise as he kept watching Kassian neutrally. "Did we ever have a threesome?"

Kassian nearly choked on the coffee he'd just swallowed, and spit it back into the cup. He coughed violently, wincing and set it down on the counter. After he was finished embarrassing himself thoroughly, he shot Sin an incredulous stare.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Threesome." Sin shrugged, although for the first time since that first night, his mouth twisted up into an actual amused, half-smile. "I told you I had strange dreams a lot, and most of them seem to be actual memories. So I was wondering if that one was."

"You had a dream that we had a threesome?"

"Yeah. We were—" Sin stopped, and shook his head. "Well, you don't need to know the details."

"Maybe I want to know them."

"That's why you don't need to know them." The look Sin shot Kassian wasn't exactly warning, but it was getting there. "I was asking, not inviting you to have one."

Kassian shrugged, and stood up. He drained his coffee cup in the sink and went to pour himself a fresh one. "I should have just said yes. I've always wondered what it would be like to fuck you."

"Well, keep wondering, buddy."
A quiet chuckle escaped Kassian, and he reseated himself across from Sin. The amusement had already faded, and the destruction of the bagel had resumed.

"I can't keep waiting like this," Sin said after the silence stretched longer. "I'm going to go fucking insane. You people are supposed to be amazing and resourceful—why isn't anyone doing anything? Where the fuck is his mother? Or these other people you told me about?"

"Your father?" Kassian asked, arching a brow.

Sin frowned, somehow seeming doubtful that such a person existed. "Who the hell ever, man. Where are they? Anything could be happening to him right now, and I can't even actively do anything but fucking sit here. What good is being Modified and having all of these skills if I can't use them? I can't even help research anything because I'm supposed to be dead."

The words were familiar, and the sentiment wasn't much different than how Kassian had felt when his sister had gone missing. Being attached to one of the most powerful organizations in the world, and somehow still being unable to find his sister or her killer, had driven him nearly insane. He'd drunk himself into a fucking black hole that Ryan had managed to pull him out of with sympathy, and understanding, and surprising amounts of tenderness.

"Sometimes even though we have access to all of this technology and Intel it doesn't mean a damn thing. Sometimes we're as bad off as regular cops if we don't have a lea—" Kassian stopped abruptly as something occurred to him. He put down his coffee cup again and looked at Sin. "Why don't we go back down to his house now that the police and fire marshal have cleared out? We never got to look around for ourselves."

He'd barely finished his sentence before Sin stood. They walked back to Magnolia Lane and bypassed the crime scene tape around the charred...
remains of Boyd's house. Any evidence that may have been there was completely destroyed, and the brief sense of purpose that Kassian had felt dwindled. Or it almost did until Sin noticed someone watching them across the street.

For all that Boyd had referenced his nosy, old neighbor; Kassian had never seen or met the woman himself. But somehow Sin had noticed Mrs. Hensley as she peered at them through her blinds, and Kassian barely hesitated before crossing the street and knocking on her door.

There was a sudden flutter of motion he could hear inside the house, complete with the squawking of a bird. There was a long silence that followed and just after Kassian knocked again the wooden door suddenly opened, leaving the old glass and wrought iron screen door shut.

A little, old woman peered out from between the wrought iron, her sharp, blue eyes darting suspiciously between the two of them. She held a phone in her hand that was so old it didn't seem possible it would still work, until she lifted the handle and a dull dial tone could be heard. She held the phone up like it was a weapon.

"What do you want?" she demanded, her voice reedy. "I'm calling the police! You're trespassing!"

"Uh. I knocked on the door." Kassian stared at her in confusion. "I'm—I live a few streets down. I'm friends with the guy who lived across the street."

At the words, her eyes narrowed. "I know you."

She took several steps backward, the suspicion turning into outright disgust. She half stood behind the wooden door, hanging up the phone in favor of one hand pointing accusingly at them. "Filth, the both of you! I always knew that boy would bring ruin to the neighborhood. He got what was coming
to him, if you ask me. His mother should have moved him out years ago before—"

She gestured wordlessly toward the burned house across the street. "Before any of this. That woman is lucky no one else was hurt or we'd have sued! I have half a mind to already. Do you know what this will do to my property value?"

"I don't even know you, old lady," Sin said with a frown.

"Ha!" Mrs. Hensley said sharply, waving a knotted hand toward his face. "You're the worst of them! Coming and going at all hours, acting like you own the neighborhood. Don't think I don't know what acts your kind does when you think no one's watching. I see what happens when he doesn't close those curtains. He flaunts it for the whole world to see."

Kassian pressed his lips together, and nodded seriously. "I apologize for the two of them, and their... flaunting." Sin glared at him, and reached out to shove his shoulder. "But can you tell me if his curtains were open the night of the fire? Did you notice anything then?"

"Of course I did," Mrs. Hensley retorted indignantly. She straightened to her full height which didn't seem likely to pass 5 foot. "I was up giving Pearl her medicine and I looked out when I saw vehicle lights. I saw those friends of his crawling around the place."

"What friends?" Sin demanded.

"These were people you've observed before around the property?" Kassian asked. His pulse sped up and his mind automatically skipped back to the conversation with Boyd, with Vivienne. The Agency, the information, the fucking Journalist Guild.
"How should I know?" she asked, her wrinkled face pinching. "They wore black, it was dark. You think I have special binoculars over here? I only see what I see."

She paused, her hand tightening briefly on the edge of the door and her eyes moving between the two men. After a moment she set the phone down on a nearby table and shuffled closer to the door, her suspicion apparently momentarily forgotten in the face of having someone to gossip to.

"But they had to be his friends. They walked right in the door and the alarm didn't go off. I could see it was armed—it flashes red, you know. Joe—that's our mailman—he set it off one time on accident when that boy wasn't around and the racket it caused!" Her eyebrows rose and she threw her hands up. "You'd think the White House was breached! People showed up right away to look around. And nothing like that happened this time, not even when all of them went inside."

"That's not—" Kassian bit down on the sentence, and looked back at the house briefly.

"What happened then?" The questions had defaulted to typical-Sin demands with a complete lack of patience. "And if you tell me that you didn't—"

"Did you see anything else, Mrs. Hensley?" Kassian interrupted quickly. "If you saw anything else, you could help the police considerably. Imagine if these weren't his friends—these people could come back. After the war there were so many arsonists around, or people kidnapping for ransom..."

Mrs. Hensley scoffed at that. "I wouldn't help the police if they asked! I won't risk retaliation, getting involved in that boy's business." She eyed the two of them. "But if it gets you two off my stoop, I'll tell you." She moved closer but still made no attempt to open the screen door separating them.
"I was up early for Pearl's medicine—I can't sleep in this weather, my air conditioning unit needs fixing and my nephew keeps breaking it every time he comes over—so I know it was 11:32 when they went inside because I saw it on my clock. A van came down the street and the lot of them unloaded and went inside, and then the van drove away. That boy keeps strange hours so I didn't think much of it. Pearl was having one of her bad nights so I stayed up talking to her and then I saw lights again. When I looked outside I saw him running in, all in a hurry like he was ready to go somewhere. I about looked away but he'd turned the lights on, you know. So then I stopped to see what was all about those people earlier. It seemed an odd time for a party but I've seen stranger things at that house." She looked pointedly at Sin and then after that carried the look over to Kassian.

"And?" Sin looked like he wanted to rip the screen door off and shake the rest of the story out of the old woman.

She eyed Sin, her lips pinching disapprovingly, but kept talking regardless. "Nothing, at first, but then all of a sudden there was some sort of hullabaloo." Her face scrunched. "Everything was so fast it was hard to see, and the curtains were only open halfway. He closes them most times but sometimes they catch. They need to get that rod looked into; mine does the same. It's part of the way these houses were constructed, you know. Makes it awful difficult to get proper privacy."

She looked expectantly at them, as if she was waiting for them to agree with her or express interest in the finer points of Magnolia Lane housing construction. It didn't happen. She harrumphed and rearranged the battered old lace shawl she had thrown on over her formless dress.

"It looked like some sort of raucous party at first—things flying all over the place, people jumping up and falling down. He was running around like a chicken with his head cut off. And it scared me something else when he
looked at the window, right at my house! Like he knew I was watching. I almost walked away—I don't have time to get involved with his kind."

She emphasized the sentiment with a sharp shake of her head and another rearrangement of her shawl. Neither Kassian nor Sin spoke, not wanting to derail her again, and when it became clear there would be no comment she continued.

"Then he ran at the window like he planned to jump right out of it, or maybe he wanted to flaunt his party and open the curtains, when all of a sudden the lights went out. I couldn't see much but there were flashes of light," she opened and closed her hand repeatedly as if to demonstrate light flickering or a strobing light, "some of it blue. Then nothing moved for a while, and next thing I knew the van came back and parked in the driveway. Seemed like more than half the people that went inside were being carried out by the rest so I didn't see at first he was one of them."

Her eyebrows drew together, her finger tapping lightly on the wrought iron door. "The strange thing is, it looked like he was tied up but he wasn't moving so I couldn't see clearly. I only saw a little from the light of the van. Then they threw him in with the others and left."

She ended the story with a simple shrug.

They both stared at her, and although a flare of irritation shot through Kassian at her nonchalance, it was nothing compared to the storm of anger that was amassing next to him. He raised a hand instinctively, and put it on Sin's shoulder. The muscles were coiled tight, and Kassian squeezed slightly.

"What did the van look like, Mrs. Hensley?"

"Black."
"Anything else?" Kassian asked patiently. He backed up a step, pulling Sin with him. "License plate? Big wheels? Anything custom?"

"It was black and that's all I saw," she said impatiently, eyes narrowing toward Sin. She took a few steps backward again, her face returning to the distrustful glare from before. "I told you everything so you get off my property! And tell someone to take care of that car of his. It's an eyesore. If only he'd had it in the garage it could have burned with the rest."

Sin flipped the woman off just as she slammed the door shut. "Stupid fucking bitch." He turned around and rolled his shoulders, eyes narrowing at Boyd's half-burned car.

"You need to relax, man," Kassian said with a shake of his head. He gave Mrs. Hensley a sarcastic wave as she drew her blinds shut. "You can't walk around looking like you want to punch old ladies."

"I wanted to break her neck."

"Yeah, and it was really apparent." Kassian nudged Sin forward, and started walking down the street. "Just relax. Danny-up or whatever. She was useful."

"Would have been more useful if she'd bothered to tell anyone that information two goddamn days ago." Sin inhaled deeply as he clenched and unclenched his hands. He inhaled and exhaled again, deeper this time, and then looked at Kassian. "So, if this city is anything like D.C. or Carson, there's probably surveillance cameras around a lot of the neighborhoods even if they're residential. There must be some way to see if the van she mentioned was really around here during that time. Maybe look at the plates."

Kassian nodded. "Right. The descriptions that she gave are one of two useful things we got from her."
"What's the other?" Sin asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"It wasn't the Agency." Kassian pulled his phone out, and once again started to text Carhart although by now he didn't expect a response. "They never would have left her alive."

It took three hours for anyone to contact Kassian. While he waited, he spent the whole time texting Ryan about the cameras around northern Lexington and watching the pendulum of Sin's personality swing back and forth the more stressed he got. When Ryan told Kassian that clearance levels had been jacked up and he had limited access to even basic things, Sin looked about ready to have a meltdown. A meltdown that would lead to violence.

Surprisingly talking him down helped. Physical contact helped. Kassian decided to swing by Killian's to buy some Xanax from a small-time pusher, anyway. Sin popped a couple of pills, Kassian knocked back a couple of shots, and they sat in the bar as he stared at his phone and waited.

"I'm losing it."

Kassian shook his head and held up two fingers so the waitress would bring him another couple of shots. "No you're not. I've seen you lose it, and this isn't it. But... you do act more like the Sin I know when you start getting angry. I kind of like Danny more, though."

Sin frowned slightly at that, and looked away. Belatedly, Kassian realized what he was implying and added: "But that's because me and Vega are both hard-headed assholes. I'm pretty sure Boyd likes the fact that you're an asshole a lot of the time."

"Oh yeah?" Sin asked doubtfully. He reached back to tie his hair back, seeming increasingly annoyed with the length. "Why would that be? I seem like an impatient fucking nutjob."
"Yeah, but you're his impatient nutjob. And I think the fact that you're so quick to tattoo people's faces with your knuckles kind of turns him on."

Sin's mouth curled up into a small grin, and Kassian tipped a shot glass at him. His phone chimed just as the alcohol scalded down his throat, and they both sat up instantly. It was a message from Carhart with instructions for Sin to go to the Mayborn Hotel, and Kassian to go to the basement of Jake & Janet's.

Kassian frowned down at the message as he relayed the information to Sin. It would have been nice for the general to have at least confirmed that they knew what was going on earlier, but at least contact had finally been made. He and Sin agreed to split up but not before Kassian gave Sin one of his guns just in case anything went wrong.

They left Kassian's bike in front of Killian's and walked towards their destinations together. In reality, Mayborn and Jake & Janet's were only twenty minutes apart but Kassian still couldn't shake the protective streak of unease that shot through him when they parted ways.

As Sin strode off towards Crandall Park, Kassian watched his lean form disappear with a slight frown. It was completely irrational to worry about someone who was without a doubt the best fighter he'd ever met, but Danny's openness was so different from Sin's stone-cold persona, that it translated to vulnerability in Kassian's mind. He could tell that this version of Sin didn't like being a killer, and it made Kassian wonder if the other man would hesitate when he shouldn't.

When Sin had disappeared entirely from view, Kassian turned to continue into the Theater District and recoiled in surprise.

"Goddammit, Emilio," he said irritably, running a hand through his hair. "Don't fucking sneak up on me."
Emilio's eyes moved slowly from where they'd undoubtedly been tracking Sin, and focused on Kassian. "Don't let yourself be snuck up on then."

Frowning, Kassian looked over his shoulder again but Sin was definitely gone. "Is Carhart at Mayborn?"

"Yes." Emilio turned and began walking in the direction of the club. With sharp, agitated motions, he pulled out a cigarette and put it between his lips.

"Why didn't you talk to Sin?" Kassian asked after a moment of watching Emilio's expression grow darker. "I told him you might be there."

"What difference does it fucking make? He don't know me no more."

"Wow." Kassian shook his head. Why was he even surprised? "I would think you'd be happy that your son is alive."

"His body is alive but he ain't my son no more."

It was hard to bite back the string of scathing retorts that nearly rolled off Kassian's tongue, but he did it anyway. The walk to Jake & Janet's was tense, and Emilio smoked the entire time. When they got there, he procured an entire bottle of Jack Daniels from the bar and led Kassian down to the basement. It was pretty much deserted in the daytime hours, but there were still two couples in different alcoves who were obviously fooling around.

Emilio ripped the curtain aside to an empty one, and dropped on the velvet couch behind it. As Kassian pulled the curtain shut again, Emilio started drinking straight from the bottle and didn't bother to offer the younger agent any. Some of Kassian's irritation at Emilio had faded during the walk, and as he watched Emilio's expressive face, the rest of it dissipated.

"It's okay to be upset, Emilio. This whole situation is—"
"Who the fuck is upset?"

Kassian shook his head and let it drop. "I've been trying to contact the two of you for days."

Emilio gestured vaguely. Now that they were so close, Kassian could see that his eyes were bloodshot. "It's been nuts over there since Boyd disappeared. Everyone is on high alert, everyone is fucking being followed and monitored because they're 100% sure the mole had something to do with it."

"It had to be the mole," Kassian agreed. "We just spoke to Boyd's neighbor, and she said the people who broke in seemed to know the alarm codes or how to disable it which should be impossible."

"Right." Emilio took another swig from the bottle. A bead of liquid trailed down the side of his mouth and went down his neck. Kassian tracked its progress before forcing himself to look away. "And since that bitch banned anyone from looking for Boyd, everyone close to the kid is kept under watch 'cause she don't trust them to follow orders. Even me, and she thinks I'm her dude now. But I'm in the unit and she don't show favoritism all obviously."

Well that certainly explained the complete radio silence and Ryan's lack of accessibility. "Does anyone seem to know about Sin?"

"Nuh uh." Emilio set the bottle down and slumped down on the sofa. He'd drained a third of the bottle already. "If they know shit, they ain't letting it show. Vivienne told Zach, and Zach told me. We didn't believe her at first, but then... I dunno." Emilio's eyebrows drew together, and he looked down at his hands. "Anyway, it don't matter."

For all that Emilio was a hardass bastard, he was horrible at hiding what he was feeling. Kassian leaned forward and put a hand on the other
man's knee. "He's not totally different, you know. He's not a complete stranger. He's still your Hsin."

Red-rimmed, green eyes met Kassian's and for a moment it looked like Emilio would say something more, but then he just grabbed the bottle again.

"Tell me what you found out, Blondie. I got to get back to the compound, and I fully intend to come in your ass before we leave this club."

===

Danny didn't know what he'd been expecting when he walked into room 22, but it hadn't been to automatically be yanked into an embrace. He remembered the man from some of the flashbacks and from Boyd's drawings, and Kassian had filled him in on the name and a brief history.

Zachary Carhart, third in charge at the Agency, and he'd always been fond and protective of Sin.

The general looked younger at the moment with his eyes wide and wheat-colored hair unruly while he hugged Danny fiercely. It was slightly awkward at first, but then the older man's breath started going ragged and his shoulders trembled slightly. Danny relaxed and raised a hand to press between Carhart's shoulder blades.

"I'm sorry," Carhart said thickly. Even after several long moments, he seemed to reluctantly pull away. "You don't even remember me and I'm being absurd."

"I remember you," Danny said automatically. "I mean, I remember some things. I get flashbacks a lot. I used to think they were dreams."
Carhart wiped a hand across his face and sniffed. His eyes were slightly damp and red, but he seemed to pull himself together quickly. "I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable."

"It's fine. Everyone else started stripping me to use my scars as identification so this was an improvement."

The general released another shaky sigh, and nodded slightly. He rubbed his hands along the thighs of his jeans, and sat on the edge of the bed. Carhart watched as Danny took a seat in the armchair across from him, and seemed to be taking in every minute detail.

"We talked to this woman earlier," Danny said after an awkward stretch of silence. "Mrs. Hensley. She lives across the street from Boyd, and saw the entire thing from start to finish. She even saw when the people arrived at his house."

Carhart leaned forward, eyes narrowing. He seemed to shake off his emotional outburst quickly enough.

"Tell me everything."

"She thought they were friends of his at first, because she said the alarm never went off like it has in the past and they were able to easily get in. She saw when Boyd came home, saw the entire fight through the windows in the living room, and then watched as he was taken from the house and thrown into the back of a black van. Kassian thinks it was Janus or whoever your traitor is, but he said the fact that Boyd's house was destroyed is not normal."

"It isn't." Carhart stood up and crossed his arms over his chest. "Did he explain the mole?"
When Danny nodded, Carhart went on. "We’ve had agents targeted in the past several months but it never seemed this personal. But that makes sense. The timing between this and the Janus activity lately is too coincidental. We never had reason to believe it was Janus who had the agent directory before, but if they have it now, it makes sense that they’d go after Boyd so viciously. You and he have been a very specific thorn in their side for years."

"Is that why they blew up his house, then? Because it's personal?"

Carhart frowned. "I'm not sure. I know they have a visual of Boyd, and I know that they know he has a partner. I think it's likely that the device was timed to kill anyone who may have come searching for him."

Danny leaned forward and pressed his forearms against his thighs. His chest tightened, and that fucking image passed before his eyes again: blond hair darkened by blood, lips blue, golden eyes open and staring blankly. Danny shuddered, and closed his eyes.

"This is my fault."

"How?" Carhart demanded, skepticism heavy in his voice. "This is not the time for you to become irrational. You and he are so protective of each other that you blame yourselves as soon as something happens with the other."

"But it is," Danny insisted, opening his eyes again to stare up at the general. "If I knew who I was, if I'd known things, I would have never told Boyd about the Janus activity in Annadale and gotten him mixed up in it. I would have handled it myself. And now for all I fucking know he's—"

Danny broke off, and shot up out of the chair. He began to pace again as the aching in his head intensified. The Xanax had briefly dulled the racing
of his pulse and the constantly flashing mental images and flashbacks, but it was already metabolizing out of his system.

Carhart watched him pace, and took a step forward although he didn't touch him. "It's amazing," he said quietly. "How much you two have been through and even now your feelings haven't changed. Even though you don't remember anything."

"Being with him makes me feel different." Danny shook his head as he tried to figure out how to explain what he hadn't even been able to figure out himself. "Since I moved to Annadale I felt... peaceful I guess, but it still seemed wrong. Everything seemed off, like something was missing. It didn't feel right until I was with Boyd. And even then, I was a fucking asshole half the time because I knew he was hiding things."

"He was trying to protect you. He couldn't have known how any of this would play out if he told you or anybody else."

"I know that now."

Danny stopped pacing and stared hard at the general. "I can't live like this. I can't exist knowing there are parts of me missing. I can't function knowing he's out there somewhere and I have to wait for other people to act because I have to stay in hiding."

A flash of uncertainty crossed Carhart's face. "I understand, but there's nothing we can do for now. Let's focus on following up on the Intel you and Kassian just gathered. Vivienne or I will have to get into the city's surveillance system. Everyone else is blocked at the moment."

"Okay." Danny nodded, and inhaled deeply again. "Okay."

"Hsin..." This time Carhart did step forward. He tipped Danny's chin up and stared into his eyes. "You have to tell me if something's wrong with you.
You've been on medication for a long time, and I don't know how they've messed with your mind further."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Carhart said sharply. "You look like you're unraveling."

In truth, Danny felt like he was. Sleep was impossible, eating was impossible, and the continuous flashes and synapses were making him feel completely out of control. With every passing hour, the symptoms that had started weeks ago grew progressively worse. It felt like someone had unplugged him, and things were starting to go very, very wrong.

"I'll be fine."

Carhart didn't look convinced, but Danny wasn't very convinced of it himself.

"We'll find him." Carhart said firmly.

"How do you know? How can you be so sure?"

"Because you and he are like my wayward fucking children and I refuse to lose one now that I finally got the other back." Carhart looked away briefly, eyebrows furrowed. He looked exactly like the drawing from Boyd's sketchbook at that point; wearied and sad. "We'll find him."

Kassian showed up at the hotel an hour later. He looked less steady, and Danny could smell alcohol, and cologne that Kassian hadn't been wearing before. Carhart didn't seem to miss those things either, and when he spoke to Kassian it was more formal, and his eyes narrowed slightly. Regardless, they scraped together the bare outlines of a plan and of how they would stay below Marshal Seong's radar.
This time whoever was making moves at the Agency made them faster. Danny didn't know if it was Carhart or Vivienne pushing things, but by the end of that night they had solid Intel and a possible location on the van. It was surprisingly easy to fall into the rhythm of a mission's parameters, and by the time they were driving out of Lexington in Kassian's truck, the two of them were in sync.

Vivienne had put together a surveillance trail that had snagged images of the black van from right outside of Boyd's subdivision and into Carson. The Wasteland stretched between the two cities significantly and the trail was lost for awhile, but she'd managed to pick it up again in the shell of what had once been an industrial district of the other city. They'd narrowed the possible location down using pre-war maps of Carson, and pinpointed a specific section of the neighborhood where the van had last been captured on the functioning surveillance systems in the city.

"No fireworks until we have a location for Boyd," Kassian said as he adjusted the comm in Danny's ear. His eyes were narrowed in concentration, and all traces of the slightly inebriated man from earlier that afternoon had disappeared.

Danny nodded, and flexed his hands slightly. The armor Kassian had insisted he wear felt heavy and threw off his equilibrium.

The potholes in the streets became so deep that Kassian's truck rocked violently over the roads as if they were in the middle of uncharted land. The city was black and dead silent, with only the occasional flickering streetlight to show there was electricity available at all. They didn't see a single person but Danny kept catching glimpses of movement from the corner of his eyes; just the barest shift of black against darker black, and unknown whether it had been human, Feral, or animal.
They had to approach the area carefully, going in a wide circle to ensure there were no tails. Kassian had Danny watching for cameras and checking against the maps Vivienne had provided them to show where camera systems might be. She had warned them that although they had no reason to believe Janus knew the Agency had tracked the van to this location, they still couldn't be certain whether Janus was watching the surrounding area for anyone approaching.

The closer they grew to the warehouse, the tighter Danny's chest felt. As the tension built inside of him, it thrummed through his body and brought with it equal parts anticipation and impatience.

Danny could not stop thinking of the alternative to rescue as the shadows grew bolder, and as the buildings loomed around them like shattered sentinels. Too vividly, he could imagine Boyd dead. Too vividly, he could imagine getting there too late.

His jaw shifted, eyebrows hooding his eyes, and Kassian stayed quiet although Danny caught the occasional flicker of blue eyes in his direction.

They had narrowed the possible location down to a few blocks, and searched each one. Danny's eyesight was sharp in the gloom, giving them the advantage of not even needing the lights on. Most of the buildings were destroyed either from the war, or simply from abandonment over time. Most of the area didn't have any indication of electricity but there were a few blocks that were dimly illuminated by flickering bulbs, and it was there that they saw the tracks.

Danny saw them first; the barest contour of shadows along the ground. His heartbeat pounded in his chest, a vibration that hummed along his ribcage, and he could feel adrenaline tingling even to the tips of his fingers.

This was it. He knew it with certainty. This was the place.
They followed the tracks, their booted feet silent except for the occasional quiet crunch of gravel and dirt beneath the soles. Kassian was a shadow that moved in and out of the dark, silently communicating with Danny through hand gestures and looks. They had the comm units, but it didn't feel right to speak, not when they were this close. Anticipation felt like a heavy blanket stifling his lungs.

The tracks vanished for a short while but picked up again and finally arced into a large building looming above them. The doors were all shut but several of the windows on the second and third floor were broken.

The doors were locked, but it was easy enough to breach the locks, and soon they were inside. The building appeared to be some sort of old warehouse or factory, with a huge open space and hallways leading off in another direction. They found the black van, parked and seemingly unoccupied in the middle of the room. There were dark splatters against the concrete floor that Danny recognized to be blood.

Kassian moved toward the van immediately, peering carefully inside, but Danny's attention had shifted elsewhere. As soon as they'd moved further into the room, the silence gave way to a faint sound: a murmur of people speaking, unintelligible, but within it he recognized a voice.

Boyd.

"I hear something."

"Wait—" Kassian started to say but Danny was already moving forward.

He could hear the voices growing louder; could hear the faint clinking of metal against metal. The sound was still muffled, still not clear enough, but as he grew closer he could distinguish words.
"You may as well give up," a man's voice was saying. "We have plenty of time to find all the ways to make you talk."

Danny followed the sounds down a hallway.

Boyd's voice came across in a low growl, "Fuck y—" The words twisted into a pained shout.

Rage burned like bile in Danny's throat. He saw a light flickering under a doorway at the end.

"I could do this all day but can you take it—"

The metal wrenched with a catastrophic sound as the entire door buckled beneath Danny's foot. The door ripped off its hinges and flew into the room, crashing and skidding across the concrete floor with a screech that echoed throughout the building.

As Danny entered the room, ducking and immediately pinning himself to the wall with his gun out, he was vaguely aware that Kassian was behind him. However that thought was almost immediately lost when he quickly looked around the room.

There was a metal slab across the room with a conveyor belt nearby. Blood splattered the area; not a truly significant amount.

The place was empty but the voices kept going.

"—no one will be coming to save you—"

Danny saw the faint flashing of light at the end of the room and realized that a digital recorder was emitting the voices. His eyebrows drew together and the anger temporarily stunned him. He couldn't move, speak or react but suddenly Kassian's hand was clamping down on his and yanking him out of the room.
"Run!"

Danny looked at Kassian blankly and the other man began dragging him down the hall, boots pounding against the floor.

"They lured us!" Kassian shouted.

Comprehension set in and fragments of knowledge from Danny's other life clicked together. The recording had started when they'd entered the building. IED with a tripwire or pressure detonator. Possibly delayed fuse. Timed to lure them in deeper; far enough into the building that a normal person couldn't escape.

Danny threw Kassian over one shoulder like he weighed nothing and took off running, bringing them bursting out of the building faster than should have been humanly possible. Instincts told him to get distance, as much as possible, and he dove behind the hull of an old jeep across the street just as the warehouse exploded.

Glass shattered around them, light and flames erupting as bright and hot as daylight. The jeep rocked and nearly flipped over before Danny's hand against it steadied it to settle back down as a shield. The explosion was fast and violent and within seconds they found themselves surrounded by devastation with the flickering glow of orange flames lighting the area stronger than the dull streetlights.

"Damn it," Kassian breathed. He scrambled to his feet, eyes flicking between the burning building and Danny. His eyes were wide, and for the first time in two days he seemed incapable of the calm that he'd been so obviously trying to emit for Danny the entire time. Now he just stared in open-mouthed shock as Danny got to his feet, unscathed and not even out of breath.

"Sin—"
"Fuck," Danny hissed, hands balling up as he squeezed his eyes shut. The anger was coming fast and hard, running over him like a freight train as fragments of images and voices compacted together to release in his brain.

It wasn't Boyd. It was another setup. Another trick. They'd known someone would come, that he would come—that Sin would come. And he couldn't do anything—Boyd was gone.

"Motherfuckers," he shouted so loud that the sound echoed across the deserted area in a way that caused Kassian to shudder. Danny's eyes snapped open and he released a sound that was almost a growl before slamming his fist into the metal frame of the jeep.

"Fuck, fuck, FUCK!"

Distantly, Danny registered that Kassian was fumbling with his phone even while he didn't look away but Danny didn't care. Fury had overtaken everything. He was destroying the vehicle, ripping pieces off and denting it, throwing parts violently and with enough force for them to vanish into the inferno across the street.

Just as Kassian started to jam his finger against the touch screen, Danny dimly heard Emilio's tinny voice demand: "What the fuck is going on?"

"It was a false trail," Kassian shouted over the roar of the fire. "There was a proximity bomb this time, and Sin is freaking out."

"ETA 2 minutes," Emilio's voice said flatly.

Danny completely destroyed the vehicle and panted wildly, his hands pressed to the sides of his head as he paced the area. The sound of his own heartbeat and rushing blood wouldn't leave his ears. The violence he'd inflicted hadn't calmed him at all; his pulse was only racing faster, and his thoughts were becoming more erratic.
Kassian had started hesitantly approaching at some point.

"Sin, calm down, it's not over—"

"I can't FUCKING calm down!"

Kassian started forward again, and grabbed Danny's arm. Danny shoved Kassian away violently, and was opening his mouth to tell the other man to back off, to tell him that something was going wrong in his head, when pain ripped through him. Crying out, Danny crumpled to his knees and pressed his hands against his temples harder.

The sound of boots pounding against concrete filled his ears, and Danny screamed again as the sound thrummed in his skull. He dragged his hands down to press against his ears and shook his head, breath coming in sharp, ragged bursts as he tried to muffle the sounds that were overwhelming him.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" a voice demanded as the sound of running skidded to a stop.

"I don't know, he just started screaming!"

Strong hands gripped the sides of Danny's head and forced him to look up. He couldn't see through the tearing of his eyes, but over the onslaught of noise and pain, he could barely make out a voice talking to him in a different language. He could faintly see someone looking down at him, and it was like looking at a rougher, harder version of himself.

"He's like fucking... malfunctioning or something," Kassian's voice drifted through the rush of noise.

The other voice didn't answer Kassian at first, it just kept speaking to Danny, the tones calming and commands clear: close your eyes, breathe, think of something good, breathe.
The images that flashed behind Danny's closed eyelids were different this time. No more death, or blood, or violence. No more screams of pain, or explosions, or anger. Just Boyd, and sunlight, Boyd smiling, trees, lips against him, laughter, a swinging bench, and contentment.

"There's something wrong, and we can't fix him," the other voice said quietly, and Danny's eyelids grew heavy as fingers dug into a point in the side of his neck sharply. "We have to take him back."

As Danny's vision dimmed and everything started to slow down, one last thought resounded in his mind:

*Good.*
Chapter Twenty-Nine

When Danny opened his eyes again, he was back in the guest room at Kassian's house. Everything was quiet and still inside, but he could faintly hear two men talking. His eyebrows drew together in confusion, but he realized that the conversation was floating in through the window that overlooked the backyard.

"—not what he wants. What if he doesn't want to remember what it was like before?"

"We don't know if that's what's gonna happen, but he can't fucking stay like this, Zachary. His pulse was so fast, I thought he was going to have a goddamn heart attack. The fucking blood vessels in his eyes burst—I mean fuck, do you know how to fix him? 'Cause if you do, please fucking enlighten me."

Carhart and... his father. Danny hadn't met Emilio before the previous night, and the man was an enigma to him. He'd kept his distance from his alleged son, but then he'd obviously followed them to the factory to keep an eye out. And he'd known exactly what to do to calm Danny down. It hadn't fully registered at the time, but Emilio had spoken to him in Mandarin and somehow Danny had clearly understood.

"Of course I don't know how to fix him," Carhart growled impatiently. "But it's a huge risk and—"

"And they have to know he ain't in Annadale no more, so if they was gonna find him and kill him, they'd have done it already. You think for one second that the Agency ain't monitoring their expensive ass project?"

There was a pause, and then:
"No. They know he's missing, they have to. Sin said he had some doctor down there. A woman named Dr. Stein. It has to be an undercover agent."

"Right. So the cards is all on the table, babe. No matter what, our odds are fucked. His odds are fucked. Go back and get terminated for real, go back and get turned back into their whipping boy, or stay like this and have his brain fucking misfire and freak out until he implodes."

A quiet sigh. "It's up to him."

Danny sat up in bed, and threw his legs over the side. He listened as more words were exchanged, and the creaking of Kassian's back door as the two men re-entered the house. He knew they would be coming up to talk to him soon, but he ignored that and walked over to the vanity mirror.

He was pale, hair tangled, and there were red splotches around the green of his eyes where the blood vessels had burst. He was a mess, and it was the least of his worries. All he could think about was the empty warehouse, and another failure.

When the door to the room opened, Danny continued to stare into the mirror.

"You're up—"

"Take me back," he said immediately.

There was a long pause, and then Carhart came to stand next to him. Danny turned to look at his father. He didn't miss the wariness in Emilio's posture as he studied his son, and the way he deliberately hung back by the door.

"I heard everything you said outside just now, and I want to go back. What the hell use am I like this?"
"It could just be the stress," Carhart started in a frustrated tone. He stared at Danny, at the bleached complexion and reddened eyes. "But you're the one who would really know. You're the one who has to make this decision, Hsin."

Danny nodded. "Yeah, I am. And it's not just the circumstances and worry. It's been happening since I stopped taking the medication, and that in combination with the heightened stress is making something go wrong. Memories want to flood my head but then something pushes back, and there's this... clash that makes me overload or something."

Emilio's gaze shifted to Carhart, eyes narrowed and lips pursed.

"And I don't see the point, anyway. I know what I was like. I read my own file." Danny looked from one to the other. "I don't give a damn about living in some fantasy land where I can pretend I'm normal just to be away from the Agency if it means I'm helpless and away from Boyd. Freedom is not worth it without him. I don't remember everything, but I know that."

Carhart and Emilio looked at each other, and neither of them seemed pleased. But neither of them argued it either.

"So how do I get back?"

"There can't be no fancy tricks, no fronts, no clever ruses," Emilio said, speaking to Danny directly finally. "That shit don't work on Seong. Your best bet is to fucking ride your bike up to the gates and say you want to come back."

"Then that's what I'll do."

Despite the fact that it was exactly what Emilio had been insisting to Carhart during their conversation outside, he merely nodded shortly before
leaving the room. Danny stared after him in confusion, and Carhart just shook his head.

"Don't mind him. He doesn't know how to deal with all of this."

Danny frowned, and sat back on the edge of the bed. He was ready to go to the Agency now and get everything over with, but the exhaustion from the last few days had finally hit him.

"Deal with what?"

"Everything. Boyd being gone, but you being alive has really had an effect on him." Carhart sat next to Danny. "I don't know how much you know about your relationship with him, or with me for that matter, but it's complicated and always has been. He's your father but he's still learning how to deal with the emotional aspect of that. You were separated for nearly two decades and just as you'd come together again as family, we were told that you'd been killed."

Danny glanced back at the door doubtfully. "He doesn't seem very thrilled with me. Is it because I'm different?"

Carhart's mouth lifted in a crooked smile. "Emilio had a meltdown in the middle of the compound when he found out about your alleged termination. He spent months locked up because of it. When I told him that you were still alive... he just stared at me. He couldn't even speak, and then he walked out of the room. He doesn't let anyone see those emotions. Not usually. But I will say that he isn't thrilled that the Hsin he knows isn't the Hsin that's been returned to him."

"Oh." Danny looked down at his hands, at the calloused fingers and faint scars. "The Hsin he knows seems like a psychotic freak."

"What gave you that impression?"
"Different things. Kassian—"

The general's smile faded and morphed into a frown. "Kassian isn't the authority on character or a well-rounded personality."

Danny raised his eyebrows. "He seems pretty normal to me. Nice at least. Honest."

"Right." Carhart's expression didn't change but his jaw clenched just slightly. "If you were a psychotic asshole, Boyd wouldn't love you. The two of you went through a period of time when you both had blinders on and were obsessively codependent, but I think you've both come to accept each other's flaws."

"Flaws," Danny scoffed. "I apparently have a habit of going on berserk killing sprees, and the entire... Agency or whatever is afraid of me because of it. To the extent that I had to be locked up when not on a mission. Seems more extreme than a flaw, General Carhart."

"Don't call me that. And if you know that..." Carhart trailed off briefly with a frown. "If you know how it is, if you know what it will be like, why do you want to go back to it? We can still search for Boyd without you returning to that nightmare. That place has tried to strip you of your humanity for so long. Don't you want to try being free?"

"I do. I'm not some masochist. But like I said before, being free somewhere else means nothing if he isn't there with me."

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Kassian and Carhart tried to talk him out of it for the rest of the night, but by morning they'd given up. When it came down to it, they couldn't stop him. Termination wasn't even a legitimate cause for concern as it was unlikely
that they'd waste their best test subject just because he seemingly chose to return to them like a well-trained dog. Worst case scenario was that they wiped his memory, and once again took him off the grid. It was a risk that Danny was willing to take.

Carhart was convinced that Seong had to have been watching Danny down in Annadale, but he had no idea to what extent. Just in case, they had come up with an explanation for the things that had happened in Annadale as well as the past few days in Lexington. Danny just hoped that Mrs. Hensley stuck to her vow of not cooperating with any sort of authority figure if any suits from the Agency questioned her in the future.

He stashed the backpack at Kassian's house, only then realizing that he'd never actually looked at the USB, and headed to the Johnson's compound that afternoon. His father never made a reappearance.

Impatience and worry for Boyd overrode any anxiety about facing the Agency or Seong, but when Danny took off his helmet at the security checkpoint at the Agency compound, he hadn't exactly expected guns in his face.

"Is this some kind of joke?" the female guard demanded. She looked extremely alarmed, but kept her gun on him even as she took a step back.

Danny looked from her to the male guard, and let his eyes drop to their nametags. Officers Lorde and Charles.

"I need to see the Marshal."

"Identify yourself," Officer Charles blurted out. Like the female guard, he was gaping at Danny in confusion. "Are you some other fucking Vega clone? What the hell is this?"
Danny could already tell that this was going to be really annoying. "I don't know what I am," he said, not keeping the irritation out of his voice. "I just know I need to speak to the Marshal, and she'll be interested in seeing me."

"Raise your arms."

"Seriously?" Danny demanded, eyes narrowing at them.

"Raise your fucking arms, freak," Officer Charles shouted.

Well this was sure starting off with a goddamn bang. Sighing disgustedly, Danny raised his arms. To his dismay, Charles yanked up his shirt.

"This is getting ridicu—" Danny stopped in mid-sentence when Charles not only examined his torso, but began going for his belt as well. Danny recoiled and shoved the man back despite the fact that he was still holding the gun.

"Hey! What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Vega has another scar," Charles said stubbornly. His eyes had widened considerably and he didn't seem as interested in being aggressive now, but he also didn't seem ready to let it go. "Down there."

"You must have lost your mind if you think I'm showing you my dick."

"What! I didn't mean—I meant he has a scar, if you're him, then you should have the same scar."

"You've seen all of the other ones, you idiot. And how the hell do you know where my scars are, anyway?" Danny asked, staring at the guy incredulously. "What, do you people have naked Sin trading cards? Pinups?"
Charles’ face colored, and Lorde snapped out of the stupor she’d fallen into as she stared. "I’ll call Marshal Seong right away."

"Thank you," Danny said dryly, still eyeballing Charles.

The woman did a double take, and fumbled with her ear in an obvious attempt to access her comm unit. They all stared at each other for the next five minutes, and Charles insisted that he keep his hands in the air until an entire squadron of guards in riot gear showed up. Unable to accept that this was seriously people’s reactions to him, Danny stayed silent even as they shoved him down to the concrete and frisked him more thoroughly than was necessary.

Apparently their orders were to take him to a nondescript building instead of the "Tower" as Lorde called it, and the entire group of guards marched him across the courtyard. They seemed intent on boxing him in to shield him from view, but Danny saw several people recoiling or doing double takes once they caught an inevitable glimpse of him. There wasn't much the guards could do to conceal him entirely since he stood two inches over the tallest one.

At one point someone actually shouted "Hsin!" across the yard, and Danny looked around to see a slender young man with unruly black hair and thick-rimmed glasses staring at him in wide-eyed disbelief. He recognized the guy from one of Boyd’s sketches, but nothing else clicked into place in his memory, and they hustled him into the building before any other contact could be made.

The building was sterile and white but none of the guards said a word about what the place was, or why they were there. Once inside the main lobby of the place, the guards in what looked like fucking SWAT gear left Danny with a different group of guards who seemed to work the interior of the
building. Like the other group, these guys stared at Danny warily as if he was going to lunge at any moment.

"What is this place?" he asked instead, looking around. As soon as his eyes moved from the guards, something pricked his neck and everything went black.

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Danny opened his eyes after having passed out. His head was pounding, and the fact that his surroundings were totally alien did not help. He was laying on what felt like a hard, metal slab with a sheet on it, it felt like someone had scrubbed his skin hard enough to scrape some of it off, and he was wearing different clothes: plain, white pants, a white tank top. There were electrodes attached to him, as well as an IV, and there was an Asian woman staring at him from a chair at the foot of the bed.

She looked to be in her fifties and had two prominent scars; one that crossed her cheek and cut through her lips on the left side, and another that passed through her left eyebrow and ended on her upper eyelid. Her jet black, short hair was sprinkled with grey.

"What are you doing here?" she asked with a British accent.

Danny expected to hate her on sight or to feel something by looking at her, but he didn’t. He felt nothing, and was only going on Kassian’s description that this was Marshal Seong.

"Am I not supposed to come back?" he asked, drawing his eyebrows together. "I'm a little... confused."

"No." She leaned forward, bracing her arms on her knees, and watched him closely. "I didn't imagine you'd be back unless we brought you in." Her tone grew sharper. "You aren't supposed to recall a bit of this so how is it you knew where to go?"
"I didn't until recently, and I still don't remember a lot." Danny frowned at her, and pushed himself up. Playing stupid was just as annoying as he thought it would be, but he didn't bother to hide the irritation. "What did you people do to me? I don't understand."

"Gave you an alternative to death is what we did, and here you are, ruining the point of it all." She scowled and sat up straight. "Couldn't call in with a phone first, could you? Had to stride right into compound in the middle of the bloody day."

"Well what the hell do you expect me to do?" he asked defensively, glaring right back at her. "I came up here from Annadale and all of a sudden I was freaking the fuck out, having meltdowns in the middle of the street because my brain was malfunctioning. I only remember that this place exists, that I work here, and a couple of people that are connected with it including you. Sorry I wasn't considering proper protocol."

She leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms. Her dark stare was unrelenting. "Explain how you came to be here. What you remember."

Danny pressed his hands down onto the hard surface beneath him. The electrodes and needle from the IV served as an irritant, and he struggled not to fidget with them or yank them off entirely. "Some shit was going on in Annadale Beach, and I got mixed up in it while working at the Blue Moon Diner. Some girl was killed by people that wound up being from Janus. And then Boyd showed up."

There wasn't a flicker in her expression as she said, "And?"

"And I didn't remember him at all. He acted weird at first and I didn't get it then, I didn't get it until just a couple of days ago. I don't even know why he was there except most likely that Janus was operating down there." Danny stopped and stared at her, trying to figure out what to say next. He'd gone
over it several times with Kassian at the blond agent's behest, but now he wondered if it was even believable.

"He kept his distance from me at first, but he showed up a few more times down there. He'd talk to me sometimes, and I started having dreams about him but I guess they were actually memories."

"So you only saw him at the diner?"

She knew Boyd had been at the apartment. He didn't know how he knew, but he was certain of it.

"No. He came over a couple of times too. I didn't trust him for awhile. I felt weird around him."

It was impossible to tell what she was thinking from her flat, unmoving expression, but she leaned back slightly in the chair. She crossed her legs, one ankle braced on the opposite knee.

"What kind of dreams?"

"Missions." He paused, and raised his eyebrows. "Fucking. Other people were in them too, but I don't know who they are."

She nodded at that. "And what brought you from having wet dreams about some stranger to malfunctioning in the streets of Lexington?"

Danny shrugged again. This was the easy part, the part that was closest to the truth. "Janus tried to kill me, and Boyd was there. We took care of the people, and for some reason that's when I started remembering a lot about him. I got kind of fixated on him, I guess. The last time he came down, he was at the diner and I flipped out on some guys. He calmed me down, and we hung out for awhile. When he left, I followed him back up here."

"When was that?"
"Two days ago." His hands ball up in the sheet, fisting it. Something beeped, and it was nearly deafening in his ears. Wincing, he looked over and saw that the machine monitoring his heart rate had spiked.

"I got here and his house was destroyed. I freaked out, and don't even remember a lot of what happened other than I managed to rent a motel. I don't know what happened but as soon as I saw his house, all of these things started coming back, and I started blacking out and having intense pain. And then I came here."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Well," she said finally. "I can't say as I expected you to come back of your own volition like this. You had a unique opportunity others would kill to have."

Danny looked at her, and for a moment he couldn't even decide what to say. She made it sound like they'd sent him to the beach on early retirement. But then again, he wasn't supposed to know otherwise. He really wasn't even positive that there was an otherwise.

"I guess," he said noncommittally. "But I don't really know what this is all about. Am I supposed to, and I don't remember? Did I sign some kind of waiver saying I'd give up my memories in exchange for an extended vacation?"

Jae-Hwa's eyebrows rose. "Is that what you've concluded?" She looked interested in the answer, but continued without waiting for one.

"Fascinating. They must have improved the system greatly this time around. I'd have thought after being back here and having direct contact with your partner, you'd have recalled a lot more."

"I remember some things," Danny admitted. "I remembered where it was, what it was, and I remembered missions, different people."

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pause, and then he raised his eyebrows slightly. "I remember enough to know my life here sucks, but I'd prefer to not keep straggling around being broken."

"It's easy enough to wipe your memories again," she said dismissively. She drew one leg up over the other at an angle.

"I don't get it though, why the hell wipe my memories in the first place? Why not just..." He raised two fingers and slid them across his neck.

One dark eyebrow rose. "Because you're a valuable asset but you'd have been a right pain to deal with the way you were. With all the previous successful genetic experiments, you were perfect for testing the new HM project."

She leaned forward, her arms resting on her braced leg. "And data from you has gone a long way."

"Data from Dr. Stein," he said.

"Yes, Dr. Stein." She scrutinized him briefly. If she was looking for something, he couldn't tell if she found it. After a short pause, she continued. "But we were watching you as well. You didn't expect we weren't, were you?"

Emilio and Carhart had, but Danny had no idea what Boyd's thought process had been. "I don't know. When I started remember things and having nightmares, I wondered why no one ever came to find me."

"If you were malfunctioning so quickly we might have, after your next appointment. But we'd been gathering data from Stein and the cameras at the Blue Moon Diner as well as in your apartment. We were able to see your progression."

She fell silent briefly, her dark gaze sharp and unmoving on his face. "We knew of Beaulieu too, of course. That he'd made contact with you. That he'd watched you. That he told you he was with Murphy Corps. It's lucky for
him he didn't tell you the truth there or it'd have ended much differently. Still, I'd wondered if you'd admit to that part of it."

The words said so calmly almost washed over Danny, but then he played them back and his poker face almost slipped. They really had known the entire time. All of Boyd's careful maneuvering, all of his planning, all of the risks he'd taken, all of it was for nothing. If he'd known, he could have fucking asked for backup with the Janus situation, he could have—

Danny wet his lips and shut down the line of thought.

"Why didn't you stop him if you knew?"

She shrugged casually. "Because he made good data."

Danny heard a faint vibration. She leaned forward, pulling out a thin phone and glanced at whatever was on the screen before turning the screen black again and setting it back down next to her. She returned her dark stare to him. For a moment she was quiet and something in her expression made Danny think she was debating whether to bother saying more. In the end, she must have decided it was worth an explanation.

"You wouldn't have known even with your memories, but I knew of you two before I even set foot in the States. The two of you were infamous, particularly together, and I knew I'd need to take care of the situation. You were salvageable because of your skills and enhancements, he was not. But once he was gone, I knew you'd be useless for a bit afterward so the project was good timing. Two birds with one stone and the like."

She paused with a frown. "Or so I thought. It was a real surprise to find he had some use left after all in the unit. So I let him take the Annadale Beach missions and when you two met, it was good data to see what an HM agent would do when confronted with someone from his past."
Seong's legs straightened in front of the chair, her boots scraping quietly across the floor. "Seeing as he didn't interfere, I let him be. But we'd have known the second anyone looked into you, and I'd have known he was behind it. He'd have outlived his use at that point."

A lot of what she said went over Danny's head, but the gist he did get was that he and Boyd had been her guinea pigs, and he wanted her to fucking die. He wondered for a moment how he would act if he was his true self. What would 'Sin' say? How would 'Sin' act? He didn't know, and at the moment, he was too fucking exhausted and too tired of the way these people spoke to even care. They never got straight to the point or said anything clearly.

"So then what happens now?" he asked, and didn't bother to keep the weariness out of his voice. "Are you going to ship me off somewhere else? Kill me? Fix me?"

"We'll adjust your medication and put you back into training here. If all goes well we'll reinstate you as a full agent."

"You—" Danny stopped, and stared at her incredulously. "You're leaving me like this?"

She gave him a sidelong look. "Of course."

Seong picked up her phone, and typed something quickly on the screen. She stood up and slid the phone into her back pocket. "After being released from this facility, you'll report to the Training Complex. We'll have a trainer finalized for you by then."

Danny's stared at her and wasn't able to talk, wasn't able to ask because the disappointment was fucking crippling. No memories, no Boyd, no fucking memories of Boyd.
"I suppose you've nowhere to stay. You'll be assigned your old apartment." Her lips lifted on the edges as she added, "Maybe it will bring back some memories."

His eyes narrowed slightly. He knew he shouldn't ask, but he couldn't stop himself. "What about Boyd? You're not going to search for him at all? I thought he was one of only a few top agents or something?"

The Marshal had approached the door but at that, she turned and looked over her shoulder at him. "His dodgy promotion is not worth the risk of more agents and he's only valuable so long as I can use him for Janus. Searching for a dead agent, or an agent who's likely been quite damaged, is a waste of resources. He knew what to expect. He's lucky enough he made it this long."

"But—"

A hint of impatience crossed her face as she opened the door. "There will be no rescue."

His hands balled into fists but he didn't say anything more as she walked out.

Danny was kept in the medical facility of the lab for three days before being sent to a sparsely furnished apartment with two guards manning the door. One of them, Office Daniels, offered him a slight grin that brought Danny to a stop because it was so unexpected. With the exception of the boy with the glasses, the only looks that had been thrown his way had been angry and the only comments he'd overheard had been about the unfairness of 'the monster' being saved when so many others had been terminated.

"Welcome back," Daniels said, grin widening slightly when Danny gave him a curious look. "I'm sure people have been giving you a ton of grief, my dude, but I've always liked you."
"Oh." Danny looked at the other guard who was staring stonily ahead. "Well, thank you."

Despite allegedly liking him, Daniels' eyebrows shot straight up at the expression of gratitude. "Man, you really are different."

Danny nodded and swiped his newly obtained ID into the door. "For now I am."

Seeing the apartment brought back nothing, not even a flash. He walked around slowly, staring at the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen, and just felt blank. Frustration swelled inside of him, and Danny shook his head curtly before returning to the bedroom. They'd sent him a supply card in the lab, and he jerked the closet open to see whether it had been filled. All of his possessions, all of Danny's possessions, were in Annadale and would likely stay there until the Agency wiped all traces of his presence from the town.

The supply card had obviously been filled, and he pushed through the hangers listlessly without really seeing the plain, basic clothes that he had asked for. The only thing that caught his attention was that the t-shirts were softer and thicker than the cheap things he usually purchased. Apparently the Agency had money to burn on designer t-shirts from Glass Town.

He stopped, and the sleeve of a black hoody dropped from his hand. Glass Town. Why the hell did the name of a random, rich neighborhood in Lexington come to mind but nothing else? Nothing important? Nothing about who he was, or what his relationship with Boyd had been?

Frustrated and angry, Danny started to slam the closet door shut but something caught his eye. The faded, black backpack. Some time during the past few days, Kassian had dropped it off. Or likely Carhart so that Kassian wouldn't draw attention to himself.
Instinct made Danny close the closet door and sit with his back pressed against it as he slid to the floor with the backpack beside him. There was a nagging thought at the back of his mind about surveillance that he couldn't explain, but he listened to it nonetheless. He sat in a manner where his body and the closet door would hide the laptop screen even if there were cameras.

Everything was still in the backpack except for Boyd's gun, and the photo album with his family pictures. A surge of protectiveness went through him, but he forced it down. He hadn't understood why he'd grabbed the gun at the last moment, but according to Kassian it'd been a gift to Boyd for his birthday. If Kassian had known that much, he'd likely just removed it for safekeeping. In its place, Kassian had put a cell phone. It looked flimsy, like one of the prepaid kind, which meant it likely didn't have a name attached to a bill. It was already programmed with a few numbers: Kassian's, Carhart's, Emilio's, and Ryan's.

Ryan... The name instantly connected to the kid with the glasses from the courtyard.

Danny left the phone in the backpack for now, and took out the laptop instead. He booted it up and felt around in the backpack for the USB. He didn't find it immediately, but after some groping he felt it along the seam and tucked into an inner, hidden pocket.

Not bothering with a perusal of his background information again, Danny went straight to the USB. There were a number of files on it, and it didn't seem to be organized in any particular way. From what Danny had learned about Boyd in the past month as well as all he'd been told, that seemed atypical which meant that it was likely deliberate.

There were several art files, scanned images of things Boyd had sketched as well as images that looked like he'd drawn them on a tablet.
There were random bits of research about various things that Danny mostly ignored until he got to a folder that was buried within three other folders. He opened it and an array of meticulously organized items appeared. Hesitating only briefly, Danny began to go through them.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised that it was about him. Him as a test subject for something called Project Zero. A lot of it was nearly incomprehensible to him without prior knowledge of the scientific language and terminology used, but he understood enough: they'd been making minor alterations on him for over a decade, but it seemed that it had been suggested way before then.

There was a note to a Marshal Connors from someone named Dr. Scheible that dated back as early as 2005. Danny wasn't sure about his own age anymore, but he didn't think he could have been much older than 13 or 14 years old at the time.

_The child is exceptional, but there is no evidence of illegal modifications in his system. However, his extraordinary pain tolerance and endurance suggests that he may be a candidate for the superior agent project._

There was no other mention of the "superior agent project" for years, until sometime in 2013. Danny flipped back to the original Hsin file on the laptop, and saw that the date coincided with the span of time that he had been incarcerated on the Fourth floor following the mass killings in the city. Apparently this Connors person had left him alone until Sin had started seeming like he may be a problem in the long run.

It had started with tweaks to his speed and strength and when his body didn't reject the enhancements as other test subjects had, they'd begun doing more. There were large chunks of time where they had been exceptionally
prolific with their work on him but then other spans of time when there was little activity at all.

Danny didn’t understand the lapse and sudden surges, but it seemed like it had come to a head somewhere in late 2020 and early 2021 before dropping off completely. They’d gone all out during that time, and made every possible enhancement that they were fully competent at: they maxed out speed and strength enhancements, eyesight, hearing...

Lips tightening, Danny began to click the links that were attached to the references to his new enhancements. Enhancements. Not modifications. This wasn’t anything like the illegal, risky gene splicing drugs that people used to modify themselves. This was real. They’d turned him into something that was barely even human anymore.

There were pieces of mission reports attached as evidence of his improved body, as well as video clips. He read a mission report from late spring 2019 where he’d taken on an entire base while carrying an injured and unconscious Boyd as well as a captive. Another report from the fall of 2019 where he’d killed nearly twenty men single-handedly, other reports that noted things like his speed, and an analysis of injuries sustained in the line of duty in the summer of 2020 following a mission in Mexico. There were clinical notations of his rate of recovery, metabolism, and responsiveness to new procedures.

Video clips of him in the training room working out tirelessly, another clip from a mission where he appeared in the shot after having jumped down from a considerable height—his feet thudded against the ground before he took off running again, dodging civilians by throwing himself sideways and running along the side of a wall before he flipped forward and disappeared from the shot.
More surveillance footage from 2023 of him on a mission with Boyd and Emilio where he’d destroyed a structure in a nightclub. There were even clips of him having sex with Boyd, two of them. One in which the bedrail was bent in his grip while he fucked Boyd, and another where it showed the aftermath of a particularly aggressive bout of sex that led to various bruises on Boyd afterward. Danny watched that one repeatedly until he was positive that Boyd was just as into it as he—as Sin was, and that he truly did not seem to mind the roughness.

It was all so much that Danny had to stop for awhile. He paced the apartment and got a bottle of water from the stocked fridge. There was so much information compacted into the files, but not the kind he wanted.

He wanted human interaction, not proof that he was basically a goddamn cyborg.

Determined, he returned to the room and hunched over the laptop again. He began methodically going through the video files, looking for anything that showed how he’d interacted with people—with Boyd.

Bypassing the statistical data, he followed a thread that led to items about flaws and questions. It focused on his mental instability and how to deal with psychotic episodes without "damaging the material." The scientists had doubted the administration’s use of drugs, shock treatments and mental torture and thought it may cause him to prematurely shut down. There was an e-mail written by Dr. Frederick that was from the January 2022:

Alternate methods of control must be utilized by administration. The material is in danger of permanent mental damage if various uses of torment continue at the current rate. Compassion and tolerance must be considered when he succumbs to psychosis.
Frederick’s proof came in the way of surveillance videos, audio files and write-ups of incidences on the compound.

There were videos of Sin losing control during episodes juxtaposed with other videos that proved his responsiveness to kindness. Him slaughtering a guard captain in his cell overlaid by a guard shoving him against a wall in the training room; Boyd intervened there and the dark menace on Sin’s face had slowly eased away.

There was a clip of him and Carhart talking in the apartment and then somewhere else on the compound. The only thing that really stood out about it was that it had begun with him storming out furiously, and the general was able to calm him down just by talking, and a hand on his arm.

It was near the end of the list that Danny finally found what he wanted. There was a video of him and Boyd hugging each other fiercely in some kind of medical room.

"Please don’t hate me ever again. I can’t take it. I know it’s not good to tell you this but I can’t live knowing that you hate me."

The timestamp said January 2022, and it wasn’t difficult to figure out that this was likely part of the reason why Kassian had said they had an on-again, off-again relationship.

Danny watched the desperate way they clung to each other, the way his former self sounded close to tears as he buried his face against Boyd. It looked fucking traumatic, like they weren’t even together at the time, but somehow it made all of this awful research worth it.

There was so much evidence that he was a horrible, sub-human being, and very little evidence that he’d actually been something Boyd would realistically want. But this was proof. Even broken up, they’d apparently loved each other.
Danny closed his eyes, and tilted his head back against the door. He wanted to remember, he wanted to remember everything and not just bits and pieces. He forced himself to calm down, to focus, to fucking remember something.

He sat there like that until the laptop nearly slid off his lap as his body grew tired. He sat there until he was barely conscious and as usual, that was when things started sliding into place like a slideshow of photo stills and brief recordings.

Him choking Boyd, lifting him up off the floor and staring up into his blank face.

Dashing Boyd to the floor in a warehouse to get cover before spinning around with a gun in each hand, and unleashing an onslaught of violence on the men inside.

Shoving Boyd against a wall in a hotel, and kissing him fiercely.

Watching Boyd sleep in a narrow, twin bed as sunlight streamed through a window and they lay tangled together and sweaty.

Waking up in a white lab room, strapped to a bed.

A dark tunnel, and the sound of splashing as he ran.

Boyd slamming into him in his dark bedroom, and a gunshot.

Carhart smiling at him, looking exasperated and fond.

Going through music on a laptop with a serious frown on his face only to look up and see Boyd watching him in amusement.

A gray cat.
Him, covered in blood and pressed against a wall in the corner of a cell. Boyd kneeling beside him and swearing that he’d find out the truth.

Emilio and he screaming at each other.

He and Boyd shouting at each other, arguing over a mission, parameters, about Sin doing whatever he wanted and discounting Boyd’s abilities because he wasn’t a super agent too. Shoving each other, slamming Boyd against the floor, kissing.

Carhart and Emilio watching each other across a conference table, and looking away when the other noticed.

Bullets, blood, pain, and Boyd shielding him as bullets slammed into the blond’s armor.

When Danny’s eyes opened again, the sky was lightening. He’d fallen asleep and he remembered more bits, more pieces. He remembered fighting for each other. But it still wasn’t enough.

He had to report to the training center at 0800 hours, and as Danny shut down the laptop, he knew exactly what he was going to do.
"Three weeks."

Carhart tilted his head back against the plush, high-backed sofa that curved along the wall of the alcove. His words were almost lost in the music that vibrated the inside of the club. "Three weeks and nothing."

"Not nothing."

Carhart lifted his beer and didn't bother to look at Emilio. "Didn't they teach you about double negatives in your extensive deportment training?" he asked dully, pointedly ignoring the distinct sound of Emilio snorting lines of cocaine.

"Yep." Emilio sat up straight, and shifted so that he was sitting closer to Carhart. "But it still ain't nothing. Ryan and Owen have heard things, stuff that make it sound like Janus might have a use for keeping people alive. There was a kid from Euro division got himself caught, and managed to escape. Said they'd had him for months. He's the only one we've heard about so far that got grabbed like Boyd was instead of assassinated."

"And he was fucking insane when he escaped."

Emilio slumped against the sofa, and knocked his knee against Carhart's. One hand dropped to the general's thigh and slid down. "Still alive though. That's important."

Carhart dropped his own hand on top of Emilio's. "Says the man who has barely spoken a full sentence to his recently resurrected son in two weeks just because he can't remember what a terrible father you've always been."
"Why don't you go fuck yourself, Zach? Or better yet—go fuck the blonde cunt that's due here in roughly four minutes. I think the alcove across the way is free."

"Is that the one you fucked Kassian in?"

"No sweetheart, that was this one. I think you're sitting right where he was before his fucking knees went in the air."

Carhart shoved Emilio's hand away from him, and drained his beer. "You're a real scumbag, Vega."

"And you love it, baby. Don't front."

Carhart looked at Emilio again, drawn to the low tone and that deep voice even if he didn't want to be. The senior agent's eyes were bloodshot, he had two-day stubble, his hair was spiked up and wrecked, but somehow in his faded black shirt with sloppy, rolled up sleeves, Emilio was effortlessly hot. But then the heavy curtain slid to the side, Vivienne stepped into the small space, and Carhart's attention completely diverted.

Vivienne's outfit was a far-cry from her typical attire. She wore a pale-colored mini-skirt and a black shirt that exposed her shoulders and back. Her hair was gathered loosely over one shoulder, and although her makeup was simple, it made her eyes look even bluer.

When she sat down across from them, he saw weariness in her face. Her expression wasn't quite as hard and cold as usual. Carhart's eyes swept over her, and he leaned forward. The alcove was small and he almost reached out to touch her face but he stopped himself before doing so in front of Emilio.

Although Seong didn't seem to have any doubts that Emilio was in with her, Vivienne had suggested they make it more concrete. It had been her own
suggestion that Emilio inform Seong about Vivienne’s efforts to find Boyd despite the edict against it, and the result had been that Vivienne was put in isolation on the Fourth for the past two weeks. She hadn’t been tortured, but the deprival of outside contact and basic needs had clearly had an effect on her.

"I would have arrived earlier, but this venue is difficult to navigate unharassed."

"Pobrecita," Emilio drawled, not sitting up from his slouch as he lit a cigarette. "Someone get handsy?"

She waved a hand wordlessly and looked toward the curtain. Her eyebrows drew together slightly and her lips turned subtly down on the edges but she didn’t answer.

"How are you feeling?" Carhart asked as Emilio simultaneously asked: "How was incarceration?"

Her lips briefly turned down further on the edges before any expression wiped from her face. "I am fine." She looked over at the two of them; lingering slightly on Carhart, moving to Emilio, then ending somewhere between the two of them. "The timing was appropriate."

Carhart frowned slightly but filed the questions away for later. He could feel Emilio watching him as he watched Vivienne, and didn’t seriously consider asking more until he could speak to her alone.

"I'm sorry about the location," he said finally. "But I think our usual locations have become overused."

"She's fine, white knight. Let's get on with this shit." Emilio blew smoke at both of them. "This little plot needs to be finished pronto, kids. The Boyd
thing has that bitch on high alert to start terminating motherfuckers who dissent. Where we at with everything?"

Vivienne set a sleek black clutch next to her on the seat. "The virus team is 80% complete."

"How fast can Bree get it done?" Carhart asked.

"A week. If their current progress rate continues, perhaps earlier."

"Awesome," Emilio said, eyebrows raising. "I was having some doubts about Wonder Dyke's skills until Ryan and Owen got on board, and started making alternate egress plans with Douglas just in case we can't be wiped from the system in time."

Carhart considered that for a moment. It was good to have a backup plan just in case the virus failed or they weren't able to get it off in time, anyway. The Agency functioned 90% on technology and still, he somehow didn't fully trust it solely for a life-or-death situation like this. When their egress plan would have to be put into play, the virus was supposed to rid the Agency's network of all agent and staff data completely and deactivate any tracking devices that they may have installed in individuals with or without their knowledge.

"Anything concrete?"

"Nothing as good as the virus, but the training center has jammers, scramblers, cloaking devices—we could try to stay off the radar but we'd be ten steps ahead instead of totally invisible," Emilio said as he took another drag. The cherry of the cigarette glowed red in the dim light of the alcove.

"Still good to have a plan B." Carhart looked at Vivienne and then at Emilio before rolling his shoulders slightly. Usually Vivienne ran these meetings but he automatically took the reins. There was something off about
her today, and with the combined stress of being sent to the Fourth and no leads on Boyd, he wasn't surprised.

"We were all supposed to have finalized candidates today for who will be included in the inner circle of people who will be escaping with us if this comes to pass. We're also supposed to decide whose termination orders will be deemed as a red alert to set the plan into action."

"It is obvious that Hsin and Boyd should be included," Vivienne said. "I suggest Thierry Beauvais as well. His expertise will aid in those who choose to disappear into Europe."

Carhart frowned slightly at that but couldn't disagree. "At what point would you tell him?"

"In the coming week, should it be agreed upon here. I will discern prior to providing any details whether he would be amenable."

"Well, I don't like him but I have no real basis for disagreeing. He has enough contacts globally to be an asset in securing safe houses and new identities for the people who will be escaping with us," Carhart said.

Emilio just gestured vaguely.

"Bree, Ryan, and Owen obviously since they're working on the virus and are continuously monitoring any red flags. Doug obviously, and I'm not leaving Brian." Carhart said the last part firmly, looking between Vivienne and Emilio. "He's covered for me for all of these meetings, and they would destroy him in interrogation attempts."

Vivienne's lips tightened subtly on the edges. Her neutral gaze turned away to focus on the wall. "If that is your criteria, then Samuel should be considered."
Emilio nodded, and Carhart gave him a curious look but didn't bother to ask. He returned his gaze to Vivienne again, and realized that if Aisha had not died, Vivienne would have wanted her to go as well. He frowned, and once again fought the urge to reach over and squeeze her arm.

"So, Kassian suggested a candidate," Emilio piped up as he lit another cigarette. "That Blair kid. Apparently he's all disgruntled and hateful now, and he's a legit pilot. I mean I can fly if y'all want to leave it up to just me, but leaving it up to one person probably ain't the best plan since transport is the only way we're pulling this shit off and if I get shot in the head or something, y'all is fucked."

"A second pilot is preferable," Vivienne said in agreement. "However, is he trustworthy? Merely being 'disgruntled and hateful' does not on its own provide qualification for this."

"Dunno yet," Emilio admitted. "Doug is scoping him out now and he said he'll give you the details to go over by tomorrow. I guess I may as well bring up that Luke Gerant is keeping an eye on the tunnel for me, but he ain't on the list to come with. He's just doing it 'cause he likes helping, I guess. Freak."

One pale blond eyebrow ticked up subtly as Vivienne turned her attention to Emilio. "Are you planning to inform everyone on compound about our plans?"

"Who said I told him shit?"

"What excuse did you provide him as reason for needing the tunnels to be monitored?"

Emilio rolled his eyes, and blew smoke in her face again. "I didn't give him a reason, I left shit pretty vague. He wanted a favor, I wanted a favor, he knows I'll rip his balls off if he opens his mouth, and he won't anyway. Dude
apparently had a major jones for bending the rules for my boy and Boyd all these years. If y'all big dogs bothered to talk to the fucking peons every once in awhile, you'd know they're pretty useful once you get friendly."

Vivienne's gaze slid away disinterestedly.

"Anyway..." Carhart shook his head, and could already see that the civil portion of this meeting was drawing to a close. It had been nice while it lasted. "So Vivienne and I discussed the fact that it may be unrealistic to set the plan into motion for every single person who is actually involved with it. It might make more sense to set it into motion only if specific, key people are red flagged for termination."

This caught Emilio's attention, and he jerked his scathing gaze away from Vivienne. "Wait, what? Which key people?"

"You are on the list." Vivienne's tone had turned a little cool, although nowhere near what it usually was. "There is no need to fret."

"What people?" he repeated, ignoring her.

Carhart hesitated before saying: "You, me, Vivienne, Hsin, Boyd—assuming he is found before this should ever occur, and Ryan."

Emilio stared at him and Vivienne incredulously. "So you're just saying fuck everyone else?"

"This plan began with the intention of saving key people, several of whom were in danger of termination should extreme measures not be taken," Vivienne replied evenly. "It has only been through further consideration that it has expanded beyond what it was initially. If we already planned such a course of action without knowing Hsin was alive and could be saved, and if we are moving forward on the possibility of leaving prior to Boyd's return, why is it we should go out of our way to risk everyone's lives for those recently
added? There are some losses that can be accounted for even if they are not preferred."

"Oh, so to fuck with people like Doug and Owen and Bree, who you motherfuckers just plan to use and endanger along the way?" he demanded, voice rising as his lip curled into a sneer.

"Do you act so differently when making your own plans?" Vivienne asked coolly, her eyebrow arching up. "I seem to recall a certain Jane Doe you abandoned quite readily to the Fourth the moment she was no longer of use to you."

"Fuck you, bitch." Emilio stood up so abruptly that the table skidded back against her knees. He flicked his lit cigarette at her, and Carhart rose to clamp a hand down on his arm.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Don't ever—"

"Don't ever what?" Emilio demanded, yanking his arm away and shoving Carhart back against the wall. "You fucking deserve each other."

That being said, Emilio ripped the curtain back and strode away. Carhart exhaled slowly, and clenched his jaw.

"He didn't actually burn you, did he?"

"No," she said, but her eyes were narrowed and her jaw tightened slightly. The cold cast of her features was back as she looked distastefully down at the cigarette where it had fallen on the seat next to her. Pushing it to the floor with the corner of her clutch, she said suddenly, "He aggravates me."

"No shit." Carhart sat down next to her, and crushed the cigarette with his boot. "He gets homicidal in lieu of emotional. I'm not surprised, honestly. He's known Doug and Bree both for over twenty years."
Vivienne sighed and leaned back against the seat. She watched Carhart for a long moment and then shook her head, bringing a hand up to her temples. "Do what you wish with this," she said somewhat tiredly. "If you feel his is a compelling argument, the alert can be expanded to the entirety of the group."

"Well, what do you think?" he asked. In truth, he'd been troubled by all of this from the start. It made sense to keep the group small, especially considering they'd all managed to function with the staggering losses of Sin and Boyd in the past, but allowing Owen and Bree to be terminated without action would be difficult if it ever came to be. "Can we do without the others if they died in advance of the plan going into action?"

"It would be problematic finding suitable replacements at the last moment anyway. There is little point in failing the long term by being incapable of following through on the short term."

"Okay." Relieved, Carhart let his back sink into the back of the sofa as he turned his head to look at her steadily. "I'll let him sulk about it for awhile."

Her lips lifted on the edges. "Good," she murmured, and dropped her hand back to her side. Even so, despite the small alcove she still wasn't looking at Carhart; her gaze had settled instead on her lap.

He raised a hand hesitantly and brushed his fingers along the side of her face. "What are you thinking about? Boyd?"

"Yes." She didn't move away from his touch but she also didn't lean into it. "And Cedrick."

"What about him?"

Vivienne continued to stare at her lap for a moment before she drew in a deep breath that she let out in a sigh. Her lips lifted faintly again but it
seemed humorless, and when she met Carhart's eyes it was one of the times when it seemed more open than usual. "Have I ever said that I felt at times Boyd received the best and worst attributes of Cedrick's and my personalities?"

Carhart nodded wordlessly.

"I have long realized that Boyd, like Cedrick, seems incapable of stopping prior to finding the answers of whatever it is that he has decided he must know. As a journalist, it seemed a necessary quality for Cedrick and, as he had been that way the entirety of our acquaintance, I did not question it. As for Boyd, at times I found it vexing. I do not know whether this is one of those times; whether I wish this particular information had remained buried."

She shook her head, looking away with a subtle draw of her eyebrows. For a moment it seemed she was going to stop talking but then she continued. "On the day he was abducted Boyd had uncovered some rather alarming news about Cedrick, which Kassian later shared with me." Her lips thinned and eyes narrowed faintly before meeting Carhart's eyes again. "Specifically, that Cedrick formed the Journalist Guild and was later assassinated by this organization in part due to that and in part due to information he uncovered which is not specified."

Sitting up straight, Carhart stared at her with widened eyes. "What? I thought he was killed in the bombings in New York."

"I thought this as well. It was what I was told, however of course there was no body." Her legs crossed and hands tightened over one bare knee. "A valentine operative who resembled me was assigned the case with the hope he might be vulnerable toward her, however he refused any advances. She was unable to gain any information from him and ultimately killed him. It seems they had planned a different cover story but when the bombs decimated New York City, it was more convenient to claim he had followed a
lead to the city and died in the bombs. Such actions were normal and believable for Cedrick, so I did not question it when I was told he was there. What I questioned, instead, was whether it was possible he had survived the blast."

Carhart shook his head slowly, almost disbelieving. It seemed that every step of the way, the Agency had played a role in Boyd's life. Taken away his father, his mother, his lover, and now they were throwing him away. Jaw clenching as anger coursed through him, Carhart reached over and put his hand on hers again.

"Are you planning to investigate this further?"

She was still a moment and then shook her head, just the faintest amount. Her gaze had traveled to his hand. "He is long gone, no matter how it occurred, but we are still alive. The timing of this is such that I cannot investigate further without the potential of disrupting our plans to flee."

She turned one hand over and wrapped her fingers around his hand, her eyes meeting his. There was little to no pressure in her fingers but her hand was warm against Carhart's palm. "Even so, it is somewhat of a relief to have discussed the information with someone else."

"I wish I could have talked to you sooner," he admitted. "It's bad enough that you were put in isolation without any knowledge of what's happening with Boyd. I had no idea there was so much more." He lifted her hand and pressed it against his lips briefly, before bringing their clasped hands down to the couch again.

"It provided me ample time to reconsider my life in context of the truth of his death." She paused and added, "However, it was frustrating having no access to any information or databases. I had thought perhaps by the time I
was released, Boyd would have returned or we would have at least found a body."

Carhart frowned, but didn't comment on the last part. He refused to even accept the possibility that Boyd was dead, as naive as it was.

"I went over the transcripts of Ivan Andel's continued interrogations. It was pretty frustrating, to tell you the truth. The man has given away nothing. All he does is recite an impressive list of Agency crimes and corresponding cover-ups in the media when he's asked questions. We can't even discount that he *isn't* the mole based on Boyd's abduction. For all we know, that is a result of the directory being sold to someone prior to Ivan's capture if he even is the one responsible."

"As I understand it, although the alarm was armed at the time of their entrance it did not activate," Vivienne said. There was faint pressure on Carhart's hand as she squeezed it and then let go. "As I knew I would be sent to isolation regardless, I took the opportunity prior to that to access the list of agents' alarm codes. I could not detect that anyone had accessed it, however they could have erased their presence. Assuming they did not access it, this either means they knew Boyd's code or they had technology available to bypass the system. Do we have any indication from the witness's account as to which it could be?"

Carhart shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. All she said was that it was flashing red which means it was armed, but she didn't see what they did to get in. There is technology that would allow them to bypass it, especially if they did recon on a day that Boyd's neighbor wasn't looking, but there's no real way to know. A good hacker can always erase his tracks."

Her lips ticked downward slightly but she didn't otherwise comment. Her hands rested in her lap. "While I was indisposed, were any other additions considered for our egress group?"
He started to reply but was interrupted by a loud moan that hitched nearby. It was followed by a loud, clattering sound and then the steady, staccato of skin slapping skin. Carhart raised an eyebrow at her, and shrugged. Emilio sure did know how to pick a spot.

"Three people, but we nixed all of them."

"Who?"

"Hughes, Harriet Stevens, and Casey Archer."

She nodded. "I can understand why Hughes was discounted, considering his involvement with Jordan Hunt. What were the reasons given for nominating and ultimately discarding the others?"

The sounds in the next alcove grew louder, and were now accompanied by rhythmic grunting.

"Archer is one of the few from my, Emilio, and Doug's generation of field agents and is extremely competent in the field. He's a good scout and sniper if it should happen that we do need to go on the run. However, approaching him about a plan like this is risky and that's why we decided not to suggest it to you."

A man's voice started demanding to be fucked harder, and Carhart shifted on the couch.

"As for Harriet, she's proven loyal in the past when it came to helping Sin and Boyd, and is a close friend to Kassian. However, even he admitted that he doesn't know where she stands at the moment. Her performance has been iffy lately, and he said she's been difficult to get ahold of. Something about relationship problems distracting her."

When there was the sudden slam against the wall next to them and the voices only grew louder, Vivienne's lips pinched. She looked sidelong in the
direction of the noise before settling her gaze back on Carhart. "Is there more?"

"No."

She nodded and reached for her clutch. "This venue has become rather distracting."

Carhart hesitated only briefly before asking: "Do you want to go somewhere together?"

She paused and for the first time seemed to look at him fully. Her gaze traveled along his face, pausing at his lips before returning to his eyes. Although she had seemed ready to stand, now she settled back into the seat and set her clutch on her lap. There was a brief moment of silence before she spoke.

"Zachary, you are the only person I have felt any manner of connection with since Cedrick's death. You are the only person I trust. However, I no longer wish to continue our arrangement from before."

Carhart's eyebrows rose, and he stared at her silently for a moment. "Okay," he said slowly. "I'd noticed that you had created some distance, but can I ask what changed?"

Her expression pinched slightly and her fingers tightened briefly on her clutch. "I knew from the beginning that you were tied with Emilio and likely always would be. It was for that reason I suggested you become involved with him in the first place. However, despite your early reservations you have shown no interest in stopping with him even once there was no longer an order to hide behind. It seems to me that you plan to continue with him into the indefinite future. Am I correct?"
His immediate reaction was to say no, he did not plan to continue this arrangement forever, but the words didn't come out. Instead, he cleared his throat and ran a hand over his mouth and jaw.

"I thought it didn't bother you," he said instead.

"It did not at first but over time something became clear to me." Her eyes did not shift from his, although her eyebrows drew down. "If we continue, it seems very possible I will develop feelings for you. If you wished to be only with me, this would not be an issue, but I do not believe you would ever leave Emilio. In the end, I would become dependent on you and I would be the only one hurt, and you would be able to continue your life unaffected with Emilio."

A faint frown pulled at her lips even as her hand reached out, resting on Carhart's knee with a faint squeeze. "Zachary, I care for you but it is difficult enough for me to become involved with anyone. I cannot go into something knowing it will be one-sided. It would make me feel as though I would be giving control over to someone who will not give me equal control of them in return."

At that, Carhart stared at her in surprise. Out of all of the things that he'd expected her to say, this was not one of them. "I had no idea," he said automatically. "I honestly had no idea or that things... may have changed."

She shook her head and withdrew her hand. Her attention turned down to her clutch, which she opened briefly and closed. "There is no reason you should have known. I was not fully aware of the extent of the situation until my isolation."

A silence lapsed between them, and Carhart dragged his gaze away from her face. She looked so lovely that his immediate reaction was to reach out and reassure her. He wanted to say that things weren't the way she thought they were, and that he could reciprocate fully.
In truth, he did think it was possible. He had never thought seriously about a long-term relationship with her, or something more than what they had, but he knew that he cared about her. But then there was Emilio. He’d told Emilio that nothing like that would ever happen with Vivienne, and Carhart knew that the moment that changed... things with Emilio would go on a downward spiral.

Sighing, Carhart’s eyebrows knitted together as he shook his head slightly. He couldn't say the things that were coming to mind, and he couldn't reassure her. Saying that he was planning to end things with Emilio would be a complete lie.

"I wish things weren't so complicated," he said finally. "And I hope this situation didn't cause you any more stress than you’re already under. I care about you, and I enjoy being with you."

"It has not yet but I imagine it would have in the future." She shook her head and the frown became more pronounced. She stood abruptly and smoothed her skirt, her tone turning more brisk. "At any rate, I do not wish for you to pity me. I informed you of the reason for my decision so you would not believe I thought poorly of you as you might have otherwise. You are still welcome to contact me should you need a friend."

He nodded and stood as well. The troubled feeling wouldn't fade despite her words, but all he said was: "I appreciate you talking to me about this."

Her shoulder moved in a subtle shrug. "I will see you on compound."

Vivienne gave him one last look before leaving the alcove. He stared at the heavy curtains even after they had swung shut behind her. The general waited for several minutes before he left as well.
The realization that he wanted them both wasn't one that surprised him, but the fact that Emilio was the one that he couldn't do without did. Or maybe he was just surprised that he'd finally admitted it.

He took the train, and called Emilio as it hurtled through the city. The other man didn't answer, but the general decided against going to Emilio's apartment in Bedford. Getting off in All Saints instead, Carhart walked to the compound from the station. The walk didn't take long, but he enjoyed the silence while it lasted.

As soon as he was in the confines of the Agency, a strange sense of claustrophobia engulfed him. For the first time in over two decades, he was very aware of the fact that the compound was essentially a prison. The guards and cameras had new meaning for him now, and he often found himself wondering how Sin had dealt with it all of these years.

The thought of the younger Vega caused Carhart to slow his pace, and he looked over his shoulder at the training complex. In the three weeks since Sin had returned to the compound, it seemed that Seong had him either training or being tested in the lab more often than not. That combined with the fact that Carhart kept a cautious distance did not make for the reunion he would have wanted. Not that Sin, or Danny, remembered enough for it to matter anyway.

Turning, Carhart started towards the complex. He slipped his hands into his pockets as a light rain began to fall, and considered the man that had just seemingly returned from the dead.

For all that Sin had not lost his steely glares, and quiet seriousness, some of the differences in his personality were startling. This Sin was not as quick to obviously show impatience, was more willing to listen and take advice as long as he wasn't being coddled, more intuitive and definitely more
Faded

expressive of his feelings. This Sin was dramatically more approachable, but Carhart missed the unyielding intensity and brusqueness of the old Sin.

It was difficult to approach this new Sin sometimes, because their interaction was so different. Formerly hard-won smiles and agreement came so easily that sometimes Carhart found himself at a loss. He was so accustomed to having to prove himself to Sin and fight for every slight smirk, that this completely put him off balance.

What threw him the most was the fact that Sin had had enough time in another location to actually become this new person. He'd picked up mannerisms and speech patterns that were completely unlike himself, and it really emphasized that passage of time. Carhart had mourned for over a year, and for over a year Sin had only been a couple of hours away.

Boyd finding Sin had likely been pure luck and coincidence, but the fact that he'd hid it for months still made a mote of resentment form inside of the general. He understood the reasoning behind it, and he knew it had been the best decision when there had been so many unknown variables, but he couldn't help thinking that he wished Boyd had trusted him more.

Picking up his pace when the rain began to come down harder, Carhart ducked into the training complex just as the first crack of thunder sounded. He could hear the rain pelting down onto the roof as he made his way through the corridors. He knew that Sin would be training in the observation room; he'd been assigned to train there almost every day for the past few weeks. It was lined with a two-way mirror, and was self-contained in that one rarely needed to leave that particular area since it was equipped with its own weapons and utilities.

He stepped into the darkened room that sat on the other side of the two-way mirror, and was surprised to see Emilio there. The senior agent had his hands planted on a table and was leaning toward the mirror, his green
eyes narrowed intently. He was focused completely on an apparent sparring session between Sin and Jenny White.

"Date end early?"

Carhart scoffed and joined Emilio by the mirror. He had no idea why Sin was fighting Jenny; she had just returned to active duty after a slow-healing injury. Carhart didn't see how pairing a freshly healed agent with a veritable fighting machine was valuable.

"Don't ever assault Vivienne in any way, ever again. I mean it."

This time Emilio scoffed, and he gave Carhart a scathing look. "If you call that assault, you're in the wrong line of business, buddy."

"I mean it."

"Yeah, I'll consider myself warned."

Carhart looked at Emilio steadily, and put a hand on the other man's arm. "I know you're used to doing and saying whatever the fuck you want, but there are limits. And unless you want to have problems with me, you won't do something like that again. She's one of the few people who are in this with us, and she's been in it with me from the beginning. I care about her, just like I care about Hsin, and Boyd, and Ryan, and I wouldn't want you treating them like that either."

Emilio's eyes narrowed slightly, and he shrugged Carhart's hand off. His lips pursed but after a moment he returned his attention to Sin. He didn't say anything, and Carhart just shook his head before looking at the mirror as well.

Sin was in a loose fighting stance, and was easily evading Jenny's attacks. Her form and technique were flawless, but he countered and dodged every move almost preemptively. When Carhart looked at Sin's face, he
expected to see the bored, irritated expression that would have been the norm in the past, but now Sin seemed to be actively paying attention to the fight.

"It's strange seeing him now."

"Tell me about it. He should have stomped her out by now. He's being nice." Emilio said the word with disgust heavy in his tone.

"Maybe he doesn't feel the need to humiliate people during training sessions anymore."

"Maybe he's fucking her," Emilio suggested as Sin flipped Jenny effortlessly, and pinned her back to his chest. He mimed breaking her neck, and her face wrinkled in a frown. "I wouldn't blame him. She comes like a SuperSoaker."

Carhart sighed. "How would you know that?"

Emilio gave him an incredulous stare, and the general just shook his head. "Nevermind. I don't want to know. Regardless, I really doubt it. Apparently Danny is as much in love with Boyd as Hsin is."

"People and their fucking monogamy."

Carhart almost commented on Emilio's tendency for psychotic jealousy and his apparent desire to have their own arrangement be one-sidedly monogamous, but he didn't bother. Instead, Carhart kept watching Sin. Jenny had left the training area, and the room was now being transitioned for something else.

The mats were cleared away, and Sin spent some time staring down at an array of guns on a long table. He picked them up, examined it, and then picked up another. A closer look told Carhart that they weren't typical guns; they were prepping him for target practice with holograms.
For the next several minutes they watched silently as Sin dodged lasers, and fired his own as the holograms materialized all around him. His movements were fluid, confident, and fast enough that sometimes Carhart had a hard time keeping up. It didn't seem as though Sin had spent a year without training, or that he didn't remember his old training. The years that he'd spent as a living weapon seemed ingrained in him.

But after a moment Emilio said: "He's fucking it up."

Sin flipped backwards and dropped into a crouch, raising his gun and shooting three holograms in quick succession.

"How do you figure that?"

Emilio shifted again, and his eyes narrowed into slits. He pointed at his son through the mirror. "He's not fucking going for kill shots. Watch."

Carhart's eyebrows drew together, and he tried to follow what Emilio, and likely what Seong and Katsaros would be noticing when they played back the recordings. But Sin's hands moved so quickly that it was difficult to catch at first since the holograms disappeared almost instantly.

"There," Emilio said after another figure had been dispatched. He pointed at one of the holograms a moment later. "Watch the one on the left, and follow where the laser goes when he shoots."

Carhart watched and noticed a flicker in the hologram near its thigh before it disappeared completely. The frown on his face deepened, and he tried to follow Sin's movements closer.

"Is it that obvious? I can barely tell."

"It's obvious because I know my kid," Emilio said shortly. "I trained him since he was fucking four foot nothing, and fifty pounds." There was a brief
pause, and Emilio pointed at Sin again. "Like it or not, killing is natural for him, memories or fucking not. It's in him, like a fucking reflex, like breathing."

Carhart's eyes shifted from Sin to Emilio as he spoke.

"Every time he raises the gun, he automatically points for a vital. Heart, head, neck—and then he shifts to somewhere non-vital. When they playback and slow it down, they're going to know."

"Why would he—" Carhart stopped, and ran a hand over his jaw. "Does he not want to kill?"

Emilio's mouth twisted up slightly, and he shook his head. "Nah. It ain't that. The fucking kid is smart. He's doing it on purpose."

There was a brief silence between them, and Carhart sighed quietly. "I hope he knows what he's doing."

===

Danny had spent a week in the lab building after coming back to the Agency. The two weeks after that had consisted of twelve hours a day of training and was sometimes followed by an hour or two of additional testing in the lab. They hooked him up to machines and did various stress tests and simulations, and didn't bother to tell him about their findings.

He didn't get to interact much with anyone except for on his walks to and from specific locations on the compound. However, the brief conversations he did participate in or overhear made one thing clear: Sin was a pariah, and was considered to be insane.

In light of this news, Seong's decision made more sense. Why give him his memories back and take the chance of him becoming an unstable,
unpredictable person again when he was functional like this? It would never happen unless he took away some of that functionality.

Danny left the observation room without bothering to look for his father or Carhart. He'd known they were there, could hear their whole conversation, and had no desire to seek them out when they didn't bother to make their presence known. Instead, he walked directly to the changing rooms.

He stripped off his sweat-soaked shirt as soon as he entered, and kicked off his sneakers. He was down to his briefs when Jenny came around the corner, wearing only a towel. Her dark brows rose, and the way her eyes flicked down his torso and to the bulge in his underwear wasn't even subtle.

"Too bad you're gay," she said after a moment, and grinned.

Danny snorted and threw his own towel over his shoulder. "I've been with women. I'm still not interested, though. Sorry."

Jenny's eyebrows disappeared into her damp bangs. "You're sorry? Wow. I think I like you being all nice and apologetic."

Danny walked around her, and headed to the showers. "Don't get used to it."

The faucet squeaked as he turned the hot water on full blast, and he didn't flinch when the spray scalded his skin. He pressed his forehead against the cool tile of the wall, and closed his eyes.

Three weeks and no Boyd. Three weeks and no more memories. Three weeks and well over three thousand missed opportunities to make a killing shot or blow.

Today he'd pushed it, and hadn't even made one. He went easy on Jenny, he talked to her and pretended that talking to her made it impossible to go anything but easy. He showed them that Danny was too soft to be an
assassin and a ruthless killer, but his speed and strength made him a resource that they couldn't possibly give up.

Carhart and Emilio's conversation hadn't been the only one that he'd overheard.

*It's not working like this.*

*His skills are unparalleled, but the edge is lost, that savagery—*

*He can be retaught.*

*He needs to remember what he is.*

It was just fragments of a deliberately soft-spoken conversation, but it was enough. Danny shifted and turned his face up to the spray. He raked his hands through the long, wet tangles of his hair and wondered how much longer they would take to put him back to normal.

He stayed in the shower for several more moments, letting the spray beat against him and what should have been his sore muscles. When he was done, he turned off the water, wrapped the towel around his waist and padded out into the locker room.

Danny had known someone was out there before even entering the room, but he'd thought it was possibly Jenny still changing or perhaps waiting to give him another shot.

Instead, he found two guards.

"Problem?"

"No problem, Agent Vega," the taller of the two said calmly. "We were waiting until you had completed your shower."
Danny looked from one to the other, and flexed his hands slightly. These guards were from the labs; there was no doubt. Typical Agency guards hauled him around and disrespected him every chance they got. Lab guards followed the edict that Hsin Liu Vega should be treated with "compassion and tolerance."

"Dr. Stein wants to see you. She requested that we alert you to that fact."

At that, Danny tensed and some of his certainty faded.

Dr. Stein.

In truth, he'd barely thought of the woman until now but the mention of her name caused Danny's jaw to clench. "Fine."

The guards walked ahead of him, but it wasn't obvious that they were escorting him anywhere. Even so, Danny had learned to keep a low profile on the compound. He kept his hood up and pulled down over his head to avoid the staring. It didn't work, but it was better than nothing. Being a spectacle was not something that he would ever get used to.

When they got to the lab, he was directed to a floor he'd never been on and did not have access to on his own. He walked to the last office in a long corridor, and stared blankly at the name on the door.

Dr. Connors.

Frowning, Danny hesitated briefly before knocking on the door. All doors in the labs locked automatically, and his card would not gain him access. He stood in confused silence for a long moment before the door emitted a short beep.

The woman sitting behind the desk was most certainly Dr. Stein, but the nameplate on the desk said Dr. Annabelle Connors. Danny shoved his
hands into his pockets and stared when the young-looking, dark-haired woman gave him a grim smile.

"Fake name," Danny commented blandly. "Are you people all complete fucking liars?"

"Yes." She stood up, and walked around the side of her desk. Not making any moves to come any closer to him, Ann folded her hands behind her back. "It's very complicated, Danny. But that's the nature of this organization. We're made to be liars, and we become adept at it."

"Why are you calling me Danny? I think the jig is up on that one."

"Do you feel like Sin?"

Danny shrugged, and turned his attention to the window. Looking at her made him angry, especially because she was so calm. "No. He seems like my evil, split personality."

"The relationship that me and Sin had in the past is complicated. For many years I was one of those people who thought Sin was evil, but once I let go of old biases and looked at the facts, I realized that he—that you, are anything but."

"Yeah?" Danny arched a brow, his tone challenging. "Well, he's nuts at least. I looked at my file, and it's pretty gruesome."

"I can understand how you might come to that conclusion if that's all you had to look at, but there's much more to Hsin Liu Vega than incident reports and scientific data."

There was another brief pause, and she sighed quietly. The apprehension in her tone was a direct contrast to the professional, unflappable woman he'd known in Annadale.
"Why don't we both sit down?" she suggested.

Frowning, Danny sat in the chair opposite to her desk. He took in the tension in her posture, the way she did not maintain direct eye contact with him, and he knew something was off. "What's going on?"

"Like I said," Ann started slowly. "You and I have had a long, complicated history. It goes back to my sister. You were her patient in the past as well."

Danny stared at her blankly before it snapped together in his mind. He hadn't paid attention to the last name at the time when there was so much else to take in, but he knew that she was talking about Lydia Connors.

"Wow."

"It took a long time to get over my anger," Ann went on. "But I was able to because I realized that she had abused her power and provoked someone who was clearly prone to dissociative episodes. When I took you on as a patient years later, we formed a bond. Dysfunctional, but it was there, and we made progress."

He frowned and didn't say anything to that.

Ann didn't look away from Danny's intense stare as she said: "When the Marshal recommended that you be submitted as a candidate for the HM Project instead of terminated, I wasn't involved in the decision. At first, I had no idea. Later I learned that Dr. Krol, your other psychiatrist, had disagreed with both options. When he refused to cooperate, I was brought on to go to Annadale for sessions and treat you. And now they want me working in the labs so that I can continue to do so."

"Wait..." Danny frowned, and leaned forward. "Back up. He disagreed? Why?"
"He thought it was wrong," she said simply. "Dr. Krol was very professional, and cared about all of his patients. But he isn't around anymore because of his adamance that the experiment not be done." Ann's gaze cut away from him briefly, her eyebrows drawing together. "It's not something I can discuss now, but I'm sure you understand."

Danny was starting to. The Agency was a horrible place full of sociopaths who believed that lying and manipulating people was okay as long as there was a greater good. And even if Ann seemed to have good intentions, she was just like them.

"Why am I here right now?"

"You're here because I know what you're doing. I know you're trying to prompt them to restore your memories."

He shrugged, not surprised.

Ann folded her hands in front of her. "They've decided to do it. I just came from a meeting about it."

"Good."

"You just claimed that your true self is a psychotic, evil twin who is capable of gruesome acts. Why would you think it's good to return to that?"

The question was easy to answer, because it was something that Danny had been going over in his mind for days. Did he really want to go back to that? Was it worth it? Did he want to remember all of the horrible things that had been done to him, and the horrible things that he'd done to others? The answer was always yes.

"Good is a strong word," he said finally. "But I'd rather be a whole person than a shell of one. I know there's part of me missing, and I know
there’s things about me... Weird habits and thoughts, that I've always had and will only be explained by knowing everything."

There was a brief pause as Ann studied him.

"It has nothing to do with Boyd?"

Danny stared at the doctor and said nothing.

"What about Kayla and Roz? You made real connections in Annadale with people who are removed from everything to do with the Agency. If you were to stay this way, you could reconnect with them and visit with them between missions. If the Agency reverses the HM condition, it's possible that you won't care about those friends anymore, and it's also possible that you won't even remember them."

There was a long pause as Danny took that in. This information was news, and not something he had considered. "I won't remember anything from this time period?" he asked, frowning slightly. "I won't remember being Danny?"

"I'm not 100% sure.." Ann leaned forward across the desk, and there was genuine concern in her expression. "There was a reason why I compared this condition to a fugue state when I began treating you in Annadale. When I studied the project and researched all of the other subjects, I realized that most of them had completely forgotten their new memories once reversal was attempted. That's what happens when someone recovers from a fugue state. They don't remember what they did while in that state. It's not 100%, and most other trial subjects were not nearly as strong as you, but it's a possibility."

Ann sighed quietly. "That's why I wanted to speak with you. They want to reverse it now: today. They want you to be the automatic killer that you were before, even at the expense of the other problems. I know you as Sin,
and I know you as Danny. I care for Sin. I was close to Sin. I owe Sin—I owe you, a lot. I owe you enough to try to stress the fact that you were happy like this. You were happy in Annadale."

"Happier but not happy. I always knew things were missing."

"I know you did." Ann's words came out with resignation, and she sat back in her chair. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Did he want to trade memories of Annadale for memories of his real life, and of Boyd? Danny didn't hesitate to say:

"Yes."

Ann nodded, and schooled her expression into neutrality.

"Then it's your choice. It's your life." She stared at him for a moment longer before dropping her hazel eyes to the tablet on her desk. "I'm supposed to send for the guards to escort you to Dr. Frederick, but I'm sure you can manage on your own."

Danny nodded and stood. He looked at her and almost thanked her for being honest and straightforward when so few other people had been. But he didn't. He just shook his head and turned away.

He left the office and headed up to Dr. Frederick's. He was ready to be normal again.
Chapter Thirty-One

Sin wasn't sure how long the procedure took or what it entailed, but he woke up two days later. He remembered being Danny, but it was like a fading dream. Several events and sequences were hazy. He remembered people and his connections with them, but the details weren't as clear.

There was enough left of the past year and a half for him to make quick connections and realizations: the first was that the Agency could take complete control of his life whenever they wanted, the second was that Boyd had found him in Annadale, and the third was that Boyd was now gone.

Sin had opened his eyes to find himself once again strapped to a bed in the lab. The first thought that had crossed his mind was that he was going to destroy the Agency brick by brick if they didn't find Boyd.

They released him from the lab, and he kept playing the part of variable subject in their science project. The deeply ingrained defiance that wanted to lash out at everyone and everything was shoved down and silenced. For all he knew, they would just wipe his fucking brain again if he didn't give them what they wanted.

So he took a pair of scissors to his hair, worked out even when he wasn't in the training center being observed for their data, and got lean again. He shut down all of the bullshit that the lobotomized part of his personality had started in terms of being remotely approachable, and developed tunnel vision.

The end goal was Boyd, and everyone else could go to hell if they weren't going to help him get to that goal.

People tried to visit him: Carhart, Kassian, and Ryan. Emilio had been shipped off on a solo, so Sin wouldn't have been able to reconnect with his
father even if he'd wanted to. But for the first couple of weeks, Sin didn't have it in him speak to anyone. He would look at people, and not even be able to form words. He couldn't fucking deal with the stares and questions and sympathy from people close to him.

None of it would bring Boyd back, and he didn't have the patience for anything less than that.

For the first two weeks, the only people he communicated with were the Reapers. He went to Frederick and told the doctor that they could use him for whatever the hell they wanted, as long as they let him see the data on Project Zero. He wanted to know exactly what he was capable of now that he knew for sure that he was basically a fucking cyborg. How high he could jump, how fast he could run, how hard he could hit—he needed to know how much he could increase the self-imposed limits that he'd previously adhered to.

He broke set records, showed them that he was their perfect goddamn agent, swallowed the pills that Ann prescribed him, and regained his clearance and active status.

The day of Sin's first mission, it had been exactly six weeks and four days since Boyd had been taken. It was ten days until Boyd's birthday, and Sin made a deal with himself that if they didn't find him by then, he would say fuck it and blow Seong's brains out. It seemed fair.

The mission was somewhere in Eastern Europe; a city that had been waylaid by disease after the war and had essentially been abandoned. The tunnels beneath it were now used to house terrorists instead of for water drainage, and they were supposed to clean them out. Emilio had just returned from his solo, so it was just Sin and Bex.

Transport dropped them off half a mile from the underground base, and they walked the rest of the way in the snow.
"I missed having you on the team," Bex said randomly. She looked at him around her hood, although her bangs were practically hanging over her night-vision goggles. "Missed getting shit done."

Sin's gaze swept around the empty grey and white landscape and his hand automatically started to reach for his pistol. Instead of his usual P97, Sin had taken to carrying Boyd's Sig with him on missions. However, he paused briefly, and instead unstrapped the M6A2 from his back. They had very little cover, and the broken windows in the empty buildings were making him paranoid.

"Not that your boyfriend don't get shit done," she went on as they finally left the openness of the main streets, and headed into the mouth of a narrow alley. "Or your father, even if he is a fucking wanker, but they don't get shit done like us."

"We're not in a special club, you moron."

He reached up and brushed the pad of his finger against the side of his own goggles. The thermal sensor on the GPS activated on the lense, and he narrowed his eyes as a cluster of red and yellow blips showed up on the next grid. "We're guinea pigs."

"Yeah, and? We're literally like, superior humans. You more than me, but certainly me as well even if I'm only Street Modded."

"Who gives a fuck? We'll all die the same anyway."

"You're such a charming bloke. You must have a huge cock to keep that kid hanging around."

"I do."

Sin held out an arm to abruptly halt her steps, and she bumped into it. Bex didn't question it, and instead shifted so that she could pin her back to the
wall. He frowned slightly, dropped his hand after a moment and began walking again.

"I don't see anything for another few blocks," Bex said quietly, following noiselessly.

"Thought I heard something."

They kept moving and Sin's fingers flexed on the grip of his rifle. Even as he tracked the movement around them on the screen, his mind wandered back to Boyd.

Self-imposed isolation and newly regained clearance had given Sin time to do research. He'd caught up on anything related to Janus but there was no further intel on the inner circle of the organization. No information on a base where abducted agents were being held.

No trace leading to Boyd.

Sin had also read the entire mission report for Boyd's extended valentine.

The unrelenting anxiety he'd had since waking up in the lab had transformed into anger, and resulted in a fucking meltdown in his apartment. He'd known he was still being watched as he ripped it to pieces, but no one interfered until the anger had turned into despair and he'd broken down for every guard in the surveillance unit to see. Only then had someone come to check on him; they couldn't have their prized possession having a mental lapse after all.

"Sin," Bex said sharply.

Sin looked over at her, eyes narrowed. "What?"
"I asked how many hostiles," she repeated. "I've got loads more on my radar than I thought there would be."

He zoomed out on the screen, and frowned. "How many did the outline say?"

"Fuck knows. Weren't you paying attention?" she demanded. Sin made a face, and she scoffed. "'Course. You never pay attention. What now, then?"

They stopped near one of the dilapidated metro station entrances. This one was falling apart worst than the others and, according to Owen's source, that was why the group rarely used it. Sin had no idea if this was true, and he didn't really give a shit at this point. He was impatient with this stupid mission, and wanted to go back to Lexington.

"Kill people."

Bex lifted her own assault rifle, and shrugged. "Let's do it."

The mission didn't take long. There were more fireworks than there needed to be, but they cleaned it out, collapsed the tunnels and made it back to the pickup point with twenty minutes to spare. He and Bex took their gear off silently during the flight back, and she began methodically cleaning her weapons without speaking.

That's how it had been with Bex before he'd been put into stasis, and it didn't seem as though much had changed. Small talk with her was an anomaly, and he attributed the earlier conversation to the fact that it was their first time on a mission together in nearly two years.

He was glad for the silence, but it did remind him of how much he missed Boyd. They hadn't worked together for so long, but somehow he could remember their last mission together perfectly. They'd successfully completed the assignment but he'd pissed Boyd off in the process for not following the
plan. They’d argued, and then fucked for two hours. Boyd always looked particularly hot when he was pissed off.

Sin closed his eyes and thudded his head against the window of the jet. He stayed that way for the rest of the flight, but as usual he couldn't sleep.

When they got back, Bex went off to do the mission report like a good little soldier and Sin stood in the courtyard outside of Artillery. He automatically went to the lab, but was informed that he was to have 24 hours downtime from training and working out after missions. Apparently guards would not even let him into the training area in the Tower.

Weary and annoyed, Sin raked his hands through his hair and tried to figure out what to do. If he went back to his apartment, he would inevitably end up scouring mission reports and files for Janus activity again. It was something that almost always led to him wanting to beat the shit out of someone from frustration.

Seeing Carhart or Ryan and dealing with the careful conversation and kid glove treatment seemed even worse. Kassian talked too much, and was equally as gloomy as Sin now that he was on the bottle again.

Shoving his hands into his pockets after yanking up his hood, Sin strode towards the gates. He swiped his ID at the checkpoint, and didn't bother to look at the guards.

"Going on an excursion, Mr. Houdini?"

Sin shoved his ID back into his pocket, and ignored Charles. The man made a face.

"It was a joke, dude."

Sin looked at Charles, letting his gaze flick up and down, before he turned to the gate again.
"Just leave the man alone," Lorde snapped at her partner.

"Jesus, I'm just trying to be nice. Fucking asshole." When the flat, green-eyed gaze returned, Charles shrugged defensively. "I'm just saying."

"Try to say less."

With that, Sin left the gate and headed South, and out of All Saints. It would have been faster to take the bus or train to Bedford, but the idea of being around people made him cringe. It was not something he could deal with when he could very easily end up on the fucking precipice of a frustrated, blackout rage explosion.

Sin walked to Bedford, and kept his head down the whole time. He ignored the people around him, the sounds of traffic, and the Spanish music that floated through the air as soon as he turned onto Emilio’s block. He let himself in with the chip his father had given him before the false-termination, and took the stairs up.

When he got to Emilio's door, he rapped his knuckles against it three times, and crossed his arms over his chest. Now that he knew that the enhancements to his senses were real and not just random flukes like he’d told himself before, he noticed more. He could faintly hear his father's footsteps coming from the other side of the apartment, and he knew exactly when they paused outside of the door.

For some reason Emilio just stood there for several seconds, and Sin narrowed his eyes. He kicked the door impatiently.

"What the hell are you doing?"

There was another brief pause and Sin started to kick the door again before he heard the click of locks. It swung open and Emilio looked at him for a long moment before nudging the door open wider with his bare foot.
Sin frowned at the older man and stepped in, shutting the door behind him. He looked around the living room and raised an eyebrow. Emilio had always taken pride in his home and possessions, keeping them on the OCD side of clean. Judging by the bottles, full ashtrays and strewn clothing, that wasn't the case anymore.

He looked over to where Emilio was leaning against the door and staring. After a moment, the bloodshot, green eyes cut away and Emilio cleared his throat. He rubbed a hand over the stubble that coated his jaw.

"What'd you, cut your own hair?"

"Yes."

"Looks like it."

Sin gave his father a dull look. "I don't really care about my hair."

Emilio rolled his eyes and finally approached his son. He put a hand on Sin's shoulder and steered him to one of the barstools in the kitchen. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, the badass who puts no effort into being gorgeous routine. Got it. Sit your ass down, and I'll fix it."

Not bothering to protest, Sin sat down and watched Emilio walk out of the room. He was shirtless and wearing a pair of black jeans. He looked much thinner now that Sin was seeing him without a jacket and layers.

"You look like shit." he said when his father returned to the room.

Emilio shrugged and dropped a pair of scissors and clippers onto the counter. "I'm cool."

"Doing a lot of drugs?"

"Enough to get by."
Not having anything to say to that, Sin lapsed into silence as Emilio began trimming his hair. He'd carelessly chopped it off somewhere far above his chin because the idea of being pawed by the people in Unit 16 had made him slightly homicidal. The idea of any Agency staff touching him made him homicidal. It was bad enough that the Reapers did whatever they wanted to him.

Neither of them spoke for the next ten minutes, but Sin watched his father's reflection through the mirror above the bar. When he was done, Emilio put the clippers down on the counter and finally looked at Sin. He dropped his eyes almost immediately, and instead ran his hand through Sin's shortened, black hair.

"Looks better."

Sin didn't bother to respond and kept observing the other man. Emilio repeated the motion, combing his fingers through Sin's hair and ruffling it so that it looked less neat. His hand dragged down slowly, and dropped down to his side. Emilio grabbed the clippers almost immediately and blew on the guard, wiping his thumb across it.

"What's your problem?" Sin asked finally.

"Don't got one."

"Why did you avoid me?"

At that, Emilio finally met his eyes. His eyebrows drew together, and his lips turned down at the sides. "I wasn't. I was just preoccupied or whatever. A lot of shit going on."

"Bullshit," Sin said flatly.

They stared at each other until Emilio finally just shrugged and put the clippers down with a clatter. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then
“I was fucked up, kid. You being dead hit me fucking hard. I... I put a gun to that bitch's head when I found out.”

“I know.” There was a brief pause, and Sin turned on the barstool so that they were facing each other. “Carhart told me. He told me that you were on the Fourth for months.”

Emilio pressed his hands against the counter, and nodded. "She only kept me around because they'd expected it, and I'm a good fucking actor." He stopped briefly, and leaned in closer to Sin. "You know that right, boy? All of this shit—all of this with Seong, it ain't nothing but an act 'cause Zachary and Vivienne needed someone on the inside."

"I know."

"So then..."

"So then that doesn't answer my fucking question. Ever since you found out I was alive, you've been avoiding me."

Emilio scowled and turned away. He shook his head and walked over to grab a bottle from the bar. "Jesus fucking Christ, kid. What do you want from me? I was goddamn traumatized when they told me they'd killed you. I was..." He trailed off and returned to the counter, dropping a bottle of Jack Daniels on top of it.

He shrugged again and dropped his gaze to the bottle. "And then it was just fucked, okay? Like, they said you were alive, but turns out it wasn't even really you. You weren't my boy no more. It felt like a fucking joke—like a big fucking trick. I couldn't deal with it, okay?"

Sin pushed the bottle away. "I'm normal now, so what's the problem?"

There was another lengthy stretch of silence as Emilio's eyes flicked over to his son, and then away. He shifted, fingers clenching around the side
of the counter. He was fidgeting like he did, like they both did, when they were nervous.

Sin's eyes narrowed, and he stood up. "I know something else is up."

Emilio tapped his fingers against the counter rhythmically. "Look, something happened, okay?"

"Something like what?"

Wetting his lips, Emilio glanced up again and this time he didn't look away. "Something with Boyd."

For a moment, Sin just stared at him without comprehending what he meant. Of course something had happened with Boyd. He was missing. But then Emilio's fingers began tapping faster and he shifted his weight, eyes skimming away, and it clicked into place.

Sometimes when Sin got extremely angry, he found that whether or not he was having an episode, there tended to be a disconnect between his thoughts and his initial response. He didn't remember grabbing Emilio and lifting him off the floor, and he didn't remember pinning him against the wall, but what seemed like a couple of blinks later, that's the position he found them in.

"It was just the one fucking time," Emilio grit out as Sin's fingers dug into him violently. He didn't try to fight back or escape as his toes brushed against the floor, and he didn't even recoil. He allowed himself to be pinned to the wall, and met Sin's glare.

"I can't fucking believe you," Sin growled. His grip tightened even as he tried to calm the rush of anger that wanted him to do something to his father. To fucking hurt him. "I don't even know why I'm surprised."
"I didn't fucking do it on purpose!" Emilio snapped. He took a deep breath and wet his lips again. When he spoke, it was in a low, controlled voice.

"We were both fucked up over your death, kid. It was right when he came back to active duty, right when I fucking got off the Fourth, we got wasted after a mission and it just fucking happened. It was stupid, and it was my fucking fault because I should have known better. He was fucking practically blacked out thinking I was you—"

Emilio broke off, eyes narrowed and lips pressed tight together. As he stared into Sin's eyes, some of the forced calm seemed to ebb away and Emilio exhaled shakily. He reached up to put his hands on top of Sin's where they were digging into his shoulders.

"Hsin... Lo siento, hijo. Por favor, no me odies."

Sin jerked his hands away and turned, stalking towards the front door. Emilio followed as soon as his feet hit the floor. He grabbed Sin's shoulder and forced him to stop.

"Please, Hsin. I'm sorry. What do you want me to fucking say, kid? I'm a fuckup. But I never meant to get nothing going with your goddamn boyfriend. It never happened again, we didn't even talk for ages after it happened. I felt like a fucking piece of shit."

Jaw clenched and hands balled into fists, Sin refused to look at his father. He stared at the front door, and then closed his eyes. He didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to think about it. If he did, he wanted to hurt them both. The urge was so strong that Sin's hands trembled with the struggle to keep them balled up and steady, instead of hurling into his father's face.

"I'll fucking beg you," Emilio said roughly after a tense, stretch of silence. He curled his fingers against Sin's shoulders and pulled him back
slightly. "Just don't fucking hate me for some stupid, bullshit mistake. It didn't mean nothing. I swear to God, it wasn't nothing."

Sin opened his eyes again, and forced himself to take deep, even breaths. Emilio tugged on him, turning him around so that they were facing each other again. It was one of the few times in Sin's life that he had ever seen his father look so visibly distraught. His eyebrows were furrowed, and his jaw was clenching repeatedly as he stared at Sin.

He wanted to stay angry; to keep reeling in the searing streak of hatred that had spread through him at the words, but Sin already felt it draining out of him. Seeing Emilio Vega stare at him with pathetically bloodshot eyes, and a genuinely apprehensive look on his face was enough to make all of the rage begin to decay.

"Why did you even tell me?"

"Because I didn't wanna fucking lie to you. And I know Boyd's gonna tell you when we find his ass, and I didn't want you thinking I was trying to hide it and shit. But that's why—"

Another shrug, another moment of Emilio looking everywhere but at Sin. "That's why even after you got your head straight, I kept avoidin' you. 'Cause... I felt bad. I felt like maybe you'd hate me, and even though I dealt with that shit before, shit is different now. Everything's different now, kid. Both of us could fucking die in the next two weeks with the way that place is running, and that ain't gonna happen with you hating me. I won't let it."

Sin looked away again. He didn't want to watch his father getting emotional. He didn't want to accept that this was fucking reality. There were so many things that had happened in the past year that he was now finding out about and had to swallow and justify, that it was starting to become overwhelming. He had to accept that Boyd had been whored out and fucked
by scores of people on his mission. He also had to accept that he’d been
thrown in some other damn town with fake memories and had wasted months
fucking around with random nobodies while the people closest to him were
forced to deal with his supposed death.

He had to accept that Boyd had lied to him for months. But that one
was easier, because Boyd had also risked his own life just by keeping in
contact with him. The Agency could have taken Boyd out whenever they
wanted just for stumbling upon their project, but Boyd had kept at it, kept
driving down between missions, kept putting his fucking neck on the line just
to see Sin, and make some kind of connection. And he had. The spark had
finally come back with the blood and violence and adrenaline of fighting
Janus, but that had been what brought them together in the first place.

But now this.

"When did this happen?" Sin asked. His tone was dull as he stared at a
spray painted mural on Emilio's wall. It was Lexington on fire, as it had likely
looked when the bombs hit over two decades ago.

"Fucking months ago. Last winter. Almost a year."

When Sin didn't immediately respond, Emilio reached out and grabbed
his chin. He forced Sin to look at him, and narrowed his eyes.

"You know kid, if you want to be mad I can't fucking change it. But it
wasn't planned, it never happened again. It was just drunk bullshit. But if you
wanna blame someone, put that shit on me though. Don't take it out on him.
And I'm saying that even as fucking pissed as I am right now that he couldn't
fucking tell me my kid was alive all this time."

Sin shrugged, and returned his gaze to Emilio. "Does it mean that
much to you?"
"What?" the other man asked sharply, meeting his eyes.

"That you didn't know."

"Fuck yes, it does. You mean a lot to me, you dumb motherfucker. You and Zach are... are the only goddamn reasons I came back to this shit hole of a city. And yeah, don't give me that fucking face. I know it's hard to believe."

Sin shook his head slightly. He stared at Emilio, at the expression that was equal parts desperate and determined.

"Does he know about this?"

"No." Emilio's eyes opened up wider, as if he just caught on to the possibility that Sin could mention this to the general. "He'd flip his fucking shit."

They stared at each other until Sin finally released a disgusted sigh and looked away. His eyes fell on the door to the bedroom, and his knuckles went white as his hands balled into fists again. His mind wanted to supply mental images: Boyd and Emilio kissing, writhing against each other, Emilio marathon fucking him like he'd done to so many other conquests in the past when Sin had unfortunately lived with him.

Sin's chest tightened, and once again he was stricken into silence.

Part of his brain was telling him to walk out. Just fucking walk out and tell Carhart and let Emilio deal with the aftermath of the general's disgust.

But then Sin looked at Emilio again and saw actual dread seeping into the other man's face. He was afraid of Carhart finding out; afraid of messing up whatever it was they finally had between them. And it would be easy to fuck it up at this point. Sin had no doubts that the idea of Emilio fucking Boyd, who Carhart looked at as another son, would push the general over the edge.
But Sin also knew that he wouldn't do it. If it was as Emilio said, it wasn't worth it.

"I'm not going to say anything." Sin swallowed and forced his hands to relax. "But if I ever have any inclination that you were really just acting on your filthy fucking need to bang everything with a pulse, you can go back to acting like I'm dead."

"Well, that ain't never gonna happen, kid. It was a mistake, and neither one of us was happy about it." Emilio searched his son's face, gaze intense. "So we cool?"

"We're something."

Emilio continued to give him the same scrutinizing stare, but after a moment his posture slightly relaxed. "Good enough I guess."

Sin said nothing to that and walked back to the counter. He opened the bottle of whiskey and dragged a short glass over so that he could fill it. Emilio approached after a moment, but he didn't attempt to reclaim his bottle.

"Well you're drinking, so I'm gonna assume you ain't holding up too well with all of this shit that keeps getting flung at you."

The liquor burned down Sin's throat as he drained the glass. He let it drop to the counter with a loud thunk, and looked at his father evenly. "I'm going to kill Seong."

Emilio's eyebrows shot up. He gave Sin an assessing look, and leaned forward with his forearms pressed against the counter. "How?"

"I have a meeting with her in two weeks, after my testing is complete with the Reapers. If Boyd isn't found by then, I'm going to kill her at the meeting."
"Okay, so..." Emilio didn't seem too concerned about Seong's impending doom. "You need a plan then, boy. You can't just go in, snap the bitch's neck and then run out. There's already a plan in place to get t—"

Sin poured himself another drink. "I'm not that concerned with getting out, honestly. They can do what they want to me."

As Sin drained the second drink, he could hear very faint sounds. The ticking of a clock or other device in the room, a dog barking somewhere in the building, and the people next door arguing. None of it came across completely clear, but he could still hear it.

"You—" Emilio stopped, and took a deep breath. He was staring at Sin incredulously, although irritation was starting to make its way into his expression. "You and Boyd are both some fucking retards. I seriously can't stand either one of you idiots. It's always the self-sacrificing bullshit and never a plan that fucking is sensible. Jesus Christ, I hate all of you people."

"If you hate me, then why are you so riled up?" Sin asked flatly.

"Just shut your fucking mouth, and let me think for a minute."

Emilio combed his hands through his hair and rocked back on the balls of his feet. They stared at each other silently until he began to pace the room.

"Aiight first of all, ain't no one going on some suicide run. I'll make her lock your punk ass up on the Fourth before I let that happen. I can make it happen so don't test me, kid."

"There's a chance that whoever is above Seong won't even terminate me. I'm their only source of data for the HM Project. They're more likely to put me on the—"

"Shut the fuck up," Emilio snapped, and stopped to slam his open palm against the counter. The bottle and the glass jumped upon impact. "I'm really
annoyed right now so just shut your goddamn mouth unless you have something normal to say."

Sin made a face and sat down on a barstool.

"I know you and Blondie like to go all Joan of fucking Arc any chance you get, but let's rewind this shit a few weeks and break it down again before you decide all bets are off." Emilio frowned and massaged his temples with one hand. "How the fuck are you and Kassian so goddamn sure that it was Janus? I feel like a shit ton of time is getting invested in thinking it's Janus just 'cause Captain America said so."

"Nothing else makes sense though," Sin said in frustration. He frowned and leaned on his elbows before pressing his face into his hands. "The Agency would never be that sloppy. Leaving fake trails, and witnesses and surveillance. Janus is good, but they're still civilians when it comes down to it. They don't think the way the Agency is trained to think."

"Yea but who says it has to be the Agency or Janus? Boyd's been around other organizations and people. He's bound to have made some other fucking enemies, somewhere."

Sin tensed, and he looked up at his father slowly. His eyes narrowed. "You're right."

Emilio raised his eyebrows. "Okay?"

Standing abruptly, Sin released a frustrated exhalation of breath. "Those goddamn kids in Annadale. We were investigating them and we never finished because I ran the hell up here and found out that Boyd had been taken."

"Wait, what? What the hell are you talking about?"
"These friend people that I—that Danny had down in Annadale Beach," Sin said impatiently. Now that the realization had formed fully, his heart was practically pounding. How could he have forgotten something so important? Another thought piggybacked on that one almost instantly: the memory reversal was the reason.

"Before all of this happened, we'd been checking into them because they were in communication with Janus recruitment operatives. They also knew that Boyd was with me."

"How the hell did you forget—"

"I didn't just forget. It's that fucking experiment, procedure—whatever. I lost some of my memories from that time period," Sin snapped. He stood up and started for the door. "I'm going down there."

"Wait."

"What?" Sin demanded, looking over his shoulder. "You can't fucking stop me."

Emilio rolled his eyes, and stood up straight. "No one said I was, boy. Just give me a second to get my shit together, and I'll go with you."

Sin was momentarily surprised into silence, and Emilio waved him off. "Don't stand there giving me stupid looks. Just work on putting your brain into high gear so you can remember anything else."

Nodding slowly, Sin watched as his father disappeared from the room. He shook the surprise off after a moment, and focused on Annadale. Roz, Tech, Kayla, Taz, Gage... All people that had meant something to him at some point while he was Danny, and now he could barely register that they were friends. He felt a complete disconnect between that life and his life as Sin. When he remembered basketball games, and movie nights, and Pandora parties, it was surreal.
Emilio came back into the room with a distressed t-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and a leather jacket in one hand. He stepped into a pair of boots, and they headed out as he sent a message to Carhart that they were going out of town.

They didn't speak for the majority of the ride down to Annadale. They stopped only for gas, and Emilio kept a steady mix of metal and dubstep playing during the drive. Sin stared out the window, and although he could feel his father's eyes on him from time to time, he didn't look over. Sitting together for almost four hours made it impossible to not focus on what had happened between Emilio and Boyd. He kept wondering about things, about details, and jealousy made him grit his teeth until his jaw hurt.

He spent the majority of the time telling himself that it didn't matter. They'd both thought he was dead and gone; ashes in the incinerator. They'd both been lonely and miserable. He had been the one in Annadale having relationships and accumulating lovers. Boyd still wanted him. Boyd still loved him. Emilio hadn't been a replacement.

Sin repeated it in his head like a mantra until the desire to smash Emilio's face into the steering wheel slowly subsided. Neither of them really spoke until they drew closer to the small, college town.

"So who are we talking to first?" Emilio asked around a cigarette as he turned off the Interstate.


"Tech?" the other man asked doubtfully. "What the fuck name is that?"

"It's an alias. She's—fuck, I can't remember her address."

Emilio slowed down as they entered the Annadale Beach city limits. "You remember her real name?"
"It's..." Sin glared at the dashboard, and thumped his fist against the window in frustration.

"Calm the fuck down. Hurt my car and I'll throw your ass out." Emilio exhaled a cloud of smoke and glanced at Sin sidelong. "Just think."

Exhaling loudly, Sin tilted his head back against the seat. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the bits and pieces. Meeting Tech when she'd come to visit Roz at the apartment building, the way he'd been drawn to her androgyny, and the first time she'd invited him over. It was like trying to remember the dialogue in a movie that he'd watched years ago; he could remember the sequence of events but not the details that filled them in.

Eyebrows drawing together, he focused on her apartment because he was sure that the conversation had happened there. She was embarrassed of her name, it didn't suit her...

"Summers," he said finally. "Her last name is Summers. I can't remember her first name, though."

"Good enough," Emilio drawled. He turned off the main road, and began guiding the car towards the beach. "Lo más chingón, I need to make a query."

Sin glared at him. "What ar—"

A low, male voice filled the car: "What would you like me to find, Naco?"

"...You named your car's computer lo más chingón?"

Emilio ignored him and continued cruising along as if he knew where he was going. "I need a people search for a female in her twenties, last name Summers, and goes by the alias Tech. She should be in the Annadale Beach civilian registry."
"Yes, Naco. Searching Annadale Beach civilian registration. Please wait."

Sin's eyebrows rose. "You hacked your car's computer?"

"I prefer the term enhanced. You should know about shit like that, right Sugarplum?"

Emilio glanced over at Sin and winked. "Now this bad boy can search for all kinds of useful shit. City and federal databases, underground bunkers, fucking nuclear weapons probs. 'Course it won't find other agents or people who are erased from the grid. Also, addresses don't always match the—"

"I fucking get it, shut up already," Sin snapped. "How long is this going to ta—"

"Query complete," the computer purred. Sin made a face. It sounded like a goddamn porn star's voice. "Two matches found. First match, Tecla N. Summers, age 29. Also known as Tec."


"—Resident of Annadale Beach. Unemployed. Registered felon—"

"Next match, sweetheart," Emilio said. His mouth curved up into a smirk as Sin rolled his eyes.


"There's our girl. Can you find us a home address for little Miss Caroline?"

"Of course, Naco. Now coordinating with the Global Positioning System."
"Thank you, baby."

Sin scoffed as the GPS system activated and a holographic map spread out over the dash. Their position blinked green and a line extended out over the map, ending at a blinking red cursor in the north side of the city.

"You're so fucking inappropriate. Even with technology."

"What can I say?" Emilio jerked the wheel and did an illegal U-turn in the middle of the street. Horns honked and someone yelled angrily out their window. "I'm a motherfucking lothario of humans and robots alike."

"Just shut the hell up and get us there."

It didn't take more than fifteen minutes to reach the bungalow that Tech rented on the beach. Emilio parked, and they both exited without delay. There was no conversation or planning, and no Trovosky-like warnings about subtlety when dealing with civilians. Sin walked up to the door and knocked while Emilio pulled out a .45 ACP and cocked it as he stood alongside the door and just out of view.

It took a long moment for anyone to approach, but Sin could faintly hear Tech talking on the other side of the door. He couldn't make out every detail but he could tell that she was on the phone and seemed apprehensive about opening the door.

"She's alone."

Emilio nodded and tucked the gun into the back of his jeans. Footsteps approached the door, and there was a long pause before the locks began to click quickly and Tech jerked it open.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

Sin raised an eyebrow at the slight girl who was glaring up at him.
"We've been fucking worried sick about you! You just up and disappeared after accusing me of doing who the hell knows what. Your apartment was cleaned out by management, you never fucking showed up for work. Kayla and Roz are frantic. I was tracking everyone down who was at Edie's stupid party because you got me all paranoid and guilty. Everyone is—"

"Will you shut up?"

"Yeah, for real," Emilio drawled.

Tech finally seemed to notice Emilio, and she gave him an incredulous once over before turning back to Sin. "Okay, what's going on? Fucking seriously, Danny. I don't have patience for this."

"Yeah, neither do I," Emilio said bluntly and shoved her backwards and into the house. He elbowed by her and Sin followed, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"Dude—" she started to protest as she rubbed her shoulder where Emilio had shoved it.

"Listen sweet pea, as fucking charming as it is to stare at your nipples through that tank top, I'm kind of in a rush. So let's get straight to the motherfucking point. Who you been talking to about Danny-boy?"

Tech crossed her arms over her chest belligerently. "I don't even know you. What are you, Danny's brother or something?"

"Father, actually."

She looked at him doubtfully. "Uh. Right. And even if I was stupid enough to believe that bullshit, Danny said he didn't have any family. But I guess you were lying."
Sin didn't bother to reply to that. His brain was working through the words she'd spewed at him after opening the door, and connecting it to the confusing cluster of other information from the day he'd confronted her about that same party.

"The man you were dating... Trenton. He was at the party?"

Tech stared at him and took a step back. Now that they were enclosed in her apartment and Sin was staring down at her with an intense, narrow-eyed glare, some of her defiance and anger seemed to fade. A hint of unease crept into her face.

"I told you before that he was," she said finally. "It was one of the last times I hung out with him and his friends before they took off. They were all really interested in who saw the thing with Leens for some reason. They kept going on about how it was probably some government cover-up, and they thought some fanatical government people from the college had taken Leens out because she was part of some amazing group who wanted to make real changes."

Emilio looked at Sin and then back at Tech. "What else did they say? Who was doing most of the talking?"

"Please tell me what the hell is going on. Are you in some kind of trouble because of this?"

Sin scoffed, and didn't bother to hide his contempt. "As a matter of fact I am, and somebody else as well. I should blow your fucking brains out for all the trouble you've caused."

Emilio nodded in agreement and reached out to lock his fingers around Tech's upper arm. She didn't even react; her eyes were locked on Sin's face. He looked back coldly.
"Answer the question or I'll get you talking some other kind of way, sweetheart," Emilio said flatly. "I don't like beating up on little girls but I damn well fucking will if you don't tell me what you did to get my son in trouble."

Tech finally reacted to his touch, and jerked her arm away. "I don't know his friends. There were a few of them, okay? Some Indian lady was asking most of the questions. I don't even remember who mentioned you first. I didn't think anything of it at the time since Leens being murdered was big news in this town, so I probably said your name without thinking. I know even Roz backed me up and started bragging about how you were smart enough to know something was wrong."

She swallowed and pushed on, her brow furrowing. "But after awhile they were creeping me out with all of their weird, conspiracy shit. They kept trying to get me interested in some club because they thought my skills with technology and engineering would be useful to them, but I said no. They didn't even tell me much about it yet so I guess Trenton lost interest when he found out I wasn't some crazy liberal activist."

"How did you meet him?" Sin demanded. All of this sounded like definite Janus recruitment. Not the wide-scale recruitment of soldiers like in Monterrey; this was different. Janus was sending out people to hand pick intellectuals. "How did they notice you in the first place?"

She rubbed her arm, face pale and pinched. "I think Edie mentioned me for some reason. I don't know why."

Edie again.

"How do they know this Edie bitch?" Emilio demanded.

At this, Tech hesitated. She started to open her mouth and then snapped it shut almost instantly. Sin reached out and grabbed her, yanking
her forward and nearly lifting her off the floor. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open, but no sounds came out.

"Listen to me, you little idiot," Sin hissed, leaning forward until his nose nearly touched hers. "You and your friends nearly got me killed, and someone else is in danger because of you oblivious, drug addicted morons bringing us to the attention of a bunch of fanatic psychopaths. So tell me what you know or I will rip your fucking jugular open with my teeth."

"There's my boy," Emilio said proudly, grinning.

"Shut the fuck up," Sin didn't even look at the other man.

"What happened to you?" Tech's voice came out strained. Waves of menace were radiating off of Sin, and a tremor went through her thin frame. "Who are you really?"

"I'm not your Danny anymore," he said flatly. "Now talk."

Tech nodded jerkily, and took a deep breath. "Edie's family is close to the Indian lady, and they ended up becoming like... I don't know, they were donating money or something to whatever group they're trying to get going."

Sin's fingers went slack. He let Tech drop to the floor and looked over at Emilio even as he said:

"Get Edie over here. Now."
Chapter Thirty-Two

An hour later, Tech was chain-smoking with trembling hands as she watched Sin prowl cagily around her small apartment. They watched his agitation and impatience rise steadily before Emilio finally broke the tense silence.

"Call the bitch back."

Tech shook her head silently.

Emilio stood from his sprawl in the flimsy director’s chair next to the television, and crossed the room. He pulled his gun out and brushed it against her mouth, tugging her lower lip down when she released a startled gasp.

"Call her back, or I'll kill you and go round her up myself. It'll make shit a lot messier, but at this point I'm sick of you and all of your stupid little friends. I figure it's only fair if one of you dies."

"What? No! Please, I—" Her dark brows drew together, and she pressed the back of her head against the sofa to get away from the gun. She swallowed, and narrowed her eyes at him. "She'll just take longer if I rush her. That's how she is."

"Sounds like a real bitch." Emilio dragged the gun down the side of her face, smirking when her slender body tensed up. "And why is it y'all hang out with her again?"

"Free Pandora," Sin said shortly.

"Ahhhh, now it makes sense. That why you couldn't remember shit about that night? Too fucked up?"
Tech's lips tightened as the gun slid down the side of her neck. "Maybe."

"Mmm." Emilio raised an eyebrow, and tipped the gun against the collar of her tank top. He tugged it down slightly. "Got any now? Could make waitin' a lot more interesting."

Sin's jaw clenched. "Stop."

Emilio tsked, and backed up a step although his eyes didn't leave hers. "Don't worry your pretty little head, sweetheart. I'm not into the non-consensual stuff. But you better hope she gets here soon, because I'm seriously out of fucking patience."

Tech looked over at Sin, but he just stared back indifferently. A flash of anger crossed her face. "What the hell is wrong with you? Were you putting on some really goddamn elaborate act all of this time, and you're actually a psychotic toon?"

Sin turned to the window. "Something like that."

"So, what? You just fucking stand there and let this guy put a gun in my face? What if it was Kayla or Roz—would you let him torment them, too?"

Emilio scoffed. "If you think this is torment, you haven't seen shit."

She ignored him, and remained focused on Sin. "Well?"

"You should be more worried about what I'll do to every single one of you that ran your mouth if this goes bad." Sin inhaled slowly, and stared down at the front of the building. "You, Roz, Taz... And anyone else that wasn't smart enough to not name me as the only witness in a murder investigation. As far as I'm concerned, all of you are responsible."

Tech flinched at the words and finally dropped her eyes.
A tiny, red sports car pulled up outside of the building, and Sin glanced at Emilio. "She's here."

"Good." Emilio gave Sin a sidelong stare. "And don't bitch out on me. We need to get back. There's no time to play nice."

They stared at each other until Sin inclined his head in agreement. He could hear the click of Edie's stilettos approaching moments later, but her hand barely grazed the door before Emilio jerked it open.

Edie stared at him with irritated confusion.

"Who—"

Emilio jerked her inside, kicked the door shut, and then shoved her across the room. She cried out as she tripped over the crate that was doubling as a coffee table, and fell on top of Tech.

Edie scrambled to an upright position, and looked at Emilio furiously. "Who the hell do you think you are?" she snarled. Her eyes opened wider when she finally seemed to realize that there was someone else in the room but instead of appearing surprised, she just glared at Sin.

"And where the hell did you crawl back from—"

The feel of the gun pressing against the side of her head silenced Edie, and she froze.

"Shut the fuck up. You're giving me a headache already." Emilio sat on the crate in front of the two women, and leaned forward. "Let's cut the shit, kitten. I know your daddy finances Janus, and I know you've been entertaining the motherfuckers for the past two summers when they come to town."

Edie stared at him for a moment before swinging her glare to Tech. Without a moment's hesitation, she reared her hand back and smacked the
smaller woman across the face hard enough to leave a red mark the shape of her hand.

Emilio burst out laughing and Sin watched with growing impatience as Tech instantly retaliated. Instead of a smack, she busted Edie's lip open on her fist.

"You stupid bitch!" Edie shouted. She attempted to lunge again, but Emilio caught her by a handful of hair and yanked her back. Still laughing, he hauled her up and shoved her into the director's chair.

"As much as I love a good bitch-fight, let's focus this shit for a minute."

Edie wiped her arm across her mouth and panted as she glared at Tech.

"What the hell did you want me to do?" Tech demanded. "Get shot in the face for you?"

"Uh, yes."

Sin growled in frustration and strode away from the window so that he was next to Emilio.

"You can beat the hell out of each other later if he doesn't shoot you both first. We know who your father deals with, and we know they came around asking questions about the girl who died. I want names, and I want them fucking now."

Edie tossed her hair over her shoulder, and straightened her blouse.
"Do you seriously think—"

"I seriously think your father is already fucked dry up the ass now that we know about this, so forget him and worry about yourself," Emilio interrupted. "Now start talking, or you'll be the one getting fucked next."
Edie blinked, and seemed to falter. Her hands fisted and just as she opened her mouth to speak, the door burst open behind her. Oliver appeared in the room, but all he managed was a look of alarm before Sin reacted.

"F*ck this shit."

Sin yanked the Sig out and pulled the trigger, shooting Oliver in the thigh. Three screams rang out, and Sin turned to Edie again. "Every time you fucking stall, I shoot him somewhere else. Got it?"

"Jesus Christ, Danny!" Tech shouted, drawing herself up on the couch as she pressed herself into the corner of it. Her eyes darted to the door as if she wanted to attempt an escape, but she didn't dare to leave the couch.

"Do you fucking get it now?" Sin shouted, looming over them. His mouth twisted in a snarl, and his eyes blazed at them furiously. "This is not a fucking game."

Edie nodded jerkily, and for the first time since she'd entered the apartment, she appeared truly frightened. Her eyes were focused on Oliver, and her face was pinched and much paler. "What—what do you want to know?"

"Who from Janus was there? I want some fucking names," Emilio said. "How many of them were there?"

"Just a few! But the main ones were Trenton and Dana," Edie said, her words coming out rushed. Sin's eyes narrowed, and his chest tightened. "They were... They were in charge of whatever they were doing down here. I don't know the details, okay? They were trying to get people to join this political organization. But Dana was asking all of the questions. Trenton was just the flunky as far as I could see."
Tech stared at Edie, seeming to have forgotten that Oliver was laying on the floor bleeding. Her eyes had widened slightly as if she was surprised, but Sin only vaguely registered that.

Emilio nodded shortly. "We know they were down here recruiting kids for their bullshit cult. Where do they take them ba—"


Edie flinched, but managed to look him in the eye.

"Dana, what does she look like? Is that the Indian woman?"

"Yes. Indian, long dark hair, she has these burn scars on her that she usually hides. She was the one who was contacting my dad for the money to fund their recruit—"

Sin stepped around Emilio and leaned down, placing a hand on either side of the chair that Edie sat in. "Tell me what you said to her. Every single word. Start to finish. Or I'll blow Oliver's kneecaps out."

Edie recoiled from him and tried to scoot back in the chair, but there was nowhere to go. Her breath began to come out in harsh pants, but she looked down to where Oliver was groaning quietly.

Emilio aimed his gun at Oliver's knee. "Start talking, kitten."

"I—she was asking about that stupid girl Leens. I don't know why, they didn't tell me every single detail of their damn plans. But when Roz and Tech mentioned you and started singing your praises about how fucking clever you were, I got annoyed because I cannot. Fucking. Stand you."

"Just go on," Tech urged. "Don't make this shit worst."

Edie cast her a withering glare. "A couple of weeks later I was at my father's house, and I walked in while they were talking. They were asking
about different places around the city, I don't know why, and then your name came up. So I said I'd just seen you at my party, and mentioned that you didn't even seem to care about any of that stuff with Leens. When they asked what I meant, I told them that you were too busy partying and being all over my boyfriend and some girly-looking blond for the whole world to see in my own goddamn bedroom."

Sin froze, and for a moment he couldn't speak. His hands tightened on the flimsy wooden armrests, and he could feel them warping in his grip.

"And then what did Dana say?" he asked, voice low.

Edie frowned and looked at Emilio and Oliver again. "Nothing at first. But then Trenton asked if I meant Taz and I said no. I told him you were with some really androgynous, blond kid named Boyd. I told him that I'd never even met Boyd before that night but apparently he's been lurking around the diner and trying to buddy up with your friends. Trenton got kind of suspicious about that and asked for a more detailed description—height, eye color and stuff. When I told him, Dana jumped up like I'd lit a fire under her ass. She started asking me a million questions about him, none of which I even knew, and whipped out her phone to show me a picture. It was Boyd but with red hair."

"Oh, motherfucker," Emilio swore quietly.

"What?" Edie demanded, looking at him in alarm. "What does that mean?"

"You stupid fucking—" Sin broke off with a feral-sounding growl, and yanked Edie out of the chair. He practically threw her across the room, and she wailed before slamming against the wall and collapsing to the floor.

"Stop!" Tech shouted, and finally got up from the couch. "She doesn't even know what's going on! None of us do!"
Sin began pacing again, his hands curling and uncurling into fists. Rage was cutting off his ability to speak, to ask any more questions, and to even think straight. Dana. Fucking Dana from Hale’s mansion. Dana who had put the hit out on the Kadin Reed imposter. Dana, who Boyd had left alive in that goddamn mansion.

"What else?" Emilio asked flatly.

"Nothing else," Edie said, her voice muffled as Tech tried to help her up. All of the bravado had fled the tall, brunette girl and now she was sobbing openly.

"I swear. I don’t know where they take the college kids for their little gatherings, I don’t know where they’re staying, and they leave almost always after the fucking semester begins. All I know is that after I said the picture was Boyd, I got kind of worried about where the conversation was going but Dana just ignored me and dragged Jon out of the room. I didn’t talk to them—"

"What?"

"Jon?"

Edie looked from Sin to Emilio, her mouth crumpling as if she was afraid of what she’d said now. "Yeah, he’s this Irish guy. I’d never seen him before that day, and I didn’t see him after that."

Emilio seemed to rally himself before Sin could, and took a step forward. "Describe him," he said darkly.

"Just... Irish, dark haired, good looking except for some scars on his face. He didn't do much talking until Boyd came up, and then he stared at me like I said I'd seen Jesus."

Sin’s hands were trembling, and Emilio put a steadying hand on his son's shoulder.
"We need to go. Now."

Nodding mechanically, Sin put his own gun away but he couldn't seem to make his feet move. His mind was reeling. Jon. Dana and Jon. Jon and Janus.

"If I find out that you're lying about any of this, I'll cut your throat," Emilio said in the same flat tone. "I know where all of you live, where you work, and I'll be keeping an eye on every single one of you."

He looked from each of the girls and then down at Oliver, who seemed to have fainted from the pain. Emilio's lip curled in disgust, and he hauled Sin out of the apartment without another word.

Sin let himself be guided to the car, and stared straight ahead as Emilio revved the engine, and sped out of the parking lot. The smell of burning rubber filled the air as he peeled out, but Sin barely noticed. All he could see was the shell of Boyd's house, and hear Carhart's emphasis that it had looked personal; that it hadn't fit the pattern. And he'd been right.

"Fucking Logan is the mole," Emilio snarled. "I can't even—And before the Investigator bitch was even gutted, I think. Christ almighty, how did you let that little punk get the drop on you before he killed her?"

Gritting his teeth, Sin let his fingers dig into the leather of the seat. "Because being on the compound makes me fucking sloppy. I didn't react when he came in. I didn't even turn around. I figured it was a guard or something, and then I lost consciousness."

"Fuck." Emilio slammed his hand against the wheel, and hunched his shoulders forward as he drove. "Jesus fucking Christ, Zach is so screwed. If that bitch finds out that they promoted the fucking mole—he is so royally fucked."
Sin blinked, and looked over at Emilio. The older man looked close to panic, or as much as Emilio could ever look panicked. His knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel, and he was breathing fast.

"Calm down. No one knows but us yet."

Emilio exhaled loudly, and stared at the road. His driving was getting more reckless by the moment. He nearly clipped a motorcyclist as he switched lanes, going around vehicles as the speedometer steadily ticked past 100 mph.

"We have to confront him," Sin said curtly. He glanced at his father again, and knew without a doubt that Emilio's mind would start going towards a quick, dirty murder if it meant snuffing Jon out before he could be exposed to Seong. "He might know where Dana is. Where Boyd is."

A muscle in Emilio's jaw ticked, but he nodded shortly. "Think of something good, kid. 'Cause right now I'm ready to go open his throat."

"Goddammit." Sin raked his hands through his hair, heart pounding as he looked out the window.

It was more information than he could have hoped for. More information than he'd expected. But the first spark of hope that he'd had in awhile was almost overshadowed by the anger that wanted to explode out of him. Jon had betrayed them, had betrayed Boyd. It kept circling in his mind until the disbelief gave way to grim acceptance.

"We have to cover up how long he's been rogue. Make it so he won't have a chance to be interrogated," Emilio said from between grit teeth. "If they get that little bitch on the Fourth, they'll make sure he sings. And if he does, Zach is dead. And it can't be none of us that reports it. She'd know something's shady."
"Harriet," Sin said quickly. "We can use her."

"How?" Emilio asked doubtfully.

"She's helped me before, and she'd want a stake in this since he played her too." Sin's eyes narrowed in concentration as a haphazard plan formed in his mind. "I need to get in touch with Kassian."

"Do it," Emilio said. "'Cause this shit is going down tonight."

Kassian picked up after three rings, and Sin put the call on speakerphone.

"Trovosky," he said curtly. "Is your location secure?"

"Yeah. What's up? News on Boyd?" was the automatic reply.

"No, but we might be getting fucking closer," Emilio said as he swerved around a truck. "We got the name of the mole. It's Logan."

There was a brief silence that was only interrupted by the sound of traffic on Kassian's end.

"Are you positive?"

"An informant IDed his fucking Irish ass," Emilio growled. "And he was there when Janus got a heads up about Boyd being down in Annadale. Shit's gonna get real in a few hours, Blondie. Get in touch with Harriet because I'm driving to her house now, and she better be ready to get in on this, 'cause we can't take it to the top without terminations."

Kassian parsed Emilio's vague, slang-filled words with ease and agreed grimly before hanging up.
"We should have killed those three kids," Emilio said flatly when Sin had pocketed his phone. He looked at his son with a dark, hooded expression.

Sin looked out the window. "I know."

Emilio scoffed in disgust and lit a cigarette. "Chingón," he growled at the car's computer system. "Get me out of this fucking traffic."

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"You already told her?" Sin asked as Kassian led them down the short hallway to Harriet's living room.

Kassian nodded and stopped just inside of the room. Sin saw that Ryan was sitting on the couch with Harriet in the dimly lit room. After going over the plan with Carhart and Vivienne, they'd been cleared to bring Ryan in. If their plan was going to work, it would take someone who was a lot better at discretion when hacking than Emilio.

Harriet looked at them but said nothing. With the exception of a weary expression and slightly red-rimmed eyes, she looked the same as she always did.

"Well, you seem to be holding up just swell even though you just found out that I'm about to cut your boyfriend's throat," Emilio said.

"Jesus Christ, Emilio," Ryan exclaimed. He gestured at the older man incredulously. "Can you tone the asshole factor down a notch?"

"It's fine," Harriet cut in gruffly. She stood up and straightened her shirt. "Let's just get this over with. I already called him, so he'll be here within the next thirty minutes. Hopefully you two have a plan because all Kassian told me to do was get Jon here."
Sin and Emilio exchanged glances, but neither of them spoke. Sin didn’t know if his father was thinking along the same lines as him, but if Emilio was, then her calm acceptance was like a red banner waving over the situation.

"Wait," Sin said sharply. "He's right."

Ryan shifted uneasily. The movement combined with the fact that R&D agent's gaze automatically flicked over to Kassian was enough to alert Sin to the fact that there was information between them that he didn't have.

"What the fuck is going on?"

When Harriet hesitated, Emilio's eyes narrowed and his hand twitched. Sin knew what would come next if someone didn't start speaking soon, and as close as he'd gotten to these people in the past couple of years, he also knew that he wouldn't do a thing to stop Emilio from making a move if they started playing games. The concept of trust was tenuous at best, especially when Sin was just getting back in the game after over a year.

When it came down to it, Boyd was his priority just like Carhart was Emilio's.

"Someone better start talking or this is going to go to shit very fast," Sin said evenly.

Kassian tensed beside him and stopped waiting for Harriet to volunteer information. "She didn't know it was him, but for the past several months, she admitted that she's had suspicions."

"And you told no one," Emilio said flatly. He was looking at her like he wanted to put her through a wall. Or put a bullet in her head.

"I wasn't sure," Harriet said defensively. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked between Sin and Emilio with an unsteady frown. "I started
tailing him months ago because I suspected he was cheating on me. It turns out that he was, but I saw some other things too. Weird meetings, odd traveling—and he was borrowing equipment to keep things covert like jammers and scramblers."

"And you told... no one." Emilio's mouth had turned down into a scowl as his jaw clenched and unclenched. He looked up at the ceiling briefly, his face fixed in incredulous anger. "Wow. I ought to knock the fuck out of this simple bitch right now."

"Just relax," Kassian said.

Ryan spoke almost simultaneously, "Guys, we don't have time to fight with each other."

"I tried to talk to Doug about it," Harriet said, not taking her eyes off Emilio. Her posture had shifted into a defensive stance. She seemed to be very aware of the fact that at the moment, Emilio was the immediate threat. If he didn't like her answers or explanations, he was going to react.

"Maybe it seems stupid to you, but I don't have close friends in high places like you people do. I don't have a mom who's an Inspector, or a boyfriend or surrogate father who's the goddamn head general."

"Oh shut the fuck up with your whining," Emilio snapped. "What did Douglas say? Better yet, what'd you tell him? Because he ain't never mentioned shit to me."

Harriet exhaled slowly before replying. "I told him that I'd been following Jon, and I noticed him engaging with some shady looking people. But all he said was that Jon is a level 10 now, and he'd be doing a lot of weird things that I don't know about."
"That's all you told him?" Sin asked incredulously. "That he was engaging in—all that makes it sound like is that he could have been buying fucking Pandora or something. Are you an idiot?"

"Yes, I'm a fucking idiot. Is that what you want me to say?" Harriet demanded, voice rising. She jabbed her finger in his direction sharply. "What would you have liked me to do? Go running to the Marshal with this half-assed information? And what if he had been on assignment? I was supposed to admit that I was stalking a level 10 agent because I thought he was fucking someone else?"

Ryan stood up at that point, and put a hand on her arm. Harriet started to yank away from him but wilted under the touch after meeting Ryan's wide, indigo eyes.

"She has a point," Ryan said quietly. "Can you two lay off? I'm as worried about Boyd and Zach as the two of you are, but attacking Harriet isn't going to change anything."

Emilio scoffed and yanked a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Fine. But that bitch is dumb as fuck."

"Yeah, we got that from you already," Kassian said impatiently. "So what's the plan?"

Sin crossed his arms over his chest. He did not ease up on the glare that was currently directed at Harriet. "Did you at least gather any intel? Or did you just do completely useless stake-outs?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, but nodded stiffly. "I started documenting things after the second time that I noticed him doing something strange. I don't have access to a lot of the technology that he seemed to have, but I got some pictures of people, and I started keeping track of where he went on downtime. And before you say a fucking word—"
Harriet threw Emilio a warning look. "I didn't show Doug because I didn't know what was sensitive material and what wasn't. I still didn't know what I was witnessing."

"Whatever."

Sin stared at her for a long moment before shaking his head in disgust. "Fine. To make a long story short, we need to know what Logan knows, and now what you know. There needs to be a false electronic trail that is not traceable any further back than the first assassination or major event that brought the mole to Seong's attention."

"So Seong gets her mole, and Vivienne and Zachary can't be blamed for it entirely since it started under the new administration, and it was Connors that vetted Jon to begin with," Ryan said, nodding. "I get it."

"Can you do it?"

Ryan frowned slightly, and rubbed his hands against his blue, corduroy pants. "I can create a fake history trail, but I need information to do it. We have to hope that we have something, because Harriet's testimony alone won't be enough to convi—"

"Wait, what?" Harriet demanded. "My testimony?"

"What, did you think you were here because we were dying to break the bad news to you?" Emilio asked, sarcasm heavy in his tone.

"Why am I here?" she asked shortly, looking from Sin to Emilio. "What's my role in all of this?"

Emilio walked further into the room, stopping right in front of Harriet. "Your man has to die. If they take his bitch ass to the Fourth, they'll use every mindfuck available to make him talk. The plan is to set the fake trail and for
you to tell Seong that you found out it, confronted him, and then took him out in the fight that followed."

Her expression didn’t change, but Harriet turned out as if to grab her shoulder but she deflected his hand without even looking at him, and focused on some point out the window.

"First of all, don’t put your fucking hands on me, Vega." The words came out even and controlled, and she didn’t so much as twitch as she finished speaking. "Second of all, no one’s going to believe that I killed Jon without him putting up a fight."

"It will look like he put up a fight," Sin said. He swept his gaze over the group in the living room, watching their reactions as he spoke. "You’ll have to take some damage."

"From you?" Ryan asked, face aghast as he gaped at Sin.

Harriet shrugged, still staring out the window with the same flat expression. "It doesn’t matter."

"You think that, but Superman here will fuck you up something awful. Nah, can’t have that even if you is a simple bitch," Emilio drawled. "I'll do—"

Kassian shook his head at that, cutting Emilio off. "No, I'll do it."

She finally moved her gaze from the window, and met his eyes. Kassian’s mouth was fixed in a deep scowl as he crossed the room and put an arm around her shoulders. Unlike with Ryan, Harriet didn’t flinch away from Kassian’s touch and for a moment there was a glimmer of hurt in her face that was quickly masked.

"Okay."
"How fuckin' sweet. You know you is in a room full of agents when the dude offering to smack a ho is deemed the white knight."

Sin shot his father an impatient glare. "Can you shut the fuck up?"

"No offense Emilio, but yeah, your commentary isn't helping," Ryan said. Emilio reached out and smacked Ryan in the back of the head, causing the R&D agent's glasses to slide down his face.

"Get it together," Sin snapped, shifting his glare between the two of them. "This isn't a fucking game."

Emilio snorted softly, and cast his son a withering glare. "Aiight, fine. So let's get this shit together. Kass and Ry, you need to beat it upstairs before Logan shows up. The dude is fucked but we don't need a circle jerk."

"Are you—" Ryan paused, lips turning down slightly. "Where... How are you going to do it?"

"After he talks, he dies," Sin said flatly. "Only a few know about what's going on with the Agency administration, and we will use that to our advantage. He won't know exactly why we're not turning him in if he doesn't realize that Vivienne and Carhart would be in danger." He started to turn his gaze to Harriet but before he could, his phone emitted a sharp beep. "I'll need one of your knives."

The statement was met with silence, and three sets of eyes stared at him for a long moment before the small group broke apart. Ryan grabbed his backpack and followed Kassian and Harriet further into the house, mumbling about needing actual intel.

"Text?" Emilio asked as Sin took his phone out.

Sin nodded shortly and unlocked his phone. It was a text from a number that he didn't recognize.
Vega, we need to talk. -Blake.

Eyebrows drawing together, Sin stared at the text for a moment. He had no idea why Adam Blake was communicating with him. Instead of dwelling on it, Sin shoved the phone back into his pocket.

"We good?"

Sin nodded, and put his confusion aside for the moment. "Let's get this done."

He looked over his shoulder at the sound of footsteps returning to the room, and saw that Harriet had returned. She'd tied her hair back, and seemed to have completely schooled herself into mission-mode. Even the minimal traces of sadness that had been showing were gone.

"I'll bring him to the bedroom," she said quietly. "You two can wait there. I don't know how you plan to do this, but I don't want to be there for most of it. Please. You won't need me after he's here."

"Fine." Sin walked over to one of the windows and peered through the slats in the blinds.

Emilio didn't comment on that. "Knife?"

"I keep a knife strapped to the side of the bed frame, and there's a gun in the side end table."

He seemed impressed by that, and toned down his attitude some. "Good girl. Now listen, did he ever come over or meet you right after one of his shady deals or trips out of town?"

Harriet nodded. "Several times."

Sin didn't look away from the window as he asked: "Did he carry anything on him that might have contained intel?"
"Yes, I noticed that whenever he had one of his trips he’d always be carrying a tablet but..." She frowned, shaking her head. "I went through it, and I searched everything in his pockets, in his bags, and I never found anything. No files, no flash or hard drives. There was never a trace of anything."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Sin said, finally looking at her. His eyes narrowed slightly. "He might encrypt so heavily that you can't find it. Or he may keep it online, also heavily hidden and protected. One thing they figured out about the mole is that he's a good hacker. He showed that when he framed me for murdering the Investigator."

Harriet's eyes widened slightly at that and her mission-mode mask cracked. "You don't think that was him, do you?"

"Yes, I do think exactly fucking that. He framed me and murdered her. I have no idea why, but it was him."

She stared at him silently at first, and then dropped her eyes to the floor. "I can't—No. I can believe it." Something in her expression and posture hardened, and when she looked up, she was composed again. "He's not who I thought he was. Actually, I never knew who the hell he was."

Harriet shook her head, eyes flashing as she looked towards the direction of the window as well. "And I really just want to get this over with."

"So do we," Sin said shortly. He turned to the window again but this time, he could hear a car driving down the quiet street. "He's here."

Harriet froze and stared out the window as headlights appeared in front of her house.

"Get it together, Harriet. At least until he's in the house."

She nodded after a brief pause, and cleared her throat. Sin watched her for a moment longer before he and Emilio headed to the master bedroom.
at the back of the house. He wasn't sure where Kassian and Ryan were waiting, but he wanted them to stay there and out of the way.

They had barely entered the room when Jon's quiet voice could be heard coming from the living room. Sin could hear them talking quietly and to Harriet's credit, she gave nothing away. She sounded tense and angry but judging from the way Jon immediately started placating her, that didn't seem to be anything new in their relationship. As their voices got closer to the bedroom, there was a moment when they sounded so much like a normal couple having a heated disagreement that it gave Sin pause. The last hour replayed in his mind, and he realized that he hadn't acted remotely compassionate to Harriet despite what they were asking her to do.

But then the voices were right outside of the door, and his thoughts scattered and refocused on the fact that Jon was the mole. Jon had been playing against them for almost two years now. Jon was responsible for Boyd's disappearance.

When the door opened and Jon stepped into the room, his eyes immediately fell on Sin and Emilio. He froze for a beat as he looked from one Vega to the other, and then shifted backwards to the door.

Jon grabbed Harriet's arm and started to yank her around so that she was between him and the other two men in the room. She twisted out of his grip and swung her elbow back toward his face but he caught it. Shoving her out of the way and toward Emilio, Jon started to throw himself backwards as one hand dropped to his gun.

Emilio dragged Harriet to the side of the room and out of the way as Sin reacted. He'd hesitated just long enough for Harriet to get out of the way, but it'd been long enough for Jon to fire. A gunshot thundered in the otherwise silent room, but Sin shifted out of the way and it missed his stomach by centimeters.
Jon swore and started to fire again, but one of Sin's hands wrapped around his wrist and wrenched it around hard enough for a crunch to echo in the room. A muffled groan tore out of Jon's throat, and the gun clattered to the wooden floor. Even as his eyes teared with pain, he lifted his knee to slam into Sin's solar plexus. He made contact but it was just a glancing blow, and Sin reared his other hand back to slam it into Jon's face.

Falling backwards into the wall, Jon used it as leverage to slam one booted foot into the side of Sin's knee. It didn't do more than cause Sin to falter, but Jon managed to evade from the flurry of blows that followed.

The Agency would never believe that Harriet would have been able to inflict the kind of injuries that Sin wanted to damage Jon with, so it lasted longer than it should have. Even then, Jon held out longer than most, but it still wasn't long enough. He had barely managed to escape the hallway before Sin had him pinned to the floor with one hand crushing his throat. Jon gagged as Sin hauled him up and dragged him back to the bedroom.

"Well, that was cute," Emilio drawled when they re-entered the bedroom. Jon was disheveled and his nose and mouth were bleeding despite the fact that the fight had barely lasted half a minute. "I really don't even fucking get why you people try to fight my boy. He's a maniac."

"Better than giving up easy, yeah?" Jon panted as Sin shoved him against the wall. His blue eyes focused on Harriet and his lips twisted to the side slightly. Eyebrows drawing down, Jon tilted his head back against the wall. "Fucking hell."

It was Harriet who spoke first, even though she had edged to the door as soon as Jon and Sin returned to the room.

"You were the one this whole time. Since before training, before everything."
Jon exhaled slowly, and reached up to press a hand against the angry, red marks that marred his neck where Sin had grabbed him. "Not the whole time, Harry."

"Does it matter?" she demanded incredulously. Now that Jon was in front of her, all of the calm had disappeared. She strode forward and released an ugly laugh as her mouth twisted in a sneer.

"You were never who you made yourself out to be. Since training you've been lying. And it was you who tortured that prisoner during interrogation training, not Cade. Wasn't it?"

"It was," Jon said flatly as Sin began stripping his outer clothing off, and patting him down. Sin removed a knife, a tablet, three cell phones, some wire, and a glass cutter.

"God fucking damn you." Harriet turned away from Jon, her body coiled and tense. She strode a few paces towards the door and just stood there, her body trembling slightly although she didn't appear to be crying.

"Okay, well, now that we've cleared that up." Emilio made a face at Harriet's back, and moved over to where Jon was standing with his back pressed against the wall. "Let's make this easy, peach. Spare me bullshit and I'll make it easier on you. We know you're the mole, we know you was in Annadale Beach with Janus, and we know you fucked over Boyd."

Jon looked at Emilio evenly. Despite the fact that his face was smeared with blood and he'd been exposed, his expression gave nothing away. "Why not run to Seong, then? She's in your pocket, isn't she?"

Emilio opened his mouth to reply, but Sin interrupted. "I want to talk to him alone."
Harriet paused only long enough to spear Jon with another cold, betrayed look before disappearing out of the bedroom. Her footsteps moved quickly down the hall. Emilio though, hesitated. He raised his eyebrows at Sin questioningly.

Jon too, was staring at Sin with a mixture of suspicion and surprise. Other than that, he didn't move.

"You got this, kid?"

"I know what I'm doing."

"Aiight, well, don't fuck it up. That's all I'm saying."

Sin glared at his father until the other man left as well. The door clicked shut behind him.

There was a brief silence as Sin turned and focused completely on Jon. "You're taking this well."

"Well what the fuck do you think I should do?" Jon's voice came out in a low growl. His body was completely tense now, and his shoulders had hunched forward slightly. "You going to take me in, Vega? Work me over before turning me in to Shane and his crew on the Fourth to be torture-fucked? Get one back for the Investigator? Your boyfriend? I really fucking doubt you care about the rest of it."

There was a slow inhale of breath as Sin flexed his hands. His eyes narrowed slightly, and it was a struggle to not reach out and crush Jon's throat for so casually mentioning Boyd.

"This is what's going to happen," he said, voice coming out in a low rumble of menace. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I'm going to tell you to do something, and if you don't do them the way I want them done, I will drag you to the Fourth and let Seong turn you into Shane's bitch for months."
Even if you don't talk, they'll keep you on life support for as long as they can just to keep torturing you until you're pissing in a catheter and shitting blood after all of the sexual humiliation they'll inflict on you. You will be begging to die."

Jon kept his expression impassive but he began breathing faster, and his hands pressed harder against the wall behind him. There was a slight flaring of his nostrils, and a subtle intake of breath that made it clear that the words meant something to him. If Harriet was right, Jon knew how to torture which meant that he knew exactly what kinds of things that someone like Shane, someone who made it an art, would do to him.

"The alternative?"

Sin walked around the bed and unstrapped the knife that Harriet had directed him to. It was 8 inches with a fixed, serrated, titanium blade. He skimmed his thumb across the surface, and returned to Jon. "I do you now. Clean."

"Why?" Jon demanded, his eyes focused on the knife. His breath hitched slightly, and he dragged his gaze away to focus on Sin's face. It was only then that his expression changed, and the desperation could be seen in the way his breath became more ragged, and his eyes grew rounder. "Why would you do that for me?"

"I don't give a fuck about you," Sin said coldly. "But I want to know what you know. And some people don't want Harriet being made into a target because you're a fucking piece of shit."

That had nothing to do with his motivation, not truly, but when the words left his mouth he realized that it was true. She would be endangered if it came out any other way than what they had planned.
"I kept her out of it," Jon snarled, shaking his head. "She has nothing to do—"

"Who's going to believe that?" Sin demanded with condescending impatience. "I wouldn't be surprised if they interrogated her to be sure, and then had her be in the room with you while Shane has his fun."

The look of horror on Jon's face couldn't be faked, and neither could the way it turned into naked fear. "You can't let them. She's innocent. She's a good person."

"So tell me what I fucking want to know, and you'll die here, and she'll be the one to turn your information in. She'll be safe."

They stared at each other for several minutes, and neither of them spoke during that time. Sin didn't break his stare, didn't look away, and didn't let Jon see how desperate he was to get this over with. Every minute wasted felt like Boyd was moving further and further away from him.

"I was never working for Janus or any other of these cocksuckers," Jon said finally, his voice coming out flat. "I was not a traitor from the go. But when the Agency was fucking invaded by some shite group of guerrilla terrorists, I saw that they could be vulnerable, and I took the opportunity to benefit from that. The information they have, the classified shite, the intel your unit has on Janus? It's worth a goddamn fortune."

"And you work alone?" Sin demanded, eyes narrowed. "You're not under anyone else's orders?"

"No. I don't know what that git Ivan got himself up to, but it ain't got nothing to do with me."

Good. Then they wouldn't have to go round up anyone else. Sin picked up the tablet from where it had been discarded on the bed.
"You want this plan to work? I need data. Something concrete for Harriet to bring back to them."

There was a flicker of unease in Jon's expression, and Sin narrowed his eyes.

"If you're lying to me about working alone, I'll personally make sure that the Agency suspects Harriet anyway."

"You're a cold motherfucker, Vega." When Sin didn't respond to that, Jon wet his lips and nodded shortly. "I work for no one, but the Agency does not need to know where the money goes."

Sin didn't bother to ask anything more. It was fairly clear enough, and likely would be to the Agency as well if they figured out that Jon was more than a greedy opportunist. Most people knew that he'd been vetted from Final Front of Ireland, a terrorist group that had fallen apart years ago. It wouldn't be surprising if he was trying to establish another organization in his home country, or to help restore FFI.

"I don't give a fuck about where your money goes. I want correspondence, bank account information, a copy of the directory, something we can use to get Janus."

Again, Jon hesitated, and Sin was starting to lose his patience.

"Do it. Or she's fucked."

A low snarl escaped Jon but he snatched the tablet and turned it on. His fingers moved over the touch screen quickly, and Sin hovered over him to ensure that he was bringing up files instead of deleting them. In the end, it turned out that he'd been right: Jon kept all of his data heavily encrypted in a digital dropbox.

"Start an upload to Harriet's private e-mail account."
Jon frowned slightly, but began putting together the data. Afterwards, Sin took the tablet and tossed it onto the bed.

"Now tell me about Boyd."

At that, Jon actually frowned and he shifted from foot to foot. He pressed one hand against his ribs, and tilted his head back against the wall again.

"It was a case of wrong place, wrong time. I got in contact with this Janus bird—some Paki named Dana. She was hot for dirt on American organizations, real hot for it. I met her down in Annadale to negotiate for the directory, and happened to be there when some other cunt came striding in running her fat mouth about you and Boyd because apparently you lot ain't never learned about low-profile."

"Get on with it," Sin said from between grit teeth. Every time Boyd's name left Jon's mouth, the urge to gut the man flared up. Sin's fingers tightened on the knife.

"Dana pieced it together somehow, I haven't a fucking clue how, and she started showing the girl pictures of Boyd. The cunt IDed him, and as I'd just sold Dana the fucking directory of civilian addresses, she found his name on it easy enough."

A scoff left Sin's mouth and he took a step closer to Jon. "And you had nothing else to do with it? That's what you're saying to me."

"I didn't have shite against the kid," Jon snapped, eyes narrowing. "I didn't have shite against you either, Vega. I tried to take you down because I wanted your spot in that unit, but it didn't pan out and I left you alone. This thing with Boyd was a coincidence. That fucking Janus bird hounded me for more information on him and the Agency, but I wouldn't sing. I didn't want them invading the compound, and I didn't want them knowing more than what
I gave them: just the parts of the directory with administration and the civvie addresses of high ranked agents. I led them to believe the compound was based elsewhere in the States, somewhere remote.”

“And they believed you?”

“As far as I could tell.” Jon shrugged stiffly, not breaking Sin’s glare. "No one knows I'm part of the Agency. They think I'm just a good hacker with ties to organizations, and got lucky. But that Dana was real paranoid. Even with his location, she didn't trust going straight to the house, said it felt like a trap. Since I knew she was hot for him specifically, I gave her the access codes to his security system so she wouldn't follow the fucking kid around and be led to the compound. It was still a risk, but I couldn't do anything else.”

Sin's teeth grit together as his jaw clenched. "That's it?"

“Yes. I don't fucking know where Boyd is, I don't know where Janus is. All I know is the name of the person who negotiated with me. Dana.”

The brief flare of hope that Sin had felt down in Annadale fizzled and disappeared entirely. He stared at Jon, and felt his chest start to constrict as the overwhelming sense of loss began to assault him again. No Boyd. No lead on Boyd. No leads on Janus. Just the first name of a woman that he was already aware of.

His lips tightened and he looked away. He tried to keep his face void of the crushing fucking defeat that made him want to explode with rage and sorrow. Every time he thought there could be something to lead him to his lover, the bits of information sifted between his fingers and disappeared. He was always two steps behind, too fucking late, and for the first time he wondered if he would ever find Boyd.

Sin's eyes were burning as he stared into space, blinking rapidly and breathing hard as he tried to keep himself together.
"Vega," Jon said sharply.

Sin looked at him, eyes wild and face twisted in anger.

It was Jon's fault. His fucking fault. He'd sold the directory. He'd put Boyd in danger. He'd given the codes. He'd sacrificed Boyd for the fucking integrity of the Agency. If they'd attacked Boyd in public, there may have been more of a chance of Boyd escaping, or getting back-up. Fuck the Agency. Fuck the compound. Sin would rather someone blow the place to pieces rather than let somebody take Boyd.


Sin's eyes narrowed into slits and he didn't hesitate. He swung his arm out and cut Jon's throat open, not flinching when the blood sprayed across his face.
Chapter Thirty-Three

When Kassian offered Sin a clean shirt, he didn't even look up. He slid off the stool in Kassian's kitchen, and stripped his own t-shirt off silently. He was still covered in Jon's blood, despite having relocated to Kassian's house hours ago. They'd left Harriet's in the early morning hours and laid low for most of the day as Emilio and Carhart sent them brief updates on the situation. So far everything seemed clear; Seong was buying the story.

Kassian had done his part with Harriet. He'd turned her into a believable participant of a fight with a level 10 agent, and she was likely in the medical wing at the compound now because of it. Between having to brutalize Harriet, and the lack of information on Boyd, Kassian looked almost as tense as Sin.

"Drink?" he asked gruffly.

Sin pulled on the black sweater that Kassian had given him, and nodded. A Heineken was set in front of him, and he picked it up immediately. He didn't particularly feel like drinking, but he needed to do something to dull the rising sense of dread and anxiety.

Kassian rested his elbows on the counter as he hunched forward. "Fuck all of this. Seriously, Vega."

Downing a long gulp of beer, Sin stared at the wall and said nothing. He wasn't in the mood for talking. He was in the mood to kill Seong and Dana and every one of those moronic kids in Annadale. A trickle of beer went down the side of his chin, and he licked his lips absently. He could taste something iron on his mouth which meant he hadn't done that great of a job of cleaning his face of Jon's blood, but he didn't care.
No one had expected him to kill Jon that quickly. Emilio had ranted at Sin the entire time that Ryan worked on creating the information trail. His father had demanded to know why he hadn't waited because they could have gotten more out of him, but Sin had bluntly said that he didn't really give a fuck about anything else Jon was responsible for. His priority was Boyd. Emilio could be happy with the fact that Carhart would never be blamed for the mole now.

Emilio had stormed off as soon as they'd set up the scene, and prepped Harriet. She was bleeding and bruised, and obviously distraught, but she'd known exactly what she planned to say to the Agency.

“This might all go to shit,” Kassian said after drinking half of his beer.

“It might.”

“Fuck.”

Sin got to his feet and walked over to the back door in the kitchen. He stared through the window as he took another long gulp of beer, and his eyes automatically fell on Kassian’s pool. The memory of Boyd and him in the pool, his body crushing against Boyd’s and their lips so close together haunted him. Even if he’d been with Boyd as Danny, it wasn't the same. It hadn't been him, and it didn't even feel like his own memories, not with the way they blurred and mingled together confusingly.

“There has to be something more than this,” he said finally. "Something I'm missing. This can't be the end of the line."

There was the sound of a glass bottle scraping against the counter as Kassian dragged his own beer closer to him. "I was just thinking," he said. "There is another option we could try. But it's kind of risky."
"Do you think I give a shit about risky?" Sin turned around, and pinned Kassian with a glare. "What is it?"

Kassian tapped his fingers against the bottle. "Before Boyd disappeared, he found out that his father had been involved with JG and that he'd gotten some serious dirt on the Agency. It turns out that he was never killed in the bombing. Connors and the old Inspector had him killed."

"How did he find this information after all of these years?" Sin demanded skeptically. The information sounded familiar, like he'd heard this before, but the details weren't populating in his head. "His mother?"

"No. I told his mother. Some uncle popped up out of the woodwork. After Boyd disappeared, Ryan and I looked into his name and it turns out he's likely Boyd's uncle on his father's side: Riley Beaulieu. He started communicating with Boyd and let it slip that Cédric had been researching Vanguard Industries before he disappeared. Boyd looked into it and found out that it was to the Agency what Murphy Corps is now. I don't know how he found out the rest, but he appeared one day with a flash drive full of encrypted information that Ryan unlocked for him."

Sin frowned, his eyes narrowing. "So let me get this straight. This Riley popped up out of nowhere, hinting at Vanguard Industries, and led to Boyd researching things. Is there any reason to believe Riley knows Boyd is affiliated with the Agency?"

Kassian spread his hands. "I don't know."

"I don't believe in coincidences."

"Well, neither do I."

Sin exhaled slowly, getting impatient. "Is the uncle also involved in JG?"
That was when Kassian straightened again, and pushed his bottle away. "That's what me and Ryan had started to wonder. We gave up on looking into this once we found out that it was more likely that Janus had taken Boyd but I started thinking... if the Journalist Guild was able to dig up dirt on the Agency, why not on Janus? What if they have intel that we don't?"

"The odds of him being involved with the Journalist Guild are a lot higher than him not," Sin said. "Why else would some random civilian pop up wondering about Vanguard Industries years after the fact? Whatever the case is, how do we find this person?"

Kassian hesitated, frowning. "We could try to track down his phone number. I think it's likely they exchanged numbers at least. I don't know if either of them used it, but it's a shot. The problem is, it's risky. Bringing JG to our attention. We're Agency, Vega. People like that can smell it on us."

"I don't care. I'll do whatever it takes."

Despite his reservations, Kassian didn't argue much more. He already had a plan for how to track Riley down. Kassian got his laptop out, and Sin easily logged into the account for Boyd's personal cell phone provider. Once they accessed the records for the previous two billing cycles, it wasn't difficult to isolate the number. Every number that Boyd had called or received a message from could be accounted for except one.

Boyd had received a call from the unknown number two months ago, just two weeks before the abduction. Three days after the abduction, Boyd's account showed three calls from the phone number and nothing after that.

The phone number was still active and from there it was easy enough to trace the GPS.
Riley’s phone placed him in Jamesport; the same city where Boyd had told Kassian they’d first met. They headed to the small city almost immediately.

It led them a small, old-fashioned, 24 hour cafe. Warm light glowed on the sidewalk from the large windows that allowed them to easily see inside.

There were only five people inside, not including the lone waitress. Two of the customers were sitting together in a corner booth. The woman wore a large, floppy hat and sunglasses. She was sitting across from a man that was recognizable from Boyd's old photo album as Riley Beaulieu.

A small bell on the door jingled when they entered, and the waitress glanced up at them as they immediately headed toward the corner booth.

Riley and the woman were in the middle of a quiet conversation, and Sin focused on it as they approached.

"Listen, Lola," Riley was saying with heavy sarcasm, his arms braced on the table as he leaned toward her. "I don't give a damn what Butcher said, it's bullshit. And if you don't take those stupid sunglasses off—"

He broke off abruptly as Kassian came within speaking distance. Riley and the woman looked up as Kassian paused next to them.

"Hi. I'm sorry to interrupt."

Sin didn't speak, but he observed the widening of Riley's eyes at the sight of Kassian and the quick flick of a gaze in Sin's direction. Riley's shoulders tensed.

With a frown, Riley stretched one arm across the booth and leaned back, eyeing the two of them. The woman pushed some of her thick black hair over her shoulder and turned her head toward the newcomers. Up close, Sin could see that she was dressed in expensive clothing.
"Can I help you gents?" Riley drawled. He jerked his chin toward the woman. "If you're going to ask if you can have my date, the answer is yes."

She leaned back, her arms crossing. Her dark red lips frowned.

"We need to talk to you alone, if that's okay," Kassian said with a smile.

Riley looked over at the woman, his eyebrows lifting slightly. She slid out of the booth with a nod, taking a small clutch with her. She hardly glanced at Sin and Kassian, adjusted the wide-brimmed hat, and left the cafe.

As soon as she was gone, Riley turned his attention back to Kassian and Sin. "So, what's this about?"

"We can't talk here. There's a park down the street," Sin said, not bothering to introduce himself or Kassian.

Riley's eyes narrowed faintly and he looked seriously between the two of them. He drew out his wallet to toss some money on the table, and stood. "Lead the way."

Sin looked Riley up and down before turning around. He strode out of the cafe, not bothering to wait for the other two. The park was three blocks away and close enough to the underpass of a major highway that the noise easily masked conversation. It also appeared to attract a shadier crowd as there were several people around clearly performing transactions or looking to solicit.

A fair haired young man attempted to catch Sin's eye when he walked in. He ignored the kid and didn't stop walking until they were further away from the entrance.

"We want to know what you wanted with Boyd," Kassian said bluntly when they had all gathered in the shadows of the overpass. "Were you using him to get information on Cedrick or his research?"
Riley’s eyebrows rose. "Well, there’s something to be said about getting to the point, I suppose."

He drew out his phone and typed something onto the screen. After a few seconds he put the phone back in his pocket and then leaned against the concrete wall.

"I don't know what you Murphy Corps types use for counter surveillance but now we're using mine as well. To answer your question, yes and no. Cedrick left something and I can't find it. I think he left it for Boyd, but then Boyd disappeared."

"So you coming back into Boyd's life was just an excuse to get information for the Journalist Guild." Sin scoffed, and shook his head.

Riley shrugged. "So do you have news on him or do you plan to turn me in? I only went with you because I know Boyd trusts you both, and I was on my way to trusting him."

"On your way to trusting him. You mean getting him tied up in your Journalist Guild bullshit in a way that could get him killed." A humorless smile turned Sin’s mouth up at the side. "But I'm sure you don't give a shit about him, just your agenda."

Riley rolled his eyes. "Oh come off it. Why do you think we left him out of it so long? Seems Ceddy boy was killed over all this so bringing in the kid seemed like a terrible idea but we finally got desperate enough we had no other choice. I still thought maybe I could leave him out of it, that's why I didn't tell him everything at first, but I planned to when we met up. Only, he never made it. So are you going to tell me what this is about? You have info on him or Vanguard?"

"You fucking moron. If you gave a shit about him, you would have left him out of it totally."
"The information you sent him looking for can get him killed if the wrong people find out that he has it," Kassian added, eyes narrowed at Riley. "And at this point I'm not giving you a goddamn thing. When he first went missing, it seemed more likely that he was killed because of you and your Vanguard information. If we find him and it comes out that he got ahold of that information, it still will."

Sin crossed his arms over his chest. "He doesn't give a fuck, so let's get to the point. What do you people know about Janus?"

Riley was in the middle of grimacing at them but the name 'Janus' caused him to grow more serious. He pushed away from the wall. "You think they have him?"

"I know they have him."

The frown became an outright scowl. "Those fuckers..." Riley pulled out his phone and flipped through some screens again, his thumb moving quickly and his eyes flicking over each window. His eyebrows drew down, the scowl growing more pronounced until he shook his head abruptly.

"I don't have anything good on me. I'll look into it, though. We get a lot of crackpot leads which don't go anywhere a lot of times, but when it comes to Janus, you'd be surprised."

Kassian looked around, his gaze falling on a cop car that was cruising by before flicking back to Riley. "We have a massive amount of data on Janus. Massive. And it still isn't enough to lead us to him. But the Journalist Guild's sources are not the same as our sources so the combination of the two might lead to something."

"In other words," Sin said curtly. "We want everything you have."
"Fine by me," Riley replied. "Whatever it takes to get Boyd back. But I want to talk to him when he's around again."

"Whatever it takes to get your information," Kassian corrected him, not bothering to conceal his distaste. He shook his head. "You know how to get ahold of me, I'm assuming."

"I can find you," Riley said with a nod. He glanced down at his watch, his brown gaze flicking back up and around the area. His lips pinched briefly.

"Listen," he said, meeting Kassian's eyes first but then settling firmly on Sin's. "If you want to be pissed at me I don't give a shit, but you shouldn't judge the Guild based on me. I normally don't do the community outreach shit because I'm no good at it. But there are people higher up who've been worried sick since hearing Boyd went MIA and agonizing like you wouldn't believe over the decision to pull him in. Keep that in mind if anyone else ever contacts you."

Sin stared back at him, expression not moving. "At this point, any organized group of people with an agenda or a mission can suck my dick. The only thing I care about is Boyd. So don't bullshit me. I'd hate to have to kill one of his few remaining family members."

Kassian put his hand on Sin's shoulder, but removed it when Sin cast him a flat glare. "Let's go, man."

Riley shrugged again, looking thoroughly unmoved by Sin's words. He glanced down at his phone and thumbed something on the screen. "We're on record again, boys. Good luck."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked in the opposite direction. He lifted the phone to his ear and Sin overheard him say, "Hey. Meet me at the hive; I need some work done."
"We should have taken him to a rooftop so you could hang him over the side of it," Kassian said as they headed back to his truck. It was several blocks away, and the same police cruiser drove up the block again. Between Sin's menacing expression and body language, and Kassian's imposing build, they likely looked like trouble.

"I told you. You wanted to take the friendly approach."

"Yeah, well, I try to be civilized sometimes. He didn't deserve it. He's as bad as Vivienne. They all just want to use the kid for their own purposes."

Sin walked around filthy puddles that had a strange, chemical film on top of them. It drew his attention briefly until his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. Sin pulled the phone and glanced at the screen.

"Carhart."

Kassian frowned, and stopped walking. "Do you think it's about Jon?"

"Doubt it," Sin said. "Seong won't announce that he was the mole. She'll look stupid if one of the few level 10s were involved. She'll cover up his death and blame it on Ivan. Guaranteed."

The blond agent shook his head. "Bitch."

Sin hadn't thought too much about Ivan in the past several weeks, and he ignored the pang that went through him. He could deal with that later.

"What?" he demanded, picking up the phone.

"Be here immediately," Carhart said instantly.

"I'm tied up," Sin said. "Can Bex and my father handle it?"

"No." There was a pause. "We might have a location on Boyd."
Sin froze, and his eyes widened. He hung up without another word, relayed the information to Kassian, and sprinted the rest of the way to the truck.

"Forakis has recently come forward with some interesting information," Carhart said.

He’d started talking as soon as Sin had burst into the room. He’d made it in under a half hour after Kassian had broken every traffic law in the city to get there. The blond had been loath to stay behind when Sin headed up to the briefing, but he’d taken the time on compound to snoop around and see if word of Jon had spread while he waited.

"What information?" Sin demanded. He was standing up, palms pressed flat against the table as he stared at the general. "How do you know Boyd is there? Just get to the fucking point, please."

"Cálmate, hijo," Emilio said sharply. His eyes flicked to Bex and then back to Sin, as if trying to remind his son that they weren’t supposed to be openly discussing Boyd.

Sin inhaled deeply and didn’t take his eyes off of Carhart.

"It's fine," Carhart said, looking at Emilio before returning his gaze to Sin. He looked infinitely calmer than he had in weeks, likely because word of the mole’s capture had already spread to upper admin. "As we know, Forakis deals in slaves. Janus buys those slaves to recruit for their army."

A holograph sprung up above the table, and Sin focused on it. It showed an image of Forakis and his compound. He swiped his hand across it impatiently, moving to the next image. There were two images juxtaposed: One was a large facility in the middle of an arid, flat land and the other was
the inside of what looked like a sterile room. There were individuals in beds that were covered by protective bubbles.

Sin's fingers dug into the side of the table. "What the fuck is that?"

"Janus has been developing bio-weaponry for a long time. We've also known that they're not just developing it for wide-scale attacks on civilian populations. They're focusing on more targeted attacks, and according to Forakis, they've been purchasing slaves to test their chemicals on. They've been asking for the sickly, the healthy—slaves of all sizes and medical backgrounds. They want to know how their drugs react to a variety of different people."

"Is it just slaves that they're using?" Emilio asked. He had leaned forward on his elbows as he stared at the images.

"No," Carhart said evenly. He didn't look away from Sin as he said: "There's reason to believe that they've been using hostages and prisoners as well."

"How do you know that?" Sin demanded. His voice guttered out low, and he ripped his eyes away from the picture. The mental image of Boyd inside one of those bubbles wouldn't leave his mind. "Conjecture or fact?"

"Forakis' contact in Janus stated as much, so I would say it's a fact." Carhart changed the image, and a map came up. "Forakis expressed concerns for healthy slaves being wasted as guinea pigs, and his contact stated that they were saving the riskiest experiments for captured enemies."

Bex made a sound in the back of her throat and stood up as well. Her eyes went to Sin and her mouth twisted to the side in a slight frown. "Alright well, is there any intel on how many captives versus slaves there are? The high risk experiments are probably cordoned off, no? It'll make it easier to find our people."
There was a brief pause as Carhart stared at the holograph with pursed lips. When he didn't immediately speak, Emilio snorted.

"This ain't a recovery mission, is it?"

"No." Carhart met Sin's eyes directly. "You are to recover data on the experiments, and any other intel that can be found before destroying their research."

"Well that's bollocks," Bex blurted out. "We're supposed to just leave the bloody kid behind if we come across him?"

Carhart looked between the three of them and raised his eyebrows. "That wasn't specified precisely. The Marshal is currently dealing with a situation. General Katsaros informed me that no agent is to go out of his way to do a recovery for a damaged prisoner."

Sin gave a short nod, and returned his gaze to the map. He would have recovered Boyd with or without that loophole. Raising one hand, he flipped back to the previous image and studied the picture of the high-risk experiments.

Emilio's shoulders moved in a rolling shrug. "I see. Well. Let's get this party started then, shall we? How soon are we out?"

"Immediately. Go to Artillery and then directly to Transport."

Emilio slid his panel into his pocket and stood. He left, and Bex filed out after him. Sin looked away from the holograph and started to the door.

"Hsin, wait." Ryan glanced at Owen and Jeffrey quickly and wet his lips. There was a nervous shift before he looked up at Sin again. "Can you send me a text... after egress? Or tell Emilio to? Please?"

Sin didn't hesitate before saying: "I will."
Ryan's lips tugged up in a slight smile, and one of his thin hands slid down to squeeze Sin's larger one before it dropped away. "Thanks."

Nodding shortly, Sin headed to the door. He left with Carhart right behind him, both of them silently going to wait at the elevator bank. Sin could feel the general's eyes on him but that wasn't atypical. After the experiment had been reversed, Carhart constantly watched him even if he didn't always verbalize whatever he was thinking.

They got on the elevator together, and Sin stared straight ahead. Agency politics were not something he'd ever been good at, and it was easier to not speak to Carhart at all sometimes than to watch every word he said. Self-censoring wasn't a skill that Sin had mastered. But Carhart broke the silence after a moment, and reached out to grasp Sin's wrist.

"If you get one, bring back a spare," Carhart said vaguely. His fingers tightened around Sin, and his eyes narrowed. "Please be careful."

"I'm not going to run off and die."

"Wear a vest."

"I'll be fine, General," Sin said, making a face. As the elevator drew closer to the lobby, Carhart scowled and pulled him closer. He dropped all pretense and spoke frankly on the compound for the first time since Sin had regained his memories.

"Don't be a fucking hardhead, Hsin. We've already lost you once, and every time you go on a mission I feel like I might lose you again." Carhart stopped only briefly as the elevator dinged on the ground floor. "It's not hard for things to go wrong on a mission. The mole was responsible for a lot, but not everything. Anything can be arranged once an agent's usefulness has run its course."
The doors opened and a group of agents appeared before them. Even so, Sin hesitated and stared at Carhart as the crowd stared at the two of them. It was only when Carhart nodded did Sin turn and walk away. The words nagged at him, and his tension only got worse. The message was ominous, especially since Carhart had actually hinted at it where people could overhear.

'Make things go wrong on a mission'? The implication of Seong arranging a death on an assignment wasn't lost on Sin. If she wanted to be discreet with high profile agents, that was the way to go. But would she try to get rid of him after all of the testing and enhancements? Sin didn't think so, but that didn't mean she wouldn't go after Boyd if he was recovered. She seemed to have something personal against Boyd. Whether that had to do specifically with Boyd or possibly with Vivienne, Sin didn't know.

Eyes narrowing, Sin crossed the compound and headed to Artillery. As he was fitted for protective body armor with active, digital camouflage, he watched Bex and ignored the artillery agent who was gushing over the synthetic fiber optics and light reversal that the suit was capable of.

Bex would be the one ordered to take out Boyd if it came down to it. Even if Seong thought Emilio was on her side, Sin highly doubted she would entrust him with murdering his son’s lover.

Arming himself with an M6A2 and Boyd's Sig, Sin remained silent as they headed to transport. Wishing there had been more time to grill the general was pointless, but he did it anyway. The words had him on edge now, and he continued to observe Bex but she seemed no different than usual. Besides that, she seemed to like her place in the unit now despite earlier problems she’d apparently had with Boyd. According to Carhart, after seeing Boyd’s work in the field, Bex had put him on whatever mental list she seemed to have that deemed an agent worthy of her respect. Beyond that, she wasn’t
like Jordan; Bex was too forthright and blunt to manipulate other people into trusting her for a long period of time.

Sin was aware of Emilio watching him, but they barely spoke to each other until they boarded the Agency's jet.

Janus' labs were located in a defunct power station outside of Page, Arizona. The flight was just over three hours, and Emilio sketched an outline of a plan on the way there. Paranoia about comm transcriptions prevented him from overtly giving Sin room to search for Boyd, but Emilio ordered him to search the holding rooms for research which would put him in the same area as the captives. Bex was put on point to collect data, set the charges to destroy the facility, and Emilio would be doing recon from the van.

The plane landed at the airport in Page, and from there they took a jeep out into the desert. It wasn't more than a fifteen minute drive, but they stopped further out. The place appeared dark and disused, but as Sin scanned the property through his night vision goggles, he saw that there was a camera system in use. It wasn't state of the art, but it was enough to be trouble.

"The range isn't far on those cameras," Sin said, pulling the strap to the goggles down. He turned to Emilio and Bex. "We can get within fifty feet of the facility before it will pick us up, and stick to the shadows of the smokestacks. According to the kid in Artillery, these suits will process the light and environment around us and account for it. We should basically be cloaked until we're close to human eyes."

"Yeah, and I don't even see no humans around anyway," Bex observed. She was still watching the facility with a slight frown. "I dunno if I trust the fact that their security seems dodgy."
"Don't assume shit ain't secure just 'cause of the outside," Emilio said. He adjusted his comm and sank down into the driver's seat of the jeep. "Proximity to the city makes it so they have to keep it looking inactive. Once you get inside, it's gonna be a whole new ballgame, kids. Try to keep the fireworks to a minimum at first."

"Got it," Bex said as she hopped over the side of the jeep.

Sin started to follow her, and Emilio grasped his forearm at the last minute. Sin looked down at the tattooed hand that was holding him before flicking his gaze up to Emilio's face.

"Watch your back, boy." Emilio jerked his head towards Bex's retreating back. "Katsaros made a comment about trimming dead weight once Janus is tied up. I don't think they can make moves with everything so close to being finished, but I'm startin’ to think they want your whole fucking unit replaced once all of this is done."

"And wipe my memory again."

"I wouldn't put it past them." Emilio released Sin. "So watch your back."

They looked at each other for a moment before Sin followed Bex. The sinking feeling that things were just going to keep going wrong was starting to feel like a normal part of his existence.

The difference this time was that the solutions were clear: If he found Boyd alive they would have to get out of the Agency once and for all, or get rid of Katsaros and Seong.
Chapter Thirty-Four

The new suits proved to be invaluable to infiltrating the facility. As far as Sin could tell, they got in undetected up until the point where they had to come into contact with people. It appeared that there was a guard detail in each wing made up of two individuals, but Emilio warned them that there were much larger clusters of hostiles towards the core of the facility. When Sin clicked to the thermal radar on his goggles, he could see that Emilio was correct.

Despite appearing relatively unoccupied from the outside, the inside of the facility was well-lit. It had fallen into disrepair and had not been fully restored, but there were definite signs that it was a well-used building. As Sin crept along noiselessly and attempted to stick to corners and nooks in the nuances of the walls, he saw signs of inhabitance everywhere. It seemed as though the people who manned the facility actually lived there at times.

Bex had entered from the North wing. According to the blueprints it was the more likely place where offices and research labs could be feasibly situated. Sin had entered from the opposite side, and the largest clusters of body heat were in that area. It could only be accounted for by the number of experiments and captives in the wing as well as a larger number of guards.

"Doin' alright, kiddo?" Emilio's voice came across through the comm.

Sin slipped out of a wide-open and unused loading area, and down a long, dim corridor. Red and yellow blobs tripled on the thermal radar, and he ducked into a slight crevice in the wall beneath an exposed, metal staircase.

"Things are about to get exciting," Sin murmured into his comm. He pulled his goggles down to hang around his neck.
He crouched down and peered around the edge of the staircase. About twenty feet down the corridor, there was a glass partition. There were three guards on each side, and a keypad that likely controlled the wall, which allowed people to exit and enter.

"I've located the entrance to the testing area. Can't get through without being noticed."

"Do it," Bex said shortly. "Three out of five set, and downloading a massive file. I've got good cover."

Sin slipped out of the spot, and began edging along the side of the wall. The staircase provided enough shadow for him to melt into it until a certain point.

"There's two possible egress routes for you, boy," Emilio said. "Let me know if you have a package with you."

"Got it."

Sin froze as two more individuals began walking up the corridor on the other side of the partition. He narrowed his eyes and watched as one of the guards input a six digit code. The partition slid open and disappeared into the wall.

"Finished already?" one of the guards asked.

"No," a dark-haired man said with a yawn. He was dressed in regular civilian clothing like most of the other people in the facility, but he didn't appear obviously armed. "We still have a—"

The man stopped talking and his eyes fell on the spot where Sin was crouched in the shadows. He didn't even have to shout out a warning; each guard turned to follow his gaze automatically.
Gunshots rang out in the corridor, the blasts echoing with deafening loudness. Sin flattened himself against the wall before ducking down. He hunched forward as the guards began to shout in alarm, making his body a small, fast-moving target.

"Intruder in the South corri—"

Sin launched into a wall run, turning his body sideways and out of the way of the bullets hurtling towards him. He moved twelve feet along the wall, his feet slamming against it before he vaulted off into a tumble and crashed his body into the group huddled by the partition. They had no cover and were clustered in the entrance, so the group collapsed into a pile.

Jumping to his feet, Sin yanked out the Sig and shot the keypad. Sparks flew and a brief beeping filled the air as several of the guards regained their bearings. He slammed his elbow into one of their necks, causing the man to gag loudly as another lunged at Sin. Using the man behind him for leverage, Sin propelled forward and slammed his boot into the other’s face. An audible crunch filled the air, and Sin threw himself sideways as bullets erupted in the hallway again.

He headbutted the dark-haired man that had initially seen him while twisting his own arm backwards to grab the wrist of the other. Bodyslamming the man and wrenching his wrist to the side, Sin disarmed him and shot him in the head with his own gun.

The confusion of shouting and scrambling for cover only intensified as more guards rushed in from the other side of the partition. Sin dodged to the side again and sprinted forward as a rifle aimed at his chest. He swept the man's legs out from beneath him, and tangled their bodies together, forcing the man to crash down to the floor with him. The rifle fired at the ceiling instead of into Sin, and the bullets ricocheted wildly in the narrow space.
Rolling out of the way, Sin managed to evade most, although two slammed into his suit.

When the echo of the gunshots faded, the hallway was a mess of blood and corpses.

The next several minutes were spent dashing through corridors, evading shots, and frantically looking into testing areas and labs. When Bex announced that she had completed the download, and that they had five minutes for egress before detonation, Sin's sense of panic rose. The search grew bloodier as the seconds ticked by and Sin still didn't find Boyd. The body count rose as Sin moved further in and didn't locate Boyd even in the rooms that were clearly designated for high-risk experiments.

There were people hooked up to IVs, clearly sickly and drugged while others were completely enclosed in bubbles similar to the ones that had been shown in the image at the briefing. Sin saw faces of people who were likely allies or innocent people but he turned away from them and kept going without pause.

It wasn't until under three minutes that Sin found him.

The room was at the furthest point in that section of the facility. In the center of a white room there was a complicated webbing system that held Boyd spread eagle up off the floor and out of reach of any solid surface.

A full body suit covered him except for one point where an IV ran from his upper arm to a small metal cart securely hooked against the wall. There was no leverage for Boyd to free himself from the webbing, and no way for him to even use his fingers or toes. His eyes were covered by a visor that wrapped back to cover his ears. He didn't react when Sin crossed the distance between them quickly.
The relief that washed over Sin was so strong that his hands trembled as he removed Boyd's visor. Boyd's head jerked back, and his eyes flit around wildly. He didn't even register that Sin was in front of him at first.

"Boyd," Sin said urgently, reaching a hand up to touch the side of Boyd's face.

Boyd's eyes snapped to Sin's and his eyebrows dragged down.

"Danny...?"

He jerked his arms against the webbing which hardly stretched to account for the movement before it snapped his arms back to their original position. He stopped struggling and instead looked around the room with a hooded stare.

"It's one of these?"

"What?" Sin stared at him and then looked around the room.

He didn't see whatever it was that Boyd was seeing, and that gave Sin pause. His eyes narrowed briefly, and he held the visor up. Looking through it, he released a disgusted exhale. It was all Janus propaganda flickering across the screen, interlaced with clips and audio about government cover-ups.

He looked at Boyd again, and realized that the blond man wasn't even truly registering that Sin was standing there. If Janus' brainwashing techniques went beyond propaganda, they likely did VR simulations as well. Judging from the way Boyd was looking around the room warily, he likely thought he was in one.

Bex's voice exploded in Sin's ear, shouting that he had a minute to get out and Sin shook the confusion off.
The webbing system was woven into the suit that suspended Boyd in the air, criss-crossing through loops in the back that kept him trapped in the complex device. It was extremely resistant to tearing, but Sin was able to rip the back of it open and maneuver Boyd's limbs out.

Boyd was left only in a pair of black shorts and bare feet. He stumbled when his feet hit the floor, and he grabbed the webbing to steady himself. When he didn't otherwise react, Sin smacked Boyd's face hard.

"We have to get out of here, so snap the fuck out of it."

Boyd turned to look at Sin. "You don't have to hit me."

He started toward the door but his knees gave out before he could cross the room. He barely caught himself again. For a second Sin could clearly read the frustration on Boyd's face before determination set his features in hard lines. He pulled himself up straight and moved more carefully to the door where he peered out with one hand braced against the wall.

"The best point of egress is through the west but they know I know that; that's where they caught me before. We're going to die again," he added. "I never make it out and they're just watching me for my habits. Maybe we should just stay here. They'll get back at me for it later but at least I won't have to watch you die again. And then I won't be giving them statistics."

Sin blinked once. "Right."

Boyd definitely thought he was in some kind of VR simulation.

Not even bothering to say anything more, Sin picked Boyd up and threw him over his shoulder.

"What are—" Boyd said, clearly startled.
His hands dug briefly into Sin's back but Sin didn't answer him. Not focusing on how thin and frail Boyd was, he sprinted towards the door and out into the hallway.

He could feel Boyd shifting, saying nonsensical things and when Sin didn't respond, lapsing into muttering to himself. Sin was too focused on remapping the facility in his head to pay close attention. He turned down the corridor with the glass partition and immediately lifted his rifle. There were three Janus operatives running at them, and Sin didn't hesitate before releasing a spray of bullets.

Two of them were downed immediately, but the third had flung himself to the side just fast enough to only be hit in his shins. The man screamed and scrambled for his own gun, but Sin crossed the distance and kicked it out of the way.

Sin started to run again, but Carhart's words replayed in his head:

*If you get one, bring back a spare.*

Swearing under his breath, Sin dragged the man up from the floor and knocked him out with a hard punch to the chest. The man's screaming ended abruptly as he went limp, and Sin threw him over his other shoulder before bringing Boyd down to the floor. Boyd's head lolled as he sagged, but Sin caught him and pinned him against his side. Boyd mumbled something but his words were starting to sound more slurred and incoherent.

"Two packages secured," Sin barked into his comm as he started to run again. "ETA 20 seconds."

Sin reached his exit point just as explosions erupted on the North side of the building. Alarms screamed inside the facility and the lights flashed as smoke poured down the hallway. Just as Sin crossed the doorway, Bex appeared by his side, obviously having run over from her route.
Suspicions caused Sin to automatically drop his hand to his gun.

"Hand him over," she shouted over the alarms. "This side is going!"

Sin stared at her briefly before unslinging the man from his shoulder. Bex grabbed him, immediately pivoted and began to run. They got out of range as the rest of the explosives detonated with deafening blasts. Black smoke billowed above the facility, and the spreading fire cast orange light into the night sky.

By the time they jumped into the van and Emilio began speeding away, the distant sound of sirens could be heard.

"How's the kid?" Emilio barked, his eyes flicking up to the rear-view mirror to look back at them. He didn't even look at the man that Bex had drugged, bound and hooded.

Sin smoothed his hand over Boyd's face, and didn't look up to meet his father's gaze. Boyd had lost consciousness sometime during egress, but he'd somehow gained an injury to his wrist. It was bleeding sluggishly but the blood smeared on Boyd's other hand and trailing down from his lips gave Sin an idea of what had happened.

"Physically he's okay. From what I found in the room, it seemed that they were focusing on trying to breach him mentally for interrogation," Sin yelled over the roar of the wind. He said the lie without hesitation, and ripped the sleeve off his shirt. Using the fabric to staunch Boyd's bleeding until they got to the jet, Sin added, "It looks like he ripped something out of his wrist."

"Tracking chip?"

"Most likely."

"Smart kid," Bex said.
Sin looked up at her briefly. He'd tied off Boyd's wound but kept his hands around the other man's arm. He was almost afraid to let go, especially when Bex was in the car.

Carhart and Emilio's words kept coming back to him, and Sin almost wanted to act on the warnings just to play it safe. Kill Bex; dump the body. Acceptable collateral damage during a mission that would bring them much closer to Janus if the intel gained from Bex's downloads and the captive was any good. He would be thrown on the Fourth and interrogated most likely, but it would be fucking worth it if it meant getting her away from Boyd.

But even as his hands twitched and the weight of his weapons became difficult to ignore, Sin didn't do it. All he saw in Bex's face was a mix of her typical post-mission adrenaline, and some actual concern for Boyd.

"Why the fuck are you so positive all of a sudden?" he demanded.

Emilio snorted from the front seat, but he was watching them in the rear view mirror again. Watching Bex, and likely waiting for a wrong move.

"What?" Bex looked at Sin as if he'd lost his mind. "Positive about what? Boyd?"

"No, the fucking Janus moron bleeding out on your lap. Yes, Boyd," Sin said impatiently.

"I don't—" Bex looked at him and then at Emilio. There was nothing but bemusement in her dark eyes, and she scratched the back of her head. "What the fuck are you on about, Vega? I thought he was nothing but a useless poof before, but the kid's got some skill. He ain't so bad."

When Sin just stared at her, Bex rolled her eyes. "Christ, don't be such a wanker. You got your boyfriend back, we got Janus info, mission accomplished, yes?"
"Yes."

"Then be goddamn happy and shut it. Fuck, you're horrible."

Sin continued to watch her until she muttered something and began pulling off her gloves. It was Emilio's laugh that snapped Sin out of it. He glanced at his father briefly. Emilio gave him a furtive shake of his head, and his mouth twisted slightly to the side. The reassurance wasn't enough to take the edge off Sin's nerves, but he forced himself to trust it.

The next four hours went by sluggishly, and Sin refused to leave Boyd's side during the entire return trip. When the transport agents attempted to do a quick check of Boyd's injuries, Sin curtly informed them that he would do it himself. He cleaned Boyd's wound, stitched it shut, bandaged it, and waited.

Boyd only woke up three times during the trip, and it became apparent that he'd definitely been drugged. He was either incoherent, confused, or vomiting when he woke up, and didn't seem to believe that any of them were truly there. Whenever he slipped back into unconsciousness, Sin went back to watching and waiting.

He ran his hands through Boyd's tangled blond hair; using his fingers to ease out the gnarls and not giving a flying fuck who was watching him do it. After so long without being near Boyd, he couldn't stop touching the other man. Two years since their separation, and this seemed like a trick, or a dream, or something that was too good to be true.

There was a knot in his chest that wanted to unravel, but the tension Sin felt wouldn't let it. The closer they got to the Agency, the more the tension increased and Sin's attitude took a sharp turn South when any of the transport agents or Bex came near them.
**In the Company of Shadows – Book IV**

*Fade*

Stay the fuck away. Don't touch him. I'll fucking kill you if you get between us.

Sin didn't say it, but the look on his face made it unnecessary, and everyone kept their distance. Even Emilio.

Boyd's murmuring started again when they deplaned in Pennsylvania. He became more fitful during the ride to the compound, and Sin crouched beside him in the back of the van. He was keenly aware of their proximity to the others, and locked his fingers with Boyd's.

"You're okay," he whispered in Boyd's ear, squeezing the other man's hand. "This is real. I'm real."

"What is he saying, anyway?" Agent Dibrachio asked with a slight frown. They'd been transported by Dibrachio several times in the past few years. What seemed like lifetimes ago, they'd broken into the compound with him when it was under siege.

Even so, Sin just shot him a glare.

"Nothing," he said curtly. "He's delirious."

Dibrachio nodded, his gaze lingering for only a moment longer before he returned it to the road.

Time passed with only the sounds of the road muffled through the van's windows. Out of nowhere, Boyd's eyes snapped open and his body jerked as if he were about to throw himself off the pallet. His gaze caught on Sin's face and he froze.

"Boyd," Sin said quietly. He reached up to touch the side of Boyd's face, cupping it with his hand. "Are you okay?"
Boyd placed his hand over Sin's with light pressure. Fingertips gently skimed past Sin's temple, down along a cheekbone to rest on the side of Sin's face. Boyd's lips lifted subtly on the corners.

"Yes," he said equally quietly. His gaze moved across Sin's features before straying back to his eyes. "Are you?"

"Yes," Sin said automatically. He smiled faintly, relief causing him to forget everyone else and focus completely on Boyd. He turned his face slightly and grasped Boyd's hand before bringing it to his lips.

Boyd's lips drew into a full smile. "Good."

He relaxed against the pallet and nuzzled his cheek sleepily against Sin's hand. His eyelids were starting to slide shut between each blink. Sin watched him, reveling in the warmth of Boyd's skin and the feel of his breath.

Every minute detail was a reminder that this was real. They really had found him. They were back together.

Before long, Boyd turned on his side facing Sin and moved their hands so they rested palm to palm with their fingers intertwined. With a brush of his lips against Sin's knuckles, his eyes fell shut and his breathing slowly began to even.

Releasing a slow exhale, Sin sat down on the floor next to Boyd. For just a moment, he wanted to be close, undisturbed, and ignore the stares drilling into him.

The van was silent, dark, and with his back to the others, Sin pretended that he and Boyd were alone. He savored the moment, the feel of his lover, and the sight of their hands clenched together. Boyd's fingers were digging into his, even in sleep, and somehow the slight indent of his fingernails against Sin's skin made the moment perfect. It made it theirs.
They were together again.

The rest of the trip moved quickly and the tension in the van and in the receiving area of transport heightened every time someone tried to get between he and Boyd. Sin didn't trust anyone with Boyd, and reacted with a violent shove and a visceral growl whenever the medical staff told him to get out of the way.

He carried Boyd upstairs himself, not giving a damn if Boyd got annoyed at the damsel treatment later, and stood nearby as the staff carefully removed the IV and began performing toxicology tests. He had no idea what they would find but given the condition he'd found Boyd in, everything seemed like a worst case scenario.

Was there some kind of drug or serum that was used specifically for brainwashing and Seong would find out? Sin had no idea, and he couldn't bring himself to ask anyone about it. He didn't dare say the words out loud, even to Carhart or Ryan. The two men had arrived as soon as possible, and Ryan looked close to crying from relief when his eyes fell on Boyd.

"Oh, thank God," he said, reaching out and grabbing Sin's arm. "I was so freaking worried."

"I forgot to text you," Sin said. "Sorry."

Ryan's eyebrows rose at the apology, and he smiled slightly. "It's okay. It was dumb to expect you to even remember that."

Carhart cleared his throat, and gave them a narrow-eyed look. Ryan immediately fell silent, looking chagrined.

"Sin, we need you for the debriefing immediately."

"No."
The general looked around the hospital room, down at Boyd, and then leaned in closer to Sin. "It would be in your best interest if you explained the conditions under which Boyd was found. You can't watch his back if you're on the goddamn Fourth."

Gritting his teeth, Sin nodded shortly. "Fine."

Reluctantly dragging his eyes away from Boyd's face, Sin released the other man's slack hand and took a step back. Even that felt like too much. The idea of going to a debriefing for an hour seemed impossible.

A jolt of panic went through Sin, and he looked at Ryan. The R&D agent's hand was still on his arm, and Sin grabbed it in his own, squeezing hard. "Stay with him. Please."

Ryan's eyes widened slightly, but his fingers tightened around Sin's automatically. "I will. I promise. I'll... I'll call Kassian."

"Fine. But don't go anywhere. Don't leave him alone." Sin knew that his grip was likely hurting Ryan, but he didn't let go. "Do you understand?"

"Sin, we have to—"

Not even sparing Carhart a glance, Sin jerked Ryan forward slightly. He tried to convey the facts without saying them in front of the techs, the doctors, the cameras: Boyd is in danger. He's not safe. Once they debrief him, they might kill him.

"Do you understand?"

Ryan nodded jerkily. "Yes. Of course. Go, you can trust me."

Sin nodded slowly, and let Ryan's hand slide out of his own. He looked over at Boyd again, and raked his gaze over the tangled hair, thin face, and motionless body. The tightness in his chest was nearly unbearable, but Sin
forced himself to turn away and follow Carhart upstairs to the conference room.

He’d expected Seong, but it was Katsaros who was sitting with Emilio and Bex. Sin looked from one to the other briefly before focusing fully on the new general.

"Make this quick," he said flatly.

Katsaros raised an eyebrow. "It will take as long as it needs to take. Have a seat, Agent Vega."

"I'm fine with standing. Now what do you need me to say that these two haven't already said?"

Carhart didn't sit either, and stood shoulder to shoulder with Sin. The fabric of his shirt rustled against Sin's armor.

"Agent Vega and Agent Hunt have already completed written and verbal reports. They were explaining to General Katsaros that you had been directed to the South part of the facility to search for—"

"I'm sure he is capable of speaking for himself," Katsaros cut in sharply.

"And I'm sure you don't need me to reiterate shit that the rest of my team told you, but here we are." Sin rolled his shoulders, and exhaled slowly "Emilio told me to go South to check the labs for Intel. I went, killed some people, found no data or computers, but I did find a hostage and Boyd." He looked from Katsaros to Carhart. "Can I go now?"

Bex snickered, but was silenced by one look from Katsaros.

"Your behavior has been diminished by this unit, Agent Hunt."
She shrugged slightly, and looked down although the corner of her mouth continued to twitch.

"You were told not to search for the missing."

"Yeah, I was, and I didn't search for him. He was there. And unlike the rest of the test subjects, he was still functional and not strapped to a bed and looking three steps away from death."

Impatience was making Sin talk faster, and more recklessly. He paused, collected his thoughts, and started again. "From what I saw, Boyd looked like one of the more recent additions to their little collection which makes sense since no one from here or Euro has gone missing in the past six weeks. When I found him, it seemed like they were in the midst of mental torture for interrogation purposes and had not yet turned him over to the labs for experimentation."

It was a lie, but since the labs were destroyed, no one could dispute it. No one but Boyd if he started talking deliriously. Another spasm of worry went through Sin, and when Katsaros opened his mouth to speak, Sin cut him off sharply.

"You people told us not to recover anyone because you assumed they would all be nonfunctional. Boyd's condition didn't put him in that category. I don't personally give a flying fuck about your opinion on the matter, Katsaros. If you and Seong are too stupid to realize that you won't find a quickie replacement in this unit if he dies, you're idiots. You can explain it to the Agency Directors when things stall again. When it comes to Janus, Boyd is the fucking go-to person. Bex and I barely read the mission outlines, and Emilio is basically only here to manage the three of us in the field. Boyd has been the expert on Janus Intel for the past five years. No one can replace him."
Silence met his rant, but Bex was nodding in agreement. Emilio didn't react, but his eyes didn't move from his son. It was a look of approval and pride that Sin had once craved from the man.

"Your attitude leaves something to be desired, but you are not wrong," Katsaros said after a moment. "Like your father, you are to the point. No bullshit." His dark eyes moved over Sin briefly before sliding over to Carhart, who had put a hand on Sin's shoulder.

"I see that you are anxious to return to your partner, so you are dismissed for now."

"Thanks so much," Sin said sarcastically.

Meeting Carhart's eyes briefly, Sin left the conference room. It only took him three minutes to return to the medwing, but as soon as he stepped off the elevator it was clear that something had happened in his absence. People were yelling, guards were scrambling everywhere, and Luke Gerant was shouting orders from the nurse's station.

"Get Lowe and Williams up here right goddamn now! They just let him run out of the fucking ga—"

"What happened?" Sin demanded, grabbing Gerant's arm and wheeling him around. "Where the fuck is Boyd?"

Gerant yanked his arm away irritably, and glared at Sin. "He woke up and panicked. Got down to goddamn transport and slipped out."

Ryan appeared from the room, his thin face pale and stricken. "Hsin! He must have thought he was still with Janus. He didn't even see me, he just ran out."

"Fuck."
Gerant nodded as if in agreement with the sentiment. "I have men going after him no—"

"No."

Gerant stopped and glared at Sin. "What? What do you mean no?"

"I mean no," Sin growled. "I'll get him myself. If he's disoriented and confused, he'll fight them. And unless you want to deal with the aftermath of them either damaging him in his weakened condition, or him damaging them in the process, you'll do what I say."

They glared at each other for a minute before Gerant exhaled slowly. "Fine. Fine, Vega. Just do it before he gets me terminated. The guards monitoring surveillance didn't catch his movements in time, and that falls on me."

"Got it."

Kassian was the next person to appear and before he could say a word, Sin held a hand out. "Give me the keys to your vehicle."

"What?" Kassian stared at him in confusion. "What's—"

"Boyd is missing," Ryan said impatiently. "Just do it, Kass."

The key to Kassian's motorcycle jingled as he tossed it at Sin. Leaving Ryan to explain the rest, Sin sprinted down the hall. He heard Gerant calling Lorde at the front gate as the door to the stairwell slammed shut, and nobody stopped him after he climbed on Kassian's bike and sped off the compound.

Boyd only had a fifteen to twenty minute head start, but in that time he could have ended up at one of two likely places: Crater Lake or Cedar Hills. To cover his bases, Sin pushed the bike to 140 mph and went past Crater
Lake and then back north up to Cedar Hills. When the bike roared down Magnolia Lane, Sin's eyes zeroed in on the charred remains of Boyd's house.

He pulled over in front of the house and threw one leg over it. He scanned the property before he strode forward. The house was barely holding together, and was scheduled to be demolished any day. The ground around it was scorched, the gate destroyed, and the inside had been completely gutted. Even so, the door still worked and he pushed it open before walking inside.

Everything was blackened, and the furniture was barely recognizable. The walls were still functioning, but the staircase had collapsed and there were gaping holes in the ceiling.

"Boyd," he called out.

There was no response at first, and Sin's eyes narrowed slightly. He headed towards Boyd's bedroom, and he released a ragged exhale when he found the other man there.

Boyd was kneeling in the ashes near where his dresser had once stood. Soot streaked his clothing and hair; made dark lines across his fingertips and cheeks. He seemed to have been digging through a pile of debris but whatever he was looking for, it seemed he hadn't found it and had given up. He was staring down at the floor with empty, stained hands.

At the sound of Sin entering the room, Boyd barely moved.

"I don't understand," he said quietly.

Sin crossed the space between them in two long strides. He crouched beside Boyd, and ran his fingers down the side of the other man's face. "Janus destroyed the house. It was a trap for anyone coming to search for you."
With a faint nod, Boyd's eyes fell shut. He pressed his face against Sin's hand.

"I don't know if this is real."

Letting the pad of his thumb slide against Boyd's cheek, Sin sat down fully on the floor. He leaned in, and touched his forehead to the top of Boyd's head. "It is. They were using your memories to... to sync with the simulations or something. But this is real. I'm real. They used intel from Forakis to find you."

Sin could feel as much as hear the shuddering exhale of Boyd's breath.

"How do I know?" There was a rawness in his voice that was tempered by the oppression of the room. "At first I could tell something was wrong because when I thought back later it felt like a dream. But they've been upgrading the program. Everything has felt more real. Even touch, pain... She's been taunting me with it. How do I know that's not happening now?"

"Because—" Sin broke off, frustrated. He shook his head and tilted Boyd's chin up with his fingers. "Because it's me. Hsin. Not Danny. This isn't the fucking Agency or Janus or anyone but us. Finally."

He searched Boyd's eyes, willing him to believe it. It didn't take much to lean forward and close the distance between their lips. He brushed their mouths together hesitantly at first, just a slight press of his lips against Boyd's, before pulling away. "Fuck. Please, come with me. Your neighbor is probably watching us. That woman fucking hates me, and I can't deal with police if she calls them."

Boyd looked up at Sin finally, gaze flicking over his hair, his lips, and back to his eyes. His expression didn't shift from neutrality aside from the briefest tightening around his eyes. He dropped his forehead against Sin and said with a muffled voice:
"I'll go with you anywhere but back there. Please don't take me back."

"I have a place we can go."

Sin stood up and wrapped his hands around Boyd's forearms, pulling the other man up with him. He let his hand slide down when Boyd was standing, and laced their fingers together.

They walked through the burnt remains of the house and to Kassian's motorcycle. He hadn't thought to grab the helmet from Kassian before running out of the medwing, and there wasn't a spare for Boyd.

"Are you okay to hold on to me? If you're still disoriented, we can go some other way."

Boyd squeezed Sin's hand. "I can hold on."

When they got on the motorcycle, Boyd sat as close as he could and wrapped his arms tightly around Sin. Sin could feel Boyd bury his face in his back and inhale deeply.

There was a pause as Sin sat on the motorcycle and Boyd melted against him. The warmth of Boyd, the solidness of him, and the feel of their bodies pressed together momentarily floored him. He stared at the street in front of them and felt the pelt of rain starting to hit his face, but for a moment Sin couldn't move.

This was real.

A shuddering sigh escaped his mouth, and Sin forced himself to pull it together. The motorcycle roared to life, and he was acutely aware of Boyd's fingers digging into his stomach as he sped down the street. He took them out of Cedar Hills to the east, and into Silver Lake.
He’d purchased a condo in one of the luxury high-rises weeks ago, and hadn’t visited the place since. It'd been a move made out of desperation to believe that they would be reunited, that Boyd would be found, and he’d told himself that his lover would need somewhere to live when it happened. The idea of Boyd living on the compound had seemed wrong.

Sin parked the motorcycle in the parking lot, and led Boyd to the entrance. There were guards outside the door, and the men looked at the pair of them over briefly. The guards didn’t work for the company that owned the building, and Sin knew they were likely perimeter bodyguards for someone who lived inside. Someone who needed extra protection.

The guards took in his body armor, and Boyd's shorts, thin t-shirt and ragged appearance, but didn’t ask any questions. The concierge looked more disconcerted, but Sin flashed his resident placard and strode by.

Boyd didn’t speak as they rode the elevator up, but Sin stopped just inside the penthouse after punching in the long security code at the door. He faltered, temporarily unsure of what to say, and looked around the place. It was decorated in darker, earth tones with cream-colored furniture. Metallic fixtures and appliances contrasted with wood floors to create an environment that was a mix of old-fashioned and contemporary.

He’d known Boyd would like it, and he’d purchased the place less than a minute into the tour. The realtor's eyes had nearly bugged out of his head when Sin had flatly said that he would be paying in cash.

"I got this place for you since the house is gone. I didn't want you to have to live on compound. With them.”

Boyd walked into the condo, his fingertips trailing along a wooden entry table. Sin couldn’t see his face at first; just the slight tension in his shoulders and the way he froze facing the main room. A wall of windows showcased a
stunning view while the open concept blended the living room and modern kitchen seamlessly.

    Boyd's breath caught, and his hands curled into fists. "I want this to be real."

    Sin was at Boyd's side immediately, wrapping his arms around Boyd and fisting his hands in his too-loose shirt. "It is," he reassured him.

    Boyd's hands were hesitant on Sin's back. "You feel real."

    "I am."

    There was a beat of silence before Boyd spoke distantly:

    "It felt real when I was in the desert, too. When I escaped and I felt the ground burning my feet. Then they pulled the visor off. It felt real the first time you died and your blood hit my mouth. It tasted metallic. Then I was in the white room."

    He sighed and pressed his forehead against Sin's chest. "None of this is real. She's using you to get to me, to break me. They're going to make me betray you someday. Betray all of you. No—" His hands clenched against Sin's back. "No, I won't let them. I won't tell them anything."

    Sin held Boyd close and glanced around the condo. He shifted to move them but Boyd tensed, looking up at him sharply.

    "What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

    "I want you to sit down," Sin told him, and kissed him on the top of the head.

    Wariness stained Boyd's features but ultimately he let Sin lead him to the couch. Sin settled on it sideways, stretching out his legs and drawing
Boyd down. Boyd stayed tense even after he had laid back against Sin's chest.

They remained silent, with Boyd's head tipped back against Sin's shoulder and his blond hair bunched between them. Sin could feel the warmth of Boyd's body; the simple comfort of his chest rising and falling. His arms tightened around Boyd's stomach, pulling him closer.

Boyd's fingertips ran along Sin's skin. Back and forth. Back and forth. The tempo rising and falling with the beating of Boyd's heart.
Chapter Thirty-Five

When Boyd opened his eyes, he had no idea where he was.

A ceiling spanned above him; a bed beneath him. No webbing snapped his limbs back into place.

He must not be awake, then.

VR.

His eyes narrowed and swept the room. Why start a scenario in a bedroom?

There was no droning words pouring mercilessly into his ears, no flashes of propaganda overtaking his vision—bombs and buildings falling and the screams of the dying. He didn’t see any ferals with their bright, animal-like eyes glowing with insanity in the distance; moving like rats scurrying in a sewer.

*Why* start a scenario in a bedroom?

He tried to think back but memories and images assaulted his mind; confusing and tripping over one another like overzealous children. Making no sense.

He remembered white coats with a maroon smear, and noises and lights. The ripping heat and sound of an explosion or maybe it was gunfire or maybe it was just his pounding heart.

Dead silence and darkness and the smell of burnt wood, plastic... Ashes smeared across fingertips. Frost. Black sky opening above—so empty and cold.
The world chaotic and jumping around him—pain that couldn't be placed—no, that wasn't right, it was his wrist and there was blood rolling down, coating his fingers and he'd needed a gun—he needed a goddamn gun because something important was right there in front of him and he needed to protect it.

No. Not something.

*Someone.*

Like a radio sharply coming into focus, the white static coalesced into a single image.

Sin.

Sin in a white room. Sin in a hallway. Sin outside. Sin in a small space. Sin in a large one, like—

Like a hotel.

Boyd's eyes widened and his head snapped to the side.

Bedroom.

He remembered the feeling of hot water being painful and relieving, with gentle fingers untangling hair that swung down into his vision like cords of pale blond. Dripping water in a funnel down, down, toward feet surrounded by filthy water.

A warm weight drawing down the bed.

He thought he remembered, but the bed was empty and he felt an inexplicable sense of panic at that. What parts were real? What parts were a dream?

Was this just the program?
He didn't know, but it seemed likely. None of this could be real. It never was. All he knew was something in him screamed urgently to get out before they caught him. Before they found him.

Whoever they were. Whatever they wanted.

He didn't realize he was halfway down the stairs until his knees buckled when he tried to leap three steps at a time. He snapped his hand out to the railing and caught himself before he fell forward. In the seconds following that, he finally heard something over the rush of blood in his ears and the pounding of his heart.

Sin's voice. Quiet, rising and falling with one-sided conversation, but still there.

Sin was there.

The relief Boyd felt might have been overwhelming if it weren't for the paranoia.

He pulled himself up and moved more carefully down the remaining stairs; hating that he had to be so careful. Hating that his body was so weak and he could no longer trust his own mind.

He followed the sound of Sin’s voice into the open kitchen. The kitchen had sleek countertops, and top-of-the-line appliances. Sin was turned away, wearing only black boxer briefs. The strong lines of his body seemed even more prominent in the warm light.

"What time?” Sin was saying into his phone, but Boyd barely heard it.

At the sight of his partner, his breath stilled in his lungs. The world both stopped moving and gained color again.
For the second time that morning he was moving before he realized it. Even knowing this might not be real, he couldn't help it.

He didn't care who Sin was talking to, didn't care if he interrupted anything—he moved as fast as his shaking knees allowed him and slammed into Sin with a hug. Their bodies crashed together and it should have been painful but it wasn't, it wasn't, not with that solid weight holding him up.

Sin inhaled sharply, and one of his arms tightened around Boyd automatically. He said something terse into the phone and it dropped to the counter with a clatter. His other arm rose, and he cupped the back of Boyd's head, fingers tangling in his hair. He leaned down slightly, kissing the top of Boyd's head.

"I missed you."

At those three words spoken in Sin's voice, Boyd felt his eyes burn. A shuddering breath escaped him.

His entire life was consumed by the simple touches of Sin's fingers and lips.

"Hsin."

His voice quaked. This felt like Sin; somehow, inexplicably, even though before he had been Danny. Recently, not long ago—how long ago? But now it felt like Sin, holding him like Sin remembered him.

But even as that certainty pulled his arms taut against Sin's body, he questioned it.

He couldn't bring himself to pull back yet, just in case this all disappeared. Just in case Janus had upgraded their program so well that now it felt this real, this important. Because Sin being here instead of Danny made no sense, none of this made sense.
And he shouldn't have said his name, he shouldn't have said 'Hsin,' because Janus could hear his words.

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face in Sin's chest.

"I don't understand. Is this real? Am I dreaming?" He didn't hear the turbulence in his own voice. "Tell me what's happening. Please. Please. I can't fucking take it if this is a lie and I open my eyes and you aren't even here..."

"I'm here, I promise you, this is real." Sin tilted Boyd's face up, and their lips came together briefly. Their mouths parted but then Sin leaned in again, tasting Boyd with a hint of dampness from his tongue. "We're never separating again. Fucking never."

Boyd's breathing sped. He knew by the way Sin tasted, the way he felt, the way he looked down at him that this was real. They couldn't fake this. Not the feel of hot, smooth skin beneath his palms, the heat that spiralled up when Sin looked at him. They wouldn't know how those smoldering eyes narrowed, how long lashes nearly obscured the bright green, making it impossible for Boyd to look anywhere else.

They wouldn't know that Boyd's breath caught when that intense look was focused on him and only him.

It had been this way since the beginning. It was something only they knew, something only Boyd had experienced, something Janus wouldn't be able to bring forth with their careful scenarios and maneuvering. They wouldn't know how to elicit this response from him; how to fake something that would create a reunion this meaningful.

This was real and he'd been wanting it for two years.
During the year of hell in Europe, it was imagining this that had helped him keep going. It was imagining this that had let him get through detox and rehab. It was imagining this that had made it so hard to keep going when he'd been certain Sin was dead, and later, when he'd been certain that Sin would never remember him.

Always imagining this.

"I don't..."

The words caught in his throat and he felt too overwhelmed to speak for one stretched moment. Instead, he kissed Sin with all the meaning of the words he couldn't seem to say and all the months he'd spent wishing for them to be back together.

A hoarse, raw sound escaped Sin, and then his tongue was sliding into Boyd's mouth as his grip tightened. He kissed Boyd as though he was trying to memorize the taste and feel of him. Parting only for breath, their lips moved against each other with an intensity that caused Sin's breathing to become ragged.

Sense of time fled as everything became focused on the warm press of lips against lips; of heated breath caught between them and fingers sometimes desperately, sometimes reverently, sliding along bare skin and clothes and tangling in hair.

Boyd didn't know how long they held each other, but at some point one of them broke the kiss. There was a sharp inhale, a few presses of lips against cheek, jaw line, edge of the mouth—until Boyd breathed heavily and pressed his forehead against the junction of Sin's shoulder and throat.

"I love you, Hsin," he said hoarsely. "I missed you so much."
"I love you, too." Sin's voice was still thick and husky. "I came back for you. Because I wanted to find you, because I wanted to remember you."

Boyd let out a shuddering breath and hugged Sin harder. For so long he hadn't known what to expect, hadn't known what was better or worse, whether his actions with the best of intentions were right or wrong.

Tension he hadn't even realized he'd still been holding inside dissipated.

Sin had chosen him over everything else. Over Annadale, over normalcy, over freedom. Over everything he might have ever wanted, and he'd come back to Boyd.

"I thought of you every day," Boyd heard himself saying. "I never wanted to let you go. Even when I thought you were dead, I didn't want to let you go."

A low exhale escaped Sin, and he shook his head slightly. "Never again, Boyd. I won't do this anymore. These fucking long missions, being away from each other—it's over. I don't care what they say."

Boyd ended the embrace with a brush of his lips against Sin's shoulder. One hand remained at Sin's back while the other lifted up, tracing Sin's cheek, his temple, and sifted into the silky hair that somewhere along the line had become short again.

He couldn't seem to stop touching Sin. The idea of breaking contact with him was unbearable.

"I had a plan. Before they found me. I was going back that night to tell you I was working on a way to get you away for good."

"What plan?"
"Your brother. We could use him to get away before—"

His lips tipped downward and he automatically glanced out the large floor-to-ceiling windows. The view was breathtaking but what he noticed now was that the distant trees he saw as little blips had lost their leaves. Now the horizon was filled with bare branches twisting and clawing toward a gunmetal sky.

"I don't know how long it's been." His eyebrows furrowed and for the first time he tried to piece together what had actually happened. What might be real, and what had since been fabricated and re-fabricated so many times that his mind had adopted it as truth.

"How long?"

"Maybe six weeks," Sin said. His eyebrows had drawn together, and he frowned slightly. "What were you talking about?"

Boyd looked distractedly away from the window, filing away that information to consider another time.

"I was looking into your brother." Boyd's hands skimmed along Sin's shoulders and down to rest on his upper arms. The heat and solidity of Sin was both addicting and a constant reassurance to himself that this was real. This was really happening.

"I thought maybe we could convince him to help you disappear. Us, now. Just long enough to go off grid and we can handle the rest. It might work. No one would expect it."

Sin studied Boyd, and his gaze didn't flicker even when his phone vibrated against the counter. "Is that what you want?"
Boyd nodded without breaking eye contact with Sin. "I can't stand this place anymore. I just want to be with you and get away, Hsin. I don't want them to fucking—"

His hands tightening without regard on Sin's arms, and he stopped himself. He drew in a breath that he let out slowly, and eased his fingers back to a gentle rest the same as he eased back on his tone.

"I don't want them to have that control anymore. I don't—I don't want anyone to have that kind of power over me ever again."

Nodding, Sin didn't take his eyes off Boyd, even when his phone vibrated again. "I've been thinking the same. I know others have been too."

The way Sin said it made Boyd draw his eyebrows together. "Is there another plan?"

"There's a plan but it's an emergency plan. In case something happens or in case someone close is in danger of termination." Sin frowned slightly, and looked at his phone, causing Boyd to glance down too. Carhart's name was flashing on the touch screen.

"I don't want to wait for anyone. I don't want to give time for something to go wrong again." Boyd stepped back, letting his hands slide away from Sin reluctantly. "Should you get that?"

"Probably." Sin didn't make any move to pick up the phone. "I have to take you back soon. To the medwing. Otherwise they'll just come get you."

Boyd's jaw clenched and his eyes skimmed away. They landed on the top-of-the-line refrigerator that hummed quietly across the kitchen. This entire situation still felt surreal.

He didn't want to go back to the Agency. He never wanted to go back again. But at the moment, he knew they had no other choice.
"Okay."

"You'll be in the medwing for a while, and they'll debrief you but... you should have downtime for a few weeks." Sin looked around briefly. "I got this place for you a few weeks ago. It was before I knew where you were but when you came back... I didn't want you living at the compound."

"This is mine?" Boyd asked in surprise.

Sin nodded, and followed Boyd's gaze as it swept over the space. "Yes. I have all of this money that I'm never going to use so... It made sense to me."

"I thought..."

When Boyd looked around the condo, he saw all of the things that he had once listed to Sin about a hypothetical future home—one that Sin had so easily made into reality.

With that knowledge he realized that the strange dream of the wreckage of his house must also be true. He dropped heavily onto one of the bar stools, for a moment struck silent. Sin's actions were juxtaposed against the memory of his childhood home in mere ashes and timber around him. He was even more grateful for the sleek lines of the condo and the warm light bleeding through the huge windows, knowing the alternative.

"Thank you." He struggled for words and was at a loss, only able to say: "I can't believe you remembered. It's perfect. All of it."

"We were supposed to try to get a place together." Sin shrugged, and ran a hand through his hair. "Of course I remembered. I don't know if I'll be able to stay here, though. It has to be cleared with Seong."

"Well..." Boyd reached out, his fingers catching on Sin's arms near his elbows and sliding down to curl around his hands. He tugged Sin closer and
stretched up from his seat to kiss him. "Even if she doesn't okay it, I hope you spend as much time here as you can."

Sin’s mouth twitched into a half smile. "I do, too. But if it’s up to the Agency, they’ll try to keep us apart."

"Yeah, well. Fuck the Agency."

The phone emitted a short beep. Sin sighed, irritation flashing across his face, but he picked up the phone.

"We should probably go. I don't want them coming here."

A bolt of panic went through Boyd, and his hand spasmed on Sin's wrist.

"I know. But I don't know when we'll see each other next and there's something..." He faltered. "There were some things that happened... It's not... I just don't want to lie to you. I don't want any secrets. Any misunderstandings."

At that, Sin's eyes narrowed slightly before his expression evened out. "I know about the Forakis mission. And I know about my father. It hasn't changed anything between us."

Eyes widening slightly, Boyd barely felt his fingers grip Sin’s wrist. "Then... I just want to say something and after that I'll never bring any of it up again if you want."

"Okay...” Sin’s voice came out slightly wary, but he didn't pull away.

"First, with Emilio..." Boyd's expression twisted but he didn't look away. "I swear to God, Hsin, I thought he was you. I missed you so much, and we were both so upset and drunk. I blacked out, I don't even remember a lot. But
the one thing I know is if I'd realized who he was, it never would have happened."

"He told me."

Sin's voice was neutral, but the curt words were a giveaway. He couldn't hide it from Boyd. Even if he said it was okay, this had hurt him. This thing that shouldn't have happened. Boyd stared at him silently, not knowing what to say anymore, but he pushed on anyway.

"Okay, then——" Boyd started to stand, catching Sin's other arm. "Just one more thing."

It felt like he was running out of time, like somehow if he didn't finish this now it would never come up again. He didn't wait for Sin to respond before he continued.

"I don't know what you know about the mission but whatever you heard, or read, or—or anything, please believe me." His hands tightened on Sin. "They kept me drugged. I didn't have control, I didn't even know who I was for months. And during that time, they—"

He stopped, eyes narrowing, before continuing fervently. "Anything that happened—it was the drugs, Hsin, it wasn't me. When I realized what was happening, I hated the Agency, I hated Vivienne... The only thing—the only thing—that helped me get through it all was you. Thinking of you. Wanting to go home to you. I even—I started a tattoo there."

He lifted his left arm, tilting it so Sin could see the tree inked into his pale skin. "It was only a partial outline at the time but it was enough. It was to remind myself of you without breaking my cover. So no matter what happened, I could remember who I was. I could remember you. And for that one second everything could be okay."
Sin pulled away and twisted Boyd's arm so that he could see the tattoo. His eyes moved over the sprawling branches, and the rich green of the leaves. After a moment, Sin pressed the pad of his finger against it.

"I saw it last night but I didn't look closely. But... It reminds me of Vermont."

A shaky breath escaped Boyd at the words and he nodded. A smile barely pushed at the corners of his mouth.

"The cabin is my happiest memory. It was just you and me, away from the world. If I could remember that, I felt safer. And I could remember everything else through you."

Sin's finger traced over the lines gently. He opened his mouth, closed it, and finally looked up at Boyd again.

"When I was trying to remember things, Vermont kept coming back. It was—" The phone began to vibrate again, and Sin's eyes snapped over to it with a dark glare. "Fuck."

Boyd stared at the phone, and tried to ignore the shudder that went through him.

They had just reunited, and they were going to have to split up again. Even if it was just the medwing and not Janus, it still felt like too much. Especially now. With this conversation in the air and no time to make things right. Even if Sin insisted that things were okay. That nothing had changed.

Despite that, Boyd couldn't shake the urgency to make sure. To make sure Sin knew before everything crashed again and they were ripped apart.

"Just, please... before anything else happens, please tell me you believe me."
Sin started to step back but then he paused. He looked down at Boyd for a moment, and then pressed a brief kiss against his lips. "I don't hold anything against you, Boyd. I never have."

A low breath escaped Boyd. He let his forehead drop against Sin's chest and nodded faintly. He felt even more tension release that he hadn't realized he'd been holding in.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Sin kissed him again before reluctantly pulling away. "Let's go."

It was cool when they left the building, and a strong breeze caused a shudder to go through Boyd. He didn't remember much about the night before, about being rescued or being back at the Agency, but he was only clad in shorts and a t-shirt. Their only transportation was, inexplicably to Boyd, Kassian's motorcycle. By the time they made it to the Agency, Boyd was shivering against Sin's warm back.

The debriefing with Carhart happened immediately. It still felt surreal but he suspended any disbelief and moved forward trusting his instincts.

Boyd told Carhart about how he'd nearly escaped Janus three times—at his home, in the vehicle, and most notably at whatever facility where they'd taken him. He'd let them believe the torture interrogation was working and, when the man who fed him let his guard down just enough, he'd taken him out and stolen his clothing. But his body had been in rough shape and he'd had no idea where he was. He'd made it all the way to a door with the glow of sunlight beneath it when they'd caught and disabled him.

It had started with a drug that had blurred the lines of reality and hallucinations, to make it harder for him to know what was real.
They'd subjected him to virtual reality scenarios, using an advanced program that let them control blank sims that were populated with identities of people from his own memories. As far as he could tell, although they'd been able to control the actions of the sims and sometimes the words, most of the conversations were hallucinations of his own mind.

It was why he hadn't known at first what was happening.

The part he didn't tell Carhart was about the attempts at brainwashing.

He'd been constantly tested—forced to escape, to fight, to solve his way out of situations, and more recently, to betray or even attack people he knew. Friends.

He'd thought it was real but none of it had been, and those scenarios had been alternated with anti-government Janus propaganda that had filled his every waking moment. And when that wasn't happening, Dana was grilling him. Asking him questions, demanding answers. Trying to catch him at a weak point between sleep- and food-deprivation and the blurring of reality.

Based on their interrogations and scenarios, he'd come to the conclusion that ultimately they'd planned for him to betray the Agency—to destroy it from the inside out. To assassinate the upper management. Maybe even attack and kill his own friends.

Dana had wanted to destroy him. Janus had wanted to turn the Agency's own training against them. And Boyd was just the first attempt at this new initiative.

He still didn't know if the reason for Dana hating him so much was real or another blurred fiction from that time. But there was a little girl who sometimes came in holding Dana's hand, and he remembered Dana's voice; saying Rick had died at Hale's mansion and she'd lost a child. A twin. Because of Boyd, she'd said. Because of him.
Janus hadn’t gotten far enough to turn him but it had been far enough for him to be constantly on guard every second he spent on compound.

Sudden movements made him nearly lash out. Seeing people he had attacked or tried to escape in the VR world created an automatic reaction that he constantly had to shut down. Sometimes Boyd dreamt of the scenarios, of killing agents, generals, his mother, and he’d wake up with fingers clenching the sheets and a sense of dread overtaking him. There were other times he woke up, ready to run before he realized what he was doing.

He tried to keep his eyes closed as much as possible in the medwing because if he opened them and saw the maroon logo of Johnson’s Pharmaceuticals it put him on razor’s edge.

Perhaps subconsciously he knew if he stayed on compound too long he would make a mistake—somehow make it obvious that Janus had tried to turn him into a double agent. Or perhaps it was the programming that made him want to escape the suffocating scrutiny of the Agency, the compound, their abuse and the lies.

With that came fear that he couldn’t trust himself. That he might betray himself. That they might find out and kill him or tie him down to the bed to keep him from fleeing.

Sin made it better.

He was in the medwing whenever possible between training, meetings, and missions. Just seeing his form leaning back in a chair or hearing the even rise and fall of his breath was enough to make the anxiety ease out of Boyd.

There was one day in particular it seemed Sin made a point to be there. Boyd hadn’t understood why until he’d seen a calendar.

November 20, 2024. His birthday.
He turned twenty-five, stuck in the medwing with nurses and doctors creating a low wash of sound in the hallway, and Sin sitting by his side. He laid there and held Sin's hand, not even feeling like talking.

All that mattered was that warmth against his palm.

When Kassian and Ryan came by, Boyd was relieved to find that no one seemed to be holding it against him that he'd been so secretive. Between them and Sin, he finally got up to speed on what had happened—Danny, Dana, Edie, and Jon.

He couldn't even feel anything knowing it was Jon, other than a dull ache. He'd liked Jon. But Jon had betrayed him. And now he was dead.

After Kassian and Ryan left, Boyd and Sin ended up in a conversation that led to Sin asking why his name was branded on Boyd's lower back. So Boyd told him—about how he'd been branded as Aleixo's property, how even after he'd accepted Sin's death he hadn't wanted to belong to anyone else. How he'd had Sin's name branded over it.

Sin watched him throughout the explanation and, when Boyd was finished, he pulled Boyd in for a kiss. Even with the door wide open and staff constantly passing by, neither of them cared whether they were seen. When their lips parted, Boyd closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Sin's, his attention caught by the simple touch of Sin's fingers at the nape of his neck and the warm wash of his breath against his lips.

That was the first night he truly wished they were alone so he could do more than kiss his partner.

Vivienne only stopped by once.

It was late at night in the beginning of the second week, at a time when he was alone. He was lying in bed, eyes closed and muscles tensed—fingers
subtly clenching and unclenching as the tension that always consumed him in the night took over.

Hyperaware, his eyes had snapped open and he found her standing in the doorway.

Her fingers were caught against the doorjamb and she hadn’t stepped inside, like there was a barrier she couldn't cross without permission. When she saw that he saw her, her eyes widened just so before falling back to normal, but her lips remained ever so slightly parted.

All she did was stare at him while he stared at her.

They might have stayed that way indefinitely if a nurse hadn't appeared behind Vivienne, asking to be let by. Vivienne started at the woman’s voice and glanced between her and Boyd.

The nurse went to attend to the IV, the hated device that Boyd had fought against initially, and that still drew his attention whenever anyone changed the bag. His eyes stayed on the nurse sharply, making sure she wasn't doing anything suspicious.

He no longer trusted anyone with drugs anywhere near him. Whether pushing the drugs on him through force or manipulation, it didn't matter—they all had an agenda and wanted to use him for their own goals. Every single one of them. His hawk-like stare was on the nurse's every movement until she finally left, more quickly than she’d arrived.

By the time Boyd looked at the doorway again, Vivienne had already vanished.

During his time in the medwing, Boyd was subjected to countless tests, psych evaluations, and physical therapy to start to regain some of his
muscles. The day he received clearance from the medwing to leave, he received strict orders by the Marshal that he was on mandatory downtime.

He was not allowed on missions and, until Dr. Shapiro cleared him, he wasn't even allowed in on the Janus-related meetings. But he was expected to be ready for those intel meetings soon. He was expected to receive Shapiro’s approval as soon as possible.

He didn't know what her reason was for keeping him alive but whatever it was, he was determined not to give her reason to reconsider.

It was the day before Thanksgiving when he was finally able to step out into the world. He felt like a free man for the first time in a long time, as absurd as that was considering he was still shackled by the Agency. He had only a few personal items that he'd thought to remove from his home before the abduction but he didn't dare touch them in case the Agency was watching.

Or anyone else.

Why it mattered if they saw him he couldn't say, but he knew it did. Part of him could only see the world in terms of lists and databases that kept track of his every move, so someone somewhere down the line could use the information against him.

He rented a car and went shopping for clothing and, because he wanted one tiny bit of normalcy from the life he’d all but lost, bought art supplies to replace the ones that were destroyed. Sin had told him he’d ordered food to be delivered to the condo but there were still some specifics he decided to buy in addition.

It seemed like it took forever but he finally made it back home laden with bags that he rolled upstairs on a cart.

Home.
Such a different place than it had been before.

Walking into the condo felt strange. He'd never actually had anything of his own before. The house had been his parents' and he'd always felt like he was just occupying it until Vivienne came back to reclaim it.

After he put everything away, he had the first chance to truly explore. There was an upstairs loft area that was perfect for drawing. A space where exercise machines were set up—which would be helpful for his physical therapy. A balcony gave him an unfettered view of the wooded area eventually shared, to the west, by the Agency, as well as Silver Lake for which the neighborhood was named.

The wind was cool and picked at his clothing but, now that he was off compound, he felt at peace.

All the stress and worry that had been plaguing him for so long hadn't found hold in him again.

Not the way it had before.

Not since he'd seen Sin in his kitchen. Not since he'd known that Sin still loved him.

He went back inside, unwrapped his art supplies from Grover Books along with a blanket, and returned to the balcony. He sat down against the railing, bundled up in the blanket, and sketched the trees, the lake, the building, the sky, a bird that landed nearby... From there he moved to people—Kassian, Ryan, Carhart, Emilio, even Vivienne caught as she had been in the doorway of the medwing.

And Sin. Memories of Sin.

He got lost in drawing and didn't realize how much time had passed until he suddenly noticed it was dark out, he could hardly see, and his fingers...
were freezing. Even empty, with little in the way of furniture, and with the cold of late November air blowing against the huge windows, the condo felt warm when he went back inside. Welcoming.

It made him think of Sin every time so every time he felt safe. Protected.

He made tea, put away the few things he'd become too distracted to put away earlier, took a hot shower to warm up, and wandered around the condo for another hour before he finally laid down to sleep.

He had a dream about Sin. He gravitated toward the warmth of him, as always.

When he woke the next morning it was a gentle slide into consciousness. The pillows were soft; the bed luxurious. There was a weight next to him and a quiet rustle of fabric.

Fingertips trailed down his cheek, his arm, while a warm mouth coaxed him out of slumber. He kissed back sleepily at first, parting his lips and automatically leaning toward the familiar heat. He felt the hand shift, sliding down along his chest and stomach.

He inhaled sharply and blinked his eyes open.

A swath of pale morning light spread across the ceiling and faded into shadows.

Hovering over him was Sin, drawn back just enough for their faces to be in focus. A half-smile curved his lips while one hand ran along Boyd's hair at his temple. Their upper bodies pressed together; a comforting weight depressing Boyd back into the mattress.

"Good morning," Boyd mumbled.
"Hey," Sin said. His voice rumbled out low, and he pressed a slightly open-mouthed kiss against the side of Boyd's mouth. The material of his body armor clung to every muscle, barely concealing the hard lines of his body as he eased down onto Boyd.

Boyd's hands slid up Sin's upper back, resting near the nape of his neck. "Where were you?" He spoke around a series of open-mouthed kisses along Sin's lips.

Sin shifted so that their hips were pressed together. The suit did nothing to hide his growing erection. "I got called in for a mission after training." Sin's tongue flicked out, touching Boyd's before he added, "I missed you."

Boyd's breath caught and he drew Sin's lower lip briefly between his. "I missed you, too." He dropped one hand from Sin's back to pull at the sheet separating them. "I was waiting for you."

The sheet slid from between them, and Sin pressed down against Boyd. He opened his mouth, dropped his gaze to Boyd's lips, and then exhaled slowly. "I was thinking about you all day."

Boyd's lips quirked. His fingers caught on the zipper at Sin's back and started sliding it down. "Yeah? What about?"

"I was thinking about what I wanted to do to you now that we were finally going to be alone," Sin said, words muffed by the press of their lips. "But then there was a fucking mission."

The zipper reached the end, revealing the crumpled tank top beneath. Boyd's hands slid under the suit, running down the hard lines of Sin's back. "There isn't a mission now."
Sin answered by licking into Boyd's mouth, his breath already ragged. He wrapped one hand around the back of Boyd's neck while sliding the other up the front of his t-shirt. Settling further onto Boyd until the full length of his erection pressed against Boyd's, Sin broke the kiss with a low sound at the back of his throat. He dragged his mouth down, kissing along Boyd's jaw and then down the side of his neck.

A moan dragged out of Boyd's mouth. He tilted his head to give Sin better access even as his hands pushed the armor off Sin's shoulders. He got the material down and off Sin's upper body. Sin's teeth dragged along his skin all the while, emitting groans that grew progressively huskier.

Boyd's gray t-shirt was shed, and he was left only in his boxer briefs as Sin began trailing wet, open-mouthed kisses down his torso. His tongue traced the old scar tissue that marred Boyd's skin as well as newer marks, causing Boyd to arch into the touch. His head pressed back into the pillows while he watched Sin through the veil of his eyelashes.

Sin's powerful hands were a gentle slide on Boyd's skin until he pushed Boyd onto his stomach. Strong hands ran down along Boyd's back, pressing down into the muscles and wrenching a groan out of him.

He ran his lips down Boyd's body, sometimes leaving a light brush of lips and heated breath and in other places an open-mouthed kiss that tingled on Boyd's skin. His eyes fell shut and his body relaxed, focused completely on the thrill of Sin's mouth worshipping him.

The damp kisses stopped briefly to focus on the scars that were etched into Boyd's skin, sucking, licking, dragging teeth lightly against them until Boyd was trembling and pressing his face into the bed as his dick throbbed.

It had been so long since he'd felt this, so long since he'd ached for Sin, that he found himself uttering hoarse pleas that tumbled out of his mouth.
Please touch me, please fuck me, I want you, I need you—fuck, fuck, please...

His boxer briefs were tugged down, and Boyd felt Sin’s hands sliding over his ass, squeezing, fingers digging in and then spreading the firm cheeks apart. When wet heat pressed against his hole, Boyd let out a startled cry. His eyes shuttered, and he dug his fingers into the sheets as Sin fucked him with his tongue.

Everything whited out, and for a moment Boyd could only focus on the feeling of Sin’s tongue laving at his hole, flicking faster and leaving Boyd panting. He shoved back against Sin even as his mouth fell wide open, even as his fingers nearly ripped the sheets off the bed.

“Oh, Jesus—Hsin—Hsin, I need you—"

The tongue was replaced by a finger pressing inside; hooking around and coming dangerously close to his prostate. But then the hot swath of tongue returned, and licked up along the outside of his hole. Boyd cried out and automatically tried to snap his hips away. Sin caught him and held him still. He licked him again and slid his tongue inside.

Boyd arched his back, wanting more, wanting to come from this, but then Sin pulled away. Pushing himself to his knees, Boyd twisted and crushed their lips together. He could taste himself on Sin’s mouth, and it turned him on more.

While their tongues and lips intertwined, Boyd worked at Sin’s tank top, breaking the kiss just long enough to yank it off his lover and throw it across the room. The body armor was next, shoved down Sin’s body until Sin had to stand to get it off. Boyd’s fingers hooked beneath the shorts Sin had on and pulled them off at the same time, his breath catching when Sin’s erection
came free in front of him. Sin had barely gotten the rest of the suit off when Boyd leaned forward and took the long, thick cock into his mouth.

Sin's body jerked and his hands clenched in Boyd's hair. Boyd could taste the precome welling at the tip, and the heavy weight of Sin's cock on his tongue was making his own erection pulse. He gripped Sin's hip and immediately started moving, taking great pleasure in the slide of Sin's cock in and out of his mouth. He pressed the tongue piercing against Sin's erection.

Their eyes didn't stray from each other and Boyd's desire was only heightened by the look on Sin's face. His green eyes burned into Boyd hungrily, his lips red from kissing and parted enough for a flicker of tongue to be seen, his hair mussed and cheeks flushed...

Boyd started twisting and bobbing his head, sucking Sin and letting his saliva drip down his cock the way he'd always liked it. Sin's eyes rolled back and his body went taut. For a second Boyd was positive Sin was going to come in his mouth but Sin abruptly pulled him away.

"Turn around," Sin said hoarsely, his eyes burning into Boyd. His hands reluctantly eased from where they had clutched Boyd's head. "Do it."

Releasing a guttered breath, Boyd turned so that he was on his stomach again. The mattress bounced lightly beneath him, and within seconds Boyd felt Sin's breath wash across his back.

One of Sin's hands pulled Boyd's hips up, and the tip of his leaking cock brushed against the sheets. His breath began to speed when Sin shifted closer, one of his hands bracing himself on the bed. It felt like time had slowed to make every bare brush of skin against skin stand out that much stronger.

When he felt Sin's cock press against his saliva-slicked entrance, he let out a heavy groan of a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in. It felt
incredibly erotic, made even more so with the touch of dampness that could be his own saliva or Sin's pre-come.

Sin moved slowly at first but it wasn't long before he seated himself deep inside Boyd with a firm snap of his hips. Boyd let out a gasping groan, his body arching. Sin's cock was thick and hot, stretching muscles that ached for Sin's presence.

For one second, all Boyd could do was revel in the feeling. The head of his cock pressed down into the mattress with a light pressure that made Boyd moan. Their bodies were hot; held against each other with trembling muscles and shuddering breath.

What started as a slow rocking of Sin's hips soon became a deep, hard fuck that had Boyd screaming. Boyd's knees slid on the sheets, hips now and then snapping down with his cock shoving into the mattress. The pressure from in front and behind was enough to make Boyd's body twist and surge with the rising of his moans.

They moved against each other hard and fast until Sin dropped one hand down, cupping Boyd's arousal and pumping it. Boyd's hands clenched into fists and he dug his forehead into the mattress with a keening shout of pleasure. His skin was so hypersensitized that his entire body shook with the dual feeling of Sin slamming into him and the rough calluses of his hands jerking him off.

Boyd moaned endlessly, urgently, pleading:

"Don't stop, don't stop—oh God, Hsin, please—!

The pad of Sin's thumb pressed into the tip of Boyd's cock, rolling around in a motion that made Boyd's entire body snap up against him.

"Ahh—Ahh—"
Boyd's mouth fell wide open and his eyes squeezed shut.

Sin pulled out of Boyd and dropped his hand away. The sudden loss of that heat and pressure wrenched a pleading moan out of Boyd. Even as he started to look over his shoulder, his heart jackhammering in his chest, he felt Sin’s hands on him pushing him over. Boyd's bare back hit the bed, his legs automatically falling open.

Boyd barely got a glance of Sin—hair tousled, lips reddened, and cock looking almost painfully hard between his thighs—before Sin moved in. Green eyes blazing into Boyd, Sin gripped his legs and pushed them wide apart to bare him completely. One strong hand moved down to Boyd's sac, his fingers gripping him with just enough pressure to be maddening and pulling slightly down.

Without giving Boyd any warning, Sin dipped his head down and took the entire length of Boyd's dick into his mouth.

A ragged groan broke through the room. Boyd's entire body arched toward the wet heat of Sin's mouth, of the incredible feeling of his tongue already rolling up against the underside of his cock. Arousal pooled with a white-hot heat in his stomach, spreading with every passing second. Before he could do more than think about how hot it was to see Sin crouched between his legs with his lips stretched around his cock, Sin was moving.

Sin drew his lips up torturously slowly, rolling his tongue along the slit of Boyd's cock and making Boyd throw his head back with a shout, before pushing back down quickly. The sensation took away Boyd's every thought, and when Sin wrapped one hand around the base of Boyd's cock and began to simultaneously pump it, it got more intense.

Boyd's lips were open, every sound spilling out, his gaze intent on Sin's every move. Just knowing that it was Sin's mouth wrapped around his cock
was nearly enough to make him come, but he tried to resist, twisting and arching against the bed to prolong the moment, his entire world focused on the feel and sight of Sin—until he knew it was too close.

"Hsin—" he hissed, the words lifting in urgency. "Hsin—"

Sin's lips lifted just slightly on the edges and he looked up, meeting his stare. It was enough for Boyd to cry out, his body snapping up as he was overtaken by the rushing heat of an orgasm. He felt Sin's mouth working, watched his throat move as he swallowed. Boyd groaned, throwing himself back down on the bed so he could rock his hips upward.

The second Sin's lips slid off the tip of Boyd's still-hard cock, Boyd pushed himself up to meet Sin in a hungry kiss. Their lips and tongues moved against each other, fingers catching and pressing against hair and skin.

When their lips broke apart, Boyd kissed down Sin's jawline, bit lightly at his lower earlobe, and moved down his neck. His lips and tongue focused on the side of Sin's neck, and Boyd reveled in the groan that followed and the feel of hard fingers digging into him.

He was nearly overcome with the knowledge that this was really happening—that they still wanted each other even after two years. That they still moved against each other as desperately and intensely as the first time they'd touched.

"Fuck, Hsin. I love you, I love you so fucking much..."

Sin's lips curved upward briefly, so short it was almost missed. He laid down on his back and tugged Boyd over with a grip on his wrist.

"Get on me."

Nearly shuddering in anticipation, Boyd sat up. He'd just come, but he wanted more. He wanted to feel Sin inside of him, and didn't hesitate before
straddling Sin. Boyd arched his back and lowered himself until he felt the head of Sin’s cock press at his entrance.

Sin’s erection was a hot, thick intrusion that pressed deep inside Boyd’s body. He could feel his muscles stretching to accommodate; a burn of pain that lingered right on the edge of pleasure.

For a moment, he couldn’t move. All he could do was stare down at Sin as Sin stared back at him.

His heart pounded in his chest and his entire body tingled with desire. He lifted his body up and pushed it back down, feeling the hot press of Sin sliding in and out of him. His need for Sin overcame all else, and within seconds he was fucking himself on Sin’s cock hard and fast. He braced his hands against Sin’s hard stomach and began to ride him desperately. Sin didn’t look away, eyes focused intently on the sight of his hard dick sliding in and out of Boyd’s body.

Boyd sat down as far as he could and rolled his hips in a circular motion, feeling the hot length of Sin’s erection angling around inside him. Their breath was each caught with a ragged groan.

Sin’s hands clamped onto Boyd’s hips, and began guiding him faster as he snapped his hips up in a relentless pounding motion. The sound of skin slapping against skin echoed in the room, and Boyd shifted so that he was crouched above Sin instead of straddling him. Sin started ramming into him harder, faster; deep thrusts that made Boyd lose sense of all else. His eyes rolled back as Sin swore and slammed him down on his cock.

"Ohh, fuck, fuck—" he moaned urgently.

Boyd was hard again, achingly so, and his balls were starting to tighten. He braced one hand back against the bed and used the other to jerk his cock desperately.
"Yes," Sin panted, his hips pistoning so fast that Boyd could barely keep a grip on his own dick. "Fuck, yes, I'm going to come—"

Boyd's mouth fell open and he nodded incoherently, not knowing why, just knowing that his cock was throbbing. That he was stretched open and the brutal onslaught of being fucked was making him insane.

The moment felt burned into his mind: Sin's eyes blazing on him; the bed shuddering beneath them and the trickling of sweat down his skin. The sounds of their harsh breath, rising moans, and aborted words. Sin's grip so powerful on him and the rushing beat of his own heart.

Sin's cock slammed deep into Boyd, pounding a rhythm that made Boyd's entire body rock with the movement. His body felt like it was on fire, and when their eyes met it was too much. Boyd came almost violently, his eyes spreading wide and unseeing. The world buzzed a shuddering white, losing all sense of reality other than Sin's body still slamming against him. He felt his body continuing to rock until Sin's moans grew louder, more urgent, with his hands tightening on Boyd's skin. With a snap of Sin's hips, heat flooded Boyd as Sin came.

They were both breathing harshly, desperate gasps of air to cool the rising heat of their bodies.

Sin had barely come down from the orgasm, and Boyd had barely reveled in the welcome feel of Sin's hot come inside him, when he yanked Boyd down closer to him. Their lips crushed together again, and Boyd felt one of Sin's hands slide along the nape of his neck beneath the heavy fall of his hair, with a light touch that was so contrary to the power Boyd knew was within those fingers that it made Boyd deepen the kiss automatically.

When it ended, Boyd held Sin close against him and wished that they would never have to move. For several long minutes, the only sound in the
room was their breathing starting to even. Their eyes fell half shut but didn't shift from one another. Sin's lips curved up slightly in a smile that Boyd returned without hesitation.

For the first time, things felt perfect. Damp sheets twisted beneath them, powerful arms enclosing them and crushing their hard bodies together...

Nothing could ruin it. Nobody could.

They watched each other silently, with brief brushes of fingertips against heated skin and the tightening of their arms on one another, until Sin's eyes started to grow heavier between each blink. Even as relaxation overcame his body, even as exhaustion seemed to pull at him, the pale green of Sin's eyes was visible through his dusky eyelashes, watching Boyd until he fell asleep.

Boyd stayed with Sin for a while, enjoying the simple peace and comfort of having Sin sleep in his arms. He closed his eyes and listened to his heartbeat, feeling the gentle rise and fall as Sin breathed.

It was a long time before Boyd got up, carefully curling his fingers around Sin's hand and starting to pull away. He didn't get far before Sin's eyes slid open, half-glazed with sleep and eyebrows dragging down. Sin mumbled a protest and tried to pull him back but Boyd pushed back a fall of hair to kiss him on the forehead.

"It's alright," he said quietly. He pressed his lips lightly against Sin's. "I'll be back."

A sleepy trace of a frown found its way to Sin's mouth but when Boyd slowly disentangled himself from Sin's grip he wasn't pulled back. Within seconds of Boyd's feet hitting the floor of the bedroom, it seemed Sin had fallen fully asleep again.
After showering and returning to the bedroom to quietly pick up a clean pair of boxer briefs, Boyd padded downstairs to the kitchen. He'd left the door mostly shut to deaden any sounds he might make, and went about the lengthy process of trying to make food. By the time two and a half hours had passed, he had a turkey breast and batch of cookies cooling on the countertop, a large bowl of spicy pasta salad refrigerating as the recipe dictated, and the second batch of cookies baking while he finished preparing a side of sesame green beans.

He was in the middle of staring intently between the color of the green beans in the pan and the picture on the tablet he had propped up against the backsplash, when he heard a faint sound behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and was surprised to see Sin sitting at the counter.

"Hey," he said, a smile automatically forming at the sight of his lover. "I didn't hear you come down."

Sin grabbed a cookie, and raised his eyebrows slightly. "You were pretty focused."

Boyd's lips quirked and he shrugged, turning back to the pan. "Just making sure I don't mess it up."

"You don't have to make anything for me," Sin said, even as he reached for another cookie.

Boyd checked to make sure the green beans were the right color before pouring in the last of the ingredients and covering it. He turned around, leaning back against the counter.

"I wanted to."

"What is it? I haven't eaten in awhile," Sin admitted as he brushed crumbs off his hands.
“Turkey breast, spicy pasta salad, I'm making sesame green beans right now, and you already found the cookies.” Boyd tilted his head in amusement toward the crumbs already littering the counter. "When I was in the medwing I spent some time researching what I could make next time you were over."

Sin's eyes rose and he slumped forward on the counter, resting his face against the side of his hand. "Pretty impressive considering your past."

"I purposely chose things that would be easy," Boyd admitted. He paused, checked the clock again, and skimmed his gaze over to the oven even though he couldn't see it well from his angle. "To be honest, I'd been practicing on and off, too. Before my house burned down. I guess I thought even when you were Danny, maybe I could make you something sometime."

He shrugged again. "But in the process I figured out it was trying to 100% follow the recipes that tripped me up in the past. It's a lot easier when I throw together pieces that make sense to me and use recipes for inspiration or best practices on how to prepare individual items."

"Ah." Sin was chewing another cookie, although his eyes were now on the oven as well. "They want me to gain forty pounds, so maybe your new skills will come in handy."

"Maybe." Boyd walked around the counter and sat down on the barstool next to Sin. "Tell them I'm your personal chef going according to a strict dietary plan. Then they can't refuse to let you come over if they want you to meet their guidelines."

“They better not try to refuse to let me come over anyway. I wouldn't listen.”

Boyd smiled slightly and dropped his cheek against Sin's shoulder. He was silent a moment, watching the cookies through the light of the oven.
"Hsin, she let me live for some reason now but it's not going to last. Even if Shapiro backs me up, she'll see me dead."

"She can try." Sin didn't tense beside him, and the words rolled off his tongue easy as if it were a fact. "We need to start talking about a plan."

Boyd nodded and glanced at the clock. Just a few more minutes. He sat up straight and crossed his forearms against the counter.

"I can tell you what I'd been planning. It doesn't sound as though we'd be able to work with the plan you mentioned was already in place. I don't know want to risk waiting a second longer than we need or they might have time to come up with a loophole or catch me off guard."

Any traces of the lazy calm that had been emanating off of Sin before disappeared, and he focused on Boyd. "She hasn't moved yet because the powers that be aren't letting her take out anyone in the Janus unit, especially not anyone who has been there for years. We need to get out before Janus is finished."

"Have you heard anything back from the Intel you gathered when you found me?"

"Ryan and Owen are working on it. You'll be expected to go in for intel meetings with them soon. They're focusing on some riddle or something that they found. Ryan talked about it a lot, thinks it will lead to the leaders." There was a brief pause. "Riley is in JG."

Boyd's eyebrows rose. He almost asked how Sin knew about Riley but that was an obvious answer: Kassian and Ryan must have told him.

He sighed and looked away. He couldn't say he hadn't suspected Riley's possible involvement in JG, but there hadn't been time to do much about it.
"How did you find out?"

"We tracked him down to see if he had any useful information on where you might have been taken. He didn't, but JG sent us a bunch of other Janus information they had. It was useless on its own, but apparently combined with Agency intel, it might lead to something big. Ryan keeps referring to it as The Puzzle."

"Do you know anything more about it?" Boyd asked, intrigued.

Sin shook his head and pointed at the oven. "That's done."

Boyd glanced distractedly at the oven, his mind working through their conversation. He didn't speak until he had the cookies out of the oven and placed individually on the cooling rack, but at that point he set the cookie pan down harder than necessary. When he looked up at Sin, his eyes were narrowed.

"It pisses me off that Riley didn't tell me anything. That JG didn't tell me anything." He dropped the oven mitt on the counter. "After I was in the Agency it makes sense if they weren't certain whether they could trust me, but what about before? They wrote about Lou's murder and my attack for all the world to see, but left it at just that paper trail. If they were so concerned, if my dad's the one who founded them, why the hell couldn't someone have swung by my house to see if I was okay? Especially if I had a wayward fucking uncle running around as part of their crew."

Sin reached out to prod one of the cooling cookies, but didn't actually take one. Instead he leaned forward on his elbows. "To be fucking honest, Boyd, those people don't give a damn about you. They'll try to sell you some bullshit but they just want to use you for what they think you might know about your father's research."
Boyd stared at Sin. He felt the vague beginnings of a headache and rubbed at his face. His hands dropped back down to the counter where they braced against the edge. "I'm really—" He stopped, grimaced, and turned to walk over to the stove where he pulled the cover off the pan.

"It's frustrating. My dad seems like the only good person in my family. I thought Vivienne was bad enough but Riley doesn't seem any better. The Agency, JG, even fucking Janus and Forakis..." He glared down at the green beans and then looked over his shoulder at Sin. "Why is it so fucking acceptable to everyone to do whatever the hell they want to me for their own gain, and then expect me to be happy that they even deigned to acknowledge my existence?"

"These people look at all of us as pawns, Boyd. The Agency basically made me their science project. All of these organizations, these people, they only care about their goals."

"Well, it's bullshit." Boyd checked the green beans and, seeing some liquid left, decided to leave it a little longer. "And until Shapiro clears me, I don't trust the Agency even if you're right that she'd have to wait until after Janus is taken down."

Sin nodded, and pressed his hands flat against the counter. "Which brings us back to needing a plan. We need to be able to completely disappear."

Boyd nodded in return. "Can you set the table?"

When Sin walked over to get the tableware, Boyd started getting the food ready. "My first goal is to get reinstated so I can at least be used for intel. My next scheduled psych appointment isn't for three days but I'll show up earlier. Shapiro has seemed trustworthy enough in the past so I think he'd prefer to see me back in action."
"They won't put you in the field, but yeah, Carhart has already indicated to Katsaros that we need you for the Janus perspective."

"Good. I don't want to be in the field, anyway. It'll give me more time to get everything else ready."

Sin set down the silverware and looked at Boyd. "We don't even have a real plan at this point. We need to start making moves now. And it might be even easier to contact Damian Perry now since he lives in this building."

Boyd glanced sidelong at Sin. So that was who the bodyguards were for downstairs. Having only been in the building one day so far, he hadn't had the chance to investigate yet. What were the odds that both Vegas would choose the same location for a condo?

"Before we contact him directly I need to talk to Adam Blake. I already had contact with Chance under a cover name and ran across Adam in the process. He'd been working on Chance for years, so he was going to help me figure out whether Chance was a viable option."

Sin's eyes had narrowed briefly at that, and he leaned over to flick the burner off the pan of green beans. "Does he know about this? About us getting out? He contacted me recently but I never got back to him. He is barely on compound."

"He knew I wanted you to be free and was looking for options for that." Boyd opened the refrigerator and pulled out the bowl of pasta salad. "There are reasons I trust him to keep it secret. But at the time I didn't know whether I was going with you."

Rolling his eyes, Sin reached out and grabbed Boyd's elbow. "That was stupid. Why the fuck would you think I'd ever go anywhere without you? Even as a brain dead civilian, I was a disaster without you."
Boyd paused and looked at him. "I was going to ask you what you wanted and follow through no matter what your decision was. But I wanted to give you that choice instead of deciding for you."

"Well I appreciate the vote of confidence since in the past that didn't happen a lot." Sin smirked, and arched a brow at Boyd, who hit him on the arm. "But I hope you know now there's no possibility of us splitting up ever again."

Boyd rolled his eyes in return. "Now who's being stupid? Even if you tried to get away from me, I'd follow you to the ends of the Earth."

"You better. Now tell me your plan."
Chapter Thirty-Six

For the first time in what felt like forever, things were calm. It was surreal; as surreal as seeing Sin walk into the Tower after being dead for over a year. As surreal as watching Sin carry Boyd into the med wing two weeks earlier when the younger agent's survival had also been doubted.

Carhart stared at his computer, at the amount of data that was currently downloading, and then out the window. There was nothing enticing about the weather: it was gray, gloomy, and damp. The skyline was as broken as it'd been a week ago, and the ruins of the military base still darkened the land that stretched beyond Lexington proper.

Despite all that, he felt an overpowering need to go out.

For the moment things were okay with the people that mattered to him. Sin and Boyd were alive, and holed up somewhere off compound. The mole was dead, and there was no danger of it ever being found out how long Jonathan Logan had been working against Vivienne before Seong had come in. Janus was continuously weakening, and with that, the direct threat against Carhart's own survival at the Agency had diminished.

And Emilio was... doing whatever he did.

The thought gave him pause, and Carhart looked down at his phone. There were no messages or missed calls. With things on compound going smoothly and everyone in his unit occupied, he'd been left alone for the majority of the day.

Kassian had received an unsigned package at his house a couple of weeks prior, and it had been a goldmine of Janus information. Despite the lack of a name, Kassian and Sin seemed sure that it was from Boyd's uncle or
one of his affiliates in the Journalist Guild. Having no reason to doubt them, Carhart had tasked Boyd, Owen, Ryan and Jeffrey with sorting through the new data. That, combined with the intel obtained during the mission in Arizona, made it seem like there was finally a light at the end of the Janus tunnel.

The general could finally focus on the annual review of agent performance which had been put off for months. It was a good time to focus, but somehow he couldn't. The more he stared at the impersonal numbers and data about the field agents he oversaw, the less he wanted to dedicate his time to the task.

It should have been the opposite. He should have been more motivated than ever because it would be harder to sanction a termination for he and Vivienne when the threat of Janus, which had loomed over the government for nearly two decades, was close to being finished due to his unit.

But his mind was not working that way. His mind was leaning more towards pessimism, and restlessness. He wondered if this was simply another calm spell before yet another storm.

There was always another storm.

He shoved his chair back and started to stand, looking briefly at the computer screen. The download was still moving steadily, but sixteen new messages had popped up in his inbox in the past few minutes. Scowling, he scanned the subjects and saw one relating to a possible promotion candidate to level 8 from General Willis.

Curious, Carhart clicked the e-mail and scanned it. Willis was suggesting a level 7 field agent named Seth Nguyen be promoted. The body of the e-mail was relatively concise, as per Willis' usual style, and Carhart
clicked the link that brought up the program which contained Agent data. Nguyen's profile populated, and Carhart skimmed it.

He was vaguely familiar with the kid only because he'd initially not liked the idea of a former Outlaw being vetted to the Agency. The agent scouts didn't typically recommend gang members because of their strong loyalties to their former affiliates, especially if they were part of a gang that was active in Lexington. However, Seth had apparently been an ideal candidate for an assassin due to his sociopathic tendencies.

Carhart went through the file briefly, and quickly went over Seth's rap sheet prior to joining the Agency. He had a long history of crime dating back to a few years prior when he'd been involved in a murder in Vickland. The bullet had a link, and Carhart followed.

What he saw gave him pause.

Seth Nguyen had been involved with the murder of Louis Krauszer, Boyd's childhood friend. The information was scrawled across the screen in tiny, unflinching, impersonal words.

Carhart's eyes narrowed slightly. He barely hesitated before sending Willis a curt e-mail in which he denied the request.

Disgusted, Carhart finally stood. He left the computer to finish downloading as he walked out of the office.

"Reschedule my meeting with Instructor Fergusen," Carhart told Brian, not even pausing by the man's desk. He heard his admin acknowledge the order before leaving the waiting area.

It didn't take long to jog down to the ground floor of the Tower, but he called Emilio as he did so. There was no response, and a quick inquiry at the security post told him that the other man had not been on compound at all that
day. According to their documentation, Emilio hadn't been on the compound much for the last few days.

A thought occurred to Carhart, and it caused his mouth to tighten into a thin line. He turned away from the guards and headed to the parking lot. He was dialing Kassian's number before he could talk himself out of it, but the senior agent didn't pick up either. Frustration turned into irritation, and Carhart tried to keep it from becoming apparent in his expression.

Kassian was starting to anger him. The man had a real knack for getting in the middle of things that he didn't need to be in the middle of. There had been so many allusions to Emilio sleeping with Kassian in the past couple of months that Carhart was close to telling Kassian outright to back the hell off. But tension over Emilio had a tendency to turn Carhart into a more vicious version of himself, and he didn't trust himself to start such a conversation. Telling would turn into ordering, and refusal would lead to something worse.

Carhart put his hands on the steering wheel and stared out the windshield. The rain was coming down harder, and all he wanted to do was find Emilio, go back to the man’s apartment and fuck for the rest of the afternoon. He’d been wanting that for the past week, but every text and phone call had been ignored.

Trying to figure out what Emilio was thinking was a recipe for frustration and headache-inducing confusion. The general had no idea why Emilio had been scarce recently, but it'd started with Sin's reappearance. Their communication had lessened considerably with the constant distractions. As everything started coming to a head with Janus, the mole, and the Agency's plans for his unit, Carhart had gotten completely sucked into his work. Until now, he'd not even noticed Emilio’s absence.

Letting the agitation guide him, Carhart called Ryan. He'd nearly started the conversation with a terse demand about Kassian's whereabouts,
but Carhart caught himself before the words could slip out. Instead, he asked Ryan to meet him at Cafe Milan. The R&D agent was so pleased by the invitation that Carhart’s frown eased into a faint smile.

The drive was short, but somehow Ryan had beat him there. The younger man was sitting in a back booth with both hands wrapped around a large, steaming mug. Between that, his enormous blue eyes, messy black hair and the scarf that was wrapped around his neck multiple times, Ryan looked more like a teenager than a man in his late twenties.

"Hey Zach."

Carhart reached out and ran a hand through the other man’s hair, ruffling it briefly. "You look like you're skipping school."

"Whatevs, people are totally charmed by this youthful face," Ryan said. He nudged a basket of assorted pastries to Carhart's side of the table, and glared until the general took an apple tart.

"So, what's up?"

Carhart chewed slowly, rested his elbow on the table and pressed his face against his open palm. "Did it ever occur to you that I simply want to have coffee with you because I enjoy your company?"

"Nope."

Rolling his eyes, Carhart flagged down the waitress. "Don't be such a cynical."

"Yeah, 'cause being optimistic gets any of us anywhere," Ryan replied with a snort.
The waitress came over and smiled at Carhart more than was necessary. She asked him if he wanted any of the specials, recommended the apple pie, and wheedled a little when he declined.

"She definitely thinks you're my hot dad."

"Shut up, Ryan."

"Hey, you started this." Ryan smirked, and shifted on his chair. He wrestled his phone out of the pocket of his tight jeans, and studied it for a long moment without bothering to say what he was looking at. The waitress returned with Carhart's coffee, and only when she was out of earshot did Ryan talk again.

"So not to make this all business right away, but Jeffrey just sent me a message, and he's making real headway with that intel from Arizona. It's all like... a clusterfuck of science stuff, but mixed in there are little nuggets of knowledge."

"What kind of nuggets?" Carhart asked, taking a sip of his coffee. "Are we close to a location?"

Ryan shrugged, and looked at his phone again. "We're not there, but maybe soon? Between this, JG's box of wonders, and the intel that we already had... It's looking good. Honestly. And I mean, I don't jump the gun very quickly because, you know, cynic. But we're cross referencing tidbits from everywhere and it's starting to paint a picture."

"How abstract is this picture?"

"Errr. Moving away from Pollock and towards Picasso?"

Carhart smiled, and shook his head slightly. "I'll take your word for it."
They sat in silence for a moment, and Ryan took large gulps of what turned out to be hot chocolate. The silence was comfortable, but it always was with Ryan. Being around him put Carhart at ease in a way that rarely happened with other people. There was something about the younger man that endeared him endlessly, and without thinking about it, Carhart reached out to adjust Ryan's scarf.

"What happened to that man you're dating?"

Ryan wrinkled his nose. "Who? Which one?"

Carhart shrugged. "I don't know. I heard somewhere that you were dating some man. Another R&D agent."

"Ohhh. Jacob."

"With the tattoos?"

Ryan laughed, and thumped his mug down onto the table. "Oh my God, you seriously just sounded like an overprotective dad."

"Ryan, get off the dad thing. I'm not old enough to be your father."

"Whatever, so not the point." Ryan smirked at him. "Anyway, we just hang out. It turned into us being buddies, as usual. I'm always the buddy. Or the sidekick, or something. I'm like an inanimate object. A cute thing that people like to collect or whatever and leave on a shelf and not touch ever again."

"That was a terrible analogy."

Ryan made a face. "Whatever, it made sense."

Carhart sat back in his chair, and crossed his arms over his chest. "What about Kassian?" The question earned him a long, blank stare and the general shrugged. "You two seem close. I've seen him flirt with you."
He'd also caught him staring at Ryan's ass more times than he could count.

"Yeah but..." Ryan trailed off, frowning slightly. "He's... Kassian. He's just handsy and flirty with everyone. I mean don't get me wrong, we had a brief thing, and he's 6'2" of hot, blond, man-god, but he's like... unavailable."

"How?" The question came out sharper than Carhart had intended, and Ryan raised an eyebrow at him.

"Uh. Just to the world. Because he's Kassian. You know?"

"Uh huh."

Ryan popped a small, oatmeal raisin cookie into his mouth and stared at Carhart. "Any particular reason why you're pimping Kass out?"

"I'm not pimping anybody out. It was a suggestion." Carhart drained his coffee and glanced out the window. "Where is he, anyway? I need to speak to him and Sin, but I don't want to intrude on Sin and Boyd just yet. I didn't even want to assign Boyd to work on the intel yet, but I'm paranoid about him being too inactive."

At that, Ryan's expression lost some of its mischievous humor. "I know... I want to see Boyd really badly, but when he's not with us working, he's at the condo Sin bought him. And I can't talk about stuff in front of Jeffrey..."

Ryan shrugged. "Anyway, I'm not sure. Emilio is already partying hard at J&J, and Kassian said he might meet him there. He invited me but I have too much work to do."

The words put Carhart on edge, and he narrowed his eyes slightly. Kassian, Emilio and Ryan at Jake & Janet's sounded like a disaster. With the combination of Kassian's history with Ryan, and Emilio's twink comments
about the R&D agent, Carhart did not want to even consider what the three of them drinking together could lead to. Not that Kassian and Emilio being there was any better.

Despite that, Carhart put the rising sense of jealousy aside and focused on Ryan. He changed the subject so as to not be completely transparent, and they spent an hour at the cafe. They talked about work, but they dwelled on what would happen if they were actually able to leave the Agency.

Despite Ryan's claim that he didn't have reason to be optimistic, that was exactly what he was in regards to their emergency escape plan. He didn't seem to share any of Carhart's doubts, and definitely did not appear to have thought about horror scenarios of being hunted and murdered when not expecting it. He was confident in the work that he, Bree and Owen had put into the program that would erase their existences, and Carhart hoped that was a good sign.

The conversation turned to how they would all keep in contact or if they would even be able to, and Ryan asked if Carhart planned to go with anyone. Apparently he and Kassian were going to stay together until they figured out where they wanted to go in the long term. Without hesitation, Carhart had nearly said that he would disappear with Emilio. The unspoken sentence made the agitation and anxiety difficult to ignore, and Carhart made an excuse to leave.

He used the agent reviews, but in reality, Carhart just wanted to find Emilio. Find him and finally tell him that things with Vivienne had ended weeks ago. Find him and try to figure out where any of this was going, if it was even going anywhere other than where it already was.

Carhart had no idea when his desire to control and then fuck Emilio had turned into an unceasing want, but it was there and there was no denying
it. It had been there before the realization that he needed the little bastard despite all of the horrible things that he, that both of them, had done to each other.

Carhart went home and swapped his clothing for jeans, a black sweater, and his army jacket. He drove directly to Jake & Janet’s in the Theater District. By then it was only six in the evening, but the place was already crowded. Several people looked as though they’d just driven down from the Financial District after work, but somehow nobody seemed out of place. Jake & Janet’s was where people went when they wanted a guaranteed one night stand, and it attracted all kinds.

Ignoring a man who attempted to catch his eye, Carhart headed down to the basement. It wasn’t even difficult to pick out which alcove Emilio might be in. Carhart would recognize his voice anywhere, even if the only sounds Emilio was currently making were low, husky groans.

Despite the fact that Carhart was fully prepared to embarrass himself in this wretched shithole if Kassian was actually in there with Emilio, the general’s body reacted to the sound of Emilio’s voice sounding so throaty and thick with lust.

Carhart approached the alcove, and didn’t even have to shove the curtains aside. Emilio hadn’t bothered to shut them entirely.

Emilio wasn’t with Kassian, but the scene before Carhart still made him take a step back. It wasn’t the fact that Emilio was currently screwing a tall, red-haired woman with long legs and large breasts that immediately drew Carhart’s attention. It wasn’t the way Emilio was shirtless and sweaty, with his jeans rucked down around his knees as he held the woman’s legs open and pounded into her.
What made Carhart's eyes narrow and hands ball up was watching some tall, tattoo-covered man tongue his way down Emilio's back as he tugged the agent's jeans further down his thighs.

The spike of possessiveness that went through Carhart made him want to do something irrational, but he shut it down. He also couldn't take his eyes away.

The sensible thing to do was to leave. With the music blasting, and them likely completely wasted, nobody would notice if he backed out now. However, Carhart's eyes traced the lines of Emilio's body and the tattoos on his skin up to his face, and he paused.

Emilio's eyes were closed, long lashes resting against his face as his mouth hung slightly open, full lips parted and damp. His eyebrows were raised and drawn together, and his inky hair was a mess of silken chaos around his face. He looked amazing. Undeniably dangerous and wild, but so ridiculously beautiful that it was almost at odds with how hard and masculine his body was.

He had thrown his head back as he fucked the woman, and he looked completely lost in the feeling of it. She was so wet that there was an audible sound of his dick going in and out of her as she slammed against him. She had turned her face to bite one of the throw pillows, her legs spread wide and one foot braced against the table as she arched against him.

It was like going back in time and watching Emilio take turns fucking Lydia and Ann and whatever other woman he brought home. Back then Carhart had ignored the way it turned him on, and ignored the way he had secretly wished he wasn't so goddamn hard-headed so that he could get closer, get in on it, take his turn, maybe feel Emilio's hands on him.
But even now, Carhart didn’t want to partake. Now he just wanted the
tattooed man to get the hell out of the way and stop running his mouth and
tongue all over Emilio. Seeing the damp trail of saliva that was likely cooling
on that soft, caramel skin was turning the general on in a way that he couldn’t
hide or deny, but he still wanted to crush the man’s face into a wall.

The thought was in his head before he could force it back: that it should
be his mouth on that skin, his saliva, his hands. But he never touched Emilio
like that. Never took the time to appreciate the feel of that skin, or caused that
blissful expression to slacken Emilio’s expressive face. When they fucked, it
was hard and violent—he usually drove inside Emilio like he was trying to
prove a point and didn’t stop until Emilio was reduced to a panting, incoherent
wreck.

Turning abruptly, Carhart strode away from the alcove. He took the
stairs three at a time, and shoved his way out of the club with more violence
than was necessary. He stood outside for several minutes, and stared into
space. Whatever plan he’d walked in with was out the window.

He’d anticipated anger, but not the goddamn cacophony of other
feelings that had choked him. Possessiveness, jealousy, and so much
resentment that another man was about to fuck Emilio.

It made him want to do something stupid; something worse than the
time he’d not-so-kindly suggested that the bartender from Killian’s get out of
Emilio’s apartment. Instead, Carhart went to his car and drove away. He found
himself driving to Emilio’s building.

The drive to Bedford took twenty minutes. He didn’t hesitate to use the
key Emilio had made for him when they’d first resumed their friendship. Or
whatever it was anymore. The building was silent except for the muffle of loud
talking or music behind closed apartment doors.
Once again, there was no plan. Not a real one. But Carhart waited anyway. He stripped off his jacket and poured himself a drink. He hadn't smoked in years, over two decades, but seeing Emilio’s pack lying on the table suddenly proved to be too tempting.

He’d drank almost an entire bottle of Scotch before went to Emilio's room. He laid down on the bed and at some point, drifted to sleep. He had no idea how long he stayed asleep but when his eyes opened, it was completely dark in the apartment and the doorknob was rattling.

Carhart pushed himself up on his elbows, and listened to Emilio’s stumbling, uneven footsteps. He'd stripped his clothes off as he made his way to the bedroom, and was down to bare feet, and unzipped jeans by the time he got there.

"The fuck?" Emilio slurred, staring at Carhart in confusion.

Carhart stared back, and didn't say a word as Emilio shrugged and collapsed on the bed next to him face-first. He didn't say anything else, and the room was immediately full of Emilio's deep, even breathing.

Having no desire to sleep next to Emilio with the other man reeking of recent fucking, Carhart got up. He debated shaking Emilio awake, but his face was pressed into the bed, and one arm was dangling off the side of it. He was completely out.

Sighing, Carhart went into the living room and stretched out on the couch. Once again, the smart goddamn thing to do would have been to go home. At this point he had no idea what he was doing or why he was lingering when he was clearly not what Emilio wanted, but determination made him stay.
If Emilio still wanted to avoid him after they talked, then Carhart couldn't do anything about it. That would be the point when he would give up, not before.

His eyes stayed open for hours, until the sky started to lighten, but once again he drifted off. When he woke up far into the middle of the next morning, it was because his phone was vibrating in his pocket.

Carhart opened his eyes with a frown, and shifted on the couch. He yanked the phone out of his pocket and saw that it was just a message from Ryan saying that they could schedule an intel overview sometime in the next few days. It was 10:00 AM.

Standing, Carhart rolled his shoulders as he walked to Emilio's bedroom. The other man was up, still damp from the shower, and wearing a fresh pair of jeans but nothing else.

"Morning," Carhart said hoarsely. He cleared his throat, and ran a hand through his hair.

"Why the hell are you even in my house?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

Emilio turned to face Carhart, and gestured at him with an unlit cigarette. He showed no traces of a hangover, and looked at the general with an belligerent arch of his brow.

"It couldn't wait? You had to stalk my entire fucking life and lurk in my house all night?"

Carhart sighed and this time he raised both hands to press against his face. "What's your problem, Emilio? It didn't occur to you that I might have something of value to say after I waited all of this time?"
"Frankly, General? I don't give a motherfucking flying fuck." Emilio scoffed and let himself fall backwards on the bed into a sprawl. "You ain't even saying a damn thing. Do you even need something Zachary or is your girlfriend just busy?"

The general didn't know if Emilio was playing a game, or if he really wanted him to go. Regardless, he wasn't leaving.

"I need something," he said evenly.

Emilio's lips curled up into a filthy smirk. "I get it now," he said. "You need to get off hard and nasty like you do it with me. Guess Viv won't let you fuck her bloody 'till her knees give out and let you come all over her after. Ain't that right, baby?"

Carhart didn't have any delusions that Emilio meant that as an invitation, but it made his gut tighten anyway as heat washed over him. They stared at each other, and then Emilio rolled his eyes, arching his back in a stretch that caused Carhart's dick to stir with interest.

Emilio watched him lazily, and was starting to look more curious than annoyed. "So? What do you want, General?"

Carhart raised an eyebrow and knelt on the bed. He kept his knees on either side of Emilio's legs, and let one hand rest on the other man's ankle.

"I was thinking about you."

Emilio scoffed, clearly disbelieving. The tension in his body seemed to be building until it seemed like he was coiled tight and ready to snap. He lifted one foot, pressed it flat against Carhart's chest and flexed it. It seemed like he was going to shove him backwards and off the bed, but Emilio just kept it there.
"I'm on downtime, asshole. Next time you come up in my apartment, call first."

The obvious contempt threw Carhart off, and his brows puckered as he wrapped a hand around Emilio's ankle again. "What's wrong with you?"

Emilio let himself fall onto his back again. The bed bounced beneath them briefly. "Figure it out. I'm done playing your bullshit game."

Carhart stared at his ex-partner, at the dark expression, the grimace, and the tautness in his shoulders. Obviously the general had done something, but he had no idea what. It'd been weeks since they'd had a conversation about something other than work, and only a little more since the last time they'd been together sexually. It'd been frantic, panting grinding in his office that had turned into a violent, thorough fuck in his apartment as they took pent-up frustration and anger out on each other's bodies.

Emilio closed his eyes, and Carhart frowned slightly. His fingers slid over Emilio's ankle and up the rough denim of his jeans, moving up his calf.

"I figured you'd be less uptight after letting that guy fuck you last night."

Emilio's body tensed. "Following me, General?"

"No. I went to find you, and there you were, fucking and about to get fucked with what were most likely completely random people." Carhart shook his head slightly. "Although that is preferable to Trovosky."

At that, Emilio's lips curved into a mean, sharp smile. "Jealous of Kassian, huh?"

"What's to be jealous of?"

"That I go to him when I wanna fuck lately and not you."
Carhart couldn't answer for a moment, and his jaw clenched. His fingers tightened on Emilio, and dug in painfully. "If you want to stoop to begging for Trovosky's dick, we're going to have a problem."

There was a pause, then: "Who said he fucked me? I ain't the bottom bitch all the time, baby."

Somehow that mollified Carhart, and he slid his hand further up Emilio's muscular thigh. His fingers curled, the tips brushing against his groin. "Does that mean you're not in the mood to get fucked?"

The full lips stayed pressed in an unimpressed line, but Emilio's dick reacted to the words. Carhart could feel the slight shift beneath his fingers, and he pressed down slightly.

"Maybe I just ain't in the mood for you."

"You're too old to be this sullen, Vega."

Emilio flipped him off in response, not even deigning to open his eyes. The tension in his body hadn't eased at all, but he didn't stop Carhart from tugging at his jeans. The general slid them cleanly down Emilio's thighs, taking the underwear with them, and ran his eyes over the other man appreciatively. When the silence stretched without Carhart touching Emilio further, the green eyes slid open.

They looked at each other and Emilio shifted, letting his thighs fall open. He watched silently as Carhart pulled his sweater over his head, tossing it to the side. His first instinct was to flip Emilio over and pound him until the sullen anger disappeared completely. But Carhart's mind kept wandering back to the man at J&J, and the way Emilio's face had looked as lips wandered over his body.
Still kneeling, Carhart leaned forward and brushed his mouth against Emilio's. The other man stiffened, eyebrows drawing together. He didn't pull away, and Carhart repeated the motion, flicking his tongue out to taste menthol and something undeniably Emilio.

Carhart raised his hand and brushed two fingers against Emilio's lips. Emilio was looking at him with barely concealed wariness, but his lips parted anyway when Carhart slipped them inside.

"Suck," he said, voice low.

Emilio's eyes narrowed but his dick responded, going from half-hard to fully hard almost instantly. He shifted again and wrapped his lips around Carhart's fingers, taking them into his hot, wet mouth. His tongue dragged against the long digits, and he didn't break eye contact. Carhart's own mouth dropped open slightly, a low sound escaping as Emilio's saliva coated his fingers and slid down the rest of his hand.

He started fucking Emilio's mouth with his fingers and ignoring how much he wanted to replace them with his dick. Shove it past those full lips, down Emilio's throat, fuck him violently, and then pull out just to come all over his face.

A shudder went through Carhart and he pulled his fingers out. Emilio had already opened his thighs wider in anticipation, readily accepting the fingers that pushed past the tight ring of muscle as Carhart began to finger his ass.

They never really bothered with fooling around; never had time for foreplay, and it had never mattered to Carhart before. But as he hooked his fingers up and hammered them into the spot that made Emilio's eyes roll back in his head, he decided that maybe they could do it more often.
"Fuck," Emilio hissed, rocking against the curling fingers urgently. He had that blissed out expression on his face again. Lips wet and open, eyebrows hiked up and eyes glassy.

Carhart began shoving his fingers in faster, adding a third, and was panting just as hard as Emilio. His dick was hard in his pants, uncomfortably trapped, and already leaking enough to dampen the front of his underwear. He ignored it for now and focused on Emilio, on keeping that look on his face.

"Still want to go to Kassian?" he asked.

"Yeah," Emilio hissed spitefully even as his fingers gripped the bedspread. His adam's apple was bobbing in his throat, body taut and breath coming out in harsh gasps. "Y'all could take turns on m—"

Carhart hooked his fingers up again, rubbing them against Emilio's prostate and silencing the bullshit. The other man's eyes opened wide and he released a sound so raw and loud, that Carhart's dick pulsed in response.

"Oh shit, oh God—" Emilio panted, mouth gaping open as he threw his head back.

"Still want Kassian?"

Emilio just released a series of desperate sounds, muscles locked in place as he shook his head back and forth wordlessly. His cock had gone from hard to looking swollen enough to burst as Carhart massaged the bump.

"Because I could stop if you do. Call him over."

"P-please shut the fuck up," Emilio grit out, the words barely comprehensible around his whimpers. Carhart smirked and slowed the motions, chest tightening when Emilio's lips trembled and a strangled, confused growl escaped them. He scrabbled at one of Carhart's legs with a tattooed hand.
"N-no, no, don't stop, fuck Kassian, hope he dies, don't stop. Just please—yes, yeah, shit."

Carhart laughed quietly at the other man's desperation, watching as he fucked himself on Carhart's fingers with no shame. Emilio was trembling, sweat covering his body and incoherent sounds pouring out of his mouth. The sounds only increased when Carhart raised his free hand and began pumping Emilio's dick roughly. It was already slick with come that was oozing from the head, making it a sticky mess. Twisting his wrist, Carhart's fist flew over the stiff length as Emilio released a string of curses, and pleas that jumbled together to make no sense at all.

It didn't take him long to come that way, and when he did, it went everywhere. Streams of semen striped Carhart's stomach, his chest, and even his face. By the time Emilio was coming down, he was slack against the bed despite the way he'd been straining up only a moment ago. His hair was sticking to his sweaty face, eyes barely open and still panting audibly. He looked wild and well fucked, but Carhart wasn't done yet.

He undid his belt, shoving down his own pants and briefs impatiently. Emilio's room was a wreck, but he spotted a tube of lubricant sitting on the nightstand. Convenient, if a little annoying considering what it'd probably been recently used for, but Carhart ignored that and slicked up his own cock. It was aching to the point of being painful, and his breath hissed out as his gut tightened.

Emilio barely reacted when Carhart palmed the underside of one of his knees. He looked dazed, and only responded when Carhart leaned forward again to lap at his mouth. The kiss started slow but quickly turned into them panting against each other's mouths as Carhart ground down against Emilio.
"Want more?" he asked, breath coming in harsh bursts as Emilio's tongue licked along his cheek. Carhart nearly groaned when he realized that Emilio was cleaning up his own come.

"You know I fucking do."

Carhart opened Emilio up with one sharp thrust before filling him completely. He squeezed his eyes shut once he was sheathed, forcing himself to stay still, to not just start driving into the tight body like he always did, but Emilio had other plans. He slammed up against Carhart, forcing him to move, and Carhart gripped the other man's knee tighter.

"Wait," he guttered out. "I want—"

He wanted to take his time, to enjoy it, to enjoy Emilio.

"Fuck that," Emilio growled, arching up. "Wreck my ass."

The muscles locked around Carhart's dick tightened rhythmically, milking it until Carhart released a ragged shout. He grabbed Emilio's other leg and shoved it back slightly, stretching him open wider. Between the tightness and heat, and Emilio's filthy demands to be filled deeper, harder, faster, Carhart began to piston in and out of him brutally. It had to hurt, even slicked up, it had to be causing pain. But Emilio didn't complain, he never did. He just met each thrust, one hand wrapped around the headboard as Carhart fucked him.

"Yeah," Emilio panted, as his eyes blazed up at Carhart's. Each thrust sent his shoulders slamming back against the headboard, and he released a string of desperate pleas. "Yeah, please, fuck yes, fuck that fucking ass!"

Carhart leaned down, crushing their chests together as he drove into Emilio harder. He pressed his mouth against Emilio's, kissing him so sloppy and wet that it was little more than a press of tongues. They kept eye contact
until Emilio's eyes rolled back and his mouth went slack as Carhart licked down, and sucked a bruise into the side of his neck.

The sound that Emilio released sent fire scorching through Carhart, and he started ramming his cock into Emilio violently. He could hear himself getting louder but he was beyond caring, even when he heard himself panting Emilio's name.

"Yeah," Emilio gasped as he rocked against Carhart and met every thrust. "Ride the fuck out of me."

Carhart growled something incoherent and shifted so that he was hovering above Emilio again. He shoved one of Emilio's knees to the side and snapped his hips in a particularly brutal thrust that caused Emilio to emit a keening wail of pleasure. He was being fucked so hard that the bed was slamming back against the wall as he clutched the headboard. His dick was hard again and he reached down to pump it as Carhart panted nonsensical promises not to stop.

Each slam of his hips wrenched a primal, agonized cry from Emilio's mouth that just made Carhart fuck him more furiously. Every sound just made him want to go harder, faster, and deeper. He wanted to hear Emilio begging, more of his frantic shouting, and Carhart kept going until his back began to ache from the force.

They were staring at each other again, and Emilio didn't break eye contact even when he came for a second time. An almost surprised, ruined shout escaped his mouth, and Emilio's come covered them both as his dick spat out over and over again. He went limp after, his eyes sliding shut, but Carhart kept using his hole. He was completely consumed by want, need to have Emilio; to keep him full and fucked and destroyed by the intensity of it all.
"I—shit, yes, fuck, fucking take it," Carhart snarled, his mouth falling open as his body tensed.

Emilio shuddered and his hooded eyes slid open, mouth twisted into a filthy, pleased smile. "You close?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes, fuck, yes."

"Pull out and come in my mouth."

Carhart's eyes flew open and Emilio smirked at him. The heat became overwhelming, the tightness in his gut and the ragged desperation to finish. He ripped out of Emilio, fingers trembling as he crouched above the other man. The loss of the tightness was staggering but he was so close, so goddamn close, that it only took two violent pumps of his hand.

Emilio's lips parted, his tongue sticking out, and Carhart groaned loudly as streams of come entered that waiting mouth. He was shuddering by the time it was over, and collapsed on top of Emilio with a gasp. It took several moments of brainless panting before he could even move enough to look at the other man.

"Are you sure you aren't a porn star?"

Emilio licked his lips and reached up to wipe a damp spot from his cheek. "Nah. Just a slut."

"Jesus Christ," Carhart said breathlessly. He put his head back down, ear pressed against Emilio's chest. His heart was galloping just as fast as the general's. "Goddamn savage. I was trying to not rip your ass apart for a change."

"Why?" Emilio asked skeptically. "That's how I like it."
Carhart just shook his head wordlessly, and closed his eyes again. "There's something wrong with you."

Emilio snorted and shifted on the now sweaty bed. For a moment Carhart thought the other man was going to shove him off, but Emilio just relaxed again. He slid his fingers through Carhart's damp hair.

"Even the Agency knows that's how I like it. That's why they be sending me on valentines with fucking BDSM and gangbangs and shit. I get off on that, baby. Pain and being used until I pass out."

Eyebrows raising, Carhart propped himself up on one elbow so that he could look at Emilio again. "And why the hell does the Agency even know that? What, did you bring it up when they vetted you? Write it on your application?"

"No. It just....came up." The way Emilio trailed off made it clear that there was more to the story, but he didn't elaborate.

They lapsed into silence, and for several minutes the only sound was their evening breathing.

"So, why are you here?"

"I told you why I came over."

"Uh huh."

Carhart made a face and rolled off of Emilio in exasperation. "What is the damn problem, Emilio? We've been sleeping together for months now. I stopped holding back a long time ago."

"And you sure as hell got past that shit as soon as Logan got found out, didn't you?"
The question didn't click any awareness into place, and Carhart just stared at him in confusion. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

Emilio's eyes narrowed and he sat up. "Do you think I'm fucking retarded, Zachary? I know it was that bitch that told you to start nailing me again. I'm not stupid, man. Like all of a sudden you decided to cozy up to my spic ass and it was around the time you both happened to be on the shit list, and Seong starting being all nice to me?"

He scoffed, looking around and reaching for his cigarettes from the nightstand. His movements were sharp and jerky. Carhart watched silently, his fingers curling into the crumpled sheets below him.

"You wanted to butter me up so I would be on your side and spy for you. Don't even try to front, motherfucker, 'cause I know it's true. That's why your punk ass vanished as soon as Logan got himself dead, and all of your Janus shit started getting tidied up. You don't need me anymore, 'cause you ain't on the shit list."

"Emilio—"

"What?"

The question was barked out, and Carhart closed his eyes briefly. He took a deep breath before opening them again. "You're right."

"Yeah, thanks. I fucking know," Emilio said bitterly.

His jaw was clenching, eyebrows drawn together, and so very obviously trying to hide how much it hurt him that it made Carhart stop. The explanation he'd prepared long ago died away, and he just stared. Stared at the stricken look that Emilio couldn't hide, the way his hands had balled into fists, and the way Emilio looked away quickly.

"Thanks for the ride, baby. Can you fuck off now?"
"No."

"If you was smart, you'd get the fuck out, Zachary."

Carhart sat up and put a hand on Emilio's shoulder, squeezing the tense muscles. "Can you listen for a minute, please?"

"For what?" Emilio scoffed. "Ain't shit to say. You're safe now, your girlfriend is safe, have a happy life, leave me the hell alone."

"Emilio—"

"The only thing I can't work out is why you hung around all night just to say that. Why'd you go to Jake & Janet's? Won't your girlfriend get mad that you're a filthy voyeur?"

"Jesus, shut the hell up already," Carhart snapped. "Can you let me speak?"

Emilio said nothing, and refused to look up. Carhart sighed and tilted Emilio's chin so that he could meet the other man's eyes. "Vivienne isn't my girlfriend. We care about each other—"

"Oh for fuck's sake, just go away, man!"

"—but we're not in a relationship. I've told you this so many times, and you just don't goddamn listen." Carhart frowned, and tightened his grip on Emilio's face. The look the move earned him was lethal but he didn't let go.

"We got close during the past year, but it's over now. We're not sleeping together anymore. Before, we were expecting to die any moment, and working alone to find the mole. Constantly expecting to die, feeling alone except for the one other person who's in on it with you... It brings people closer together. You should know that. It's what happened with us in Brighton."
Emilio jerked his chin away, sneering. "I was in it deep for you way before Brighton, asshole. You know that."

"Yes," Carhart admitted. "I did. I do now, anyway. And Brighton was like an extended nightmare for me, and I was so pissed off at you afterwards that I didn't want to think about it ever again."

"Why?" Emilio demanded. "Because I did what I had to do to survive?"

"Survival had nothing to do with you publicly fucking me or getting me on my knees every chance you got, just because my cover was supposed to be your bitch," Carhart said evenly. "Don't insult my intelligence, Emilio. You took advantage of the situation. You used me like I was your whore, and I couldn't stop you."

The words said so frankly for the first time in almost twenty years seemed to cool some of Emilio's fire. This time he looked away, but his lips twitched into a frown. "Well," he said flatly. "Well, I just wanted you. And I finally had you. And I'm an asshole. So... it is what it is."

Carhart shook his head, running a hand over his short, blond hair. "You know I liked some of it. You remember the way I acted, how jealous I got when anyone else would go near you, how obsessed with you I became. It wasn't normal, and you know it. I was totally consumed by that cover, totally out of my mind because we were there so long, and you used it to your advantage. When we got back, I wanted to kill you. You'd shamed me, Emilio. I was humiliated."

Emilio's hands clenched into fists and he shrugged stiffly.

"So I told you to never bring it up again, or I'd never talk to you again. I was angry. I hated you for awhile. And then you disappeared, and then I was told you died, and I spent twenty years being obsessed with the fact that you thought I hated you before that."
Looking away, Carhart frowned as he thought back to those days. He’d been a wreck. Drinking, crying, feeling so anguished and guilty.

"When Sin came, he couldn’t stand me. All I did was ask about you. He didn’t trust me, and after awhile he probably thought I was like his mother and Lydia, another psycho trying to use him to feel like I was closer to you. Because he could tell it wasn’t just me asking about an old friend. It creeped him the hell out."

At those words, Emilio looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

Rolling his eyes, Carhart finally released Emilio’s face. "He could tell I felt something for you, and he was probably leery that I’d start directing it at him. Vivienne could tell as well. That’s why she suggested I begin sleeping with you. She knew I would. And she knew it would be believable, because she knew I wanted you even though I try so hard to hate you for all of the fucked up things you do."

To this Emilio said nothing. He just stared at Carhart as if he was from another planet.

"For God's sake, Emilio. Is it that hard to accept that I actually want you? I always wanted you. I didn't accept it at first. I'd only been with a couple of women in my life. I'd been married. I grew up in a small, blue-collar town where I'd never even considered the idea of being with a man. And then along came Emilio Vega, gorgeous and dangerous and reeking sex, and it was goddamn overwhelming."

"So then why didn't you ever..." Emilio trailed off, frowning. The skepticism was still on his face.

"Because everyone wanted you. I didn't want to be like everyone else. I liked being the one person that you were real around. The one person you
trusted. Not just another person who couldn't resist the body, the eyes, and the voice.”

Carhart broke off briefly, and the memories flooded his mind. Being partners with Emilio. All of the casual touches; the way Emilio would come up behind him and pin his chest to Carhart’s back. The way those green eyes would stare and travel over Carhart’s body, not even trying to be discreet. The way Emilio would gaze at him as he fucked some woman, lips parted and eyes narrowed with want. The first time he’d walked in on Emilio with another man, and the frantic way Carhart had jerked himself off as soon as he’d been alone.

"Jesus, do you have any idea how hard it was for me to not give in?"

Emilio frowned. "Well, you’re retarded. We could have been banging that whole time."

"That’s your problem, Vega. You just want to screw, and back then I wasn't like that. I wasn't into just banging, and I wasn't about to be one of your conquests."

"Well you sure as fuck didn't act like you wanted nothing to do with me, baby. You didn't then, and you don't now, and I'm wondering if all of this is bullshit."

Carhart made a face, starting to get agitated with the way his confession was being continuously brushed off.

"How many ways do I have to explain that I care about you? That I want you? Do you want me to write you a sonnet? Do you want to know why I went to Jake & Janet's? Because I thought you may be with Kassian and you’re right—the idea made me insane. I hate the fact that you go to him. I hate the fact that you choose someone else over me. I want you to come to me when you’re horny, not every random person with a hole or a dick."
Emilio still didn't react. He absently flipped his unlit cigarette between his fingers.

Disgusted, Carhart shook his head and stood up to yank on his briefs. "Fine. Have it your way."

"Are you screwing with me?" Emilio asked finally.

"I'm not, you goddamn idiot. And I'm not explaining it again so if you don't believe me, tough."

"Yeah, but why now? Why the fuck now do you want to explain?"

Carhart opened his mouth, closed it, and then looked out the window with his jeans dangling from one hand. "Because that sinking feeling that I've had for the past two and a half years won't go away. Things may seem okay now, but for how long? How long until I'm expected to sit back and once again accept that people I care about may be terminated? Murdered once they're not useful anymore. Since I hit level 9 as a field agent, I've compromised my integrity in every single way for that place. I'm... I'm not who I used to be. I'm messed up, and a monster, just like they are."

Emilio frowned. His hand lifted, but then dropped back down to the bed. "We just do what we have to, Zachary. To survive."

A low scoff escaped Carhart's mouth, and he shook his head. "What's the point of surviving if the people I love are taken from me? What's the point in protecting myself if I have to pretend that I don't want to protect them? That I don't care about them? I can't anymore. I can't. I can't goddamn pretend. Not for them. I won't pretend I don't love Sin, and Boyd, and Ryan. And I'm tired of pretending that I don't love you because this place has warped both of us so badly."
Carhart pulled up his pants and zipped them up. He shot a quick look at Emilio, and the other man looked so unsure that Carhart paused and left the belt undone.

"I'm not lying, Emilio. And I'm tired of this. All of this bullshit. We're probably never going to be normal in any capacity, but we can at least try to enjoy what we have now."

"You're the one that likes being able to crush me just to say you can."

"I know." Carhart frowned, looking at Emilio's unreadable expression. "I know I'm screwed up. But can we fucking please just—" He stopped, frustrated, not having the words to make any of this right. "Just, please. Try to have a little faith in me. I'm afraid I won't be able to make this right. I'm afraid we'll run out of time before I can."

Emilio stared down at his cigarette or his tattooed fingers, Carhart couldn't tell which. But the anxiety was building the longer Emilio took to respond. It seemed like a mission failed. Making things right, not a possibility. He'd pushed and manipulated too much. Done all of the things he accused Emilio of doing. Fucked things up. Fucked them up.

"Please, Emilio."

Emilio's eyes rose, narrowed, and watched Carhart carefully. Emilio got up and walked closer, stopping less than a hand span away. They stared at each other again, not talking, not touching, just watching each other.

"Fine," Emilio said finally, his voice low. "But don't mindfuck me anymore, Zachary. Or I'll make you wish you'd never met me."

"I won't."

"Better not."
Carhart started forward, and Emilio looked at him warily.

"You ain't gonna try to hug me now, are you?"

"No, but I did want to kiss you." Carhart lifted his hand and wrapped it around one of Emilio's hard, tattooed shoulders. "Is that okay, or is it too mushy for you?"

Emilio finally cracked a smile, and he reached down to grasp one of the loops in Carhart's jeans. He gave a tug, and pulled the general back towards the bed. "It's okay, I guess. As long as you're not lying to me."

"I'm not." Carhart didn't resist as Emilio guided him back down to the bed. He twisted, lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. "Are you ever going to trust me, Emilio?"

There was a brief silence before the other man replied:

"I'll work on it."
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Boyd and Sin stood still as Chance's bodyguards searched them for weapons. When it was verified that they were unarmed, the guards stepped back. They eyed Boyd briefly before settling their stares on Sin. They stood that way for nearly a minute before allowing them to enter.

Chance's penthouse was even more luxurious than the one Sin had bought for Boyd. It was two levels, and the windows along the far wall spanned both floors. Chance was sitting in a massive living room with a woman. She was tall, had long black curls, and looked like she could be of Latin American origin.

The woman looked from Boyd to Sin, and then raised one sharply arched eyebrow. Her light brown eyes slid over to Chance, and then back to Sin, before returning. Although Chance and Sin were nothing close to how similar Emilio and Sin looked, they had the same high cheekbones, full down-turned lips, and intense stare.

"We'll have to finish this conversation later," Chance said, not moving from his leather and chrome chair. He refocused on the woman. "But I'm glad you came."

The woman stood, and her curls brushed the small of her back. "Don't get excited. I only came because of business."

Chance shrugged, appearing unconcerned. When she turned away, his eyes automatically fell to her ass. She brushed by Sin and Boyd, and disappeared out the door. Only then did Chance turn his complete attention to them, and the two bodyguards that still stood just inside the apartment over their shoulders.
"Did you check to see if they're wired?"

One of the guards, a bald man with tattoos snaking up his neck, took a step closer. "No, but I can now, if you want."

"They can strip, and prove it. You go through their clothes."

"Wow." Sin looked down at Boyd incredulously. "This again?"

Boyd's gaze didn't shift from Chance. "Is that really necessary?"

"If you want to have a full conversation with me it is. For all I know, this entire thing is a set up. I know Big Brother is watching me." Chance crossed his arms over his chest. "Your choice, kids."

Boyd sighed and kicked off his shoes. He pulled off his shirt and pants while next to him, Sin gave a disgusted shake of his head and did the same. Before long, the two of them were standing in their underwear. Boyd held his arms out at his sides so Chance and the guards could see there was nothing on him.

"Satisfied?" Sin said. "Or do you need to see my cock and balls too? After all, I could be hiding a mic under my sac."

Chance looked them both over critically. "Search their clothes."

"Smartass," the guard muttered at Sin, and yanked his jeans away before going through the pockets diligently. When he was done, he tossed them at Sin's feet. He watched Sin for a reaction and then wrinkled his brow when all he got in return was a steady glare. Boyd's clothes were searched next, and this time the guy tossed them at Boyd's chest.

"They're clean."

"Thank you, Junior," Chance said, his lips stretching in a brief, sharp smile. "You can go." The two guards hesitated only briefly before leaving.
Chance's gaze went over Sin and then settled on Boyd. "You're more emaciated than you were last time I saw you."

"Good thing I'm not trying to be your porn star anymore or that might have been something to discuss," Boyd commented as he started to pull his pants back on.

"Who said it's time to get dressed already?"

Boyd stilled, and looked up at Chance with mild incredulity.

Sin, who hadn't even moved to pick up his clothes from the floor. "Role playing is over. He's not doing a trial for you."

"I'm curious as to how far you two are willing to go for my help," Chance admitted. He raised his eyebrows, and walked around them in a slow circle. "You'd both be good in my lineup."

"Sin doesn't do that sort of thing," Boyd said evenly.

"Unlike you." Chance's lips turned up more at the sides. When Sin's eyes narrowed, Chance raised his hands slightly. "No offense meant. Just stating facts."

Boyd saw the significance in the raised brow that was so like Sin's. Chance wasn't making assumptions based on Boyd's fake credentials; he knew. Those videos Aleixo had sent out, the ones Boyd had thought Skyn might have received—they did. And Chance saw it.

Boyd's gut clenched and he glanced quickly at Sin. The last thing he wanted was for Sin to see one of those videos, let alone even know they existed. Eyes narrowed, Boyd's gaze swept away to stare blankly at the wall ahead of him.

"I'm not available."
Chance focused his stare on Sin. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"How far are you willing to go?" Chance tilted his head to the side, and rubbed his chin with one hand. "I've watched you two coming in and out. I know you're together, and I know this one was in bad shape when he first showed up in my building." He paused, and pointed at Boyd. "Would you fuck your boyfriend on camera to get me to help? Is it that serious?"

A flash of irritation crossed Sin's face. He rolled his shoulders, the muscles roiling under his skin. "If that's how you get your rocks off. But no one else is touching him but me."

Chance looked at Boyd expectantly.

A surge of frustration was barely kept from Boyd's stony expression. "If that's seriously going to be a requirement of this then I want to have a chance to discuss it with Sin. Privately."

"By all means." Chance nodded to the hallway next to the kitchen.

Sin jerked on his jeans. He pulled his shirt over his head, waited long enough for Boyd to do the same, and then walked to the hallway. The first door on the left was open, and appeared to be a study or library.

"This is bullshit," Boyd said heatedly the second the door was closed behind them. "Do you see his name burned into my skin? I'm not his fucking sex toy and I'm not his goddamned property. I say I'm unavailable and the first thing that fucker does is ask you if you'll fuck me on screen instead."

Sin watched as Boyd's movements grew sharper, and glanced at the door. "Just take a minute to calm down. He's just playing power games."
"I know." Boyd sneered. He pivoted as he reached a corner and stalked back toward Sin. "That's what his type does. They think with enough money it's their right to force anyone to do anything they want but it's not. I'm not under his fucking control right now and neither are you. We're our own people and we have the goddamned right to say no."

"We do have the right to say no, and we can." Sin grabbed Boyd's arm, and pulled him closer. "Look, it's just us, okay? I'll think of a way out of this."

"We have to," Boyd said insistently, his gaze still darting around. "I can't do this. I haven't—" I haven't been in a situation like that since the mission. I'm scared I might turn into someone else or have a flashback. "You might—" You might think less of me if you know how I was. You might not love me the same anymore.

Boyd stopped and gripped Sin's arms. "I don't want to do it."

"We can try to find another way." Sin didn't pull away from Boyd, even when Boyd's fingers dug in deeper. "I'm not going to let anyone fuck with you. You know I won't. We'll bluff him for now, and I'll think of something else. And if this doesn't work, we can see if my father can do something. It might take longer this far from 4FF base, but we can try."

Boyd closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and held it. After a moment, he let it out and nodded. "Okay."

"Just relax. It's fine." Sin slid his hand down, and locked their fingers together.

Boyd squeezed his hand and rested his head against Sin's arm. It was amazing how much comfort he could derive from Sin's presence alone. The steady beating of his heart; the scent of his clothing; the gentle pressure of his calloused fingers on his hand. He could already feel his own heartbeat start to slow.
"I know it will be, because you're here." Boyd pressed his forehead a little stronger against Sin's arm and then pulled back so their eyes could meet. "I love you, you know."

"I love you, too." Sin leaned in, and brushed his lips against Boyd's. "Don't worry. No one is going to get between us anymore." They looked at each other for a moment longer before going back out into the main room where Chance was waiting for them.

"Did you come to a decision?"

"Yes. Do you want us to fuck here or at your studio?"

Chance's mouth turned up slightly at the side. "At the studio would be ideal. So we'll get to that part of the contract later. Now let's get to the point. You moved into my building—"

"I didn't realize you owned it," Sin interrupted.

"Right. I had my people look into you because you seemed shady, but they found zero, which shouldn't be the case. It all makes sense now."

Sin stared at him. "Does this story have a point?"

"The point is that both of you are suspicious and probably trouble, and I'm only going along with this out of morbid curiosity. But I don't do things out of the kindness of my heart." Chance folded his arms over his chest again, looking from one to the other. "Most people will tell you that I don't have a heart. I've done terrible things to my own employees, so a long lost brother doesn't mean shit. With that in mind, tell me what else you have to offer me aside from your twink asses."

"We can offer you three million," Boyd said.
There was a brief silence. It seemed like Chance was waiting for one of them to admit that they were bullshitting, but when it didn't happen, he nodded. "I'll take the money, your cooperation and some information, or you both can go to hell."

"What kind of information?" Sin asked.

Chance stood up, and walked over to a large cabinet that held an assortment of liquor. He selected a stout glass and picked up a bottle of Hennessy.

"I know some things," he said as he poured the liquid into the glass. He met Sin's eyes again before replacing the bottle on the shelf.

"But there's blanks, and I don't do business without a full deck of cards. I know you know Adam because Adam knows all kinds of shady people, which is what makes him an amazing asset to my company. But I want to know more. How did you find out about me, what information you have on me, and what you're running from." He picked up the glass.

"We found out about you through government files on Hsin," Boyd replied. "They researched his family and you were listed as his half-brother. They know you're the CEO of Skyn, but also have connections with the gangs in Lexington, and are the sole distributor of Pandora in Lexington and Carson."

"So why come to me?"

"You have the money and possibly the connections to assist us with our plan to escape," Sin said. He didn't move to go further into the apartment, and seemed content to keep a room between his half-brother and him. "The people we work for keep us contained. We don't have the kind of resources that you do."
Chance drained this drink. "Good point. It's not like you blend." He went to refill his glass. "So, what are you running from?"

"There's a covert sector of the government that we've been involved with, and we want to end our employment with them," Boyd said. "They won't let us leave, so we're finding our own way."

"I see."

"If you're not going to do it, just say so. I don't have time for bullshit." Sin looked Chance up and down. "If you’re worried about a threat to you as a result of helping us, don't. As far as they know, you and me have no idea that we even live in the same city, let alone the same building. They have no reason to think that we would have been moronic enough to ask a drug dealing, porn director for help."

Chance's expression barely moved. "You're the charming one, I take it. Which one of us takes after our loser father?"

"He's an idiot. So more you than me."

Chance's lip quirked. "Cute." He drained half of the new glass, and walked around the bar. "Let's say I buy into your secret government bullshit story. Why should I care? Three million isn't that much, and I can always find another blond pretty boy and a piece of dulce de leche with green eyes."

Asshole, Boyd thought acidly. He stared stonily out the window to keep the glare from his face.

Sin exhaled slowly, and looked at Boyd briefly before returning his gaze to Chance. "So then forget making us fuck, and think about this in a different way. I can owe you a much bigger favor. One more consequential to your business."

"What are we talking about here?"
"I'm an assassin. I can kill anyone that you need to be out of your way, and I'm sure you can think of one or two people," Sin said flatly.

Chance ran his tongue over his lower lip. "Anyone?"

"Anyone. For example, the leader of the South Side Boys. Fender. I know he's been trying to edge into your Pandora business for years, and I know that you can't touch him without an all out war. I can make him disappear, and point the evidence elsewhere."

At that, Chance's eyes narrowed and he looked from Sin to Boyd with keener interest. His lips turned up into a fuller smile.

"Now we're talking."

The rest of the meeting was spent going over the logistics of their payment, and the plan itself. When the conversation turned to plotting the demise of the leader of the South Side Boys, Junior came back in but before they could begin talking, Boyd's phone rang. It was a private number. He sent the call to voicemail, but it immediately called again. A thread of anxiety went through him as he wondered if the calls were coming from the Agency. He and Sin decided split up just in case anyone came looking for him.

Leaving Sin to plan with Chance, Boyd left the building entirely in case he was being watched. He checked, but no one left a voicemail. If it had been the Agency, if it had been urgent, they would have contacted him again by now.

He felt restless, and had since the meeting with Chance. He didn't want to go back and interrupt the negotiations, so he took a taxi to finally empty his storage unit of the few possessions he had saved before his house was destroyed. With winter underway, the condo was already black as night by the time he returned home. He unpacked the various items he had hastily thrown
together that night over two months ago, putting them into piles based on the topic. Everything related to his dad was spread out to be examined for clues.

He was in the middle of skimming some articles when he got another call from the private number. This time he accepted the call.

"Boyd?" It was Riley's voice. "Don't hang up."

Boyd's eyes narrowed as tension thrummed through him, building on the agitation he'd been feeling since Chance. Over the past few weeks Riley had called him repeatedly, and repeatedly Boyd had ignored it. If Riley had tried to stop by anywhere, he had missed Boyd or not been able to get inside. Apparently Riley had realized this and had switched to an unknown number.

"What do you want?" he asked evenly.

"Didn't you get my messages? I want to meet you."

"You know my house burned down, right? Anything he left me is destroyed." He wondered if Riley knew that was a lie, whether the Journalist Guild had watched him take items out or not.

"Even so. You free tomorrow night? We can meet at Lynette's."

Boyd frowned and swept a stare out across the journals. He had questions, but he didn't trust Riley. He didn't trust anyone in JG. But the questions were about his father. About the Agency. A swell of anger flared up, and Boyd's other hand clenched into a fist. For a moment he couldn't speak but another question popped into his head: If JG had information on Janus, how much did they have on the Agency?

"I'll think about it."

There was a pause. "For how long?"
"As long as I need." Boyd paused and, over Riley's muffled sigh, he spoke. "Was it only him?"

"Was what only him?"

"You know what I mean. Was it only him or were there others?"

There was a bout of silence, and the very distant sound of something: music, people talking, a show—Boyd couldn't tell with how faint it was. Then: "No one else like that."

Boyd's hand clutched the phone. A red haze briefly overtook the room. The walls seemed closer. It wasn't as easy to breathe.

"Okay," he said at length, forcing his voice to be neutral. "I'll consider your proposal." He hung up before Riley could say anything further.

His father had been the only one in JG to be assassinated. He'd already known that his father had found something; he'd already assumed that it was for that reason he'd been killed. But now he knew for certain—it wasn't his connection to the Guild that had contributed to his death. It was only because of the Agency.

Boyd dove into the task of perusing his father's journals. He had no idea what he was looking for but he felt compelled. The more he flipped through the entries, the more frustrated he became. His father must have found something important to make the Agency kill him.

He wanted to find it. He needed it, this elusive information that had threatened the Agency's old administration that much.

His movements became sharper; more manic. If only he possessed it, everything would change. If only—
His hand scribbled quickly, notes scrawling across the page as he compiled information from various sources.

December 23, 2000 - first entry, my journal. Christmas. Unrelated?
January 18, 2001 - periodical, Sun Times. Children dying, disease. —War?
March 21, 2001 - periodical, JG. First release. Main article: government contractor responsible for death of children, cover up. Dedication: For the future.
—JG released 3rd Sat every month. Nov 20, 1999, 3rd Saturday—

He wrote increasingly quickly—noting confluences, conspiracies, coincidences—anything that stood out to him, anything that overlapped, anything that might tell him what had happened. He read through the whole journal Cedrick had dedicated to him again, flipping through earmarked passages, going faster and faster and barely keeping the pages from ripping.

That's when he saw it—the words that had never made sense until now.

The general's grave.

The door rattled.

Boyd's heart leapt and he spun into a crouch; one hand drawing his gun and the other splayed back to protect the journals. He didn't have time to hide them or escape. Sudden fury made his vision quake. The Agency—they knew. They knew he'd taken his father's journals, they were coming for him the way they had for his father.

He wouldn't let them. Kill them, he'd kill—
The door swung open. His heartbeat jackhammered inside his chest; his throat and heart were ice cold.

Sin entered the penthouse, his eyebrows raising slightly when he saw Boyd.

A harsh jolt of breath escaped Boyd. He forced himself to unclench his fingers and holster his gun. Even so, tension buzzed through him. Was Sin followed? Were they watching? How would he know what was being recorded, what wasn't?

"What's wrong?" Sin asked. His eyes swept the room, taking in the scattered journals and papers, before focusing on Boyd again. "Who did you think I was?"


"I see." Sin crossed the room, his eyes not moving from Boyd's. "Well, they're not here. It's just me. We're fine."

Boyd tried to focus on the information but the flash of black beneath Sin's jacket was just like the Agency body armor. He saw movement from the corner of his eye and jerked his head around to see—out on the balcony. He turned fully, gaze darting quickly across the expanse of glass overtaking the entire wall. Windows everywhere. If they used binoculars or hyperzoom cameras, they could have been documenting everything. They would know that he knew.

"Boyd. There's no one here. It's just us." Sin put his hands on each of Boyd's shoulders. "Look at me."

Boyd barely felt the touch. Outside he could see the dark of the woods in the distance, and even though it wasn't visible from here he knew exactly
where the Tower was—a black shadow against the sky. The country had a disease and the Agency was its wound.

"We could do it, Hsin," Boyd mumbled, the words falling over themselves. "We could do it."

His eyes fell on the journals spread out on the floor; pages wide open and scrawled with so much damning evidence. "Don't you see? If we just leave, they'll still have the power. And they'll misuse it. They're government; it's all they do. They could never be trusted, we never should have trusted them. They're a disease that spreads with every minute, every generation."

He gripped Sin’s wrists, searching his eyes. "But we could do it, Hsin. We could show them that oppression leads to revolution."

"Okay, stop." Sin leaned down slightly so that they were eye level. "What would happen if we decided to go on some crusade against the Agency and the people we care about are still there? I don't know, and you don't know. So stop. You're repeating Janus propaganda and we both know why."

Boyd's eyebrows dragged together. What was wrong with sounding like Janus? They were the ones fighting to right all the wrongs. Kassian, Carhart, Emilio... any of them. Their lives meant nothing compared to the cause. They should be so lucky to die for it.

The second the thought crossed his mind, he froze.

His heart felt gripped by ice and he released Sin as if he'd been burned. He stepped back, breaking Sin's hold on him. For a moment he could only stare at Sin in horror, his heart beating faster in his chest.

"Have I—" He stopped. "Have I done that before?"

"Yes. Sometimes. It's not usually that blatant, but it's there. I could even see it when you were in the medwing, the way you looked at the Agency
staff." Sin paused, still watching Boyd carefully. "Look, don't get upset. It's... not unexpected. You were already harboring bad feelings about the Agency. We both were. We all are. It probably made you susceptible. To the brainwashing. So even if they didn't finish..."

Boyd ran a slightly shaky hand through his hair and looked away. "For a second, I thought it would be worth it. Even if they had to die."

Sin watched him closely for a moment before reaching out and pulling Boyd close. "But we both know that's not how you really feel."

Boyd wrapped his arms around Sin and pressed his face against his chest. He breathed in his scent and tried to calm down. He'd thought he had everything under control by now. He'd thought the dreams he still had didn't matter because he didn't act on them when awake.

He could feel Sin's heart beating; the strength of his arms encircling him. For the second time that day, he took solace in Sin's presence. It was the only place where he felt truly safe; where the demons in his mind couldn't haunt him as clearly.

He felt so tired and, if he was honest, a little frightened. Sometimes, he didn't even know who he was anymore. Sometimes, he was afraid everything he'd been would be swept away by the enemy—and, worse than anything, he didn't even know who the true enemy was anymore.

"I just want to go," he muttered into Sin's shirt. "I just want to get away from here."

"We will. Soon. And if we get killed getting the fuck out of here, at least we'll be together." Sin tilted Boyd's head up and pressed a kiss against his lips. "You're fine. If the worst they did is make you hate the Agency more, then that's not too bad. What brought this on, anyway?"
Boyd grimaced faintly and pressed a hand against his temple. "I don't know..." He tried to remember where his thoughts might have skewed away from reality but everything he'd imagined and felt seemed as real as anything else. "I already felt tense because of that bullshit with Chance, and then—" He straightened. "Riley. It was Riley. He called, and for some reason it made me..." He gestured to himself and trailed off.

There was a brief silence before Sin asked, "What did he want?"

"To meet tomorrow."

For a moment there was silence between them. They looked at each other, and Sin's fingers slid up until they skimmed under Boyd's shirt and pressed against the smooth skin. His thumb brushed his own name burned into Boyd's back.

"Don't go. I know you want to know things about your father, but we're so close to being free. And we don't know these people."

Boyd's hands flexed on Sin's shoulders. Arguments for why contacting them would be good ran through his mind, but they fell silent soon enough.

"Okay."

Sin raised his eyebrows. "That's it? Just 'okay'?"

"I found something, right before you came in. It might lead to answers without having to contact them. Besides," he added with a grimace as his fingers brushed the ends of Sin's hair, "between the two of us, you're not the one who was just convinced that our friends should die for Janus. My guess is right now your arguments are more valid anyway."

"Convinced is a strong word. You snapped out of it fast. Give yourself some credit." Sin pressed his fingers against Boyd's shoulder. "Now, show me
what you found. If you can figure this out without adding more assholes to the pot, I'll help anyway I can."

Boyd flashed a small, weary smile and then turned. "I found it in the journal he'd dedicated to me..."

He dug through the mess he'd made on the living room floor until he found the right notebook. He flipped through the pages as Sin looked on, and continued: "There was something he mentioned in the last entry that didn't make sense at first. Here: 'If you ever feel uncertain, remember the general's grave. That should give you what you need to begin anew.'"

Sin crouched beside Boyd on the floor, looking at the notebook over his shoulder. "Who's the general?"

"That's what I wondered, too... There are a lot of generals’ graves in and around Lexington and none of them seemed significant. But then I remembered—when I was a kid, he used to sing me a song about General Whiskers, a mouse who came out when everyone was asleep. The last time he ever sang me that song, we were in a cemetery."

He looked over his shoulder at Sin with a thrill of anticipation moving up his spine. "I think he might have left something for me there."

The look Sin gave him was skeptical, but despite the raised brow and slight twist of his lips, he just nodded. "If you want to check it out, we should do it now."

Boyd nodded, and went to get his coat. When they got outside, they hopped on Sin's motorbike. It had started to rain; a cold drizzle that made Boyd cinch his arms tightly around Sin to trap their body heat.

It was a short ride out to the old Silver Lake Cemetery, which, despite the overgrown trees surrounding it, still looked well-manicured inside the
boundaries of the wrought iron fencing. The few lights that were on were dim and occasionally flickered, lending a spooky quality to shadows that jumped and twisted along the ground at every breath of wind. Rainwater collected beneath their shoes and left footprints briefly pressed into the ground.

Boyd had brought a flashlight with him that he cast across the cemetery, the light alternatively catching on gravestones and falling to stretch wide across the dying grass. As they moved further into the cemetery the wind picked up, casting the rain at abrupt angles to the accompaniment of distant howls.

In the gloom, it took awhile for Boyd to remember where they had been.

It had been nearly twenty years since Boyd's father had last brought him here, his large hand encompassing Boyd's as they'd trekked across the grass on a bright, sunny day. Strange details stood out from his memory: a huge white building that had loomed over him, and sad angels carved into the stone. Red flowers encircling the building, and words above the door. A name? He couldn't remember what it had said, just that he'd seen letters.

It must have been a mausoleum, but there were several of them scattered across the large cemetery. Boyd vaguely remembered walking up a huge hill, and a glittering blue lake nearby. When he relayed the details to Sin, whose eyesight was far better normally and particularly in inclement weather that nearly blinded Boyd, they finally were able to locate what seemed the closest thing to his memory.

As a seven year old, everything had seemed so huge. What had been a tall hill, an expansive lake, and a towering building turned out to be a small mausoleum on a little knoll near a pond. They approached the front of it, trudging through wind and water spraying against their jackets. Boyd swept the flashlight across the building to be sure this was it.
Above the door, he saw the name Souris engraved into the stone. He couldn't help a sound caught somewhere between a snort and short laughter. Sin looked over and, upon seeing his smile, peered up at the structure.

"What is it?"

"My dad," Boyd said with a shake of his head. "He just..." He gestured at the mausoleum, trying to figure out how to put into words all the little things his dad had always done. The sense of humor and playfulness Boyd remembered infusing a lot of their interactions, and the way he'd made inside jokes that Boyd was starting to get now that he was older. Things that had seemed lost to memory until moments like this happened.

"Souris means 'mouse' in French," he said instead. "This is it."

"So are breaking into this mausoleum?" Sin asked. He pointed at the lock and chain on the outer gate. "Wouldn't be one of the weirdest things we've done together, I guess."

Boyd snorted. "Not by a long shot." He stepped up to the wrought iron gate and rattled it experimentally. The chain looked rusted and the lock was a simple padlock. "Looks like we'll have to. Can you hold this?"

He handed Sin his flashlight, and then pulled out the set of lockpicks he'd brought in case of such an event. It didn't take long to compromise the lock, unwind the chain that was bitingly cold to the touch, and pull open the gates with a screech that was quieted by the rain. But when he tried the heavy, intricately carved wooden doors, they didn't budge. Light fell across a heavy-duty lock when Sin turned the flashlight on the door. Boyd shoved wet hair out of his eyes and looked back at his lover.

"I don't think my picks will work on that."
"I see where this is going." Shaking his head, Sin sighed and moved closer to the lock. He flexed his fingers, looked at Boyd, and then wrapped his hands around it. He gave a little tug, paused and then braced his foot against the door. The metal squealed but it was slick from the rain, and slipped from his hands.

He let it go, stopped, and glared at the lock. After a moment, he eyeballed the wooden door instead. "If I get arrested, it's your fault."

Boyd gave him a roguish smile. "Don't worry, baby, I'll bail you out."

Sin scoffed, and then shifted his stance and slammed his boot into the door. It creaked, and he repeated the action, this time causing the door to burst inward. The drone of rain fell away as they stepped inside, replaced by distant pattering on the roof. Boyd shoved the door shut as much as possible.

"Impressive," Sin said as the beam of light moved over the inside. "An empty mausoleum."

The room was small and it looked a bit like a setting for a horror movie. It didn’t appear to have been touched in years, with nothing more than a cement floor and blank walls, and empty spiderwebs strewn in corners. Dust covered the floor. The wall opposite the door had four marble faceplates. Boyd moved his light across it and approached. Each of the plates was blank save for what seemed to be initials in the center:

M.I.

R.J.

A.M.

G.W.
Boyd walked to the one marked G.W., put the flashlight in his mouth to keep the light on the plate, and ran his hands around the edge. As he worked, Sin turned and stood by the door. He looked out into the cemetery, staying to the shadows so that he wasn't framing the entrance.

When Boyd was finished checking the G.W. plate, he checked the others. It was just cold enough that his fingertips were starting to lose feeling as he worked. Still, he noticed something he'd suspected he might find. Returning to G.W., he pried on the plate but he didn't have good enough leverage or enough strength.

He dropped the flashlight into his palm with the wash of light safely aimed away from the door.

“The one marked G.W. feels loose. Can you help me get it off?”

Sin gripped the plate and yanked. He'd barely pulled before it abruptly broke in half. Sin and Boyd both stared at the piece of stone in Sin's hand, and then down when another large piece crashed to the floor. There was a beat of silence before Boyd spoke conversationally:

"Remember that time you asked me whether I get off on how strong you are? I do, but if this ever happens to me, we'll have a whole different story."

"Shut up."

Inside the crypt, they found a small black safe. Boyd felt his heart skip a beat at the sight—for as much as he'd thought his father had left him something, he hadn't known whether he was reading too much into the clues. They took the safe and returned the mausoleum to its original state as best they could before returning to the condo.
Once they were safe inside the penthouse, they set to work opening the safe. In the end, they had to force it open as well—if his father had left him a key, it had likely been lost in the fire. A plastic bag protecting its contents was the first thing Boyd saw inside the safe; and the second was the handwritten note taped onto it, with yellowed paper:

For my son.

It was the same handwriting he’d spent hours poring over, filling his father’s journals.

This was it.

Boyd pulled everything out of the safe. It was a mixture of papers, a notebook, what looked to be a police evidence bag, and an old drive that he would have to find a compatible computer to use. He did a cursory flip through the documents, and then stopped when he saw two sheets in particular: two copies of Vanguard Industries’ founding document from two different years.

The first was a photocopy. It was dated 1987, and listed Simon Pinney, Terry Morgan, and John Claremont as the founders. The next document was exactly the same as the first, except it was a clearer copy with an official stamp on it, from 1988, and the founding names now read Terry Morgan, John Claremont, Christopher Duclos, and William Delano.

On the second sheet there was a note attached in his father’s handwriting that said: ex.1, only in library. ex.2, official, no indication of original document. Why did the names change?

And another note of:

accepting criminals? prison

On an attached note, the names Terry Morgan and John Claremont were circled multiple times in red, with Claremont underlined. A note next to it
appeared to be a case number. On the side of the note was Simon Pinney's name followed by a question mark.

Boyd frowned.

"What is it?" Sin asked, but Boyd shook his head and grabbed his secure tablet with renewed fervor.

His fingers flew across the screen, the windows appearing and disappearing quickly as he accessed information from secure databases using tricks Ryan had taught him. "These names. I recognize..." He flicked his gaze between the documents on the screen and those spread out in front of him.

"When I was looking into his assassination, I read a lot of the wartime personnel directories. These two," he shoved the papers so Sin could see them better and pressed his finger down by the names, "Morgan and Claremont—they're aliases for a 7 and an 8, James Hoffman and Peter Bassano. I bet you Duclos and Delano are empties created as misleads for anyone looking into it. But this name," he pointed to Simon Pinney, "I remember seeing somewhere..."

Boyd fell silent briefly, his eyes narrowing. "Can you check the earlier directories? I need to see something."

While Sin skimmed the personnel files, Boyd accessed the file Ivan had sent him. It took awhile to load and during that time Sin verified a few key facts, namely that Simon Pinney had been the Marshal in the late 1980's and beginning of the 1990's. At that point, his name disappeared entirely off the personnel records.

The amount of information Ivan had compiled was nearly overwhelming, although well organized. For the moment, Boyd ignored the
majority of it and looked only for Simon Pinney. That didn't get him anywhere useful so he started reading through other sections of information.

One file in particular made him freeze as information clicked in his mind. He stared at the screen with widened eyes.

"Jesus," Boyd said lowly; dread mixed with awe. "I know why they killed him. He found out who runs the Agency."
Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Gwyneth," Ryan said triumphantly. His eyes crinkled at the sides as a smile stretched across his face. When three sets of blank stares focused on him, he rolled his eyes. "She's the key."

"To...?" Emilio nodded encouragingly, inclining his head like he was trying to coax an animal to approach him.

"To the great beyond," Owen said ominously. He raised his eyebrows and wiggled his fingers. "To the end of the line on Mystery Express. To graduating past WWJD, What Would Janus Do?, to the more important question of W3D, What Will We Do? To—"

"To ending Janus once and for all," Jeffrey cut Owen off, shooting him an annoyed look.

Owen huffed and threw his hands in the air. "Way to ruin the moment, dude! Moment killer! The blood of my dramatic sentences is on your hands." His eyebrows furrowed and he cocked his head. "Are? 'Are' on your hands?" He looked around at the others expectantly. "C'mon guys, where's the grammar Nazi among us?"

Jeffrey scoffed.

"Wow." Bex stared at them before turning her dark eyes to Sin. "I can't say I'm not thrilled to be finished with this lot once the mission is through."

"Heh." Ryan flipped her off, and rolled his eyes. When Carhart gave him a stern, slightly impatient stare, Ryan sighed. "Fine. Moving forward. Boyd helped us put together the JG goldmine with the Agency data we've compiled over the past million years of working on Janus, and the data that you guys picked up from Arizona, and it all started coming together."
Carhart nodded, although his eyes were focused on the window and not on Ryan. "Go on."

Leaning forward with his forearms on the table, Ryan looked between Owen and Jeffrey as if to see if he should lead the explanation.

"Go ahead, little bespectacled buddy," Owen said with a gracious nod and spread of his hands. "I know no moments will be murdered on your watch."

"There's this video we've been using for ages with Rank 10 training. It shows this kid going off on an anti-US rant while code scrolls in the background. Boyd said that during his training he was nearly obsessed with cracking it, and that it took forever for him to do it. Anyway, the cipher key was the name Gwyneth, but the coded information didn't seem significant. They didn't know what any of it meant. For a long time it seemed like this pointless puzzle, but in the JG goldmine, we finally found a link to that video. JG connected Gwyneth to the death of an undergraduate student back when the anti-government protests first started getting really ugly."

"And?" Bex looked bored as she scratched at the table with her fingernail.

Ryan speared her with a cold look. "And, she'd been killed during an anti-war protest but it was covered up because it was a peaceful protest that got out of hand when they tried to break it up. To retaliate, some group attacked the Rose Parade in California a week later. Somehow JG found the link between that video and the girl, Amelie Gwyneth Monroe, who went to UC Berkeley. And from there, they found out that she'd been a part of this really radical extremist left-wing group."

"So you're telling me..." Bex trailed off. "What are you telling me?"

"Oh my fuck, shut up!" Ryan snapped. "You're worse than Hsin."
Sin raised his eyebrows. "I don't know what I feel about that."

"Just get to the point," Jeffrey said impatiently. "Or I will for you."

"Fine. Long story short, once we had the list of the people in that group, we cross referenced the names to everything we already had and the info from Arizona, and a lot of matches started to form. The names of kids in the Berkeley group were scattered in bank accounts and other information in files downloaded from the research facility. Sometimes it was just first names, or combinations of names as aliases, but there were too many coincidences. The Janus founders were all present and accounted for in that group."

When Ryan stopped talking, they all looked at each other for a moment as the information sunk in. The identities of the Janus founders were present and accounted for after many years.

"What now?" Sin asked, breaking the silence.

"Now we go get them," Carhart said simply. "With their names and faces, we've managed to track them."

The next several minutes were spent going over the logistics of the plan. Their unit and two other units would engage in a three-pronged assault on the Janus founders, their seconds in command and some lower-tiered lieutenants. They would decapitate the organization completely, leaving the underlings to scramble in confusion.

When they had gone over the logistics, Ryan looked up from his panel. His fingers had curled around it slightly as he looked at each member of the team. "So this is it. This is the end of it."

Sin met Ryan's eyes, but didn't say anything.
"This is it," Emilio said. He hadn't look at Sin throughout the entire briefing, but he did now. His gaze lingered, his fingers tightening briefly on the panel, before his green eyes skewed away.

"So let's fucking do it, then," Bex said, pushing her chair back. "I'm sick of these Janus cunts."

Jeffrey nodded and slid his tablet into his briefcase.

Owen threw out a hand just as Jeffrey and Bex were about to stand. "Hold up there, pardners! This is a monumental moment. If this goes right, there's no more Janus to dink around with. It's kind of weird, right? Like we're losing our mortal enemies. Arch-nemeses no more. What are we gonna do afterward? Shouldn't we say some words or set up the most bad ass happy hour ever for when we get back or something?"

"You know I'm always down for a happy hour, Red," Emilio drawled as he got to his feet.

This time, his gaze did not stray to Sin. Carhart's did, though. Because if things went according to plan, this would be the last time they saw Sin at the Agency.

"Maybe," Sin said vaguely. Ryan gave him a slight smile, and then stood without a word.

Owen eyed everyone. "Well, alright then," he said dubiously as he stood. He pointed an accusatory finger at each of them in turn. "I'm holding you people to this, and of course we're going to make the Boydlet come too, right?" He speared Sin with a pointed look and then went on without waiting for a reply. "At the end of that night, someone is going to go home mortified. It's not a proper happy hour without someone taking it too far."
Jeffrey rolled his eyes. Owen must have noticed because he glanced at him sidelong, started to look away, then turned to him fully.

"Something you wanna say, Jeffsterlicious?"

"Only that I doubt any of us honestly expected we'd be able to rid ourselves of you that easily. You're like a fungus." He closed his briefcase with force and narrowed his eyes. "And don't call me Jeffsterlicious. Or any of the thousand other nicknames you constantly seem to invent in your free time."

Jeffrey left before Owen could reply, so the R&D agent just shrugged instead and turned a grin on the field agents. "Well, go kick some Janus ass for us desk huggers, then come back with vastly embellished tales we can hear in varying accents and impressions. I'm looking at you, Senior."

Emilio smirked and thudded a hand against Owen's back as he followed Bex to the door. His low murmur and the sound of Owen replying in what sounded like a heavy, Mexican accent was abruptly cut off when the door shut behind them.

Ryan walked to the door slowly, his face drawn and faint efforts at smiling failing. He paused by the head of the table, looked down at Carhart and the way the general was staring down at the table, and then at Sin again.

"I'll really miss you."

Sin opened his mouth to reply, not knowing what to say, but was saved when Ryan abruptly stepped forward and hugged him. It was awkward at first, and Sin stood there with his arms dangling at his sides.

"I'll miss you and Boyd so much." Ryan pulled back reluctantly, his lips pursed together. "I'm happy you're getting out. But still."
A crooked smile curled Sin's mouth up, and he released Ryan from the awkward hug. Taking a step back, he slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You'll have Trovosky to keep you company."

Ryan's eyes narrowed at that, and he twisted around to stare at Carhart briefly. A slight flush had risen on the younger man's face. "Whatever. I'll find a way to talk to you guys. Somehow."

It wasn't true. If things went according to plan, no one would be able to find them. But Sin didn't say that, and Ryan didn't say it. They looked at each other briefly before Ryan gave a single nod and turned to hurry out of the room.

Sin knew he should have said more. Done more. But as usual, words had failed him. He shook his head, and took a step closer to where Carhart was still sitting at the table.

"I have to go."

"I know."

Sin stared at Carhart, eyebrows drawing together. The other man wasn't looking at him. He was sitting stiffly and staring down at a shut-off tablet.

Sin stood by the table for a moment, waiting for something and not knowing what, before shaking his head and starting for the door. Something tugged at his chest, something sharp, something that made it tight, but he didn't know what it was. He couldn't identify it at all until a strong, warm hand grabbed his wrist and pulled him back.

"Sin, wait," Carhart said, voice gruff.

Wordlessly, Sin stopped and looked at the general again. Carhart stood and finally met Sin's eyes.
"I don't know how to do this."

"Do what?" Sin asked. He pulled his arm back, but Carhart didn't let go.

"I don't know how to say goodbye to you. I won't see you again. And I can't..." Carhart's voice dropped lower before he stopped speaking completely. His throat worked for a moment before he dragged his eyes away briefly to focus on some point on the wall.

"You can't what?"

"I can't do this. It's too hard." Carhart looked at Sin miserably, and released a low sigh. His eyes were bloodshot, and his mouth tightened into a thin line as he stared. Swallowing again, Carhart's brows pushed together as his mouth sank. "This is too fucking hard."

The knot in Sin's chest unraveled some, and he realized it had been something close to disappointment. Somehow Carhart's pain pushed it away.

"You could come. You and my father. It's not safe for you here, anyway."

"I know. But I can't. Who will keep an eye out when they start going after you? What about Ryan and Vivienne?" Carhart shook his head slightly. "My place is here until I have no choice."

"That's fucking stupid. Your place is not here. I don't have a good feeling about you staying."

Carhart gave Sin a wan smile. "Neither do I."

Sin's eyes narrowed. He wanted to yell at the general to stop being such a moron and just go with them. Just disappear. Stop waiting, stop trying to do the right thing. But he just stood silently and stared. Once again he couldn't find the right words to say.
For the second time someone pulled Sin into a hug, but this time it was less awkward. This time he closed his eyes when Carhart's muscular arms wrapped around him and crushed him against his broad, solid chest.

"I love you, Hsin. So fucking much."

Carhart's voice was choked, thick, and Sin knew he was crying. He raised a hand and placed it between Carhart's shoulder blades, and turned his face slightly against the older man's neck. Somehow this was more comforting. More familiar. Even though they'd never really hugged before.

"I know."

A low chuckle escaped Carhart, and he pulled back to press a kiss to Sin's forehead. They looked at each other again, and Carhart stepped back.

"Take care of Boyd. Let him take care of you."

"I will."

"Be safe."

Sin inclined his head and finally, reluctantly, headed to the door. "You too."

He stopped walking with his hand on the doorknob. It was cool beneath his fingers, but Carhart's gaze burned into his back like it had so many times in the past. All of the arguments, disappointments, the rare good moments that mixed in with all of the bad. All of the times that Carhart had tried to reach out. All of the times Sin had pushed him away. It all rushed back, and Sin found himself staring blankly at the door.

"You..." he trailed off, frowned slightly. "If you let them hurt you, I'll come back. I'll kill them all."
There was another soft laugh behind him. "I know. I know you would. I know you love me."

Sin looked over his shoulder, eyes narrowed and locked with Carhart's. He nodded curtly, turned, and finally walked out the door.

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Boyd knocked quietly on Carhart's door and wasn't terribly surprised when Emilio opened the door. The senior Vega stepped aside to let him in, and Boyd glanced around. He didn't see Carhart anywhere in the vicinity.

"Hey," Boyd greeted him once they were both in the living room.

"He'll be out in a minute. Just getting his shit together. You know?" Emilio smoothed a hand through his black hair. He looked agitated, and was already wearing his body armor for the mission. "He's a fucking wreck."

Boyd nodded and sat on the couch's arm. "How are you faring?"

"I'm fine," Emilio said flatly. "Are you ready?"

"Almost. I have to do a few things still."

Emilio nodded. He rolled his shoulders before crossing his arms over his chest. He was fidgeting, a Vega indicator of nervousness. "Well if either of you fuck this up, I'll kill you myself. It has to be perfect, you understand?"

"It will be," Boyd assured him. "There's no way I'm letting anything get in the way of this."

He glanced down the hall where he thought he could hear Carhart moving around, then turned his gaze back on Emilio. "Hsin will be okay. Even
if they catch us, they'll kill me but they'll bring him back safe. If that happens, I know you'll find a way to help him."

"Why don't you just shut the fuck up with that bullshit," Emilio said sharply. "Try not to be a fucking failure and not die."

"I won't, not if I have any say in it." Boyd shook his head, his lips pulling darkly to the side. "They'll have a hell of a fight on their hands if they think they'll take me away from him. I just don't want you worrying about your son. He'll be safe—even if he wasn't capable enough on his own, I won't let anyone touch him as long as I'm alive."

Carhart entered the room, pale-faced with red-rimmed eyes. "I wish there was a way to keep in contact," he said, obviously having overheard the conversation.

"There's not," Emilio said curtly.

Carhart shot the other man a look. "I know there's not. But I wish there was." They stared at each other for a moment, and Carhart shook his head before turning to Boyd fully. "Do you need anything from me? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No," Boyd said with a shake of his head. "Just be safe. I hate leaving you two behind."

Carhart nodded slightly, and looked away. "I know. I just spoke to Sin. He suggested that we come. Emilio and me." At that, Emilio looked up with raised eyebrows. "I told him we can't but it's hard. This hurts. Losing you both."

"If you enacted your plan today, we could all disappear together and no one would be in danger."
Carhart didn't say anything to that, but he and Emilio exchanged glances again. When they looked away from each other, Emilio cleared his throat.

"I need to get going. You better watch your ass, Blondie. If you get yourself or my boy killed, I'll fuck you up."

"Well, you're certainly more frightening than the Agency so we'll be sure to be careful," Boyd said dryly.

Emilio narrowed his eyes and reached out to shove Boyd's shoulder. "Don't fuck around. I'm serious."

"I know. I'm sorry." Boyd's gaze strayed briefly to take in Carhart's apartment before righting itself on Emilio. "I don't want to leave either of you. It feels less real if we act like we'll see each other again even if we won't."

"I'll find my son," Emilio said automatically. "And I guess you'll be there too."

Boyd smirked at that. "Thanks. Good to know I factor into your ten year plan."

"Shut up."

A slight smile had also crossed Carhart's mouth as he watched Emilio and Boyd. "He wants to hug you."

"Shut the fuck up."

"You do."

Emilio made a face, and jerked Boyd forward abruptly. He wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close.
The surprise Boyd felt at that quickly gave way to a strange, sharp twinge in his chest. He didn't care that Emilio might make fun of him for it, he turned and gave Emilio a full, strong hug.

"Hey," he said against Emilio’s shoulder. "I'm glad you were a creepy stalker in Monterrey. It means I got to meet you."

Emilio froze with his fingers digging into Boyd, but then drew back quickly. The look on his face was unreadable, but his mouth had tightened into a line. "I have to go," he said again.

Boyd nodded and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Will you promise me two things? First, that you'll watch out for each other the way Hsin and I will..."

"What's the other?" Carhart asked, eyebrows raising.

"That you'll remember this code. I was thinking, somewhere down the line we might need to contact each other for an emergency. 4FF worked to alert you about Emilio," Boyd turned his gaze from Carhart to both of them, "so what if we decided on our own code to disseminate in the underground if we need to catch each other's attention? I was thinking 20LM—the year Hsin and I went to Monterrey, and the first letters of the cities where we met each of you."

"That's a surprisingly good idea," Emilio said. He nodded his approval.

"I agree," Carhart added. There was some relief in his face, as if the idea hadn't even occurred to him before.

"Okay." Boyd felt a wave of relief as well—this way they still had a lifeline to each other. No matter what happened, they could still connect.

"Aiight." Emilio nodded at Boyd, and shifted to the door. "Remember what I said, Boyd."
"I will."

Emilio looked at Boyd one last time, and then stepped out of the apartment.

When Carhart and Boyd were left alone, for a moment they both watched the closed door before turning to each other. They talked for a short time, in part saying the things they may never get to say again and in part just prolonging the moment. It grew harder to say goodbye as time passed, and in the end they parted as simply as they could.

As Boyd left Carhart's building and passed through the cool open air, it hit him how this would all be gone when he woke up tomorrow.

He would never see his hometown again. He would never see his friends or remaining family members. All the places he knew—Killian's, Grover Books, even Crater Lake—they would become nothing more than a memory, along with all the people connected to them.

He would be giving everything up in his life, every modicum of stability, but he would be getting something far greater in return: a life with Sin.

Even if he hadn't been certain Seong would kill him the second Janus was destroyed, he still would have fled. He could never truly live without knowing when his lover could be taken from him, never knowing what they'd be forced to do or when he himself would be killed.

Still, passing through the courtyard and automatically looking for familiar faces, Boyd felt a strong sense of loss.

He was going to miss this. He was going to miss them.

But that was the way it went anytime a person was on the precipice of change. The fear of the future mixed with the loss of the past. At those times, all a person could do was step forward.
When the jet landed in Nova Scotia, Emilio, Bex and Sin deplaned and hurried across the tarmac. It was windy, and Sin could hear the pilot shouting at them that he was leaving with or without them if they didn't make the pickup time. The words were nearly lost on the wind, but Emilio gave his son a significant look when he caught the gist.

The mission, despite being the most important one they'd ever had, was straightforward.

Janus had perfected the art of invisibility, but their method of hiding was flawed. When it came down to it, they were just civilians who had cobbled together an empire of rebels. They had learned to be calculating and merciless because of the war and the fallout with the government that had followed. They weren't trained to be emotionless and isolated. So they kept forged bonds, and managed to maintain their core group throughout the entire Janus initiative.

The last part was their undoing. There were four of them, and they'd remained friends throughout the years. Charlotte Greer, Sebastian Rowe, John Arber, and Quentin Parr.

They didn't trust anyone but each other. Due to that, after traveling the world and being constantly on the run, they'd settled in Halifax together three years ago. Greer and Rowe lived together, but John and Quentin lived elsewhere in the city.

Jeffrey had analyzed the data in multiple ways to ensure that this was the location for all four of them. It had seemed unlikely. Too easy. He'd doubted it, but he couldn't disprove it. Everything pointed to Halifax, and recon missions had confirmed it.
The plan was for Sin, Emilio and Bex to split up. One agent per location with Sin at the most heavily secured and armed. They would kill the power, strike simultaneously, and take the targets out. At that point, the Agency would deploy other agents globally to rush the bases and locations of other Janus leaders.

"Watch your ass," Emilio said gruffly as they paused at the edge of the runway. He watched as Bex disappeared, running inhumanly fast through the darkness.

"You too. You've been sitting in the van too long. Maybe you got sloppy."

Emilio made a face and reached out, shoving Sin’s shoulder with his gloved hand. "Shut up, punk."


He knew he should be backing away and sprinting in the opposite direction, but he felt rooted to the spot. He couldn't take his eyes away from his father, or the way the wind was whipping the fine, black hair away from his eyes. The same green as his own but wider, rounder, more expressive.

"Go," Emilio said. He pushed his fingers against Sin's shoulder again.

Sin didn't move, and Emilio tilted his head to the side. He searched his son's face, and then shook his head slightly before releasing a soft laugh.

"Go, kid. Get this shit done." There was a pause, and then he said quieter: "I'll find you. I promise."

"How?" Sin asked automatically. His eyebrows drew together, and he wrapped his hand around the grips of his rifle. "How will you find me?"

"I have my ways. I'm lo más chingon, ain't I?"
Sin's mouth finally crooked into a full smile. "You are."

"Aight then. Have some faith and get your ass going, boy."

They looked at each other for a long moment before Sin inclined his head, turned, and broke into a run.

===

The sky grew darker, like storm clouds rolling in. Boyd stood before the entrance to a building; no doors to disrupt the pitch black inside.

"Help me!" a woman screamed frantically. "Help, somebody please help!"

The unmistakable crack of gunfire; the woman’s scream cutting off.

A scream to his left, now—a man's, sounding vaguely familiar. Begging that rose in pitch and hysteria. "No, no—I didn't do anything—money! I only gave—"

Gunshots a staccato crescendo, overwhelming his senses. Boyd looked back and forth, trying to catch movement of the enemy through the adrenaline-spike of his pounding heartbeat.

He saw blood flying in a fatal arc, splattering against the outer wall, splashing back from the windows. The stench of death surrounded him and he felt people moving all around—encircling him. Predators. The glow of eyes like an animal's, but they were human. The black of Agency body armor, and the glint of light off an Agency-issued gun. Here and gone—where were they?

Where were they?
A sickening chill clenched his throat and stomach. The same urging that had been in the back of his mind for weeks grew deafening:

*It's them. They did it. They did everything. You can't trust them. Kill—run—run—kill, kill, kill—*

"Hey," a voice snapped irritably.

Boyd stopped, heartbeat shuddering and disorientation making the darkness spin.

He was standing in the middle of a bright, if chilly, day. The wide doors of the Tower encased him. He felt a distant pain he couldn't initially place.

A woman was glaring at him, holding a bag close against her chest. Boyd's mind automatically assessed her; catching details like the scent of perfume, the tinge of lipstick, and the nametag just peeking out beneath her arms.

Civilian.

"Mind moving?" she demanded impatiently. "I know you agents think you're God's gift to mankind but some of us have things to do."

"What..?" Boyd asked blankly.

She looked pointedly down, and when Boyd followed her gaze he saw that he was gripping the door handle so hard that his knuckles were white. He stood in the middle of the doorway, partially blocking entrance and exit. His body felt like it wasn't entirely his to control.

He released the door as if it burned, and removed his other hand from beneath his jacket. Where it had been gripping the smooth contours of his gun.

"Sorry," he muttered as he stepped aside. "I got distracted."
The loud snort she gave was full of all the derision she didn't bother voicing. She was gone before he'd managed to step inside.

He felt shaken as he strode into the Tower.

How close had he come to losing everything in the hours before he escaped? And what had happened to trigger it this time? He knew now that this had happened multiple times, even before Sin had pointed it out to him. When he was alone, when things skewed, but he hadn't always realized it hadn't been real.

His gaze darted around the Tower as he walked. People moved around him like water in a river. It seemed too bright inside; colors strangely enhanced. Was it real even now? Had he fully snapped out of it or did he only think he had? He couldn't even trust his own mind anymore.

His hands flexed at his sides, clenching and unclenching as he walked.

_You can feel this_, he told himself. _This is real._

_I could feel it when it wasn't real, too_, he countered darkly in his mind.

On his way to Shapiro's, he did his best to ignore the part of him that noted the weaknesses of every Agency employee who passed him. How easy it would be to steal weapons from the Artillery and make these fuckers pay. Every single one of them.

Shapiro was already in the waiting room when he arrived, even though Boyd was five minutes early. The psychiatrist looked at Boyd sharply, then behind him, and back to him again.

"Jennifer," Shapiro said with a glance at his watch. "You've missed your lunch hour again."
His assistant didn't look up from studying something on her screen. "I did," she said with a faint frown, "but these files you gave me need more updating than we thought. I've been at it all morning." Her fingers flew across the keyboard.

"It would be easier for you to concentrate elsewhere. Take your lunch break and work from home for the rest of the day." Shapiro's tone, while not unkind, didn't leave room for argument.

Jennifer's eyebrows rose. This time she did look up, and incredulously at that. "Sir...?"

Shapiro's lips lifted slightly in the closest thing to fondness that Boyd had ever seen cross the man's face. "You're a hard worker, Jennifer. I like to reward that. Take the day off but don't tell anyone or I'll get hell for it from my superiors."

"But—" She looked at Boyd in bewilderment. "Your sessions..."

"Are no worry for you. I've managed without an assistant before, you know. Now, go. I expect to hear you gone by the time my session starts."

"Well—" She looked between the two of them before her lips curved upward. "If you insist..." She was already gathering her purse with one hand and doing something on the computer with the other by the time Shapiro turned to Boyd with raised eyebrows.

"Early today? Not unlike you, of late. Well, come in." Shapiro held the door open for Boyd. Once Boyd had entered the room, looking around automatically and noting the closed curtains, Shapiro shut the door behind him.
Boyd's instincts were still on alert but he didn't want to make it obvious. He sat down in the chair as usual, casually glancing around the room to see if there were any changes while subtly moving his hand closer to his gun.

Everything seemed normal except for the way Shapiro hovered near the door, his ear against it and eyes narrowed. Boyd watched the man suspiciously but didn't say anything.

After a minute, the faint sound of the main door shutting came into the office. Shapiro let out a sharp breath and turned. He strode toward Boyd immediately, his face full of hard lines.

"You have to leave. Now."

A threat seemed imminent—Shapiro coming on him too fast, too deliberately. Boyd's heartbeat skyrocketed instantly back to the adrenaline high from the Tower doors. He snapped out his gun and stood, pivoting to keep Shapiro in focus. Took a few steps back for space.

It took him a second to think to speak.

"What?"

Shapiro raised his hands even while he let out an impatient huff of breath. "We don't have time for this, Boyd. She plans to kill you during this session. They're scheduled to arrive ten minutes in; just long enough for me to lull you off guard."

"What?" Boyd's gaze darted to the door and around. Only one exit. This was too high off the ground to jump out the windows. Closed curtains; shutting out his view of the outside but also the Agency's view inside.

Shapiro followed Boyd's glance. His lips were thinned grimly. "She considered a sniper at one point—so you would have no way to see it coming
or escape. I believe I convinced her otherwise but just in case...” He gestured to the curtains.

Boyd stepped back again, the gun trained on Shapiro’s head. His heartbeat surged as he felt a moment of trapped panic.

Contradictions, adrenaline, was this even happening?

Was he having another flashback? Was he standing in front of the real Shapiro, aiming a gun at his head while the man wondered what he was doing and was calling security?

Fuck, fuck, fuck—

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head sharply. Focus. Focus on breathing. The moment.

"I know this is confusing, Boyd," Shapiro's calming voice was saying in the background, "but you have to leave."

"How..." Boyd opened his eyes. The room was the same. Shapiro looked the same as he had before. Nothing had changed. No blood or images of an Agency death squad, but he still felt the clawing need to get the fuck out and now.

"How do I know this isn't a trap?"

Shapiro's harsh laugh somehow brought Boyd more sharply into the present.

Sitting on the edge of the desk, Shapiro shook his head with a humorless draw of his lips. "What good would a trap like this be? I've put you on alert, haven't I? It would have been far better to kill you unexpectedly."

"Why would you help me?" The cold suspicion in Boyd's voice cut through the air.
"I have my reasons."

Boyd adjusted his grip on the gun and glared at Shapiro. "Not good enough."

Although they had known each other for almost a year and a half, when Shapiro met Boyd's eyes and finally lowered his hands, it felt like they were truly looking at each other for the first time. Something passed through Shapiro's face that Boyd couldn't fully identify other than a shadow of a darker emotion, and then Shapiro was sighing and looking away.

"I've always strived to do my best, but I've been in this position too long. I've seen too many good people die for doing the right thing. Too many people successfully struggle through trauma they were pushed into, only to be tossed aside when they were deemed no longer useful." His lips twisted in distaste.

Shapiro's gaze returned to Boyd and seemed to burn into him. "And then, you. I'm proud of our work together. I thought you could be the one person I could still save. I've lost so many others... But now not only do they want to end it, they want me to help?"

His features hardened. "No. I will not. A year and a half ago a friend of mine gave his life for your partner. For the ideals we both believe in. I never knew what I could do about it all this time, but now I know. Like him, I'm tired of being a bystander. So, leave. Now, before it's too late."

Boyd stared at Shapiro for a short moment, his fingers automatically tightening on the gun. He darted his gaze around for any indications that this was a lie; that there was something more happening. But all he saw was Shapiro's world-weary gaze hardened by determination, and a quiet office he'd seen many times before.
If this was true, he had to act on it. If it wasn’t, he would have to adjust as he went.

Boyd sheathed his gun. He didn't look away from Shapiro but hesitated, not knowing what to say.

Shapiro's lips lifted slightly. Sadly. "I realize that if you leave now you'll be a fugitive, but this is better than the alternative, yes?" Shapiro stood from the desk and walked over, squeezing Boyd briefly on the shoulder. "Be safe, and avoid cameras as much as you can."

Boyd started toward the door but then paused, looking back at Shapiro. "Thank you."

"Thank me when you're safe and gone," Shapiro replied with a shake of his head. His jaw tightened and his glare shifted to the door. "Until then, run. Run like hell."

===

Greer and Rowe's house was more like a miniature fortress. It was made of red brick and wood, and sat on a large deck that caused the structure to loom far above the hill that it had been built on. It overlooked an expansive pond and a tiny dock with a boat that was currently knocking quietly against the wooden structure. The moon reflected off the water, the silver light bright and illuminating the wooded area just beyond the perimeter of their property.

Sin had decided against the woods. There were guards patrolling them and the possibility of booby traps was too great. After moving through the trees, and slipping from shadow to shadow as he monitored the increasing number of bodies that appeared on his thermal sensor, Sin had detoured to the water.
The embankment was slick and the rocks damp, but he made his way across them carefully. His narrowed eyes flicked between the sensor, his surroundings, and the house. Even in the dark he could see details cast in sharp relief the more he stared at them. Distant sounds filtered to his ears; hidden beneath the lapping of the water and rustle of the trees, he heard footsteps and quiet, truncated conversations between guards.

Hunching down against the side of the dock, Sin stared up at the house. A dark-colored orb glinted in the moonlight, nearly invisible in the shadows, but his sharp eyesight caught it. He had no way of knowing whether the camera was fixed or if it took in the entire length of the property. Frowning slightly, Sin's eyes flicked along various surfaces around the property.

He counted four similar orbs. Fuck.

Inching closer to the trail that led from the dock to the property, Sin measured the distance between it and the shadowed section of the deck. If he ran fast enough, it was possible that it wouldn't pick up anything but a blur moving inhumanly fast. However, he wasn't close enough to hear the whirring and clicks of the camera that would enable him to judge whether it was fixed or rotating.

Swearing quietly, Sin hunkered down. He peered around again, shook his head, and then began to inch instead to the water that was lapping quietly against the rocky embankment. He stayed in the shadow of the dock, allowing it to obscure his position as he blended into the darkness. After storing his weapons in the waterproof pack that was strapped to his back, he waded quietly out into the water.

The coldness was almost a shock, but he ignored it and swam around the side of the property. The water did not saturate into his suit, but the waves pushed against his face, pulling at and dampening his hair until he emerged from it swiftly, hunching down and scrabbling across the embankment. The
shadows were longer on this side of the house because the trees pushed in further onto the property, and he took advantage of that.

By the time he was crouched along the side of the deck, water was dripping down his neck and he'd spotted a sole camera on the side of the house. He observed the security with a slight frown, eyes flicking from the upper balcony with guard detail, to the camera, and then to the nearest place where he could slip in while still obscured by darkness.

Crouching down, Sin cast his gaze over the area again and that's when he saw it. A thin line, barely a glimmer of light, circling the property. It was barely visible and for a moment, Sin wondered whether his father and Bex would even be able to see them without the enhanced vision that he had.

An image flit through his mind, one of his father stealing across the darkened plain of a Janus member's property, tripping one of the alarms, and his blood splattering across the grass. It hit too close to home, and he flashed to another image — this one a memory. The memory of himself dragging what he'd thought had been his father's lifeless body across a field of grass.

Without hesitation, Sin reached up to activate his comm.

"I'm in position. Kill the power before stepping foot onto the property."

===

The door to the office burst open abruptly, causing the handle to slam into the wall.

Katsaros appeared, flanked by four Agency guards with guns drawn. His dark eyes flicked over the office before slowly focusing on Shapiro.

"Where is he?"
Shapiro sat at his desk and turned an even gaze on the intruders. He set down a glass of Scotch and leaned back in his chair. "Where is anyone, these days? Who's to say this world is even real and not a figment of our collective imagination? Are you aware that there's a fascinating study about the possibility of this being true?"

Katsaros' eyes narrowed. The five of them moved further into the office. "I said, where is Beaulieu?"

Shapiro's blank expression tightened. "Where is Dominik Król? He's dead. We were good friends all the way back to school, both so proud to be chosen by the Agencies, both so certain we could change the world by helping people willing to sacrifice for their country. But then you people wanted to destroy his patient's memories and he refused, and you killed him for it."

He glared at Katsaros. "Isn't it his job to give the best recommendations for his patients? And yet that is a death sentence in this place. Now you want to kill my patient right in front of me..." He scoffed, shook his head, and took one last drink of his Scotch. When he set the glass down, it sounded especially final.

"Kill me, then. Blindly follow orders without ever bothering to develop your own moral compass. We both know you will. We both know you never had the integrity to do anything different."

A muscle in Katsaros' jaw ticked. It was the only indication that the comment upset him. He didn't say anything, didn't change his expression, and removed his own gun. The sound of the gunshot thundered through the quiet office. An arc of blood sprayed across the desk as the bullet ripped into Shapiro’s chest.

===

In the Company of Shadows – Book IV
The property had been thrown into chaos as soon as the lights flickered and everything was cast into darkness. For a single minute there had been silence before things had descended into controlled chaos.

There was no screaming, no shouting, no running, but as Sin melted into the shadows and slunk into the house, the sense of tension and urgency thickened until it was nearly palpable. Footsteps moved faster, the voices got louder, and so did the demands to know what the hell was going on. Rowe may as well have announced his position in the house.

It was impossible to stay completely unnoticed as the traffic increased. The pop of necks breaking and bodies sliding to the floor followed Sin’s tread as he closed in on his targets.

He could hear hushed conversation through a door, and light flickered beneath it as if there was a fireplace or candles inside. There was urgent whispering, a clicking sound, and someone wondering whether the power had gone out all over the city. The voice was low, young.

Too young. Not one of his targets.

The door crushed inward when he slammed his foot into it. Sin ducked to the side and down as a spray of bullets immediately unloaded in his direction. Rolling to the other side of the room and out of the way of more gunfire, a bullet grazed his calf just as he took aim and released a single shot.

There was a scream, and Rowe staggered as the bullet slammed into his sternum. He fell backwards across a desk. Bright orange light washed over the room as someone dropped a freshly lit candle and the flame spread over a sheer curtain that clung to the window.

"Get out," Rowe croaked. The order was clearly directed at his family, but so weak that it was barely heard over the wailing across the room.
Sin crouched in the corner, and redirected his gun to the others. There were just two: Greer and a kid who looked to be in his early teens.

"No!" the kid screamed, and launched himself at his father but Greer yanked him back.

She looked exactly as she had in her picture. Youthful, curly red hair, bright blue eyes, and very slim. Her face was blank, no hysterics, no surprise, and the piercing eyes focused on Sin instead of her husband.

"Agency," she said flatly as the flames spread up the curtain and across the room.

The kid shoved her back and scrambled to his father, leaning over Rowe and releasing a scream. Sin's mouth ticked, and his hand flexed on his gun. He stared the woman down as she looked back. She was defiant and ready, prepared to die, not backing down.

Sin hesitated. Fucking kid. Why did there have to be a kid?

His eyes flicked to the fire and he heard footsteps charging down the hall. The distraction cost him, and Greer ripped a gun from the small of her back. He reacted before she did and released another shot that went cleanly into the middle of her forehead.

Men barrelled into the room. Smoke billowed around them; the scarlet flames were spreading across the ceiling now. The kid was still wailing, and Sin sprinted across the room. Shots were firing wildly and another slammed into his back, striking the suit. He ripped a grenade from his belt, and released the pin.

He cooked it long enough to grab the kid by the scruff of the neck, and threw it just as he slammed into the window shoulder first. The blast of the explosion was deafening, and his ears rung as they went flying through the
air. He wrapped his arms around the kid, forcing them to turn mid-air as fire shot out of the window above them.

Glass shattered and rained down on them, slicing across Sin’s face as they barrelled down toward the ground. The kid was still screaming when they crashed down, even though Sin took the full brunt of the fall. For a moment he was stunned, paralyzed, and was only vaguely aware of his arms loosening on the teenager.

The sounds were muted around him. Distant shouting, distant footsteps, sirens, the roar of fire spreading, and a splash.

Struggling to his knees, Sin ignored the blood streaming down the side of his face and looked around blearily. The kid was gone. He’d most likely rolled down the embankment and into the water.

Suddenly aware of the burn in his throat every time he took a breath, Sin climbed to his feet and staggered down the hill to the dock. He saw ripples in the water, and hoped the kid knew how to swim because the rescue operation was officially over. The fall had jarred Sin, and his feet were unsteady as he broke into a run. A high pitched whine in his ear was fucking with his senses, and Sin squinted as lights blurred together and the fire raged behind him.

He flexed his hand on his gun and looked between the water and the house behind him. Disorientation had screwed him over, and he dove out of the way just as bullets ripped into the earth around him.

He bolted into a run, moving so fast that he was a dark blur that outpaced the speed at which his pursuers could aim. He sprinted for the pond and shouted into his comm again.

"Targets neutralized. Alert the outer teams."
The team swarmed the property, moving over it and leaving destruction in their wake. The farmhouse was massive and the green acres around it were lush and sprawling, but at the moment it was anything but picturesque.

Gunshots ripped through the house, tearing into the wooden paneling as flash grenades went off and added to the frenzied chaos. A myriad of shouts and screams combined in a nonstop wail of sound beyond the barrage of noise from the firefight.

Kassian sprinted up the winding staircase, glancing over his shoulder to see that Archer was hunkered down at the bottom. His large body was coiled and ready to spring into action, fully prepared to cover Kassian's back as Harriet and the rest of the team cleaned the bottom of the house of hostiles.

Refocusing his attention, Kassian sent a smoke grenade spinning down the hallway. Soot-gray smoke billowed out of it, and he spun so that his back was to the wall as he inched further down the hallway. He encountered three more hostiles, three more explosions of skull and brain splattering everywhere, before he found his prize.

The Janus lieutenant. The one he'd requested to go after.

Dana.

The bitch who had tortured Boyd.

He released two bullets in quick succession. They both entered her head and she fell on the canopied bed. Her blood began to seep into a colorful quilt, spreading until it blended with the patches.

"Clear," he said curtly into his comm.
"Sin, where the fuck are you?"

Bex's voice exploded out of his comm, and Sin ignored his automatic reflex to start moving faster. Drenched, still dazed from the fall and clutching a bloodied knife in one hand, he finally came into view of the pickup spot. His father and Bex were distant blips on the landscape and the Agency helicopter was already there.

"We're off in thirty seconds, kid," Emilio's voice came across with no real urgency. "They can't wait. Too much heat on this fucking rock, and the media will pick up the chopper if there are cameras."

"So get the bloody lead out," Bex snarled, piggybacking on Emilio impatiently.

Swearing, Sin slowed down just slightly now that he was in their line of sight. His gaze swept the perimeter impatiently, searching for the next part of the plan. Bex shouted that he had twenty seconds and he sped up enough to make it believable just as a matte red jeep came hurtling up the road.

"Hsin, on your fucking left!"

The jeep screeched to a stop and several armed men jumped out. They began unloading on him as Sin spun out of the way, flipped backwards and threw himself to the side. He barely flinched even as three bullets struck his suit. One whizzed by his head, and Sin gnashed his teeth in annoyance.

"Vega!"

"Don't you fucking pursue!" Emilio's voice snarled, presumably at Bex.

"It's your son—"
"Just go," Sin snapped as he rolled to cover behind a cluster of rocks. "I'll find my own way back. If someone spots an Agency helicopter, we're all fucking dead."

Gunfire sprayed around him, and Sin flattened himself to the ground as he peered around the edge. He fired, not aiming for anyone in particular, and ensured that the distant figures of his father and Bex were gone.

They were, and the helicopter took off not even a breath later. The integrity of the Agency's cover was worth more than one agent, whether he was enhanced or not. And media coverage of the city behind them burning would surely pick up a lone, dark helicopter hovering in the sky.

The gunfire halted, and he sat up to aim a withering glare at the men who'd jumped out of the jeep. He disabled his comm temporarily, and wiped a hand across his face.

"You almost blew my head off," he growled.

The tallest of the men, a tattooed man with a muscular build that dwarfed those around him, looked at him unapologetically. There were tattoos crawling up the sides of his neck, and several teardrops were inked in beneath his eyes. "I ripped my dick out of the finest pussy in New Rochelle to get here with no notice. So don't bitch. It had to look believable, right?"

Finally giving in to the urge to cough, Sin sheathed his own gun and walked over to the jeep. He ran a hand through his damp hair, shoulders shaking as he coughed.

The man smirked. "Con que finalmente llego a conocer al hermano de Chance."

Sin's eyes swept the perimeter. "Yes. That's me."
"Heh. You and him look alike." Looking him up and down once again, the man gestured sharply with one hand and the other men began to crowd into the jeep. "I'm Wilfredo. Now get the fuck in and let's go if we're going to make time. We had to call in quick favors to make this shit happen since you gave us no notice at all."

"It was unavoidable. We didn't have the location until today."

Shrugging, Wilfredo got into the driver's side of the jeep. "Let's go."

They switched vehicles after driving for fifteen minutes, and Wilfredo gave Sin a change of clothes which he pulled on over his suit. A flannel shirt, loose jeans, and a battered army jacket. They barely exchanged words on their way to the southern tip of Nova Scotia. Wilfredo's gruff voice only filled the silence once they arrived at a desolate cape and a waiting boat.

Wilfredo handed the man in the boat a large wad of money, and looked at Sin evenly.

"Don't fuck this up, man. Or get Chance caught up in this no more than he already is. I told him not to help you at all."

"He won't get caught up. There's no reason for them to think that ambush was fake."

Wilfredo gave him a long, assessing stare before he nodded. "Get out of here."

Sin inclined his head, and got into the boat. Wilfredo watched as the motor whirred to life, and they began heading out to the darkened expanse of water between the cape and Maine.

Even with the plan going smoothly so far, anxiety kept Sin wound tight. He kept waiting for something to go wrong. For the helicopter to come back and find him, tranq him and kill the old man that they'd just paid off.
There was no way for him to contact his lover. No way for him to make sure everything was fine on Boyd's end. They'd already scanned each other for GPS, and after coming up clean, they hadn't been willing to chance cellphones or computers of any kind.

No electronics. Nothing that could be traced.

He wouldn't know if Boyd was okay until Chance's complex string of connections got him to New York Harbor.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Emilio ripped his gloves off, and tossed them on the floor of the helicopter. They were caked with a mix of blood and mud which was also splattered across his armor and face. His prey had been good, but not as good as him. Even so, he'd taken too long. He'd been too distracted by everything else.

By the plan. By Sin.

He could feel Bex glaring at him, and he didn't bother to acknowledge her with a glance. Instead, he sat down and ripped a nearly crushed box of cigarettes out of his backpack.

"You can't—"

Narrowed eyes met the aborted statement, and the Transport Agent cut it short. He was young and unfamiliar. Probably still in training, and too wet behind the ears to know who he could talk shit to, and who he couldn't.

Emilio flicked his lighter, and inhaled deeply. Smoke poured out of his mouth, filling the tiny cabin. "Got somethin' to say?"

"No," the guy said sullenly.

"Thought so." Emilio smirked, and turned his gaze to the open mouth of the helicopter. He took another pull from the cigarette, sucking on it like it was a lifeline, and listened to the *chop-chop-chop* of the blades as they whirred in the black, night sky.

"I'm fast enough," Bex said after several moments had passed. "You should have let me assist."

"Yeah?" he asked carelessly, not looking in her direction.
"Yes," she snarled. "So what if we were a minute off the timetab—"

"No," the Transport Agent cut in. When Bex's onyx eyes focused on him, he faltered once again. His face went white, but he pushed on anyway, fingers pressing against the knees of his black pants. "There were local police everywhere, media vans were coming in, not to mention civilians with electronic devices that could record. We had specific orders to not get any adverse attention. The Marshal does not want any direct link between the Janus hits with an outside organiz—"

"Shut the fuck up," Bex cut in. "Before I fling you out of this bloody helicopter."

"Why so mad, sugar?" Emilio drawled, still not looking at either of them. "The man speaks the truth."

"Fuck the truth."

The words finally drew Emilio's interest, and he took in the other agent's heated glare, the tense set of her shoulders, and the way she was staring at him with obvious animosity. "You sweet on my boy, darling? That why you got your panties all in a wad?"

"No," she said stonily. "I'd do the same for you. We're on the same team, you fuckwit."

"Hmm." Losing interest, he looked out the window again. "Too bad. Thought maybe you was movin' on from your sister seeing as how she's a major ho. Now cool out before I regale your annoying ass with stories of how me and Doug DP'd her."

Bex just made a face at him, and sat down on the floor. She lapsed into silence, and began taking apart and cleaning her guns without sparing him another glance. The Transport Agent seemed to lose interest in trying to
communicate with either of them, and Emilio spent the next hour chain smoking.

They switched from the helicopter to a jet once they got into Maine, and from there it wasn't long before they arrived at the Agency. Once their vehicle rolled into the receiving area and parked, Emilio got out and headed for the doors. Bex had long since realized that he operated on a separate set of rules than she did, and didn't attempt to call him back to complete the report. He reported directly to the top.

The compound was not as busy in the wee hours of the morning, but there were still people around. Guards, agents coming from missions, late-night visitors to the gym. The usual people greeted him with easy smiles, but he ignored them.

There was a feeling in his gut that something was wrong, and he couldn't identify why that was. He glanced at his phone as he took the elevator up, but there were no messages from Carhart. No indication that anything was off. And nothing should have been off. Boyd was not active, and Seong had no reason to know that he was already out of the state. They had no reason to think that the ambush was suspicious. That Sin wasn't coming back. But the sinking feeling wouldn't leave, and it dogged Emilio all the way to Seong's office.

Seong was sitting at her desk, glancing between two tablets while she typed on one. At the sound of the door opening and closing, she didn't look up. By the time Emilio sat down across from her, she had apparently finished what she was working on and pushed the tablets aside.

"I sent a squad for Beaulieu while he was meeting with Shapiro."

"Oh." Emilio stared at her, expression unchanged.
There was a hiccup of silence as scenarios paraded through his mind. Killing her now would result in him having to shoot his way out of the Agency, which was probably suicide. Another thought chased that one: He could kill her and activate the red alert plan. But then he realized that if Boyd was dead, the plan would have been activated already.

She was lying.

"Well, Hsin ain't back yet so what are we going to tell him when he finds out?" he asked, tilting his head to the side with a frown. "The kid is going to flip his fucking shit. Are we wiping his memories again?"

She watched him steadily for a moment, and then leaned back in her chair. "Beaulieu was gone by the time they arrived. Shapiro warned him, it seems. I've sent men after Beaulieu."

"Was he seen escaping?"

"No." Her lips thinned briefly. "He'd already vacated his condo as well, but he'll make a mistake and we'll find him. I've sent men to the most likely locations for the moment."

*And he'll be across the fucking Atlantic already, bitch.*

Emilio nodded, and leaned forward slightly in the chair. His eyebrows drew together, and his mouth twisted to the side. "Even so, what the fuck do we do about Hsin when he gets back? We got a lot of heat after taking out the Janus leaders. We were ambushed on our way out of Halifax, and Hsin was held back. The pilot wouldn't wait, so we took off without him."

Seong's expression didn't change. "He's reported in twice since the separation. We're giving him a window to return, and once he does, his memories will be wiped."
"Okay," he said, voice even. Wetting his lips briefly, Emilio looked out the window just so he could see something other than her face. "Are we anticipating problems from their little cohort? Ice bitch and the general, and what not?"

"I always anticipate problems from Vivienne at the least," Seong said with clear distaste. "But it's of no consequence. Even if they interfere, they'll be dealt with accordingly."

"Aiight." Emilio stood up, flexing his hands and rolling his shoulders as if he was working out the kinks. "Let me know if you need me to handle some shit. I'm gonna go score some happy pills from the Med Wing. My suit took a lot of hits."

She nodded and looked back down at her tablets.

His boots thundered down the stairs as he took them three at a time. He sent Carhart a text after he got into the Gran Torino, and then gunned the engine. He sped out of the parking lot, almost running over a guard, and showed just as much discretion on the way back to Bedford.

It was a little under an hour before Carhart arrived, and all Emilio had accomplished in that time was pacing the living room and throwing back four shots of Cuervo. He'd only half-stripped out of his suit, and the upper part hung down from his waist, exposing the bruises that were spread liberally over his torso.

"I have a weird feeling about this," Emilio said as soon as Carhart entered the apartment.

The general froze, taking a moment before he pushed the door shut behind him. "Bex just reported in that Sin got away—"
"He did get away," Emilio interrupted. He took a long drag from his cigarette, and exhaled loudly. "But I can't shake the feeling that something ain't right. She's too calm."

"Too calm? What do you mean?"

"I mean—fuck, it's just a feeling, Zachary. She's too okay with the coincidence of Boyd taking off, and us being separate from Sin. I expected her to be shitting kittens, not looking at me more relaxed than a fucking pothead listening to Kenny G." Emilio clenched his jaw, and sat on the arm of the couch. His body was coiled tight with tension, his shoulders hunched forward slightly as he stared into space. "Something's weird."

"Just calm down," Carhart said, but his hands balled into fists as the words left his mouth. "No one has retrieved Boyd, and he's been gone for hours. If they knew the plan, Boyd would be dead by now, and Gerant is keeping me updated on all guard activity on the Fourth."

"They tried to get him before he left. I don't know if it was because they knew the plan or if it's because Sin wasn't around, but..." Emilio stubbed his cigarette out on his tongue, and flicked the butt carelessly onto his floor. "She sent a hit squad for him. Shapiro warned him to get the fuck out."

"What did they do to Shapiro?"

"Dude is probably in the incinerator already."

"Goddamn everything." Carhart finally crossed the room and dropped down onto the couch. He pressed his elbows against his knees, and after a moment pressed his face into his hands. "I don't know if I can handle waiting it out. I wish I could just be certain that they're okay."

Emilio exhaled slowly, and looked down at the general. The broad shoulders were hunched forward, his head tipped down and fingers fisted in
short, blond hair. After a moment, Emilio raised his own hand, and untangled the strands from Carhart’s fingers, pushing them away. Carhart looked up at him then, his face pale and drawn with stress.

"Do you think they'll be okay?"

Emilio let his hand rest at the back of Carhart’s neck. He let them rest there for a moment, before moving them in a gentle, circular motion.

“They have to be.”

===

Boyd paced, his eyes darting quickly across the dock. Only the crews of the Asasara and other docked boats were visible. Now and then there looked to be some travelers trickling in, looking down at tickets in their hands and up with strained faces toward the ships lined up in the water.

The ship swayed gently beneath Boyd’s feet.

His jaw tightened and he walked faster.

A thump beside him caused him to jerk his head to the side, his hand snapping to his holster.

Tayla’s dark eyebrows rose sardonically. "Chill out, cowboy." She dropped a second heavy crate on top of the first, and half sat on the edge. Her gaze strayed out toward the dock. "Loverboy not here yet?"

"He'll be here." Boyd pulled his hand away from his gun with an effort. Tension thrummed through his body, making his senses heightened for threats. Even now, he kept expecting an Agency squad to pop out between the buildings, and shoot him where he stood.
Tayla shrugged and drew a lock of black hair tinged with blue behind her ear. Her hair had grown considerably since they’d last seen each other years ago, in the basement of the pharmacy in Monterrey, but her clothing style hadn’t changed much at all. Her black leather jacket with too many zippers and a skull and crossbones patch on the back creaked faintly when she crossed her arms. With the long sleeves, he couldn’t see the winding snake tattoo on her upper arm that went with the name she and Liani were known by: the Snakes. But it seemed that their business of illegal transport had only grown in the interim.

She opened her mouth but her attention shifted to a man across the ship. "Wally!" she yelled at him. She pointed at the crates beneath her when he looked over. "We've more here."

The man nodded. "That the last of it?"

"Nah," Tayla called out easily. She looked down in apparent distraction and patted her pocket for something. "Li’s bringin' the rest."

Wally rolled his eyes and flicked his thumb across the screen of the tablet in his hand. "Chrissakes, let us handle the loading for once."

Tayla snorted and shoved herself off the crates. "Where's the fun in that?" Wally snorted in return but didn't answer, and Tayla grinned. She turned back to Boyd and, upon seeing his dark expression aimed once again out toward the docks, slammed him hard on the upper back.

"You'd better hope he shows soon, mate, 'cause we ain't waiting if he's late." Her cheerful tone was incongruous with the meaning of the words, and the way it struck ice deep in Boyd's chest.

"He'll be here," he said firmly. His arms tightened across his chest.

"And if he isn't?"
"I'm not leaving him," Boyd said flatly. He shifted his weight, feeling more worried as time went. "I'll get off this ship and wait for him if I have to."

"Right, well. We're leaving in two. Cheers." She spoke lightly and, with a grin and a ruffle of his hair, she strode off. She was already yelling something at Wally again, but Boyd stopping paying attention to her as soon as she left.

He stepped up to the edge of the ship, bracing a hand against the wall to steady himself against the quiet roll of the sea, and leaned over to look both ways. He searched increasingly desperately for Sin's familiar figure, but he was nowhere to be seen.


Scenarios flashed vividly through his mind—the fact that he'd had to flee early got the Agency onto their plan and they'd caught Sin along the way; Sin had been seriously injured in the mission and couldn't make it out; they'd tranqed him and brought him back for brainwashing before Sin could escape; Chance had fallen through with the ambush and transports...

If Boyd got off here, he would lose his only opportunity to escape. But if he didn't get off, he wouldn't see Sin again. He had to get off. But if he did, the Agency would catch up to him. They would finish the job that Shapiro kept them from doing.

The seconds dragged by torturously slowly. One and a half minutes to leaving. His fingernails dug into his palms painfully. One minute to leaving. The ship was in motion around him; people running back and forth on final adjustments.

"Fuck, fuck," Boyd hissed under his breath. He grabbed the bags he'd brought, their only worldly possessions for the next stage of their lives, and threw them over his shoulder.
Boyd grabbed the nearest crewman on the arm. "How much time do I have?"

"Before we leave?" The man gave him an odd look. "Just about now. Why?"

The dock was still empty of Sin. Boyd found it difficult to drag his eyes back to the crewman. "There's someone important I'm waiting for. Can we stall—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" The man gave Boyd a look like he was an idiot, and yanked his arm out of his grasp. "Above my paygrade, man. Go bug someone else."

Boyd thought about trying to contact Tayla but he knew it was useless. He scoured the dock, looking for Sin's head of dark hair.

He wasn't there.

The man moved toward the ramp with purpose, and Boyd jumped forward. "Wait! Wait, I have to get off—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," the man growled. Someone must have spoken into a comm unit in his ear because he pressed a button and said sharply, "Not yet, I got a runner. Hold off a sec." The man glowered at Boyd. "Well? Get off, then."

Boyd looked at the man with a feeling of doom clawing at his chest, and then hefted the bags further up his shoulder. He started to walk down the ramp, when he noticed movement on the far side of the dock.

Sin was running phenomenally fast. His boots pounded against the wood beneath his feet, dodging lingering pedestrians as he scrambled towards the ship. The moment Sin was on the deck, Boyd dropped the bags and jerked him into a hard hug.
"Thank fucking god," he muttered. His fingers dug into Sin's back, tangling in the fabric of his clothing and holding him tightly in relief.

"Sorry," Sin breathed into his ear.

Boyd just shook his head wordlessly against Sin's shoulder.

Sin pressed his lips to Boyd's forehead, and looked at the man. His eyes narrowed slightly when the crewmember just stood there. "Do you want to fuck off, or do you need a written invitation?"

The man gave Sin a look of disgust and turned to continue his job. Boyd gripped Sin's wrist, and then tugged him away from the ramp.

"Let's get out of view," he said with a look back toward the dock.

He still didn't see any Agency personnel but he wasn't going to feel even relatively safe until they were in the middle of the ocean with no Everyman face in sight.

They grabbed their bags and Sin followed him to their cabin. The bedroom was just large enough for a double-sized bed and a set of drawers, with a tiny bathroom attached. The floor swayed beneath them and in the distance a deep vibrating sound of a horn or perhaps simply the engine droned through the walls.

As soon as they were inside the room, Boyd looked Sin over closely. Dried blood stained his hair and streaked parts of his face, caused by several cuts. Boyd did a perfunctory check of the rest of Sin but he couldn't see much beneath his clothes. Sin's hands appeared to be cut as well, with smeared blood having been wiped off at some point along his palms.

"Are you injured anywhere else?"
"Just a flesh wound." Sin stripped off the jacket and flannel shirt that he wore and tossed it onto the bed. His black body armor was seen beneath, clinging to his muscular chest. "How was it getting out?"

Boyd shrugged with a tight movement and sat on the edge of the bed. "Apparently she had an order to terminate me in the middle of my meeting with Shapiro."

Sin paused with his hands poised to shove his jeans off, and stared at Boyd. "How did you get out?"

"Shapiro warned me and gave me time to leave." Boyd's expression darkened. "He's probably dead now because of that."

"Probably." Sin sat on the edge of the bed, and stared at the wall. He was silent for a long moment, his fingers curled onto the edge of the bed.

Between fleeing and worrying about Sin's delay, Boyd hadn't had the time to fully think about Shapiro. The psychiatrist had met Boyd at one of the lowest points in his life, had seen him through to stability and happiness, and in the end he'd sacrificed himself to see Boyd live. Boyd hadn't realized Shapiro cared enough about him or his patients to do anything like that, and knowing that he did, it made it even worse that he was likely now dead.

Boyd's eyes narrowed as he stared at his clenched fingers. The dull rush of anger was a steady backdrop to his thoughts. Yet another life needlessly lost to the Agency and its agenda.

"Did you get here without trouble?"

Boyd looked up, startled out of his thoughts by Sin's question.

"Yes. I snuck out before they knew I was onto the plan and I've been looking over my shoulder since." He hesitated, glancing at Sin sidelong and then away with drawn eyebrows. "But I had a flashback heading into the
Tower, and another on my way to the ship. I hope this shit stops soon because if it doesn't go away, I'll be a liability someday."

"You're never going to be a liability." Sin was still staring into space, his dark brow furrowed. His fingers splayed on the bed as if he was going to push himself up again, but he didn't move. "They should have left with us," he said suddenly.

"I know. I suggested it but they just looked at each other and didn't say anything."

"Goddamn it."

Sin raked his hands through his hair, and fell back on the bed. His body stretched across it, and he turned his face to the side so that he could look up at Boyd. He inhaled slowly, and reached out to twine their fingers together.

Boyd smiled slightly down at him and squeezed their hands together. He shoved all the dark thoughts out of his mind and turned his body to face his lover.

"They'll figure it out, you know. They always do. And in the meantime..." He gestured to the cabin, his lips ticking up further on the edges. "For now, we're actually free. We made it."

"Yeah." Sin pulled Boyd's hand closer, and pressed his lips against it. "We did."

Boyd didn't look away from Sin's eyes; from the pale green of them focused solely on him. The cabin felt disconnected from the rest of the world.

The bedspread made a quiet shuffling sound as he braced his free hand on the other side of Sin's shoulders. Keeping eye contact until they were too close to focus, he leaned down to press his lips against Sin's.
What started as a chaste kiss grew quickly before their lips mutually parted. Sin's hand fisted in Boyd's hair, pulling him closer. Boyd straddled Sin and rolled his hips downward, growling against Sin's mouth at the feel.

"Take your clothes off," Sin said in his ear, breath hot against the tender flesh.

Boyd shuddered, licking Sin's mouth before he sat up with another press of his hips. He reached down to strip off his shirt. Sin's fingers had just closed around the buckle of his belt when someone knocked on the door.

"Fuck," Sin growled, eyes flicking to the door. His hands locked around Boyd, as if preventing him from moving.

Another knock, louder and more insistent. This time it was accompanied with a young woman's drawl of, "I've orders to bring you to a meeting, and a master key to see it done. If you don't answer, I'll come inside right now. I know you're in there. I can hear you."

When they didn't immediately respond, a look of unhappiness mutually crossing their features, there was a brief rattling of the door.

"Damn it," Boyd hissed, and twisted toward the door to snap loudly: "Hold on! We'll be right out."

"You've a minute at most before I enter," came the mild reply. There was a muffled rasp and a slight rattle, as of someone turning their back and leaning against the door. The assumption was verified when her voice came slightly more distantly: "Sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight..."

Boyd pushed himself up and off of Sin, who threw his long legs over the side of the bed and stood up. He strode across the room and jerked the door open, glaring down at a young woman who looked to be in her early twenties. Her hair was bleached so blond it was nearly white.
"What the fuck do you want?"

The young woman peered up at Sin with a quirked eyebrow pierced with a hoop. "I told you just now, didn't I? I've orders to bring you to the Snakes so that's what I'm doing." She glanced past Sin to where Boyd was seated on the side of the bed. "Ready?"

"No. You can tell them to wait." Sin took a step back and slammed the door in her face before turning to look at Boyd again. "Is there a reason why these people think they can tell me what to do?"

Before Boyd could respond, the woman threw the door open. She glared at Sin. "Maybe because they're letting you losers on board, yeah? In case you didn't notice, we're not a cruiseship. If you want to get your jollies off, do it another time."

"If they want to talk, they can come to me. They don't summon me. They don't summon Boyd. They got paid by chingon. In fact, they got overpaid. So you can get the fuck out of my cabin."

"I'm not going anywhere. I've a job to do."

Boyd glanced between the two of them and then stood. He walked up next to Sin and met the woman's eyes. "Give us a minute."

She eyed the two of them with clear suspicion, but ultimately shrugged. She stepped back into the hallway and crossed her arms. "I'll resume counting."

Boyd shut the door and turned back to Sin. "I'll go with her."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"She's being an idiot but all I care about is getting away safely with you," Boyd said with crossed arms. "And after stressing out thinking you
weren't going to make it, I just want to relax with you. If my going makes that happen sooner, I'll do it."

"I care about the same thing, but I didn't leave the Agency to walk into another situation where someone is giving me orders." Sin sat on the bed, and rolled his shoulders as a grimace crossed his face. "If you're just talking logistics with them, I don't need to be there anyway, right? My father already paid them."

With an easy nod of agreement, Boyd stepped closer to Sin. His hands rested on Sin's shoulders, absently kneading the tight muscles he could feel straining beneath his fingertips. "Right, and you haven't had a chance to rest yet, anyway. Why don't you stay behind and I'll catch up with you when I get back."

Sin's mouth turned up slightly, and his eyes moved over Boyd slowly. "Be quick."

Boyd leaned down to kiss Sin. When their lips parted, he grinned slyly. "You don't need to worry about that. I have Plans for you, with a capital 'p.'"

Sin smirked. "I'll try to clean up some. Not that blood has stopped us... ever."

Boyd let out a short laugh and straightened. Before he could reply, there was another knock at the door. He grimaced faintly and walked over. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see Tayla standing there instead of the young woman.

"Hullo, sunshine. I dunno if Iris asked what time worked for you before Li had her bugger off, but plans changed. If you're free I can talk now, or else we'll have to do it later."
Sin scoffed and kicked off his boots silently. Tayla perked up at the sound.

"Good on ya, mate, you made it—" Tayla was saying as she peered around Boyd's shoulder, but she stopped when she saw Sin's face. Her eyebrows raised and her lips twisted upwards with amusement. "Well. You're looking ropeable. Did I interrupt something delicate so soon into the trip?" Her suggestive tone was overlaid by a roguish glance between the two of them.

The boots fell over with a thud, and Sin began to skin off the upper part of his suit, exposing the expanse of scarred flesh beneath. "I don't know you, and you don't know me, but for the next five days we will get along better if your employees don't give me orders and threaten to unlock the door and force me to go anywhere."

All traces of amusement left Tayla's face in a flash. Her narrowed eyes met Boyd's. "Iris?"

Boyd crossed his arms and nodded. "Gave us a countdown and everything."

She let out a low swear and scowled. "That—" She stopped, straightened her features, and looked at Sin. "Sorry, mate, that's on me. She's a friend's cousin, just started and still getting worked in. She's too aggressive at the strangest of times. I'll have Liani get on her. All's we told her was to get from you both a good time for a meet and greet."

"Good." There was a more metallic thud as Sin set his guns on the scarred, wooden surface of the end table. "I'd hate to have to be a dick so early on, especially after I had an initial good impression of you from Boyd and chingon."

Tayla nodded easily and leaned against the doorjamb. "It's not in our business to piss off potential associates, either. I gave Iris a chance
because—" She stopped, grimaced, and waved a hand dismissively. "Eh, it's too long a story. But for your trip I'll see that she's not a messenger for you. Stop any crewmate you like to send a message to me when you know what time will work for you, unless now is fine."

Sin nodded, and sat on the edge of the bed. He leaned forward so that his arms were on his knees, and looked up at her. "So what do we need to do? Just lay low?"

"Right." Tayla glanced over her shoulder, frowned slightly, and then glanced questioningly at Boyd. He stepped aside so she could walk fully into the room and shut the door behind her. She didn't speak again until she had moved to lean against the wall, away from the door where presumably her voice could be more easily overheard.

"I'd stay off deck unless at night if I were you. We're all crew with just ten passengers including you, this run. I can vouch for my crew no question—the rest of the travelers?" Her eyebrow quirked. "They're running from their own demons and they've all paid a fine price for it but you can't always say what a desperate person will do, yeah?"

"Is there any way they'd know who we are by turning a crewmember or finding a list somewhere?" Boyd asked.

Tayla shook her head. "We don't keep a manifest with names on it and I placed you far as I could from everyone else. So long as you aren't yelling out your full names and vocations where anyone can hear, it shouldn't be a problem. But be careful, anyway. Now and then we get waylaid by other pirates on the open seas and I'd hate to have anyone sell you out for an extra bit of cash on my watch."

Boyd nodded and walked over to sit on the bed next to Sin. "Have the port plans changed?"
"Nah, but Liani just told me we’re hearing word of bad weather down the way. Might be six, seven days before we can port in Lisbon. You have leeway on your transport, yeah?"

"It won't matter if we're a few days late," Boyd agreed.

Tayla nodded. "Good."

"What's the food situation?" Sin asked. He was touching his own scalp carefully, and his brow furrowed as he extracted a small shard of glass.

"You get three meals a day and can buy more if you need. Booze and smokes for a price, too, if you want. Unless you need special treatment for your situation, you'll have to eat with the rest of us." She eyed Boyd and then settled her gaze on Sin. "Seeing as you don't exactly blend in, if there's a hit out on you with a description, you might want to try a disguise or two."

Sin grimaced at that. "I hate disguises. If I pay you extra, can someone just bring us food?"

Tayla nodded. "An extra one hundred a day and that's yours."

"Fine." Sin shifted so that he was laying on the bed, his legs pressing against Boyd's back. "I appreciate it," he added.

She nodded again and pushed herself away from the wall. "Anything else you need?"

"Can I get access to the radio system, to monitor traffic control?"

Tayla looked at Boyd and didn't answer at first. Her lips shifted into a small smile before she finally shrugged. "Three hundred and it's a deal. But no access to private communications."

"That's fine."
She nodded, started to turn toward the door, and then stopped. "Oh. I've a request of my own."

"What is it?"

"One of these nights, I want to come down to your cabin with Liani and play a game or two. Doesn't matter what game," she added, forestalling the question she might have seen growing on Boyd's face. "Maybe cards, maybe one of the boards or apps we have on deck. Just something to play a little strategy."

Boyd thought the request was rather odd but he didn't say that aloud. He looked at Sin and saw that his eyes were closed, his eyebrows faintly furrowed, but Boyd knew that he wasn't asleep. Since he didn't say anything or indicate he was against the idea, Boyd turned back to Tayla with a shrug.

"Okay."

"Brilliant," she said with a pleased grin. "Then, I'll be leaving you. Catch a crewman if you need us, like I said."

When the door was locked behind her and they were alone once again, Boyd kicked off his shoes and stretched out next to Sin on the bed. When Sin's eyes remained closed and he didn't immediately comment, Boyd crossed one arm behind his head and absently ran his fingertips along Sin's wrist with the other.

"If you want to sleep, I'll get the door if anyone comes."

"I'm okay." The green of Sin's eyes appeared as they opened slightly, and he turned on his side to face Boyd. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep until we're holed up in a random town in a random country, far away from Seong and the Agency."
Boyd's lips lifted and he lightly kissed Sin's forehead. "I know how you feel but you'd be exhausted if you didn't sleep until then. Right now, we're as safe as we're going to be for the next week and I brought extra precautions I can set up." He gestured to his bag tossed on the floor nearby. "I can keep watch."

Sin's eyes dropped to Boyd's mouth, and he leaned forward to draw Boyd's lower lip into his mouth. He looked up again, meeting Boyd's eyes after he released it. "Maybe later."

Boyd smiled and rolled on top of Sin, pushing him onto his back. His blond hair fell down around them, sheltering their view of the rest of the cabin as he leaned down. He sucked on Sin's earlobe, rolling his tongue piercing along it. The slight shudder he felt from Sin made Boyd release a hot wash of breath along the wet skin and murmur:

"If you put it that way, then maybe a lot later."

After the first night of thoroughly exploring each other, they spent the next two days holed up in the cabin, sleeping in shifts and cautiously monitoring the door. Exhausted and stressed as they both were, they weren't able to enjoy each other's company as much as they wanted. But when they were both awake between shift changes, they touched each other with the same intensity as they had back at the Agency, years ago when they had thought each time would be the last.

Tayla and Liani stopped by the cabin on the third day, and Boyd enjoyed the visit more than he'd thought he would. The two women were easy-going, and for all that Tayla could occasionally be off-putting, she managed to amuse them all by the end of the night.

Liani had changed more than Tayla had: now she wore a hijab, she appeared to have aged a bit more than Tayla, but she also seemed more
approachable. Boyd vaguely remembered her as being more serious and quiet, but she turned out to have a dry sense of humor that appeared when least expected.

Maybe it was the bit of human interaction that didn’t end in tragedy, but by the third night Boyd and Sin had stopped taking shifts and spent their time with each other instead. That night, the dark, moving water proved too tempting a view from their small window, and they decided to go on deck for some fresh air.

They went up in the early morning hours, when the ship seemed to be quietest. When they stepped up on deck, Boyd stilled at the view.

The moon was a waxing silver crescent against the pitch black sky, but what stood out to him were the stars. The clouds were nonexistent in a large section of the sky, and there he saw constellations like he’d only read about in books. With no city lights, no pollution, nothing visual to stand between them and the universe, it felt both humbling and awe-inspiring. It was the first time he understood why past civilizations had seen gods in the stars. And beneath it all, the sea was a rolling black reflection of everything stretched out above.

"Wow."

Sin leaned against the railing, propping his arms up on the white metal rungs. His eyes focused on Boyd, and he smiled slightly. "Impressed?"

"How could you tell?" Boyd asked with a faint twist of his lips. He leaned over the railing to peer down as best he could at the water, and then back up at the sky. "I've never seen anything like this before."

"It's nice," Sin agreed. He turned so that he was facing the water as well, and stared out into the darkness. "It's strange being so completely alone."
"I know." Boyd's gaze passed along what he could see of the horizon. "I keep expecting a hit squad to come speeding across the water."

"I know. So do I." Eyebrows drawing together slightly, Sin's fingers tightened around the rungs of the railing.

Boyd gently pulled one of Sin's hands from the rungs and entwined his fingers in Sin's. He pressed his arm against Sin's without looking away from the water. "They'll be okay. She has no reason to believe they're involved in any of this, and worst case scenario they have their own plan."

"Yeah. Maybe." Sin looked down at Boyd, a small smile flashing across his face. "Don't think I regret leaving. I don't. I want to be with you. I only want to be with you. Always. I'm just worried about the people left behind."

"I know, I didn't doubt your reasons." Boyd tipped his head against Sin's shoulder and breathed in the fresh air. The cool wind chilled his exposed skin, but he didn't mind. "I'm worried about them, too, but at the same time I know these are the only days we'll have even the slightest chance to relax. Once we hit dry land, we'll have to be on the run again."

"And keep running." Sin squeezed Boyd's hand tighter. "It will be worth it."

Boyd smiled and turned toward Sin. With his free hand, he pulled his lover down into a short kiss. Their lips were chapped and tinged with the chill of the night air, but Boyd still felt a sense of stability and completion that he wasn't sure he'd ever felt before now.

Sin's hand rested against the back of Boyd's neck, beneath the fall of his hair. The touch was light, almost gentle, and Sin's eyes seemed a deeper green in the low lighting. Boyd was struck by the intensity of happiness he could feel from such a simple moment, and at a sudden thought he let out a low laugh.
"What?"

Shaking his head, Boyd couldn't keep the bemused smile from his face. "Nothing, just... We met, what? Almost six years ago?" He gestured to the ocean and the ship. "If someone had told me back then that this is where we'd end up, I would've thought they were insane."

"They put us through enough shit that it's amazing we've survived." Sin looked down again, and bumped his shoulder against Boyd's. "We're pretty tough."

Boyd smirked and rocked back against Sin. "And apparently both too stubborn to know when we're supposed to give up."

"And we never will."

"Not in a million years," Boyd agreed.

They stood together in silence for several minutes before the quiet scuff of a footstep behind them interrupted them. They pulled apart, and pivoted. A man was walking across deck; his skin pale in the night, with short dark hair and a pointed goatee. His eyes were partially hidden by black-rimmed glasses.

"Oh," he said when he saw them. He paused, glanced behind him toward the door he'd presumably come from, and then out to the sea. After a second, he continued walking toward the railing.

Sin stood up straight, but didn't step away from the railing. Still, Boyd could feel him tense.

The man stopped to lean against the railing not far from them. When they continued to watch him suspiciously, he looked over at them with a twist of his lips. "If I ruined a moment or whatever, it wasn't on purpose. I just
wanted some fresh air. First time I've seen you two on board, though—I thought I'd met everyone already at mealtimes."

He looked at them questioningly. Boyd shifted against the railing, debating briefly whether to answer or not. He ultimately decided that they might stand out in memory more if they were completely uncooperative, but he wasn't going to give the man any important information.

"Neither of us have been feeling well. Thought we'd get some fresh air, too."

"Ah," the man said knowingly with a nod. "Seasickness." He turned to face them, with one arm still leaning against the railing. "Name's Eli. What can I call you two?"

"James," Boyd said, gesturing to himself, and then for Sin, "and Ethan."

"Americans, I see." Eli flashed a smile. "I've been on this sort of transport a few times, and I don't always get a hometown accent along the way, even when we're leaving port from there. Where are you headed?"

Boyd raised his eyebrows at that, and Eli let out a humorless laugh. He waved his hand with a short shake of his head.

"You're right, sorry. Weird question, considering the circumstances."

"It is." Sin's eyes raked over the man, and he shifted his weight away from the rail.

Boyd glanced at Sin, and followed his lead. "We'll let you have some peace."

Eli's eyebrows rose and he glanced between the two of them, but then he shrugged. "Alright then. Maybe I'll see you both around."

"Maybe."
The two of them headed back toward their room. Even so, Boyd could feel Eli's gaze on them until they left the deck.

They saw Eli once more on the deck, but that time the man didn't speak to them. Even so, they took to barricading the door after their nightly excursions to the top. They didn't dare talk about their plans, and they occupied their time by focusing on each other. When their time on the ship finally drew to a close, they'd had sex on every possible surface in the cabin. They'd licked the salty tang of the ocean from each other's bodies, waking each other from sleep with hands and mouth almost every day.

The cycle of sex, sleep, and finding ways to release their anxiety seemed to go on forever, but when they finally docked in Lisbon, the departure was almost abrupt. They packed their belongings, armed themselves, and followed the other few passengers onto the deck. Eli was nowhere to be seen.

They arrived in the dead of the night, with the dark lines of the suspension bridge Ponte 25 de Abril spread in pale lights against the black sky. The passengers wandered off while the crew members began unloading the designated cargo. Tayla looked up through a fall of blue hair and flashed a quick smile at Boyd and Sin.

As they were about to walk down to the dock, Liani walked over. Her clothing was darker than she'd worn earlier in the trip.

She smiled with a curve of her lips and no teeth, and looked between the two of them. "As-salamu alaykum. If you need us in the future, you know how to find us."

"Thank you for your help," Sin said. He paused, and then added, "Chingon and I both are grateful."
"It is our pleasure." She paused, glanced over at Tayla who jauntily waved at her lover, and then turned back to Sin and Boyd. Her back shifted slightly toward the rest of the passengers, and her voice dropped further.

"Tayla tends to trust her first impression very strongly. She liked Boyd from the start, and it became stronger with his referral and the new business from Di Zhi. I won't lie; we were suspicious when chingon contacted us for the first time, but when we learned it was for you two it was an easy answer. Now, we may work with him again in the future." Her lips quirked. "Perhaps we should make small statues of you both to keep aboard and use as money idols."

"I'm pretty sure any statue of me would just scare people away," Sin said blandly.

"Perhaps, but that could be of use as well." She winked and then looked over her shoulder. Boyd glanced back just in time to see Tayla waving a tablet with her eyebrows raised pointedly. Liani's lips thinned and she stepped back. "It seems I'm needed. Insha'Allah we will meet again."

"I'm sure we will," Boyd said. He hitched the bag up further on his shoulder and flashed a small smile at her. "Thanks for everything."

Liani nodded and, with a friendly pat on Sin's arm, walked back over to Tayla. The two women began to speak to each other, with Tayla pointing out something on the tablet.

Boyd turned his attention back to his partner. "Ready?"

"Let's do it."

The wind had a biting chill to it when Sin and Boyd stepped off Asasara and onto the pier. The place was nearly empty so early in the morning. The water of Rio Tejo was nearly black, reflecting the nearby lights like stars.
wash of the waves, the creaking of ships in the harbor, and the thump of cargo being loaded and unloaded were the only sounds aside from the quiet brush of Sin and Boyd's footsteps on the pavement.

They veered away from the main walkway to cut through a side street between two buildings. A short jog across a street, and subsequent hop of a fence brought them across an empty parking lot, and through another side street. As they walked down the poorly lit street, a wrought iron fence came into view. It blocked their way to the bus stop visible just beyond.

Before Boyd could comment, Sin stopped abruptly and his hand clamped down on Boyd's arm.

Boyd looked at Sin, and felt a chill crawl up his spine. Sin's eyes were focused upward, and he was completely still.

"We're surrounded."
Chapter Forty

From their position on the ground, Sin could see five agents in the perimeter. The man standing ahead of them was flanked by a leaner guy with a tattooed face, and a petite Asian woman. When Sin's eyes flicked to the buildings around them, he saw another man with almost unnaturally pale skin on one roof, and yet another agent on the roof of the building across, aiming an assault rifle at Boyd.

He automatically sought out more. Seong should have sent an army after him; she knew what he could take on, but the five agents were alone. It didn't make sense. Unless...

Sin's hand tightened on Boyd. "Spliced Mods."

He could feel Boyd tense.

The man ahead of them had smooth tan skin and eyes that looked as dark as the night, with jet black hair falling partially over the side of his face. He appeared calm, as if he were meeting them for a pre-arranged coffee date.

"Good evening," he greeted them, his British accent echoing loudly in the silence. "I'm Donovan and this is my team. Vega, if you come in without trouble, we won't kill Beaulieu in front of you."

A glint of light caught Sin's eyes, and he looked up to see the pale man watching Boyd predatorily. He was flipping a knife between his fingers. From a distance, it seemed like he was still on the ledge, but Sin could see minute movements as the man shifted, gaze fixed and anticipatory.

Sin looked down at Boyd. They stared at each other for only a breath before he pivoted automatically, a spin of motion that was almost a blur in the darkness of the early morning. He wrenched Boyd in an arc so that Sin was
between him and the agents that surrounded them. They both dropped their bags, and Sin was aware of motion behind him as Boyd took off sprinting down the alley.

"Two klicks East from the spot," Sin shouted, knowing that Boyd would understand. His answer was the pounding of Boyd's boots against the cobblestone and broken bottles. The explosion of a gunshot cracked through the air as Sin ripped his pistol free of the holster and shot the red-haired woman's forehead. Her body toppled over the side of the building, and the other agents burst into action.

The shuffle of footsteps above Sin signaled the movement of the pale-skinned man as he began to pursue Boyd. Sin jumped, catching the sill of a window, and gunshots exploded down the alley. One grazed his arm as he turned his body sideways, running halfway up the wall before grabbing the ledge of the roof with one hand. His fingers had barely curled around the edge when a whistling sound filled the air, and a thin blade slammed into the backside of his hand.

Nearly losing his grip, Sin yanked himself up despite the pain searing up his arm, and flipped onto the roof when another barrage of bullets slammed into the building. In the second it took him to throw himself completely onto the roof, another bullet slammed into the back of his calf.

The man that had been watching Boyd had already vanished, and Sin ignored the blossoms of pain exploding all over his body as he shifted into a fighting stance. The tattooed man leapt over the side of the roof the same way Sin had, his Agency armor glinting in the darkness when his body moved fluidly with the motions of Parkour. He was agile, as agile as Sin, and he barreled forward in a flurry of motion while the sound of his teammates scrabbling up and over windowsills filled the early morning. They skittered up
the wall as easily as spiders. The tattooed man flung himself at Sin, dodging a bullet that took off part of his ear without so much as a flinch.

The man fought with a deadly grace. They matched each other blow for blow, the battle taking them across the crumbling roof. For the next few seconds, the packing sounds of blocked blows and skin hitting skin surrounded them, but Sin's lips twisted in a snarl because it was taking too long. Every moment he wasted on this spliced freak was a moment that Boyd was being pursued by a mutated Mod with a sadistic gleam in his eye.

"Give it up, Vega," Donovan called. He was watching the fight detachedly while the Asian woman trained her gun on Sin. "You can't take us all."

"Watch me," Sin growled.

The knife was still buried in his hand, and he yanked it out, tucking it between his knuckles. A well-aimed kick from the tattooed man sent Sin's P97 skittering onto the rooftop, but he retaliated with an uppercut that sent the blade slamming into the soft underside of the agent's chin. There was a gagging sound, and blood squirted everywhere when Sin yanked his fist back. His opponent stumbled, but before Sin could dive out of the way, another hail of bullets hurtled at him.

The Asian woman wasn't aiming for vitals, so Sin shifted from side to side, ducking and throwing himself backwards as her hand shifted with lightning speed to aim for each limb. She was too quick, her aim too true, and another bullet slammed into his shoulder after he managed to evade one meant for his kneecap. He staggered back again, but his foot met empty air.

There was a sudden sense of weightlessness as Sin fell backwards off the side of the roof.
As Boyd ran, he calculated his position in the city. It was dangerous to take on a Mod of unknown strength alone. He either had to get back to the Asasara for assistance, or get somewhere public where the Agency wouldn't want a fight overseen.

He hadn't seen pursuit yet but he knew it wouldn't be long. Blocks from a main road—

A blur of shadow blocked the way in front of him. Boyd barely had a glance of pale skin and metal before he threw himself to the side. A knife flew past his cheek, slicing through his hair. Boyd's boots skidded against the cobblestone, his fingers clawing into the caked dirt, and he redirected his angle just enough to sprint toward the street he'd just passed.

The man was still standing there calmly, watching him with a smile.

Not far and he'd reach—

Boyd ducked and felt a knife slice across his upper arm. He glanced around quickly but couldn't see his pursuer, so he lunged toward the nearest building door. The other agent was so fast he nearly appeared from thin air, sending Boyd flying back with a hard kick to his ribs.

"Nay, wee bird," the man said with a heavy Scottish accent. "You've got to get back to your cage."

Catching himself before he hit the street, Boyd started running back the way he'd come. Staying a moving target was his only hope until he could find a place to hide and regroup.

He twisted, searching behind him. Years of being Sin's partner helped him find someone who was too fast to properly see. He heard a scuff of noise
behind him, just the barest sound, and immediately shot in that direction. The bullets cracked into the old buildings and the man laughed, nowhere to be seen.

Boyd started to turn, but a knife flew at him from the side. He ducked behind a car, then twisted and shot back along the trajectory of the knife. The man seemed to disappear and reappear again further down the street, blocking Boyd from escaping to a public area.

_Fast._

Boyd started sprinting again, feeling the strain already pulling on his body with burning lungs and thighs. He hadn't had time to train again after Janus. He couldn't do this forever.

He was forced up a hill and felt his stomach clench when he saw a wall blocking his path. He found himself on an abandoned road, blocked off by the tall wall on one side with trees peeking over the edge. The other side of the street was filled with buildings that were in obvious disrepair and plastered with graffiti. Nearby, there was a lone vehicle that had been stripped of its parts.

It was the type of neighborhood where people minded their business and remained uninvolved. He would not find help here.

The sound of footsteps gaining on him caused Boyd to move faster. He worked his coat off, twisted, and whipped it back. He was rewarded with an irritated curse, and a brief slowing of feet slamming against cobblestone. He aimed his Sig as he ran and unloaded several rounds at his attacker.

There was a brief silence and the sounds of pursuit ceased. Boyd looked over his shoulder once again. The man had crossed the distance between them in great, bounding leaps and abruptly appeared at Boyd's side. A crushing grip wrenched the gun out of Boyd's hand and he was thrown back
against a building. The impact was powerful enough for the breath to rush out of him, but it didn't stop him from scrambling out of the way of another attack.

Boyd's heart thundered even as his mind continuously analyzed the situation. He was out of weapons and the unnatural-looking man was sprinting after him once again.

Where did the man want him to go? He was as fast as Sin and Bex, and could have caught up to Boyd at any time. The wolfish expression and taunts implied that the man wanted something other than a clean kill. He wanted to keep playing this game. Maybe he was leading Boyd to the wooded area on the other side of the wall where he could hunt him like an animal.

Not far away were two ramshackle one-story buildings. Broken pieces of scrap metal, roof tiles, and a long, iron pole lay scattered across the second building's roof. Sprinting to the worst of the two, Boyd leapt onto a garbage can and scrambled up to the roof. The tiles shook around him and showered over the side onto the man, who swore even as Boyd threw himself over the side. Before he could flatten the other man to the ground, he was grabbed out of the air and thrown.

Boyd didn't have time to roll to disperse the momentum—all he could do was throw his arms out. He landed hard on his right arm and felt a sickening crack. He had no time to recover before the attack began again. A hard kick in his stomach threw him onto his back and snapped his head back against the ground. The man grabbed him by the right arm and flipped him onto the nearby car. The bone in Boyd's arm audibly snapped. A shock wave of pain rushed through him even as he felt the hood dent beneath him.

A knife arced down toward him. Boyd jerked his left hand over, grabbing the man's wrist and yanking it to the side. The knife bit deeply into the side of his face and down toward his ear. It quickly became evident that
had been a feint when the Mod immediately dropped the knife and grabbed Boyd's wrist so hard he could feel an ache in his bones.

A glint of light off metal was the only warning Boyd had. He looked up to see a knife in the man's other hand, striking down at him. He barely had time to throw his right arm up to block, and he felt the full strength of the Mod's body crashing into it.

His broken arm buckled, and he screamed as the knife plunged into his left eye.


The impact stunned Sin, and for a moment he lay motionless. The crunch of metal and glass filled his ears when the car dented inward under the force of the impact. His left hand dangled over the side of the vehicle limply. Everything seemed to slow down while he stared at the dark sky, looking at a satellite that blinked down at him. There was a damp warmness near the back of his head that indicated some sort of trauma, but he didn't react to it.

He didn't react to anything until a shadow soared through the air next to the destroyed car, and reality came rushing back with the sound of boots slamming against cobblestone.

The female Mod.

Sound rushed back to Sin's ears and the muffled silence vanished. He flipped to the side and off the car, his feet hitting the ground right before the woman fired. He dropped into a crouch when she aimed at him again, the tranq gun only recognizable by the wide, gold rounds that dropped next to her.

She fired twice more, each shot missing him only by millimeters despite his inhuman speed. When she lifted the gun again, he feinted to the side.
before leaping forward with one hand planted on the roof of the car. He jumped over it in one swift movement, landed behind her, and grabbed her neck with both hands. The pop was loud in the darkness, and he dropped her body, grabbed the tranq gun, and bolted in the direction that Boyd had run. He was halfway down the street when the faint sound of a voice tugged at his attention.

Someone was demanding backup.

Sin turned on his heel and sprinted back to the alley. Donovan was standing over his and Boyd's fallen bags, seeming to have temporarily aborted the pursuit. He spotted Sin, but Sin pumped the trigger back on the tranq gun three times before Donovan made it halfway down the alley. The Euro agent dodged each bullet, and Sin discarded the gun.

Donovan sent a knife hurtling at Sin. It sliced across the side of his neck as it whistled by, and he flattened himself against the wall when Donovan threw another. Ducking so that the knife embedded in the wooden panel of the building behind him, Sin jerked out the twin to his P97 and fired four shots in quick succession. The other man dodged them all, moving with the same unnatural speed and grace that Sin possessed, and was on Sin in seconds.

Donovan launched into a full-on offensive attack, and swung blows at Sin with staggering speed. This one was faster than the tattooed Mod, and his movements were more fluid and confident. They matched each other blow for blow, a vicious dance that took them out onto the main road again as Sin tackled the other man to the ground. They rolled over into the street, nearly getting crushed by an oncoming car that disappeared into the darkness without pausing, and stopped with Donovan pinning Sin to the ground.

Blood dripped down the side of the man's face from one of Sin's attacks, as the webbing between Donovan's thumb and index finger crushed
down on Sin's windpipe. Gritting his teeth as his breath was taken away, Sin wrenched his arm out from under him and returned the favor, crushing Donovan’s throat with an iron-like grip.

The Mod's eyes opened wide, a look of surprise crossing his face when Sin’s hand completely cut off his oxygen. They stared at each other, both breathless and beaten, bloody and bruised, until Donovan’s grip loosened and Sin twisted out of the hold.

He kicked Donovan back and leapt to his feet. The other agent rolled onto his stomach, and moved to rise to his knees. Before he could complete the motion and once again rely on the speed that had been enhanced in him and his team, Sin slammed his boot against the back of the man's skull. Donovan's face crushed against the curb, his mouth open and skull caved in, causing blood to pool down onto the filthy cobblestone.

===

"Come on, now—I like watching this part but yer an agent, so stop fighting and I'll make it quick. It'll go right into your brain."

Boyd hardly heard the comment as his head exploded in pain greater than he'd ever felt. The man’s weight bore down on him, pinning him. His feet kicked out, scuffing the ground, unable to gain purchase to flee or hit the man. Jerking on his left arm only felt like his hand would get pulled off, and his right arm was the only thing stopping the knife from embedding deep in his skull. He could feel the broken edges of his arm bones grinding against each other with the pressure.

The man leaned on him, heavier and heavier, and Boyd could feel the knife jagging deeper into his eye. He grit his teeth, holding in another ragged scream.
"Dinnae ye want to die with dignity, wee bird?" came the Scottish drawl. "If no, I'll make it fun for me. I've been gantin' for a vivisection."

It took a few harsh, truncated breaths to be able to speak. "Then do it, you sick fuck," Boyd growled.

The man's eyebrows rose. "Yer off yer head but I'm no gonna say nay."

Boyd acted the second the man's fingers lightened on his wrist. Wrenching his left hand away, Boyd slammed up on the man's knife hand. The knife sliced through his eye, nicking the bone and jerking up against his brow, but it caused the man to lose his grip.

Boyd yanked the knife out of his eye and whipped it around, slashing with all his strength across the man's throat. The blade ripped through his neck, deep enough to almost touch bone. A look of pure surprise overcame the man's pale features. He stumbled back with a horrible gurgling, gasping noise, his hands against his throat to try to hold the skin and muscles together.

For a moment the man started forward again, but blood was spurting liberally from between his fingers, splattering Boyd and coating the ground. The man's knees buckled and he fell over.

Boyd wavered on his feet as his body overloaded on pain. He felt a dual moment of déjà vu; the feeling of a knife handle in his hand, slippery with blood, and the image of a body lying on the street in a growing pool of blood. The feeling of that same blood splattered across his face.

A wave of disgust overcame him. The knife clattered to the street.

His left hand pressed against his eye, which he just noticed was pouring liquid down his face. Blood? Something else? He didn't know. When he started to look to the side, he nearly collapsed. His left eye screamed at
him—every minute shift too much. His head pounded violently to the beat of his blood, sending spikes of pain with every compression of his heart.

Turn your head, some distant part of him noted. Your eyes move in pairs.

Breathing erratically, he tried to peer through the blood for his gun. His left hand felt like it was the only thing holding all the blood in his head in place and even then he could feel a hot slick waterfall rolling down his face.

He shivered, suddenly feeling the cold bite of the air much more clearly.

When he found his gun, he had to drop to his knees to grab it. When he reached for the wall to hoist himself up, his bloody hand slipped and he fell forward. It felt like his arm and eye were about to rip out of their sockets.

The world flickered around him.

For a moment, the darkness shuddering on the edge of his vision seemed so welcoming. His eye and arm hurt so much he couldn’t breathe. The cold was leeching the strength out of him. Maybe he should lie down, just for a few seconds. To give his head a chance to stop pounding.

A slow, seductive slide into silence and then a gasp of breath.

The stones suddenly came back into focus. Dark grey diamonds crowded against each other; covered in dirt and blood.

_ I have to get to …_ 

He had to drag in several harsh, gasping breaths before he could get his legs under him again. He didn’t realize he was stumbling down the road until he hit the edge of a building with his right arm and white noise burst in his head. He staggered, falling against a light pole.
Was he any farther than before? Through the blood he could see the Mod's body. Hardly ten feet away.

_Hsin. Hsin_—

He tried to take a step forward and his knees buckled beneath him. Cobblestone came flying at him. His hands shot out automatically to stop his fall—right arm too, and he let out an agonized shout at the crack of bone against skin.

This time, the darkness didn't slow. Pitch blackness enveloped him and ice raced up his limbs. Labored breathing sounded like it was coming from somewhere else.

More distantly still, he heard voices. Soon, even that felt too far away.

===

The first thing Boyd noticed upon waking was that he had a massive headache.

He tried to squint and saw a white ceiling with heavy wooden beams. That was the moment everything else came sharply into focus.

He couldn't move his right arm. Something wasn't right with his face.

A jolt of fear shot straight to his stomach when he realized he could only see half of the ceiling. Everything was black to the left of his nose.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Boyd lifted his left hand. It felt strange to feel the sudden touch of fingertips on his face without being able to see the hand. He could feel gauze over his left cheek, and a ball of bandaging pushing down over his left eye.
Memories came flooding back. The Mod, the fight, the pain. Blood and stumbling and darkness.

He noticed someone out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to see Sin moving to sit on the edge of the bed. His face was a patchwork of bruises and cuts, and his head had been shaved short although it wasn't immediately obvious why. One of Sin's hands was bandaged but Boyd couldn't see what other injuries might exist beneath his clothing.

Even with the visible injuries, Boyd still felt a wave of relief at the sight of Sin. They'd made it out, both of them. Somehow.

"Are you okay?" Boyd's voice cracked from disuse.

One of Sin's hands closed over Boyd's, the one that was not encased in a cast.

"I'm fine," he said, voice hoarse.

Boyd turned his hand so he could curl his fingers over Sin's. "You don't look fine. What happened?"

"I have a mild head injury that required stitches, and I was shot a couple of times. It's nothing for me."

"Are you sure?" Boyd's hand tightened on Sin's. "You have a habit of downplaying your injuries."

Sin inclined his head, lips sliding into a half-smile that quickly faded. "I'm fine. You know me."

Boyd snorted. "I do know you. That's why I worry."

"I'm fine. I promise." Sin's eyes dropped, and he stared at their fingers. "I tried to get back to you, but it was too late."
The sinking feeling grew stronger in the pit of Boyd's stomach. He had to swallow before he could ask the question that had been lurking in the back of his mind. The words he'd been too afraid to say.

"Is—did my eye..." He had to stop and start over. "Am I... blind?"

There was a brief silence, and Sin finally looked up again. "Your left eye... It was too damaged. It had to be removed."

Even anticipating bad news, the words hit Boyd harder than he'd expected. His hand spasmed on Sin's and he let out a low, harsh breath. He felt hollow inside, and had to look away, turning his head back up to stare at the ceiling.

Removed.

Not just patched up and temporarily nonfunctional. Not something that could be fixed in the future, maybe when they had access to better medical help, or—or something.

It was just—gone. And now he would never see the world with two eyes ever again.

The enormity of it was terrifying. Seeing that huge black gap where there was supposed to be sight. Where he was supposed to—where he should have—

He felt his good eye starting to prickle with moisture—fuck, it wasn't even his good eye anymore, it was his only eye. What if something happened to it? What if he went blind entirely?

What would he do?
He'd been on so many missions, he'd been through so many fights, but scars and wounds had never seemed as chilling. In one moment, during one fight, his entire life had changed.

He closed his eye, trying to ignore the finality in his mind, that horrible voice that kept pointing out that he had to think in terms of singularity from now on. His jaw clenched and he just nodded, not knowing what else to do. Not even knowing what to say.

"I'm sorry, Boyd."

Boyd tilted his head to look at Sin. "There's no reason for you to feel sorry."

Sin swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "If I'd been faster—"

"Hsin," Boyd cut him off, squeezing his hand. "Stop. Don't you dare blame yourself for any of this. It's not your fault. That Mod did this. The Agency did." He paused, his lips wavering briefly before he drew in a deep breath. "But I can still see, right? And we're both alive. I'm not going to lie, this is scaring the shit out of me right now, but as long as you're with me I know we'll be okay."

"I just love you so much, and I—" Sin broke off. His fingers tightened around Boyd's, and he released a quiet breath. "Just tell me what you need."

Boyd tried to think of how to answer that, but all he really wanted was Sin's presence. He drew in another breath, slightly shaky this time. "Will you still love me no matter how I look when the bandage is off? Or if I can't help you in fights anymore? Even if—I go completely blind?"

"I will love you no matter what, Boyd. Don't be stupid." Sin leaned forward and brushed his lips against Boyd's, lingering slightly. "We're not
splitting up if we're surrounded like that again," he said against Boyd's mouth. "I swear, I'll die before someone hurts you like this again."

Boyd smiled slightly, feeling a compression in his chest lift at Sin's assurance. "Don't do that. I could live even with turning into Frankenstein's monster as long as you were there in the end."

Sin closed his eyes and tilted his forehead slightly against Boyd's. "There's painkillers," he said quietly. "For when you need them."

"Can I have them now?"

Sin helped Boyd sit up, which turned out to be useful when Boyd felt his head pounding worse than ever and might have laid back down immediately on his own. Sin handed Boyd some pills, and a glass of water from a nearby table. Feeling parched, Boyd swallowed the painkillers and drank the whole glass at once. While doing so, he looked around the room as best he could.

The walls were comprised of huge stones in the old world European style. A small window was covered with white gauzy sheers that showed him a hint of rustling tree branches outside. There was a tiny kitchen across the room, little more than a petite sink, miniature fridge, and stovetop built into the counter. A small bathroom just big enough for a toilet, sink and standing shower was situated next to it.

The room wasn't large but it was comfortable, and to his right he could now see a door that he assumed led to the outside.

It provided no clues as to where he was. It certainly didn't look like the hostels they'd researched as potential safe houses along their journey.

Boyd handed Sin the empty glass. "Where are we, anyway?"
"France." Sin's mouth turned downward, and he glanced at the door. "Your uncle's people found us. That man on the ship? He was in JG."

"Wait—what? Why didn't he tell us? And what do you mean they found us? They were looking for us?"

Sin sat down again, and pushed Boyd back down to the bed gently. "That man on the ship, his real name is Ian. He happened be on the same ship as us. Apparently JG has used the Snakes for travel as well. He recognized us but didn't want to approach until he cleared it with his people, which he did after meeting up with them after the ship docked. According to Ian, they went looking for us immediately because they were afraid we would disappear."

There was a pause, and Sin reached out to brush his fingers against the bandaged side of Boyd's face. His lips thinned before he spoke again. "I killed the four Mods, recovered your bag with the data, and went to find you. You were with JG, with Ian and a British woman, and I nearly fucking killed them before I realized that they were trying to help. All I could see was you, and all of the blood, and I lost it.

"I went into a complete rage, and I didn't snap out of it until Ian screamed that he knew your uncle. Livana said they could give you care. So I trusted them with you, and I went. And I kept thinking, what if I lose you? What if you die? After everything. And I thought..." Sin trailed off. He wet his lips as his brows knit together. "I thought this must have been what you felt like in Mexico. Watching me dying. Watching me bleeding."

Boyd pressed his hand against Sin's cheek and temple. He didn't look away from Sin's eyes. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I never wanted you to have to feel that way."
Shaking his head, Sin grasped Boyd's hand in his own and kissed it. "Shut up. Don't apologize." Their fingers twined together again. "We treated you as best we could in the car, to stop the bleeding, and we drove into Spain. Other JG people were based there, including the founder, a man named Bell. They did the surgery on you there, and treated my wounds before I agreed to come here. To France."

Boyd ran his thumb lightly along Sin's warm skin. "It sounds like they saved our lives."

"Yeah. But I don't trust them yet. I came here because I had no choice. There was nowhere else to go. No one else to help you. Or to help me remove the chip that the Agency had planted inside of me."

"What?" Boyd started to sit up but aborted the attempt with a wince. A chip would explain how the Agency had found them so quickly, but—"How did that happen? We checked before we left."

"I don't fucking know. I told Ian that we both scanned ourselves, and that the Agency didn't follow you to New York so if it was anyone being tracked, it had to be me. There was no other explanation unless someone sold us out on the ship, and Ian said there is technology that would make a tracker undetectable by conventional means. JG has access to their own tech shit, and sure enough, they scanned us again, and I had a device in me."

Boyd was quiet a moment, and he shook his head in disgust. "We never would have gotten away. How long have I been out? We haven't had any issues since you removed it?"

"It's been two days with no sign of the Agency. Unless they're regrouping and figuring out what to do, they must not have a lead on us." Sin ran a hand through his hair, movements sharp. "I wish I could believe that's what it was, but they won't give up that easy. We took out five Modified agents
from the Euro division. They weren't completely enhanced like I am, but they were still valuable, rare resources. Even if Seong miraculously gave up on us, the Marshal of Euro division won't."

"It won't be long until they find us. If we didn't stand out enough already, now..." Boyd gestured to his eye and grimaced. "And if a Mod—hell, if a normal agent came after me right now I'd be dead." He paused. "Hsin, I want to help the Guild. There's a solution for this, and together I think we can do it."

Instead of replying, Sin's attention switched to the door. Boyd turned his head just in time to see an elderly woman walk in. She was very carefully carrying a silver tea tray with refreshments. When she looked up and saw them staring at her, she jumped in place. The porcelain cups and plates rattled, nearly falling off.

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. She set the tray down on the nearest surface, and straightened with a hand pressed to her chest. "I did not think you are awake."

Boyd looked at Sin questioningly, before turning back to the woman. She smiled kindly at them, sky blue eyes standing out against her pale, wrinkled skin and silver hair. Her gaze caught only briefly on Boyd's face before sliding away.

"This is not a good time, I think," she said, almost to herself. "I will leave tea and go. Please, be comfortable. You are my guests."

Boyd tried to figure out what was niggling at the back of his mind as he looked at her. "Who are you?"

"I am..." She paused. It almost seemed like she wasn't going to continue but then she lifted her head up high and spoke: "My name, it is
Éliane Devereux. Your mother, Vivienne, she is my granddaughter. So I am, to you, a great-grandmother."

Boyd stared at her, overcome by surprise. "I don't..."

He almost said he didn't have living family aside from his mother, but then, he'd already been proven wrong once with Riley. What the hell was with random family members showing up out of nowhere lately?

"I don't understand," he finished instead.

She smiled at him sadly. "I know. I am sorry for it. But we have met before, yes? In Paris. I did not know it was you at first but your features, I know them. Vivienne, yes, and I have seen a photograph of Cedrick, but you remind me of Jacques as well."

"Who—Jacques?"

"Ah, yes." She shook her head. "I should leave this for another time. You need rest now?"

"No." Boyd pushed himself up with his left hand, feeling his head pound at the new elevation but not as badly as before. He started to swing his legs over the side. "I need to know what's happening."

"Calm down," Sin said. He stood and put a hand on Boyd's shoulder, steadying him. "She will explain. Bell and Riley will too. They're back now. I heard them pull up."

Boyd relented. With Sin's help, he rearranged himself to let his back rest against the headboard. With a promise to be right back, Éliane left the room. Not long afterward, the door opened again, this time with Éliane, Riley, and a black man Boyd had never seen before.
Riley looked over at Boyd but quickly averted his eyes when they caught on the bandage over Boyd's eye. Riley wouldn't look at him directly afterward. Boyd felt his stomach clench, even more when he realized that Éliane was also avoiding his gaze.

Fuck. Did he have that to look forward to for the rest of his life? People who looked at him like his existence was something uncomfortable that they couldn't face head-on? Would he always see that first flash of pity before the eyes slid away?

His fingers dug into his palm and he had to turn away from them. He tried to pretend it was on purpose, like he'd just wanted to look out the window, but it only made it worse.

I have to turn my whole fucking head just to see this side of the room, he thought bitterly, furious with himself and the Agency and the permanency of this truth.

Warm fingers at his palm made him jump slightly. He looked down to see Sin's hand gentle on his own, discreetly uncurling his clenched hand. A comforting brush of skin against skin. Boyd tilted his head up to see those green eyes blazing into his face and not sliding away.

He let out a quiet breath as the tightening in his chest receded.

Sin sat back in his chair, letting his hand slide away from Boyd's, but it remained on the bed where Boyd could feel the faintest depression in the blankets. The dragging of the chairs and settling of people slowed and stilled.

The black man sat closer to the bed, his gaze focused on Boyd. He had short hair that was greying on the sides, and light brown eyes. His dark skin and stocky build stood out in his crisp white button down shirt and dark washed jeans. He looked to be in his fifties, and had a friendly face with the sort of wrinkles seen from a lifetime of smiling.
He clasped his hands in front of him and rested his elbows on his knees. When he spoke, his voice was a soothing rumble, with a slight accent that was hard to define. It sounded faintly Southern American to Boyd's ears.

"Hello, Boyd. My name is Bellamy Sall but most people call me Bell. I operated on you and Sin both. I understand that you're wondering what's happening right now but I want to get the important part out of the way first. How are you feeling? Anything you'd like me to look at to help with your comfort?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. No headache? It's normal to wake up with one."

"I already took some painkillers."

"Good." Bell's gaze hadn't shifted from studying Boyd. It was the clinical once-over of a professional, but Boyd noted that he, too, didn't seem uncomfortable looking him in the face.

"Take those every four hours for now. By tomorrow, the headache should recede. There are some timelines we'll have to talk about—when your compression bandage will come off, how soon we can look into an artificial eye, and some precautions for the next two weeks. That can happen now or later depending on your preference."

Boyd hesitated. With the bandage on, it was too easy to feel like maybe his eye was just damaged for now and needed a rest, even though he knew that wasn't true. Hearing 'artificial eye' said so casually felt daunting and frightening.

He wanted to know what he was supposed to expect—how much would change in his life. Would he ever get used to it? Would he ever be able to drive, or fight, or shoot as well again?
But even with all the questions buzzing through his mind, he didn't want to discuss any of it with Riley or Éliane in the room. And right now, he wanted answers of a different kind. So he ignored the loss of his eye as much as he could, and focused on the other topics at hand.

"That can wait."

"Okay." Bell turned his attention to Sin. "And you? Any complications or concerns since yesterday?"

"No. But now that Boyd is awake, we want the whole story. You didn't just help us because suddenly Boyd's relatives are feeling nostalgic."

"And what are you all doing together, anyway?" Boyd asked suspiciously, looking at Riley and then Éliane. "You two aren't even related."

Riley crossed his legs, his ankle resting on his opposite knee. "Long story, shortstop, but if you want the condensed version, I needed a safe house in France, and tracked her down. She's been helping ever since."

Sin appeared uninterested in this detail, and kept his attention on Bell. "You want something from Boyd, so what is it?"

Bell watched him for a long moment in return and then sighed. All the weight seemed to fall back into his face and he nodded. "It's a fair point, and I can't say we hadn't tried to contact you initially for a reason." He looked questioningly at Boyd. "How much do you know about your father?"

Boyd hesitated, trying to figure out how fully to answer that. "I know he was involved in the Guild. Central to it. I know he was a journalist and he seemed to be obsessed with the truth."

"That's the truth, if I ever heard it. Your father, he was a great man." Bell shook his head, repeating to himself: "A great man. He believed in people—saw something in everyone, something worth saving. He believed
that if the people of the world were treated with respect, given as much of the unbiased truth as possible, they'd choose right in the end. Whatever end that might be. He really thought good always wins in the end if people try hard enough."

Boyd didn't say anything. It sounded pretty in line with what he'd already gleaned from the journals he'd read.

Bell paused, his dark eyes studying each of them in turn. His hands flexed in front of him, fingers tangling together and releasing. The white fabric of his shirt strained at the movement of his muscles.

"I want to tell you a story," Bell said solemnly, "so bear with me."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old, worn photograph that he held out, first showing Sin and then Boyd. Cedrick's face beamed out from the picture, not looking much older than Boyd himself. This close in age, Boyd could see more of the similarities between them. Cedrick had an arm thrown over the man next to him who was unmistakably a younger Bell, also smiling widely. They appeared to be sitting in a pub that Boyd thought may be Killian's. When neither Boyd nor Sin reached out to take the photo, Bell turned it around and stared down at it. His shoulders bowed slightly.

"The idea for the Guild first came up at a party. Your father and I met there and, well, I suppose that's a story all its own. But we were both frustrated by the media at the time. We set out to tell the truth when everyone else seemed set on choosing sides. We had grand ideas about what we could do, about how far we could reach." A smile crossed his lips but faded quickly. "Back then, we knew we should be careful, but we had no idea how dangerous it would turn out to be."

He sighed heavily and sat up straight in the chair. "Cedrick had a knack for finding the little details that unraveled everything. And he was stubborn."
When he got something into his head, he would see it through to completion come hell or high water."

Bell's expression darkened. "But that tenacity had a cost, and sometimes he wouldn't give others enough information when he was looking into something. He didn't like to cry wolf until he was positive he was right. I think that's what happened when he died."

Boyd turned his head to see Riley, but the man was looking down at a small tablet in his hands. He didn't bother looking up even when Boyd asked:

"And Vanguard? Did he actually talk to Riley about it or was that a lie?"

Lips thinning, Bell followed Boyd's gaze. "He didn't talk to Riley, but we did hear the name from a reliable source. Not long after Ced died, just being in the wrong place at the wrong time when the bombs hit, we thought—I received a message on a secure line. One meant only for emergencies, that only Guild members had. Someone calling out 'Vanguard Industries,' Ced's name, and gunfire cutting it off."

Boyd wondered if this was connected to some of the information he'd dug up on his father. "Who left the message?"

"Julian Jones, a private investigator," Bell replied. "In the year before he died, your dad had said he was onto something big, but he wouldn't tell me anything more. We'd had a bet—God," he winced, "we were so young and stupid. We'd said whichever of us uncovered the most interesting story by the end of the year would get his bar tab paid by the other on New Year's Eve."

Bell shook his head with a sigh before he continued. "At any rate, I knew he had someone else helping him, but I didn't know who. Not until I got that call and it led me to JJ Investigations. Except, thing was, the office was wiped. We might have missed it if we hadn't heard the message, but we still saw some signs of a fight. What looked to be bullet holes in the wall."
Boyd and Sin exchanged a look.

"We checked later." Bell's eyebrows drew together. "It made no damn sense. No 911 calls or witnesses, yet somehow within a couple of hours of me receiving that message, JJ Investigations was gone. We found a story later. It said he and the women working insurance across the hall were killed when the ex-husband of a former client of Julian's snapped. But that didn't explain how the reporters knew information even we couldn't find, why there hadn't been police involvement at a homicide scene, why we couldn't find anything of Julian's, or why he'd called me in a panic. That's when we knew something was very wrong. Eventually, we started to wonder if Cedrick's death hadn't been an accident after all."

Boyd's gaze hovered on Bell. The information filled in some of the blanks in the information he'd gathered over time.

"So, what made you decide to contact me?"

There was a brief pause after that, and Bell slid the photograph back into his pocket. He drew in a short breath and let it out slowly. His eyes turned up to settle on Boyd somberly.

"I knew Cedrick. I knew he would never leave it all to chance. Whatever he'd uncovered, the information that had gotten him killed, there was no doubt in my mind that he'd left it somewhere safe. We dug into Vanguard Industries and found a few public articles about them, but once we realized how covert they were, we backed off completely. Anything buried that deep is too dangerous with nothing to go on. We had no idea what we were dealing with.

"For years we laid low, never mentioning Vanguard Industries. We didn't know what we were dealing with, just that whoever was involved had the power to make people disappear and cover it up. But I could never forget, and after a while, we discovered Riley," Bell gestured at the man, who wiggled
his fingers in a wave at no one in particular without looking up from his tablet. Boyd saw that all along he had been playing some sort of game on silent mode.

"We thought Ced's brother might know more than us, so he ran leads for years. You might not know it given the way he usually acts," Bell's expression tightened and Riley rolled his eyes, "but he's damn good at what he does. He just works better with a certain crowd."

"He means assholes usually like me because I'm an asshole myself," Riley put in helpfully. He smirked and looked up, his thumb remaining on the screen.

Sin stared at him with undisguised dislike, and Bell pushed on.

"After a point, we'd run down every lead we had except you, Boyd. By then, we'd learned you worked for Murphy Corps, and we had discovered several similarities between the two organizations over time. We knew you were our best bet at this point, so we watched and waited."

At that, Boyd cut in, "Why didn't you just tell me? Why send Riley in with his bullshit story?"

"Hey, now, it wasn't all bullshit," Riley protested. "I really do have money problems."

Éliane scoffed quietly. "He has a habit of bending the truth when he feels."

Riley shrugged, appearing unconcerned. He returned his attention to the game.

"You have to understand," Bell said, his face drawing tight. "We didn't know if we could trust you. Riley was the best choice because he had the
family connection to fall back on, but the rest of us were complete strangers to you."

Not entirely convinced, Boyd looked between the two men with a frown. "But if Vanguard Industries possibly got my dad killed, wasn't it a bit rash to throw the name at me?"

"Might have been," Bell admitted. "But before you, we'd had no insider with any of the private military groups."

"Did you ask my mother?" Boyd asked, and Riley let out a harsh laugh. He turned off the game and dropped the tablet in his lap.

"Your ma is the biggest bitch I've ever known, kid. She doesn't do shit to help others unless it works in her favor first," Riley said with a scoff. When Éliane shot him a sharp look, he raised an eyebrow. "What? You haven't seen her for years. She's a bloody ice queen. You must've seen it when you were around her before."

"She was a child when I last saw her. I was certain she would—" Éliane stopped, clenched her fingers in her lap, and looked away with a sharp shake of her head. "This is not the time. Please, Bellamy. Continue."

"Cedrick never would have left information with her," Bell said without hesitation. He seemed sure of his answer, and looked at Boyd fully. "She was too obvious of a choice for outsiders looking for the information. And she was completely unaware of the Guild."

"So then what made you believe he'd leave something for me?"

"We didn't know if he would. We don't know if he did," Bell corrected himself. He rubbed his face wearily. "I won't lie to you, Boyd, we're close to giving up. Our leads ran cold two decades ago and I haven't dared step foot in Lexington for nearly that long. It wasn't until we found out you were employed
by Murphy Corps that we seriously considered you as an option. And then we started thinking like Cedrick."

Bell dropped his hands into his lap. "I remembered how damn obnoxious that man was, showing off your drawings to anyone who walked by. Saying things like, 'my five year old draws better than you do' and it actually being true. Pictures of you everywhere. And even the Guild's release date, the third Saturday of every month..."

"The same day of the month I was born," Boyd noted, and Bell inclined his head.

"You were so young when he died. Completely uninvolved. But that's the beauty of it. With so many other possibilities—Riley, me, his wife, any Guild member—why would anyone ever think of the kid? We knew that any information he might have left with Julian was gone forever. But then it occurred to us that maybe he'd have left it for his son to figure out. Maybe he thought we'd involve you in the Guild sooner, or maybe he thought it would be natural for you. Ced always thought you would follow in his footsteps someday."

There was a beat of silence after Bell's proclamation; one in which Riley, Bell, and even Éliane looked at Boyd with various levels of expectation.

Sin's eyes had shifted to Boyd while the story was told, but he didn't speak and his expression barely changed. "Are you doing this?"

Boyd met Sin's eyes. "I think it's the only way."

A moment passed quietly with the three members of JG looking on, but Sin turned away from them and stepped in front of Boyd. He reached out to ghost his fingers over Boyd's bandage, and as Boyd stared up into the green eyes, he didn't see any of the indecision that had appeared in his lover's face when the idea had come up before. No more fear that Boyd wanted to work
with JG because of the brainwashing. If any of it was still beneath the surface, Sin must have shoved it aside.

All Boyd saw in his gaze was the burning intensity that appeared when he wanted to destroy someone.

Boyd reached up, gently pulling Sin's hand down so he could brush his lips against Sin's knuckles and then bring their hands back down to the bed. Sin's gaze was caught on Boyd for a few seconds longer before he turned to JG.

"Vanguard Industries was a front for a covert, government organization that recruits anyone—including criminals—who fits their profile for the perfect killer," Sin said. "We work for that organization. Boyd was recruited by his mother, but neither of them had any knowledge of the connection to Cedrick's death."

Bell's eyebrows shot up. "You work—" He held up a hand as if to forestall more information and closed his eyes with a pained look. "All this time..." he muttered to himself. His hand dropping into his lap was accompanied with a sigh. "Then, what is the purpose of this organization?"

"To eliminate domestic terrorism and any threat to the US government, on paper, but in practice it also manipulates the media, creates mass cover ups, and is a catch-all for all the acts the government wants done but can't order because of accepted conventions." Boyd looked at them all in turn. "You want to know why my dad died? Fine. We can tell you. I know how he came upon the information, and how he was killed. You're right that he left me something—and what he didn't leave me, I found out on my own."

Relief clearly washed over Bell's face. His fingers shook when he brought one hand up to his face. "Thank God," he muttered.
"But if we tell you the details," Boyd continued seriously, "you're putting your whole organization at risk for attack. I want to be clear on that. And the information doesn't come for free. I want something in return."

Bell peered between his fingers. His hand dropped into his lap and his jaw flexed as he studied Boyd and Sin in turn. "What is it?"

"I want to expose the organization. It needs to be destroyed."

Sin's fingers tightened around Boyd's briefly. "We have information, but we don't have the means to disseminate it. If you want to know what Boyd knows, you will do it."

Bell's face relaxed and warmed with a grin. Years seemed to melt from him, and there was excitement in his voice when he spoke. "That's exactly what I've been wanting to do all along—to find the people responsible for Cedrick's death, and to expose the truth that he so desperately wanted to find. If you can get us that information, by God we will get it disseminated the world around, I promise you that on my heart."

"We've been working on some new models, actually," Riley put in. He leaned forward, one leg tipped against the other. He settled his gaze on Sin. "You know that girl I was with when you came with the blond model type? That's Genna, though she goes by a lot of aliases. She's obsessed with government conspiracies and already has something set up for a scenario like this. You get us the info and we don't even have to muck about. It can just," he snapped his fingers, "go. Like that. Worldwide, local, targeted, multiple languages, digital, paper, no matter. We can do it."

"Good," Boyd said, unable to deny the relief he felt himself. That was going to be their biggest hurdle. "But we'll have to be especially careful in the coming days. Are you positive this place is safe? Because the people who
attacked us are the ones we worked for, and they will kill me and all of you if they find us."

The creases around Bell's eyes tightened. He looked back at Éliane.

Éliane shook her head. "It is not a worry. My house, it is safe. If they still come..." She smiled impishly and gestured at herself. "I am old but not helpless. My house and I, we have surprises for guests we do not invite."

"This has become our headquarters for the area. There's a bunker on the property that's from the first World War. We've enhanced it and use it as our base of operations." Riley crossed his arms. "So what's the big reveal, anyway? What got my brother killed?"

"The organization we worked for is known as the Agency," Boyd said. "There are two divisions and both are controlled by the same board of directors who operate it in complete secrecy, even from us. But my dad found the identity of one of them."

Sin's gaze went from Riley to Bell and back again. "Keeping the integrity of the Agency's cover is of the utmost importance. If you talk, they will kill you. If an unsuspecting civilian even stumbles upon a mission, they will erase that person. Cedrick found out something that even people within the organization do not know. If we're going to take them down, we have to make sure that everyone knows what we know. And what he found out."

Bell's smile turned sharp. "Then we'll make sure that's exactly what we do."
Chapter Forty-One

The Gran Torino glided into the parking spot, but Emilio didn't open the door even after the purr of the engine stopped. Instead, he looked out the windshield and didn't take his hands off the wheel.

The compound sprawled ahead of him, clusters of trees dotting the courtyard and crowding the tall, black gate that shielded the property. From his position, he could only see the Tower shooting up through the canopy of leaves and into the steel-colored sky. That was his destination. According to the call from Carhart, that was all of their destinations.

In the nine days since Sin and Boyd had vanished, things had remained quiet until Emilio received the phone call about the briefing. They had orders to come in at noon, to the large conference room on the second floor of the Tower. The briefing would be led by Katsaros, who had been AWOL since he had made the mistake of letting Shapiro in on his plan, thus allowing Boyd to escape.

The door opened with a creak, and Emilio stepped out into a morning that was bitterly cold. He shrugged on his leather jacket and lit a cigarette. Trails of smoke followed him as he walked slowly to the Tower. He texted Doug, a curt message that just said, 'something might be up. be ready.' to which Doug replied: 'always, papito.'

The compound appeared to be business as usual. People walked from one building to the next, with a number headed to the residential halls, and there was a steady flow of agents moving toward the Tower. But even as agents and civilian staff alike walked with a sense of purpose, there was barely a face that did not look tense. He wondered how many of them were waiting for the moment when the execution squad would come for them. How
many of them had made a mistake that would end in incineration, or how many of them were red flagged for nothing more than a minor error.

Emilio melted into the crowd, matching their march to the hub of the Agency and deviated only to take the stairs up to the second floor. The conference rooms were bigger there, used mostly for multi-team storms, and when Emilio went in, he saw why Katsaros had chosen it.

They were all there.

Carhart, Ryan, Owen, Jeffrey, Kassian, Harriet. Seong and Katsaros at the head of the table. Vivienne next to them.

"Looks like a party," Emilio drawled, stopping just inside the room. The corner of his mouth turned up slightly, but the attempt at a sarcastic smile faded when Katsaros looked at him without comment.

The Greek general was paler than he had been during their last meeting, and was sporting vicious criss-crossed lacerations across his hands. Apparently, even people from the European administration were not safe from the Fourth.

Emilio sat in the chair between Seong and Carhart, leaning back just enough to cause it to recline slightly. No one responded to his comment, and only Ryan made direct eye contact. The kid wore his fear like a shroud, and he was more peaked than usual.

"So, is anyone gonna talk, or is this some kind of new age meditation bonding shit?"

Seong turned an impassive stare onto Emilio and then shifted it to each of the other people gathered in turn.

"As you've no doubt heard, Agents Beaulieu and Vega attempted to flee the Agency. Beaulieu narrowly missed capture on compound," she aimed
a brief look of disgust at Katsaros before continuing, "and Vega did not return from his latest mission. Two days ago, I assigned a unit of Level 10 agents from the European division to intercept them in Portugal."

There was a beat of silence, and Emilio's fingers pressed harder against the armrests of his chair. "Just one?" he asked after a moment. "If we're gonna bring my boy back, it's gonna take a fuckload more than one team."

"They were specially trained," Seong said. She paused shortly before continuing with clear displeasure in her voice and face, "It wasn't enough. One agent attempted to call for backup but was unable to complete his request. This is what the transport agents found on arrival."

A hologram in the center of the table flickered to life. A series of gruesome images of the dead agents rotated.

"Looks about right," Emilio drawled. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kassian turning to look at him, but he didn't meet the other agent's gaze, even when it lingered.

"I don't..." Ryan trailed off briefly and shifted in his seat. "I don't understand what this has to do with us? What are we supposed to do?"

Seong's emotionless stare settled on Ryan. "You're to help track them down," her gaze swept along the agents, including Carhart, "and you're to recover them."

Vivienne's mouth thinned into an imperceptible frown.

"But—but how..." Ryan started to say.

"This has nothing to do with our unit," Carhart interrupted sharply.
"Is it not?" Condescension stained Seong's voice, and she turned her eyes onto the General. "The team we sent was unsuccessful, no doubt because Vega and Beaulieu did not hesitate to do this." Seong pointed to the holograms. "But would they do the same to one of you? That is the question, and I suspect I know the answer."

Emilio opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Carhart spoke again.

"You're sending us after them," the General said flatly. "All of us."

"Yes. The field agents only, of course." She pinned Owen, Ryan and Jeffrey with her stare. "The rest of you will be aiding from the compound. And Vivienne," Seong's mouth lifted on the edges briefly, "you'll help with your contacts, of course."

Vivienne stared straight ahead at the wall.

"But, um, Marshal?" Owen put in, raising a hand slightly. He dropped it with slightly widened eyes the second her attention turned to him. "How will we even know where they are?"

"They're being tracked."

"Agent Vega managed to remove his," Katsaros said, his voice stony and without inflection. He brushed his hands against the top of the table, dropping them into his lap. "But we still have a location on the Beaulieu boy."

There was an audible inhalation of breath. A low, strained sound that was loud in the sudden silence of the room. It had to be Ryan. Emilio had known that dumb fucking kid would give himself away. While Vivienne's features remained expressionless, cold like stone, Ryan wasn't able to hide the fact that he cared. But, when the senior Vega looked at Carhart, he saw
the same stricken expression on his lover's face as Ryan's. Pale eyes blazing hatred, and hands that gripped his chair.

Fuck.

Ignoring the twisting of his own gut, Emilio rapped his knuckles against the table in a steady beat. "I can't believe they'd be retarded enough to remove the chip from one and not the other."

"The technology we used to track Boyd is new. Whatever equipment they managed to scavenge from the black market would not have detected it. We allowed the boy a head start deliberately upon his escape from the compound. We wanted to see where he was going, and who was assisting him. Surprisingly," Katsaros continued, turning a sharp glare to Vivienne and Carhart. "None of you were involved. Directly."

Seong moved her fingers across her tablet, and the gory death scenes were replaced by a slowly revolving map of France. A small red dot glowed in the southeastern section, and with a flick of her thumb, it zoomed in. Not far from Lorgues, France, the red dot grew larger. Other windows popped up; showing a satellite image of a set of small residential buildings nestled in amongst the trees, the street address, and the name Alette Laroche.

Across the hologram, Emilio saw Vivienne give a short start. She subtly pulled her hands into her lap and her expression lapsed back into a blank mask.

"As of last cycle, this is their location," Seong said. The satellite image zoomed in further, showing two buildings half hidden by trees. "We haven't any stock pictures of the building on file, so you'll have to do reconnaissance upon your arrival. They stopped at a hospital in Spain on their way, so no doubt one or both of them are seriously injured. We don't have current intel on the connection of the property owner to them, but we'll find out soon enough."
Emilio noticed Vivienne's gaze dropping to the table.

"What makes you think Vega would be any easier on us than on those other agents?" Kassian hadn't even bothered to look at the image before speaking. "Vega doesn't like me, he barely knows Harriet—" Harriet nodded in agreement as Kassian continued. "Sin knows his father doesn't give a shit about him or Boyd, and General Carhart hasn't been in the field for years. No offense, but this plan—"

Katsaros slammed his scarred hand on the table, interrupting Kassian. "Don't lie to me, you pathetic little fool. Do you think we are unaware of the friendship you and Agent Stevens have forged with the two of them? Vega is a monstrous killer, but he is loyal to most of you. And if not to you, I know he is to this one."

A slightly panicked look crossed Ryan's face when Katsaros pointed at him, and he shot a stare at Emilio in alarm. "Wha—"

"What are you talking about?" Carhart's voice was flat, but his expression betrayed his horror.

"One of you, if not more, were likely involved in their escape, or are likely to aid them in the future," Seong said flatly. "As it stands, I can't trust a one of you. So, I'll make it easy on you. The field agents in this room will leave for France immediately. You will recover Hsin Liu Vega, and terminate Boyd Beaulieu."

Ryan had begun to shake his head, even when Emilio reached out beneath the table to rest a hand on the kid's knee.

"Protest as you like, but you'd expect us to be fools to believe Vega would willingly harm the lot of you without hesitation, and that hesitation, as we know from his past, is all that's needed to gain control of him. Bring him back as well as proof of Beaulieu's death. The body should suffice or, if
needed, the head alone will do. Do this, I'll know where you stand, and you will survive. Don't,” steel crept into her voice as she pointed at the R&D agents and Vivienne without turning her hard stare from Carhart, "and those who remain will be terminated after interrogation."

Emilio started to stand, his hand sliding into his pocket to grasp his phone. His finger brushed against the touch screen to dial Doug, but before he could do anything more, Carhart's voice broke the silence that had blanketed the room.

"No."

Vivienne looked at Carhart in surprise. She shook her head subtly; staring with silent intensity.

Seong straightened in her chair. "No?" she echoed mildly. She glanced around the room, as if to see if others had heard the same, before settling back on Carhart. "It's not difficult, Zachary. You've orchestrated your own ways of getting the most out of Sin before. He won't even be angry with you once we wipe his memory. As for Boyd, why should it matter to you?" She pointed at Vivienne, who hadn't looked away from Carhart. "His own mother is sitting right here, not saying a word in his defense."

Seong crossed her arms. "You lose one insubordinate agent and regain Sin, or you and the rest of your team all die now. Direct insubordination here won't change the outcome for Sin and Boyd, but it will for you." An edge crept into her tone. "So, to be clear, your answer?"

"My answer remains the same." Carhart stood up, and yanked his arm away when Emilio grabbed it.

"Zachary, sit the fuck—"

"No."
The word cracked through the room, and Emilio's heart drummed in his chest as he stared at his lover. But Carhart's attention had centered solely on Katsaros and Seong. "Do your own dirty work. Use your Modified agents from Europe. Or some of your genetically manipulated experiments from the labs. I will not do this. I won't."

Katsaros' lips pulled back in a sneer. The animosity in his face was undeniable, and it turned his expression into a hateful mask. "How dare you."

Carhart strode across the room as Katsaros started to shout. The man’s tone was lethal and his expression dangerous, but Carhart's fast departure cut him off. The door slammed shut, and the room fell still. No one spoke, and Katsaros rose from his seat and bolted out after Carhart, his face darkened with rage.

Seong stood so quickly that her chair clattered to the floor. "Michael!" she shouted, and was also gone in a flash.

"Oh no." The words left Ryan's mouth in a low moan, thick with tears and worry as everyone stared at the door in shock. "Oh God. What do we do?"

Emilio speared a glance at Vivienne, but she was already looking at him significantly as she stood. The conference room was filled with a scramble of movement. Ryan jumped to his feet, nearly hyperventilating as he rushed for the now open door. The others looked on in stupefied horror, and Kassian only mobilized when Ryan ran out into the hall.

"We do this shit now," Emilio barked at Vivienne, and bolted after Ryan with the others hot on his heels. Several agents were milling around the hallway outside the conference room, and that was the case even in the main lobby of the Tower when Emilio burst out of the stairwell a moment later.
He heard shouting that was barely muffled by the blur of voices of spectators. Many people had stopped to stare, their expressions confused, some scared, some completely blank as they watched.

Years ago, this would have been a shocking sight. A complete anomaly. But now, watching General Carhart stride away from the Tower as Katsaros snarled threats and Seong snapped orders at her second-in-command was enough to make people freeze in place. Wondering what new horror was awaiting this spectacle, yet not surprised that something terrible was about to happen.

When Emilio stepped out into the courtyard with Vivienne right behind him, Katsaros was red-faced and barely acknowledging Seong. The cool, collected mask that he had worn so well was gone. Shattered by whatever had happened to him on the Fourth, and the barely concealed frustration and rage that had spewed forth after Carhart's insubordination.

"Zach!" Emilio shouted. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Stop him," Katsaros hissed. His eyes were wide, the whites too visible around them, and every muscle was tense and straining beneath his clothing. "Or I will put him down like a dog."

Emilio took a step forward as Carhart turned to face them. They stared at each other from across the courtyard, and a chill wracked Emilio's frame. He forced himself to remain where he stood despite his fading hope in salvaging the situation.

He kept his back to Seong, to Katsaros, and looked into Carhart's eyes. Anger and frustration made him want to lash out. Don't fuck this up, he wanted to say. Don't walk out those gates. Just go cool off. We can get out. We can do this.
He wanted to say those things. He wanted to lie. Even though he knew Carhart wouldn't believe it. How could he? The cards were all on the table, apparently had been for a while, and he knew there was no way that all of them would be able to get out. Not now that attention was focused on every single one of them.

They'd blown it. For the first time, it occurred to him that they should have listened to the kids. Someone would have to be sacrificed now. But it wouldn't be Carhart. It couldn't be. He would kill the rest himself before he let anyone have this man.

"Stop. Don't be a fucking idiot."

"I won't do this."

The words were clear, and loud enough to reach the clusters of Agency staff that were surrounding the scene. Carhart didn't even seem to register them; he stared at Emilio with bloodshot eyes and a pale face that was set in its grim determination.

"No matter what we do, someone will die. I told you, I can't do this anymore."

Shut up, you idiot.

The words were on the tip of Emilio's tongue. He could hear the murmurs, the agreement. Everyone was watching. Everyone was looking at them. And then everyone was looking at Katsaros and Seong. Scores of faces, civilian and agent, watched them from the perimeter of the courtyard, some moving closer even as Luke Gerant and a bunch of guards shoved through.

And several yards away, a familiar face.

Doug.
"I'm done," Carhart said flatly.

The sinking feeling in Emilio's gut momentarily paralyzed him, and their eyes were still locked when explosions of gunshots filled the courtyard. There was a second, just a second, when comprehension failed, and Emilio couldn't understand what he was looking at. He didn't understand what had happened. He didn't understand how it could have happened.

Everything shut off. All sounds were muffled. He could only see Carhart, his Zachary, his best friend and lover, his everything, on the ground. Emilio's feet moved slowly at first, then faster, then the warmth of Carhart's blood was covering his hands. He pressed them against the wound, the wounds, but the stain of red continued to spread. Multiple entry points. Multiple gunshots. The pale blue eyes were looking up at him, and ragged sounds were coming out of Carhart's mouth.

"Zach!"

The scream was wild, raw, but it wasn't Emilio's. Someone was crying, feet were sprinting towards where Emilio was kneeling on the ground next to Carhart, but there was a scuffling sound and the footsteps halted abruptly.

"No! No! Zachary!"

Emilio looked up, and saw Ryan. He was crying, screaming, and Kassian was holding him back. Owen was moving to help.

"Oh God, oh God, he's dead, he's dead, they killed him—"

The screaming got louder, more hysterical, and the words sent a shiver down Emilio's spine that spread through his body. His hands were shaking, he couldn't keep them still. He touched Carhart's face, pressed his fingers against the mouth he'd kissed, the shadowed eyes, bruised from lack of sleep.
They were closed now. The blood from Emilio's hands was streaking the fair skin, staining the blond hair, and the shuddering sounds stopped.

Emilio shook his head briefly, again not comprehending. This was wrong. It was wrong. He'd been right there. A few feet from Katsaros. A few feet from Seong. Carhart's eyes had been focused on his. They'd never flicked behind him, never reacted to a gun, why hadn't anyone reacted? Why hadn't he turned around?

"Zachary?"

His voice sounded strange. Broken. Everything got blurry, his face was damp, and his heart stopped. A shout ripped out of him savagely. There was no sound in the courtyard other than the choking sobs and a continuous, keening wail that muffled just slightly when he pressed his face against Carhart's neck.

Sound filtered back in, but nothing came through clearly. A confused garble of shouting behind him, around him, Seong's sharp voice and Katsaros' defensive snarls, and Ryan's anguished cries. But Emilio couldn't look up, couldn't open his eyes.

"Don't be real," Emilio said against Carhart's ear. "Don't be real. Don't be real. Please. Please. Please."

No response. No movement. Just the warmth and smell of blood, taking over a scent that was so undeniably Zach, something that Emilio had remembered for over a decade, and yearned for, and had come back for.

"Emilio, we've got to go, mate. You've got to get up."

Doug's voice was close, and a hand was on Emilio's shoulder.

"They've got guards around us, baby. We've got to move."
Emilio looked up abruptly, ripping himself away from Carhart. His breath came in explosive bursts as he stared up at Doug wildly. "Take them, and fucking go," he snarled.

Confusion clouded Doug's face, then understanding. "Don't."

"Don't let them bring him to the incinerator."

"Emilio, don—"

It was unclear how much time had passed between the shooting, and Doug intervening, but there were guards around Katsaros when Emilio stood up. Seong was turned away barking orders, and Vivienne was gone. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. When Emilio ripped his gun from its holster, he sent the first bullet directly into Seong's head.

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The shocked silence exploded into a chaos of noise. Kassian released Ryan, who went running for Carhart's body. The area erupted in sudden movement; people were shouting, and there was a confused rush as civilian staff tried to take cover.

Yanking his own pistol out of its holster, Kassian met Harriet's eyes briefly as she shoved Jeffrey and Owen away from Seong's body.

"Find Blair," Kassian shouted at Harriet. She nodded shortly, not hesitating before she shoulder-checked a uniformed guard out of her way and sprinted into the converging crowd.

Blood was pooling on the steps of the Tower, and guards were beginning to swarm. In the blink of an eye, everything had gone to hell. Kassian ducked down, and spun to the side, pressing his back against the
staircase. He sent bullets slamming into the guards who were swarming around Emilio and Doug.

Katsaros was shouting orders and taking cover behind a bench as Emilio unloaded indiscriminately into anyone wearing a uniform. He was like a one-man war machine, unleashing carnage and dodging bullets, as if the hatred and grief that caused him to scream over Carhart's body was now turning him into the monster that Sin had always been labeled as.

Emilio was fighting recklessly. He did not take cover, and he did not try to protect himself. He was unmoving beside Carhart's unmoving body, seemingly uncaring or unaware that he was now also injured.

"Goddamn it, Vega! Take fucking cover!" Doug shouted as he fired.

Emilio didn't heed the warning, and took a bullet to the shoulder although he ripped a knife out of his boot and sent it flying into his attacker's eye with barely a pause in between. The man dropped to the ground, and Kassian saw that it was a level 9 agent.

The situation had moved beyond guards.

"Archer!" Kassian yelled, spotting the sniper in the crowd. "Cover me!"

Archer's head snapped over to Kassian. In the sea of chaos, he looked completely calm. He immediately dropped into position as Kassian ran through the courtyard. He wove through the crowd, barely dodging bullets and evading interception. He ran by civilians, guards, and bypassed Owen as Jeffrey jerked the other man to the ground, clearly trying to drag him to cover.

Archer dropped to a crouch by Doug, automatically pivoting his back to Doug's and shooting a guard who was just swinging his gun toward Kassian.

"We need to move him out of here," Kassian shouted, skidding to a stop beside Ryan and Carhart. "They'll take the body."
Ryan looked up, eyes red and expression frantic as he pressed his palms to Carhart's wounds. "He's not—"

"On your left!"

Archer's shout caused Kassian's attention to jerk away from Ryan. A swarm of field agents were rushing to the courtyard, all of them fully armed, and all of them transplants from the European division from what Kassian could see.

A rain of gunfire ripped up through the courtyard, and Kassian threw himself backwards as Archer pinned Ryan to the ground beside Carhart. The assault was directed specifically at them, at Doug and Emilio, which meant only one thing.

Katsaros was mobilizing his people.

Kassian scrambled behind the trunk of a tree as Archer put a bullet through the face of a red-haired woman they'd once gone on a storm with.

"Archer!" Kassian shouted. "Move Carhart to the training complex. Now!"

The sniper grabbed hold of Carhart and began pulling him out of the killzone. Ryan scrambled over to where Emilio had staggered near the steps while Doug took a bullet in the vest, and tackled a Fourth Floor guard to the ground. Emilio was covered in gore, although it wasn't clear how much of it was actually his.

Ducking as someone pumped bullets in his direction once again, Kassian sprinted closer to the Tower and nearly collided with Katsaros. The man had rushed him fast, but Kassian strafed out of the way. Out of ammunition, he yanked a knife from his belt and abandoned his gun.
Katsaros aimed his own pistol at Kassian's head, and narrowly missed when Kassian once again ducked to the side. The bullet penetrated another field agent who had come up behind Kassian, and the woman fell to the ground, dead. A quick glance showed that it was Jenny White.

Kassian darted into Katsaros' space as the man swore viciously. His lips were pulled back over his teeth, and there was a wild look in his eyes that wasn't entirely sane. He released a howl of anger when Kassian swiped at his midsection with the knife, cutting him open, and then following it up with a slice to his face.

Katsaros aimed again, but Kassian kicked the pistol out of his blood-slicked hand. It landed a few feet away, and Katsaros retaliated with a right hook that sent Kassian reeling back. The wind knocked out of him as Katsaros shoved him to the ground, and they rolled twice before Kassian managed to pin the other man beneath him.

The knife had fallen in the struggle, and both of them reached simultaneously for the gun. The tips of Kassian's fingers grasped it first, and he jammed it against the General's eye as he panted ferociously.

"You didn't have to shoot him," Kassian said through his harsh breaths. "You didn't have to kill him."

"He should have died long ago," Katsaros snarled, his voice guttural in its anger. "He was a danger. You all are. This Agency needed to be cleansed."

"And now it has been."

Kassian didn't flinch when he pulled the trigger, and blood and bits of brain splattered all over his face. He sat for a moment, still breathing hard, but got to his feet when Ryan's voice rang out across the courtyard. Kassian stepped over the body, and rushed to the Tower once again.
He could see Jeffrey dragging Owen towards the training complex while Archer ran for cover with Carhart slung over one shoulder, and Doug provided cover. The fight had spread, and now field agents from Euro were fighting agents from the original regime. Luke Gerant shouted orders to his guards to assist and block off entrances to the surrounding buildings.

Kassian bypassed them all, shoving his way through the chaos. As the crowd shifted, he saw Bex, Emilio and Ryan several yards away from where he stood. Bex was bleeding furiously from several wounds, but had gained the upper hand during the fight and was pinning Emilio to the ground with her knees. Ryan threw himself at her back, but she fended him off almost effortlessly and he went flying to the side.

Raising his gun, Kassian aimed at Bex's head but the chamber clicked and nothing happened. Swearing, Kassian threw the gun to the side and pumped his legs, crossing the distance between them. Bex had her Glock to Emilio's temple as he stared up at her, his full lips spread in a red, fearless grin. Kassian shouted, some wordless, horrified sound, and expected Emilio's face to turn to pulp, but nothing happened.

Bex hesitated, and Emilio laughed, an ugly, hysterical sound that carried across the courtyard.

A new voice, identical to Bex's, rang out through the discord. "Bex, you bloody idiot!"

Kassian knocked Bex to the ground just as Jordan raised her weapon, finger on the trigger. She tried to aim at Emilio around her sister's fallen form.

"No!" Ryan screamed, his voice high and terrified. He grabbed Emilio's discarded gun, and wrenched it upward, unloading the magazine into Jordan's chest. Jordan's eyes widened and she fell even as blood spread across her clothing.
"Jordan!" The grief in Bex's voice almost rivaled Emilio's, and her anguished cries only ended when Kassian slammed his fist into her temple, knocking her out.

"What the fuck were you doing? Do you want to fucking die?" Kassian roared at Emilio, getting to his feet and leaving the twins on the ground. He grabbed Ryan, and jerked the smaller man up.

"Fuck off, Blondie," Emilio sneered, and got to his feet unsteadily. He staggered, and Ryan rushed to his side.

"I'm not leaving without you," Ryan said fiercely. "If you want to do this, you'll get us all killed."

"Ryan—"

"Shut up, Kassian!"

Emilio untangled himself from Ryan, and shoved him forward. "Just fucking go. I'm right behind you," he said flatly.

With the rest of the Agency engaged in combat, they slipped through the trees and took the back way to the training complex. Kassian kept his eyes on Emilio the whole time, not trusting the other man not to go throw himself into the thick of things once again. Vegas didn't give up that easily. If Emilio had a death wish, he was going to make it happen one way or the other.

They ran into the squat, long building that housed the training center. Doug was just inside, a shotgun gripped in his hands as he stood pressed against the wall next to the entrance. As soon as they were in, Doug smashed his fingers against the keycode next to the door.

"All in?" Emilio asked, his voice still flat and dead.
"Yup. And them fucks will have a goddamn hell of a time getting in once they figure out who's fighting whom. First time I think it's good that we keep the rookies locked in this bloody building."

When Emilio didn't respond, Doug's mouth pressed into a thin line, and he did not move his intense gaze from the other man's face. Kassian wondered if some unspoken communication was passing between the two.

Before he could demand how the next phase of the plan had been modified and if they had found Blair, voices echoed down the corridor. Owen appeared to have been trying to run back to the entrance, but Jeffrey had seemingly yanked him back.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Owen snapped furiously. He twisted and shoved Jeffrey away roughly. "Get off me already!"

"Then stop being such an idiot and trying to go back out there! You're going to get yourself killed." Jeffrey looked ready to grab Owen again, but the red-haired man only sneered.

"Like you fucking care."

Jeffrey's face twisted into an indignant glare.

"We're all here," Ryan called out to Owen, his voice thin and weary. Owen started moving toward them faster. When Jeffrey caught sight of the others, he suddenly slowed his step. His arms crossed his chest defensively.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Kassian barked, pointing at Jeffrey. "Isn't he a sellout?"

"Fucker wouldn't let me go—" Owen was starting to say in irritation, but Jeffrey cut him off with a heated glare and furious retort of his own.
"I didn't sell anyone out, you assholes. Seong called me into her office and made me choose her or death. The reason she noticed me at all was because of Owen—"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Owen demanded.

Waving the question off, Jeffrey continued hurriedly. "She wanted someone watching the unit. Especially Boyd and Carhart. 'Just in case,' she said. I didn't know who else she had reporting back if I acted like I wasn't complying. I was too scared to do anything else at first but then I figured out I just had to be obvious and no one would do anything around me I'd have to report."

Jeffrey shifted his sour stare away from them. "Obviously none of that matters anymore, so now I'm not going to watch you morons kill yourselves."

Owen eyed him suspiciously, but relented on his glare.

"Right." Emilio reached for Doug's shotgun. "I'll go back out and distract them," he said flatly.

"No, you are fucking not, Vega," Doug growled. "I been waiting for you this whole fuckin' time, and if you think I'm lettin' you go back out now, you're goddamn mad. Just because they got Zachary—"

"Whoa, whoa, wait!" Owen said in alarm, waving his hands. He moved between them and the door, and grabbed onto Emilio's upper arm. "Don't do anything stupid, Senior. Or any of you. He's still alive."

Emilio's empty gaze jerked to Owen, but he didn't move. Not even when Ryan sprinted down the corridor. Kassian started to follow, but one look in Emilio's direction rooted him to the spot.

In the sudden silence, there was a barely audible dripping sound that was accompanied by small, crimson splatters that had begun to pool beneath
one of Emilio’s dangling hands. It was then that Kassian noticed how
damaged Emilio was. How the steadily darkening stains of blood on his
clothing couldn’t possibly belong to someone else, and how his olive
complexion looked chalky.

"Let's go, mate," Doug said quietly. He put a hand on one of Emilio's
shoulders, and didn’t move it even when the other man flinched as if he'd
been abruptly brought out of a trance. Emilio jerked away and followed Ryan.
He put a hand on the wall at one point, and left a smeared handprint behind.

Kassian's eyes followed the older agent as he limped down the
corridor, a trail of blood streaking the linoleum behind him.

"They're both fucked," Doug said when Emilio had rounded the corner.

"I know," Kassian said.

They joined the others in one of the sparring rooms as the battle
continued to wage outside. Despite the fact that the training complex was
soundproof and lacked any windows, the ground occasionally shuddered,
indicating that the violence had escalated further. With full access to the
explosives in the armory, and years of tension building, Kassian wasn't
surprised that the two divisions were trying to massacre each other.

"Status?" he demanded immediately upon entering the room. Carhart
was stretched out on the padded floor, paler than Emilio and still unconscious.
His shirt had been removed, and the wounds washed and bandaged tightly.
Crimson could still be seen through the thick wads of gauze. Harriet hovered
beside him with assorted medical supplies spread out nearby.

Emilio had sunk down to his knees and was staring down at his lover
silently.
Blood covered Archer's hands and spattered his shirt. "The General has lost a lot of blood. Gunshot wounds to the torso and neck. Owen started an IV, his airways are clear and we've stopped the bleeding for now. Still," he glanced at Emilio with a brief pause before turning back to Kassian. "He needs help, Kassian. More than we can give."

"So what do we do?" Ryan demanded, his voice high. Kassian stood next to him and pressed both hands down on his shoulders. "Bree just messaged me that she and the others are already out and headed to the helipad. She breached the locks that blocked the tunnel. We can go, we can take him with us, get him to someone—"

"We'd just slow you down," Emilio cut in sharply. He pushed Archer's hand away when the sniper tried to attend to him. "Just get fucking going, kid. Before the Euro generals get their shit together and take this bitch back over. Once shit clears, y'all is gonna be the first fuckers they come for."

"I'm not—"

"Do you have a plan?" Archer cut in, staring at Emilio. "He has an hour or two, max, without better treatment for these wounds. Where he was hit here," he pointed at the side of Carhart's neck. "If he'd been shot higher up or at a closer range with a higher caliber bullet, he'd be dead already."

"There's a plan, and it involves getting the fuck on a helicopter and out of Lexington in the next twenty minutes," Emilio growled. He reached out and ran a hand over Carhart's face, releasing a slow, shaky sigh. "These motherfuckers don't got no time to sit around wondering what to do with this hard-headed idiot. I'll take care of him myself."

"But—" Ryan started to say.

Owen put a hand on Ryan's shoulder and squeezed. "Ryan, buddy," he said. "It sucks, but he's right. We have to run back out into the fight just to get
to the tunnel. And we need to get to Blair, like yesterday. Senior's better off figuring out a way to get help to come here or using his connections to get him somewhere safe."

"You're wasting time," Emilio said, not looking away from Carhart. "They'll shut down the fucking tunnels, and block any airspace once they reconfigure a chain of command. You won't even be able to make it to Thierry's contact in Quebec before they shoot your asses down."

"You're injured, too," Kassian said. "Badly. What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about me."

Owen's lips trembled as he stared at Emilio and Carhart. Jeffrey was a pale, silent shadow behind him. When Ryan's shoulders began to shake slightly, Kassian pulled him closer, turning the younger man away.

"Let's do this," Kassian said sharply. His tone left no room for further debate.

They mobilized as Emilio gave orders from his station beside Carhart. He did not move, and instead, twined his fingers with Carhart's. He went through the plan in a gruff, strained voice, and refused to divulge his own plan.

Kassian directed Archer and Harriet to get the supplies that Emilio had stashed in the training room weeks ago, while Emilio demanded explosives, ammunition, a cell phone charger, and cigarettes. Within five minutes, they were ready to go, and Doug tossed Emilio a small, waterproof pack filled with supplies and some emergency money.

The last time Kassian saw Emilio, the last time he walked through the door of the room where he'd trained Boyd years ago, he saw that Emilio had climbed to his feet and was standing protectively in front of the man he
refused to leave behind. His mouth twisted up into the cocky smirk that had graced his handsome face so many times in the past, and he nodded at Kassian. There wasn't a trace of fear in his eyes.

The door shut between them, and Kassian turned away.

Outside the training complex, the compound had transformed into a warzone. The divide between the new and old regime had erupted into an onslaught of violence that had surpassed even what Kassian had imagined before they'd slipped out of the door.

The once deceptively peaceful landscape of the gated world that so many had inhabited for years was on fire.

Bullet-riddled bodies were strewn along the dead grass, civilian employees were screaming and trying to get into buildings that Luke Gerant had likely locked down to prevent further access to ammunitions or calls for assistance, and the sounds of continued battle were everywhere.

As the group slipped to the northern gate and the small residential building that housed one of the underground tunnels, the sound of police sirens could be heard in the distance. With the compound of Johnson's Pharmaceuticals on fire near one of the richest neighborhoods in Lexington, it likely could not go ignored despite the mandates that had previously been put in place about the JP property being out of the jurisdiction of local cops.

When they reached the door that led down, Ryan input the passcode with shaking fingers. His tears had dried, but he had lapsed into an unwavering silence. Using a scrambler to cause the door to lock automatically when they shut it again, the seven of them slipped into the small space beyond the door and began to descend into the darkness of the tunnel.

Kassian ran steadily. The only sounds were the splashing of water around their feet and Ryan's labored breathing. By the time they climbed out
and into the dreary, cold afternoon, Ryan's breath had turned into a steady wheeze. With scant minutes left before Blair was set to leave, Kassian led the group to an SUV that had been planted in a nearby garage when Carhart, Emilio and Vivienne had finalized the original plan.

They sped away from the compound as a voice on a loudspeaker demanded that the gates to Johnson's be opened. Ryan twisted in his seat to look out the rear window of the vehicle as Archer drove. His slim, pale fingers clutched the leather and he rested his face against it.

Johnson's Pharmaceuticals fell away behind them. The compound that had housed them for years, that had brought so many of them together, and had torn so many of them apart, was steadily disappearing. The glow of fire licked at the black monolith of the Tower; looking even darker and more ominous against the clawed branches of the trees and the iron grey of the sky. Here in the car it was silent, but Kassian could still hear a ghost of the screams and explosions.

It was all falling apart as they fled.

"What do you think will happen?" Harriet asked quietly. Her dark eyes were focused in the same direction as Ryan's.

"I think..." Kassian licked his lips, and tried not to look over his shoulder as well. "I think the compound and all of the staff will be liquidated."

No one spoke following the comment. Tense quiet filled the vehicle until they reached the wide-open space of the wastelands, and eventually came upon the helicopter.

The rotors were already moving when they arrived. The drone overtook all sound around them as Archer slammed on the brakes, and they jumped out of the SUV. The door was open on the side of the helicopter, with Vivienne standing to the side. Her eyes darted between them for a moment
before she had to stand flat against the wall while everyone poured in. She searched the bloodied, dirty faces, and then peered out the helicopter again.

Kassian barely got a glance at the others inside the helicopter, Bree, Thierry, Samuel and Brian, before Vivienne's hand gripped his upper arm and pulled him to face her.

"Where is he?" Her voice was taut.

"We had to leave them."

"You had to leave them?" she demanded icily even as Blair's voice came across:

"All ready?"

"No," Vivienne said even as Archer called out, "Go!"

Her fingers tightened on Kassian. She was searching his face with more emotion than he'd ever seen on her, which even then wasn't much. But in the draw of her eyebrows and darting of her eyes, he could see the worry staining her features.

"They were supposed to be here. What happened? Is Emilio—did Zachary...?"

Kassian exhaled quietly, and put his hands on top of hers. "He wasn't going to make it."

She jerked back as if she'd been burned. For a second, a stricken look crossed her face, but Kassian was continuing even as he noticed it, and her expression turned distant again as she listened.

"Not on a three hour helicopter ride. Not when there isn't a safe place to get him care. The Agency has eyes and ears in every hospital in the country, and he needed something immediate." He stopped briefly, steeled
himself, and continued. "It wasn't an option to put everyone else at risk. So Emilio stayed behind. I'm sorry."

The helicopter swayed around them. Archer reached up and pulled Vivienne down. Her eyes were centered on Kassian even when Archer scoffed and reached over to buckle her in when she did not move.

"Will he make it?" She asked it so quietly that Kassian almost didn't hear.

"I don't know. I... I don't know Emilio's plan."

"The place was a fucking mess when we left. We're lucky we weren't shot trying to get to the bloody tunnel," Doug said. His arms were crossed over his chest, shoulders pushed back against the side of the helicopter. "That crazy fuck might throw together an insane plan, or he might blow himself and the compound up if he can't get Zachary out."

"Even if they got out of there, they needed real medical assistance immediately," Archer said. "Zachary didn't have much time with those wounds. Emilio wouldn't let me touch him, but I could tell that he was not in much better shape. The longer they wait, the weaker they'll get, the harder it will be to escape without further injury. And Zachary, if he gets another serious wound, he'll die from blood loss."

Ryan's mouth trembled; Kassian reached over to grab his hand but Ryan pulled it away.

After a moment Archer added, "If they didn't get out already, they aren't getting out at all."

Vivienne's expression tightened and she turned to stare out the window of the helicopter. She didn't speak again.

There was a beat of silence before Owen spoke. "So... What next?"
Kassian exhaled slowly, and tilted his head back. His eyes slid shut, blocking out the sky and Lexington's skyline, as he answered.

"We split up once we get to Thierry's people in Quebec, hope Bree's program worked, and try to disappear." The whir of the rotors filled the brief silence until he said, "And most of us will never see each other again."
Chapter Forty-Two

The underground WWI bunker was far more upgraded than Riley had let on. Despite the fact that it was over a century old, it was filled with every possible tech that JG could acquire. Computers, scanners, weapons and emergency supplies that were hoarded in case of emergency—the place contained everything they needed, and more. It was also digitally secure. All signals were blocked, keeping them off radar and disrupting all known types of surveillance.

They'd holed up there for the majority of the day and worked continuously to amass the data from their sources. Boyd's head hadn't stopped pounding for hours, even after he took more painkillers. With one hand and one eye, he was significantly slower than the others. He'd been relegated to dictating intel to Bell for the first several hours, with minimal breaks along the way.

Two other JG members, Genna and Livana, had appeared during the night, and they were as efficient as any R&D agents Boyd had seen at the Agency. Sin had apparently met Genna while Boyd was missing, although she'd been in disguise at the time. Livana was a dark-skinned British woman who had found Boyd with Ian.

Bell said that more members were traveling in from different areas of Europe to help them in their endeavor. But even with the additional help, Boyd was impatient to get everything compiled. He was paranoid that they still wouldn't be fast enough before the Agency somehow ran interference.

The Agency always managed to find a way.
"I still can't believe this is real," Genna said, shaking her head. She paused just long enough to pull a lock of hair dyed dark red behind her ear.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard on one laptop while her eyes darted across another screen. The databases were becoming massive with the amount of intel gathered.

"I've been convinced for years that shit was going down behind scenes, and I'd even noted some of these incidents at the time as possible indicators, but—damn. This is more insane than even I had imagined."

"And that's saying something," Livana muttered. Her eyes hadn't shifted from the screen where she was rapidly completing the program to disseminate the information.

Boyd shoved the computer away and, with his eye squeezed shut, stopped to rub at his temple. His head was pounding and he couldn't ignore the doubt seeded in the back of his mind. There were still some gaps in their intel, and he didn't know how significant that would end up being.

He couldn't help worrying that, even with everything they had, it wouldn't be enough. That the Agency would prevail.

If they didn't dismantle the Agency with this, how long would it hold them off? And would they track down and destroy the Journalist Guild along with Boyd and the others this time?

"Everything is almost put together," Sin said, looking over from the tablet he had been hunched over. "Why don't you rest?"

"No." Boyd swallowed a painkiller with a swig of warm water from a cup next to him. "I want to see how they plan to do this."

Before Sin could respond, a buzzing tone filled the room. Boyd and Sin looked up at the speakers mounted into the wall, while the Guild members
snapped to attention. They quickly armed themselves and Livana shut down the program she'd been working in.

"What's happening?" Boyd demanded, reaching for his gun. Sin had already stood, his lean body transitioning to a fighting stance.

"Unexpected visitor at Éliane's." Bell's face was set in hard lines as he reached for a shotgun. "We have alarms strung across the property and a way for Éliane to adjust it. There are different tones for different reasons."

"What does this one mean?"

"Means we don't know what the hell is going on yet. But we weren't expecting anyone."

Boyd stood and aimed at the door. His heart raced as scenarios rushed through his mind, all involving the Agency.

Livana looked up from the computer. "Should I wipe—"

The buzzing tone flipped from a fast staccato to a more leisurely beeping noise. The Guild members appeared to relax, but a frown still crossed Bell's face.

"I'll be back soon. Don't let anyone in unless they know the code." He glanced at the two women, who nodded.

Bell exited the bunker, and Livana closed and locked the door behind him.

"If it's dangerous, I should go with him," Sin said. "If the European division sent more of their mutated Mods, he's fucked."

"It wasn't an emergency code," Genna said with a short shake of her head. She hadn't looked away from the door. "It might not be your agency, and if you go up now you'll be seen."
 Appearing unconvinced, Sin remained standing with his body between Boyd and the door even when the buzzing ended. Genna and Livana eventually sat back down, remaining tense but otherwise returning to work.

Thirty minutes passed before a different alert sounded, followed by a pattern of knocks on the door. The two women exchanged glances before Genna opened the door. When Bell re-entered the room, his expression was tight and he looked at Boyd first and then Sin.

"I need you two upstairs. Liv and Genna, you can keep working. But be alert. We don't know yet which way this will go."

"What's going on?" Sin demanded, not moving from his position.

"There's someone here. As far as we can tell this isn't a threat, but you might be able to gauge it better than us."

"I asked what's going on, not for another vague statement."

Bell sighed. "Vivienne is here."

"What?" Boyd said in surprise, moving around Sin to see Bell better. "What the hell—Why?"

"That's what we want you to verify. She gave us a story and says she isn't a threat, and it seems likely it's the truth. But she's with the Agency, so we don't know if we can trust her until we get a second opinion from you."

"She's alone?" Sin demanded.

"Seems so. She kept asking if you two were here, so she might give you more information than she provided us," Bell said as they headed up to the ground floor.

Boyd was a little clumsy on the stairs, so Sin's hand remained at the base of his elbow steadying him as they followed Bell. They exchanged a
glance only once, and Boyd could tell the same questions were running through Sin’s mind as his own.

They re-entered the house and saw Éliane sitting in the front room with her head in her hands; her expression tainted with worry.

When they entered the room that Vivienne was being held in, Boyd saw that Riley had been guarding her. He leaned against a wall, arms crossed and a sardonic sneer aimed at Vivienne’s stiff back, but the expression fled when Riley saw them enter. He pushed away from the wall and spread his hands.

“Well, lookit here, it’s a whole family reunion. Someone get Éliane to come in here, too.”

Bell gave the younger man an impatient look. “You can go. You’ll only confuse the matter.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Riley said, long-suffering, but he followed the directions regardless.

With Riley gone, Boyd finally got a good look at his mother. She had been turned away, but as soon as the door opened, she swung around to face them. She was a mess; rumpled clothing, hair falling out of its constraints, her skin pale and eyes reddened and framed by dark circles.

Vivienne barely catalogued their injuries before she strode across the room. "You are being tracked," she said urgently to Boyd. "We must disable it and leave."

"What?" Boyd said sharply. "How? They already checked me twice and I was clean."

"It is new technology, recently developed in the labs. I had no knowledge of it until yesterday. We gained information on it when Breanne
downloaded their high clearance data after activating the Red Alert plan. Jae-Hwa deliberately allowed you to flee. They wanted to follow you, and locate anyone that aided you. They had your location," she checked her watch, "fifteen hours ago. We must move." She looked at Bell. "There is a device in my suitcase. I need it to locate the tracker."

Bell looked at Boyd, who nodded. When Bell hurried from the room, Boyd tried to determine when the Agency would have planted the device in him. The only time that made sense was after he'd been recovered from the Janus lab in Arizona. He'd been sedated more frequently than not when in the medwing. They could have done anything to him, and apparently, they had.

Bell returned to the room a moment later, and Vivienne removed a handheld scanning device from a small bag. She input a code into the small screen, and instructed Boyd to stand up straight and hold out his arms as she moved it slowly over him.

Bell peered over Vivienne's shoulder, a frown making the lines in his face more apparent. "I have hackers whose job it is to keep track of all the latest technology and they've never mentioned anything like this."

"Why was the escape plan put into motion?" Sin demanded, ignoring Bell. The device emitted a loud beep when it hovered over the old scar tissue on the lower part of Boyd's stomach, but Sin didn't seem to notice. "Who was flagged for termination? Where are my father and Carhart?"

Vivienne went still, her fingers tightening on the scanner.

"There was a briefing. Jae-Hwa ordered Zachary and others to recover you and to terminate Boyd. The rest of the unit was to be held hostage. Zachary refused, and was shot, and Emilio was later injured as well. He would not leave with the escape team, and they were both left behind. We did not
wish to leave them behind, but we did not have a choice. Their present status is unknown to me.”

"Why would he—" Sin broke off, and swallowed audibly before speaking again. His voice pitched lower, and there was little intonation as he said, "He stayed because of Carhart."

"Yes."

There was another pause. "Is Carhart dead?"

Vivienne stared at the scanner with hunched shoulders. "I do not know."

Sin turned away from her as she continued.

"I wish to believe they escaped, but Zachary was shot multiple times. The compound became havoc. Agents fought agents, guards..." She shook her head and pulled the device away from Boyd, adding more quietly: "The general consensus of those who were present was not optimistic. We do not know how they would escape with their injuries."

A tense silence followed her words, broken only by the sound of Vivienne setting the scanner on the floor with a quiet thud. Sin looked partially over his shoulder again, and the heartbreak was not masked from his face.

"Remove the chip, or whatever it is, and get me when we're ready to move out," he said tersely. He left the room without waiting for anyone else to comment.

"Hsin—" Boyd instinctively went to follow him, but Bell put a firm hand on his shoulder and turned him around. Boyd stiffened and said stonily, "Remove it quickly. Please."
Bell pushed Boyd down to lie on the bed. "I have to get some items. Stay here."

The older man returned in no time, numbing the area where the tracker was and pulling out a scalpel. But the urgency to get the tracking device out of him was eclipsed by Boyd's desire to get to Sin. The pain on his lover's face had come across clearly, likely to the others in the room as well, and that alone was enough to make Boyd want to run after him.

The idea of Emilio and Carhart possibly dying didn't feel real. They were both so strong and tenacious. It seemed impossible that a Vega could ever go down for good—especially not Emilio. Never Emilio.

Even as Boyd wanted to believe that they had escaped, that they were fine, he had to acknowledge that for all that they had been constants in his life for years now, they were still human. And as he knew all too clearly, one fight, one wound, one moment, could make all the difference in the world.

Carhart had sacrificed himself for them. He must have known that it wouldn't change anything, but still, he had done it. The idea of the rest of their team being hunted by Modified agents sent a chill through Boyd, and only reinforced his desire to destroy the Agency.

"Are you being tracked, too?" he asked Vivienne.

She was sitting next to him on the bed, her hands curled tightly over one another, eyes unmoving from Bell's precision cuts into Boyd's skin.

"No. We believe she was particularly suspicious of you following your time with Janus and thought it likely you might defect. It seems she was using you as a test subject for this technology, but it is likely she planned to install it in others in the future."

"Where are they? The others. Are they okay? Who fled with you?"
"No one else was gravely injured. There were eleven of us altogether. Thierry, Kassian, and Ryan were there. In addition, we had Douglas Ferguson, Breanne Calahan, Harriet Stevens, Casey Archer, Owen O'Connell, Jeffrey Styles, Samuel Goldberg and Brian Leblanc as the passengers. Jonathan Jones flew us to Quebec. When we landed, we all parted ways. I did not pay heed to where the others were headed, as I was too concerned with reaching you."

Boyd shot a sharp look of surprise at his mother before running the names through his mind. He'd never heard Bree's full name, but that must have been Breanne, and he remembered that Blair's real name was Jonathan. Samuel and Brian were Connors' and Carhart's old assistants, respectively, with Samuel serving as Emilio's informant. He was surprised to hear Jeffrey had been with them as well.

All the original people plus a few more had made it. They were safe. The words resounded in his mind. They were safe.

A wave of relief loosened the knot in his throat. He'd been sick with worry about the others since the moment he'd realized what had happened, and that Emilio and Carhart were hit. Knowing that they were okay made it easier to concentrate on the task at hand.

Vivienne's voice, faintly hesitant as it was, still seemed sudden against the backdrop of his thoughts. It threw him back fully into the present.

"Your eye?"

"Gone," Boyd said without emotion. "Are you going to belittle me for not looking good enough for you now?"

"No," she said quietly.
Bell watched them from beneath his eyebrows. "We're leaving the second this is out. The others are getting everything together. We'll have to try one of our other bases and hope to hell your people haven't found all the connections already."

"I have a safer location." When Bell looked at Vivienne questioningly, she added, "In Creuse. There is an old dairy farm there belonging to our contact Thierry."

"Well," Bell said, "that's a fair drive but at least we'll be far away."

Bell finally located the tracker. It was smaller than a dime, and looked like nothing more than a silver sticker. It was paper-thin and flexible. Boyd barely had the chance to look at it before Bell put it inside a sterile container and set it aside.

Boyd got up immediately, only allowing Bell to apply a bandage hastily before he strode out of the room. He tried to move quickly, but bumped into things often when he forgot to account for enough space around a corner, and let out a breath of relief when he located Sin.

He'd found a secluded spot in a small library, and was standing by the window. Boyd didn't know if it was the weight of grief that was making the change in Sin's appearance more apparent, but in that moment the differences in Sin were undeniable. The stitches in Sin's shaved head, the bruises covering a face that was gaunt and weary—it looked like Sin had gone to hell and back. And Boyd was sure that he looked the same.

Footsteps muffled by the thick carpet, Boyd moved forward and stopped beside Sin. He reached out, touching Sin lightly on the arm even as he looked up at him. He felt his chest tighten in response to the look on Sin's face.
The pain was unmistakable; the misery and self-loathing made apparent by green eyes shot through with threads of red. Shadowed by darkness and emphasized by the pale hue of his skin.

"I should have stayed."

Boyd turned Sin toward him, leaving his fingers curled around Sin's arm. "It wouldn't have helped. She would have already wiped your memories by now."

"You don't know that." An erratic breath escaped Sin, and he inhaled deeply. "They can't fucking overpower me. They made me into what I am. I could have tried to stop them."

Boyd's voice was gentle and his hand ran along Sin's arm.

"Hsin... I know how much you're hurting right now. Believe me, I understand what you're going through. But that's why I also know you can't put this on yourself. You don't know what would have happened. There are too many variables to assume how it would have played out if you'd stayed, but what we do know is you're safe right now, and both of them cared about that more than almost anything else in the world."

Sin's eyes closed at the words. He shook his head, as if denying that he was crying, but a tear escaped his eyelashes and slid down his face. "I need to know," he said roughly. "I need to know what happened."

"We'll find out." Boyd pulled Sin into an embrace. "I promise you we will, and if they're still out there somewhere, we'll find them."

Sin nodded, his breath hitching while he wrapped his arms around Boyd. They stayed that way until the sounds of loud talking echoed through the emptying house, and an engine revving to life sounded outside.

"We have to go," Sin said, voice hoarse and thick.
Boyd pulled back just enough to see Sin's face. He wished he had both arms in use but all he could do was reach up with his left hand and cup the side of Sin's face. His thumb ran along Sin's cheek.

"We will, but Hsin... No matter what happens, no matter what we find, I'm here for you. If you want to talk, if you want silence, if you just want to be held... Anything you need, I'll do it for you."

Sin's kissed Boyd, and inhaled deeply. Their foreheads pressed against each other and their touch lingered. The sound of the front door opening was faint, but Riley's yell wasn't.

"We're ready!"

"Let's go," Boyd said quietly. He brushed his lips against Sin's again before they met the others outside.

Riley was hovering just outside of Éliane's main house, while two vehicles purred behind him. "Your bag is in the trunk already," he told them. "There's too many of us for one car and we're worried about being followed, so we're taking different routes. Each car has a copy of all the info—if one doesn't make it, the people left in the other will have to do the job."

They were led to a silver car with Bell at the wheel and Vivienne in the passenger seat.

"We'll take A7, you take A75," Bell told Riley as Boyd and Sin settled into the back. "Get off on the side roads if you think you're being followed."

Riley rapped his knuckles against the top of the car. "See you there."

Bell set the car in motion the second Riley stepped back.
"It's nearly seven hours a drive," Bell said, glancing in the rearview mirror. "Any of you need a break, you let me know, but we hope to make it there in one shot."

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They passed in and out of cities and open fields of the country. Everything was covered in white. Flurries fell quietly on the windshield, the wipers sweeping them away just as they started to melt. The rolling hills and pastures were beautiful, but when Sin pressed for answers, it was made surreal by Vivienne's recounting of the bloody scene she had missed at the Agency.

Sin stared out the window as she spoke, barely reacting to Boyd's hand curled around his. The details didn't make it any clearer to Boyd whether or not Carhart and Emilio had survived. It sounded like many had died, even agents and support staff they had been friendly with.

He felt sick at the idea. He spent most of the trip with his cheek pressed against the cold glass of the window, looking out at an unfamiliar countryside, thinking about all the people they'd left behind to get here. When the headache returned, he welcomed the distraction from his thoughts.

The sun had already set as they reached the farm. It was nestled in rolling hills and appeared to be several acres. The stone buildings on the property looked like they had been built centuries ago.

"Well," Bell said, clapping his hands and sweeping the room with his gaze once they had unloaded and entered the house. "We'd best find somewhere to put the rest of the equipment for when the others arrive. Riley's last call placed them twenty minutes behind schedule, and the others are closer now that we relocated."
When Boyd moved to follow, Bell stopped him with a hand on the shoulder. "Is your head still hurting you?"

Boyd shrugged with one shoulder, which Bell correctly took as a yes. He frowned, looking both of them over clinically. "Maybe you two should rest."

Sin shook his head curtly. "I'm fine. I've had worse." When Boyd started to say the same, Sin cut him off in a tone that allowed no debate. "Your injury is different from mine, Boyd. If you want to be at your most alert when we finish this, you need to rest."

Boyd frowned, for a moment ready to argue the point, but in the end he looked away without protest. In truth, with his already limited sight made worse by his head pounding so hard he couldn't see clearly, he probably wouldn't be much help. And he suspected that Sin wanted something else to concentrate on for the moment. Something to forget the gory details of Emilio and Carhart's potential deaths.

The two men disappeared into the shadowy recesses of the house, and Boyd was left alone in the main room with Vivienne.

She may as well have been a statue for as much as she moved or spoke.

Rather than sit restlessly, he began to explore the ground floor of the house. He muttered something about looking for the bathroom and walked away. He discovered quickly that he was even slower moving than he'd expected, and that Bell and Sin had been right to tell him to rest. The property was massive, and more time would be spent guiding him around than getting anything done.

It felt as though all the bits and pieces that had been taken from him over the years were finally reaching a tipping point. From here on out, no matter what had happened on the compound, even if he managed to scrape
out a full life, he would never be able to leave the pain of the past few years behind. Every day he would wake up and wouldn't be able to see an entire half of the world. Every day, he would be reminded of his time with them, and everything that had happened there.

   It was as though the Agency was mocking him even now.

   When he made it to the back door, he found Vivienne standing outside nearby.

   Her arms were crossed with her hands tucked under her opposite arms. It was dark but the moon and stars lit up the sky, casting pale silver light that reflected off the powder white snow. Her expression was something he couldn't decipher cast half in shadows as it was, but he saw that she was staring at the farmland spread out in front of them.

   He didn't know what exactly made him do it, but rather than walking away he stopped next to her and looked silently out at the white-dusted fences and trees. They stayed that way for a length of time he could only measure by the cold creeping into his skin.

   Just as Boyd started to move away, she spoke.

   "I was mistaken."

   For a moment, Boyd thought he must have heard incorrectly. He never thought he would hear her say those words. When he looked at her, nothing had changed. She was still staring straight ahead with the same enigmatic expression as before.

   "About what?"

   She was silent, long enough that he thought she would not reply, but then she huffed out a humorless sound.
"What did Éliane tell you?"

"Nothing. She just mentioned someone named Jacques."

"I see." A heartbeat of a pause. "He was my father."

"Oh." Boyd hesitated. She had never spoken much about family before, so for a moment he wasn't certain whether he should bother asking for more information. She took the decision out of his hands.

"He was killed when I was eight, along with my mother, Alette. My paternal grandmother raised me, however she blamed my mother for his death, as it occurred while they were aiding her friend. She blamed Éliane as well, for raising my mother the way she did. I suspect that is the reason she told me Éliane was dead when I was a child. I only learned otherwise today."

"Is she alive? That grandmother?"

"No. She died many years ago."

Boyd searched his memory for any knowledge of the story. The only thing he could vaguely remember was being told that a grandmother had died. Maybe that was this woman.

"You never mentioned her before."

"I have told no one. It has seemed unnecessary and I do not enjoy discussing these things."

She spoke in the same emotionless voice he remembered from childhood, and with that came the automatic assumption that she didn't want to interact with him. Boyd stared at her, and for a moment he almost pointed out she was the one who brought it all up. Instead, he only shook his head and with an, "Okay," he started to turn back toward the house to leave her alone.
"I did not say I would not."

Stopped mid-pivot, Boyd nearly raised his eyebrows before he remembered not to. Vivienne looked over at him in assessment, and lingered her gaze briefly on his bare arms.

"It is cold. We will wait for the others in the kitchen. I believe there is tea available."

Vivienne walked past him before he could reply. Bewildered, he followed her. While she moved straight to the counter, he remained hovering in the middle of the kitchen. The scene of Vivienne cleaning a tea kettle was oddly domestic.

"What are you doing?"

"Preparing tea."

"You know what I mean."

Her head tilted slightly, and in the lighting he saw that she had not straightened up at all even in her time alone. Her skirt suit was still wrinkled. Her hair was only partially held back by a band, and otherwise spilled down her back in a tangled mess.

"Providing an explanation." She looked over her shoulder at him. "Perhaps you should sit."

Boyd stayed standing at first, wary of what she had to say, but in the end he didn't have anything else to do, and he had to admit he was curious. He settled into one of the dining room chairs.

"It is too long a story to tell in detail so I will keep it to the most pertinent pieces." She drew a trail of long blond hair behind her ear. When she
continued, it was almost as though she were speaking about someone else's life.

"Mireille told me that people could not be trusted, that I must use others before they could use me, that vulnerabilities could not be afforded, and that love did not exist. I came to realize the truth of her words as I grew. I was a wealthy, attractive young woman who was often judged negatively for this. Many felt it was their prerogative to use me for their own agendas and found it intolerable if I disagreed with their presumptions. I thought it would always be this way until I met Cedrick."

The kettle made a scraping sound as she set it on a burner. White-blue flame flickered into life, licking at the base. She turned to face Boyd, although she did not sit.

"It is not possible to overstate the effect he had on me. He was genuine, without ulterior motives, and accepted me for who I was. It seemed impossible to me that such a person could exist. I became enamored of him, and did not listen when Mireille warned me to stay away. When I fled with him, in order to silence me from her life she provided me the money I was due from my parents' deaths along with an additional stipend, and disowned me. I did not think it mattered. I had Cedrick."

It was strange hearing so much about his mother's life after so many years of silence. His mind flashed on the pictures he and Kassian had found in his attic. The photographs of his parents much younger, with Vivienne still closed off but looking more approachable than he remembered from his own life. The stipend explained why they hadn't worried about money as he grew.

"However, when we relocated to Lexington, I became fearful of what would happen should he leave. Without him, I was not only alone in a foreign country, but I also knew no one could replace him. When he said he wanted a family, I was too frightened of losing him to say no. I had hoped I would grow
into the idea at some point during the pregnancy or upon your birth, but I did not. I was exhausted, miserable, and found it difficult to be around you."

"Did he know?"

"No." She turned her gaze to the black reflection of the windows. Her arms crossed tightly.

"It was... a very difficult time for me. I was aware that I did not feel the way I was supposed to feel, and yet could not force myself to do so. I felt conflicted and was certain that if I admitted my feelings, Cedrick would leave. In retrospect, I believe I had undiagnosed prenatal and postpartum depression. However, at the time, I was ashamed and spoke of my difficulties to no one."

Boyd's mind flashed back to the expression on her face after his suicide attempts, and the disgust she had shown. The way she had always belittled his own mental anguish.

She pushed herself away from the counter and started searching the cupboards for mugs.

"It is enough to say that such was my state of mind at the time. Cedrick's parents visited Lexington to see you when you were born, and they were killed in the bombing. As they had become a surrogate family to me, I was devastated and what I felt only grew worse. As time passed, his love for you made me feel further flawed for being unable to share it and made me worry I was losing my connection to him. I began to feel left out of my own family. Despite this, I was certain we could get through it as long as we were together. When I was told that the bombs in New York took him as well... I blamed you."

The words were said so simply, but with them came the weight of their whole relationship.
"In my mind, you became the sole reason why I had lost everything. Why his parents were in the wrong place, and why the short time I had with Cedrick was so stressful. When I fled with him, I had imagined a long, romantic life. Even with you, I had thought I could last until you were old enough to leave the house. I thought perhaps then, my feelings would change. Instead, I lost it all. I was young, left alone in a country that saw me as a spy due to my nationality, with no family and nowhere to go, and with a child I now had to support but had never wanted."

The water began making a rushing, bubbling noise in the kettle, and she turned off the burner. Despite her pause, at first Boyd could say nothing and silently watched her prepare the tea. Having all of his thoughts cemented after so many years caused his stomach to twist, but there was an absence of surprise.

"Riley said something similar... that his parents were in Lexington because of me. But he said I shouldn't blame myself."

Vivienne let out a harsh breath and shook her head. "Of course he said this. He is adept at identifying potential weaknesses in a person and manipulating them to his advantage. You cannot trust a word that man says. He has always been this way."

"So." Boyd stopped, flexed his fingers, and didn't let himself turn his gaze from her. "So, you still think it's all my fault?"

Vivienne stilled. For one moment she simply stood there, facing away from him with a straight back. A quiet sigh left her and she turned around. Her heels made her footsteps ring in the otherwise quiet room as she headed toward the table.

Once seated, she slid one of the mugs over to him without breaking eye contact.
"No. That is what I wished to tell you. Recent revelations have made it clear that the blame I laid on you was misdirected. It is the Agency who is responsible for both Cedrick's death and the deaths of his parents."

Anything he might have once felt at the words was dulled by time and all that had passed between them.

"I still don't understand why you ever joined them."

"I recognized an unparalleled opportunity to access high clearance information and a network of informants I could cultivate. I had become obsessed with the idea that, because we had not seen a body, perhaps Cedrick could still be alive and I could find him."

She took a careful sip of her tea. "$I was, of course, unsuccessful, and as time passed I came to simply rely on the job itself. It became my sole reason to continue living." She paused and her eyes narrowed. "$They have played me the fool. I thought I was using them but they were the ones who used me."

The words stung, and Boyd forced himself to break her stare. The Agency had destroyed their family, and them both. "$Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"I did not think my reasons would matter. Perhaps they do not. But Zachary thought it was important for us to talk, the same as he wished for Emilio and Hsin. When I learned of the Agency's involvement in Cedrick's death, I realized the gravity of the situation and thought Zachary was right. But at that point you were already gone and upon your return the timing did not seem right. I thought once more that perhaps it was not necessary. But yesterday..."

Darkness flashed across her face. "$When I saw them shoot Zachary, I felt... consumed."
"Why?" Through everything, Boyd had never figured out what had truly been between Carhart and his mother. "Did he matter that much to you?"

Vivienne looked at him for a long moment. "Zachary never ceased to care, even in an environment such as the Agency. There are many of us who became twisted, but he did not. I am unaccustomed to feeling as though I am accepted in any manner for who I am. Cedrick accepted me and Zachary did as well. Seeing them shoot Zachary, I remembered the loss of Cedrick. I failed him, in life and in death. I will not make the same mistake, now that Zachary—"

She stopped, her gaze cutting away and her expression shutting off the little emotion that had been visible before. Her jaw worked briefly and, when she spoke, her voice was forcibly distant, the way he remembered from childhood.

"Now that he is gone, too."

Boyd looked down at the table. He kept trying to believe that they were alive. He kept avoiding thinking about it, because if they weren't, it would be too hard to focus on what needed to be done. But at her words, their presences flashed unbidden through his mind.

The way Carhart's weary expression would give way to a fond smile. All of the times he had watched the members of his unit knowingly, and would temper his exasperation with a kind word. His blue eyes locking with Boyd's, telling him without words when to be safe and stand down.

The rakish smirk on Emilio's face, unapologetic and brash. Emilio shoving Boyd's shoulder as a playful reprimand. All of the times Emilio refused to say that he loved Sin, even when it had been obvious.
The emergency code they’d discussed before Emilio and Sin’s final mission in Canada flashed through Boyd's mind. His gut twisted. That code was useless now, if they were really...

"Oh."

Heavy silence settled between them.

"He did not deserve what they did to him, Boyd." He looked up to see her watching him evenly. "Neither did you, or any of its many casualties. The Agency overtook me and I allowed it. It was a conscious choice on my part and it is not something I can change, so I will not regret it. However, I will not accept that Zachary devoted his life to the Agency and was betrayed. I will not accept that they killed Cedrick and took my family as well. And I will not accept that they thought they could use me."

The quiet was broken only by the creaking of the windows as the wind pressed against them, and droplets of water slowly ticking out of the faucet into the sink.

"Bellamy informed me that you plan to expose the Agency, and that you have gathered information from various sources in order to do so. Do you believe that the information you have is sufficient?"

Having a question that had a simple answer helped him to focus. It was less confusing than having to put his mother's life in a different context or consider the question of whether her explanations mattered.

He could understand so many pieces; depression, the fear of losing the most important person, the stupid things a person might do or say to keep them. On the other hand, no matter her reasons, the fact remained that the things she had done to him had left him with visible and hidden scars. He didn’t know what to say about any of that and was relieved that she didn’t seem to be expecting a response to it.
"As much as we're going to be able to get." He tapped the mug as he ran over the information. "I'm a little worried it won't be enough. But we have an extensive list of cover-ups, the information gathered by JG, a Director's name—"

"A Director?" Vivienne cut in. Her expression sharpened intently. "Which one?"

"Simon Perry."

She was already shaking her head as he said the name. "No. That will not do. Simon Perry has not been a Director for years. You need the entirety of the current Board to be effective or they will simply evade and begin anew. Do you have a tablet?"

Boyd stood, leaving the kitchen briefly to find the few belongings that had been recovered from Portugal. He went through it clumsily and pulled out the tablet he'd been given by Ryan months ago. The thought of Ryan made him briefly wonder where he was, whether he was still okay, whether he'd ended up with anyone else. But he had to shove that thought aside, like so many others. He unlocked the tablet and gave it to her.

He watched her type, still trying to figure out what he thought about all of this. It was too difficult to process, especially with the possibility of taking down the Agency looming before him. When Vivienne returned the tablet, all other thoughts vanished from Boyd's mind.

Mark Sutton, Duncan Clark, Nathan Mead, Alton Daniels, Victor Welles.

The names were spelled out in the document, black against the white of the page, but for all its innocuousness, the impact of the information was staggering. Their full names, dates of birth, addresses, even their social
security numbers, detailed information on their families, and where to locate photographs—everything was there.

When he looked up at her in surprise, her face was hardened.

"It is my nature to know the variables to all equations. If they believe they can use me without consequence, they are as ill-informed as anyone else who has ever tried the same in my life."

Seeing the Board of Directors spelled out so succinctly made the doubt that had been plaguing him disappear. The main missing piece had been the upper structure, but now—

They could do this.

With this, with everything else—they could really do it. They could dismantle the Agency. They could stop the attempts on their own life—they could protect their friends who had fled. They could get back at the Agency for what it had done to Carhart, to Emilio, to his father, to the fallen agents, and to the innocent people who had been assassinated along the way.

They could end it all.

"When it is available, I will view the list of cover-ups as well. Perhaps there are further details I can provide."

Boyd nodded, feeling overwhelmed by the moment. "We would love that. Does anyone else know this?"

"I cannot say. I gathered that information from various informants without providing them the context, as insurance should they ever threaten me."

Floored, Boyd could only think to say, "Thank you."
"Do not thank me. It is far too late to attempt to rectify what I have done. This,” she gestured at the tablet, "is simply something I can and must do right now."

Her features seemed simply set in stone now, rather than the piercing cold from most of his life. Here, at the scratched wooden table with mugs of tea and information spread out before them, he briefly remembered the rare, pleasant moments. The nights she had taught him French, correcting his accent and grammar and occasionally saying something positive. Thinking back with the information he had now, it put a different light on the weariness he remembered in her features; the way she used to glance back at the hallway. Looking for his father.

They had been just three people living in that large home, but between them had been enough lies by omission to forever change their lives.

===

The full team assembled a little under an hour later. Riley, Genna and Livana arrived as well as others in the Guild. There was a flurry of activity as they worked with a new sense of urgency to not only expose the Agency, but to take it down before its leaders could find them and destroy them all.

During this time, Vivienne disappeared. She did not say goodbye, but to Boyd, one had not been needed. A goodbye was trivial in contrast to all she had finally told him. He could only assume that he would never see his mother again, and that she had stayed at the farmhouse as long as she had only to speak to him, to explain, and to share what she knew.

The idea was as hard to believe and comprehend as the possibility of Carhart and Emilio being murdered on the compound that had brought them all together. But Boyd pushed aside the confusion of warring emotions that he
felt at her discreet departure, knowing that he would pick it apart and analyze it later when this was finished and they were free.

Genna and Livana began the task of weaving the new information into the data they had compiled as well as hacking the satellite that would broadcast the information globally. At Sin's suggestion, they included an exposé on Janus. The public demolition of a covert, Western organization would cause people to turn to the remnants of Janus despite the fact that they were just as corrupt, and they wanted it known that neither group could be trusted. It would also help keep Janus from finding a way to begin anew.

As the moment approached, Boyd noticed tension growing in Sin. He moved closer to him, standing at his side in a quieter corner of the room.

"What's wrong?"

"I wonder what will happen when different groups start fighting over who is going to pick up the pieces," Sin said quietly. "And who is going to do the Agency's job when that happens."

They looked at each other. They were standing by one of the large windows as the sun began to rise, the dark sky illuminated by streaks of pink and gold. The uncertainty in Sin's expression caused a slight edge of doubt in Boyd, but he pushed it away.

"We can't control that. What we know is that the powers in place right now are corrupt and have caused as much or more harm than good. This is the only way to protect our friends, us, even the innocent people who were being controlled." He squeezed Sin's hand. "Whatever happens, at least we'll finally be free to make our own choices. Live the way we want to live, the way we've dreamed for years."

"Do you really think so?" Sin turned slightly, and looked at the JG members.
They were grinning at each other, and counting down with Riley. Someone had brought out a bottle of wine they planned to share when it was done. Bell's arms were crossed, and a glint was in his eyes as he looked on with pride.

"I know they're getting what they want," Sin said. "But will we ever really get what we want? Do we even know what we want?"

There was a collective exclamation of excitement, and Boyd turned entirely to look at the monitors that had been set up in the room. The first of many messages flashed across the screen; messages that would be broadcast across the world in many languages. A Guild member was in another room broadcasting live on the radio, the words recorded to be looped later. Next to him were two other members, speaking the first of many translated versions.

_For decades, we have been lied to and manipulated. For decades, government agencies and radical, activist groups have fought for control and we have been caught in the crossfire. It stops now._

The sentences seemed to swell, and they exploded across the screen. As the words scattered, data, graphs, pictures and videos they had compiled took their place, playing in a never-ending loop that would go on until a hacker better than Livana and Genna managed to end it.

It was all laid bare, the structure of the Agency, the hierarchy, a reference to the brutal way its own members were treated, the videos of assassinations and murders juxtaposed with lists of slaughtered civilians who had been caught in the middle. Clearing the names of so many people whose life works had been twisted in their death. The names of the Directors scrolled in an unending marquee, always present and reminding viewers that it was they who did this, it was they who had pulled the strings behind it all.
And when Janus’ time came, when images of the lab where Boyd was found, of the rooms where Sin had been tortured in Monterrey, and their plans to win the political war with guerilla tactics and biowarfare was shown, it all started again with new footage, new documents, new videos—all of it reinforcing what had already been stated.

As he watched, a chill slipped through him.

It was finally happening. It was real. The world was seeing everything he saw, everything that had been building for years. All the lies, conspiracies, all the things he’d hated to be beholden to, all the things that had twisted and changed his fellow agents. All the things the Agency had fought to contain.

Everything was unraveling at a rapid pace on those screens, seeming impossible after all the time and effort it had taken to pull it together. After all the lives lost just to have these lists.

He wondered what the other agents were doing—the ones left at the Agency, but especially their friends who had already fled. How they would react when they saw this broadcasting across televisions and computers. Whether their friends would know it was Boyd and Sin who had done this, and whether they would understand why, instead of merely disappearing, they had taken things this far.

As he watched the JG members huddle around their computers, as he watched Bell grinning and scrubbing briefly at his eyes, he thought of his father. If he’d lived, while he might have eventually sought to expose the Agency, he probably never would have been able to get all the information in one place. But when it came down to it, this victory was partially due to Cedrick. His death had rippled out across the years, moving people into the positions where this information could be gathered.
It felt strange, and terrifying, and hopeful, and more than anything he thought of his father's small handwriting sprawled across an old journal's wrinkled page:

*I hope someday you'll continue my legacy.*

"Let's go."

Boyd jumped at the words, and was torn from the trance that had momentarily caught him.

He looked up at Sin, questioning and silent, shaken by what was happening and the magnitude of it all. There was a swelling in his chest that he couldn't contain, an emotion that caused a breath to escape his mouth instead of words.

"Now. Let's leave now," Sin said again, his voice low and the words slipping from his lips to Boyd's ears, not meant for anyone else. "Just disappear."

The members of the Journalist Guild were not looking at them and barely seemed to register that they were still in the room. They were all manning a station, barking orders and leaning close to screens as they presumably fought to keep the messages on the air, desperate to protect the culmination of their efforts throughout the years.

Boyd didn't protest when their fingers locked, and Sin tugged him out of the room. They disappeared into the shadows, walking away from the unceasing narration that droned during the program, and away from the journalists who had helped them to finish it all.

The moments it took to slip out of the farmhouse were few. It felt like heartbeats compared to the scope of time it had taken them to get to this
point. Soon, their boots were crunching on the snow outside. Soon, breath ghosted out into the cold air, and Sin led Boyd away from the property.

Their hands clasped again, and this time neither let go.
Epilogue

The breeze that blew in was warm and caused the smells of the *favela* to waft in, an unpleasant mix of sewage, rotten eggs and cooked food. He was used to it after a year of living in the shanty town, but when the wind gusted again, Sin opened his eyes. He was facing the balcony door of their studio which the wind had blown wide open during the night, but it only provided scant relief to the near-suffocating humidity of the studio. The space was small, barely five hundred square feet, with patchy sheetrock walls and a mish-mash of furniture that had been procured over time.

Sin propped himself up in the bed, bare skin sliding against Boyd's; sticky but never uncomfortable. They were tangled up in the sheets, both naked and still messy from the smear of lubricant, come, and sweat that accompanied the thorough fucking that always followed Sin's return to their tiny home after a night patrol.

Seeing Sin in his BOPE uniform seemed to have the same effect on Boyd as seeing Sin in his Agency gear had in the past. On those nights they seamlessly transitioned from a kiss hello to quick fingers unfastening his armor, as if Boyd was getting off on borrowed adrenaline and the smell of gunpowder and danger.

Glancing down at his lover, a small smile stole across Sin's face. Unruly blond hair sprawled across half of Boyd's face, hiding the scruff that covered his jaw and the lips that Sin knew were parted in sleep. Boyd was turned toward Sin, having previously been tucked under his chin, and paint-stained fingers were curled loosely.

Sin brushed a kiss against Boyd's forehead before untangling their limbs entirely. There was still over an hour before they planned to head to the
outdoor market to set up Boyd's stall, but Sin couldn't sleep. His body wasn't conditioned for it, even after two years of being away from the routines that had dictated his life for so long.

He grabbed his briefs from the colorful linoleum floor, and pulled them on. The breeze gusted stronger, and Sin looked out the balcony door again. That kind of wind promised rain, which wouldn't be much of a surprise. In the middle of the summer in Rio, it always seemed to fucking rain.

Sin grabbed a crumpled box of cigarettes from the bedside table before going out to the balcony. A rickety wooden rail enclosed the space, and a slanted sheet of corrugated metal served as a roof. It provided shade as the sun began to rise over the beaches and hills of Rio de Janeiro, but he knew it would cause the balcony to swelter in another hour.

After flicking his lighter, Sin took a deep pull of his cigarette and leaned against the railing. His foot brushed against a bowl of water that was full of paint brushes, and he pushed it to the side with his toes before it knocked over to spill onto the filthy street below. Paintings sat gingerly on the balcony, leaning against the walls and drying in the open air. He examined each one with an exhale of bluish gray smoke.

Boyd's focus seemed to have been portraits for this month's market. Each painting told a story, and Sin had no doubts that Boyd had found real models for his art. Elderly people, withered and beaten from time and poverty, as well as clusters of children, one featuring a group of homeless kids that resided high up in the hills of Rocinha favela. The tiny faces looked familiar, but that was inevitable. Sin saw scores of children every day during his patrols with the Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais.

Turning away from the painting, Sin took another drag from his cigarette and looked out at the urban sprawl that surrounded their squat apartment building. The residents of Rocinha favela were waking up, and the
cobbled streets were starting to fill with people heading down the hill. This close to the bottom, the population was a hodgepodge of bohemian implants from foreign countries, young professionals, and the working class who had lived in the hills for years. But even they were better off than the people who lived higher up in the mountains. The colorful buildings that were stacked on top of each other like children’s blocks moved up further into the sky, but the vibrancy of the structures didn't take away the filth and corruption.

They had settled in Rio after a year of constant movement, choosing the city due to its increasing population and diversity. He'd been feeling restless and on edge after strings of odd jobs, and had found a position with the special forces police squad. Armor on his back and a gun in his hand had felt right. Natural.

But it had not taken long for the crawl of dissatisfaction to spread once again. It was quelled by Boyd, always by Boyd, but returned as soon as Sin set out in the armored vehicle and drove by skinny, ragged children who stared defiantly at the men with their big guns. They reminded him of his father, and Sin wondered too frequently what tiny Emilio’s life had been like in this monstrous collaboration of rich, poor, concrete, and jungle.

Sin heard the rustle of sheets not long before he felt Boyd approach. Even far from Lexington and the agent life, there were some things that hadn't faded. Boyd still automatically quieted his footsteps, even in their home.

He wrapped his arms around Sin from behind. With a kiss against Sin’s shoulder, he turned his face and rubbed it sleepily against Sin’s bare skin. "Come back to bed," he mumbled.

"We have to go soon," Sin said, twisting his arm back to cup Boyd’s head.
“So?” Boyd turned his head to kiss Sin's wrist. "Still enough time to have a good start to the morning."

The words had an immediate effect on Sin's dick, and he flicked his cigarette away after stubbing it out on the railing. He turned around, his back to the street and hands sliding up Boyd's bare back. Sin's eyes roamed over Boyd, and he pressed the other man closer when his body reacted further to the sleep-tousled sexiness. The scars on the left side of Boyd's face and the damage to his eye didn't take away from his looks. To Sin, they never had.

He leaned in and brought their lips together. A brief kiss passed between them, damp and just a tease of tongue, before it deepened. He pushed away from the railing and backed them into the rooms beyond the rickety door.

Boyd's fingers dug into Sin's shoulders and he parted his lips, allowing Sin's tongue inside. The backs of his knees hit the edge of the bed and Sin pressed him back until they fell onto the mattress.

"Let's blow off the market and stay here," Sin said against Boyd's mouth.

A smile flashed across Boyd's face. He spoke between kisses. "Can't. Need to clear inventory."

"So do I." Sin smirked, and rolled his crotch against Boyd deliberately.

Boyd snorted and nipped at Sin's lips. "We only have time for something quick now; we'd have to wait to do it proper tonight." His thumb ran just beneath the waistband of Sin's briefs. "I want to swallow your inventory a whole different way then."

"You better." Sin rolled to the side. "Let's get going, then."
Boyd smacked Sin's ass. "Tease." He stood with a yawning stretch. "If we're not doing anything then I should have time to take a quick shower. I'm still dirty from last night."

"You like it dirty."

"You like it when I like it dirty," Boyd retorted lazily as his footsteps padded across the studio. He left the door halfway open before starting the shower. The faucets turned on with a loud whine and the pipes shuddered before the patter of water filtered out of the room.

Sin got up and began the task of collecting the paintings that Boyd planned to sell. By the time he had stowed them in canvas carrying cases, Boyd was done, and Sin was covered in a sheen of sweat. He took his turn in the shower and came out to see that Boyd was dressed, wearing his eyepatch, and had already called a cab to take them to the open air market. It was a luxury they didn't normally utilize, but they needed to travel further up into the mountainside with the paintings.

Before they left the studio, Sin tucked his service pistol in the small of his back. It had become habit to carry it even when off-duty. Spending his day off around hundreds of people wasn't something that Sin particularly enjoyed, but sending Boyd alone wasn't an option. Despite having adjusted to monocular vision, Boyd still had a blindside and rarely carried a weapon due to the increased police presence in the favela.

The paranoia hadn't deteriorated in either of them over time. Looking over his shoulder had become second nature, as had worrying about the hours that Boyd spent alone wandering favelas and sketching overpriced portraits for tourists on Ipanema Beach. He knew it was the same for Boyd, who often watched from the balcony for Sin's return from work and mourned that he could not be Sin's partner anymore.
The ride to the market was not long, but the place was already crowded when they arrived. They wove their way through the booths with hot meats and different wares until they reached the tented stands that were closer to the stage where bands would play later in the day. Fortunately, Boyd's booth was furthest from the rest.

The day moved sluggishly and was filled with haggling, the occasional drama of a pickpocket or fight, and the occasional civilian shying away from Sin when they got too close. The locals sometimes recognized him from his patrols in BOPE's black, armored vehicles with their skull emblems. The tourists just seemed to sense that there was something off about the intense, green-eyed man who stood ramrod straight next to the fair-haired, tanned artist with the eyepatch.

Unsurprisingly, no one tried to rob them.

Boyd left the tent around noon and returned with pasteis and drinks for them. They sat beside the paintings with the wind blowing hot air and the smell of the market into the tent. Activity had slowed down at the height of the day, and there were only a few people wandering the market. An old man was studying the landscape paintings a little ways off and a band had begun to set up on the stage.

The brief moment of privacy caused the tension and continuous sense of anxiety to ease out of Sin. They remained seated even after finishing their snack and he absently kneaded Boyd's shoulders. The scarred pads of his fingers slid partially beneath the sleeveless shirt that Boyd wore. Boyd let out a quiet groan and tilted his head to give Sin better access.

Just when Boyd gave Sin a heavy-lidded look of appreciation, a small group of kids came running into the area. They were breathless with laughter, flushed red from the scorch of the heat, and speaking Portuguese loudly. When one of them saw Boyd and Sin, he pointed and said something to the
others. Five sets of eyes rounded on them, and the kid in front steeled himself before striding over. The other kids hovered behind him along the way.

"This should be good," Boyd said dryly.

The oldest child seemed to be about ten. He stared at Sin warily and stopped twice before a glance back at his friends seemed to propel him forward. He crossed his arms over his worn red shirt and jerked his chin up, turning his attention to Boyd.

"I've seen you before," he said in Portuguese. "You're that gringo that lives in our favela."

Boyd nodded and replied in the same language, "I draw people from there. Other places too." He pointed to the painting Sin had seen earlier of the kids from Rocinha. "You know any of those kids?"

"No," the kid said stoutly without bothering to look at it. "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Boyd echoed mildly, a faint hint of amusement in his voice. "I'm a deviant. What's wrong with you?"

"No. Your face."

"My face?" Boyd tilted his head as if thinking, and then grinned. "It's devilishly handsome."

Sin rolled his eyes.

"No," the kid said sharply. Behind him one of the kids snickered nervously, causing the oldest to stride forward. He started to get right up in Boyd's face before he caught sight of Sin's expression. He balked, and took a step back. "Your eye! I heard you got fired from the factory because of it."
Boyd's expression didn't so much as flicker. "This one?" he asked, pointing to his good eye.

"No, your other eye," the kid snapped impatiently. "Stupid fucking gringo, what's wrong with your face?"

"Ohh, this one," Boyd said in understanding, tapping the eyepatch. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I did!"

Boyd kicked his feet out in front of him and linked his hands behind his head. "Jaguar got it," he said casually.

"That's stupid," the boy retorted snidely. "You're lying. A jaguar wouldn't just get your eye. What'd you do? Piss off the wrong person? Maybe that guy behind you did it. My friend lost his arm to BOPE—"

"Why don't you get the fuck out of here before I rip your arm off?" Sin rumbled from his sprawled position on the ground. He tilted his head back, damp hair falling out of his eyes as he sneered at the kids. "Now!"

The younger kids immediately scrambled out of the tent. The oldest child lingered just long enough to gesture at his crotch crudely before he turned and sprinted after the others. Boyd watched them go with a faint hardness to his features, and a subtle thinning of his lips.

Sin scoffed and looked up at Boyd. "I thought we talked about this whole conversing with other people thing. As in, don't do it when I'm around."

Boyd's lips lifted, and the hard lines loosened when he looked over. "I can't sell paintings if I tell everyone to fuck off."
"You thought those kids were going to buy paintings?" Sin made a face, and got to his feet. He surveyed the area, focusing on the band that was playing.

"Nah." Boyd followed Sin's gaze. "But they've been working up the balls to talk to me for a month now, always hovering in the background when I was in the favela. I figured I may as well get that out of the way." He paused, watching them run past another booth, and scoffed. "Good thing they don't know about the other times that's happened or they'd be impossible next time I see them."

When Sin didn't reply, Boyd looked at him fully. With a frown pulling at his lips, he stood and turned Sin to face him.

"Hey," he said quietly, his voice pitched low enough that only Sin would hear. "We should talk later. I know you aren't happy here anymore."

"It doesn't matter. It will be the same wherever we go." Sin slid his hand in the pocket of his shorts, fingers curling around his cigarettes. "Civilians have an uncanny ability for sensing freaks."

Boyd's fingers tightened on Sin. "Don't—"

Before he could finish, Sin's gaze snapped over Boyd's shoulder and Boyd automatically fell silent. An elderly white man had wandered over to the booth. Right afterward, a young woman in a flowing skirt approached to study a painting. Boyd scowled, his fingers squeezing Sin's arm, but he fixed his expression into polite inquiry as he turned to face the customers.

"Can I help you with anything?" Boyd asked the woman in Portuguese.

She shook her head. "Just looking." She carefully picked up the painting and turned it at different angles for the light to hit.

"You painted all these?" the man asked, flipping through the canvases.
Boyd nodded. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Maybe," the man said. He pulled out one of the smaller pieces and squinted at the lower right corner. "What does this say?"

"That's my signature." When the man looked at him questioningly, Boyd added, "Isaac Winters."

"Ohh, yes, yes..." The man slipped the canvas back into place. He peered around, lingering slightly on the young woman as she approached Boyd with the painting. The old man watched the transaction briefly before turning his milky-blue eyes over to Sin. "And you're one of those BOPE people. I've seen you about. Francisco Perreira, right?"

"Funny, I haven't seen you on any of my patrols," Sin replied. There was something off about the old man, and he couldn't identify what it was. The lack of fear, the boldness, the name dropping—it was enough to put him on edge completely. "Who are you, and how did you come to know my name, old man?"

"Oh, you know, I hear things."

The woman left the booth with her painting, and Boyd approached the man.

"I heard you telling those children about your eye. Such a shame for a young man, such a shame. Makes it hard to find work, doesn't it? Especially being a foreigner." The man switched to English and spoke with an American accent. "But you know, Boyd, I hear it happened a different way entirely."

Boyd recoiled, his breath rushing out as Sin snapped his fingers around the grip of his pistol. The old man put his hands up, but there was no fear in his expression.

"Not so hasty, Agent Vega. I am here to talk, not to fight."
"Talk fast or die."

A small smile curved the old man’s mouth. "I see the rumors of your charm weren't exaggerated. You don't blend well, Agent. Several of your colleagues have had similar problems. I don't know why any of you bothered to try."

"What are you talking about?" Boyd demanded. "You're watching them? Did you hurt any of them?"

The smile turned sarcastic, and the old man slid his hands into the pockets of his khaki shorts. "Oh, yes. I terminated Kassian and the rest all by myself."

Sin tensed at the mention of Kassian. He hadn't thought about the man in months. He hadn't thought about any of them in months. Except...

"Who are you?" he asked roughly, cutting off the line of thought.

"You can call me Matthew. You haven't heard of me. Not even your mother—" Matthew looked at Boyd. "—has heard of me. Which is why she could not betray me."

Boyd's features darkened. "Tell us who you are and what you want, now, before we have to assume you're stalling us for backup."

"I told you, I want to talk. Everything has changed thanks to you two and your fellow conspirators. Both divisions of the Agency are finished. Liquidated. By me."

Sin looked at Boyd quickly, his eyebrows drawing together. "What do you mean?"
"You exposed the Agency's Directors, but me and another colleague were the ones who founded the organization that created you both. We were the Chairmen of the Board."

"What?"

The word came out harsh and quiet from Boyd. He shifted his weight away from Matthew further, his body tensing as if he wanted to strike. His hand automatically snapped toward his hip, and balled into a fist when it met emptiness.

"Careful now," Matthew cautioned. "Shooting an elderly American man in the midst of an impoverished area may draw attention that you don't want."

Sin looked around, his teeth gritting as he realized that it was true. But even as frustration shot through him, knowing he couldn't end this now and make a clean break from Brazil before anyone else could track them down, he realized that there was no one else around. Nobody but locals, young hippies, and people diligently selling their wares.

This man was alone.

"Why do you want to speak to the people who helped to destroy your organization?"

The smile grew wider, but there was an edge to it that had not been there before. "I once heard a quote. Quite beautiful, quite applicable to this situation."

Two couples meandered into the booth, pausing to look at Boyd's paintings. At first they seemed oblivious to the three men standing off to the side, but when one of the women looked at them, she nudged the others and they walked away.

"Get to the point, old man," Sin growled.
"Change is the signal for rebirth. I thought it was apt."

Boyd crossed his arms. "You're recreating the Agency?"

"You could say that." Matthew stepped past them both, and stood at the very edge of the tent. He looked out into the market, and cupped his hands behind his back. "I'm an old man. My colleague is an old man. When the Agency was founded, there was a certain vision. We wanted to protect the country, and we were willing to do whatever it took to do so. If we had to dirty our hands to ensure that our great nation continued to thrive, well, so be it. That vision has never changed, however, the manner in which our work was carried out by the Marshals became counterproductive."

The group of local children ran by the tent once again, their laughter consumed by the Samba band that was playing.

"My soldiers were designed to be strong, but years of hard use made them angry. Vengeful. We were hands off with the HR aspect after decades of standing over the Board and micromanaging their decisions. Frankly, we were uninterested in how the two divisions were managed as long as missions were accomplished successfully. However, we now see where things went... awry."

"It cultivated a culture of sociopaths." Boyd looked over Matthew's shoulder at a potential customer who slowed at the opening of the tent but, after a lingering stare at one of the paintings, continued walking. "Good job figuring that one out. Why are you telling us any of this?"

A low sound escaped Matthew's mouth. It sounded almost mirthful. "I was hoping that you would connect the dots a lot faster than that, Boyd. But to be blunt, in a sense, I admire you both. Not just you, but the others as well. Carrying out such a daring plan requires ingenuity. My new vision would benefit from people like that."
Sin stared at Matthew, disbelief momentarily striking him silent. It was only when the old man nodded encouragingly that he found his voice.

"You want us to work for you."

"You can't be serious." Incredulity stained Boyd's features and voice. "Why the hell would we ever willingly put ourselves under your control again? I have zero trust in you people. You talk a good game here but we'd just find ourselves stuck under another Seong again. If not now, then a year from now. There's no way in hell I'm putting myself in that position ever again."

"An expected response." Matthew turned to them again, his hands still clasped behind him. "But perhaps you should put your emotions aside and think clearly. The people who wronged you are dead. You were not on my radar until the end, and I have nothing to do with your vendetta. My goal is the same: to keep the nation safe from those who wish to take us back to the dark days of the World Wars."

The man's eyes moved over Boyd before turning to Sin. "Can you deny, Hsin, that those are the goals of the Agency? That many of your missions revolved around the defeat of terrorists and insurgents who put our people, our government, and our nation at risk?"

Sin's lips pressed together, and he cut his gaze away from the old man.

"Can you?" Matthew asked, his voice sharper. "Or has your hatred of the Marshals blinded you completely?"

"No," Sin snapped. "I never said that."

"Is that not why you chose to work for BOPE?"

"Don't pretend you know me, old man."
Matthew shrugged, a movement so subtle that his thin, button-down shirt barely moved. "Deny it if you want, but it's plain for anyone to see. You fought to escape the Agency just to find yourself in a similar role, but now, in a Brazilian ghetto. How utterly absurd."

He turned to Boyd. "And you. You're nothing as you are. A one-eyed foreigner peddling your silly pictures. The two of you helped to take down the most dangerous rebel group in the world. It's quite pathetic how meaningless your lives have turned out to be. It must be distressing to realize, after all of that time, that the normal life you craved isn't exactly what you thought it would be."

A muscle in Boyd's jaw twitched. He looked away stonily.

"Your friends are the same. Foolish children who thought the grass would be greener and found nothing but corruption, or worse, mediocrity."

Beams of sunlight streamed into the tent, casting a golden glow on the ground around them. Matthew turned his face upward to the sky.

"You know where the others are." Sin wasn't surprised. At this point, he couldn't be. If the Agency had found the two of them, as careful as they'd been, there was no telling who else had been rounded up.

"I do. It was idiotic to think you could hide. I admit, it took longer than expected due to Breanne Calahan's innovation, but there were ways. I have yet to proposition your loved ones, but the time will come."

"You want the others to join, too?" Sin demanded incredulously, taking a step closer to Matthew. "Do you expect us to believe this? That you tracked us all down to extend an invitation?"

"I have tracked most of you down." A hint of displeasure made its way into Matthew's voice. He turned to Sin again, and raised his shaggy, white eyebrows. "Your fathers are still unaccounted for."
"My fathers—"

"The General and the criminal, yes."

Sin replayed the words in his mind, and searched the pale eyes for a sign of deceit, but he could detect nothing.

"What—Where are they? Is Carhart alive?"

Matthew's eyes crinkled at the sides when he smiled coldly, an expression that was sharp and unpleasant. "Agree to hear my offer, and I will tell you what I know."

Sin didn't even hesitate. "Fine, offer whatever the fuck you want, just tell me."

"Predictable." Matthew chuckled quietly until it tapered off into a sigh. "They fled the compound with a guard. We traced them to a location in the Industrial district of Lexington. Judging from later investigations, it was an underground medical center that was run by his other bastard son—Damian Perry. The compound was in such shambles that no one made an executive decision about whom to locate and follow until it was too late. By then, they had gone dark, and have remained that way since. It is not too surprising. Your father had escaped us once before."

For a moment, Sin couldn't speak. For two years they had looked for signs of his father and Carhart, and for two years there had been complete radio silence. He'd convinced himself that they were long dead, executed on the compound during the revolt, but now...

Blinking, Sin shook the thoughts off and tried to collect himself. The man was still talking, but he'd heard none of it.

"—paired up or went off on their own. Kassian Trovosky and Ryan Freedman are in Mexico City. You might find it interesting to know that they
have both undertaken illegal activities to get by. Harriet Stevens, Douglas Ferguson and Casey Archer, on the other hand, are working with a private military organization in the Middle East. Owen O’Connell is in Ireland with the Journalist Guild, no surprise there either, I suppose. Your mother and Breanne Calahan are more difficult to find, which is likely why Vivienne stayed with her.”

Boyd sat on the edge of one of the tables. His arms were crossed, and his fingers tapped against his bare skin. He regarded Matthew with a frown. "You approached us first? Why?"

"Our original plan was to obtain the fathers first. Get them to agree after making the offer. Without them, the offer passes to you."

Sin frowned. "What are you saying?"

Matthew held his gaze and the shark-like smile appeared. "I’m saying that you and Boyd would be the Marshals. It would be a new era for the Agency, and you could be the ones overseeing it. Leave this pitiful shithole of a city and return to what you have been trained to do. Make a difference in the world once again. Matter once again. And gain the ability to protect or even fight side-by-side with your friends."

When he received no immediate response aside from stunned expressions and widened eyes, Matthew inclined his head. "I will find you again."

Boyd opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Matthew cut him off sharply.

"Keep in mind, I am offering you the chance to manage one of the most powerful organizations on the planet. Whatever you think you have to say or ask right now, don’t be rash. Once you give me an answer, it will be final, so consider carefully."
Matthew stepped outside of the tent, and turned to face them. "Think about my offer. Next time we meet, I'll expect an answer."

The Chairman of the Agency walked away, leaving them to stare at his back in amazement. He disappeared into the cluster of people as innocuously as he had appeared.

Once Sin lost sight of him, the day seemed surreal. The conversation, the information that they'd gained, and the possibilities. In the stunned silence of the tent, Sin met Boyd's gaze. He saw the same disbelief on Boyd's face that had consumed him with the Chairman's first utterance of 'the Agency.'

The Agency.

The hush that had fallen between them was disrupted only when Boyd turned to his paintings. He stared at them for a long moment, the portraits cast half in shadow, before slowly beginning the process of packing them away in the canvas bags.

"Are we ready to go?" Sin asked, his voice nearly lost in the beat of the music.

Boyd looked up again, and time seemed to still as they stared at each other. He inclined his head and quietly said, "Yes."

- The End of In the Company of Shadows -