



Tomorrow's Gambit
a Torquere Press High Ball
by Anah Crow

High Ball: Tomorrow's Gambit

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ISBN: 978-1-934166-70-3, 1-934166-70-7

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press electronic edition / March 2007

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78650.

www.torquerepress.com

Chapter One

"Quiet," Luka said, to break the silence. Carson looked over at him where he sat in the driver's seat of their transport unit, his strong features outlined by the dawn light filtering in through the dusty truck window, big hands wrapped loosely around the worn steering wheel. When Carson glanced in the side mirror, he could see five other transport units and the white medic truck following them to Camp Kingston.

"It should be." Carson rubbed at his temples and then shook his head to crack his neck.

"I mean you."

"What are you, the psych?" Carson reached for his mug in the holder between them and made a face at Luka.

"Nah." Luka laughed and shook his head, then fell silent; concentrating as he brought the rattling, top-heavy transport around a tight curve. "Just bored. Usually, you're going on about something."

"Bitching."

"Expounding."

"Not today. I have a headache." Carson leaned back in his seat, drinking the bitter, black slurry of synthetic coffee and hot water – not that many people knew what coffee tasted like anymore – and hoped it would help.

The security gates of the camp were closed, the lookout posts empty, the morning breeze in the trees the only movement that Carson could see when the transports pulled around the corner. Luka slowed the truck and Carson stepped out, feeling the wind tugging at his hair when he pulled his cap off to run his fingers through it. He needed a haircut, he thought, as he trudged up toward the gates. Maybe just a run-through with a pair of clippers that would send the unruly curls falling like black and silver leaves around his boots. He never looked when Mehrdad sheared him and the rest like sheep. Every year, his hair got a little less black and a little more silver. If he didn't look, he could ignore the marks that time was leaving on him.

He stuck an access card in the gate lock and jiggled it, hoping the power supply for the gate lock was still good. The lights flickered to life and there was a soft whir as the lock read the codes. Only habit kept Carson worrying about things like regulation haircuts; it wasn't like there was anyone left to report to anymore. This was Central Command. A little hair on the collar wasn't going to matter now.

Behind him, the other trucks pulled up, motors coughing and idling, breaking the silence. Doors slammed and boots crunched on the gravel, then Rudi and Paderau, a pair of corporals, were there to haul the heavy gates open.

"Morning, sir." Rudi saluted neatly, always a little more by-the-book than the rest of them.

"Hey, Rudi." Carson patted him on the shoulder and stepped back, settling his sunglasses into place as the sun began to touch the edges of the trees with light. His head was killing him and the light just made it worse.

"So." Paderau got a shoulder under one of the bars of his half of the gate and grunted, getting it moving. "You surprised it was us?"

"Not really." Carson gave him a grin. "I always said you boys were the best."

"All your fault, sir," Paderau quipped, giving Carson a grin.

Carson loped back to the truck and pulled himself up next to Luka. "Take us in as soon as the gates are clear. Straight up to Central. We'll clear the command rooms first and work down. Looks like the main power's off." Luka put the truck in gear and crept forward as the gates were opened. Carson flicked on his radio.

"Taf? Once we're in, take Kim and start the backup generators. Make sure we won't register on the main grid." The radio crackled and then Tafadzwa's thickly accented voice replied.

"Yes, sir. Gonna take me at least ten if I'm going to clear the disconnect on the grid."

"That's okay, just make sure we won't be tracked. This camp was officially closed and vacated as of midnight."

"Got it. Taf out."

"You're really not surprised it was us?" Luka had the window rolled down and the breeze came through the cab, clean and sweet.

"No." Carson fumbled in his breast pocket for his cigarettes. "And yes. I was trying not to think about it. When we got sent out to clean up Camp George, I knew we were going to be fine."

"For now." Luka took them through the curving streets of Camp Kingston, taking each speed bump carefully. It gave Carson a chance to look over the familiar arrangement of

low, gray buildings with black roofs and white trim, everything neat and clean, the flagpoles empty even a half hour past reveille. Talking to Luka was making his head hurt worse.

"We're fine. We're doing our jobs. For the future." He was trying to light a cigarette, he realized, only he had his utility knife in hand instead of his lighter. "Damn it." He frowned, trying to concentrate, and put his knife back in the upper pocket on the outside of his left leg, taking out his lighter instead.

"You okay?" Luka slowed to go around a corner and Carson rolled his window down for some fresh air, looking out as he tried to maintain his composure. There was something black sprawled across the sidewalk and Carson tipped his sunglasses down to make it out better. A black cat. A dead one, with its tongue hanging out, pink and innocent. Bad luck. Bad luck for someone.

"I'm fine."

"Ask Mehrdad for something," Luka said, and it sounded a little like an order. "And ask him for a haircut while you're at it. You're getting shaggy." Carson couldn't help laughing at that, no matter how it echoed in his throbbing head.

"Who died and made you command?" Carson finally got his cigarette lit and leaned back in his seat, his head bumping lightly on the thin wall between the cab and the cargo hold. His head felt worse, but it relieved the ache in his neck. It was a poor trade-off, but at least one thing wasn't hurting as bad. "You're just as bad." Luka's blonde hair was starting to curl at the nape of his neck and over his ears, feathering against his cheeks, contrasting with his dark, tanned skin. Only the standard issue cap they all wore was keeping it from tumbling down into his eyes.

"It's been a while since we had any leave," Luka pointed out. "But we're almost done. You look tired. Like I said, maybe you should see Mehrdad."

"Goddamn it, Luka," Carson finally snapped. "You're making my head hurt. Shut up. That's an order." There was no response. Carson said shut up, Luka shut up. Luka was an insubordinate pain in the ass sometimes, but when Carson drew the line, Luka wouldn't cross it. He might waltz up to it, he might do a soft-shoe along it, but he wouldn't cross it. If Carson drew it hard enough, Luka wouldn't even dance.

There was only silence. Almost silence.

"Don't sulk so goddamn loud, Luka."

"Sir, yes, sir," Luka said quietly, turning into the curving driveway leading up to the command center. That was better. Everything looked regulation from here. The lawns were bright green and groomed short, the steps of the command center were swept clean, the reinforced glass of the large doors was sparkling in the rising sunlight, the painted concrete walls were crisp white and spotless. A swirl of breeze plucked at the empty lines of the flagpole and made them sing against the metal. The medic truck carrying Mehrdad and Coleman pulled up behind them and Coleman – a lean, black whip of a man in a white medic's suit – hopped out first. He loped up to the lead truck and stopped a few steps back as Carson started to get down from the truck.

"The usual, sir?"

"Get Baptiste," Carson ordered. "Bring him up before we go in. I want this all on the record. You and Mehrdad come in as well. We're going to call them where we find them, load up, and move on." He stopped and patted his pockets. "Where's the list?"

"I got it," Luka called from inside the truck. How had he lost track of the list, Carter wondered. He didn't remember... maybe he had taken it out to review and put it down. The truck door slammed behind Luka, shaking him out of his thoughts.

"I'll get them," Coleman said, saluting hastily and heading back to the rest of the convoy. Carson dropped his cigarette on the sidewalk and crushed it underfoot, feeling out of sorts.

"Here you go." Luka held the list out and Carson took it, turning the printout over in his hands and reading through it to make sure it was complete. There were a handful of names toward the end that he'd never heard before. The rest, he knew. Maybe not to see their faces in his head, but he knew them. "Pretty short list. Won't hardly fill us up."

"We're coming to the end." Carson folded the list up carefully and tucked it into his breast pocket. "Let's go finish up." He pulled his gun from its holster and nodded at Luka to do the same. Coleman and Mehrdad came up at a trot, carrying medical bags, stethoscopes around their necks. Mehrdad was an elegant little man; short and slender and always neatly dressed in his white physician's uniform, he stood out among the broad, khaki-clad soldiers of the unit. Baptiste was right behind them, camera on his shoulder. "Roll that thing, Baptiste," Carson ordered. Baptiste flicked a switch on the camera and a green light on the front lit up. Carson turned his back on it and took the steps up to the front door.

Their footsteps echoed in the dark halls. Carson and Luka went ahead, casting long shadows, backlit by the light from Baptiste's camera. There were other shadows in the halls, solid shadows that huddled in the corners and stayed dark even when the light slid

over them. Bodies. Not many; the camp had been on skeleton crew for years. Carson snorted softly. Skeleton crew.

“Main office is down one level,” Luka said quietly.

“I remember.” Carson’s voice was taut with irritation. There was no reason for it, just that his head hurt and he was walking past the dead, his own dead, and he thought that he should be feeling something about it. “Command staff should have been in morning briefing.” There wasn’t anything to be briefed on anymore, not really. The whole world was almost at peace now. Still, there were protocols to be observed. Carson waited a few paces back from the elevator while Luka carefully pulled a body away from the door so they could enter unimpeded.

The Nobel Weapon didn’t penetrate more than ten, maybe fifteen feet below ground level, so Carson checked his gun before he punched the access code into the elevator.

“You’re not really expecting to need that, are you?” Baptiste asked, keeping his voice low.

“Not likely,” Carson said, looking over his shoulder and giving the camera a tight smile. “But it’s best to be careful. Command’s office being down a level could make things tricky.”

But it hadn’t. The weapon had done its job, and when they emerged into the circular room, lined with display screens and carpeted in blue, there was only silence.

“Let’s start calling them,” Carson ordered. “Top down.”

Mehrdad and Coleman gave their biolamps a knock or two to start them glowing, then headed for the front of the room. There, at the head of the horseshoe-shaped table, they put their lamps down and carefully sat an old man up in his chair. Mehrdad checked for vital signs while Coleman fished out the dogtags hanging around the withered neck.

“General Harrington,” Coleman said quietly. Carson checked his list.

“Anyone got a pen?” He patted his pockets and came up with nothing.

“Here.” Luka stepped forward and picked one up off of the table, offering it to Carson.

“Thanks. General Grant Harrington. ID number?”

“Niner, niner, one, two, five, eight, Hotel, Alpha, Romeo, Golf, zero, six, five,” Coleman recited, squinting in the light from the nearest biolamp.

“Check,” Carson said, making a mark next to Harrington’s name. “Mehrdad?”

“No signs of life.” Mehrdad checked his watch. “Time of death, six-twenty-four.”

“Take him up, Luka.” Carson scribbled the time down on the list. “Start sending the boys down. It’s all quiet.”

“Yes, sir.” Luka pulled the old general’s chair out and then hefted the withered body easily over his shoulder. “Want me to check on Taf?”

“Confirm with him and Kim, then report back.” Carson stepped aside to let Luka pass by in the spotlight of Baptiste’s camera. “We should be done by dinner. Next?” He turned back to Mehrdad and Coleman, who were processing the next body.

“Captain Timon Ferrell, sir,” Coleman said. Carson stepped closer to Baptiste for more light and started scanning the list.

“Last haul,” Luka said quietly as the truck rattled down a long, cracked stretch of highway. There were no lights, nothing but the nearly full moon above and the stars. Pandemics and human catastrophes had wiped the slate clean in most parts of the country. “How’s it feel to be in command of the whole fucking army?”

“Surreal.” Carson finished peeling the wrapper off of a meal ration and twisted the bar in half, offering one piece to Luka. If he were to be more honest with himself and Luka, he felt sad. And old. He felt older than General Harrington.

“Think they knew?” Luka glanced over at Carson when he took the meal ration.

“We all know,” Carson said, leaning back in his seat. He was one of the youngest of them, but he felt so old. “When we all signed up, we agreed that nothing mattered more than peace. We’ll hit the Kingston incinerator, fire it up, and send the films back west. Then it’ll be time for the last phase.”

“You got your orders yet?” Luka was munching on his rations, seemingly unconcerned. When the engine quieted on the way down a hill, Carson could hear singing coming from one of the other trucks and he laughed in spite of the ache in his head and his chest. He didn’t feel much like singing, but he was glad the others did.

“Nah.” Carson ripped a chunk of ration bar off with his teeth and chewed contentedly.

“Will you tell me when you do?” Luka glanced over at Carson; it was too dark in the cab to make out his expression clearly when he turned away from the rising moon.

“Sure.” It was against protocol, and Carson didn’t know why he agreed. Maybe because it was Luka. Luka was... Luka. He knew everything Carson did. Kept him from forgetting, too, which Carson was doing with alarming frequency these last few days.

“Incinerators should be running by morning,” Luka said mildly, changing the subject. “We’re cleared for destruction of the last military equipment from Camp Kingston.”

“The Core better have the power on,” Carson said, feeling the irritability come swinging back. “I swear, I’m gonna kick that machine in the processors if it screws up the timing like it did down in Camp Henry.” The computer program coordinating the Nobel strike and subsequent clean up had nearly caught them in the area of effect.

Carson started feeling more than a little irritable after that. Everyone else’s headache had cleared up in a few days; his kept coming back. He didn’t let anyone but Luka know. It wasn’t worth the trouble. It was only a little longer until they were done, anyway. Once, that thought had made him feel calm, contented. Now it just pissed him off like most of the things that used to make him happy. He took a vengeful bite of ration bar and felt his teeth creak.

“When do you think the orders are going to come?” Luka pulled off the old highway and headed the wrong way up an empty on-ramp.

“I don’t know!” Carson spewed half-chewed rations across the dashboard and punched the truck door hard enough to make it sound like a bass drum in the small space of the cab. “Ask me again and I’ll fucking shoot you.” He inhaled a piece of ration bar in his ranting and started to cough. Luka, unflustered, pulled a canteen from the rack over the seats and handed it over.

“Forget I asked,” he said, raising his voice enough to be heard over the sound of Carson choking.

Chapter Two

They camped in the empty shell of the old garbage incinerators above the lake. The moon and stars shining in the broken skylights and the glow of the fires they built on the concrete floor lit the space enough to turn the dead machinery around them into the skeletons of monsters. Outside, the trucks loaded with the bodies of the dead waited for the rumbling furnaces to reach full heat.

Carson couldn't sleep. He wandered their tiny encampment to find it all silent in the small hours of the morning, seven tents dark and quiet, even the medical tent, where Mehrdad usually sat up late reading. The tent he shared with Luka was dark. The two of them got a tent to themselves instead of a four-man tent like the rest. It was one of the perks of rank, only having to listen to one other guy snore in your ear. Carson hadn't checked, but Luka was probably sound asleep, sprawled on his belly and taking up more room than Carson and both their kits together.

Having nowhere better to go, Carson climbed a long flight of rusting stairs, and then another, to walk the catwalks high above the floor. He found a small door at the far end of the building and let himself out, pushing at it until the rusted hinges yielded and let him out onto a wide landing. A fire escape, he realized. From here, he could see the lake glittering under the moon; so vast that if he hadn't seen a map before he might have thought it was the sea. The night was cool and clear, the wind felt good on his aching head.

He sat down under the moon and stars and fished in his pocket for his cigarettes, then lit one successfully after a few tries with the wind tugging at him. Absently, he scratched at his shoulder where he'd had his regular shot of serum. Out here, moving among the buildings of the last world, there could still be viral agents from the pandemics, or bacteria they'd never encountered. The shots kept them safe, kept them going. They'd started burning a little lately, same time that the headaches started. Carson exhaled smoke at the sky. It was just as well that they were almost done; he was breaking down, getting old.

"Hey."

The gentle greeting nearly sent Carson down the stairs as he leapt to his feet, whirled about, and stepped back into space. Luka grabbed him by one flailing hand and pulled him back up onto the landing before he could fall.

"Goddamnit, Luka," Carson grumbled. His cigarette was gone, flame over filter, into the dark of a loading dock three stories below.

"Sorry. Didn't find you outside or by the trucks. You okay?"

"I can't sleep." Carson dug around for another cigarette and tromped down a few steps before sitting down again. "That's all."

"Headache still?" Luka sat down on the landing behind him and Carson grudgingly appreciated the warmth of his proximity. It was a little cool if you were up here on your own in your shirtsleeves.

"I'm fine."

"Your neck hurts, too," Luka said, leaning over and fishing in Carson's pocket to get a cigarette for himself.

"Does not."

"You're holding your head funny." Luka snagged Carson's cigarette to light his own from and Carson jerked around to protest, or he almost did.

"He...ow!" He slapped a hand to the side of his neck as the muscles clenched painfully.

"See?" Luka lit his cigarette and handed Carson's back.

"I hate you," Carson growled, taking his cigarette without looking over his shoulder.

"Here." Luka's hands were warm on Carson's neck, and surprisingly gentle. He seemed to know where the worst knots were and worked at them slowly, leaving Carson whimpering in spite of himself. At least, Carson thought, they were alone here and there was no one to hear the little noises of pain and pleasure that escaped him. He could feel the calluses on Luka's fingers, stroking down the sides of his throat, loosening the wire-taut muscles. He wanted to ask how Luka knew how to do this, but he could barely think enough to smoke his cigarette, much less formulate a question.

"Oh. Fuck," was all he could say when Luka's thumbs dug into the knots of muscle between his shoulder blades and his spine. He gave up on the cigarette and crushed it out under his boot so that he could melt and whimper without setting himself on fire. Luka pulled him back slowly so that he was supported between Luka's solid thighs, his head leaning back on Luka's chest, while Luka's strong fingers started working over his shoulders and chest.

"Better?" Luka asked. Carson could swear Luka looked a little smug, but it was hard to tell in the moonlight and from this angle.

"Uhuh," Carson said articulately.

“Good.” Luka ran a thumb along the aching muscle of Carson’s jaw, looking down at him, and Carson thought that maybe he wasn’t smug, maybe that look was something else. “Car...?” Luka petted the other side of Carson’s jaw, thumb trailing over Carson’s lips, and for some reason Carson wasn’t cold anymore. Not at all.

“Yeah?”

Luka shifted, leaned in a little more, one hand straying down Carson’s chest, the other still tracing his features with feathery touches that soothed. Luka’s fingertips drifted over Carson’s lips again and when they were out of the way, Luka leaned in to kiss him. Whether Carson meant to or not, he moved to meet Luka halfway.

It had been years since Carson had kissed anyone, male or female. He’d been so busy he’d almost forgotten what it was like. He froze a little at first. It seemed that Luka remembered what to do, though, his mouth slow and gentle on Carson’s, waiting for him to catch up. After a moment or two of Luka’s soft mouth on his, Luka’s warm, wet tongue tasting his lips, Carson’s brain, or whatever was in charge of sex and kissing and things, kicked in. He kissed Luka back with a low growl that got a soft noise of surprise out of Luka, leaned back and got one hand in Luka’s hair to hold him close so he couldn’t get out of kissing Carson until Carson was good and done.

Carson had no idea how he’d forgotten how good this was, how he’d forgotten the rush of heat in his veins and the extra skip in his heartbeat. Luka yielded fast enough to his demand for control, he always did, and Carson slid his tongue into Luka’s mouth to explore. Luka’s hands slid over his chest and down and when Carson felt Luka tugging at his shirt, he arched a little to let Luka get it free of the waistband of his pants before going back to kissing hard and hot.

Oh. God. Luka’s warm, rough hands slid up Carson’s bare chest and the touch of someone else’s skin on his, someone’s living skin on his, made him shiver and ache. He pushed up into their kisses, bumping his teeth against Luka’s with someone’s lip in the way, but couldn’t feel anything except Luka’s hands on him enough to know which of them it was who was bleeding a little into their mouths. Years of touching no one but dead people, beyond a slap on the shoulder or a couple hits in sparring practice; Carson didn’t know how starved he was for this until Luka touched him.

“Car.” Luka’s voice was unsteady and his thighs tightened around Carson’s ribs.

“Luka.” Carson was amazed that his voice still worked. He pushed away, ignoring Luka’s whine of protest, so that he could turn and kneel where he’d been sitting, the diamond grate of the steps digging into his knees. Cupping Luka’s face in one hand, he pulled Luka back in for a kiss that Luka devoured with a hunger that put a fire to match it in Carson’s belly.

Oh. God, Carson thought. *I'm going to miss you.* The thought made his breath catch and he pushed Luka back onto the landing, crawling up over him.

Luka yielded easily enough, reaching up to slide fingers under Carson's hair. Luka pulled Carson down for a kiss and to rub the knots at the nape of his neck. Luka's mouth was hot and gentle and tasted like cigarettes and coffee. Everything felt surreal and right at once. Carson bit at Luka's lower lip and Luka made a soft sound that Carson had never heard him make before, a little noise that felt like an electric shock. As he slid a hand up under Luka's shirt, Luka tilted his head back, offering his throat up to Carson's mouth. Carson kissed down, licked at tanned skin and fine gold stubble, and Luka said his name, just once, so low he almost didn't hear it.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Carson's rational mind was taking notes, as though he was going to get to do this all again some day, as though this wasn't some strange detour in all the years Luka had been his best friend. Propped up on one elbow, ignoring the way the rusting steel bit into his flesh even through his sleeve, Carson explored the smooth planes of Luka's chest with his free hand, kissed and bit his way along Luka's taut throat. Luka made that same soft noise when Carson's mouth found Luka's pulse, Carson's teeth digging in a little, his tongue feeling Luka's blood washing past.

"Careful," Luka whispered, tightening one hand in Carson's hair to pull his mouth away. "Careful. No marks."

No marks. Right. Carson moved to kiss Luka on the lips again, to swallow Luka's words and breath, tongue slicking through that mouth like he owned it. Luka's body arched up against Carson's, hips moving to slide Luka's hard cock against Carson's thigh. The sensation made Carson shudder and he gasped against Luka's mouth. The want in the way Luka moved left him breathless. When Luka slid a hand down to stroke him through his pants, Carson whimpered, grinding against Luka's palm, forgetting how to kiss.

"Luka..." It came out unsteady and a little desperate. Carson wasn't in control of anything right now, and he shivered at the thought. This was all Luka's idea.

"Let me..." Luka murmured. Luka's hands slid down to undo Carson's belt and pants. While Luka was busy at that, Carson pushed Luka's shirt up further, to kiss his chest. Luka's skin was so much warmer than the air, warmer than Carson's lips, and it tasted of Luka's familiar smell: sweat and sun and all the heat and dust and oil and smoke of keeping the trucks running. Without thinking, Carson slipped his hand down to mirror Luka's hands on his belt and fly. He was deft enough to get them undone while he kept exploring with his mouth, discovering as he did that he could make Luka clumsy if he kissed and bit a nipple just right. Any smugness at the discovery disappeared when Luka slid a hand into his briefs and brushed strong, rough fingers over the head of his cock. Carson gasped Luka's name loud enough for Luka to cup his face in the other hand and pull him up for a kiss to silence him.

After that it was quiet except for their harsh breathing between kisses. Carson worked Luka's pants and briefs down enough to be able to stroke him, found himself rocking his hips and pushing into Luka's hand instinctively for more friction that sent shivers of pleasure through him. When Carson touched him, Luka sounded the same as he did when he was getting off in the dark of the tent in the small hours of the night, the same catch of breath and shaky inhalation. The realization made Carson shudder and he kissed Luka hard to silence himself.

His blood was pounding in his head, his belly was tense, every pass of Luka's hand sent another wash of heat through him. He tightened his hand a little around Luka's hot, hard cock, feeling his fingers get wetter every time they slid over the smooth, slick head, doing it again just to feel Luka's hips come up and his breath catch. The reactions felt like they were happening to him, they felt that good and visceral.

Before he knew it, Luka was gasping against his mouth and whispering his name. Luka's boots scraped on the metal step as he planted his feet to push his hips up faster, his hand tightening in Carson's hair.

"Fuck. Car," he muttered. And then his body went taut, head back, small of his back coming up off the grating. Carson's eyes focused and he could see Luka's face perfectly in the moonlight, eyes closed, expression all pleasure. On the next stroke, Carson's fingers were coated with heavy, wet heat, and the sensation made him groan. His body moved faster, rocking over Luka's and shivering.

"Luka," he moaned, dropping his head to Luka's shoulder. Luka's body was still moving under his when he lost all sense of rhythm and reason and had to bite his lip to keep from saying anything else. His body moved in spite of himself, shaking, pushing his cock hard into Luka's hand, spilling hot come all over Luka's belly. He whined, burying his face in the curve of Luka's neck, trying to be quiet through the rush of pleasure as it washed over him, deeper and longer than he knew it could.

Afterward, Luka pulled him down and they lay there, his body half-covering Luka's, limp and exhausted. Little shivers kept running through Carson's body and he could feel them run through Luka, too. His head was a swirl of thoughts and uncertainty and contentment, a jumbled mess that he ignored in favor of luxuriating in how it felt to lie with his cheek on Luka's chest, listening to Luka breathe.

"Cold out here," Luka said at last. It was, the temperature was dropping further the closer it got to dawn. Carson didn't want to move. He felt undone, relaxed, in spite of the metal under him that was leaching away his body heat.

"Yeah," he said unhelpfully, not moving.

“Car.” Luka’s voice was that flat tone he got right before he got irritated and Carson knew it so well, knew the exact look on Luka’s face that went with it, he had to laugh because he didn’t even have to look up to see it. “Get off.” Luka smacked him lightly in the side of the head, and Carson rolled off, bumping up against the railing and looking up at the stars.

Damn, it was cold. Carson pulled his pants back up and fastened them again, pulled his shirt down to meet them, wiped his hand off on his shirt, and made a mental note to change. His head was swimming with questions through the afterglow of coming like that, but he was afraid that if he spoke it would break some spell and they’d never get back here again.

“You need some sleep,” he said quietly, instead.

“You, too.” Luka struggled to his feet, pulling his shirt down over his sleek, semen-splashed belly and doing up his pants. “That’s an order.” Luka poked Carson with a foot and Carson groaned, but obeyed, using the rusting railing to pull himself to his feet. “How’s your head?” Luka asked, once Carson was on his feet. Carson shook his head experimentally and was surprised to find that it didn’t hurt that badly anymore.

“Pretty good.” He reached past Luka to give the door a tug, only to have it clunk solidly instead of squeaking open. “Shit.” Luka looked at him wide-eyed and then turned to test the door for himself.

“Locked.” Luka was master of the obvious and Carson started to laugh again.

“Oh, hell.” Fortunately, the stairs looked pretty solid and Carson started down them. “Come on.” Grumbling softly, Luka followed him down to where the last ladder was rusted into place, eight feet off the ground. Carson swung over and dropped first, Luka following a moment later. They walked around to the main doors in silence. When Carson thought Luka wasn’t looking at him, he looked over at Luka, who was walking with his hands deep in his pockets, eyes on the moon and the stars. A head full of questions was as frustrating as a head full of pain, but Carson knew that if Luka had anything else to say on the subject, he’d say it.

They made it back to their tent without incident, without another word, changed clothes in silence, and tumbled into their bedrolls. Luka lay on his belly, arms crossed under his head, facing away from Carson; Carson lay curled on one side watching Luka. The distance between them, all of a few inches, felt intolerable, and Carson didn’t know why. He was still trying to figure it out when he slipped into sleep.

When Carson finally woke, the tent was empty and he could hear the voices of his unit in the distance, the growl of a truck, the rumble of a conveyor belt. He reached into his kit and brought out his relay communications unit. It was small, the size of his palm, and worked sporadically at best. This close to Kingston, it should be functional, able to pick up the orders being broadcast from the Core to anyone with the clearance to pick them up. When he turned it on, sitting up across from the empty space where Luka had been, it whined, then indicated that it was searching for a working relay point. Carson yawned and ran a hand through his hair, waiting.

Instead of flashing at him to indicate a relay connection, the unit beeped and went dark. Carson banged it against his palm a few times and tried again. This time it didn't even get through the whine. Everything was getting old, from Carson to the equipment. He crawled over to Luka's kit, took out Luka's relay unit, and flopped on Luka's blankets to try again. If this one didn't work, he'd have to go borrow Mehrdad's. They only had three small relay units for receiving direct orders; everything else had to go through the main communications unit using someone's command clearance. The main unit wasn't configured for picking up canned orders and Carson didn't need more of a headache right now.

When the connection finally came through and the screen flashed a full five green signal bars at him, Carson's chest tightened and he felt a hot adrenaline rush under his skin. Orders coming down usually gave him a kick, but not with this twist of fear. There couldn't be too many orders coming anymore. They should be done soon. He put in his own command clearance number and waited.

[Report to Camp Nickel], it read. [Confirm lockdown of waste containment units. Await orders.] Carson didn't know whether he felt relieved or disappointed. His hands were unsteady when he tucked the unit away in Luka's kit and started to pack up, his things first, then Luka's. He needed to wash, he needed to eat. He needed to do a lot of things. Anything but sit here with his head in his hands and feel like this. He crawled out of the tent to find Rudi reviewing their supplies.

"Morning, Corporal."

"Almost noon, sir," Rudi said, looking up and grinning at Carson. Rudi's rusty hair had more gray in it than Carson's, but there was a boyishness to Rudi's face and attitude that always made Carson feel twice his age. "You want something hot, stove's still on over there." He pointed over to where a camp stove was set up, a pot of 'coffee' simmering on a burner.

"Thanks. We got running water in here at all?" Rudi pointed over to one of the doors with the silhouette of a man on it.

"In there, sir. Kim got it going."

Carson washed and pulled on a clean shirt, came back to get his coffee, and found the kits and bedrolls stacked beside the tent, which Rudi was busily breaking down.

“Thanks again, Rudi.” Carson nodded at Rudi’s bright smile, then got himself a coffee and went to watch the rest of the unit work.

One of the furnaces at the far end of the building was up to temperature, and that was all they needed to start. The conveyor belt to it was moving, too, with a creak and shudder and whine that put Carson’s teeth on edge. One of the trucks was backed up to it, Charlton and Reid stood on the open gate and slung bodies onto the belt one at a time; wrists and ankles, swing, and release. A little further down, out of the line of fire, Mehrdad and Coleman checked each corpse over once more and Coleman snapped off their dogtags before the belt took the body away. Cables from the power supply to the furnace snaked across the floor and out the door. The trucks must be recharging from it while they were here. Everything was running like clockwork, even when Carson slept in; it was a good feeling.

It must have been hot near the mouth of the furnace where Luka, Tafadzwa, Kim, and Gervasio were working on some of the machinery, because they were all stripped to the waist. The sweat on their bodies shimmered in the light from the mouth of the working furnace. Tafadzwa, broad as a door and black as coal, kicked the pipes leading to one of the gauges, making them ring. A little percussive maintenance was never out of place. He beckoned to Luka and braced himself against the pipes. Luka scaled him, agile and quick, standing on Taf’s shoulders to get up where he could take a wrench to a valve. All the muscles on Luka’s back stood out for a moment, then the valve squealed and surrendered suddenly, sending Luka tumbling backward.

Carson dropped his coffee and sprinted forward before the fact that he was too far away to get there in time could register. Kim, almost as small as Mehrdad, danced out of the way wisely when he heard Luka shout. Luka was already twisting in midair to get his feet under him and he almost managed, then Gervasio was there to make up the difference. Luka bounced off of him like he was a bumper and straight into Tafadzwa, who elbowed him in the ribs, laughing, and took away the wrench. Gervasio cuffed Luka in the back of the head, getting a knee in the thigh for his troubles.

Carson came to a halt, boots sliding on the concrete a little, trying to figure out why he’d been running in the first place. They had it all under control. They always did. Irrationally angry, he stalked back and scooped up his mug, which had only bounced and landed on its side, coffee leaking out of the spill-proof lid. Carson took a drink to wash the lump out of his throat.

“Hey,” he shouted, his voice cutting through the sound of the belt and the furnace and the rumble of the next truck coming in. The response was instantaneous. Charlton and Reid dropped the body they were about to swing, Coleman snatched the dogtags off of the body in front of him and then turned to face Carson, shoulders back, the four at the

furnace stopped horsing around and came to attention, Mehrdad looked up, his expression mild and curious. "We got orders. We're going north. Y'all get that other furnace going. I want to get out of here."

"Sir, yes, sir." The response came in unison, without hesitation. Carson turned his back on them, feeling his head start to hurt. The spilled coffee was a small, glossy black pool on the floor, too dark to be blood, but it put Carson in mind of blood anyway. He gestured for the other truck to pull up to the belt for the second furnace and went to find a cigarette, something to keep him from thinking. His head was starting to throb again.

Disposing of the bodies and shutting the incinerators down took until the sun was dropping in the west and turning the sky a myriad of colors. When they were packing up the trucks, Baptiste brought Carson the memory card from the camera.

"Sir." Baptiste saluted Carson, the card held out in the palm of his other hand. Carson returned the salute and took the card carefully. It was small, weighed about the same as a feather, but it, like all the ones before it, was full up with death and dying.

"Thanks, Baptiste." Carson tucked the card away in his pocket, carefully.

"My last one, sir. I thought I had a few more, but I was wrong." Baptiste looked a little abashed at that. "I should've picked up a couple back at Kingston."

"Don't worry about it." Carson patted the man on the shoulder. "Doesn't matter from here on in. Good work." Baptiste gave Carson an uncertain smile.

"Thank you, sir."

"Go tell Luka I'm ready to start moving us out. We can get a few kilometers behind us before we're hungry again."

"Sir, yes, sir," Baptise said cheerfully, giving Carson a nod and then loping off to find Luka and get things going. Carson made his way to the lead truck and swung up into the passenger seat, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back, resting before they were on the road again.

"Hey." Luka hopped up into the driver's seat, put a pair of mugs into the cup holders, and nudged Carson in the shoulder.

"What?" Carson pulled his sunglasses down and cracked an eye open to look at Luka.

“Take this.” Luka pushed a pair of red and white capsules into the palm of Carson’s hand.

“You told Mehrdad...” Carson sat up, starting to get angry.

“That I had a headache, yeah,” Luka said. He started the truck and then flashed Carson a grin. “Come on, Car. I keep your secrets.” The grin faded a little, Luka turning serious for a moment, and then he turned away to put the truck in gear and pull out.

Right. Last night. Carson looked at the pills and then popped them in his mouth, washing them down with a swallow of hot coffee. “Thanks,” he said quietly. Thanks for right now. Thanks for last night. “I know you do.” He didn’t quite know why he said it out loud, but as soon as he did, he felt better.

Chapter Three

They camped in the middle of nowhere that night, pulling the trucks into a loose half-circle up in the hills and using the lights to make camp by. Everyone seemed in good spirits and they sat around the fire until it burned down, listening to the distant howl of coyotes and laughing at Sky howling back at them in perfect imitation. Finally, Carson sent them all to bed, ordered Lauritz and Sullivan to take one more walk-around, and crawled into his tent beside Luka when they reported back and turned in.

He wanted to say something to Luka, but Luka was already asleep as far as Carson could tell, head buried in his arms, breathing steady. Carson slid into his own bedroll and pulled it around him, lay there staring at the stars through the mesh of the tent where Luka had left the rain-cover open. Life was good. He could hear some laughter in the distance, recognized the lowest tones as Tafadzwa and the lightest ones as Gazsi. He knew them all, their laughter, their voices, every little oddity about them, when he bothered to think about it. And he knew Luka best of all, or he thought he did. He never would have expected last night, at least not until it happened, and then he could hardly feel surprised. It was Luka. It was him. It was what they needed. Carson wanted to reach over and touch Luka's arm, touch his back, feel his heart beating. One hand even made it out of the blankets to hover, uncertain, in the moonlight between them, but Carson pulled it back in and turned over, tried to sleep, and eventually managed to fall into the dark.

Carson woke with a start and sat bolt upright, the knife of wrongness in his chest shocking him out of a sound sleep. He listened, but didn't hear anything. The only thing out of place was the fact that Luka's bedroll was empty. When he reached over to touch the blankets, there was still a little warmth in them. Carson laid back down, but couldn't shake the sense that something was wrong.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Carson flailed and got out of his blankets, found he'd fallen asleep with his boots on as usual, took his gun from under his pillow, and then crawled out of the tent, grabbing his flashlight on the way over the threshold. Still sleepy and fuzzy-headed, he stumbled downhill and could hear nothing, then turned and tromped back up toward the trucks.

He came around the back of one of the transports, flicking his flashlight here and there, yawning. The flashlight caught something near the ground and he stopped in his tracks. He dragged the circle of light back as claws of adrenaline ripped away the last of the veil of sleep over his mind and his head started to pound in time with his heart.

"It's you." Carson focused his flashlight on Luka's face, pulling out his gun with the other. His second in command was crouched over Mehrdad's serum case, syringe in

hand, a few vials and an IV bag laid out neatly on a sterile pad. "I wondered why I never got my fucking orders. They sent you the orders. Did you do something to my relay unit?"

"Carson." Luka put the syringe down and left his hands where Carson could see them. "Please. Wait. I didn't touch anything. I don't have any orders."

"I don't understand," Carson said, rubbing at his forehead with the back of the hand that held the flashlight, sending the circle of light bouncing all around them, off of trees and shrubs and the hulks of their empty transports. Luka pushed himself to his feet and pulled his gun in turn the moment the light was off of him. "Don't move." Carson brought the light back to shine in Luka's face, steadying his gun hand. "Did they say why? When they told you what to do, did they tell you why they picked you and not me?"

"Just put the gun down and I can explain." Luka sounded pained, his free hand coming up to try and shield his eyes from the light.

"I don't think so." It was ludicrous, really, that the two of them, who were going to die soon anyway, should be standing off against one another like this. Especially after all this time.

"Car..."

"Lieutenant, soldier," Carson snapped. His finger slid against the cool plane of the trigger, tightened up a little to take up the bit of give that kept him from firing it accidentally.

"Sir."

"Put the gun down, Luka. That's an order." Carson finally remembered how to give orders.

"Sir, yes, sir." Luka put the gun down slowly, kneeling down beside the case of antivirals and antibiotics, all the life-giving, life-preserving tools of Mehrdad's trade.

"Tell me what they said to you when they gave you the order." Carson braced his gun hand on top of the one with the flashlight, trying to keep them both steady.

"They didn't..." Luka shook his head and sat back on his heels, letting his hands rest limply on his thighs. "There was no order, sir."

"Explain."

“They didn’t give me the order, Carson,” Luka said quietly. “How could I have gotten one and not told you? This isn’t about that.”

“Then tell me what it’s about.”

“It’s about saving us.” Luka looked down at his hands, turned them palms up, and shook his head. “It’s not the end of program. I’m not under orders. I don’t know when the end of program is supposed to come. I don’t want the end of program to come.”

“This is our lives you’re talking about, Luka,” Carson whispered. “Our whole fucking lives.”

“That’s my point.” Luka started to get up and Carson kept the gun trained in the middle of his chest, finger trembling on the trigger. “Our whole lives, Car. Everything.”

“We’re almost done with the program,” Carson said stubbornly. The sadness in Luka’s voice was so thick he breathed it in and it threatened to choke him. “For the future, Luka. Remember?”

“I remember. Car, just put down the gun. Please.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve done this. You’ve been putting something in the serum.” It dawned on Carson slowly, everything seemed to be slower these days. Slower, sadder, heavier; the world was painful.

“Not for you, no. And I haven’t been putting anything in. I’ve been... taking it out.” Luka was on his feet now, reaching for Carson’s gun. “They’re not anti-anything, Car. They’re mood altering drugs. I’m sorry about the headaches. There’s these withdrawal symptoms. I tried to make it slow, but I was running out of time.”

“What about you?” Carson stepped back out of Luka’s reach. “Don’t make me do it, Luka.”

“Resistance, I guess. Happens to some people. I asked Mehrdad about it once. He increased my dose, but it didn’t work. I just made like it did.” Luka took a step back, but didn’t drop his hand. “Just put the gun down, please?”

“And so you decided to mess with the program. Damnit, Luka. That’s treason.” Carson wanted to cry. “You did this to me. To us. You know what I have to do now.”

“You don’t have to do it.”

"Yeah, I do. Luka... end of program. You know how many bodies we've carried? Just us?" Carson's hands were shaking and, the way the light danced over Luka's calm face, there was no hiding it. "Just our unit? Luka, we brought ourselves here, one corpse at a time. The program has to end."

"Then let it end." Luka took another step forward and reached out again.

"When the orders come." The trembling light was making Carson dizzy, nauseous, and he threw it down. With the cloud cover breaking up and the moon full, he would be able to see well enough. The flashlight bounced at his feet, turning itself off with the impact, and for a moment they were both in darkness.

Suddenly, Luka's hands were on the gun and there was a sharp crack; Carson's wrist, not the gun. One of Luka's legs hooked behind his and then he was airborne for a moment, just a moment before the ground came up and slammed all the air out of him. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard the gun clatter and slide down the hill a little, then Luka's weight was on him. He threw a punch that grazed the side of Luka's head before Luka grabbed one of his wrists in each hand and pinned him to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Luka said softly, his breath warm on Carson's cheek. "I'm so sorry." Carson's injured wrist was screaming under the pressure of Luka's grip, but he blocked it out, or tried to. His old techniques weren't working as well as they should.

"What's wrong with you?" Carson hissed. The question should have been, 'what's wrong with me?' He should have been shouting for help, should be fighting back, but neither option was one he could bear to pursue. If he shouted for help, there'd be a bullet in Luka's head right now. What Carson couldn't do, Anacleto could, or Lauritz, or Yale. Any of them but Carson and Luka.

"Nothing. For once." Luka leaned back, taking some of his weight off of Carson's wrist. "Can we talk about this?"

"Can we talk?" If Carson wasn't pinned down, he'd have hit Luka for that, when nothing else had really inspired him so far. "Can we... You ruin everything, everything. We have the blood of our brothers all over our hands. And you want to talk?"

"Yeah." Luka let go slowly, shifting back so that Carson could sit up. Carson propped himself up carefully on his injured right arm and took a swing with his left. It wasn't his best punch, but it caught Luka in the jaw and the man sprawled backward, leaving Carson free to roll to his feet.

"Don't you ever fucking disobey me again." Carson cradled his wrist in his good hand, not that there was much good about it since bouncing it off of Luka's jaw, and staggered toward where he thought he heard his gun fall.

“That mean I’m still part of the unit?”

“Until I court-martial you, yes.” Carson kicked his gun in the dark and had to get down and pat around for it. “And don’t shoot me. That’s an order.”

“I don’t want to shoot you.” When Carson finally got the gun and turned around, Luka was standing there, lit by the pale moonlight, with his hands in his pockets. “The last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

“Breaking my wrist doesn’t count?” Carson put his gun back in the holster, but didn’t fasten the strap.

“It’s not broken, you big baby. Let me see.” Luka took a few steps down the hill, then stopped. “It’s not like I don’t have Mehrdad’s kit open already.”

“Where are Mehrdad and Coleman?”

“Asleep. Let me see your arm.”

There was a moment of quiet, a stand-off of sorts in the moonlight, and then Carson trudged back up to where Luka was waiting.

“When did you know?” They sat on the tailgate of the medic truck, the medkit and a biolamp between them, while Luka carefully bandaged Carson’s wrist with fiberglass tape.

“A while ago. Started just feeling off. Mood swings and headaches.” Luka smoothed the tape gently up and across Carson’s palm. “Started really... feeling.”

“Don’t do this, Luka. Don’t fuck this up.” Carson watched Luka’s long fingers carefully winding the dark green tape around his wrist.

“Don’t fuck what up, Car? Mass suicide?”

“How long ago is a while?” Carson ignored the question, bringing the questions back to what he needed to know.

“A couple years.” Luka’s hands slowed and Carson thought he saw them tremble, but it could have been a flicker in the bluish glow of the bioluminescent, flameless lamp.

"Years?" Carson didn't know whether to be impressed or horrified.

"Years. I figured it out. It took me a while, that's all, to figure it out, to decide what to do." Luka pulled out his utility knife and flicked it open to cut the end of the tape.

"We knew they were giving us anti-depressants in with the doses." Carson watched the blade flicker and cut through the tape. "Standard."

"They weren't just anti-depressants, Car. They were euphorics. Make us manic. Effective." Luka smoothed the end of the tape down and then ran his hand over Carson's wrist again. "Compliant. I told you it wasn't broken."

"And you thought you'd just... un-drug me? What the hell, Luka?" Carson flexed his fingers slowly. Luka was right, it wasn't broken. Hairline fracture, probably, and a strain.

"I figured you could help me work it out. Or something." Luka ran his fingers over Carson's. "Or just not die."

"Whose were you doing tonight?"

"Yours. Baptiste. Tafadzwa. Braeden. Reid. Mehrdad and Coleman last." Luka bit his lip and ran one hand through his hair. "Car..."

"I can't let you do it. Luka. Not after all this time. Don't make me speed this up." Carson pushed himself to his feet, feeling his throat and chest tight with emotion. He rubbed at his chest and up to the back of his neck, trying to loosen it, to make it go away.

"Then just you." Luka looked up from putting the medkit away, and when Carson turned around, his expression was pleading. "Just you. For a few more days. You can stop me any time."

"By killing you, yes." Carson ran a hand through his hair, tugging at it. "Is that why you... why you did that... the other night? You and me?" That hurt. The betrayal, he could almost understand. But that just hurt.

"Fuck." Luka snapped the medkit shut, tucked it in its slot, and laid the biolamp down so it would start to go dim. "No. That had nothing to do with this. You feel it." He got up and took a step toward Carson, glancing to make sure that Carson's hand wasn't anywhere near his gun. "You know what I mean. You *feel*, Carson."

And he did. Carson didn't want to, but he did. He felt. He felt so many things, they made his head ache. He wanted to cry over all the bodies he'd hauled, over the dead cat,

over the way his wrist hurt, over the fact that he really, really had to kill Luka and he really, really had to do it now. "Why did you do this to me?" He asked, but he knew. He already knew and he knew he was right when Luka closed the gap between them to kiss him on the mouth.

It should have occurred to him that Luka could still have the knife in his hand, could have a syringe in his hand from the kit, and he thought about it after the fact, but in the moment, all he knew was Luka's mouth on his. Luka kissed like fire, better than a shot of whiskey, heat that went right from Carson's mouth and past his belly, to his groin. His fingers laced in Luka's hair, his mouth opened for Luka's tongue, and the taste of Luka's mouth made him moan. Carson was about to push Luka back into the dark of the medic truck when his common sense struggled free of the wash of desire.

"Wait," he whispered, tightening his hands in Luka's hair, trying to put a little distance between their mouths. God, but Luka tasted good. Think, Carson. "Can't leave this." He gestured at the drug kit and the other equipment Luka had been using. "Just put it away." He pulled himself away and took a few steps, wondering why his legs were so unsteady, to start cleaning it all up.

"I'm not done," Luka said quietly, dropping to his knees to pack the kit back up, gathering the vials carefully. Carson froze, looking down at the vials in Luka's hands, trying to decide what he was going to do. Across from him, Luka stopped moving as well. When Carson looked up, their eyes met. The moonlight painted Luka's golden hair and strong nose and high cheekbones in silver, cast his eyes into blue shadows.

"Are you done with mine?" Carson asked at last, feeling his moral footing starting to give.

"Yes," Luka said softly, pointing to where he'd already put Carson's back in the kit. He held the rest out and Carson took them carefully, crouching down so he could put them away himself.

"Okay. That's all for now." Carson started trying to read the names on the vials so that he could slide them into place. Luka took the saline and put it back in its place above the gurney, Carson snapped the kit shut with his good hand when he was done and brought it over to lock it into place in the truck. They worked in silence, cleaning up all the evidence of Luka's treason. When they were done, Carson felt drained. He sank down to sit on the tailgate and put his head in his hands, feeling his skull throb in time with his wrist.

"Car?" Luka sat down beside him and put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I have to think, Luka. I can't think." Carson rubbed at his forehead with his good hand.

“Okay.” Luka’s voice was soft and soothing, he stroked the back of Carson’s neck and then leaned over to kiss where his hand had been.

“Luka.”

Luka didn’t answer, he just kissed Carson again, his breath and lips warm and gentle. It wasn’t making it easier for Carson to think; he knew when he was being seduced, even if no one had tried it before. He couldn’t think even before Luka started kissing him, so there wasn’t much sense pushing Luka away. He might have a clear head tomorrow. Luka’s mouth was on his ear now, gentle lips exploring and sending shivers down Carson’s spine. Carson turned his head to find Luka’s mouth with his own.

It was easier this time; they kissed slow and sweet for a long time, as though they had forever to do it. Luka was gentle with his touches and Carson bit lightly at his lips to get him to hum and shiver a little. The world disappeared, the night faded away, and it was just them and the silence between them.

Luka nudged Carson back into the truck and followed him, crawling after him into the space between the locked-down gurney and the supply cases. Straddling Carson’s hips, Luka straightened and pulled off his own shirt, and Carson wished for a little light to see Luka by. He had to make do with running his hands over Luka’s skin, remembering how it all looked. He remembered everything: the way the light hit the pale gold hair on Luka’s chest, the slight ripple of muscles across that belly, the hollow of the navel, the thin line of hair trailing down to the waistband of Luka’s pants. He couldn’t see, but he knew exactly where his hands were.

When Luka tugged at his shirt, Carson wriggled out of it, tossing it onto the gurney, and then reached for Luka again. Luka leaned over him, bare skin against Carson’s, fingers in Carson’s hair, and kissed him slowly. Carson ran his hands up Luka’s sides, around to his back, exploring the landscape of Luka’s body while they kissed. Something in his head said they didn’t have time for this, they couldn’t be doing this, but he wondered where they had to be, who was going to care, and then it didn’t matter anymore. The only thing that mattered was the sound of Luka’s breath and the feel of his body and the way that he was kissing Carson, with the intensity that he never wasted on anything unnecessary.

“Wait,” Luka whispered, when they’d kissed each other breathless and Carson was trembling with want, not even trying to stop his hips from grinding up against Luka’s. Wait. Carson wanted to say that he’d been waiting more than ten years for this, but he stroked Luka’s thighs and nodded in the dark.

“Okay,” he murmured.

Luka slid away from him for a minute and Carson heard the twin thuds of Luka's boots hitting the ground, the rattle of one of the drawers in the supplies, and the slither of fabric. Then Luka was crawling over him again, stopping to kiss his belly and tongue his navel, making Carson whimper. Luka did it again, almost purring when Carson shivered, tangling his fingers in Luka's hair.

"Luka," he said, and was shocked at how desperate he sounded. His whole body was straining for Luka's, his erection rubbing against the inside of his briefs when he shifted, and he could feel the fabric getting damp. He felt more than heard Luka's soft laugh, warm breath on his freshly wet skin. Luka was enjoying this, enjoying teasing him, as always; it was so completely Luka and such a turn-on at the same time, to know that Luka was happy. Luka untangled Carson's hands from his hair and brought them to his belt and Carson didn't need any prompting to start getting Luka's pants undone. Carson's wrist hurt a little as he worked at the belt buckle, but the pain was easily forgotten in the moment.

Luka was moving over him again, and Carson couldn't quite tell what he was doing. Any thought went out of his head anyway when Luka slid his pants and briefs down his hips and Luka's warm hand, slippery with something, wrapped around his aching cock.

"Oh. Fuck. Luka." Luka crawled up to kiss him on the mouth, all hot, hungry lips and teeth and tongue. Being wanted, knowing that Luka wanted him, was a rush almost more affecting than Luka's touch on his cock. And then Luka shifted, whimpered, and Carson was suddenly pushing up into something slick and hot and nearly unbearably tight. "Oh, God." Carson grabbed Luka's bare hips and he couldn't tell whether it was to get Luka to stop or to pull the man down and so he froze. "Luka, Luka..."

"Please?" It was almost too late to ask and the need in Luka's voice had Carson on the verge of coming already, just with one word. He couldn't say no to that, would have promised anything right then.

"Yes." He managed to let go of Luka's hip with one hand to cup Luka's cheek, leaning up to kiss him. Luka's face was burning with heat, flushed with need or shame, Carson couldn't tell. Luka panted against Carson's mouth as he pushed himself down on Carson's cock, his whole body trembling. "Shh," Carson soothed, trying to keep a little clarity in the face of how incredible it felt to be inside him. Luka finally settled down and Carson wrapped his arms around him, holding Luka close, kissing his mouth and cheeks and down to the softness of Luka's throat where he bit down gently, making Luka shudder. The shudder went right through Carson as well; he gasped against Luka's neck and did it again, just to feel it.

"Car," Luka whispered.

They couldn't see each other in the dark, so Carson petted Luka's smooth, bare skin and kissed him gently, murmured low, "Luka." It's okay. It's good. Calmed a little, Luka started to move, pushing himself up with his clean hand braced on Carson's shoulder. "Fuck," Carson whimpered.

He slid a hand up Luka's thigh and over sleek curls to wrap around Luka's cock. Luka's sharp cry and the way he tightened up were a shock that left Carson breathless. He stroked gently, working out how to match Luka's rhythm as he moved, uncertainly at first, but with more confidence as he kept going.

Carson knew his hands were dry, rough, and he reached for whatever Luka had used on him, knowing it couldn't have been put far from hand. He found it on the gurney, his fingers sliding against the cool metal tube. It was hard to think through Luka moving over him like that, but he managed to fumble the tube open and get his good hand slick. Satisfied, he put it aside and let his mind go back to more important things, like Luka's low groan when Carson slid his slippery hand over Luka's cock.

The awkwardness faded away and Carson drew his knees up, rocking his hips to meet Luka's body, let his hand slide over Luka's cock as he moved. It didn't take much thought; he couldn't think much through how good it felt anyway. Luka was all tight, relentless heat, demanding, his hand clenched on Carson's shoulder. Luka rose up and sank back down, hard and fast, making Carson shudder, his back arching with pleasure. There was an edge of desperation to Luka's movements, a tension in him that wasn't pleasure, and Carson reached up with his other hand to touch Luka's hot cheek. Luka rewarded him with a hot, open kiss above the bandage, and then a nuzzle that was so tender and trusting it hurt. Carson rolled the palm of his slick hand over the head of Luka's cock, letting Luka thrust into it for a moment, and Luka bit back a cry, tensing.

All the rhythm fell apart into something chaotic, Carson shuddering and pushing up into Luka's body, Luka writhing and trying to get Carson's cock deeper into him. Luka grabbed at Carson's hand for balance as he shifted back, changing the angle a little, and making himself cry out. He started to come, drenching Carson's hand and splattering Carson's belly in semen.

"Please," he whimpered, his body clenching around Carson's cock. "Carson, please." The plea and the pressure were too much and Carson had to bite back a wail as he came. His back arched, his head hit the floor, and he didn't feel a thing, all he knew was that his body was on fire and Luka was tight and needy over him and around him, still coming. His boots slid on the metal floor of the truck, losing traction, he could feel everything get slicker and hotter as he spilled into Luka's body, and just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, couldn't stay quiet a second longer, Luka slowed down.

Still shaking, Luka dropped his head to Carson's chest and Carson hoped that it was his cleaner hand that he ran over Luka's sweat-filmed back. It must have been, because he had to make himself uncurl his other hand and pull it out from between their bodies to

wrap that arm around Luka's waist. He didn't know what to say, had no voice where moments before he'd been trying not to scream and curse, and so he held Luka against him and just tried to breathe.

After a long time, Luka pulled away and grabbed a handful of packets from a drawer – wet cleansing cloths, for Carson to use to clean himself up – then slithered out of the truck. By the time Carson had remembered his own name and how to move and how to dress himself, Luka was clean and dressed and sitting on the tailgate of the truck, waiting. He radiated weariness and despair, head in his hands, shoulders slumped. Carson began to get a small idea of how lonely and long this had been for him and tried to think of what to do or say.

He remembered how good it had felt when Luka had been soothing away his aches and pains. He slid forward until his feet swung off the end of the gate on either side of Luka's and he could easily touch Luka's tired shoulders. He felt awkward at first, petting a little, then gaining some confidence as Luka made a little noise of pleasure and he felt the muscles shift under his hands. It wasn't too hard to figure out, if he paid attention to Luka's body, so he kept touching, rubbing, and petting, until Luka let out a slow, shuddering sigh.

"Two years?" Carson put his chin on Luka's shoulder, leaned his body against Luka's. It felt so good. Now that they'd touched like this, it was impossible to keep his hands and body to himself. He didn't know how he was going to make it through the daylight hours.

"Yeah," Luka said softly. "It took me a while to really get thinking straight, and then to realize that there wasn't anything I could do to change things once the wheels were in motion." He sounded so sad that it hurt Carson when he spoke and Carson slid an arm around him, pulling him back to lean on Carson as much as Carson was leaning on him.

"You could have left," Carson said. "Once you knew. You could have gone AWOL."

"I could have. Just me." Luka covered Carson's hand on his belly with his own, laced their fingers together. In the silence afterward, feeling Luka's fingers wound in his, feeling Luka's heart beating through their bodies pressed together, Carson worked it out.

"Luka." Carson rested his forehead against the nape of Luka's neck, against the curls and the sweat cooling there.

"I couldn't leave the unit, Car."

"I know." Carson wrapped his other arm around Luka and held him tight.

"I don't want to die," Luka continued. "I don't want us to die. And I don't want to kill anyone. No more. I don't believe in the program. And I don't believe that I'm evil. Or you. Or any of us." His voice got unsteady and ragged and something hot and wet hit Carson's forearm. "Can't it just stop now, sir?" Luka whispered. "Please?"

"We have orders," Carson said automatically. But he didn't feel it anymore, he didn't feel that spike of surety that kept him steady, focused. Once he could have done anything. Once he'd put down one man after another when they'd found a bunker that the Nobel strike hadn't penetrated fully, a bullet to the back of each head, while they suffered and cried out and begged him for mercy.

It was so easy when he had his orders, when they were on program. His breath came faster, harsher, and his stomach churned. They'd laughed about the mess afterward. Roparzh and Mitxel had drawn the short straws and had to hose down the bunker once Tafadzwa hacked the water system to get them some pressure while keeping the spike off the grid. Only Core would know they'd been there, pressure-washing dark blood pools into pink foam that went down the drains with a dying gurgle.

They complained about the big cleanups, the way the bodies were in rigor once they were half-way through and you couldn't stack them in the trucks. Carson used to call a break while the bodies softened up again; they'd lie around on the soft, groomed grass of the camps, swim in the pools, raid the kitchens for something other than their ration bars, get into the beer and scotch from the officers' club, and they'd turn the music up to sing. Drunk and full and content, they'd gone back to work, steady and merciless, stacking bodies to take them to the nearest incinerator.

How many bodies? Carson had asked Luka. He couldn't count them anymore. The bodies from Camp George, the other remaining cleanup unit had been among them. They'd been raised together, the last of the Army stock, and now Carson's unit was the last of them. Once they were gone, the world would be clean of all the violent people.

"I don't believe in them anymore." Luka voiced the words Carson didn't even want to think. He closed his eyes and dropped his head to hide in the curve of Luka's shoulder.

"Two years, Luka? How did you do it?"

"I don't know." Luka sounded a little panicked and Carson hugged him hard. "I couldn't work out what to do. It was pretty easy to just go along. Too easy. Damn it, Car." Luka let his head fall back on Carson's shoulder. It was perfect, the way bodies fit together when they needed comfort. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. Come on." Carson patted Luka lightly on the hip. "Let's get out of here."

"And then?" Luka didn't move.

“I have to think about it,” Carson said quietly. He leaned his cheek against Luka’s, soaking in the moment a little longer. Luka made a small sound of despair and sat up, then pushed himself to his feet. Carson crawled out after him and shut the back of the medic truck quietly. When Carson turned around, Luka was already trudging back downhill, hands in his pockets. Carson checked around to make sure they hadn’t left anything out that might catch someone’s eye, then followed him.

Luka was lying on his belly when Carson crawled back into the tent and into his bedroll. Carson laid still and listened, could hear the unevenness of Luka’s quiet breathing.

“Luka.” He reached across and touched Luka on the shoulder. Luka was so warm and Carson’s hands were so cold. “Fuck, Luka. What am I going to do?” Luka lifted his head and then pushed himself up on hands and knees, moving until he was sliding into Carson’s blankets, and Carson found himself shifting and sorting his limbs and blankets to fit Luka against him. It felt awkward for a moment, and then they were still, entwined and warm against each other.

“I don’t know,” Luka whispered against the curve of Carson’s neck. “But we’ll figure it out, Car.”

“We?” Carson wound his fingers in Luka’s hair for warmth.

“Yeah.” Luka’s arm around Carson’s waist tightened a little. “In the morning. You can always change your mind.”

Change his mind. Carson knew it was too late for that, now. “In the morning,” he said. “Sleep, Luka. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir.” Luka was quiet after that, and before Carson fell asleep, he could feel and hear Luka’s breathing get slow and steady as Luka slept.

Chapter Four

Carson woke before dawn to the quiet beeping of Luka's watch and Luka wriggling to get his hand back from under Carson's body to shut the damn thing off. Carson moved and Luka flipped over onto his back to press the little button that cut the alarm off in mid-chirp.

"Sorry," Luka murmured, staring up at the sky through the mesh ceiling.

"We should be up soon anyway, make it up to Camp Nickel in good time." Carson shifted to lie on his back beside Luka, their shoulders touching. His wrist throbbed quietly, a reminder of last night. They lay there in silence and Carson wondered if Luka could hear his unasked questions the way he could hear Luka's.

"You really need to shave," Luka said, instead of asking anything. Carson blinked, scrubbed a palm across his stubble, and turned his head so he could see Luka.

"What?"

"You need to shave." Luka was rubbing his thumb over his own lower lip and chin. As fair as he was, classically blue-eyed and golden-haired, Luka didn't shave more than a few times a week. Carson knew this because it was great fun to tease Luka about it when they were younger and gave a damn about things like that. "You're giving me beard burn."

Carson stared at him, brain trying to leap the chasm between trying to figure out how to keep all of them from dying and trying to figure out how to stop chafing Luka's chin. While Carson was struggling not to snap entirely, Luka sat up and started rummaging in Carson's kit until he found the razor and mirror.

"Luka." Carson sat up as well, and was about to put his hand on Luka's shoulder when Luka turned to give him the razor and mirror. Somewhere in the back of his head, a part of his brain that had escaped the momentary chaos parsed that the demand that he shave might indicate that kissing Luka again was welcome. Carson took the razor and mirror in one hand and leaned in. "Luka," he said again, just before he kissed Luka carefully.

Outside, there were the first sounds of waking, including a yelp and grumble that sounded like Yale tripping over Tam on his way out of their tent. Luka started laughing against Carson's mouth and Carson couldn't help joining him.

"Yes, sir?" It was so incongruous to hear those words between one soft kiss and the next. Carson could hear Konrad and Reid's voices joining Yale and Tam's in the same tent, then Paderau's shout from the next tent for all of them to shut up. It was all familiar

except for Luka's mouth on his, but it was all good. Carson's heart twisted in his chest, the ache something like love for all of it, and he cupped Luka's cheek in his sore right hand and kissed Luka harder.

"Go get some hot water started so I can shave," Carson said, a little unsteadily, when he pulled away. God, did Luka look good like that, sleepy and kissed. Carson could just barely see in the graying dark, but it was enough. It was enough to see the question in Luka's eyes, lurking under the surface. "Give me some time to think."

"Okay." Luka rolled away and crawled out of the tent, closing it behind him when he was gone, leaving Carson to collapse back in the blankets and watch the sky change color while trying to figure a way out of this mess.

Decades ago, long before Carson was born, the world fell apart. Disease, war, pollution; everything was poisoned and ruined. As everything slid into disaster, the first steps were taken to try and repair the damage. The prisons were the first to be emptied. Then the cities were cleansed, more carefully, the population picked over. The peaceful abandoned the cities for the mountains, and the armies moved in to clean up the disaster, to burn the disease out of the cities. Slowly, slowly, the world crept toward peace. Then, one step at a time, the armies began to be decommissioned. Carson was born in the early days of the decommissioning, born into the army at the same time that the Core AI began to take over the main peace programs. He was thirty-four years old now, the same age as the Core. Carson was raised in the Army, under the watchful eyes of the Core, raised in the ways of the program, and enlisted in the Army when he came of age. And that, he remembers, thinking back, was where he first met Luka.

Luka, who seemed perfect, better at everything than anyone. Carson pushed himself to match Luka's performance. The only difference between them was that Carson was driven and Luka, well, Luka liked to laugh. It was what separated them, what gave Carson the rank above Luka and, instead of being offended every time Carson was promoted ahead of him, Luka always waved it off and said, "Better you than me, Car. Uneasy rests the head and all that." He had no idea when he said it how uneasy Carson's head would get. Nor, Carson thought, how uneasy his own would become, command or no.

The sky lightened while Carson watched, and the stars faded beyond his sight. Dawn, someone once said to him, had to come so that the world could have light. When dawn came, the stars were put out by the greater light, as soldiers were snuffed out by the greater good. The first time Carson heard it, and every time after, it had brought him some peace. He didn't mind the idea of dying, if it meant something better for everyone else.

He didn't mind until now. They had their something better. What more would they gain by his dying? He laid under the lightening sky and listened to his men and tried to think of the ways in which the world would be better with those voices silenced. Then again,

what right did he have to keep living when the rest were gone? All the rest had gone on to the fires, faithful to the end. Carson's breath caught in his throat and he realized that there were streaks of wetness tracking from the corners of his eyes into the silver in his hair. Did any of them have the right to keep living by virtue of being the last men standing?

"Water's on," Luka said, low, crawling back into the tent. Carson hadn't even heard him unzip the door. Luka crawled to lean over Carson, blocking out the sky, and Carson had to refocus on the blue of Luka's eyes. "I'm sorry," Luka whispered. He reached out and his callused fingers smoothed the tears from Carson's cheeks.

"Don't be," Carson said, shaking his head a little, but not enough to disturb Luka's gentle touches. "How did you stand it?"

"Because I didn't have to decide," Luka admitted, shifting to sit beside Carson. "Want to hit me again?" He looked ashamed, ran his hands through his hair, kept his eyes down. "I'd feel better if you did."

"You did decide." Carson sat up as well, wrapping his arms around his knees. "You diluted my serum." He looked over at Luka. "What did you think I was going to do?"

"I didn't know." Luka shrugged and finally met Carson's eyes. "I hoped. I just... hoped." There was a pause and then Luka inhaled, pushing himself away. "I'll go see if Rudi has the transmitter set up for the video. He said we were getting a good ping off of a satellite. Good enough to upload."

"Thanks," Carson said softly. He waited until Luka was out of the tent, then started rolling up their bedrolls, doing Luka's as well, going slowly to favor his wrist. It would give him time to think some more.

It was full dawn when Carson settled down on a camp stool to shave with a cup of hot water scooped from the pot on the nearest camp stove. Yale was making oatmeal over at another stove and arguing with Tafadzwa over whether or not to get into the powdered eggs to make for a bigger breakfast. The other men were scattered around; working on the trucks, cleaning their kit. Mehrdad was smoking a cigarette and reading a battered medical journal, sprawled with his back against his bedroll, while Coleman went about making coffee.

Mirror in one hand, razor in the other, Carson started scraping stubble from his cheeks, a little awkwardly because of the bandage on his wrist. His own face looked back at him when he concentrated on something other than not cutting his throat. The first thing he thought was that he looked old. There were lines around his eyes, and silver streaked thick from his temples and back through his hair. His eyes were dark under dark lashes like a girl's – he'd always hated that – and his face was still strong and stubborn, marred

by a broken nose and a scar on his chin where he'd split it open going down in a fight. Fighting. There hadn't been much of it, but Carson had always been a fighter. He tilted his head and drew the razor up to the edge of his jaw, slowly, thinking.

"Sir?" Rudi came bounding down the hill and Carson's hand twitched, opening up a thin line of red along his jawbone.

"Shit." He dropped the razor in the cup and blotted the cut on his sleeve.

"Sorry, sir." Rudi looked horrified.

"No problem, Rudi. What's up?" Carson picked up the razor again and got back to work.

"I'm finally getting a steady ping off of that satellite, sir. We can establish an uplink, with your security code." Rudi was almost standing at attention, as always. Carson wondered if it was genetic.

"Okay. Just a second." Carson tilted his head to one side, trying to see what he was doing and keep his skin taut all at the same time.

"May I?" Rudi reached for the mirror and Carson gave it up gratefully.

"Thanks." This way, he could get everything done faster.

"Not a problem, sir." Rudi stood where Carson could see himself easily in the mirror and Carson started scraping the stubble off of his face again. "Are you okay, sir?"

"Huh?" Carson looked up and saw Rudi looking at his wrist. "Oh, yeah. I was wandering around without a light last night, cracked it. Just a little bump. Don't you worry." He gave Rudi a grin and got one in return. "You're getting shaggy there, soldier. You and me both. Maybe we need to get Mehrdad to shear us once we hit Nickel."

"Good idea, sir."

Once he was shaved, Carson followed Rudi up to the truck where the communications rig was stored. He hopped up on the gate and ducked under the canvas, following Rudi to where Luka was crouched in front of the board, watching one of the three display screens.

"Good signal?" Carson asked.

“Yeah. Rudi got up early to catch the window. We’re cooking now,” Luka said, sliding away from the board so that Carson could take his place, while Rudi settled down on an overturned crate that sufficed for a chair in the small space.

“Good work, Rudi.” Carson crouched down in front of the board and found the memory card in his pocket. “Last one, boys.” He started typing in his security code to get the uplink going. There was a moment as the display put out a series of pretty colors and icons meant to represent the message being sent to the satellite and then to the Core. When the icons flashed green and then went steady, the board flickered and the memory card slot lit up. “There she goes. Watch that for me, will you, Rudi?”

“Yes, sir.”

Carson tapped Luka on the shoulder and Luka followed him out of the truck. Carson walked around to lean on the front fender of the truck, looking down at the camp.

“Better?” he asked, rubbing a hand over his chin when Luka joined him. Luka looked around and then laughed quietly, sheepishly, kicking at the dirt. He leaned against the fender next to Carson, hands in his pockets, staring at his feet.

“Yeah. But you can leave out the bloodletting next time,” he said at last.

“Good idea.” Carson watched the camp, watched the men go through the motions of their morning. Sleepwalking, if what Luka said was true. He knew it must be. If it were any other morning, he would have been polishing his boots, writing a report, arguing about haircuts with Mehrdad, talking to Tafadzwa about getting the trucks to run smoother. He’d have been doing anything but thinking about his past, their pasts, and their future. He’d have been thinking about anything but the fact that they were all going to die. The wind curled around them, pulled at their hair and clothes, carrying the distant sound of a bird cry and the smell of growing things. “I’m going to let them decide,” he said quietly.

Luka made a sound somewhere in the back of his throat, dropping his head a little further, his shoulders slumping. When he breathed again, he shuddered a little and forced himself to stand straight. “When?”

“Tonight,” Carson said. “I’d do it your way, but we’re running out of time.”

“Orders?” Luka shook his hair back and looked at Carson, tension lining his mouth and eyes.

“Not yet.” Carson felt a tension in his chest to match the look in Luka’s eyes.

“What are you going to say to them?” Luka nodded down toward the rest of the men.

“I don’t know yet.” Carson patted the pockets of his shirt and pants, looking for his cigarettes. He was running out of them. He was running out of a lot of things. “I’ll figure it out.”

“And if Mehrdad tries to stop you?” Luka found his own cigarettes and offered one to Carson. “Or someone else?”

“I’ll figure it out.” Carson took a cigarette and let Luka light it for him. “Thanks.”

“Not a lot to thank me for.”

Carson watched the little, sky-blue chicory flowers bowing in the wind, a few yellow vetch blossoms scattered between them, looked up to where the same wind was combing a few wispy clouds across the arch of the sky. “Shut up, Luka,” he said quietly.

“Yes, sir.” Luka lit a cigarette for himself and relaxed a little, his shoulder brushing Carson’s as he did. Carson shifted a little closer and Luka leaned against him. The sun glittered over the tree line to the east, past Luka’s profile and wind-ruffled curls. Life was good.

Camp Nickel was set on the outskirts of an old mining town, under the skeletal watch of abandoned factories. The land all around was sparsely treed and a colder wind whistled through the empty streets and ragged pines. The camp had been decommissioned over a decade ago, one of the first decommissions that Carson had attended. Attended. It sounded so formal. Like you’d salute the flag and pack it up and everyone would go home.

He got out of the truck under a graying sky and looked around him. The wind was mournful, reminding him that this wasn’t any place for the living to be. Something moved and caught his attention, a slim red fox sneaking under the barracks. The weather had stripped the color from everything; the camp was the same gray of the stone and the sky, nature was taking it back. A chill ran down his spine and he got back up into the truck.

“Tell the others we’ll make camp down by the lake,” he ordered Luka. Luka looked at him, hesitating before reaching for the radio. “Just do it, Luka.”

“Back it up, boys,” Luka said into the radio. “Take the lake road down. We’ll camp there.” He hung the handpiece back up on its hook and started the truck up again, pulling slowly around the long circular drive to take them back out to the main road.

There were no questions, no complaints. They made camp in the rambling field that had once been a park down by the public docks. Tafadzwa organized a handful of them to haul stones and clear a fire pit. Anacleto and Sky went down to the crumbling docks to test the water for biohazards and found signs of fish in the lake, sparking an enthusiastic discussion over fishing poles and whether or not to try eating what they caught. Red and Charlton took axes and tromped out to find wood for the fires. Everyone else settled in to do their evening chores. Carson helped Luka unpack tents and bedrolls and supplies, losing himself in the work for a long time until the sky got too dark for him to ignore what he had to do.

“About that time.” Carson said quietly, handing the hammer off to Luka to put away.

“What are you going to say?” Luka dropped the hammer back in the tool kit and closed it up.

“I don’t know, Luka.” Carson tipped his head back and stared at the sky, at the darkening blue where the stars were starting to shine, one pinprick of light at a time. “But I hope it works. Come on, have some dinner before I ruin everything.” He started toward the fire pit and the stoves where dinner was being served. Voices rose up with the smoke, spiraling toward the stars.

“Hey.” Luka caught up with him in a few long strides. “I helped,” he said, nudging Carson with his shoulder.

“Yeah, you did. But if you wanted credit for it, you should have studied harder. Then you could have been in command.” Carson leaned in and bumped Luka back when he started laughing. “I’m serious, jackass. All this shit on me because you couldn’t study.”

“I’m trying not to be sorry,” Luka said, dropping his voice when they got closer to the others. “For everything.”

“Me, too.”

“Hey, thought y’all got lost.” Tafadzwa waved them over and ladled out two more bowls of dinner.

“What’s to eat?” Luka stepped ahead and took his and the spoon Reid handed him from the pile by the stove.

“Instant gumbo tonight,” Tafadzwa said, grinning. “Just add water and boil.”

“You boys didn’t catch us dinner?” Carson gave Anacleto a mock scowl, then looked around for Sky, finding him sprawled lazily between Braeden and Lauritz. “Hey, Sky, where’s my fish?”

“In the lake,” Sky said, laughing. “We’re still here tomorrow, maybe I’ll catch some.”

“I’m not eating it.” Braeden thumped Sky on the head with his spoon. “You’re crazy, man. Stick to your rations.”

“We drink the water,” Tafadzwa said, handing Carson his dinner. “Good enough for us, good enough for the fish, fish must be good enough for us.”

“Think we’ll be here tomorrow?” Rudi looked up when Carson passed by on his way to a clear spot around the fire.

“Yeah,” Carson said, sitting down next to Luka. “We’ll still be here.” Luka was warm beside him, the same familiar golden blur at the periphery of his vision on the right that had been there all these years. The wind was cool in his hair, the fire threw sparks up at the sky, the sky answered it with more stars as the light died. He couldn’t give that up.

Carson was still eating when the others started tossing dishes into the bucket to be washed. A few of them started to get up and Carson put his bowl down.

“Hey,” he said, raising his voice to carry over the others, putting a little edge into it. The other voices died away and those who were standing sat back down without hesitation. “I need to talk to y’all.” He could hear Luka’s breath catch as he stood, shoving his hands in his pockets so no one could see them shake.

“We get our orders?” Gazsi asked. Carson could see his face clearly in the firelight, expectant and eager, just like the rest of them, and his chest hurt. He clenched his hands and the pain in his bad wrist was a jolt that kept his mind from wandering.

“No. Not yet.” Carson said. “And that’s why I need to talk to you.” He didn’t look at Luka, as much as he wanted to, as much as he wanted to know that he was doing the right thing. This was his to carry alone. “We’re almost at the end of program. And we all know what that means.”

They all knew what it meant. They never talked about it. They laughed past it, steered around it, even saluted it, but they never talked about it. The murmur that had started died off sharply. Carson looked west to the last of the light, to see the last stars starting to shine.

“We’re all going to die,” he said. And when he said it, he felt a little more certain. “Like all the ones before us, only there won’t be anyone to do the clean-up. Because we’re the last. And I am damn proud of every last one of you. You’re my family. My brothers.” He looked at each of them, at the faces he knew so well, all of them waiting for him to tell them what to do. “And that’s why I’m telling you now that I don’t want to take the next orders. I don’t want you to die. And I know it feels right and simple and easy, but I’m telling you that it doesn’t have to be that way.”

“What the hell?” Tafadzwa was the first to speak, voicing the confusion of the rest. “Sir?”

“Taf,” Luka said gently. “Do you really want to die?”

“I’m not crazy, man. But this is... this is not on program.” Carson could see the struggle in Tafadzwa’s eyes.

“You’re going to go off program?” Rudi sounded horrified: he was white as a sheet, looking at Carson as though Carson had lost his mind.

“Only if the rest of you come with me,” Carson said. “You have a choice. Any consequences, I’ll take. My command. My orders.”

“Who’s gonna give you the consequences anyway?” Sky spoke up, his voice wondering. It was less of a challenge and more of a dawning realization.

“There’s that, too,” Carson said, nodding at Sky. “So here it is. You’re my men. I’ve taken care of you all this time, done what’s best for you and for peace. And I don’t think it’s best for anyone for us to wait for the end of program. It feels easy for you because you’re taking shots every few days that make you feel good. I’m not taking them anymore and my head’s clear for the first time in years. Right, Mehrdad?” He turned to the little physician sitting in Coleman’s shadow and Mehrdad looked startled. “The truth.”

“You’re correct.” Carson could see the ‘professional’ mask slide into place over Mehrdad’s expression. “In order to improve morale and efficiency, the Core implemented a supplementation schedule that would allow all soldiers to carry out their assigned tasks without interference.” The men started to murmur quietly, trying to work out what Mehrdad meant. “It doesn’t completely obscure your judgment.”

“He means that it makes you feel like everything’s fine,” Luka said bluntly. “And you don’t think for yourself as much, even if you still can.”

“You knew this?” Paderau asked. Carson could see anger struggling to surface in his eye.

“He didn’t,” Luka interrupted before Carson could speak. The fire cracked and sparked emphatically, crumbling in on itself with a fountain of sparks. “I did. I worked it out because it doesn’t work on me. And then I told him.”

“But you knew.” Paderau stabbed a finger at Mehrdad.

“Of course,” Mehrdad said soothingly. “It’s all part of program. It’s what’s best for us all. This is what we agreed to do, this is just to make it easier on us. Luka, you knew it was right, even if the serum didn’t work on you. You followed orders with the rest of us.”

“We swore.” Rudi’s voice cracked and he ran his hands through his hair. “We swore we would do whatever we had to do. For peace in our time. We have to trust the program.”

There was silence as Carson stood watching them all, watching it all sink in. Most of them looked stricken. Coleman looked furious with Carson, jaw clenched, eyes hard. Tafadzwa looked like he’d been punched in the gut. Kim had his head in his hands while Gervasio patted his shoulder gently with one big hand.

“You fucking bastard.” Paderau exploded from his seat, lunging for Mehrdad. Coleman came to his feet, ready to meet Paderau halfway, but Luka was there faster, catching Paderau around the waist and turning him with his own weight and momentum. “You motherfucker,” Paderau howled. His fist caught Luka in the face before Anacleto and Braeden could grab his arms and Luka came up spitting blood.

“Enough!” Carson’s voice cracked like a whip, driven by anger. “Paderau, sit down.” Paderau didn’t have much of a choice, with Anacleto and Braeden on either side of him, but he sagged between them, giving up the fight for the moment. Luka wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “We’re going to take a vote in the morning,” Carson said flatly. “Stay on program or not. You want to go, we’ll go.”

“Where?” Kim lifted his head to look at Carson with empty eyes.

“South,” Carson said. “Nothing’s down there anymore, or so they say. We’ll just go until we find where we really belong. We won’t be hurting anyone. We just won’t be dead.”

“Why don’t you just tell us to go?” Coleman crossed his arms over his chest and gave Carson a defiant look.

“Because I want things to be better than they are.” Carson met Coleman’s eyes, feeling calmer than he had all day. “Because I want you to have a choice. We’ll vote in the morning. If you vote to stay on program, we go on to Nickel and wait for orders.”

“Or for the Nobel strike,” Luka added quietly.

“We wait for whatever comes,” Carson said, nodding at Luka. “We take what they give us, or we make our own way. Your choice. All of you.” He stepped back from the fire, looking around at them again. “Make it peacefully. I’ll see you in the morning.” He turned and made his way to his tent, leaving them to talk.

Chapter Five

"You okay?" Luka came wandering out of the dark, hands in his pockets. Carson was sitting on a camp stool outside of his tent, watching and listening to the men around the fire. He couldn't hear them clearly, but he could see them silhouetted by the firelight, and he watched how they moved and their angry gestures and wondered if he'd done the right thing.

"Yeah." Aside from the fact that his hands were unsteady and he wanted to puke and he'd just incited his whole unit to sedition, Carson was fine.

"Me, too." Luka settled down at Carson's feet, wrapping his arms around his knees, and watched the others in silence.

"Paderau behaving himself?" Carson asked after a while.

"Yeah." Luka laughed a little and shook his head. "I can't believe he went off like that."

"He's always been energetic," Carson pointed out, laughing a little himself. "And I don't blame him. I'm pretty pissed, myself."

"It's too easy to follow orders," Luka said quietly, his laughter fading. "And I'm still not sure it's wrong."

"We're not immortal," Carson said. He reached out and put a hand on Luka's shoulder. "Going south could see us dead anyway. And there's not many of us left; if the Core is right, we're the last. If it's not, shouldn't we keep going?"

"I've thought of that." Luka nodded, but didn't turn to look at Carson. "This is all my fault. More days than not, I think I shouldn't have done it."

"Come on." Carson got to his feet, offered Luka a hand up. Luka slipped his hand in Carson's and Carson hauled him to his feet.

"Where are we going?"

"For a walk." Carson checked to make sure he had everything; flashlight, gun, cigarettes. Once he was sure, he started toward the edge of the lake, and Luka followed him without another word.

The beach was stony and pebbled, the water looked cold and black under the white moonlight. The wind brought them an occasional hint of wood smoke, a scrap of voice, and then the cry of something lonely far out on the lake. Carson lit a cigarette, took a

drag, and passed it to Luka. They walked on like that until the cigarette was gone and Carson shredded the filter before letting it fly away on the next breeze. He stopped then and crouched down to unlace his boots. Luka watched him without comment or question, then did the same.

The water was icy on Carson's bare skin when he dove into it, it took his breath away, and when he surfaced, the air felt warm. There was something moving past him, Luka swimming out deeper. Carson felt for the bottom with his feet and found smooth, shifting sand and polished stone. He straightened and the water was up to his chest; he stood and watched Luka swim, water rippling away from Luka in silver and black ribbons. Luka moved effortlessly, getting further away from Carson with every stroke, the ribbons getting smaller and thinner by the minute. Carson pushed off again, cutting through the cold water with long strokes, chasing the ripples.

It took him longer than he expected to catch up and grab one of Luka's arms, pulling the man around. Luka floundered a moment, sputtered, and tossed wet hair out of his eyes, treading water.

"What?" He was out of breath, so was Carson. It was so cold, and they'd been making good time.

"Come back." Carson didn't know what else to say, didn't know how to explain the knot in his chest that whispered that Luka wasn't going to stop swimming, that Carson was going to stand there in the black water under the white moon and watch until the ripples disappeared.

"Is that an order?" The look in Luka's eyes made Carson colder than the water.

"No." Carson pulled him closer, kicking a little to push them back toward the shore. "But come back anyway. I want you to come back." Luka pulled his wrist out of Carson's grip, not hard to do with the stab of pain that shot up Carson's arm as Luka twisted free. When he started swimming again, he was headed for the shore. Carson turned and followed him back in.

Back on the shore, the stones rolling painfully under their cold, bare feet, they pulled their clothes on over their wet skin and tried not to shiver.

"You," Carson said, struggling into his shirt, "are not allowed to be sorry anymore. Clear?" Luka, shoving his shirt into his pants, laughed a little breathlessly. "You had your chance," Carson continued. "And you didn't take it."

"Okay," Luka said easily. Carson pushed his hair back and narrowed his eyes, looking at Luka suspiciously, and Luka laughed at him. "Okay," Luka said again. "I'm not. I'm really not. Just tell me one thing."

“What?”

“If they decide they want to stay on program, are you going with them? Am I going with them?” Luka pulled his long-sleeved shirt on over his undershirt and rubbed his arms to warm them.

“I am.” Carson had been turning that one over in his head for a while. He tugged his own shirt on and tried to do it up with cold, stiff fingers, hampered by the bandage on his wrist. Luka reached over and started doing the buttons up from the bottom while Carson worked on the one at the top.

“Okay,” Luka said, softly this time. He got four of the buttons done up before his hands clenched in Carson’s shirt and he pulled Carson close for a kiss. His lips were cold, but his breath was warm on Carson’s mouth. Carson slid his arms around Luka’s waist and Luka’s hands came up to cup his face, cold fingers moving over Carson’s cheeks and jaw. “I’m not sorry,” Luka whispered between kisses, like a mantra. “I’m not sorry.”

“Me either.” Carson kissed him again to reassure him, stroked his back, feeling the ridges of muscle and the line of his spine through his shirt. They wound together so close that Carson felt like he was dissolving into Luka and Luka was dissolving into him, like they’d never be apart again. That distant, lonely cry echoed over the lake again, the call of something condemned to solitude. Carson could feel Luka taut and trembling against him, and kissed away from Luka’s mouth to kiss his cheeks, the bridge of his nose, his temples.

“Car,” Luka said, his voice thick with sadness. “Car, come to bed.” Bed. It had been so long since Carson had slept in a real bed, but what they had would have to do, as always.

“Okay,” Carson whispered against Luka’s cheek. They let go of each other slowly, and Carson found it strange to be back in his own skin alone. He reached for Luka’s hand and Luka wove his fingers with Carson’s as they walked back along the beach.

They crept into their tent, Luka following Carson. Luka zipped the door shut and when he turned around, Carson reached out to start undressing him. Luka’s hands went to the buttons of his shirt to help, but Carson moved his hands away.

“Let me,” he said firmly. Luka’s hands fell away and Carson went back to undressing Luka. His fingers were warming up, getting more coordinated, and he had to go slow, but he managed. He kissed skin as he bared it, ran his hands over Luka’s shoulders and arms, the lines of muscle and angles of bone he knew so well. His fingers found the scar on Luka’s left arm where he’d broken both bones in training. Carson knew the color of Luka’s blood, the color of his bones, the white of his face when he was suffering, the tightness of the smile he tried to fake to cover the pain. Carson bent and unlaced Luka’s boots, taking them off, stripping away the socks. “Lie down,” he ordered, and Luka did.

There was just enough light to see by, to admire how beautiful Luka was, how powerful and efficient and sleek. Carson undid Luka's belt and pants and Luka lifted his hips so that Carson could pull them down and off. He paused then to kiss Luka's belly and hips, then his cock, lips soft and curious, tongue sliding out to taste.

"Oh, God, Car," Luka whispered. Luka's cock swelled and hardened against Carson's lips and Carson kissed it again, slow and wet, his tongue tracing the silky skin and the veins underneath it. The reactions were arousing, almost painfully so, but Carson wanted to pay attention to Luka. He wrapped a hand around the base of Luka's cock and tentatively slid his mouth over the head, pushing the foreskin back with lips and tongue.

The taste was strange and familiar all at once, definitely purely Luka. Luka's cock was heavy and thick and Carson went slowly, taking more of it in with every stroke. Luka whimpered, muffled, stifling the sounds with the back of one hand. Carson braced himself over Luka's hips with his free hand and used the other to stroke over the part of the shaft that he couldn't quite get into his mouth. As he sucked and stroked, slick, slightly salty fluid coated his tongue and the roof of his mouth, making every inhalation even headier with the scent of it. Luka was writhing, making desperate, incoherent noises, and Carson moaned, pushing his mouth down onto Luka's cock until the head slid against the back of his throat. If he did it right, he didn't gag, so he did it again, and whimpered around the thickness at how shockingly good it felt to take Luka in like that.

"Stop, Car," Luka whimpered, finally grabbing a handful of Carson's hair instead of the blankets. Carson pulled his mouth away reluctantly and Luka sat up, leaning in to kiss him hard. "So good," Luka whispered, the hand clenched in Carson's hair loosening enough to pet. "I want you." Carson shivered at the words and kissed Luka, stroking the wet hair back.

"Okay," he said simply, then he moved away to strip efficiently while Luka rolled over to get something out of their kit. They came back together on Luka's blankets, their bodies tangling together as they kissed. Carson's cock slid against Luka's belly and he shuddered, making Luka moan softly and catch his breath. Luka pulled away to flip open the same tube of lubricant they'd been using the night before and Carson reached out to take it "Let me?" Luka hesitated and then surrendered the tube, rolling over and drawing one knee up to open himself up to Carson's fingers.

Carson had little idea what he was doing, but he was sure he couldn't fuck it up too much if he was gentle. This level of intimacy was new, but it felt good. He leaned over to stroke Luka's hair with one hand and kiss the back of Luka's neck as he slid a finger inside to get everything slick. He wasn't prepared for the low moan and the way Luka pushed back against him, but it sounded good enough to make him shiver. It wasn't supposed to take a long time but Carson got lost in the way Luka moved, the way Luka's breath caught, the way Luka whispered for more until Carson was shaking with want, pushing his fingers in deep and finding exactly what made Luka's body jerk and shudder with pleasure.

“Car,” Luka whispered, back arching. “Please.” He pulled away from Carson’s fingers to roll onto his knees, forehead on his arms crossed in front of him. Carson obediently got up on his own knees and slid a slick hand over his cock. And then he looked up to see Luka waiting for him. The sight, the little he could see, all drawn in light and shadow, made his heart pound. Luka’s back was a pale plane, his hips a white curve, and he was spread out and open and vulnerable.

“Fuck,” Carson breathed. He ran a hand over the curve of Luka’s hip, pulled Luka toward him while he guided himself into place. Everything was so smooth and easy this time, he slid inside and Luka muffled a moan. Luka shuddered as he started moving, rocking back to meet him, body pure, tight, slick pleasure around Carson’s cock. It took a moment to find the right balance, the right rhythm, and then it was perfect. He fucked Luka like that until he was dizzy, his breath coming harsh and ragged.

“More,” Luka demanded, pushing himself up on all fours, head down, grinding himself back against Carson’s cock. “Harder.”

Carson gave him what he asked for, holding Luka’s hips to pull himself in deeper, faster. Luka started to gasp and shake, rocking back harder, lost in how good it felt. Carson shivered and tried to find the same angle he’d found with his fingers that had made Luka so desperate. He wasn’t expecting to know so clearly when he found it. Luka’s whole body jerked and shook and Luka dropped to his elbows to stifle his voice against one arm.

Carson bit his lip to keep from coming, gripping Luka’s hips hard, and let himself go, pushing in fast and deep enough that he was breathless and desperate, trying not to beg Luka to come, please. And then Luka was bucking back against him, clawing at the blankets, and Carson lost control. He knew he was quiet, it was the only thing he had any thought left for, but his body was beyond him, pleasure driving him into Luka over and over again, keeping him moving long past when he was done coming.

Finally, to get himself to stop, Carson pulled out and collapsed with his cheek between Luka’s shoulder blades, his hips still moving a little. He could feel Luka shaking under him and he shifted, letting himself fall into the blankets beside Luka. Petting Luka’s shoulder with one shaking hand, Carson tried to find some words. It was a relief when Luka shifted and rolled into his arms, nudging him toward his own blankets. He moved and Luka came with him, dragging a blanket over them both.

Carson wanted to say something, but his voice wouldn’t work. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Luka and Luka sprawled across him, still shaky and breathless. Carson managed to get a hand up to stroke Luka’s hair, Luka kissed his chest, and sleep took them before they were anywhere near recovered.

“Sir?” There was a tapping on one of the tent poles that woke Carson out of a sound sleep. He would have startled, but he was tangled up in Luka’s heavy, naked limbs. Oh, shit.

“Just a second. Something wrong?” Carson shoved at Luka’s shoulder and Luka grumbled, waking. Pants. Where were his pants? Carson fumbled around and grabbed someone’s pants to pull on; he and Luka were the same size, anyway. The belt and holster caught in the blankets as he wriggled into them. The gun was heavy at his hip; he didn’t know if he’d ever fallen asleep without putting it under his pillow before.

“Not... not an emergency, sir.” It was definitely Mehrdad, by the clipped tones. Luka shoved a shirt at him, and Carson pulled it on. He grabbed his boots as he crawled out of the warm tent and into the chilly night air.

“What can I do for you?” Carson tried to fake a little dignity as he put his boots on, feeling sticky under his clothes.

“I’d like to know if you’ve lost your mind,” Mehrdad said simply.

“Do you want to know that or do you want to know whether or not I’m still fit for command?” Carson tied his boots and stood up, looking Mehrdad in the eye.

“The latter, if you don’t mind.” Mehrdad looked up at him curiously, expression non-judgmental.

“I think I am. I don’t want to die, but I never feared dying for a reason. This... this is meaningless,” Carson said. He tilted his head back to look at the midnight curve of the sky and the stars scattered across it. The moon was already on a decline, sliding toward the dark forest.

“The serum, it doesn’t make us into zombies,” Mehrdad said quietly. “It made things easier, but what we did, following the program, it was our choice. We weren’t insane, we weren’t coerced, we were doing what we said we’d do.”

“We said we’d give our lives for peace,” Carson retorted. I know we weren’t talked into anything, but we were told it was the right thing to do. I don’t know if it’s right anymore. You tell me how our deaths are going to make anything more peaceful. You tell me why we deserve less than any citizen living under the Core.”

“Because of the things we’ve done.” Mehrdad’s expression was inscrutable; his eyes glittered in the little light there was to see by.

"Things we did for the greater good. It can't be a crime if we did it for that reason." Carson shook his head and put his hands on his hips. "Mehrdad, I'm not going to die just because I don't want to live with the guilt of something I've done. I'm not going to make anyone else die for that reason, either."

"This is an eleventh hour change of heart, Carson," Mehrdad said mildly, though there was warning in his tone. Carson watched Mehrdad a moment, then pulled his gun, flicking the strap aside and the safety off, bringing it to bear on Mehrdad's impassive face all in one smooth movement. Mehrdad hit the ground and rolled, coming up to his knees with his hand going to his own gun.

"So is that." Carson flicked the safety back on and slid the gun back in the holster, then stepped forward, offering Mehrdad his hand. "If I thought for a minute that it would make the world better, I'd use it on myself," he said gently. Mehrdad put his hand in Carson's and Carson pulled him to his feet. "Didn't you take some oath to preserve life?"

"I did." Mehrdad actually looked a little shaken.

"We can change our minds any time, as long as we choose to live now," Carson said. Mehrdad nodded slowly.

"South, then? Away from the Core communities?"

"Far away," Carson promised. "Into exile. The end result will be the same, except we live out our lives and die on our own terms."

"I accept your evaluation that you remain fit for command," Mehrdad said, brushing himself off. "I will see you in the morning, sir. I'm sorry for disturbing you."

"Not a problem, Mehrdad. Get some rest."

Dismissed, Mehrdad turned and made his way back towards the medic's tent. Carson slid back into his own and found it somewhat tidier, at least by what he could feel. Luka was sitting up, the faint light from above falling on his hair and shoulders. When he reached out, the light traced Luka's arm and hand in silver, guiding Carson home. Luka laid down and drew Carson down into the blankets with him, tugged a few up over them both.

"You didn't do what I think you did." Luka's fingers feathered through Carson's unruly hair.

"Threatened to shoot him?" Carson couldn't help laughing at the whole mess.

"You did." Luka snorted softly, amused. "You are crazy."

“Well, I have all this help, see,” Carson said, trying to stop laughing. He finally managed when Luka rolled him over on his back and kissed him again, hard and fierce. Carson wound his fingers in Luka’s hair to make sure Luka wouldn’t stop kissing like that, his whole body arching and yearning for contact. Luka, he realized, was still naked, and Luka was working at his belt with one hand, pushing himself up and over Carson with the other.

Above him, Luka was a shadow outlined in starlight, every wild curl and sleek muscle drawn in careful detail. Carson slipped his hands out of Luka’s hair to help strip away the clothes between them.

Carson knew exactly what he was doing this time, and Luka was still slick from before, wet with Carson’s come when Carson rolled him over on his back and slid a hand down to touch. Luka slid his fingers, thick with lubricant, over Carson’s cock, then guided him in. Like this, Carson could kiss Luka, moaning low, while he pushed inside. Luka drew his legs up and Carson braced himself on knees and elbows and found the right angle after a few strokes.

They moved slower this time, Luka’s body wound around his. Everything was gentler, but no less intense; Carson was just as breathless as before. Luka’s kisses were so needy, so wanting, that Carson could get lost in kissing him back, hot and messy, trying to reassure him wordlessly. It was going to be okay. After a long time, Carson shifted to slide a hand between them, gently stroking Luka’s cock and breathing in the soft moans that Luka exhaled into their kisses.

Luka came silently, head back, eyes closed, just like the first time they were together on the fire escape. Carson watched Luka avidly, shivering at the warm splash on his belly and fingers. He slowed and took his hand away, letting Luka recover enough to open those eyes and smile up at him.

“It’s going to be okay,” Carson promised, petting Luka’s cheek with his free hand. Luka exhaled slowly, a shuddering sigh.

“I’m not sorry,” Luka said at last, pushing himself up a little to get Carson to kiss him. Carson kissed him back into the blankets, hungry and possessive. It had to be okay, because he wasn’t going to let Luka go. “So, not,” Luka said, when Carson let him breathe. He stroked Carson’s hair, running his fingers through it. “Come for me?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Carson whispered back, kissing Luka as he started to move again. It felt so good. He couldn’t give this up, couldn’t give Luka up. Right now, he didn’t care what he deserved or didn’t, he just wanted Luka. Luka, who was so tight around him, body moving with his, sighing with pleasure as Carson fucked him. Carson shuddered and tucked his head down against Luka’s shoulder, his body moving automatically, harder

and faster as he got closer to orgasm. “Luka,” he whimpered, and started to come, slow and intense. Pleasure rolled through him like waves uncurling on the shore and he could feel Luka kissing his neck and shoulder, stroking his hair as he came.

“Better,” Luka said softly, when Carson’s body stilled. They shifted to get more comfortable, but stayed close, limbs entwined, and Luka pulled the blankets up again. “Now sleep.”

“You, too, soldier,” Carson murmured, and felt Luka laugh a little.

“Yes, sir,” Luka said. Carson didn’t stay awake to find out if Luka was following orders. Luka’s gentle hand on his hair soothed him to sleep before it fell still.

Chapter Six

Despite a lack of sleep, Carson was awake before dawn, before Luka's watch beeped at them. He opened his eyes and shifted so that he could see Luka sleeping, pushing himself up on one elbow. There were fine lines at the corners of Luka's eyes, even when he was resting, and a few around his mouth, probably from laughing. The thought made Carson smile. He ran a finger over Luka's temple, realizing that there were silver hairs in with the gold that he'd never seen before. His dogtags dragged against Luka's bare shoulder; that and the touch on the temple made Luka stir. Luka's eyes fluttered open and he stretched, stifling a yawn with the back of one fist. Relaxing again, he smiled up at Carson.

He rubbed a hand over Carson's chin. "Better." Carson couldn't help laughing at him, especially when Luka patted Carson's cheek and said, "Now, go do it again."

"Trying to get rid of me?" Carson turned his head and kissed Luka's palm.

"Never." Luka pushed himself up to kiss Carson on the mouth. They fell back into the blankets and Carson slid his body over Luka's, kissing him slow and deep, memorizing the feel of his mouth. They didn't have long, a few minutes of that closeness in the gray morning, before Luka's watch beeped. Carson moved away and Luka turned off the watch.

"Might as well wash, with the lake right there and all," Carson said quietly, as though it was any other morning. He found his pants – he had been wearing his own last night after all – and pulled them on.

"Good idea." Luka sounded tired, but he grabbed his own pants and then started going through his kit for another set of clothes. Carson found his own, pulled his boots on without doing them up, and crawled out into the morning.

Morning by a lake or river meant washing. Usually it also meant a lot of horseplay and a fair amount of soap lost forever to the swirling currents or rushing waves. This morning it was quiet except for the sound of water splashing. When Carson looked up from rinsing out his hair, combing it back with his fingers, up to his waist in the cold water, he counted the bodies in the water. Twenty-four. All of them. The rising sun that put out the stars glittered off of their bodies, the water darkened their hair and hid the silver in it, even Carson's. They scrubbed and shaved and dried and dressed in silence.

Carson was one of the first out of the water and dressed, so he filled the pots on the stoves with treated water and started them heating.

"You don't need to do that, sir." Tafadzwa came up from the beach behind him and tried to wave him off.

"I remember how." Carson gave him a grin that lacked his usual spark, and he knew it. "Did you sleep?"

"Hardly." Tafadzwa opened a tin of oatmeal and started measuring it out into a pot. "You?"

"Not really." Carson felt a little ashamed that he'd missed out on sleep tangled up with Luka, trying to be quiet in spite of the pleasure of their bodies wound together, instead of trying to make sense of a life overturned.

"Are you sure about this, sir?" Tafadzwa, usually stolid and unshakeable, looked up at Carson like a drowning man.

"Yes." It was all Carson felt right saying.

Tafadzwa turned back to his work, watched the oatmeal pour into the water, then looked out at the lake and the bathers. "That's all I need to know," he said quietly.

"Carry on, Taf," Carson said. He patted Tafadzwa on the shoulder and headed up to the truck to get things ready.

Breakfast was as silent as the morning ritual of bathing, just a murmur here and there when someone passed their cup down for a refill of coffee, and the clink of spoons against bowls. Carson sat on a log between Luka and Paderau. Paderau, who never sat near him, preferring to be in the middle of his friends, looked grim and weary. Carson felt guilty, looking around at all the familiar faces, at the uncharacteristic strain on them.

When people were done eating, instead of rising and drifting off, they stayed where they were, waiting. Some of them closed their eyes, Gazsi laid back and looked at the sky, and Yale used his belly as a pillow, Tam slumping against Yale in turn. Carson rose, moving to collect the things he'd gathered, and was surprised by a hand on his thigh, a gentle touch. He looked down at Luka and Luka smiled up at him. He brushed the back of his knuckles across Luka's cheek, just a touch, then moved away.

"I want to make sure we all understand," he said quietly, returning with an empty coffee tin and a handful of paper and some pencils that he'd found, miraculously, in one of the crates in with the communications supplies. "I just want to know one thing, if you want to keep on program or if you want to go somewhere else. Somewhere we won't hurt anyone. Exile. That's all." Luka came over to hand around the papers, Rudi got up to pass around the pencils. "Checkmark for staying on program, 'x' for exile. Your choice. I won't know, no one will know." He put the tin down in the ashes of last night's fire. "Vote, fold it up, put it in there. Mehrdad will count them." He took the last piece of paper from Luka and the last pencil from Rudi, then went back to sit down.

They were slow about it, but one at a time they got up and dropped their papers into the tin. Charlton put his in and went back to sit down with his head in his hands, shoulders shaking. Red sat down and put an arm around him, a little awkwardly. On the other side, Roparzh patted his knee and murmured something in his ear before getting up to drop his own paper in as well. Finally, they were all done but Luka and Mehrdad and Carson. Luka got up to drop his vote in, then Mehrdad. Carson marked an 'x' on his paper, folded it up, and got to his feet.

He picked up the tin, put his vote in it, and gave it a shake before handing it off to Mehrdad.

"All yours," he said. Mehrdad took the tin in one hand and saluted Carson.

"Thank you, sir," Mehrdad said crisply. He took a seat again, gesturing for Coleman to get up and move so he could have some room, and began to count the votes. He smoothed each piece of paper out and put it to one side of him or another, face down. Carson walked back to stand by Luka, giving Mehrdad time and space to do his work. Luka was running his dogtags along the chain, a nervous habit, ticking the tags over one ball at a time, slowly. It usually drove Carson crazy; now it was just comforting, familiar. Tafadzwa refilled his own cup of coffee, passed the pot down to Mitxel and Lauritz.

I can't lose them. The thought startled Carson and he shook his head. If he'd done a good job in his life, if they trusted him, he wouldn't.

"I'm done, sir." Mehrdad had two stacks of the little papers, and he turned them face up.

"What's the verdict, then?" Carson's hands were cold and wet, curled in his pockets.

"Twenty-one votes for exile," Mehrdad said, sounding more than a little surprised. Carson's knees wanted to give, but he inhaled and straightened; he didn't expect the decision to be so overwhelmingly in his favor. "Three votes for program." There was a soft murmur around the circle and Carson breathed slowly, looking around. There were various expressions of shock and surprise. Rudi looked stricken, Paderau was grinning like a fool.

"Put the papers back in the tin," he ordered. "That's it, then, boys. We'll need to start making arrangements to go south."

"What do we do now, sir?" Sky looked as pale and frightened as Carson felt.

"We make plans to collect supplies," Carson said, ticking off the list of emergency procedures in his head. "We modify the power cells to run off of solar power. We can

go back by Kingston to get more panels and gas. It'll mean we have to move slow, but we don't have any other source of fuel once we're out of range."

"How far south are we going?" Yale ran his hands through his hair and sat up straight, looking resolute.

"Get out the maps. There's some decent country down there around the low mountains below the lakes." Carson nodded as Yale started to get to his feet. "Calculate how much power we'll need to get that far."

"Yes, sir." Yale snapped off a quick salute and took off for the trucks at a run.

"As for the rest of you," Carson said. "Refill the water supplies, get us ready to go. And then..." He looked over at Mehrdad, who was talking quietly with Coleman.

"I'll prepare what we need." Mehrdad looked around at them. "We all have microchip implants, for those of you who remember getting them. If I remove them, there's no way for Core to track us. It's nothing but a nick under the arm to get them out."

"That's assuming that the satellites have ever been reliable enough to track us regularly," Luka chimed in. "Core will be waiting for our report from Nickel to give us our final orders. Or drop us with a Nobel strike."

"We'll worry about that when we come to it," Carson said.

"I can probably put a delay on the report," Kim said, raising his hand tentatively. "We'll be able to be in and out before it goes out. If we leave the trackers there, Core won't have any way of knowing we're not there."

"Good idea." Carson nodded approvingly at Kim. This was all falling into place so quickly. People were starting to talk, starting to gather themselves up. Some of them still looked like they were sleepwalking, but they'd probably be okay in time. He allowed himself the luxury of looking down at Luka with a smile; he wanted to sit down with his head in his hands and shake a little, but that would have to do.

"You can't do this. Sir." Rudi recovered enough to get up and step forward. His voice was unsteady and his face was white, but his eyes were full of fire. Carson looked away from Luka to see Rudi and something inside said to get out of the way. He ignored it and stood his ground. It was just Rudi. Quiet, obedient, smiling Rudi. Rudi was just having trouble adjusting, that was all.

"Rudi, we've decided. We're going," Carson said gently. "I'm taking us out of here. That's all there is to it. Let's get to work now, soldier."

“We are not going off program.” Rudi’s voice hit a painful pitch and broke on the last word. “Sir!” His hand was moving toward his gun before anyone could move. Everything slowed to a crawl. Rudi’s gun came up and Carson was pulling his out, too late.

“Get down!” That wasn’t Carson’s voice, that was Luka’s, his words punctuated by gunfire. Luka, lurching to his feet and throwing himself at Carson. He took Carson down, hands fisted in Carson’s shirt. They hit the ground, Carson on his back, and rolled. There were shouts and screaming and more shots, heard as though from the far end of the tunnel. Carson pushed himself up off of Luka, gun in hand now, and tried to regain control before anyone could return fire, before anyone got killed.

“That’s enough.” His voice still had the same effect, the crack of command through the chaos. They drew back as Carson stepped back into the circle, gun trained on Rudi. The slender corporal had backed away, uphill a little, and Carson couldn’t spare attention to anyone or anything else. Somewhere, he heard Mehrdad and Coleman’s voices, heard someone gasping in pain, someone else almost sobbing. “Rudi. Put the gun down.”

“I can’t do that, sir.” Rudi’s hand was unsteady, but he hadn’t shot Carson yet, so that was a good sign. Something was moving at the periphery of Carson’s vision, Tafadzwa, maybe, on one side, someone else on the other.

“Rudi. Don’t do this.” Carson tried taking the edge out of his voice, gentling his tone, pleading. “Please.”

“Don’t come any closer!” Rudi swung the gun to the side and fired, then there was another shot from another gun and Rudi fell backwards. Carson brought his gun down; it had been everything he could do not to drop it when he fired and the kickback wrenched his bandaged wrist. That he’d fired at all felt surreal. Rudi clutched at his thigh, blood running through his fingers. Carson had been aiming for his shoulder and missed terribly, but the effect was the same for the moment. The only problem was that Rudi still had his gun in his hand.

“Rudi.” Carson started toward him slowly. “Put the gun down. Come on. We can talk about this.”

“Don’t come any closer,” Rudi gasped, writhing around so that he could bring the gun up again.

“Please, Rudi.” Carson stopped moving and put his gun away. “See? We can talk about it.”

"There's nothing to talk about." Tears were running down Rudi's face now, the blood was coming faster between his fingers, staining the soft, green grass and little, white clover flowers under him. "We have to stay on program."

"We can talk about it," Carson said soothingly. "We're all going to stick together." He took a step forward, and then another. A few more steps and he would be close enough to get his hands on Rudi's gun. "Come on."

"No," Rudi gasped. He was curled up on his left side like a child, left hand clamped over the hole in his right leg, trembling right hand keeping the gun raised. Tears ran down his face, into the red and silver curls tangled in the grass. "We have to stay on program." He turned the gun away and Carson had a moment's relief until the gun didn't stop moving. "We have to stay on program."

The shot went off before Carson could get the word out. "No!" And then it was too late, even though Carson was moving to close the distance between them. The gun slipped away into the grass and flowers and the blood welled up between the blades and blossoms, so quickly. "Rudi, no," Carson whispered. He dropped to his knees, but the light was already out of Rudi's eyes. When Carson touched his shoulder, he slumped back, staring at the pale blue sky.

"Sir." Coleman was there, pulling Carson back. Carson picked Rudi's gun up and pushed himself to his feet, feeling cold through. He took a few steps backward and then turned around to take control of the rest of the group.

It looked like a small war zone. Tafadzwa was bleeding from the shoulder, Baptiste was cutting away the red-soaked sleeve of Taf's shirt to see the wound. Until he saw that, it never really occurred to Carson that Rudi would actually hit anyone, that the bullets from his gun could kill his own people. Sky was lying with his head in Anacleto's lap while Sullivan held his shirt folded up over Sky's shoulder, pressing down to stop the bleeding. Gervasio and Paderau were sprinting up to the medic truck. Tam had Reid in his arms, propping him up, comforting him. Gazsi was holding a jacket over a wound in Reid's side. The fabric and the grass underneath were red and getting redder. Carson looked around for Mehrdad. Where the hell was Mehrdad?

Rudi's gun dangling from his hand, Carson crossed the camp like he was sleep-walking, looking for Mehrdad's white shirt. He finally caught sight of it on the far side and headed that way. It felt like he was walking a hundred miles to get there. He could hear Mehrdad shouting something at someone, and Lauritz took off for the medic truck.

"Someone take this." Carson held Rudi's gun out and Kim came running to take it carefully in both hands, cradling it like an injured bird. "Lock it up."

"Yes, sir." Kim faded away, taking the gun with him.

“Mehrdad?”

The physician was bent over someone laid out on the ground, the crushed grass around them wet and dark with blood. “Hold this for me,” he snapped, moving so that Carson could step in. Carson knelt down and put his hands on the folded pad of khaki fabric that was soaking through with blood.

“Hey,” Luka whispered. “You okay?”

“I... yeah.” Carson felt like he was bleeding from somewhere he couldn’t see. Luka’s blood seeping through the cloth was warm on his hands. Luka sprawled in the grass like he’d thrown himself down for a rest, and looked up at Carson calmly, for all that his side was drenched in blood. Calm. Shock. Carson was swimming in it. “I’m fine. You?”

“I’m fine.” Luka managed a smile, then coughed. Pink flecked the corners of his lips and Carson lifted a hand to brush the back of it across Luka’s mouth, wiping it clean.

“When did you...?” Carson’s voice trailed off and he realized that it must have been when Rudi shot first, when Luka dragged him down. He’d never even made a sound. “Don’t you die on me, Luka,” he said desperately.

“Is that an order?” Luka didn’t smile this time, but the lines at the corners of his eyes deepened like they did when he was laughing.

“Yes.” Carson’s hands were turning red with Luka’s blood. “Don’t make me write you up.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Luka said. He was fading and Carson could see it, could feel him seeping away with every heartbeat.

“I’ll take that from here, sir.” It was Coleman, medical kit in hand, stepping in with Braeden a pace behind. “Braeden, take over pressure. Darius, we’re going to move you to a backboard in just a minute.”

“Never a good sign when you call a guy by his first name, Coleman,” Luka said, then coughed again.

Darius. Carson stepped back as Braeden moved in, his bloody hands hanging useless at his side. For a moment, he didn’t know who Coleman was talking to. Luka. Right. Sergeant Darius Luka. Carson had all but forgotten that they had first names, any of them, they’d been soldiers so long.

“We need to get up to Camp Nickel,” Mehrdad said. He came back at a run, carrying the backboard down with Lauritz.

“Nickel?” Carson felt like he was swimming through mud.

“There’s a surgical facility there,” Mehrdad said, gesturing for Braeden to get out of the way a little. “Yale and Sky should make it without, but someone here had to throw a vital organ in front of a bullet.” He glanced down and gave Luka a sharp look.

“Sorry, sir,” Luka said faintly.

“Contrition is an excellent sign.” Mehrdad looked over at Carson. “I need to go with him, of course. I’ll need Coleman to assist me. And we need Kim or Tafadzwa to get us power.”

“Not if they tell me how to do it.” Carson’s brain snapped back into real time and he knew what he was doing again. The minute that power came on at Nickel, they were all in danger. “Just get him in the truck.” He turned around and nearly ran Kim over.

“Sir,” Kim said, stepping back out of the way. “I don’t mind going. I don’t think I can explain it all to you, and it’ll probably take two people to get it going.”

“Okay.” Carson went to run his hands through his hair and realized that they were stiff with blood. *Don’t think about whose blood it is*, he ordered himself. “You understand...”

“That they could knock the shit out of us as soon as we’re online, yes, sir,” Kim said briskly. “I’ll go get my things together.” As Kim ran for the engineering truck, Carson turned away to locate something to clean off his hands. The dishwashing station was set up, unused, so he plunged his hands into a bucket of water. It turned red around his wrists and he dumped it out when he was done. When he looked up, he caught sight of Tafadzwa, shoulder bandaged, leaning over Sky while Baptiste cleaned out Sky’s wound.

“Taf!” Carson called, heading his way.

Tafadzwa met him halfway. “Yes, sir?”

“I’m taking Kim, Mehrdad, and Coleman up to Nickel in the medic truck. You’re in charge while I’m gone,” Carson said briskly. “You’re doing okay?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Tafadzwa said, looking a little surprised. “Just a graze on the shoulder.”

“Good man.” Carson slapped him on the good shoulder.

“About Rudi, sir?” Tafadzwa looked over his shoulder to where Rudi lay in the long grass. He looked like he was sleeping in the green field, under the perfect sky.

“Cover him up,” Carson said quietly. He caught sight of the men moving Luka to the medic truck, under Merhdad’s watchful eye. “I’ve got to go. We’ll bury him when we get back.”

Camp Nickel felt even colder and more foreboding when Carson was the one driving the medic truck in, with Kim beside him and Luka in the back with Coleman and Mehrdad both working at keeping Luka alive.

“If we use the backup generators,” Kim said quietly, just loud enough to be heard over the engine, “We might be able to stay off the grid. I have no idea if there’s any fuel left in the tanks, but the facility here had an external set to keep the hospital going.”

“And if not?” Carson pulled through the gates and followed the faded signs with a white H in the center of an almost-white background.

“Then we hope that the satellite uplink is down again.” Kim looked grim, but he flashed Carson a smile. “As usual.”

“Bless hinky technology,” Carson said, laughing quietly.

They unloaded Luka at the cracked doors of the old hospital and Carson came around to see him before he disappeared inside.

“Hey,” Carson said, leaning over the gurney and pushing Luka’s hair back from his pale face. “You remember your orders.”

“Not dying.” It was hard to hear him with the oxygen mask over his face. He was swathed in blankets, strapped in with intravenous lines already in one of his arms.

Carson leaned down to whisper in Luka’s ear. “I want you to come back.” He was cold like he had been in the lake and Luka was swimming away from him, only this time, Carson couldn’t go with him. Luka got a hand out of the blankets and pulled the mask down.

“I’m coming back, Car,” he whispered. Carson kissed Luka then, softly, on his iron-flavored lips, and let him go.

“I’ll be here,” he promised.

Carson sat on the shore of another dark lake under a waning moon, watching his men. He couldn't see quite well enough to pick them out by sight, but he knew their voices and a few of them stood out, like broad-shouldered Tafadzwa launching slender little Kim into the air to dive into the deeper water. And that laugh was Paderau making tracks into the water with a now-soaking, irate Baptiste hot on his heels. Carson couldn't help laughing as well, and Luka made a discontented noise, waking.

"You're sure I can't go swimming?" Luka tilted his head to look at Carson and Carson smiled down at him where he'd been sleeping in Carson's arms, back to Carson's chest.

"Once you don't have a hole through your chest, we can talk about it," Carson said, ducking his head to kiss Luka on the mouth. "Or are you trying to get me in trouble with Mehrdad again?"

"I have better ways to get you in trouble with Mehrdad than swimming," Luka said smugly.

"Yes, you do. But I'm not falling for that one again." Carson felt his cheeks flush even with the cool night wind on his face.

"What's a few split stitches between friends?" Luka snuggled down against Carson's shoulder again, yawning. "I'm tired of being tired, Car."

"You're healing. It's only been a few days." Carson made sure that Luka was wrapped well in the blankets.

"Coffee?" Merhdad materialized out of the dark with a cup in each hand.

"There's medicine in mine, isn't there?" Luka asked, looking up at the physician suspiciously.

"Absolutely. Drink up." Mehrdad held out the cup and Luka took it with a sigh.

"Thanks, Merhdad," Carson said, taking his.

"You know," Mehrdad said, looking at Luka and Carson with some dismay, "men with less serious injuries are resting properly right now."

"I'll get him back in a few minutes," Carson promised. "It was this or he was going swimming."

“Carry on then.” Mehrdad laughed and turned away. “But don’t be complaining to me when you take twice as long to heal, Sergeant.”

“You sure you don’t want to go join them?” Luka nodded toward the lake where someone had just been tossed in, raising a shower of glittering droplets.

“I’m fine.” Carson kissed Luka on the temple and then took a sip of his coffee. “If I get bored, I can always look at the stars.”

-end-