

Red Sage Presents

A muscular man with long blonde hair and a black blindfold is shown from the chest up. He is shirtless, revealing a well-defined physique. The background features a city skyline at sunset, with a bright orange and yellow sky and dark silhouettes of buildings. The overall mood is dramatic and mysterious.

NATHALIE
GRAY

AGENT
PROVOCATEUR



An eRedSage Publishing Publication

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Agent Provocateur

by Nathalie Gray

To My Reader:

I've always wanted to write a story set in my hometown of Montreal. *Agent Provocateur* is it. Against a backdrop of a 24th century dystopian society, this is the story of Troy and Mercury, both secret weapons in their own rights. As they slalom around obstacles, blow stuff up and generally destroy their way to their goal, they have to decide which is more dangerous—falling in enemy territory, or falling for each other. What have I done to my beautiful Montreal?!

Agent Provocateur: Chapter 1

“La faim chasse le loup hors du bois.”

Hunger draws the wolf out of the woods.

—French proverb

He usually received his meals in his cell. Because he didn't play well with others. Because he'd already tried to kill another inmate and maimed half a dozen. And because every last person in the building was scared of him.

But they just couldn't leave him alone. They had to test him, had to see if he was the big scary Stinger who'd brought down the infamous Kryonics cartel, biggest human organs and DNA trafficker of all time. He was and he had.

A Stinger's job was to infiltrate the enemy and kill it from the inside. He'd been so good at it that shit really *had* hit the fan in a big way. Collaterals left, right and sideways. Innocent bystanders. A rushed trial and oily superiors who'd let him take the fall. So there he was, five and a half years into a sentence of seventy-one, with a degree in Classical Studies—had to keep busy somehow—his hair way past regulations, and a yellow nylon uniform that would've made his ex-girlfriends faint in embarrassment.

Still, it wasn't all bad. He was *alive*. Better than his unwitting victims. An entire city block, gone. In the overcrowded Misborn ghetto of downtown Montreal, he suspected the casualties ran even higher. He'd brought Kryonics to its knees, and to him, nothing else mattered. But sometimes, he wondered—

“Troy!” crackled the comms through a dirty yellow box overhead. Guards took infinite delight in startling inmates.

Troy stared at the ceramic core ceiling, designed for added strength but minimum weight because no one wanted a prison to land on their head. The main reason prisons had become hovering citadels five hundred meters above cities? No one wanted them in their backyard.

Knowing security watched his every move, he yawned theatri-

cally and pretended not to hear when the guard called his name again. Louder. Maybe hoping to startle him. But unless a pair of naughty nurses in white latex minis popped into his cell for some TLC, pretty much nothing could surprise him anymore.

“Prepare for transport. Skybridge Four, Level One, visitor chamber.”

Now this *did* pique his curiosity. He’d never had a visitor. Not once.

When the clear thermoplastic door slid into the wall, he unfolded from the low cot, smoothed the front of his nylon coveralls, and went to stand in the red circle painted on the floor so the scanner along the doorjamb could go over him. Twice top-down-top, twice sideways.

“Specimen clean. Scan negative for illicit substances. Proceed.”

Smells assaulted him as soon as he stepped outside the relative haven of his cell and onto the long gangway. Thanks to DNA tampering in his family tree, he could catch days-old scents and even detect odors as faint as cash in a guy’s back pocket or ether in the wind. His gift. His curse. He cringed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Solvents, paints, heated aluminum, plastic joints, the acrid odor of rubber seals, and people smells, too. Fellow inmates most of all—one of them reeked like a diabetic, and that guy with the seizures had a nasty one coming.

When he reached the thick steel door, the scanner did its thing again. Twice top-down-top, twice sideways. With a chime, the door slid into the wall to reveal a securibot. He hated those stupid machines.

“Follow us,” it said in its genderless, metallic voice.

Us. Who the hell did it think it was? Us.

The synthetic guard led him to one of the skybridges. Beyond the steel and thermoplastic, Troy could see two people standing in the visitor chamber with a trio of gorillas in suits. Bodyguards were always so damn obvious. Those people looked like State. He *hated* State. State had let him down. State had let the judge fuck him—figuratively—in the ass with his pants on. State had betrayed

him.

The door slid into the wall and his mechanized nanny invited him to “Follow us” into the visitor chamber proper. As soon as he did, smells assaulted him. Cologne, dry cleaners’ solvent, polyurethane, hair products—damn, had someone fallen in the stuff? But above all, one scent caught his nostrils, entered his skull, and swished around in his brain.

Female musk. Goddamn, there was a woman in here. And a hard one to miss, too.

Trouble on legs, white-blond hair in a punkish, asymmetrical cut, thin lips ready to smirk, and kohl-lined black eyes that could melt a guy’s crotch. To the untrained eye, she could’ve been a Misborn—not everyone had an iris shaped like a diamond—but he knew better. She was an Integer. One from the ruling caste. So her street looks were just play-acting and fancy surgery. Did they think he’d lost his edge that bad? Give the guy some credit! Still, the way she carried herself—and the nasty-looking set of throwing knives worked into her corset—let Troy know she was dangerous with a capital D.

Then another, subtler smell tickled his nostrils. In a corner, he spotted a small man with hair shaved up to his crown on one side of his head. On the lapel of his gray shantung jacket, a pink mimosa had been pinned. Joseph Arsenic—or more affectionately Joe Arse Nick—his former boss and the reason he sat in a cell.

“Troy.” Arsenic bowed and smiled. “It’s been too long. Please, take a seat.”

“Not long enough,” Troy snapped. “And please, go fuck yourself.” He turned on his heel, ready to walk right back out.

He had no time for them. They’d let him down when it suited them, and now here they stood, probably looking for some intel he’d gathered. Well, fuck them. They could kiss his ass and find some other Stinger to jerk around.

“Jean-Sébastien Troy,” said the woman behind him. He froze. “Born in 2139 in Area 4B, only child of Adrienne Dupuis and Wallace Troy, both Misborns and deceased. Graduated bottom third of

your class. Arrested half a dozen times for various misdemeanors until your recruitment at age seventeen. A case study of what a Stinger should *not* do—”

“That’s all in my file, Blondie,” he cut in. “So you can *read*. Hoo-fucking-ray.” But he still turned around so he could eyeball the only real woman he’d seen in six years. She looked like a tough little shit with attitude enough for three her size.

He loved chicks with attitude. She smelled nice too.

“We have a proposition,” Arsenic went on.

“You shut up,” Troy snapped. Then he pointed with his chin at the woman. “You want me to do something for you because, oops, you forgot that I’m the best, and now there’s no one good enough to fish your collective dumb asses out of the lake. In exchange, you’ll either clean my slate with State or you’ll get me a new trial, preferably rigged, during which I’ll conveniently choke on my tofu wiener—which I don’t eat ’cause it tastes like shit—and poof, all your troubles will go away. How close am I so far?”

“Pretty close,” she replied, deadpan. “But it wouldn’t be a tofu wiener because I agree, they do taste like shit.”

Troy offered her his most acerbic grin. “You have some mouth on you. I like that.”

She shoved her fists into the pockets of her cargo skirt. When she sighed, her breasts pushed against the black polyurethane corset and made the buckles glimmer. If that didn’t give a guy a hard-on, he didn’t know what would.

“I’m so glad I passed the interview,” she remarked acidly. “Now, do you want to know how you can get out of here, or do you prefer to go back to your cell and stay there for the next sixty-five years?”

“Sixty-four.”

“Sixty-four years and six months. Rounded up it makes sixty-five.”

“You don’t ‘round up’ in prison, Blondie—”

“If I may,” Arsenic cut in, standing and slipping a finger in his lapel pocket. “Here’s what we need done, Mister Troy. Do you know Brother Cain?”

Troy rolled his eyes. “I’m in prison, Arse Nick, not living on fucking Pluto. Of *course* I know that crazy bastard. You want me to infiltrate his little band of merry men and stir their shit? Forget it. It’s like a bunker in there. And last I heard, you lost three Stingers just knocking on Cain’s front door.”

Arsenic shook his head, but it was Blondie who spoke. “I prefer the back door myself.”

“Figuratively? Or are you sharing something with us?” Troy was delighted to see her blush. Her female musk thickened. It was all he could smell.

“We need you to bring him back. Collaterals are not an issue,” Arsenic went on in that smug way Troy had always detested. Even *he* didn’t talk about killing with a smile on his face. There was some decorum around death, goddammit!

Troy snorted a laugh. “Kidnap Cain? He’s like a messiah to the Misborns. You’ll have a riot on your hands.”

“What do you care?” Blondie retorted.

Those black eyes of hers, even the funky one, were really doing a number on his blood pressure. He wondered if she’d taste the same as she smelled. Fresh and juicy. Cucumber and melon body lotion?

“If I’m caught anywhere near that cluster fuck, believe me, I’ll *care*. Call me shallow, but I don’t like to get shrapnel that doesn’t have my name on it.”

Arsenic shook his head. “Alive, Brother Cain is a symbol, a catalyst, yes, even though in prison he won’t do much harm. But should he die, yes, I agree with you, the consequences for us would be irritating.”

“Yeah, full-out revolt and armed Misborns loose in the streets can be so ‘irritating.’ What’s your plan, anyway? We can’t just barge down there and say, ‘Hey, hand over the crazy bastard, would ya.’ They won’t know which one we mean. Kinda confusing, you know.”

“Your partner will brief you as she sees fit.”

“Oh, great. The classic need-to-know bullshit.” He checked the

clock on the wall. “Thanks, but no thanks. My show’s about to start and I don’t want to miss it. Send me back.”

“This,” Arsenic said as he waved a blue datacard with a small corner smile, “should help you decide.”

Smug, detestable prick.

Arsenic slipped the datacard into the reader on the table. At once, a ghostly document appeared. The holographic image twirled slowly enough for Troy to read the first few lines. A full pardon letter. Christ, they weren’t joking. Before he could read further, Arsenic removed the card and the blue mirage that meant Troy’s freedom blinked out. Asshole.

“You enjoyed doing that, didn’t you?” Troy snarled.

Arsenic’s grin widened. “Immensely. What’s your decision? Should I get security to take you back to your cell?”

One of the gorillas in suits shifted on his feet.

“Down boys,” Troy snapped. “He meant the one on wheels.” Turning to his former boss, he shook his head. “I hate your guts, Joe Arse Nick, I really do. But since you have the gorillas, the pretty bait and all the guns, I guess I’ll fall in line.”

“I’m glad we agree.” There was steel underneath Arsenic’s gray eyes. As little as Troy thought of his former boss, he knew the man wasn’t to be messed with. He’d seen what a pissed-off Arsenic could do. They were probably still scraping the walls to put a certain wayward Stinger into a box.

“When does the fun start?” Troy asked, looking at Arsenic but all the while keeping his attention on Blondie.

“Brother Cain has to be in our compound before sunset tomorrow.”

Troy rolled his eyes. “Always sunset.”

“Seems appropriate. Plus, I have plans for tomorrow night.” Arsenic motioned for one of the goons. The duffel bag in the guy’s hand looked like a child’s toy when he tossed it on the table. “Clothes,” Arsenic went on. “Weapons and a self-deleter. All the necessities of life.”

Troy grabbed the bag and took a quick peek into it. Black

clothes and boots. Black weapons. For once, he'd like to go on a job in a fuchsia bathrobe and flip-flops. Just for the hell of it.

"You can keep the self-deleter." He took the slim black tube from the pack and put it on the table. "I wouldn't give those fuckers the satisfaction."

Blondie approached and, with her mesmerizing eyes on him, put the tube back into the pack. "You never know."

Her scent was so strong, so intoxicating, Troy could only grunt in reply. He cleared his throat. "They'll spot me a block away in these things."

"Who said Misborns have to dress poorly?" Arsenic asked. He brushed a gentle finger over his mimosa. "Clothes are modern man's armor."

Troy lined the contents of the bag on the table and cut a glance at the woman who was staring at him, and not subtly either. "Normally, I'd charge, but for you Blondie, it'll be free."

A roll of her pretty, black-lined eyes. "The name is Mercury."

"Like the Greek god messenger?" Finally, his degree was coming in handy.

"Like the poison."

Despite the scowl tightening her face, he knew he'd scored a good one and that she wanted to smile. So she had a mouth *and* a sense of humor. His kind of girl. But. She was an Integer. One posing as a Misborn. Messed up in her pretty head.

Too bad, really. He would've liked getting to know her a bit better. Maybe a *lot* better.

Mercury wanted nothing more than to kick the arrogant jerk in his tight ass. Even ugly nylon the color of rubber chickens couldn't hide the fact the man had one gorgeous butt. She was a butt girl, what could she do? Not to mention a wiry network of muscles she admired as he stripped to don the clothes Arsenic had provided.

Pretty bait? Had he called her pretty bait?! Asshole.

She chanced a surreptitious peek at the mimosa-wearing man conversing quietly on his e-link and grimaced inwardly. Compared

to her true bosses at Kryonics, Arsenic was almost charming. That the cartel had contacted him to get their hands on Troy surprised her more, in fact, than Arsenic accepting their generous offer.

Then again, Augustine had been one vindictive old bitch, and she'd been pining to repay the Stinger for bringing her cartel down. It'd been six years. Mercury had only been with Kryonics for four, but she'd heard plenty of times the story about Augustine's demise at the hands of Troy. Mercury had no idea what her boss planned for the Stinger, but whatever it was, it'd hurt long and hard. And would probably mess his good looks. Too bad.

Mercury's job was to bring the doomed man to the old metro station *Champs-de-Mars*. There'd be a diversion along the way to add some veracity to the plan and make sure Troy followed willingly. Once at the metro station, Augustine's assistants would take over and bring him to the compound across the St. Lawrence River. They'd never come anywhere near Brother Cain and his zealots.

When Troy's legs came into view, Mercury's mind snapped back to the here and now. Nice. Very nice. Built like a swimmer, all long limbs and wide, athletic shoulders. His hair was long now, contrary to the photo in his file. It suited him. Gave him a rebel look. Plus, whenever he'd stare at her through his bangs wearing that cocky, wicked half-smile, she practically melted between the legs.

Even in her right eye, which rendered visual stimuli in heat patterns, he was handsome. Usually she tried not to look at people too much because of the crazy color patterns their emotions created. But Troy's body heat was nice and steady, a pretty shade of coral in her right eye. Except for when he'd first walked into the chamber. There'd been a spike of heat then, like white light directly in her brain. Almost bright enough to hurt. Sexual energy always shone the brightest and his was off the charts. His arousal showed pretty clearly still, even if on the exterior he controlled himself rather well. She'd already abandoned the idea of denying her own arousal for him. She knew he could smell it a block away.

"Like what you see?" he tossed without looking up from strap-

ping high boots over his pants. A Japanese-style tunic split up to his hips hugged his lean frame and was cinched at the waist with a wide obi sash. Everything in black. A great contrast to the man's dark blond hair hanging to mid-back.

Straightening to his considerable height, Troy bounced his eyebrows at her before crossing his arms and adopting that scowl for which he'd become infamous. The butts of two mismatched guns protruded from the sash. She wished Arsenic hadn't armed Troy. He was dangerous enough without the two powerful weapons added to the mix. But she'd come equipped for the job. If he gave her any trouble, she'd put the big guy to sleep in ten seconds flat with one of the subdermal trancs she carried.

Arsenic made a wait-a-minute gesture, spoke a few more words into his sleek, silver, crescent-shaped e-link, then flicked it closed. "All is well? Yes? Let's proceed then. Time is money, as they say."

They trooped out of the visitors chamber with the securibot enjoining them all to "Follow Us." The thing led them back the way they'd come. When they reached the skybridge arcing over the void five hundred meters above downtown Montreal, Mercury averted her gaze. She hated heights.

"I'll keep that in mind," she heard Troy remark behind her.

Damn. He'd noticed.

He'd undoubtedly smelled the fear on her. She'd have to work hard not to reveal her plans too soon when they reached the metro. Surely Troy would be able to catch the adrenaline oozing off her.

Smoke and pollution gave the busy sky a greenish tint, which turned the late afternoon sun into a verdigris disc barely bright enough to cast a bit of light on the surface. Beneath their feet, only misery. Once a thriving metropolis, Montreal had become a bloated, grimy collection of buildings in various states of decrepitude, broken-down machinery littering the streets and a Misborn population that surpassed any other on-planet. Ten-point-four million people crammed downtown in a fenced ghetto. A pressure pot of hatred and inequity since the Gene Wars half a century before.

Like a beetle on a leaf, Arsenic's silver shuttle gleamed,

crouched on its skids a few centimeters off the thermoplastic pier. In her right eye, the whole of downtown was a churning mass of ambers and reds. It was hot down there—crowded, humid and hot. And smelly. Horns, sirens and other shuttles filled the air with a cacophony that drilled into her brain.

A flare of red far to the right in her peripheral vision made her turn to look back. Troy stood stoic, face set in that perpetual smirk, but she could tell he was in great pain. Waves of sunburn-red flares licked his head and shoulders. Migraine. A nasty one.

“The smells are getting to you?” she asked. They did to her. She could only imagine what they did to one gifted with an extraordinary sense of smell.

“You think?” he sneered.

Why had she tried to be nice anyway? She knew the man’s reputation, had studied his file. She turned away, shoved a fist in her pocket, and muttered, “Asshole.”

A snort of laughter made her want to turn back and punch him in the crotch.

“Well,” Arsenic declared with a sweeping arc of his hand. “Here we are. You can’t be seen disembarking from an official State shuttle, so I thought an entrance a bit more subtle would be better.”

From the shuttle’s tail hatch, one of the bodyguards produced a pair of white airboards, which he set on the floor.

“You have just enough fuel for one descent,” Arsenic said. “Have a safe trip.”

“We’re coming back how?” Troy stepped on the airboard and pressed the heel-plate to activate the straps, which shot out from within the board and snapped around the toe and heel of his boots. It lifted by a couple centimeters to hover soundlessly. “By thinking happy thoughts? And anyway, how the hell will you know when we have Cain with us?”

“We’ll *know*, Mister Troy.”

Mercury avoided looking at Arsenic when he set his beady eyes on her. She didn’t know why Augustine trusted this man. She didn’t.

“You have a mole down there,” Troy replied with a mean smile. Ha. Not quite, but he was close enough.

“You already have a mole in Cain’s little entourage,” Troy went on, disgusted. “Why didn’t you ask him to do that job, huh? Why me?”

Arsenic turned to Mercury, his grin like that of a sphinx. “Ask your colleague. She proposed, quite forcefully, that we use you. I agreed with her assessment. If we lose you, it won’t jeopardize the mission since you’re no longer a valuable Stinger. And if you succeed, all is well.”

She felt a blush rise to her cheeks when Troy turned a dark glare at her. “Thanks, Blondie. I didn’t know I had a fan club.”

Mercury let it go—the best lies were those untold—and strapped on her board. They’d land on a rooftop somewhere, hide their boards, then go on the hunt. Well, on the surface anyway. But all the while, she’d be leading him to the metro so Augustine’s men could pick him up.

“*Bon voyage,*” Arsenic said with a big grin.

Her gaze on Troy, she angled her toes down, the sensitive board responding to the subtle move, neared the edge of the pier. Below the tips of her metal-clipped boots, five hundred meters of busy, traffic-laden, dirty air separated her from the ground. Shit, she hated heights. But would chew rivets rather than let it show.

Let’s go.

After a wink for Troy, Mercury leaped in a perfect angel dive, arms out straight and hair flying, a midair crucifixion, for a second feeling nothing but the exhilaration of freefall before the board kicked in. With a small *bleep*, the midair collision avoidance system also engaged.

The airboard powered up with a blue flare and automatically stabilized her feet-down. Like a surfer, she sent her board in a wide swerve to watch Troy leap off the pier. No grace there. He fell like a rock. The long black tunic flapped angrily around his hips as he rocketed past her and cut into traffic as a diving crow would cut into a flock of seagulls. Hair like a blond flag in gale-force winds,

eyes narrowed, mouth in a thin line. He meant business.

Wind and traffic noise didn't allow for conversation, but through experience they both possessed and killer instincts they shared, they aimed for the same building, the skeletal remains of a factory at the foot of the now entirely mined-out Mount-Royal. With twitches of her front knee, she pumped the board to get more speed and easily caught up with Troy as he flew in a straight line. Barely avoided a large ferry the color of kiwi fruit that blasted its horn at them. Twist of the hip, dip of the shoulder, she angled her board to the left, executed a tight swerve that put her directly in front of him. Down and front, the building grew. Large. Larger still. One last lane of traffic reserved for older and slower crafts.

A split second before she landed, Mercury pulled her toes up in her boots. Flew hard back and right. Her board clipped Troy's. Sent him careening out of control and skidding onto the rooftop. It wouldn't kill him. She hadn't meant to topple him. But teach him a lesson, she *had*. Asshole.

Mercury landed smoothly on the flat tar roof and ground to a halt ten meters from Troy, who rolled head over heels a couple of times in a snarl of long limbs and black tunic. Not a second later, he snapped to his feet, murder in his eyes. His tunic was ripped on both shoulders. Blood covered his knuckles on one hand and an abrasion darkened one side of his strong chin. She couldn't look away from his mouth when he licked his bleeding knuckles. That tongue.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he demanded, the next second coming at her with hands balled into fists.

She barely had time to kick off the board and leap away to adopt an aikido guard. "That's for calling me 'pretty bait,'" she growled. Backed another cautious step. "Asshole."

Troy's mouth curled at one corner. She didn't like the triumph in his eyes. "It's nice to know my words have so much punch on you."

"They don't," she replied. Tried to ignore the way his body heat, which registered in her right eye in crimson and scarlet, triggered

some of her own down low between her legs. “I just don’t like assholes who run their mouths at me.”

Troy lunged low and fast. With a growl, Mercury sidestepped the sneaky attack by walking directly into his reach, right under his outstretched arm. She delivered a quick one-two-three jab in his ribs with her middle knuckle protruding, rewarded by a grunt of pain. Still spinning, she let her right foot arc high—he was a tall man—and aimed for the back of his head.

Her heel never landed. Surprisingly fast, he pivoted, caught her heel. For a split second she could only stare into his dark eyes and note the menace there before he flipped her. Hard. Despite some serious gymnastics and midair twisting, she landed on her back and the next second received at least two hundred pounds of muscles.

She *oomphed* when Troy scored a punch in the solar plexus. Pure instincts triggered her knee-jerk. He barely seemed to feel her kneecap connecting with his crotch. A long hand wrapped around her throat, squeezed.

“You play a dirty trick on me again,” he pushed through his teeth, “and I might get pissed off enough to kick your ass for real. Got it?”

Disheveled dark blond hair fell in a veil around his head, created an enclosure that only their two faces occupied. In her right eye, his angular face took on a demonic shade of vermillion and amber. Like flames. After he moistened them, his lips glistened. Rendered gold to her heat-sensing vision. She’d never seen anyone with such mesmerizing heat patterns. Like a painting from a master, but with only reds and gold as palette.

“Like to beat up on women, do you?” she breathed. Stubbornly stared into his eyes.

“No, but for you, I’ll make an exception.”

The fricative revealed perfect teeth that gleamed like polished alabaster. She couldn’t stop looking at his mouth, that wicked and dirty thing.

He relinquished her throat to grab her other hand and force it above her head. She resisted for as long and as hard as she could.

Mercury relished the obvious effort it took him to plant her knuckles into the granular tar.

Troy's lips quivered, curved into a lascivious grin. "I bet you like to make a guy work for it."

"If it's easy, it can't be good."

"Ha! Isn't that something? We finally agree." He lowered his face enough that only heat patterns filled her vision.

Sexy.

Without warning he pressed his mouth to hers. Not in a proprietary manner. More like a test. Even if he'd caught her completely off guard, remnants of a metallic tang on his tongue fired her sensory system. She fought the impulse to arc against him. She couldn't give in to him this way, even if her body seemed ready to do just that. What the hell was wrong with her?

Two hard lumps dug against her hipbones. His guns. A third in the middle pressed against her mons. His rocket.

She tried freeing her hand again but couldn't. While she twisted, her pelvis rose to push against his and effectively ratcheted up her arousal at the same time.

He sucked the moan from her. In turns tender and demanding, his mouth covered hers, traveled side to side. Deepening the kiss, his tongue darted once in a quick flick that triggered a mental image of this man's glorious organ between her legs. He must have been a very, very good lover.

Fight it, for fuck's sake.

Mercury ended the kiss by turning her face away. Eyes closed, it was much easier to fight her attraction. But the feel of his hard body, the smell and heat of him, still pushed her too close to the edge for comfort.

He gave her neck a long, leisurely lick. She shivered with thrill. "That's supposed to tell me you don't want this?" he murmured in her ear.

"I don't care what it tells you. I *don't* want this."

"Mmm, that's too bad. I could've sworn you did." He rolled his hips, which triggered a soft moan that instantly shamed her. Damn

hormones. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s what I thought.”

Mercury gritted her teeth when he teasingly nipped her lobe. She couldn’t keep back the groan of delight. The guy could kiss.

“You don’t want that either, huh,” he whispered, raking his bottom teeth up her neck. “Or that.” The sudden nip on her jaw made her whimper.

She twisted her hips to get a better anchor for her heel, but all it did was accentuate the pressure of his long and hard body against her. She couldn’t think straight. Each kiss arced her up like a bow.

Troy pulled away. He breathed hard. “We should *celebrate*. Right here, right now. Quick and dirty. We both want it. What do you say?”

That was her chance to put a stop to this nonsense, dump a bucket of cold water on him.

Who was she kidding? She needed a bucket of cold water as badly as he did.

When in doubt, go for bravado. She angled one leg out and up, as if to wrap it around his hips, and he moaned happily.

“If we ever celebrate,” she said, “you’ll be the one looking *up*.”

His grin evaporated when she snapped her boot down hard, right in the tender spot behind his knee. With a grunt, Troy released her hands and rolled away, cursing profusely and colorfully.

Mercury stood, dusted off her cargo skirt, and made sure every knife was accounted for, including the two she hid in sheaths strapped to her thighs and accessible through the Velcro bottoms of her pockets.

Troy’s narrowed eyes spelled murder in capital letters when she turned to face him. She kept pivoting and even made sure she popped her hips for good measure as she walked away.

Who did he think he was? Who did he think *she* was?

Mercury’s theory was that she’d been born half-bad and half-bred. A hard life had taken care of the other fifty percent. She’d lied, killed, used her body as weapon and tool, and been trained and groomed for a life of deceit and violence.

So she should’ve known better than to turn her back on a man as

dangerous as Troy.

Agent Provocateur: Chapter 2

When his kick took her feet from under her, Mercury barely had time to put a hand out and use it as support for a clumsy but effective front handspring. One aerial cartwheel. Another. A third. By the time her lead foot landed for a third no-hands cartwheel, Troy was waiting with a trick of his own. For a split second, she knew fear. He wouldn't do that....

Snarling, he punched upward—her face would never look the same if he connected—with the heel of his hand. She raised an elbow to block. Crazy mother—

Mercury recognized the feint too late. He wasn't about to knock her nose back into her head as she'd feared. With a curse, she was unable to block his other hand when he snatched it forward like a striking snake, dug four fingers into the front of her corset and reeled her in.

They collided with a shared *oomph*.

"That was a dirty trick," she protested.

"That's how I like it. Dirty."

No aikido joint lock could help her dislodge the fist from her garment. Parry. Block. Feint and deflect. Her wrists hurt from knocking against his forearms. She fought harder, faster. He matched her every move. Panting, she planted her palms against his chest to at least keep him at arm's length.

Troy's mouth stretched in a triumphant and mocking grin. "Now we're equal."

If her years of aikido wouldn't help her, then maybe something less graceful but one hundred percent effective would. She squeezed her eyes shut and snapped her forehead against his face. Caught nothing more fragile than his chin.

"Ow!" Tiny suns exploded behind her eyelids.

"Argh!" When he staggered away, not looking near as debilitated as she would've preferred, his block-like fist was still on the front of her corset. Mercury heard and *felt* something give in the polyurethane strapping. Then release and cool air on her torso.

Staggering back a step, Troy straightened with her corset still clutched in his hand and her body no longer inside it.

For a second he looked stunned, contrite, seemed about to say something as he glanced at her then at the thing in his hand. But the surprise gave way to unmitigated male pride. He arched an eyebrow. “Well, well.”

“Give me that.”

He flipped her corset once. “Come get it.”

She fought the urge to hide herself. Fought it with all she had. Cool air caressed her skin and hardened her nipples. As if she needed that. His body heat flared.

“Why don’t you take the rest off?” he asked, taunting.

“Why don’t you come and do it?”

His smile turned feral.

Not the smartest thing she’d ever said.

Before he called her bluff, she took the initiative and snapped a front kick that missed his jaw by a hair. He tossed the corset and both his guns, yanked his tunic wide and chucked that too.

“Now we’re *really* equal,” he snarled. His nostrils flared as his gaze hungrily roamed over her.

She repaid him with the same sort of attention. Damn, as fine a man as she’d ever seen. The couple of scars glistening on his chest and arms only added to the intoxicating mix. Speaking of which, his heat patterns were through the roof and blazing white-hot. In her right eye, he’d become a being of white gold.

He charged.

Mercury took a run up the closest wall, dislodging a few bricks when her boot scraped for purchase. Arching at an acute angle and pivoting, she flew over his head with her arms tucked on her chest. The look on his face!

He charged again, this time using his great wingspan to trap her into a corner. She should’ve known the same trick wouldn’t work twice on that guy. She jumped, twisted, and felt something tug on the back of her skirt. A long ripping sound. With a gasp, she landed in a puff of dust and debris. Cool air caressed her thighs and butt

around the hot shorts.

Shit.

Grinning, Troy brought her skirt, which he held in a fist, to his face and took a long, theatrical inhalation. “Nice,” he commented with his eyes half closed. “Very nice. Just like I thought.”

“Asshole.”

He looked at the pair of throwing knives strapped to her thighs. “Hey. That’s not fair.”

“Aw,” she sneered. “Sorry.”

Mercury deftly retrieved one and sent it twirling at him. It sliced the air between his legs with barely a finger’s breadth to spare. The mocking grin died. Replaced with alarm. Then thrill.

“And now, you only have *one*.” He dropped the skirt and slowly crab-walked to her left, never taking his gaze from her face. Must have been trying to circumvent and outflank her.

Did he think she’d been born yesterday? She may not have been a true Stinger with never-ending State funding, but she’d still received lessons from life, which were plenty enough to match his fancy training.

Long hair that looked like liquid fire in her genetically modified eye fretted in the breeze. He pinched the closure of his pants, cocked his head at her.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Usually I’d take the odds in my favor and run with it. But for you, I’m ready to make all kinds of exceptions.” He tucked his bottom lip behind his teeth, gave her a pronounced once-over.

“Lucky me.”

“You have no idea.”

To her undying shame, getting a full frontal view of Troy was one of those things a gal would never pass up, even if she’d never admit it.

The sound of his zipper triggered adrenaline to sluice her systems of everything else but him. In her right eye, he glowed like molten lava. She could barely breathe for the anticipation chocking her. This was going to be very, very good.

His belly constricted with his hard and fast breathing, muscles corded. A thin line of dark blond hair separated his chest and dipped below the waistband of his pants. She'd gladly follow that trail.

"But if you're not gonna play fair..." He took his hand away.

"Chicken," she snarled, genuinely frustrated. Tease.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Troy backed a few steps, kept her in front while he all but ripped his loose-fitting pants off. Black boxer briefs that looked spray-painted on strove to contain a sizable rocket aimed straight at her. In her enhanced vision, this portion of his body blazed painfully bright. Tears and sweat stung her eyes.

"What's wrong, Blondie? Too much for you?"

"You wish."

Don't give in to him, don't give in to him. The mantra did nothing to help. He was a fine, fine-looking man. But she didn't know him, didn't know the first thing about him. All she had was his file, and everything in it convinced her to run like hell. Yet she couldn't. Stood there half naked, taunting him as much as herself. If he overpowered her, what would she do? Abandon herself to the sexiest guy she'd ever seen—who also happened to be a man who knew fifty ways to kill someone with his bare hands?

"You want this," he said through his teeth. "You've wanted this since I walked in that room. And lucky you, I want it too."

Mercury snorted a laugh intended to brush him off. It didn't work. His feral smile only widened. Maybe she should listen to her good sense and run like hell. If she were lucky, the devil wouldn't catch her.

Instead, she raised her chin and pretended he didn't have an impact on her, that he didn't scare her as much as he aroused her. That damned Stinger was messing up everything.

Like predators, they circled each other once, twice, thrice. Looking for a flaw, looking for the sheer pleasure of the other's toned body and intense gaze. Their measured assessment took

them into the gutted factory. Dirty light stabbed in through broken windows high above. He moved first.

She was ready when he spun on a heel, arm extended for a wicked hand-chop that passed a hair above her head when she executed a quick back bend. She flicked her foot hard and caught him on the chin. His snarl made her grin.

She quickly lost it when Troy trapped her ankle in a steel grip and, through the sheer strength of his arm, reeled her to him. When his chest slammed against her back and his arms encircled her, fever spread throughout her body.

“Damn, no,” she snarled.

Mercury stood immobile, panting, when he snaked a hand down her bare belly and covered her mons. Heat seeped into her skin. God, he was hot.

His breathing in her ear huffed like a machine. “No?”

One good thing, with him pinning her from behind, was that he wouldn’t be able to see the desire in her eyes. But she also couldn’t see him and anticipate his next move. “You heard right.”

“Yeah, I heard right, but I’m smelling entirely different things. You can’t lie to me, not about that, not when I can smell how badly you want me in you.”

“I don’t,” she growled, angrier with herself than with him. Or equally, anyway. “Get off.”

He parted her sex through the thin hot shorts, which made her take a quick, gasping breath. Moisture speed through the stretch fabric. He put his mouth by her other ear. “Tell me you don’t want this and I’ll never touch you again.”

Mercury tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. As if she’d lost control over her body, her buttocks rolled against the erection he pressed into her back. Animal instincts. Primeval female preparing for a male.

Stupid hormones. Stupid instincts. Stupid man with the most wicked hands.

With his other hand, he captured a breast, which he molded with his palm. She let out a strangled whimper. God, it was good.

He slipped his hand higher until he'd put her nipple between his thumb and the base of his index finger. Rolled her nipple ruthlessly.

Her long moan seemed to spur him on. He slipped his hand into her shorts and resumed his activities, but this time beneath the fabric. "Get rid of them before I chew right through them." He snapped the waistband of her shorts for added emphasis.

"No."

"Still not convinced, huh?"

"Go to hell."

Troy deftly retrieved the lone remaining knife from her sheath at her thigh. Her gasp turned from shock to exhilaration when he sliced through one side of her shorts, then the other.

"Life is too short for half measures," he whispered.

"How dare you!"

He slipped the slim knife back into the sheath. "Now for the last time, if you want this, you're gonna have to tell me. Loud and clear. Or I swear, I'll never lay a hand on you again."

He didn't move, didn't say anything. Just waited.

Her body had already made its decision. She'd known it would come to this as soon as she'd set eyes on the towering Stinger with the wicked mouth. Remnants of doubt still plagued her. He was dangerous. A killer and a troublemaker.

Still Troy remained immobile at her back, probably smelling each time she changed her mind.

Eyes closed, she took the hand he'd planted on her hip then pulled it to her sex.

"I'll take that as a yes," he murmured in her ear.

What had she done?

What feels right.

Troy slipped a finger into her. "Oh, God. You're so hot. So hot."

He rubbed a few times back and forth, then sank in to the last knuckle. She gasped her pleasure at him.

"Let me hear it. Like that?"

"Yeah," she whispered, eyes closed. "Like that."

What was she doing?

Mercury inhaled long and hard. Between their bodies, sweat made a perfect bonding agent. While Troy rubbed her clitoris in hard little circles—that man’s hands were pure sin—she squeezed a hand behind her, between their bodies. Fabric tented his boxers and curved his cock. It sprang out of its confines as soon as she used her thumb to pull the waistband lower. Hot and smooth, it rested heavily in her hand. She gripped him. Hard.

“Blondie,” he grunted. A warning.

Two fingers into her. In and out. Full assault on her clit again. Liquid heat dribbled to coat his fingers. Pure torture.

As a response to the furious way he pleased her, Mercury dug her fingernails into his flesh, relishing the hiss she exhorted from him. With her thumb, she rubbed his glans ’round and ’round, gathering pre-cum that she spread to the rest of his cock.

She accentuated the pressure and felt his flesh mark underneath her nails. “How you like that, Stinger? Harder?”

If he broke down all her defenses, she could do the same to him.

“I gave you fair warning,” he growled in reply. The next second, two fingers brusquely pumped into her.

“Ah!”

Her senses overloaded. Her vision filled with tiny suns of pure white and coronas of gold. Sensualization. Sensory pyrotechnics. Darkness swallowed the rest. Nothing mattered but his hand, these fingers with which he fucked her. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a lover just give it to her without waiting for instructions or preferences. He knew what he wanted. And obviously, he knew what *she* wanted, too.

Her voice became a metronome to his thrusts. “Ah. Yes. Take it.”

“Roll your hips,” he said against the back of her head. “Roll them for me.”

With her hips doing figure eights, she took him deeper. Troy rolled her nipple with his free hand, perhaps knowing she enjoyed it like that or through his gifted sense of smell detecting the spikes in hormonal levels. Whatever it was, Troy used his fingers as pis-

tons until the slow burn conflagrated into all-out firestorm. On a long, muttered curse, she came.

Troy sucked in a strangled curse. When she came, Mercury's fingernails dug painfully into his shaft. But the small discomfort wouldn't deter him from giving it to her the way she wanted it. He'd known from the get-go she had it in for him. No one could mask the smell of their hormones, and hers had been burning a hole in his brain. She wanted it hard and quick and dirty, the way he liked it.

He'd never had a woman like this. Strong, tough and unapologetically sexual. She knew what she wanted, despite the ego trip of trying to convince him she didn't. She knew how to get it and what to do with it. His cock was no exception. And her scent—he could spend a night with his face between her legs for the sheer pleasure of consuming her scent.

Her vaginal muscles squeezed hard around his fingers as she started to pump him with her hand squeezed between their two bodies. It wouldn't take long, partly because he'd been without female companionship for years. Mostly because just looking at the hot, kickass babe made his brain melt out of his ears. Twin throwing knives in sheaths around her thighs? Hell, yeah!

"You like that, Stinger?" she taunted with two powerful pumps that made him see stars.

"I'm not gonna last long if you—"

She shut him up by squeezing her vaginal muscles hard around his fingers. Holy shit! Perhaps it was the hot and wet pussy—shaved clean, to his utter delight—milking his fingers, or the way she handled his cock with borderline ferocity, but he had only one thought swirling in his mind. He had to have her. Now.

He spun her around, cupped his hands behind her thighs and hoisted her against his waist. Mercury's mouth glistened like wet candy as she smiled down at him. Not a friendly grin. A wicked, lascivious thing that incinerated his self-control. Without a thought for comfort or decorum, he aimed for the wall. When he slammed

her against it, her pheromone and adrenaline levels shot up to stratospheric levels. He could smell each notch.

“You’ve been waiting for that, huh?” he growled against her throat. “You’ve been wet for me, haven’t you? I can *smell* it.”

“Mmm.”

He saw himself in her enhanced right eye and its iris shaped like a diamond. Saw the animal bullet inside the human shell casing. With a grunt, he took her.

At once, he saw reflected in her face the hellish fire devastating his restraint, turning him into a mere vessel meant to sustain their furious coupling against the wall of an abandoned factory. He became what he did to her. Flesh, hot and wet. Taking. Heart rate arrhythmic. Muscles aching. Troy’s lower back and thighs burned from the strain, yet he pounded into her with every shred of muscle he had. Dust and debris fell around them from the force of his claiming. With iron-hard thigh muscles she kept herself around him while she tilled his back with her fingernails, nibbled his bruised chin, murmured and moaned demands and pleas.

“Take it,” she breathed with her eyes fixed on him.

“You want me to fuck you?” he demanded. “Hmm? Take you hard?”

“Yes.” She tucked her bottom lip behind her teeth.

“Fuck your sweet, wet cunt? Like that?”

“Yeah, like that. Take it.”

He did. All that she asked. More. After a particularly potent thrust that knocked her head back against the wall, he grabbed her by the butt cheeks and rolled toward a windowsill to their left. Misjudged and with a curse, staggered around like a drunk.

Mercury laughed the way she fucked. Hard and without modesty. Grinning, she wiggled her butt to deepen the penetration. Made him see stars. She yelping and he cursing, they went tumbling onto the concrete floor. He took the brunt of it and bit his tongue in the process.

Just as she’d said she would, Mercury managed to roll on top, still wrapped around him. Knelt up proud. In the gloom of the

decrepit factory, her nipples resembled pink gumballs. Working her hips, she gathered her smallish breasts together, bent over to offer them to him. Troy wasn't about to refuse such a luscious offer.

"Mmm, give me those," he snarled. She did taste the way he'd imagined she would. Cucumber and melon. That lotion would drive him mad.

He sucked on those succulent points until he could tell she was close again. Then he bit one. She yelped at the same time as she came. He could feel every ring passing through her vagina. It tightened around him. Tighter. Harder.

He growled incomprehensibly. Mercury threw herself back. The sight of her rosy, glistening pussy distended around his dick drove all other thought away. Quick salvos. His cum jetted out of him and into her.

"That's it," she said through a triumphant grin. With her fingers she worked herself some more. "Mmm."

He'd lasted a helluva lot longer than he would've expected, given his deprived condition and the fact he could hardly think around the sexy Stinger.

How long did they stay this way, with him on his back, eyes closed and hands slowly stroking her thighs, and she, humming and sitting astride him with his cock inside her still? He didn't know. Except that he liked it this way. Didn't want to move. Never wanted to change a thing. Right now was perfect. Right now was heaven.

Right now ended with Mercury sighing long and hard. "We should get going."

Troy opened his eyes and caught a look of regret quickly replaced with that insufferable air of complete self-confidence. Nothing could touch her. No one could own her. She was invincible and hot as hell.

And in his book, the sexiest woman in the galaxy.

She rose, dribbling cum on his thighs as she retrieved her underwear and wiped herself, reserving a clean corner to dab his throbbing cock. So thoughtful. The incongruous thought made him grin.

What a cretin.

Now that he could think a bit more clearly, she *was* right. They should get going. If only he could focus on something else than the smell of her cunt.

He stood and grimaced. His balls hurt from the vicious knee jerk she'd given him earlier.

Sneaky little shit.

While she dressed, he carried their two airboards to bits of unrecognizable machinery piled in a corner. Wrestled his clothes back on when all he wanted was another disorderly go against the wall. Although if he ever had another chance with her, he was going to get a taste of that sweet pussy if it was the last thing he did. Completely shaved, too. Hot damn.

She retrieved her knives, the one she'd thrown at him as well. The way she moved piqued his curiosity. No surgical precision about her, just sheer determination, hunger and an air of *don't give a fuck*. Unless Stinger training had changed drastically since he was sent to prison, she'd had that before working for the State. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe she was no Integer trying to pass as a Misborn. Maybe she was the real deal.

"I'd like to as well," she said. A half smile tugged her glistening lips to one side. "But we really have to go. Cain's compound isn't that far."

"Reading minds, now?"

"I don't need to." She pointed down at him.

He adjusted his tunic over the erection tenting it. "If I have my way, Blondie...."

Troy enjoyed the blush that darkened her cheeks.

Despite the polluted air that made his head feel as though it would blow up and spray his brains two meters high, her scent drowned every other. Drowned the smell of misery—ten million bodies crammed in a space meant for a fraction of that number—old buildings, rotten things beneath dead ones, dust, spores, chemicals, sweat, spices to hide the fact one's food was spoiled. That was how his mother hid the nasty stuff, with spices and lots of

them, humming old French Canadian songs under her breath as she cooked. He probably had a hole in his stomach the size of the one in the ozone layer.

Ordinarily, no amount of female musk could mask the perfume Eau de Misborn Ghetto. But the subtle fragrance from Mercury's body lotion and deeply feminine scent not only saturated the air, it went right down to his cock to give him a spectacular hard-on despite just having tasted her. That lithe and sinewy body made his palms tingle. It had been so long since he'd even seen a woman, never mind touched one. Kissed and fucked one! Although to be fair, she would've sent his system into the red zone even if he'd been surrounded by naked women armed with cans of whipped cream. She was His Type. Dangerous at the best of times, deadly for this mission.

One he didn't intend to complete.

She'd have a nasty jolt, Miss Cheap Shot—shit, his balls still hurt—when she turned around and discovered him gone. He'd rather live down here than go back to jail. Arsenic could go fuck himself. Troy wasn't coming back, no matter the tempting pardon letter or the promise of things to come in his sexy colleague's eyes. Plus, there was something that didn't add up, and he couldn't put his finger on it.

With a hand, Mercury raked back her asymmetrical white-blond hair. It stuck up in places. "Don't look at me like that. You had it coming."

Troy licked the pad of his index finger, drew a *one* in the air. "I owe you one, Blondie."

To his shock—and quite a bit of delight—instead of looking pissed off, afraid, frustrated or any other way one would expect a woman in her position to react, she gave him a half-smile. "I'll look forward to that."

Be still my heart.

A hand on her knives, she kissed the air and turned her back to him as she marched down the stairs.

Adjusting himself in his suddenly too-tight pants, Troy followed

her down the dirty and dangerous stairwell, in turns wringing her neck in his mind then kissing it. Mind-screw on legs. Who needed that?

Who did he think he was fooling? He *loved* bitchy women who could take it and dish it out.

“You should’ve worn pants,” he said to the back of her head. “So I could at least have a nice view.”

“I forget, before me, all you’ve had to play with for the last six years was your hand.”

Troy sucked his teeth. “Cheap shot.”

She just laughed.

As soon as they emerged into the crowded street below, he fell into Stinger mode. The pleasant warmth of after-sex drifted away. Old habits. Look at nothing in particular. Mentally note everything. Neither of them stood out against the eclectic crowd.

Against the backdrop of a dystopian society lived racketeers, ex-felons, religious figures, unfortunates, mercenaries, aid workers, drug dealers, dirty little kids, and whores of all genders or no gender at all. There was someone for everyone in the Misborn ghetto. And they all shared two traits. One, some genetic tweaking or other that precluded them from the status of Integer, and which could range from a funky eye like his companion’s to horrible mutations. And two, most Misborns were armed to the teeth. If they had them. Lawlessness had its advantages. Bleeding-heart Integers didn’t even cut their food with a real knife, for fuck’s sake, using energy utensils instead. Not here. Folks around here, they carried, and carried plenty.

Troy patted his mismatched guns. He couldn’t believe Arsenic had given him these. In fact, he should check them. As soon as he pulled one out of his sash, Blondie angled her chin at him although her eyes never strayed from their course. Walking in the ghetto could be a tricky affair.

“You want to pick a fight?” she snarled. “Put it away.”

“It’s not what you said earlier.”

She aimed a rude gesture behind her.

He wanted to lick and kiss that finger. Instead, he forced his mind off her ass and onto the present situation. “How long have you worked for Arsenic?”

She seemed to get his meaning and nodded. “They’re legit. I checked and loaded them myself.”

“So which one is supposed to blow up in my face? The silver one?” He didn’t hide the fact he thought her checking and loading his guns didn’t alleviate any of the doubt. “Wait, I bet you rigged the black one.” He grinned when she cut an affronted look at him.

“I need you alive to watch my back,” she remarked acidly.

Troy avoided a pair of tall, skinny forms hidden underneath dirty cheesecloth. The stench emanating from them made his skin crawl. He would recognize that smell anywhere—clones long past their expiration date. A copy of a copy of a copy tended to be screwed up in the end. Cloning never should’ve been allowed, even for pets.

His migraine deepened. “What makes you think I *will* watch your back?”

“I’m your get out of prison card,” she replied. She licked her bottom lip, winked. “You have to be nice to me.”

Montreal’s old, carved Chinatown arch temporarily blocked what little sun managed to poke through the airborne filth. The stench here was even worse. As she had the first time, when he winced and massaged his temple, she turned and seemed to want to say something. Why would she care if his head split down the middle? He didn’t want her sympathy.

He grabbed her wrist and brought her hand to his mouth. Knowing he had a split second before she tried to kick his ass again, he nipped the tender inside of her wrist. “You want me to be nice to you again? Right here and now?”

Mercury’s stark white teeth flashed when she grinned. Not at all the reaction he was expecting. Goddamn. That woman really was His Type.

“Mmm, is that a promise?” she asked. “Or a threat?”

“I don’t do threats.” He released her arm before he started lick-

ing it. “So, what’s the plan?”

Despite the stew of smells pressing in on him, he detected the sharp tang of adrenaline from her. And fear?

What the fuck?

A shadow passed over her expressive eyes. “His compound is in the old metro tunnels—”

“I know that, Blondie. What I—”

“*And,*” she cut back in, narrowed her kohl-lined eyes at him. “Some of them are flooded, others are walled in, but there are a few still in use that aren’t on most maps.” She tapped her corset in the back. “They are on ours.”

“So we get in there, crawl around for a bit, then what? You think the bastard’s gonna be waiting in bed, nice and quiet?”

The crowd thickened at that point and drowned what Mercury replied next. Whatever she said, it didn’t sound friendly. When they could talk again, she pointed to a small cookshop. “Hungry?”

A bit too drastic change of subjects.

He logged the *faux pas* in his mental roster, let her think he hadn’t noticed the change in her scent, the shadow in her eyes, or the way she was suddenly hungry and walking away from him.

He offered her his most lascivious smirk. “Yeah, but not for anything that’s in there.”

Female pheromone caressed him like a silk shawl and filled his brain with images of her lithe body writhing beneath him and those sexy eyes closed in ecstasy. His hard-on returned with a vengeance. Man, not even a half an hour break?

Troy waited while she approached the grimy counter cut directly into the brick wall and purchased a bowl of suspect noodles that she gobbled with a pair of plastic chopsticks. He couldn’t help looking at her mouth as she devoured her meal and felt like a creep for it. But what else could he do? She was hot and he liked watching her.

With the rate at which she wolfed the food down, Troy was afraid he’d have to do the Heimlich maneuver on her. “You should breathe once in a while.”

She noisily slurped noodles and shrugged.

No Integer he knew would eat this way, like someone starving or not knowing where the next bit of food would come from. Definitely a Misborn.

Behind her right shoulder, a trio of men detached themselves from the corner of an old Catholic church used as temporary quarters. *Chambres à louer* blinked irregularly in blue sputtering neon above the double doors. Who would rent a room there?

Brother Cain Followers, easy to spot with their brown robes and hemp necklaces. Garrotes in disguise to Troy.

And a perfect diversion for his disappearing act. As soon as he kicked their smelly asses.

“When Arsenic said collaterals weren’t an issue,” he said under his breath, “did he mean public or the more sneaky kind?”

He rested a hand on the butt of his silvery kinetic energy gun. Like pool balls hitting one another with increasing kinetic force, each bullet would shoot out and make a nice hole in pretty much anything softer than armored concrete. But it wasn’t the most discreet of weapons. His other gun, a black matte, old-fashioned thing, housed sixty bullets of barite alloy for maximum shredding result. He would use this one first.

Waves of adrenaline radiated from her. Troy had to breathe through his mouth so he wouldn’t start humping doorjambs. A blast of female pheromone *and* adrenaline, all in the span of a few seconds? It was enough to make him lose his legendary cool.

“How many?” she asked, not changing a thing about her outward deportment. Not gaze, nor angle of her head, nor speed of her pace. She even kept eating, the chopsticks never slowing. He’d never heard about Mercury before his sentencing, but she must have been one hell of a Stinger.

“Three Followers,” Troy replied. He smiled at something she didn’t say, nodded in assent to a question she never asked. Had to look occupied. Had to lure the guys in close enough. “Big guys. One’s got nanotech visual aids. The other two are carrying zappers. One’s got to lay off the garlic and all three reek to the high heav-

ens, if that's of any interest to you."

She grinned, shaking her head in exasperation.

For a reason he couldn't explain to himself without feeling like a moron, her reactions to his mouthing off thrilled him to the highest degree. Women invariably thought he was just too much of a loud asshole. Instead of looking irritated or downright pissed off, though, Mercury seemed to enjoy his little commentary on life. Well, damn!

The trio converged on Mercury, thinking they would go for the smaller, thus weaker—in their minds—link. He had half a mind to hang back and watch her beat them into groaning heaps on the ground. But in case one of them turned out to be dangerous on top of stupid, Troy used his longer gait to place himself directly behind her.

Because Mercury and he didn't look familiar to the three Followers, because they wanted the two Stingers' guns, or because they were bored and just felt like it. Could've been anything. But the three men attacked. Hard and fast and silently.

One pulled a long zapper from his brown robes and let it hang along his leg. Maybe thinking he was very stealthy that way. Troy wanted to kick the guy's ass just for insulting his intelligence. But he would leave that one for Mercury. She'd already tossed her bowl of noodles and aimed a kick at the cretin, low and vicious, right in the nuts. The zapper went flying.

Passersby never even blinked as the two other Followers pulled out telescopic batons and rushed at Troy. He could've used his guns and finished this business within seconds. But what the hell, he needed the exercise.

Plus he needed at least one alive to keep Mercury occupied while he disappeared into the background.

The one who tried to tackle Mercury was projected ten paces back with a powerful kick to the chest, which she followed with a pair of twirling, silvery knives. Boom, boom. That girl could throw *fast*. One pierced the man's windmilling arm, pinned him back against the faded wooden door while the other did the same with

the man's robes. Why the hell hadn't she just finished him? This was no fucking time for mercy.

Troy sidestepped the first Follower's attack and sent him into a face-plant with a kick on the lower back. The man floundered to his feet and took off. Since when did Followers run away?

From the corner of his eye, Troy spotted the third reaching into his robes and producing a clear ball the size of a walnut. Shit. A telekinesist.

Mercury was still busy with the first. He'd sent the second scurrying back to his mama with his balls in his hands. Only one Follower remained. Perfect opportunity.

He could run away right this instant. Get a shot at freedom. Fuck Arsenic, fuck Cain.

The Follower with the dangerous glass missile raised his hand. She hadn't seen him. If Troy left, she wouldn't make it out of that fight alive. The telekinesist would crush her skull.

Fuck.

Troy pulled his gun, the one that fired bullets. Aimed and squeezed the trigger twice. He hadn't been the best Stinger for being careless. The Follower jerked and crumpled to the ground. His hood fell over his ruined head but couldn't hide the glistening red snake that slithered into a crack in the concrete.

It was over before Troy could work up a sweat.

Mercury turned to him, horrified. "What the hell did—" The rest died on her lips.

She yanked him down by the sleeve a split second before the church wall to his right erupted in a string of tiny blasts that threw dust and mortar in every direction. That could've been his head.

He turned to follow her gaze. Only had time for a single word. "Shit."

A whole lot of gun-waving Followers had just burst out of a side street. This time the crowd reacted and cleared the decks. Funny how fast people could move when faced with a stampede of armed Followers.

"Come on!" she snarled as she took off between the church and

its closest neighbor. The two buildings leaned against one another like drunkards.

With a last look at the loose end they'd left dangling—the knifed Follower was enthusiastically tugging his arm free—Troy fired a shot behind him before following Mercury. She dashed along the darkened alley, dodging obstacles or simply leaping over them. Shit. She was incredibly hot this way, all fired up and in kick-ass mode. When this was over, he was getting another taste for damn sure.

Shots resounded somewhere behind them. He lengthened his pace to overtake Mercury. “The metro,” he directed without looking her way. “There’s a station! Around the corner!”

She nodded. Her face was set in stone instead of the cocky attitude he'd come to expect.

“There!” she pointed. With a particularly high leap over a rotten bench park, she cleared the chain-link fence.

Downtown Montreal stretched to their left as they emerged from the Byzantine network of gloomy, crowded alleys and makeshift habitats of corrugated metal. Something like an outdoor bazaar from the olden days, but filled with garbage, broken things and broken people.

He could catch a glimpse of river between two dilapidated factories. Sun barely managed to reflect off its surface. He'd once seen a picture of twentieth-century Montreal. Back then, the river had been the most brilliant shade of aqua. Nowadays, it was gray, like most things in the Misborn ghetto. Ahead, the old metro station, completely demolished except for the actual hole in the ground, gaped like a demonic maw fringed with broken teeth.

They bounded down the uneven steps littered with dislodged bricks, ceramic tiles and detritus of every kind. Beneath a peeling sign that read *Station Champs-de-Mars*, a man who'd crouched to inject himself with a rusted dermagun lurched to his feet. Troy almost put a bullet in his head and barely managed to abort the muscular impulse at the last nanosecond. Reeking of chemicals and sweat, the man unsteadily escaped the station.

In fact, the smells were so bad underground that Troy feared tossing up his breakfast. For a second, he braced a hand on the wall to keep from keeling over. His head was pounding. Moisture under his nose made him curse.

“Are you all right?” Mercury slowed just long enough to cast a quick glance behind her.

“Would you stop asking that?”

“Then stop acting like you’re going to pass out,” she snapped. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“Yeah, sorry to inconvenience you with my freakish Misborn gift.”

“I’m a Misborn, too.”

“My ass. You’re an Integer trying to pass as a Misborn. You may have fooled Arsenic—frankly, I don’t blame him, you’re one hot babe—but you won’t make me believe for a fucking second that you spent a single week down here. That fancy eye of yours, you weren’t born with it.”

As he spoke, her face blushed deep red. Anger, not embarrassment. A storm brewed in her black eyes. “You’re right. I wasn’t born down here. My dad tossed my mom and me here when she had her baby. He didn’t take well that I had a fancy eye. He’s an Integer and so was my mother.”

“Then how the hell did you—”

Oh.

Obviously, the mom had had an affair. With a Misborn. Ouch.

Despite his better judgment and the fact this would totally kill his rep, a rush of sympathy warmed his cheeks. A hybrid? That had to be the worst thing in life. Loathed by both sides, home in neither. Maybe that was where she got her charming personality.

“Don’t look at me like that.” She walked around the old turnstiles. “I don’t need your pity.”

The venom in her tone surprised him. For a Stinger, she shouldn’t have so much emotional baggage dragging behind. They must be hiring anyone these days.

“So where’s that map of yours?” Troy asked to change the sub-

ject, dabbing under his bloody nose with the cuff of his sleeve.

A faint ribbon of smells floated to him. Soap. Marzipan. Genuine leather. Something minty. Male and female mix. All of them expensive smells. Weird in a place like this.

He made a patting down motion when Mercury turned to approach him. As much as he tried to ignore her and focus on the incongruous smells, her presence scattered his neurons as effectively as a fan would a mound of salt. Female hormones drowned every other scent. She was aroused. And not just a little bit. A weak tang of fear laced the rest. To be expected in their situation.

Her lips glistened in the gloom. She licked them. He could look at nothing else. “They should’ve found me another partner for this. I can’t focus with you around.”

“Arsenic said you’d asked for me.”

She smiled, nodded. “I did.”

A flash of fear surfaced amidst the other scents emanating from her. From sweet, her sweat turned sour. Yet she smiled as she put her face a finger’s breadth from his. Her tongue darted behind her teeth. He wanted that mouth around his cock in a big way. Yearned for another go with the hot Stinger.

The smell of marzipan grew stronger, and it didn’t come from Mercury. Shit, he couldn’t think.

When he grabbed her by the upper arm and pushed her against the wall, her pupils dilated in the most delicious way. He loved the effect he had on her. Troy put his mouth a hair’s breadth from hers. “It wasn’t nearly enough for you, was it?”

“All night long wouldn’t be enough for me.”

His cock hardened painfully. “Greedy.”

“No, hungry.”

“How about a little appetizer then.” He crushed his mouth to hers.

The sweet taste he was expecting felt different this time. Something was off.

He pulled away to look at her. In her right eye, the diamond-shaped iris narrowed to a slit. Fear and adrenaline. She reeked of

both.

Shit.

“You know what I hate more than a half-Integer?” Troy hoisted her to him. “It’s a *lying* half-Integer.”

Instead of trying to fight him off, Mercury wrapped her hands around his nape. Sadness filled her eyes. And regret. A lot of both.

“It’s just a job,” she murmured. “Nothing personal.”

A sharp, burning pain at the base of his skull triggered a wave of heat down his back. He heard himself grunting but didn’t feel the muscular actions required for speech. Actually, he couldn’t feel shit. In his vision, her face slipped downward, replaced with brick wall, dirty tiled ceiling.

He was on his back with Mercury struggling to hold on to him. She was trying to lower him gently to the ground, but given the size difference, didn’t have that much success. When his skull thudded against the dirty floor, Troy intellectually knew he should’ve felt *that*. But he didn’t. Couldn’t feel a damn thing.

Trancs. She’d injected something into him.

Bending over him with her hand around his, Mercury looked pissed off and sad. Damn, he could barely think. Where were his legs? And the rest of him?

He heard voices in the distance. Then a slew of smells, the ones he’d detected earlier but a hundred times purer. Marzipan overwhelmed even Mercury’s sweet lotion. People congregated around him. A woman he recognized, dressed in white leather—smelled like the genuine thing—bent over him. She smiled. Said something.

A voice right out of his past. His best mission. The one that had cost him everything.

He only had enough consciousness left to mumble one word. “Kryonics.”

Agent Provocateur: Chapter 3

Cold. Wet. The smell of chlorine and latex. A pool?

Troy woke with a start and found himself strapped naked in a PVC chair lift and dangling over a whirlpool with his feet touching the water. It was *cold*. Around him was a quarantine chamber like an upturned fishbowl. He could barely see beyond the semitransparent polymer. A woman dressed in a white hazmat suit and face shield stood not far to his right. He knew she was a woman because of the slim frame and center of gravity. It never lied. Mercury? That little backstabber was there gloating?

She had her arms crossed. When she saw he'd opened his eyes and stared at her, she waved and nodded. Mercury didn't move like that. Someone else.

Then the smell hit.

A putrid stench unlike anything he'd ever experienced—and he'd been born in the second worst part of the Misborn ghetto—assaulted him. As though tiny razor blades the size of grains of rice were rushing into his nostrils with every breath. He coughed, eyes squeezed shut, turned his head away. Nausea choked him.

“Do you know what pyridines are, Troy?” she asked.

Augustine. Kryonics' sexy, vicious and *freed* CEO?

Why wasn't she still in jail? She didn't seem to have changed a bit since he'd last seen her on her way to the courthouse. Who the fuck said Integers didn't mess with their DNA? Liars.

That bitch should still be sitting in prison. He'd brought Kryonics down after months of undercover work and shit-stirring that had included but not been limited to flirting, spying, backstabbing, and causing an entire block of downtown Montreal to go up in flames. One of the Kryonics plants had been hidden underneath the old ice rink near Atwater. Integers all the way across the river had felt that tremor.

Troy snarled a cursed but didn't reply. He couldn't stay here. That chemical would kill him. Despite rocking back and forth in the plastic chair, he couldn't loosen the webbed belt holding him

tight around the torso, thighs, wrists and ankles. Who knew Velcro could be that damn strong! He tried again. Failed.

“They’re organic chemical compounds,” Augustine went on, approaching. In her mid-fifties, she carried herself like a woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it. Too bad for him, she seemed to want his ass on a platter.

Hell hath no fury....

She crossed her arms on her slim chest and peered into the whirlpool. “Also notorious carcinogens. They’re related to benzene, actually.” She shrugged. “I’ve had time to study chemistry while I waited for my lawyers to clean your mess.”

Her voice came out muffled through the mask, but he could still detect the malice and the triumph. She’d make him hurt long and hard. Bitch.

“Are you getting dizzy? It’s the first stage. Followed by nausea, abdominal pain, hallucinations. The list is quite long.”

He *was* dizzy, but he’d rather eat tofu wieners than tell her. Whatever that stuff was, it reeked worse than even dead bodies. The chemicals swished around in his head like blades. His skull throbbed as if a manic drummer was ripping through a solo in there.

“And the best part is that pyridine intoxication reduces sperm activity.” Her hand moved up his leg, settled on his thigh. He would’ve shaken her hand off but couldn’t move enough for that. “It kills all those little swimmers.”

She’d done that often, back when he’d pretended to be her liaison in the off-world shipping business. If he wouldn’t have minded a tumble with her then—she was one sexy woman with fingernails like claws—he did now. With a snarl, he rocked the chair.

Augustine laughed and took her hand away. “You’re right. *C’est dommage*, we’re past that stage now, unfortunately. For a Misborn, you’re not bad at all.”

Like he cared! His brain was ready to melt out of his fucking ears. He tried breathing through his mouth but only spread the burning, cutting sensations to his throat. A solvent being poured

by the liters into his nose and mouth wouldn't hurt so damn much. Burning, caustic, raw. He coughed, realized he was hacking up blood when the taste added itself to the chemical mix.

"I'm sorry to hurt you this way. A few years ago, I would've invited you into my bed instead of my pool." She laughed. "But this is just the *apéritif*. Later, we'll add acetone to this bouillon. And then, we'll talk again, *mon beau Troy*."

He would've loved telling her to go fuck herself, but his ragged breath didn't allow a single word. So through the tears, he stared at her. Oh, she got the message loud and clear. If she freed a single finger—preferably the middle one—he would make her see just why he was the best Stinger.

The grin slid off her face. "*Trou d'cul*," she muttered. "You always were an asshole."

"Thanks," he coughed.

"An asshole worth four million credits and a retirement villa on Mars," she went on, smiling again. Behind the face shield, her lipstick glistened purple. "That's what Arsenic wanted for you. Isn't that a shame? I would have asked twice that much and you weren't even that valuable to me back then. Four million, Troy, *c'est tout*. That's all you're worth to him."

"So, did you have—" He coughed, shook his head against the dizziness. "Did you have to borrow some? Sell your skinny ass for the rest?"

Compared to the chemical stench melting his brain, her slap across the face felt like a breeze. He gurgled a laugh. She slapped him again. Then again.

He wouldn't last long. He could already feel his body shutting down. Better to pass out than live through the nasty end she had lined up for him. But then again, he was a Stinger. An asshole, cut-throat and liar by trade, and in his case, by nature. Maybe the end fit perfectly.

Nothing personal. Just a job.

Those had been her last words to Troy as the trancs dulled

that sharp gaze of his and smoothed the constantly scowling face. He was even more handsome this way, sleeping peacefully. He couldn't be anywhere near peaceful right about now. Had Augustine started playing?

Mercury avoided looking into her own eyes in the mirror as she removed the kohl and mascara. She didn't know what she would see there. Didn't care to find out. Outside her bathroom, the glass wall reflected the dying sun's rays. The Integer side of town stretched below her feet. Augustine's steel and glass spire reached a thousand meters into the sky. Around them were other buildings, improbably shaped giant lotus pads made of clear thermoplastic, colored crystal and precious titanium structures, and gardens that looked suspended in thin air, and wide mansions built on stiles that disappeared into the early evening fog. In her right eye, everything was cast into shades of aqua and jade, with some blues indicating cooler parts. Such a difference from the miasma of reds she'd left that morning.

Despite the hot shower and light meal, nothing made her feel good. Problem was, she didn't fit in. Integers looked at her as they would something that had crawled out of their food. This was the world she'd been born into, cast out from, and then pulled back into. Yet she'd never felt home. Not down there and certainly not up here.

Had Augustine started?

That same question. Over and over. It plagued her, nagged and whispered things she didn't want to hear. Just a job. Nothing personal. What did she care anyway? These things happened daily. On either side. She'd done worse.

She flicked the lights off and went to bed. Sleep eluded her. All she could see was his face. That mocking half smile. Abruptly, the e-link played its tune. She retrieved it from the console.

"I need you down here," Augustine said. Mercury had discovered awhile back that Augustine didn't deal with her male employees unless there was no one else around.

Shit. She didn't want a part in whatever her boss was doing to

the Stinger. She may have brought him to this place, but it didn't mean she wanted to see him suffer.

She sighed. "Give me ten minutes."

Augustine mmm-ed. "I'm not sure he has that long. And bring the medikit from the security room."

Mercury's heart squeezed painfully. "I'll be right down."

Dressed and armed, she took the bubble elevator to the last floor, retrieved the kit from the deserted lobby, and headed to the pool level. A chemical smell hit her as soon as the bubble rotated its entry to align with the door.

Augustine waited outside the pool room. She'd tied the sleeves of a white hazmat suit around her waist and was pacing the white marble floor. Blue lights gave purplish hues to her red hair.

She scowled at Mercury. "Bring the medikit. I think he's gone into shock, and I can't carry him by myself."

Mercury felt as though someone had closed a cold and clammy fist around her stomach. Dread invaded her. She donned the suit Augustine proffered, and when both of them were suited up, marched into the pool area with the medikit tube under her arm. Someone had installed a rubber seal around the door and blocked access to the patio with thick, semitransparent tarps to create a sort of airtight enclosure at one end of the pool. Inside, a quarantine chamber created distorted shadows of what it contained. But she could tell someone was inside, sitting in a contraption suspended over the whirlpool.

Dreading what she would find, Mercury held the tarp aside so Augustine could enter first. The door to the quarantine chamber slid into the polymer wall. As soon as the scene hit her, the terrible and shocking vision, a headache began to jackhammer her skull.

Troy sat naked in a chair held by a hydraulic system that allowed a sort of boom-crane to lower the chair into the whirlpool. Thick straps held him firmly at several points. His long blond hair hid his face, but with blood dribbling down his chest and belly, she could tell it wouldn't be pretty. Despite the suit, a strong solvent smell originating from the whirlpool assaulted her. That stuff might

have been clear, but it wasn't water.

And she'd done that to him.

After using the remote to hoist the chair back over the tiled floor, Augustine pulled the straps on his wrists, chest and ankles. Troy slumped forward. Mercury dropped the tube to catch him before he fell on his face against the ceramic tiles.

"*Merde*. Never mind that," her boss snarled from the strain of holding onto his wrist. "Give him a shot of adrenaline. You'll hose him down to rinse the chemicals off when he's awake. With *cold* water."

"Chemicals?"

"I had a lot of time to prepare this," Augustine replied. Behind the clear visor, sadism shone like a candle in her black eyes.

Frissons tightened Mercury's skin.

"That man can smell things not even dogs could detect," Augustine continued. "Anyone would suffer when dipped in this soup, but to him, it's like fire being poured into his brain."

He felt cool in Mercury's arms, despite the suit she was wearing. And his heat patterns, so bright earlier that day, were dimmed and running along the bluish side of her scale. Worryingly cool, in fact.

With as much care as she could, she lowered his head onto the tiles and applied the adrenaline patch to his chest. Only then did she look into his face.

Shit.

His lips were blue. Blood, which seeped from his nose, covered his chin. Whatever chemicals laced the water and floated in the air, they were eating him inside.

Mercury willed her hands to stop shaking as she applied another adrenaline patch. No response. His heat pattern was still in the blue zone.

"He didn't last half as long as I expected. Such a disappointment." Her boss bent over and carelessly pushed the hair from Troy's face. "*Alors?* So? Can you see anything with your eye?"

With her eye? Did Mercury have only one? Had she been re-

duced to an eye? Of course she had. Always had been. It was the reason her father had kicked his wife and the product of an affair out of a comfortable life and into one of sacrifice and misery. Because of her eye. A tool Augustine and everyone else regularly used. Making her feel as if her whole being had been relegated to this enhanced organ, that no real human sheltered the damn thing. She didn't count, did she? She was just an eye to this Integer. A Misborn, a freak with a useful trick. She had half a mind to slip a knife from the belt and adjust Augustine's haircut. Bitch.

Mercury shook her head. "I don't see any—"

Troy's heat pattern kicked up a notch, with blue turning to burgundy then scarlet. He was coming back. But still his eyes were closed. He should be awake by this time. Even his lips gradually acquired a reddish tinge.

"And?" Augustine urged.

Mercury narrowed her eyes. He definitely should be awake.

She didn't know why she did it. Mercury placed her gloved hand on his chest, slick with blood. "No. Still blue. He won't be conscious for some time."

"Revive him with the salts, then."

The thought alone made her cringe. "But it'd be like having acid poured into nose. I'm sure there's another—"

"So thoughtful of you," Augustine cut in as she grabbed the tube and dumped its content on the tiles, obviously looking for the smelling salts.

Mercury let her boss sift through the medikit while she brushed the blood from the Stinger's mouth and chin. His scowl was back in force. "Can you find the salts?" she asked calmly.

At her words, a flare of crimson spread from his chest to his throat and face.

"*Non*, I can't find them!" The redhead threw her hands.

Troy moved fast.

Mercury fell on her ass when he backhanded her across the face shield, pulled one of the knives from her belt, and struggled to his feet. As Augustine turned to flee, Troy closed a fist over the back of

her suit. Her feet flew out from under her and she would've fallen had Troy, staggering but upright, not held her up.

"Get me out of here." Eyes closed, grimacing in obvious pain, he gave a rough shake to the redhead before he applied the blade to her throat. "Now."

Mercury stood. She pushed the door aside. "This way. Follow my voice."

Shoving Augustine in front of him, Troy tottered forward on stiff legs, cleared the makeshift partition made of tarps, and kept going until the wall stopped him. There, he plastered the woman with her face shield against the marble wall, keeping her put with an arm over her nape while he rubbed his eyes with the other.

Mercury reached for the topmost towel from a pile on the bench but stopped when he turned bloodshot eyes to her. Through the ribbons of hair hanging over his bleeding face, the cold rage froze her. "You," he snarled. "Stay where I can see you. And get my coat."

Mercury did, draping it over her arm.

Speaking seemed difficult for him. He coughed, grimaced. "As for you," he went on, giving another shake to his prisoner, "you're going to make a damn fine bargaining chip. And get rid of the suits, both of you. We're going."

"Where?" Mercury asked after she peeled off her suit. Augustine also removed her face shield and seemed about to throw it, but must have changed her mind because she dropped it with a disgusted curl on her painted lips.

"Roof. Shuttle. Fucking *now*."

Mercury back-pedaled to the door and hit it with her butt so it would open in time for Troy and his prisoner to shuffle through. Augustine threw murderous stares at both of them.

Arriving at the bubble elevator, Mercury activated it and waited while casting glances at Troy. The hand holding the knife shook badly and would cut the woman's neck before long. Mercury always kept her knives razor-sharp.

"If you need her alive, you should keep that—"

"Shut up," he cut in as the bubble rotated to level its opening

with the landing door.

He stepped inside and put his back against the clear wall. With his chin, he motioned for Mercury to press the correct button. She did before proffering his coat. He slipped it on, changing hands to hold the knife. Didn't meet her gaze.

"You, *p'tite hypocrite*, backstabbing little bitch," Augustine said through a haughty smile. "Scum will always smell, no matter how hard you wash."

Troy snapped a tight "Shut up."

An uneasy silence settled as the bubble quivered on its way to the roof. Beyond the thermoplastic, the Integers' part of the city glowed. Higher they climbed, and higher still. Beyond the fanciful buildings, Mercury spotted the river and the glowing red miasma of the Misborn ghetto. The bubble slowed as it reached the last level. All three trooped out onto the landing pad. Tiny lights embedded in the concrete made straight lines to the many shuttles Augustine owned.

The wind tossed Mercury's damp hair across her face. She shook it out, and in doing so, spotted a form darting from behind the very last shuttle. She doubted Troy had seen it. In his state, he could probably observe the shuttles and nothing else. Had Augustine seen the furtive movement? Both could've been blind for what little they could see. Bizarrely, a nursery rhyme she'd heard somewhere floated across her mind.

*Three blind mice. Three blind mice.
See how they run. See how they run.
They all ran after the farmer's wife.
She cut off their tails with a carving knife.
Did you ever see such a thing in your life
As three blind mice.*

Had she been the only one to see? What if she had?

"Shit," Troy hissed after a quick sniff. "Company."

She drew near him but resisted the urge to put a hand on his shoulder. He probably wouldn't take it well. "Keep to the wall," she whispered in his ear. "And keep her from talking."

He tensed but didn't say anything as he wrapped his hand across his prisoner's mouth. Augustine's eyes narrowed in seething hatred. Directed mostly at Mercury.

Choices, Mercury reminded herself. On silent feet she crept across the landing pad, keeping to the wall and its protective shadow. She'd circumvented the shuttles when she spotted the two men crouching behind the emergency mooring clamps. One had a gun, the other a zapper and an e-link clipped at his ear. Within moments, the place would be crawling with guards. They would know she'd switched sides. Again. Augustine would make sure of that.

Unless the men never found the three fugitives, in which case, no one would be the wiser. She would start over on the Misborn side. Rebuild her life. Again.

Blades felt cool and familiar in her hand. Two knives went flying end over end, twinkling in the night. The first buried to the hilt into the gun-wielder's nape. The second caught the one with the zapper as he whirled around, eyes and mouth gaping. Eerily silent. The e-link clattered against the concrete.

Life was one uninterrupted string of choices.

Troy had made it to the nearest shuttle when Mercury appeared around the nose of it, right in front of him. He'd had time to smell her, but barely. She was sliding two knives back in her belt. Turned on her gang, had she?

That girl was worse than a weathervane with her loyalties. Couldn't be trusted half as far as she could be thrown. Maybe he should get rid of her now and keep the CEO as bargaining chip. Or maybe he should just push them both off the goddamn building and take the shuttle. His brain felt like mush. Fuck them, fuck everything.

But no. He'd decided he needed the CEO in case he could exchange her for something else, and the fake Stinger in case....

He didn't know why. He just wouldn't get rid of Mercury. Not yet.

"Get inside," he snarled. Hell, his throat burned as if he'd swal-

lowed acid. And his eyes as well. Blood covered his chest and the hand with which he rubbed his mouth. In his grip, Augustine squirmed.

“You keep that up,” he snarled into her ear, “and I’ll get really cranky.”

“You need me alive,” she replied in that mellow, haughty tone he’d always found irritating.

“Who said I’d kill you?”

He heard her swallow and smelled the stench of fear oozing from every pore. Troy didn’t enjoy scaring a woman half to death, but with Augustine, he would make an exception. She was *special*.

The wail of a siren drowned what she said next, but it couldn’t hide the glint of triumph in her eyes.

“They’re coming!” Mercury whipped around. The tight, purple one-piece caught some of the light. A curve of hip here, an apex of breast there. A sharp shoulder. Was there any other woman as hot as this one? He didn’t think so. Too bad for him, she tended to switch sides a lot. No, that wasn’t true. She’d always been on the same side. Hers.

Not much unlike him, come to think of it.

She curled her arm inward as if to throw a disk. A silvery item flashed in the night, then another, followed by a guttural cry and the sound of a body landing on the ground.

Troy would recognize that sound anywhere, anytime. Even in his state. The smell of blood floated to him. Then sweat, aftershave and shoe polish. He wondered if the one who reeked of metabolic waste products knew he had lung cancer.

“How many?” he demanded. Couldn’t see shit in the darkness. Obviously, she *could*.

“Two behind the last shuttle,” Mercury replied. Another pair of knives flashed. How many did that girl have on her? “Then half a dozen by the bubble. Shit! Duck!”

Troy barely had time to “shit, duck” before a hail of bullets and kinetic shots flew over their heads. The first thudded against concrete and steel while the latter flashed like tiny blue laser beams.

Clearly Augustine's men were afraid of hitting their boss. Too bad for them.

"That one!"

Troy pointed to the second shuttle. Uglier and plainer than the rest, it caught his eye for the metal skeleton pointing out of the regular polymer-compound panels. Not as good as armored shuttles, but given their present need to hightail it out of there fast, it would have to do. He kept Augustine between the bubble lift and himself in case her men had any ideas. When he leaned against the hull and pawed blindly behind him, the hatch readily opened. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Mercury had slid it wide and was holding it there with her hip, knife arm ready and cocked back. A stupid hard-on momentarily clouded his judgment. When she nimbly stretched a leg into the shuttle and all but oozed into the cabin—that girl could *move*—a twitch of lust cramped him. Couldn't he control his motherfucking responses? Apparently not.

A bullet ricocheted along the hatch. Mercury and Augustine both yelped. Women.

"I'm flying," he announced as Mercury sat behind the controls. "Move."

She did, but not without throwing him an affronted look. She slammed the hatch shut with a resounding *bang* that rattled the shuttle and his poor brain.

"Sorry, my dear." He turned to Augustine. Before she could reply, he cocked his fist back and knocked her out cold. Even unconscious, the redhead fell elegantly onto the shuttle's back seat, white like everything the Kryonics CEO owned. Mercury strapped her nice and quick, then looped the seatbelt so that Augustine sat tied-up more than strapped-in.

"Stay where I can see you," he snapped.

As soon as he ran his hand over the console, lights blinked on. A soft whir indicated the electrical components were activated, and after the longest three seconds in his life, the engines rumbled to life. A series of *thunks-thunks* hit the hull. More bullets. If they thought he was afraid of lifting off in the middle of a gunfight and

exposing the shuttle's vulnerable underbelly, they had another think coming. Fuck them.

Mercury cursed profusely and colorfully when he yanked on the altitude lever and sent her waltzing sideways against the passenger seat. She more or less collapsed in it and fumbled with the seatbelt. With skids grating against concrete, proximity alarms wailing, and stabilizers trying to override his commands, Troy tore off the roof. A yellow line blinked and then turned red at the edge of his nav console. Shit.

"Fuel!" Mercury yelled.

There was barely a tenth of the tank left. Who the hell left their shuttle almost empty? Just his fucking luck to choose that one!

"We'll glide across the river."

"We can't *glide* in this thing," she replied, looking at him.

Not looking at her, he could still make out the pallor that washed over her face and the way her eyes had flared to the size of bridge tokens. Then he remembered why.

"Afraid of heights, huh?" he taunted. "Too bad."

Bullets followed them as he circled the glass and steel spire. Tried to keep his underbelly facing outward. Across the bow of their stolen shuttle, a stream of blue beams flashed. One must have fried a couple of sensors because part of the console went black. Troy no longer cared if he flew directly into a mountain. It was better than prison and it sure as shit beat what Augustine had in mind. Teeth gritted, he aimed north but stayed below the buildings' median height to delay detection until the last possible moment. The State was probably already on their tail. Couldn't have some fleabag Misborn steal a nice Integer shuttle.

Sure enough, over the comms, an official-sounding voice exhorted him, "Land at the nearest pad and prepare to show papers." That hadn't taken long. Well, he had no papers and no intention of landing, but he would show them a thing or two. Hell, yeah!

As he'd predicted, the first State shuttle rose behind a building shaped like a giant cluster of colored crystals. Such a damn waste of materials. He yanked on the altitude lever while simultaneously

kicking the pedals. The shuttle responded right away and veered at an acute angle, aft almost overtaking fore. The mountain of crystal loomed in front of them, myriad colors reflected along its many facets. Troy aimed right for it.

“Troy!” Mercury warned.

Sweat stung his eyes. His nose and head throbbed as they’d never done before. He still fought against the nausea, but he sure as hell wouldn’t make it easy for these fuckers. Instead of pulling up and over the building, he aimed right for its core. His target spanned about ten paces wide and no more than twenty tall. He gunned the engines.

“*Troy!*” Mercury shouted.

Close. Closer.

So much so he couldn’t see the night sky anymore. The building loomed like a mountain of mirrors. Crystal surfaces reflected their shuttle to the last angle. If not for the tinted windshield, he probably could’ve seen their faces in the cockpit. His must have been scary.

As if she meant to claw out of her seat but had forgotten she wore her seatbelt, Mercury braced her hands on the cabin ceiling and her booted feet against the console and, with her face turned in his direction, squeezed her eyes shut.

For Troy, the moment froze.

She could’ve fought for control. She could’ve pulled one of her many knives and had a go at his throat. In his condition and with the shuttle flying at a wall of glass and crystal, he wouldn’t have been able to fight her off. But she did none of these things. In fact, she didn’t react at all the way he would’ve expected a woman like her to respond to such a threat. It felt almost as if she’d relinquished control to him, at least for this short time.

The notion would’ve floored him had he been standing. Impossible, right? Not a woman like her. But there it was. So he took her gift. Her vulnerability and dependence on him to survive—as twisted as it was. He took it all in, even the fear he could smell coming off her in potent waves. Fear that made her more to him.

More human, woman, fallible, mortal, lovable. Just *more*.

Mercury stamped her boot on the console. “Holy *shi-i-i-it!*”

And there it was. Their moment. He either did it right and survived, or fucked up and killed all three of them.

At the last possible moment, he kicked the right pedal, angled the lever against his left knee, and flew sideways at forty-five degrees. Right between two support pilasters cleverly masked by twin mirrors.

Their shuttle shot through the ten-by-twenty-foot aperture in the building like a bat out of its cave and safely emerged on the other side.

Beyond, the St. Lawrence River slithered left to right like a bloated dead snake. From fear, her scent lightened to adrenaline and quite a bit of arousal. Female pheromones were like a fog in the cabin. He could’ve cut through it with a knife. Damn.

“You’re *crazy*,” she breathed as if in wonder.

Before he could reply, the fuel gauge beeped once, twice, then in a long, uninterrupted chirp. In the cabin, everything went dead. They were out of fuel.

From a thousand meters, they descended to half that in the blink of an eye. The lurch almost cost him the contents of his stomach. Below, Saint Helen’s Island glistened with the many Integer houses, the last good neighborhood before the river that was the natural barrier to the ghetto.

He aimed for the rusty vestiges of the Jacques-Cartier Bridge, its iron skeleton eaten by rust and metal scavengers and forever used as canvas by graffiti artists. Old steel pylons stuck out of the broken concrete like the devil’s fingers. Nothing but Mercury’s shallow breathing came to his ears. Except for the swoosh of his heart.

Negative Gs accumulated. Troy groaned while he fought the lever and kept the pedals as leveled as he could. The river flew by below them. Then the old cruise pier. Without the lightshow and glitz of Integer abodes to help him fly, the old city light posts, some of them still functioning, served as sort of impromptu approach lights.

A large carcass of a grand building flashed not ten meters under them—the *Hôtel de Ville*, City Hall, built in the old Napoleonic style. Well, damn, he was finding all kinds of uses for his Classical Studies degree. Too bad it couldn't help him fly a dead shuttle.

Troy cursed. They wouldn't clear it.

As though a spiteful consciousness inhabited the gutted edifice, one of its walls bristled with jutting metal I-beams, a pair of which scraped their shuttle's underbelly. Metal against metal. In a long angry-dragon screech, the beams tore out a good chunk of the shuttle's deck. Sparks flew. Smells of burning wires and rubber invaded the cabin. Wind whistled an angry tune into the deep gash between their feet. The shuttle shook and rattled.

"It's been a helluva ride, Blondie!" Troy roared over the racket.

She shook her head as if to say "you *asshole!*"

Wind. Acute angle pulling him against his seatbelt. They were rolling to the right. Darkness engulfing the cabin. A split second of clarity before sensory overload. Then impact.

Troy didn't know how long he sat there, dazed and addled. When he tried working his legs underneath the consoles, both responded the way he'd become accustomed to in his thirty-nine years. So there was that. Both arms as well. Neck, okay. Hands. The protective foam had already started to evaporate, so they must have sat there for at least twenty minutes. Not safe in this part of town. Their crash was sure to have attracted all sorts of attention. The wrong kind, mostly.

In the darkness—fuck, how come they had not a drop of fuel left to fly but the smell still overpowered everything?—he reached to the right for his passenger. Through the slimy foam, he felt something rounded and firm. The warmth of life still made it nice and hot. He squeezed it for the sheer pleasure of knowing Mercury still lived.

"That's my *ass*," came the grunted remark, followed by a curse.

Nerves must have played a large part in creating his response. He burst out laughing.

Smoke stung his nose. Fire retardant foam could only do so much. “We should get out of here.”

“My seatbelt is stuck.”

“You have one of those knives left?”

“What?” she snapped before a muffled thud heralded that she’d moved. “You think I wouldn’t remember? Just mind your own damn business.”

Bitchy. Good.

Troy pulled the buckle on his own seatbelt, bracing his fall with an arm. By memory, because he couldn’t see shit, he squeezed into the back of the shuttle, slipped in the foam a couple of times as he bent in half and pawed blindly for Augustine. If two of them had survived, she must have done so as well, being harnessed in the shuttle’s rear.

He found nothing.

“Where is she?” He pawed in wider circles. “Fuck. She’s gone.”

“She’s tougher than I gave her credit for.”

A whole other strata of smells suddenly assaulted him. Wet wool, dirty feet, acrylic, and cabbage.

“Company.”

Mercury cursed. “I know. At least half a dozen.”

And no guns.

A beam of light hit the shuttle’s gaping hatch, which confirmed that Augustine was indeed gone. Several heads bobbed into the golden beam. Troy could see particles of dust and debris dancing in the light. Nowhere to run now.

“Come out,” a man said. Older, tough, gravelly.

Troy slotted the voice into the don’t-fuck-with-me category.

“Now!”

Out of some inane male instinct, he barred Mercury’s way so as to exit first and take whatever danger lay beyond. Foolish pride or a male protecting its female? He had no idea. He actually *smelled* Mercury’s frustration.

Standing by the overturned shuttle, Troy nonchalantly leaned back against the warm hull to show no one was going to make him

sweat bullets. And they could go fuck themselves, too. Mercury nimbly climbed out, butt first, and twisted to join him. If that didn't make him want to hump doorjams! Well, damn.

In the beam of a couple of flashlights, he realized Followers had surrounded them. A pair had Augustine on a makeshift stretcher. Except for the red of her hair, it didn't look as though she bled. Good, because she'd just become his ticket out. And they worked much better alive.

One of the Followers, a large fellow with a kinetic energy gun as big as Troy's arm, stepped forward.

"Do you know why Adam and Eve's son Cain killed his brother Abel?" he asked. The beams of light revealed a boyish grin in a weathered, bearded face. Also exposed the misshapen hand anyone would've recognized. The Integers' favorite propaganda, Brother Cain's appendage as a demonic talon, curled over the city.

Troy cursed under his breath. "No idea."

"Because he could see," Brother Cain went on, smiling benevolently, "that beneath the beautiful face lay a rotten core, that outer perfection meant little more than good fortune and told nothing of the man's heart. Abel was a spoiled, idle boy who lay in the grass all day as his uncontrolled flock wreaked havoc on the land. If Cain was guilty of anything, it was of acting too late."

Troy placed his hand on Mercury's arm, pressed until she'd lowered the knives she held in a V between her fingers. "I never thought I'd say this, but am I glad to see you crazy bastards."

One Follower armed his kinetic rifle, the high-pitched whir like steam escaping from a boiler. "Mind your words when you address Brother Cain."

Troy rolled his eyes. He was in no fucking mood for this. "Yeah, well, you know what, asswipe? Fuck you with capital F and U. I've had a bad day that started up in Block 4D, went down this toilet bowl of a city with a quick stop in Integer Land for some chemical TLC with this vindictive bitch over here—" He hooked his thumb at Augustine. "All the while wondering why the hell I was putting up with *her* shit—" He snapped his chin at a stone-faced Mercury.

“But not before I had my balls fried for a job I did too well. So you can kiss my Misborn ass if I’m not one hundred percent the brown-noser you are.”

Troy took a long breath, slowly exhaled through a curse. And his head hurt, goddammit.

Brother Cain’s smile widened. “I don’t know who you are, other than you walk with both Integers and Misborns. And that you wield words like one would knives. But if I knew nothing else about you, this would intrigue me.” He turned to a pair of very, very large Followers. “Disarm them. We’ll bring them home for a chat.”

With a last smile, he turned and disappeared into the shadows once more.

Agent Provocateur: Chapter 4

Despite Troy's cocky attitude—how could a barefoot guy wearing only a coat still act like the King of Everything?—she saw his heat patterns going haywire with adrenaline. So as the Followers took them back to their home underneath the old metro station Square-Victoria, Mercury readied for fight or flight. She was a survivor. Always had been, at any cost.

Some of the old yellow tiles still clung to pitted walls. Other Followers and regular folks stopped what they were doing to watch the group walk by. She felt the weight of their stares between her shoulder blades. At her side, Troy looked straight ahead, long coat buttoned to his neck. His bare feet clacked on the terrazzo floor. He must have been so cold. Poor guy.

They entered a room once reserved for employees only. Offices, perhaps? She'd never been here.

“Welcome to our home.” Brother Cain stood behind a black desk on which large white letters spelled IKEA. Whatever that was. He scratched his beard. “I must inform you that before she passed out, your lady friend with the red hair told us you two are Stingers. So this will taint whatever you have to say.”

A murmur of disapproval floated around the room. The closest Followers grimaced. One hissed, “Judas.”

Troy planted his fists on his hips. “Did she tell you she was Kryonics CEO, or did she leave that detail out? If I remember right, her company harvested organs from Misborns to sell them on the black market. I did us a favor, okay. You can thank me later.”

Cain grinned, to Mercury's relief. But while he appeared to have a sense of humor, none of his Followers did. Integers had it all wrong—the man wasn't responsible for the violence. If anything, he was probably the one reining the rest back. She'd known bad men and Cain wasn't one.

“Kryonics CEO?” Cain asked. His eyes grew hard. “I'm not surprised she left that out.” He rubbed his beard with his misshapen hand. “But Stingers are no better. Misborns working for Integers,

misguided and opportunistic at best, despicable at worst. As my brother said, Judas.”

Mercury surreptitiously scanned the place. A large underground room covered in tiles, with concrete floors and tunnels leading in and out. At least half a dozen Followers present, plus who knew how many where she couldn't see their heat patterns. They all had guns. She had knives. Troy had nothing for a weapon but his motor-mouth. She had no doubt he could down enemies left, right and sideways with it, but still, they needed a tangible hook into Cain's side.

She might be fast, but she wouldn't get to the knives strapped to her waist quickly enough. She had other weapons. A little bit of herself died inside when she resorted to her least favorite tool and offered a lascivious smile to the closest Follower. He looked away.

Brother Cain tut-tutted at her. “Followers have no such needs of the flesh.” He narrowed his eyes. “Follow me. I think you'll find this interesting.”

Embarrassment and mortification flushed her face. It was one thing to offer, but a whole other thing to be publicly rebuked. An impulse fired her muscles to bury a couple of knives in Cain. By her side, Troy shook his head once. He'd smelled that, too? Shit.

Panic was starting to make her contemplate crazy ideas. She was getting desperate to escape. No matter the cost. It was what she knew. All she knew. It had kept her alive. She felt trapped like an animal.

“Calm down, okay?” Troy murmured without looking at her. “We're good.”

His words had a soothing effect. She took a long breath.

With only four Followers—much better odds—bringing up the rear, Cain led them through a convoluted network of tunnels and levels, up metal stairs, through covered bridges from an old mall, then into a house that made everything else look recently constructed.

Genuine wood planks covered the floors, which creaked as the group walked across an old-fashioned living room pulled out of

history books. To her shock, Mercury slowed so she could look around. A melancholy hung around the place like drapes. A clock ticked the time away. She checked her timepiece. The clock was wrong, but so lovely. Only after a Follower nudged her between the shoulder blades did she pick up her pace. She liked it here. For the first time in her life, she felt *home* here. How crazy was that? She'd never been in this house.

After climbing a spiral staircase and passing through a door left ajar, they ended their trek on the roof. Rain, cold and toxic, made everything look greasy. Smells of downtown were strong here, but it was the best view she'd ever had of this part of town. There was beauty here. Sort of.

"I see you appreciate the scenery," Cain remarked gently.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed his smile. Her first instinct was to shield her contentment to keep him from getting a handle on her. He probably wasn't even trying to. It was just her way. Distrust was something she'd learned young. Instincts had kept her alive so far, but she knew she paid a cost. Inside, she was dying a little every day. Growing colder, more cynical, harder.

Troy ran a hand through his hair. He shook badly, although he still looked ready and able to kick ass. "Yes, it's very nice. A nice shade of brown all around."

Cain moved to stand in front of her, rain landing like diamonds on his wool robes before seeping in. "Your friend doesn't appreciate the beauty of the place, the peace of it. But you do. This was once someone's home. And you feel that, don't you?"

Troy turned narrowed blue eyes at her.

Mercury couldn't speak for fear of betraying more than she was willing to let go. She shrugged, looked away. Played it cool. Had to survive, had to keep everyone guessing.

"I feel it, too." Cain extended the arm with the deformed appendage toward the rest of downtown stretching below the hill. "This is our home, to us Misborns. But it doesn't have to be the ugly thing it is now. There *is* beauty in this decrepit old house, and there could be beauty all around us."

Clearly Troy was at the end of his rope. He took a step toward Cain, which made the closest Follower ram his gun in Troy's belly. "Stay back."

Troy shoved the man. "You keep that thing away from me!"

Cain raised his hand in a call for peace. "You see?" he said to Mercury as if only the two of them existed. His dark eyes searched hers. "Our first response is violence. Integers don't keep us down in the toxic sludge. Misborns do. We do it to *ourselves*. You, who belong to both sides, see it more clearly than any of us."

Belonged to both sides? She'd always thought she belonged to neither. And how the hell had he known that?

"It's what keeps us alive." Her voice sounded hard and cold. It made her sad for no reason. "Fighting for survival. It's all there is."

Cain's expression grew somber. She couldn't explain why, but Mercury felt as if she'd just failed a test. He stepped away from her. "In the spirit of our mutual appreciation for beauty no one else can see, I'll grant you two hours to organize your proposal. When I come back, if you don't have one for me, I'll use the three of you in a prisoner exchange with the Integers." He nodded to the others, who trooped back into the house. Maladjusted planks creaked in unison. She heard the door close down below.

With rain rendering his face glossy, Troy turned to her, eyes and mouth hard. "What the fuck was that?"

"I don't know—"

"That's all right," he cut in. "I don't really give a damn, because you and I, we're going to have a talk. Not here because I'm freezing my ass off. Down inside. I saw a room on the top landing."

When Troy began to descend the spiral staircase, Mercury had no choice but to follow. In the tiny hallway, he pushed open a door and as she passed, followed her with a tight, "Ladies first."

As soon as the door slammed shut, darkness settled in her normal eye even as in her right eye, everything took on deep purple and midnight blue hues. They stood in a tiny bedroom with a dirty glass door leading onto a rooftop terrace. Two hundred years earlier, this might have been a pretty annex to the building's roof.

Now, it was just another broken thing. Still, that feeling of home kept floating around her like faint perfume.

She heard Troy's rattling sigh and saw him plant a hand on the wall for support. Heat like a fever made his patterns blaze in certain places. His head radiated shades of ambers. One serious headache. The hand he rubbed over his forehead shook badly.

"You should sit before you keel over," she suggested. "You're too big for me to carry."

"That's supposed to be funny? Lighten the mood, huh? Make me drop my guard so you can stab me in the back again? Well, I have news for you, Blondie. I'm not dropping my guard around you. Not ever again. You got that? So stop acting like you're all worried about me, 'cause I'm not buying it."

"That's okay. You don't have to." She hoped the sting his words had caused didn't show in her voice. Or her smell.

He muttered a curse.

"I told you, it was nothing personal. Just a job."

"Fucking me blind was the job too?"

"Every job has its perks."

Heat patterns flared to white-hot. "That's a *perk*?" He encircled her waist and brought her against him. His erection pressed at her belly.

"What's it to you?" she countered. Not staring at the way his mouth resembled molten gold proved very, very hard.

"I don't know, animal magnetism, two Misborn freak shows finding a shoe that fits?" The remark dripped derision. "Sexual tension?"

"It's more like friction."

He abruptly released her, which sent her back-pedaling a few steps. Her first instinct was to kick his ass for turning her into a hormonal mess, but worry drowned everything else when he curved as though under a massive weight. His knees hit the floor with muffled thuds. Hair like aqua-colored ribbons spilled over his bent shoulders.

"Damn, take it easy." Mercury reached for him. He slapped her

hand away, but she managed to snake her arm under his and hoisted him back to his feet. “Come on. There’s a sink over there.”

“Take your hands off me.”

“Keep your spit for Arsenic. He’s the one who screwed you the worst.”

Mercury ignored Troy’s mumbled threats as she guided him across the Spartan bedroom—a cot in a corner the only testament this was indeed a *bedroom*—and toward a tiny sink bolted askew in the plaster wall. A plastic bench to the right would provide a perfect spot for her charge. Where had this nurturing gene come from, anyway? She’d never cared about anyone but herself. And sometimes, barely even that.

“Sit.” She guided him as he all but collapsed on the bench, his long legs propped straight out in front of him, his coat parting to reveal a glorious rod of deep amber and golden light.

No one had heat patterns like he did. Saliva pooled under her tongue. She forced her gaze away. Cold water was all she got when she twisted the old-fashioned metal spigot. A glass glistened in a holder just as crooked as the sink, and half a bar of soap in a dish resembled a shark tooth.

“Here. Drink some water.”

After rinsing the glass, she filled it and guided Troy’s hand until he could take over. He gulped four glassfuls. From flame-red, his throat darkened to burgundy as the cold water went down. Mercury could only stare, another sort of thirst knifing her, as he licked his lips and settled back against the wall. He kept the glass cradled in one hand, a couple of fingers above his rocket. Still erect. Shit, was the man a machine?

At the price of an aching palm, she balled a fist tight enough to dig her nails into her flesh and looked around for something textile. Anything. A towel, a dishcloth, a sock. There was nothing she could use to wash him, so she unzipped her suit down to her navel, slipped off her cami, bunched it under the running water, and wrung it out. “Take off your coat.”

For once, he didn’t offer a slice of his charming personality-pie

and did as he was told.

“It’s going to be cold,” she announced before placing the rolled cami against his forehead. He sighed long and hard. Drops like beads of lapis lazuli rolled down his face and throat and between his fingers. Would they taste as good as they looked? She could hardly breathe.

“Here.” She retrieved the cami to rub the triangle of brittle soap against it. After a while, some lather formed. Troy’s face glowed lemon-yellow when she ran her cami down his shoulders and arms, finishing with his throat because the water would’ve warmed by then.

“You’re not as bad as you let people think,” Troy said with his eyes closed.

“I’m plenty bad. It doesn’t mean I’m cruel.”

“Ah, yes, a world of difference.”

“There is to me.”

Mercury washed his belly and back, and then ran the cami backward over his head a few times to strip off some of the dried blood. She had reloaded and was ready to wash below his waist when he closed a hand over hers.

“I can take care of that part.”

“I can, too.”

“What if I don’t *want* you to?”

“You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t, would you?” she murmured. Breathing was quickly becoming a difficult process, given the haze of sexual hunger choking her.

“Maybe I would, just so I could snap your neck and be done with a dangerous loose end.”

She smiled in the darkness, knowing he couldn’t see her. “I’m dangerous, huh?”

“Don’t get cocky.” Troy reached out, perhaps to grab her shoulder, but ended up with his hand right over her naked breast.

“Okay?”

“It’s my cami I’ve been using to wash you.” His hand was so hot.

He squeezed her breast and ran a thumb over her nipple, which ached and hardened into a point. "I'll let you finish with what you were doing. And when you're done washing my cock, I think you should suck it."

Her gasp of shock and outrage must have triggered something in him. He trapped her with a long arm around her waist, effectively fencing her in with her breasts against his face. He pressed a kiss between them.

Mercury gritted her teeth. The glass landed on the floor with a muffled *thunk*.

"Not because you owe me or I owe you," he added against her skin, "but because we both want it." With a lick to her nipple, he released her, gently this time. "Unless I'm misinterpreting your scent. But I doubt it."

Pride or lust?

The fight was a short one. Mercury briskly rubbed the piece of soap against her cami and made sure to wash every square centimeter of this man's body because in a few minutes, she intended to return to it with her tongue. To hell with pride.

She was still washing the arrogant, cocky, gorgeous, sexy man when he grabbed the cami from her hand and blindly dropped it into the sink, where it settled with a wet *plop*.

"I think we're good," he said.

A moan escaped her when he pawed at her waist and trapped it with his long hands before bringing her up against his face. She planted her palms against the wall to withstand the sheer ferocity with which he covered her chest and belly with kisses and licks. She'd known that man would be good with his mouth. That razor-sharp, dirty mouth. But she hadn't expected the fevered vigor.

She undulated against his face, pressing herself harder so he could consume her more deeply. At least for a while.

"I love the way you move," he murmured against her belly.

So she gave him more. Shoulders and hips together, spine like a corkscrew, she twisted and gyrated against him. He caught her breasts with his mouth every time she came near enough. Sucked

on them, licked them. Her head filled with his heat patterns. She forced her eyes to remain open. She'd closed them for other lovers. He was different. Somehow, it mattered that she watched him while they had sex. *He* mattered.

She yanked off the suit to expose more skin to his hungry mouth. Her boots thudded against the wooden floor.

He bit her shoulder, then her neck when she bent over him to press her cheek against the top of his head. While he trapped her wrists in iron grips, she knelt between his legs, strained against the pressure on her joints. Glowing with heat, his cock pointed straight up. Maybe he thought he could call all the shots.

Not this one.

"Nice rocket you have there," she murmured, taunting.

A wicked curve pulled his mouth. "You call it a rocket?"

"Why not? It makes for a nice visual."

"Rocket," he repeated with a shake of head. "You're something else."

She didn't know what she was anymore. But she knew what she *wanted*.

Mercury wrapped her lips around his glans. But instead of releasing her wrists, his hold on them tightened. From reds, his heat patterns lightened to ambers, then gold. She'd never seen anything like it.

Eyes wide to not miss a detail, she slid his cock deeper into her mouth. Worked her jaw to accommodate his size. Arms straight over her head, she began to bob up and down. Heat came off him in platinum-colored waves. She took him deeper. Salty-sweet, the taste of him made her half growl, half mewl in satisfaction. Troy rolled his hips, which pushed his rocket deeper. At her moan of encouragement, he did it again. Then again.

A long shudder announced his impending release. He tried to pull out of her mouth but she followed him, unrelenting, hungry for what he had to give. She wanted it all from this man.

"Mercury," he warned with a twist of his hips. He released one of her wrists.

She gripped his rocket. Hard. Sucked on it with abandon. “Come on,” she murmured between licks. From platinum, his shaft glowed like molten silver. Bright enough to hurt her eye. She didn’t look away. Couldn’t.

A long frisson shook him. She felt each tremor pass down his legs. He was there. Mercury readied for it. In sharp pulsations, Troy came into her mouth.

She barely had time to feel the liquid silk glide down her throat when he forced her up by the wrists he still held. With an *oomph*, she stumbled back against the wall.

The next second her was standing before her, his long hands all over her body, getting rid of her panties, messing her hair, discovering and conquering. Nipples, belly, clitoris. He knew how her every system worked. Her voice filled the tiny room when he concentrated his efforts between her legs. She felt herself melt there. Coated his fingers within seconds. The Stinger was good with his hands. Very good. Instead of his fingers, something incredibly hot and wet touched her on her thigh. His tongue.

Troy parted her with demanding fingers and replaced them with his mouth. She cried out in shock at the ferocity of his touch and in thrill at the way he seemed to know how she wanted things. He found her clitoris, shoved his face between her legs to access it. Sucked and rolled it. She’d always been able to achieve climax easily enough—at a lover’s hands or her own—but this was just—

On a long whimper, she came.

Instead of slowing, Troy intensified his touch, quickened his cadence. With his fingers and tongue he took her. Over and over. How long did she stay this way? Couldn’t be sure. Senses dominated everything. Mercury spread her legs as far as she could and leaned back against the wall. Then cool air replaced hot mouth. A snarl of frustration left her.

He stood like a feral god made of molten gold. Long hair in ribbons spilled over his swimmer’s shoulders. Muscles corded when he planted a hand on the wall. He spun her to face the wall, and she couldn’t see him. Couldn’t *see* him. She waited, barely able to

contain her thrill.

“Put your foot up,” he commanded in her ear.

Mercury hurriedly obeyed. He planted his other hand on her hip, curled long fingers into her flesh. Would he know how she wanted it? Could he smell it on her, the wish for a brutal partner tempered with a lover’s affection? Did he understand the duality of her nature?

He did.

On a brusque thrust, he took her. Precision coupled with force. When he began to move, Mercury felt the change in her. Body and heart. He opened something in her that couldn’t be shut again. Each push a conquest. Each retreat a gift. Unfurling and blooming, a promise of things to come.

Mercury urged him with taunts and pleas, commands and supplications. “Take it all,” she told him, while at the same time, she took from him. “More,” she whimpered. “More, more, more.”

Troy’s hips worked hard and fast. He gave her everything, she could tell. She paid him in kind, gave to him all that she was. Her voice rose higher, a crescendo of cries that spurred her lover on. Skin slapped against skin. Hair stuck to sweat. Two essences joined and mixed. Deeper. Into her. Heels coming off the floor. Mercury gritted her teeth when their furious coupling propelled them from the wall and against the sink, then farther where they hit the cot and collapsed on it. Creaks accompanied, then drowned, their panting. A metronome to their union. On a violent shove that burned all shreds of mental cohesion, Mercury climaxed again.

Troy froze, sheathed to the hilt. The sudden lack of movement allowed her to focus on her orgasm in a way she’d never done before. A great languor took her. They said coming was like a small death. She disagreed. To her it was a renewal, every nerve coming to life at once. It was also another chance at life. Another kick at the can. Maybe she’d found the right man for the job.

She pushed the thought away. *Just focus on the moment.*

Panting, Troy pulled out but stayed behind her with an arm draped down to her thigh. The guy had some wingspan. He placed

a tender kiss on her nape. “I have to sleep,” he mumbled. “Will you be there? Later, I mean?”

Her first reaction was to push off him, get her clothes and leave. She fought it. Fought her nature. But damn, why did he have to ruin it all with a question about commitment? Couldn't he just enjoy the moment while it lasted? Couldn't he just live *now* and not worry about later? She didn't know where she would be. She knew where she *wanted* to be. But that wish was the scariest thing she'd ever had to deal with.

“I don't know,” she muttered. “Maybe,”

Troy reached back to stroke her hair. “I hope you are. But if you're not, I'll find you. Then I'll kick your ass.”

He couldn't see her grin, for which she was glad. Because he might have used it against her. People did that. Found a flaw and stuck a blade in it. She should know. People let others down all the time. She didn't want that to happen to her. Not again and not with him. This Stinger had come to mean a whole lot more than a nice rocket and a pair of strong arms on which to count. He'd started to *matter*.

He smelled them before he heard their tread on the creaky floor below. He didn't wake Mercury as he silently pulled his coat over his aching shoulders and padded out of the room. Down the stairs, Brother Cain and two Followers armed to the teeth with crossbows and kinetic energy guns greeted him without a word.

“And?” Brother Cain wore a knowing half-smile Troy didn't like much but against which he could do shit. So he let it slide. This time.

“I have a proposal,” Troy replied.

Cain nodded. “I'm glad. I'm beginning to like you, even if you caused the death of many a few years ago.”

Despite his best efforts, Troy felt his face blanch. Shit.

“Yes, Miss ‘I-have-connections’ CEO told us *all* about you,” Cain went on with a narrowing of eyes. “I lost many friends the day Kryonics burned.”

“So did I. We all did.”

“But I presently have even more friends who are alive and well—and with all their organs—today because that corporation was brought down.” Cain brushed his beard downward. “So aside from this, she had little to offer and nothing I can use. The question now becomes, what do *you* have to share?”

“Information.” Wasn’t this the story of his life? Information had always been and would always be humanity’s most powerful specie, no matter what commodity happened to be *en vogue*.

Looking unimpressed, Cain waved with his misshapen hand. “Information can be good, I guess.”

Oh? A challenge? Adrenaline kicked up a notch. He’d always been a shit-stirrer, hadn’t he?

Troy knew his smile had nothing friendly about it. He tapped his temple. “No, you don’t get it. This information, it’s going to make Kryonics’ disgrace look like a fucking picnic. I know stuff that’ll keep Integers up at night for the next ten years, names of politicians who supposedly don’t exist, their mistresses’ shoe size, memos, numbers, and even bits of genealogy no one would want exposed. I’m done playing my cards for others. It’s my goddamn turn and I have the aces, Brother Cain. All five of them.”

Cain cocked his head. “There are only four in a deck.”

“*Exactly.*”

To their credit, all three Followers appeared to have understood what he meant. “And what’s the price of such a proposal? What do you want in exchange?”

A faint odor of cucumber and melon caressed Troy’s nostrils. She was awake and moving. He looked to the ceiling, as if he could see Mercury through the dirty plaster.

“I want peace and quiet. A new life.” His tone of voice surprised him. Earnest.

“She can’t be trusted, your complex lady friend,” Brother Cain put in softly. “She’s one of those plants that have no roots. Who knows where they’ll grow?”

Heightened blood pressure jackhammered Troy’s skull. Earnest-

ness and now defensiveness? Where was the world coming to?

“Maybe she was waiting for a reason to put down roots. Anyway, that’s not your business. Shit, I’m not even sure it’s mine. So, do we have a deal?”

Brother Cain extended his deformed hand. As much as the ruined appendage would repel anyone, Troy shook it with aplomb. Better take a man’s imperfect but honest offer than shake a liar’s perfect hand. Arsenic would get it in the teeth, just as he deserved. Troy wondered if they would see it coming or would act as Integers always had, haughty and oblivious right until Misborns knocked at the front door. Literally.

“Very well,” Cain said, nodding. “I’ll make the necessary arrangements for the CEO to be transferred in exchange for a good many Misborns rotting in their prisons. My men will be more than happy to part with her, I assure you.”

Troy could relate.

“Can you put a message on her?” he asked. “One addressed to Joseph Arsenic. Tell him Troy wishes him and his family a great retirement. Maybe I’ll go pay them a visit at their villa someday.”

Cain scowled. “Would you go after a man’s family for his crimes?”

“*He* thinks I would, and that’s what counts.”

Brother Cain grinned.

After the Followers had left, Brother Cain invited Troy and Mercury to join them for a simple meal in the main underground hall. Troy climbed the stairs to the tiny bedroom. Only by smell, he could tell she wasn’t there anymore. He pushed the door wide to allow some light into the room. No one. Her clothes were gone as well. His heart squeezed painfully. He’d expected her to stay, even for a short while. She hadn’t even given him the chance.

A faint tendril of cucumber and melon caressed him. He grinned in the gloom. Relief mixed with trepidation. She was still around.

Troy found her outside, perched on a broken ledge, crouching on her heels with her boots tucked underneath her butt, her arms wrapped around raised knees. Despite the fact she took less space

than a crate of milk would, rain reached her at an angle and splattered the tips of her boots. Her white-blond asymmetrical hair stuck up in places.

She reminded him of an alley cat. Scrawny and wild but mindful, ready to pounce. An élan of affection warmed his cheeks.

She sliced him a glance over her shoulder before turning back to gaze out at the night sky. “Plants with no roots, huh?” she snapped.

“Are you going to throw knives at me?”

To his delight, she smiled. “Asshole.”

“Damn right.”

“He was right, you know,” she added without looking at him. She sighed. “I can’t be trusted.”

“No one has ever given you any reason to be trusted,” Troy replied. He came around the ledge and stood in front of her, wrapping his hands over her ankles. Rain fell hard and cold on his nape and hands. He shivered.

“And you will?” she demanded.

Weariness, hope and distrust intertwined in her tone and expression. He smelled and could also see the internal battle. The yearning to believe, yet the natural instinct to put one’s back against the wall. He knew the feeling.

“Yes.”

“Just like that, ‘yes’?”

“Just like that.”

Mercury closed her eyes. “You should ditch me the first chance you have. I would do the same in your boots. I’m not girlfriend material.”

“Like I’m boyfriend material?”

“Good point.”

He squeezed her ankles harder. “Oh, *now* you agree with me?”

Her grin was short-lived. “I’ve never done anything in anyone’s interest but my own. I don’t even know what it feels like to trust someone. Is it a good feeling? Is it something that can hurt you? How *do* you trust?”

“Slowly. Carefully. Bits at a time.”

“It’s scary,” she whispered. “It’s so scary, it’s....” Her voice faltered.

Troy rested his chin on her knees so he could look her in the eye. “You think I’m good at this? You think it doesn’t scare the shit out of me, Blondie? It does and I am. But you know what? If it means having you with me, I’ll *learn* to trust, because the alternative is, well, it’s just too fucking bad for words.”

“I’m not going to change for you, Stinger,” she started. “You’re going to have to take me the way I am.” Defiance shone in her dark eyes and the way her chin jutted.

“You’re my type, throwing knives and all. But you have to make me a promise.”

He felt her tense. She grimaced. “Yeah, nothing comes free, huh?”

“Not this, no. You have to promise me this. You’re not going to call my cock a rocket anymore. It’s just wrong.”

Her burst of unladylike laughter was all he needed. It still rained inside the back of his coat. The wind still smelled of garbage and rot, the sky still looked heavy with smog, but dammit, her laugh made everything seem inconsequential. His own little sun that thumbed its nose at the gloomy world.

She agreed with a nod, dropped from her perch and into his arms where she pressed her forehead to the crook of his neck. Heat seeped into his chest. Her sweet smell suffused his being. He wanted nothing else but her. He’d told her the truth. He was scared shitless of dropping his guard. But life without his unpredictable little ally—

Troy couldn’t even fathom the thought without his heart squeezing painfully. It would suck. Period. Long and hard. The realization he loved Mercury came just like that. No big lightning strike or choir of angels. Just a thought, a seed floating into his brain and taking root. He loved her.

But he wouldn’t tell her. Not yet. Someday, when both of them were ready, he would. Stingers had to be patient. And hell knew he was the best goddamn Stinger this side of the sun.

When Mercury looked up into his face, offered him that sexy half-grin that could melt a guy's crotch, Troy knew they would be all right together. They would be happy.

"I'm so hungry, I could eat tofu wieners," she said before nipping his chin.

"Be careful what you start, Blondie."

"Or what?"

"A challenge?"

"Why not?" Mercury mirrored his lascivious smile. She nodded.

"Life is all about choices."

About the author:

After a twelve-year career in the Canadian military (army), where I learned English and the many uses of parachute cord and gun tape, I decided to recycle my skills and become a writer. Of erotic romance. What can I say? I'm a late bloomer. To know more about my books, my real-life adventures or my opinions about nothing important, visit me at www.nathaliegray.com.



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