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Shadow of the Templar:  
**The Morning Star**

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*by*  
M. Chandler

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The **Shadow of the Templar** novels:

*The Morning Star*

*Double Down*

*With A Bullet*

*High Fidelity*

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for Lyn  
who started it

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## ◆ Codenames

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[saturday]

“Well?” Simon asked, flicking two fingers against his lapel and raising an eyebrow at Sandra.

Sandra reached out and smoothed Simon’s hair down slightly, then nodded. “You’re good to go, boss.”

“Great. Another day, another tuxedo,” Simon said, straightening his bow tie and checking his reflection in the van’s rearview mirror. “Let’s do this thing, people. Pretend we’re professionals. Are we set? Specs? Specs Two?”

“Cameras are on-line and reasonably steady, Templar,” Nate said from the back of the van, scanning the flickering monitor banks. “Party looks dull. Good thing I’ve got a camera in the ladies’ room, or I might fall asleep out here—” Sandra promptly smacked the back of his head. “—ow! Springheel, I was kidding!”

“Good thing, too,” Sandra said, automatically double-checking the clasp of her diamond bracelet. “I love you like a particularly retarded younger brother, Specs, but I draw the line at letting you watch me pee.”

“Specs Two?” Simon broke in, scowling at Sandra.

“Alarm systems hook-in is a go,” said Rich. “Our link-up back to headquarters is working fine. I’m testing the second team’s headsets now—Honda? Do you read me?”

“Loud and clear.” Mike’s voice boomed in from the speaker over Rich’s head. Rich frowned irritably and adjusted the volume.

“How are things looking where you are, Honda?” Simon asked the speaker.

“Looks pretty sweet, Templar. The door mechanism’s smooth, the rich fucks seem okay with only being allowed in ten at a time, no static so far. Wallpaper’s ugly as sin, though, and I’m considering mugging Texas for his flak vest and gas mask. These penguin suits are for chumps.”

“I hear you,” Simon said, tugging grumpily at the wing collar of his tuxedo shirt.

“Texas?” Rich said.

“Yo.” Johnny’s voice was less clear and crackled slightly, but was perfectly understandable. “We’re good in the display room. That sure is one shiny rock.”

“Headsets are a go, Templar,” Rich concluded. “Lemme check your link-up. Springheel?”

Sandra pulled a tiny cell phone out of her equally tiny purse and flipped it open. “Hello hello, can you hear me?”

“Got it,” Rich said, making minute adjustments to the dials in front of him. “Templar?”

“Right.” Simon pulled out his own phone and flipped it open. “Testing, testing, one, two, three, *hang on Sloopy, Sloopy hang on . . .*” Everybody in the van clapped their hands over their ears, and Rich ripped off his headphones. Mike’s caw of protest made the speakers whine with feedback. “Guess it works,” Simon concluded, just barely smiling, and slid the cell phone back into his pocket. Rich scowled at him and put the headphones back on. “Anything else, people?” Simon asked. No one said a word. “Ready, ‘Tiffany’?”

“Next time I get to pick my own alias, ‘Adam’,” Sandra said, grimacing. “Let me just get my heels on.”

“Right!” Simon clapped his hands together, suddenly and totally calm. “Springheel and I are going in. Let’s keep up the chatter, it’ll keep us alert. Remember that I can hear you, even if I can’t respond.”

“Big Brother is listening,” Nate intoned.

“So speak up the instant something looks fishy,” Simon finished, as if Nate had never spoken at all. “Yell for backup if you even think you need it. Let’s bag this slick boy and make the world safe once again for shiny rocks.”

“Art Theft’s going to hate us if we manage to do it,” Mike said over the speakers. “Personally, I’m jonesing for that.”

“Art Theft,” Johnny said, his snort of disdain crackling with static.

Simon popped the back doors of the van and slid out, offering a hand to Sandra, who took it delicately and stepped down beside him, shimmying her hips to put her dress back to rights. “How do I look?” she asked, touching her updo lightly. “Think I’ll pass?”

“You look just like a real girl,” Simon assured her as Nate pulled the van doors shut again behind them. “No slimy thieving lowlife in the world could possibly resist you.”

“Thanks so much, Adam,” Sandra said, sliding her hand into the crook of his arm. “You sure know how to sweet-talk an ex-girlfriend.”

“Aww, Tiff, you know that it was your sarcastic tendencies that broke us up in the first place.” Simon touched his ear, making sure that the tiny earpiece was still hidden. “Let’s go party with the rich people and the thieves.”

Sandra laughed. “Assuming there’s a difference between the two.”

\* \* \*

The party was already in full swing by the time they arrived. Simon paused in the doorway, Sandra clinging demurely to his arm, and scanned the room. Sam and Brenda Morning's enormous Virginia mansion was packed to the roof with glittering socialites and Washington DC's politics-heavy version of 'reasonably important people'; this early in the evening they were mostly standing about in clumps talking or clustering about the buffet tables, although a few hardy souls were already braving the mostly-empty dance floor, circling the completely unnecessary fountain in the very center of the room. In the corner of the room a string quartet played steadfastly on, although from Simon's vantage point they could barely be heard at all.

"And there you are," Nate said in Simon's ear. "We've got you on camera ten. Adjust your bowtie if you can hear me." Simon touched his fingers to his tie. "Good. Great. Springheel, look to your left." Sandra glanced left and smiled. "Great. Looks like you're both still in touch."

"Bring me back some of those little shrimp things," Rich added.

"There are shrimp things?" Mike said, plaintively. "I'm down here staring at wallpaper and missing *shrimp things*?"

"Sure are," Rich said as Simon and Sandra headed into the room. "Looks like there are cheese things, too. Oh, and curly vegetable things. At least, I think those are vegetables."

"Oh, and your favorite, Honda: booze things!" Nate said.

"Booze things?!" Mike's voice went from 'plaintive' to 'incredulous'. "Man, I wanna switch jobs with someone. Hey, Springheel, you come down here and guard the door and I'll be Templar's date for the evening."

"Gack . . . unwanted . . . mental image . . . killing brain cells . . ." Nate croaked.

Rich snorted. "You'd look ridiculous in that gold dress, Honda." Nate moaned in Simon's ear in what sounded like real pain.

"Shut up, Specs Two," Mike said affably. "You shrimp thing, you."

"I hate them sometimes," Sandra breathed through a smile suddenly gone brittle.

Simon patted her hand. "Patience, dearest. You can kill them all after we're done."

"Promise?"

"Check in, Texas," Nate said.

"Still here. Rock's still shiny."

"Check in, Honda."

"Three more groups of gawkers in and out, no problems. The wallpaper hasn't gotten any prettier, either. Least someone brought me a chair." Mike whistled. "Man, I am just in the lap of luxury. All's I need is a sandwich and a TV."

"And this is Specs, on line."

“Specs Two, on line.”

“We’ve still got you on camera eleven, Templar and Springheel . . .” Nate’s voice suddenly went soft and silky. “. . . and there’s our priiime suspect, on ten.”

Simon did not look up through an effort of will, concentrating very hard on the shrimp he was nibbling on. Beside him he could feel Sandra tense. “By the fountain in the center of the room, Templar,” Nate went on, immediately all business. Everybody else on the link-up was silent. “Shadow’s talking to your charming hostess right now. If you and Springheel can get over there quick you can probably finagle an introduction and confirm the ID.”

Simon dropped his half-eaten shrimp into a nearby potted plant and swung out across the dancefloor, Sandra’s hand tucked into the crook of his arm again. The hostess, a heavy-set middle-aged woman in a froth of black ruffles, saw them coming and flashed them a nervous smile. “She’s going to give us away,” Sandra gritted out through her teeth. Simon squeezed Sandra’s hand warningly, his eyes locked on the man talking to the hostess. Jeremy Archer. Almost certainly. If he’d just turn around—

“Mrs. Morning!” Sandra trilled as soon as they got within range, her voice frothing with vapidty. The sudden change in his ‘date’ made Simon blink. It also made both the hostess and her companion turn to look at them, and Simon kept the jolt of recognition off his face only through an effort of will. *Well!* he thought. *Fancy meeting you here, Jeremy Archer.*

Sandra was still babbling even as she let go of Simon’s arm and swayed forward to catch both of Brenda Morning’s hands in her own. “Adam and I just had to come over and say thank you so much for inviting us! We’ve been down to see the Morning Star already and it’s just *beautiful*. I may have to go see it again later!”

Brenda Morning’s expression wobbled for half a moment before years of hostessing took over and she went on autopilot. “Oh, no, thank *you* for coming!” Brenda gushed, squeezing Sandra’s hands. Simon relaxed imperceptibly. “I’m so glad you like it—isn’t it breathtaking? When he brought it home I just knew I’d have to throw a party and show it off!”

“It’s astonishing,” Sandra said. “It makes mine look like gravel, honestly, I should have known better than to wear diamonds to *this* party!”

Mrs. Morning laughed, dropping Sandra’s hands. “Oh, nonsense, darling, your bracelet is perfectly lovely. But I mustn’t be so rude! Mr. Crown, please, I’d like you to meet Tiffany Wellcome and . . . oh, dear, I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name . . .”

“Moore,” Simon said, offering his hand to ‘Mr. Crown’. “Adam Moore. Pleasure to meet you. And you are . . . ?”

“Ah,” ‘Mr. Crown’ said, lazily taking Simon’s hand. “James Crown, at your service, Mr. Moore. A pleasure to meet you—” He paused, squeezing



Simon's hand once in lieu of actually shaking it, and then let go, turning to Sandra. "—both."

Sandra bubbled out a laugh and held out her hand to 'James', who offered her an arch little smile and bowed over it. "Oh, goodness," Sandra said. "How Continental! Are you English, Mr. Crown? You sound it."

"I do indeed have that dishonor," 'James' said, straightening back up. His thumb played over Sandra's knuckles. "It's quite a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Wellcome. I don't suppose you'll be needing your hand back . . . ?"

Sandra barely hesitated. Her eyes flashed at Simon over 'James's' shoulder and then she almost purred, "I'll make you a deal, Mr. Crown. You may keep my hand *if* you ask me to dance right away. Adam doesn't like to dance, the party pooper, and I'm just dying to . . ."

"Of course! Where are my manners? Ms. Wellcome, may I have the honor of this dance?" 'James' turned to Mrs. Morning. "If you'll excuse us, of course."

"Of course, of course," Brenda Morning said with heavy joviality, and shooed them both towards the dance floor. "Please, go, dance, enjoy the party!"

'James's' eyes met Simon's. "If you don't mind . . . ?" he asked, his voice trailing off inquisitively.

"I don't mind," Simon said, putting on his mildest smile. Surreptitiously he studied 'James's' face, memorizing it as best he could. "Anything that'll keep me from having to do it."

"Mm." 'James's' smile was a slight thing now, one that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. "Such a pity. Ah, well. Ms. Wellcome?"

"Call me Tiffany, please," Sandra said. She came within a hair's breadth of batting her eyes at him, and Simon nearly choked.

"Tiffany," 'James' said agreeably, leading Sandra out onto the dance floor. "And you must call me James."

Simon watched them go, then excused himself to Mrs. Morning and left, looking for a quiet corner.

"It's definitely Shadow," Simon said into his cell phone, watching 'James' and Sandra. Sandra's head was very nearly laying on 'James's' shoulder, and 'James's' hand rested on the small of Sandra's back like it belonged there. Simon felt a sudden stab of—not quite jealousy, no. More "get your hands off my teammate" than "get your hands off that girl". "Springheel, could you possibly dance any closer to him? Maybe you can find out if he's circumcised. I might need to know."

Three or four disembodied voices choked back laughter. Out on the dance floor, Sandra's head twitched up slightly, and the hand on 'James's' shoulder jerked once. 'James' smiled and said something, and Sandra forced a bright smile of her own and shook her head.

“We’ll keep an eye on him for as long as we can,” Simon went on, now smiling just the slightest bit. “Springheel’s probably got the radio tracer on him now. Shift your left hand if you have, Spring.” Sandra’s left hand shifted inwards, nearly grazing the side of ‘James’s’ throat. Simon’s eyebrow twitched.

“We have a problem, Templar,” Rich said in his ear. “Tracer stopped working about two minutes ago. I’m working to bring it back online now.”

Simon’s little smile vanished. “Shit!” he said through gritted teeth. “Okay, do what you can. We can track him visually if we have to, but I’d feel a lot better if we had the tracer going, too.”

“Working on it, Templar.”

“Good man, Specs Two. Okay, team, here’s your visual, courtesy of yours truly: Jeremy Archer, aka ‘James Crown’, aka ‘Shadow’ thanks to those worthless uncreative idiots in Art Theft. 5’10 or so, tan skin, brown eyes, yadda yadda blah blah whatever, tuxedo, red bowtie, red cummerbund, black studs. Hair’s a lighter brown than it was in the photos, slicked straight back except for those stupid little bits that hang down at his temples, curls a little in the back. He’s got a red rosebud in his lapel with those little white flowers around it, whatever they’re called.”

“Baby’s breath,” Johnny put in.

“What the fuck ever,” Simon said.

“Just saying,” Johnny said.

“Gold watch, right wrist,” Simon went on. “One of those expensive thin jobbies. Springheel, anything I’ve missed, share it with the goon squad after you’re done humping the lucky bastard out there.” Sandra’s hand twitched again, flipping Simon off for a fraction of a second.

“Looks pretty smooth,” Nate said. “Man looks like he knows how to dance.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, watching them. “Man does.”

“There’s definitely something under his tuxedo,” Sandra was saying five minutes later from the relative safety of the restroom. An immediate whoop of laughter on the frequency made her snap, “Some kind of *undershirt*, Honda. I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s too thick to just be a t-shirt.”

“Aw, damn,” Mike said, still laughing. “Way to ruin a whole string of ‘concealed weapons’ jokes, Springheel.”

“So *was* he circumcised?” Rich asked.

Nate added, “Inquiring minds want to know!”

“I hate you all,” Sandra said. “He was a *perfect gentleman*. And a good dancer, too. You boys just wish you could be half the smooth operator this guy is.”

“Spring~ heel and Sha~ dow, sitting in a treeee~,” Nate chanted. Someone—Simon guessed Johnny—snorted out a laugh.

Simon, in the crush at the bar, swirled his ginger ale around in its champagne flute, making it bubble. He was only half-listening to the chatter on his earpiece, scanning the crowd around him and trying to locate 'James Crown' again. There were hundreds of men here, all in tuxedos, half of them with brown hair; tracking the man visually was turning out to be much more of a challenge than he'd made it out to be, and he prayed that Rich would get the tracer working soon.

Across the room the string quartet finished whatever it was they were playing and started playing something else; it might have been the exact same song, as far as he knew. Simon repressed a sigh and took another sip of his drink as the chatter in his ear died down. He was just about to abandon his drink to its fate and take another swing past the buffet tables when Nate made a small surprised noise in his ear. "Don't look now, Templar," Nate said, "but he's heading your way at nine o'clock. I've got him on camera eleven."

Startled, Simon grew still, then looked up and away, toward the restroom. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Moore," 'James' said at his elbow, and Simon looked around in not-entirely-feigned surprise.

"Ah! 'scuse me, Mr. Crown." Simon edged aside, giving 'James' access to the bar. 'James' favored him with a thin little smile and picked up one of the flutes of champagne, then leaned against the bar practically at Simon's elbow instead of leaving. Simon's nerves immediately all prickled. For an awkward moment or two he waited for 'James' to excuse himself and vanish back into the throng, but 'James' didn't seem to be in any hurry to go. "Enjoying the party?" Simon finally asked, once 'James's' amused silence grew too oppressive.

"Mm. Well. It isn't bad as these things go, I suppose, but It was actually rather tedious before your lovely date showed up." 'James' glanced at him briefly over the rim of his champagne flute, his little smile inviting Simon to share in the private joke.

Wary, Simon tried to edge away and give 'James' a bit more room. Almost immediately he backed into someone, who muttered "Excuse me!" but didn't move away; the crush of partygoers at the bar was two and three people deep in places and only getting worse. Even as Simon recovered from the minor collision another guest wormed up to the bar behind 'James', who murmured an apology and slid closer to Simon in order to let the man pass. Around them the chaos of the party swirled and bellowed, but Simon's attention was riveted on 'James', now looking very properly apologetic about nearly being pressed into Simon's chest. *I could grab you right now and put you under arrest, easy as anything*, Simon thought, and his fingers twitched in anticipation at the idea. Instead he just said, "Tiffany has a way of making everything more exciting, that's for sure."

Sandra came out of the restroom just then, tucking her tiny cell phone into her purse. Spotting Simon still standing with 'James', she stopped, and then caught the hand of a passing guest and led the startled man out onto the dance floor. "You just can't get her off the dance floor," Simon smoothly added, nodding in

Sandra's direction.

'James' turned to look, leaning back against the bar. His arm came to rest touched lightly against Simon's, so close that Simon could feel the band of 'James's watch warm against his wrist. "She's quite a wonderful dancer," he said idly, bringing up his champagne flute again. Simon, currently painfully aware of everything that 'James' did, could have sworn that none of the champagne actually made it past 'James's lips.

"And I'm not," Simon said, on full alert now. "She always did love to dance. One of the reasons we broke up, in fact."

"Really? That's a shame. The two of you make such a lovely couple."

Simon forced himself to laugh it off. On his other side a bit of room opened up, and he was able to subtly edge away just enough to break off that bit of contact. "Oh, gosh, thanks so much," he said, relaxing somewhat. "Now all you have to do is start going on about what beautiful children we'd have had and you'd sound just like my mother."

"Ouch." 'James' winced politely. "I'm terribly sorry. I assure you that wasn't my intention at all, Mr. Moore."

"Eh, don't worry about it." Simon waved the apology away. "You know how these things go. It was nice while it lasted, but Tiff and I are a lot better off just being friends."

"Oh. Yes. 'Friends'." 'James' made the little quote-marks with his fingers, smiling slightly. "So terribly American, that concept. In England, we're generally able to *admit* when we loathe each other."

"Oh, yeah. I hear England is famous for letting it all hang out and getting in touch with its feelings."

"No, no, you misunderstand me, Adam." 'James' brushed two fingers against his little smile, his fingertips tracing along the sardonic bow of his upper lip. Simon's eyes flickered helplessly to follow the little movement before he could stop them. "We English put on our famous stiff upper lip, like so, and very *politely* allow that we loathe our horrendous exes."

Simon took uncertain refuge in his drink after one last glance. "So anything goes as long as you're polite about it, huh? Well, I can see how that would work out great."

"Well." 'James's eyes sparkled, but he let his fingers drop again. "It would have excused you from spending an evening at this tedious party with a woman you're no longer seeing, now, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, it's not that bad. I only really came to see the diamond anyway." Simon paused, watching Sandra dance with what he thought was the correct amount of nostalgia. "Have you been to see it? It's a hell of a thing."

"I went earlier this evening, yes. It's not bad. If you're partial to large clear rocks."

“Very expensive large clear rocks. Our host would be really upset if you forgot that part. And what business are you in, that you can afford to be so snobby?”

“Mm? Ah. I’m with the British Museum, actually.” The wry twist in ‘James’s little smile came and went so quickly that Simon almost missed it. “Antiquities.”

*I’ll just bet you are*, Simon thought. Out loud, he said, “Ohh, so you’re a shiny rock *expert*. Well, ’scuse me all to hell for doubting your credentials, sir. You actually *do* know what you’re talking about.”

“Well,” ‘James’ said wryly, touching his glass to his lips again and again failing to actually take a sip of champagne. His voice dropped to a confidential murmur, almost lost under the roar of conversation around them; Simon was forced to lean in to hear him. “There had to be at least *one* person at this benighted party who does,” ‘James’ purred, casting a jaundiced eye over the room.

Simon was startled into an actual, genuine laugh. “Boy, you really are English, aren’t you?” he said, the first thing that came to mind.

“Born and bred, as they say.” ‘James’ put his still-full glass back down and took a single swift step backwards, bowing slightly. “And now, if you’ll be so kind as to excuse me, Adam, the tedium awaits . . .”

And before Simon could say anything else, ‘James’ was gone, sliding through the crowd like water. Simon watched him until he vanished into the crush.

“My feet hurt,” Sandra was muttering into her cell three hours later, once again safely ensconced in the powder room. “I’ve been on my feet all night in brand-new heels. If Shadow doesn’t make his move soon, I vote we go pre-emptive and have Templar challenge him to a duel over my honor.”

Simon’s eyebrow twitched, just a little. Someone yawned in his ear, proving to be Mike a moment later when the words “Jesus, this is a bust.” slid out of the huge yawn. “He’s not coming,” Mike added irritably. *And* I didn’t get any shrimp things.”

“This tracer is a piece of shit,” Rich grouched. “I can’t get it to respond at all. I know the fucking thing was working when I gave it to Springheel.”

“Guys,” Nate said, sounding worried. “Come on, chill, okay? There’s still another hour or so before the party’s scheduled to end, let’s hold it together . . .”

“This is one hell of a shiny rock,” Johnny added. “I could look at it all night.”

“You doing okay, Templar?” Nate said. “. . . wait, you’re not on the link-up. Never mind.”

Simon stifled a sigh, then stood up and drifted off down one of the hallways. “I’m good,” he said into his phone as soon as he managed to get away. “Wish that fucking tracer would decide to start working. It’s damned hard to keep an eye on Shadow in this press.”

“You and me both,” Rich said.

“Okay. Run it down for me, people. Honda, has he come down to look at the rock?”

“Not since you confirmed his ID, boss. I think he came by earlier, but he didn’t do anything suspicious.”

“Texas?”

“Yeah, he was here really early on. Acted like all the others, far as I could tell.”

“Springheel?”

“He complimented me on my dress. *And* he kissed my hand. Pity he’s slime. I think I’m charmed.”

Someone—Simon was pretty sure it was Mike—made a gagging sound. Simon snorted and went on. “Specs?”

“Nothing. Not a damned thing. Lost him in the crowd a minute ago. From out here all you guys in penguin suits look alike. One little camera flicker and I can’t even find you, let alone Shadow.”

“Specs Two?”

“Tracer’s a bust, Templar. Alarm systems are quiet. Everything but the tracer’s working normally.”

“Christ.” Simon exhaled, glancing around. “I hate lazy thieves. Wish he’d hurry the hell up.”

“Want me to go ask him to get on with it?” Sandra asked.

“Nah. Maybe we scared him off, that would be great,” Simon said, tugging at his tie. “Man, what I wouldn’t give to peel off this monkey suit and order in a fucking pizza. I can’t stand miniature food.”

“Aw, you’re just saying that to torment Honda,” Sandra said.

Mike was silent.

“... Honda?” Sandra asked.

“Honda,” Simon snapped. “Speak up.”

Mike was silent.

“Shit. Shit! *Camera flicker*—it’s going down, people, it’s going down! Texas, lock down the gallery, I’m on my way down now!” Phone still pressed to his ear, Simon bolted for the elevator. “Specs Two, standby for call for medical assistance! Springheel, take your goddamn shoes off, and if you see Shadow, throw down, we’re through playing!”

Johnny was also silent. Simon swore furiously, shoving past a scandalized knot of women in black dresses. “Honda, Texas, god fucking dammit, if you’re there you speak the fuck up, do you hear me?” Nate and Rich were frantic background noise in his ear. Simon muscled aside a couple of loitering partygoers and slammed the heel of his hand into the elevator call button.

“That won’t do you any good,” one of the women said snidely. “We’ve been waiting for almost five minutes. It’s broken or something.”

“*Fuck*,” Simon snapped at her. She visibly recoiled from him but by that point he was already gone, running for the emergency stairs. “Elevator’s been disabled! Specs Two, why didn’t we know this?”

“Don’t know, Templar,” Rich said, his voice eerily calm. Simon’s ears could pick out a distant clatter in the background; Rich’s fingers were flying over the keys. “The alarm systems are all reporting normal operations. He’s rigged everything somehow.”

“Templar, I’m on my way, don’t you fucking dare go down there alone,” Sandra said.

Simon threw open the door to the stairs and went racing down, three and four steps at a time, skidding on the concrete landing. “Negative, Springheel, you *keep the perimeter*, that’s an order. I’m going in armed and I will shoot this bastard if he does not come along meekly. Specs, what do the cameras say?”

“Honda and Texas look normal on the cameras, boss. I think he got to those too. That or he’s cut our link-up, and I don’t think that’s it.”

“No, they’d have realized something was wrong when we all went quiet. I’m going in. I want silence on this channel unless you have vitally important news.” No one said a word in his ear as Simon kicked open the door to the basement hallway, his gun out.

Everything was silent. Too silent. Simon whipped his gun down the corridor, which was empty save for a chair and beside it, Mike, stretched unconscious on the floor with his right arm outflung towards the handprint scanner. Simon swore and darted for him, pressing his fingers to the pulse in Mike’s neck. It was strong, if a little erratic. “Honda is down but alive, repeat, down but alive,” he almost yelled into his phone. “Get those medical teams here on the double, Specs Two.”

“On it,” Rich said. Simon dropped the link-up phone on the ground. Leaving Mike where he was, Simon slammed his own hand into the handprint reader. The heavy vault door hissed open and Simon burst into the display gallery, letting the barrel of his gun lead the way.

Six bodies lay in tangles on the floor, in full SWAT riot gear, including their gas masks. Faint wisps of smoke still lingered in the corners of the room and eddied over the ceiling, and Simon hissed his next breath through his teeth. In the center of the room stood the glass display case, the alarm grid still in place around it; as Simon exploded into the room the slender figure suspended upside-down in mid-air over the case looked up—down—and said “Oh, *damn*.”

“You call *this* tedious?” Simon snapped, his gun trained on ‘James Crown’. ‘James’ had lost the tuxedo somewhere, traded it for a skin-tight black catsuit and a pair of extremely formidable-looking technological goggles, all the better to be hanging from ceilings in. Despite the heavy mirrored rectangle of the goggles obscuring his eyes, it was undoubtedly him. The rope snaked about his right leg five or six times and stretched up to the ceiling, attached to some sort of huge suction cup. One gloved hand held the mate to that suction cup over

‘James’s head, with a burnt-out circle of glass still attached to it; the other hand was curled gently around a sparkling white diamond the approximate size and shape of a walnut, that had until just a moment ago been resting on the velvet bed in the now-empty display case. The Morning Star. “That was a rhetorical question, don’t bother answering,” Simon went on, suddenly flush with controlled excitement. “Freeze. FBI.”

“Yes, well, I thought it might break up the monotony—FBI!” One eyebrow rose from under the goggles. “And here I’d assumed you and your lovely date were private security. You’re not with Art Theft.”

“Art Theft?” Simon spat, edging closer, gun still trained on ‘James’s face. “You really don’t know what kind of shit you’ve stepped in here, do you, *Jeremy Archer*? Well, I’ll tell you what, we’re a charitable bunch at the Bureau, you put that rock down now and submit to arrest like a good Little Lord Fauntleroy and you’ll only be looking at a year, maybe two, in a federal detention center. Keep your hands up. Down. Where I can see them.”

“Mm.” ‘James’—Jeremy—didn’t move. The only thing that moved was the diamond, sparkling as it rolled lazily back and forth in his gloved fingers, and Simon had to force himself not to glance at the lure. “Might I suggest a counteroffer?”

“I’m thinking no, actually. I don’t know what kind of deal you made with Rupp, but it’s not worth what that scumbag has in mind, and it’s definitely not worth what *we* can do to you. Now drop the Star, Archer.”

Jeremy actually smiled. “Oh, do tell me what you can do to me, Adam. I’m all aquiver.”

“We can make it so that just the thought of ironic banter will have you curling up and crying like a baby, for one thing. And it’s Simon, actually, as long as we’re sharing.”

“But then what will I do for fun, Simon? Honestly.”

“Probably you’ll be fending off all the large sweaty men who want you to call them ‘daddy’. Put it down! Now!”

“Oh, is that all?” The diamond rolled up slowly until Jeremy could palm it. Simon watched it travel out of the corner of his eye, braced for anything. “I’ve done that before. It’s not as bad as you might think, particularly the ‘sweaty’ bits—catch.”

Jeremy brought both his hands up in a slow, lazy underhanded throw. The Morning Star lofted gently through the air towards Simon, who caught it left-handed, his right hand keeping the gun trained on Jeremy’s face. “Good boy—” Simon started to say, and then Sandra was shaking him and saying his name over and over, and he was staring uncomprehendingly at the ceiling, with neither gun nor Morning Star in his hands.

“What happened?” he said groggily, struggling up onto his elbows. “What—Archer! The diamond! Where?”



“Gone, Templar,” Sandra said, helping him sit up. “By the time I got down here you were out cold and he was gone. What happened?”

“Don’t remember—fuck, my *head*.” Simon grabbed at his temples as his headache crashed in around him. “Let me think, I had my gun on him, he threw me the diamond . . . I said ‘good boy’ . . . some kind of white smoke shot from his right cuff after he got his hands up—that bastard *gassed* me!”

“Probably the same stuff he used on Honda,” Sandra said, squeezing Simon’s shoulder. “Honda’s up, too. Groggy, but up. Texas and his team are still out but they’re breathing just fine.”

“That’s something,” Simon said, rubbing his temples. “How long has it been?”

“About twenty minutes since you told Specs Two to call the meds and dropped your phone. I got here five minutes ago.” Sandra hesitated, then said, “We lost him, Templar. Shadow’s gone and so is the diamond.”

“*Fuck*. Where’s my phone?”

“I’ll go get it.” Sandra stood up and left the room, silent on her stocking feet. Simon sighed heavily and let his hand drop. It fell against something cool and velvety on the carpet next to him. He glanced down. The rose from Jeremy’s buttonhole lay there, still surrounded by its froth of little white flowers—*baby’s breath*, he remembered Johnny telling him—just an inch from where his fingers would have been laying when he was out. Simon picked up the flower and studied it, frowning a bit. “Here, Templar,” Sandra said, crossing the room back to him, and quickly, before she could see it, Simon slid the rose into the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket and took the phone from her.

“People. We there?”

“Specs here.”

“Specs Two here.”

“Honda here. Ow, motherfucker, ow.”

“Springheel’s with me,” Simon said. “I hear Texas is still out.”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “Meds have him and Honda.”

“They can let me go any time,” Mike said.

“Or you can shut up and take it like a man, Honda,” Simon said. “Listen up, people. Here’s what’s going to happen now. Honda, Texas and I are going to get checked over by the meds. No telling what that stuff he used on us was. The rest of you get changed if you need it and head for the saferoom. No one sleeps until we debrief. I’m going to need answers, people. If not tonight, then very, very soon.”

“Got it, Templar,” Rich said. “I’ve got some answers. You’re going to hate ‘em.”

“I fucking hate answers I hate, Specs Two.”

\* \* \*

“Answers,” Simon said, slamming into the saferoom an hour later, Mike and Johnny in tow. He’d changed out of his tux and he felt a world better for it. “Someone make coffee?”

“Duh. Coffee’s up,” Nate said, flapping a hand at the battered old coffeemaker wearing its nametag that said HELLO! MY NAME IS: MRS. SIMON DRAKE (♥). “Johnny? You okay?”

“Head hurts,” Johnny said, dropping into his chair and going all loose-jointed. “Mouth tastes like cowshit.”

“And you’d know,” Mike said, taking his own seat. Johnny flipped him off.

“Children,” Simon said, taking his place at the head of the table with a mug of coffee clutched firmly in both hands. “First things first: med thinks we’re okay. Whatever that stuff was, it was just some kind of knockout gas. Johnny got one hell of a larger dose than the rest of us, but as you can see he’s back to his usual loveable and talkative self.”

All around the table, people relaxed slightly. Sandra, looking much more comfortable in jeans and sweater with her hair down, picked absently at the remains of her manicure. “So what happened?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Simon slapped one hand on the table. “We’re going to take it in order. Nate. What happened with the cameras?”

Nate took off his glasses and cleaned them on his sweater, fingers rubbing nervous circles on the lenses. It was Rich who spoke up. “I’ll field that one, Simon. Same thing that happened to the alarm systems, and the elevator. You want the bad news first, or the bad news? I’ve also got some bad news.”

“Hm.” Simon chugged down half his coffee and made a horrible face. “What the hell, let’s have the bad news.”

“He sabotaged every single camera we put in yesterday, plus our links into the alarm system in the house, the elevator’s alert system, and the alarm system around the display case.”

“You’re kidding me. He did all that in twenty-four hours? Found all our cameras? All the wiring?”

“He did. Now it’s time for the bad news: you wanna know how he did it?”

“Hit me.”

Rich shoved his glasses back up his nose with one finger. “He didn’t even have to go into the house. He diddle the goddamned *van*.”

Silence reigned for a long moment. Then Mike slapped a hand to his face and groaned aloud. Simon rubbed his temples. “Explain that, Rich.”

“As nearly as I can figure, he did it yesterday when we were all inside setting up. Nobody was out keeping an eye on the van. I figure he broke in, spliced into the cables to the recording devices, set up the cameras to rebroadcast old loops when he told them to, and made our link into the alarm system talk happily to itself in a mirror instead of actually watching the house. And that’s just what I’ve

found so far. God knows what else he did in there. I have the van isolated in motor pool. Nate and I'll take it apart tomorrow."

"He fucking played us!" Mike burst out.

Simon ignored him. "So the camera flicker—"

"He was telling the equipment in the van to stop broadcasting live and start replaying old footage. No wonder we could still see Mike and Johnny's team moving around normally when they were already out."

"Christ!"

"Oh, it gets way better." Rich's lips drew away from his teeth. It was almost a grin if Simon didn't look at his eyes. "He left us a present. After he knocked you out and split, he did something to make the recorders electrocute themselves. We lost all the recorded footage and a couple hundred thousand dollars' worth of electronic equipment is so much slag."

Simon shut his eyes and chugged off the rest of his coffee. Nate got up, fetched the pot, and refilled his mug without a word. "Okay," Simon finally said, his voice forcibly calm. "Next time we do this? Somebody babysits the van. You said there was some bad news, too, Rich?"

"Yeah. Tracer? Was working fine. He had some kind of device jamming ordinary radio transmissions, I think he had it on him. It's a good thing our link-up was using cellular tech or he'd have been jamming us, too."

"Who the hell does this guy think he is, James fucking Bond?" Simon exploded. "How'd you find out?"

"Tracer winked back in half an hour ago. I sent a field agent out to track it, and he came up with an abandoned tuxedo stuffed in a Goodwill box. Tracer still attached and beeping happily."

"Well, hell. At least we have the clothes to do evil lab shit to." Simon chewed on his thumbnail for a moment, then dismissed it. "Next. Do we know what he did to the elevator?"

"Jammed a screwdriver into the card slot. Crude, but highly effective," Nate said. He sighed and put his glasses back on, which was Rich's cue to take off his own and scrub them so hard the lenses creaked in their frames.

"Jesus, that's almost a relief. I was afraid he'd rewired it to be some kind of, of laser-powered killer toaster, I don't know. Okay. Next. Mike?"

"The last group had left about five minutes before he hit," Mike said, getting up to grab his own coffee. "I swear to God, Simon, I didn't even see him. I think he hit me from above or something."

"Yeah," Simon said slowly, staring into his mug. "He had some kind of suction cup things."

"Yeah," Mike echoed. "Anyway, one moment I'm looking down the hall, there's this weird medicine-y smell like hospitals, and I wake up half an hour later with Sandra all up in my face, not that I'm complaining." Slings himself

back into his chair, Mike took a deep pull on his coffee and eyed Sandra through the rising steam. “Girl is *fine* in that little gold number.”

Simon snorted. “We’re aware, Mike.”

“Pity I had to return it,” Sandra said.

“Next,” said Simon. “Johnny?”

“Door opens five minutes too early for the next tour group. I look up and there’s this guy in a black leotard thing and goggles, looks like some action-movie villain, he’s got Mike’s hand slapped up to the reader. Minute he does that he tosses this smoking can into the room and slaps his arm across his face—” Johnny demonstrated, holding his forearm up “—and so we all go for our masks, get ‘em up fast. Don’t remember anything after that.”

“Holy shit,” Mike said, staring at Johnny. “That shit of his gets absorbed through the skin or something?”

“Actually,” Nate broke in, “no, it’s . . .” He tapered off, aware that everyone was staring at him.

“Go on,” Simon prompted, fighting for calm.

“I took a look at Johnny’s mask while Rich was driving the van back.” Nate hauled out a black gasmask and put it on the table, wrenching the air canister loose and holding it up. “See this puncture, here?” He tapped the bottom of the canister, where something silvery glinted on the black surface. “It was covered with some kind of wax.”

“Wait, he . . .”

“He boobytrapped the gasmasks, too,” Rich broke in, seething. “Probably at the same time he did everything else. They were in the *van*, Simon, along with everything else, and he shot some of that junk into every single one.”

Simon’s knuckles were white on his coffee mug. “So he threw in some kind of worthless special-effects smoke bomb—”

“—and Johnny and his team all went for their masks and gassed themselves for him, yeah,” Rich finished, overriding Simon. Johnny made a faint disbelieving noise and slumped over, burying his face in his arms.

“Jesus,” Simon said. “*Jesus*. I want this motherfucker. Preferably being some tattooed scumbag’s bitch in McCreary, but I’ll settle for dead, you know, if I have to.”

“Can we make him *our* bitch instead?” Nate said, shoving his floppy bangs out of his eyes. “I want him in prison, sure, but . . . Templar, you have got to see the stuff he did to the van. He’s good.”

“‘Good’,” Rich spat. “He’s a fucking *supervillain*. I want him dead.”

“Professional jealousy?” Sandra asked, acidly. Rich glared at her. Nate choked on a particularly ill-timed laugh.

“*Children*,” Simon said, slamming his mug to the table. Coffee slopped over the sides and Simon jerked his hand back, sucking on his burned knuckles. “My turn now. So I get in there and he’s gone in over the alarm net. He is, no lie,

hanging from the ceiling by a rope. I figure I've got him dead to rights, he's hanging upside down all trapped in a harness, there's nowhere he can go, I've got my gun on him and he's got both hands full." Simon picked up the now-less-full mug and threw off half the contents, burning his tongue too. "So I tell him to put the diamond down and he tosses it to me all easy, but that brings up his hands to point at my face, and he shoots me with the same gas he got Mike with. He's got some kind of tube mechanism strapped here—" Simon tapped the inside of his right wrist "—under his watchband, I think, and it shoots the stuff in a thin stream. I went out like a light, and when I came to, he was gone with the diamond."

"That's where I come in," Sandra said. Chips and flakes of gold nail polish glinted on the table around her hands. "I was running the perimeter as best I could, but it was just me in Versace versus a bunch of panicking civilians. I didn't see him leave the grounds. No surprise there. So when the meds showed up I led them to Mike and Johnny, and that's where I found Simon."

They all fell silent. Mike fiddled with his coffee mug. Johnny grunted into the circle of his arms. Rich put his glasses back on and blinked several times; just like clockwork Nate pulled his off five seconds later and started to clean them again.

"Okay," Simon said softly. "Okay. I think that gives me enough to work with for now. Nate, run that air canister down to the lab before you head home. Rich, you and Nate strip that van down to spare parts tomorrow, give me something written I can pacify Upstairs with. Sandra, work with profiling, get me a good sketch and an outline of his tics and speech patterns. Mike, you take Johnny home with you tonight and keep an eye on him, just in case. Johnny, you feel even the least bit weird, go yelping to med. The both of you sleep in late tomorrow, then come in prepared to stay overnight. I don't have to tell you kids this is a fiasco." He paused. No one said anything. "Right. You all go home. Now. Get some sleep. I'm going to file the preliminary report and then I am going to stare at the far wall and hate this smart, smart bastard. Got me?"

"Got you, Templar," Mike said, shoving back his chair and standing up. "Think we're going to get thrown off the case?"

"Don't know. It all depends. We'll be pulled back to work on the Rupp angle, probably." Simon drained his coffee mug dry and slumped in his chair. "All of you piss off. See you tomorrow."

In ones and twos they left, quiet and dead tired. Finally it was just Simon, sprawled out in his chair, legs kicked out in front of him. Once it was quiet, once he was sure they were all gone, Simon reached into the pocket of his bomber jacket and pulled out a small red rose corsage, now a bit the worse for wear. The rosebud was beginning to open, fooled by the warmth of his body.

"Jeremy Archer," he breathed, spinning the rose in his fingers. Baby's breath flicked off the corsage, falling to dot the front of his jeans. "Jeremy Archer,

you unbelievable idiot, if you only knew what kind of shit you just bought yourself . . .”

Closing his eyes Simon held the rose to his face and breathed in that sweet scent, and the faint smirk he’d seen on Jeremy Archer’s face rose like a specter in his mind.

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## ◆ Compromise

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[tuesday]

It was almost eleven in the morning by the time Simon slammed open the door to the saferoom. He barely had time to throw up his hand before a hurtling paperweight smacked into it, accompanied by a yelp of “*Shit!* Sorry, Templar!” from Mike. Mike promptly punched Johnny’s shoulder. “Asshole, you were supposed to catch that!”

Johnny shrugged. “Ducking’s easier.”

Simon hefted the ersatz missile in his hand for a moment, considering it, then whipped halfway around and rifled the paperweight as hard as he could against the wall. It did not so much shatter as it did explode, shards of glass ringing as they struck the floor. Everybody in the room stopped dead.

“Well! I feel better now,” Simon said brightly, dusting off his hands.

“Templar?” Nate eventually squeaked.

Before Simon could so much as open his mouth to explain, someone on Team Hall (their unfortunate next-door neighbors) promptly pounded on the wall, interrupting the impending announcement. “Hey! Templar’s Asshole Squad! Keep it the fuck down, *some* of us are trying to work over here!”

“Sorry!” Simon bellowed, and whoever it was shut up. Simon directed an exasperated glare in the direction of Team Hall and then let the door to the saferoom slam closed under its own weight to punctuate his general displeasure. “Anyway, as I was saying, I,” Simon said, crushing a bit of glass with the toe of his sneaker, “have been Upstairs.” He was careful to pronounce the capital ‘U’. Everybody else in the room cringed. “Upstairs is not happy,” Simon went on. “To put it delicately. Apparently the Mornings decided that the theft could not possibly be their fault, despite the fact that they completely ignored us when we begged them to keep the Morning Star, oh, say, *in the vault where it belongs*, and have been tossing lawyers at us to see if any of them stick.”

“Lawyers,” Johnny said. “Damned sticky.”

“And just to add insult to injury, Art Theft is positively pissing itself with glee over its unprecedented opportunity to point at us and laugh and say ‘I told you so’. *Art Theft*. We,” Simon said, eyeing each of his team members in turn, “are

being *laughed at* by *Art Theft*.” Nobody said anything, although Johnny made a face like he’d just sucked on a lemon. “So,” Simon went on, “today we are the building’s buttboys—”

“Nothing new for Men’s Room Johnny,” Mike put in, and Johnny neatly kicked Mike’s feet right out from under him. Mike went crashing to the floor with a yelp.

“—and we’ve got until Friday to redeem ourselves or they’re pulling us off the Rupp case entirely and giving it to Team Firefly,” Simon said, talking right over the mayhem. That was enough to make Mike let go of Johnny’s ankle, and Sandra poked her head out of Simon’s door-less office just to stare at him.

“Firefly?” Nate said in disbelief. “Firefly couldn’t find New Mexico if they were airlifted to Santa Fe. They’re bruisers!”

“Man, I hate those bruiser types,” Mike said from his seat on the floor, driving the heel of his hand into the inside of Johnny’s knee. Johnny made a strangled little “Hrgh!” sound and kicked him, mostly by reflex.

Simon cleared his throat. Everyone fell silent again. The only noise in the room was Rich’s machine-gun-fire typing. “Sorry to interrupt recess, kids, but I think I’m going to have to suggest that we get back to class,” Simon said, his voice incongruously cheerful. Mike scrambled for his chair. “Hey, thanks for your cooperation. Rich, how’s the report on the van coming?”

“I’ll have it for you before lunch, Simon,” Rich said, stopping to grab a quick sip of coffee before going back to his furious typing.

“Nate? Lab reports?”

“They said tomorrow.”

“Go after lunch and ask them again, and play really dumb until they give in and cough up. You feel like you need to light a couple of them on fire, I got your back.”

“Dumb, tenacious, fire. It must be Tuesday. Got it, Templar.”

“Where’s today’s toilet paper? Who brought it in?”

Rich raised his hand, still typing with the other. “On your desk, to be ignored at your convenience.”

“Great!” Simon clapped his hands together. “Anything I need to know?” No one said anything. “Let’s all pretend we’re worth what they pay us. I’ll be in my office. Scream if you need me.” Dismissing them all with an absent wave, Simon headed into his office. Behind him there was a fleshy thudding sound and a strangled yelp that sounded like Mike, both of which Simon ignored with the ease of long practice.

A pile of papers sat in the big middle of his desk. Half of them were useless—he knew this without even having to look—another quarter of them were ‘sign-and-send-on’s, and maybe two or three things were actually worth looking at. Slingsing himself into his desk chair Simon picked up the topmost folder and flicked it open, to discover his preliminary report of Saturday’s fiasco, copiously



red-penned. “Fuuuck,” he said, rolling his eyes, and grabbed the arms of his desk chair, preparing to haul himself back upright. “Need coffee for this mess—”

He stopped, half in and half out of his chair. Nate was standing diffidently in the doorway to his office, Simon’s coffee mug clutched in both hands. “Brought you coffee,” Nate offered, inching in.

“My man!” Simon sighed, letting himself thud back into his chair. “So, is this a peace offering or are you trying to soften me up before you dump more bad news on me?”

“Eh, half a dozen of one . . .” Nate put the coffee mug down and fidgeted for a moment, then abruptly sat in the other chair. “They sent me to deliver the coffee because they figured you wouldn’t hurt me. Well. As much.”

Simon grabbed the mug and sank his face into it, gratefully inhaling coffee vapors. “Nah, it’s one of my rules. It’s bad luck to hurt the team mascot.”

“I was kinda counting on that, yeah.” Nate hesitated, then said, “You okay, boss?”

“Oh yeah, I’m good.” Simon blew the steam off his coffee, then took a tentative sip. “Upstairs has been unhappy with me before.”

“Yeah.” Nate glanced over his shoulder like he was thinking about bolting. “It’s just . . . Templar, these last couple of days, you’ve been . . .”

“A cast-iron son-of-a-bitch?”

“ . . . well, I was going to say ‘kind of short-tempered’, but I can go with that if you want.”

“Yeah.” Simon put his coffee down and started sorting absently through the stack of papers in front of him, dropping every second one into the trashcan. “Jesus, can you blame me? No one’s pulled one over on the team like this since—” He stopped abruptly, glanced up at the suddenly stricken Nate, and shook his head. “—sorry, Nate. But this team is the best and I’m not used to getting assfucked like this.”

“Least . . .” Nate swallowed and looked down at his fingers, knotted in his lap. “Least no one got hurt this time.”

Simon stopped, put down the folder he was currently sneering at, and looked at Nate. “No,” he said carefully. “No one got hurt this time, and I’m grateful for that. Okay?” After a moment Nate nodded, but he didn’t look up. Simon repressed a sigh and started going through the pile of papers again. “But this guy played us all for suckers and he’s out there somewhere laughing at us, and I swear to God if I ever see him again I’m going to . . . call . . . him . . . call him *holy shit!*”

Nate’s head jerked up. Simon had a departmental pink memo slip in his hand and was staring at it like it had just stripped off all its clothes and started to shimmy. “What?” Nate said after a moment, uncertainly.

“He called me,” Simon breathed, his eyes widening. “He *called* me. Jeremy fucking Archer called the front desk and left me a *message*—Nate! Christ, get the phone-tracing gear *now*!”

Nate blinked twice and then bolted out of his chair, which went spinning back to bang against the wall. Out in the main room Mike called a question and Nate answered, and then suddenly there was a babble of excited voices and some crashing noises as Nate went slamming into the equipment closet. Simon had already tuned it out, staring at the pink slip. ‘Jeremy Archer’, ‘wants you to call’, and a phone number. A local phone number. “Archer,” Simon breathed, and the pink slip crumpled in his fist as a fierce predatory joy bloomed in his chest.

“Scoot back! I need that space—” Nate was saying outside, and there was a screech as someone’s chair got pushed back. Simon shoved himself out of his chair and almost ran back into the main room, face-first into a maelstrom of questions.

“People!” he bellowed over the din, and they all more or less quieted down, except for Nate, who was banging equipment around with an enthusiasm that bordered on catastrophically expensive. “Yes, he called and left a number. No, I don’t know why. Maybe he just wants to gloat, but I don’t care, as long as it keeps him on the line. Here’s how this is going to go down. We’ll be taping this call, and Nate will be running the trace. Mike, go warm up your car and pull up to the side entrance—” Mike started to protest, but Simon cut him off with a chop of his hand. “—and you take Johnny with you. Leave a door open. The second we get a location on him, Sandra’s going to come running with that information while I keep him on the line, and you all break the laws of physics to get there, you hear me? I’m not waiting for the cops on this one. You three come back with Archer in cuffs and I’ll kiss you all right on the lips, swear to God.”

“Oh, Simon honey! I always knew you cared!” Mike warbled, his eyes huge and wobbly. Simon faked a swing at him and Mike snickered and warded him off.

“Rich, I’m going to need quiet. Think you can finish up the van report later?”

Rich shoved his glasses up and nodded. “I’m good, Templar. Want me to stay here? Can I help?” Without waiting for an answer he swiveled to look at Nate. “Nate! Toss!”

Nate threw a handful of black cables at Rich, who caught about half of them and scrambled to pick up the rest, stretching the whole mess across the saferoom floor to the phone by the door. The poor direct line phone had its bottom panel yanked off a second later and Rich was plugging cables into it while Nate scooted under his own computer and hooked another set of cables into there. The actual hardware was left stranded in the middle of the floor, throwing cables off in every direction, and Mike had to pick his way through to get to the door. “Jesus, it looks like tentacle porn in here,” Mike said. “Damn phone’s getting more action than I’ve seen in a year—”

“Why are you still here?!” Simon said, rounding on him. “Move!”

“Whoa shit we’re gone, chief! Sixty seconds, swear to God!” Mike burst out the door with Johnny hard on his heels, their running footsteps fading fast. Sandra kicked off her shoes and grabbed them, then went to stand in the doorway, nearly bouncing on her bare toes.

“Okay!” Nate said, dropping into his computer chair. “Let me just sign in and we’re good to go, Templar.” Simon nodded and found a place to pace in between the wires, burning off some of the adrenalin. Rich withdrew to his lair in the corner, his eyes owlish behind his glasses, and fell silent, watching Nate. Windows popped up on Nate’s computer, one after the other, and Nate typed something into each one before shoving up his own glasses and nodding excitedly. “We’re online, Templar. Call when ready.”

Simon huffed out his breath, then took another one and held it. *Game on*, he thought, and just like that, he was calm. Yet another window blinked into existence on Nate’s computer when Simon picked up the receiver, and Nate caught his own breath and laid his fingers gently on the keyboard, ready. Simon punched in the number. Behind him, green numbers glowed on Nate’s screen.

The phone clicked gently in his ear. Nate made a faint whuffing sound, his eyes going wide, and started counting on his fingers as the clicking went on; after seven clicks the phone abruptly started to ring and Simon’s heart thudded once in his chest before subsiding again. Nate scowled furiously at his computer. Simon didn’t notice.

On the second ring the phone was picked up. “Answering service,” a pleasantly impersonal voice said. Female. American. Definitely not Archer. Definitely not what Simon had been expecting. Simon’s head jerked back, and for a single surprised moment he failed to say anything at all.

“I’m trying to reach Jeremy Archer?” he eventually managed to say, and suddenly he was back in the game. “He left me a message.”

“Yes, sir, I can take that message for you.”

Simon closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine. Thank you. Tell him to call Simon Drake at this number—” he read off the number on the direct line’s nameplate “—as soon as possible. Immediately would be nice. Already would have been nicer.”

“Yes, sir.” There was a soft sound of typing in the background. “I’ll pass that message along to him as soon as I can.”

“Thank you.” Simon glanced over his shoulder at Nate, who shrugged and nodded. Simon hung up the phone and eyed Nate. “Well?”

“Did you hear the clicking? Before the phone started ringing?” Nate asked. “Relays. I counted at least eight. I can trace that number he left us but it’ll just lead us to a relay number in town. Tracing it out from there will be a *bitch*, and sounds like it’ll just lead us to his answering service or whatever...”

“Shit.”

"I'll try again when he calls back, Templar. Maybe he'll slip."

"Good. And hey, at least we'll have some recordings. Sandra, go tell Mike and Johnny to stand down—"

The phone rang. Everyone in the room jumped, and Nate actually squeaked.

"—or not," Simon said, and grabbed for the receiver. Another window popped up on Nate's computer and Nate whipped back around, hunching over the keyboard. "Drake," Simon said, hard-pressed to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Simon," said a male voice on the other end. He sounded amused and English and naggingly familiar, and Simon closed his eyes. "I rather thought you'd have called back earlier than this."

"What can I say? I just got your message a few minutes ago." Adrenalin bubbled through Simon like boiling water. He ignored it, although his free hand kept snapping open and closed. "And I don't remember giving you permission to use my first name."

"Mm. I do apologize, Mr. Drake."

"Save it," Simon said. "What do you want, Archer?" Behind him Nate made a tiny excited sound, and the Tentacle Beast in the center of the room started whirring, and Simon mouthed "Yes!" and pumped his fist in the air, once.

"Straight and to the point! Oh, how I love dealing with professionals. So refreshing." Jeremy laughed softly in his ear. "Well. Let us just say that I've had a change of heart."

"All right. You've had a change of heart," Simon said, almost giddy now. "Now will you explain just what the hell you mean by that?"

"Perhaps. I think we might benefit from a meeting, Mr. Drake."

"Oh? Why's that? You want to gloat?"

"Mr. Drake! I do not *gloat*. It's unprofessional."

"Right. Sure. I believe you. So if that's not it: why?"

"Let's just say..." Jeremy's voice trailed off. When he spoke again, he sounded both more and less businesslike, if such a thing was even humanly possible. The words were utterly business, a sort of business that Simon was all too familiar with, that 'I admit to nothing, you can't prove anything, but maybe we could make a deal, copper' sort; the tone, however, was low and—mocking? possibly—and put Simon in mind of anything but business. "Let's just say," Jeremy nearly purred, enunciating every consonant to the point that it was almost a singsong, "that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I've stolen."

It took Simon a moment. Hung up on trying to decode what Jeremy's tone was saying, he nearly missed what the *words* meant. Then he got it, and he stiffened like someone had jammed a gun into his back. Simon grabbed the receiver in both hands. "You still have the diamond?" he demanded, his voice gone hoarse with excitement despite his best effort to give nothing away. "You

haven't turned it over to Rupp yet?" Nate promptly dropped his pen and Sandra sucked in a breath.

"Well, if my esteemed employer was so indiscreet as to inflict the FBI on me . . . which is not to say that it wasn't a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Drake. Not at all." Jeremy paused, and dimly, in the background, Simon could hear the rush of traffic and the ratchet-and-click of a cigarette lighter. "At any rate, to answer your question, yes, I still have it, but if you want it back . . . well. That's business, and as such requires some delicate negotiation."

"Fine. I can negotiate with the best of 'em. I took a *class*. Tell me what you want." Simon made a frantic hurry-up gesture at Nate.

"Mm. No. I'm afraid it won't be that easy, *Simon*. I'll be at the Lincoln Memorial at noon. Come alone. Don't be late." The phone clicked in Simon's ear. Behind him the machinery stopped whirring with a soft mechanical groan, and Nate threw up his hands in defeat.

Simon slammed the receiver back into its cradle and rounded on Nate. "Well?"

"Pay phone, Templar, somewhere near J Street. I got it down to about a three-block radius, but he'll be long gone by the time we can check the area."

"Yeah." Simon huffed out a long breath and thumped his fist against the wall, almost gently. "Right! Sandra, go get Mike and Johnny, tell 'em it's off. Rich, go steal someone else's van and gear. Nate, bust out the toys. It seems I've got a date!"

"In half an hour," Rich added as Sandra left. "Bet he did that on purpose. No time for us to plan much."

"No time to go shopping, then," Simon said. "What am I going to wear?"

"Jesus, we're really going to do it," Mike exulted, slamming back into the saferoom with Sandra on his heels. "We've actually got another chance to nail this sonofabitch—"

"Shh!" Nate hissed, popping out of the equipment closet like a jack-in-the-box and jerking his head in the direction of Simon's office. "Upstairs." Mike strangled on a yelp and shut up.

Simon was in his office, pacing. He was clutching the interoffice phone with both hands, and his knuckles were white. "Uh huh," he said, voice thrumming with energy, and "Uh huh . . ." again a moment later. "Uh huh."

Johnny wandered back in a minute later, took in Simon on the phone with a single glance, and didn't say a word. Picking his way over to the coffeemaker he fetched himself a cup, then more or less fell into his chair and closed his eyes.

The heavy droning voice on the other end of the line said something, and Simon stopped pacing, squeezed his eyes shut, and exhaled unevenly. "All right. Yes sir, I understand," he said, his voice a relieved rush.

Rich came back, triumphantly bearing a set of car keys in one hand. He glanced at Simon's office. "Upstairs?"

"Upstairs," confirmed Mike.

"Yeah," said Nate.

Johnny nodded.

Rich whistled, low and sliding, and crept into the room, edging around the Tentacle Beast.

"Whose van did you get?" Nate asked under his breath.

"Hall's." Rich spun the ring of keys on his finger, making them jingle. "Bobcat owes me big-time for covering his ass on their little computer fiasco last month."

"Hall's?" Nate squeaked, loud enough to make Sandra shush him. He flushed pink and lowered his voice. "Man, Rich, they're already pretty permanently pissed at us, are you sure that's a good idea?"

Rich snorted. "What's going to happen? It's just a routine surveil-and-record."

"Oh, Jesus," Mike put in. "Don't ever say things like that, Specs Two."

"Asking for it," Johnny added.

Rich rolled his eyes. "You and your superstitious crap."

"This from the guy who has to knock on the wall before he turns on his computer in the morning," Mike told Sandra.

"I'm not—" Rich spluttered, his voice rising even as his face went pink. "It's called 'grounding myself', asshole!"

"Why, your momma not ground you enough when you were a boy?"

"*Shh!*" Sandra insisted, kicking Mike's ankle. Mike yelped, loud enough to make Simon lean out of his office and slash a finger across his throat: *cut it out!* The team subsided into guilty silence, Rich and Sandra glaring at Mike, Nate gingerly sorting through a box of cables, Johnny apparently asleep in his chair. A minute later Simon hung up the phone with a bang and strode out into the main room again, shoving a hand through his hair. "All right! Upstairs has been informed. We've got the go-ahead. They're leaving the details up to my discretion."

"Those fools," Mike intoned, still rubbing his ankle.

"So what's the verdict, Simon?" Sandra said with a quick glare at Mike. "How are we going to do this?"

Simon considered for a moment, closing his eyes and thumping his fist against his forehead. Finally, with a rush, like he knew what was coming, he said, "We're going to cut a deal."

Immediately half the team groaned. "Templar, come on, the guy *gassed* you, and we're not going to take him down?" Rich demanded, scowling furiously. "I say we take him out. He's scum, and he deserves to be in jail."

"And we deserve to be the ones who put him there," Mike added, nodding at Rich. Johnny grunted in agreement.

"I agree with you," Simon said, yanking out his chair and sitting down. "But we're going to cut a deal."

"Why?" Mike's hands bunched into fists, but his eyes were nothing short of plaintive. The rest of them more or less fell into their seats.

"Our goal here is to *stop Rupp*. Not catch us a thief, no matter what Art Theft thinks. There's no telling what kind of contingency plans Archer's made. If we go swarming out there and jump him, sure, we might get a conviction out of it, but there's every chance that Rupp will get the Star anyway." Simon stopped and knocked his knuckles against the tabletop. "So we deal, at least until we get our hands on the diamond. He'll deal. He's a *professional*." Simon leaned on the last word, laughing.

"Where I come from, we call 'em 'whores'," Johnny offered, cracking one eye open.

Fifteen minutes later Simon was sitting in the back of a nondescript white van half a block from the Lincoln Memorial, his arms akimbo and his shirt pulled up, letting Nate tape a tiny flat mike to his chest. "You're sure about this?" he asked, craning his head down to watch Nate work. "I don't want a repeat of that feedback thing from last time."

Nate looked injured, even as he ripped another long piece of white medical tape off with his teeth. "Won't ever happen again, chief. I swear. I fixed that little glitch *months* ago."

"Yeah? Tell that to Mike, he's the one who—hey, whoa, too tight, watch where you're putting that tape. If Sandra's cleavage didn't impress Archer, mine sure won't."

"Sorry, Templar." Nate yanked the tape back up. Simon yelped. Nate flushed, apologized again, and patted the tape down gingerly. "Okay, that should do it," he said, dropping the roll of tape back into his toolkit. "Just make sure your shirt stays kind of loose. And don't let him touch your chest."

Simon snorted and rolled his shoulders, testing the tape. It stayed where it belonged. "*That* shouldn't be a problem. Rich? How's it sounding?"

Rich flashed him a thumbs-up and adjusted his headphones. "Sounds good. You better hurry or you'll be late for your date."

"You know what?" Simon asked, yanking his shirt back down and tucking it back into his jeans. "I'm gonna be real sorry I ever called it that. Where's my jacket?" Rich tossed Simon his bomber jacket and Simon shrugged into it, then held out both hands and looked at his techs inquiringly. "Well?"

"Tug your shirttail out a little, loosen the shirt," Rich said. Simon did so. Rich nodded.

"You look good," Nate added, shoving his glasses up. "Pity we didn't have time for you to pick up some flowers."

“Shut up, Specs,” Simon said, and aimed a ruffle at Nate’s hair before he threw open the van’s back doors and slid out. “Five minutes to showtime, folks. Let’s play some cops and robbers.”

“Got it, Templar.”

“Remember to compliment him on his outfit!” Nate added, and yanked the van doors shut before Simon could react.

“Funny, funny man,” Simon muttered under his breath, trusting in the microphone on his chest to carry his words, and then set out for the Memorial at a brisk jog.

The first time that Simon had seen the Lincoln Memorial, on a particularly poorly supervised high-school field trip, he’d been stunned into silence by the place. Something about the the immense statue and the massive white marble chamber had awed him, like he was simultaneously very small and an indispensable part of the best country on Earth. The rest of that field trip had degenerated into half-hearted (and failed) attempts to buy beer and get into the pants of one of his more well-endowed classmates—some of Simon’s better memories of high school, actually—but he’d never forgotten that first minute within the white columns.

He’d been here twenty times since then and it still never failed to get to him, just a little.

By the time he reached the foot of the broad marble steps he was more or less calm, his anticipation well under control. It was almost noon exactly; most of the tourists were off having lunch or jacking off or whatever it was they did when they weren’t obstructing traffic, the morning school groups were all done, and the afternoon school groups wouldn’t show up for an hour yet. Exactly what he’d expected from the middle of a spring weekday, and it suited him just fine.

The Memorial wasn’t exactly deserted, though. A few people stood here and there on the steps, most of them guards, who were really all but useless. For all that Simon liked the place he also knew it was a nightmare from a security standpoint. There was no way to secure the area, no way to subtly clear out the crowds, no way to man all the exits from the broad and open building. Maybe if he had a team of a hundred agents and two hours to deploy them, he could have worked something out; as it was he had about a minute left and he was on his own. Everything was working to Archer’s advantage without *quite* putting Simon at a disadvantage. Mentally, Simon scored him a couple of points for the shrewd move.

“I love my job,” Simon said for no particular reason, loping up the steps.

He pulled up short just inside the row of columns, letting the expected rush of awe wash over him and dissipate before bringing his mind back to the business at hand. The Lincoln Memorial. Christ. Archer won another couple of points for sheer Hollywood *style*, too. “Feel like I’m in a goddamned spy movie,” Simon



said under his breath as he stepped in and started looking around. “Oh. Wait. I *live* in a goddamned spy movie. Where are you, Archer—” He rounded the corner of the massive statue, and his sentence broke off there.

A familiar slender figure dressed all in black lounged decoratively not twenty feet away, tucked neatly into the corner formed by the back wall and Lincoln’s massive seat, his back protected by a couple of feet of solid stone on two sides. Nicely defensible spot. Impossible to sneak up on him without crawling over Mr. Lincoln. Simon considered doing just that for a moment, just to be contrary, before dismissing it as uselessly dramatic. (Besides, he thought, it would probably scrape the microphone loose.) Instead he considered the stark black-leather-on-white-marble tableau—carefully staged, he had absolutely no doubt—gave Archer another point for shrewdness and two for style, and headed in.

Jeremy Archer saw him coming long before he got there, which was almost certainly the point. The thief smiled a thin little smile and reached up to tilt his sunglasses down, eyeing Simon over the top of them—and also, Simon couldn’t help but note, serving as a convenient excuse to bring his right hand up. Simon’s eyes flickered to the inside of Jeremy’s loaded right wrist for a moment, and when he looked back, that thin little smile was ever so slightly wider. The corner of Simon’s mouth twitched helplessly upwards despite everything and he turned his hands palm outwards, showing that they were empty. Jeremy nodded slightly and let his hand drop again.

*Three* more points for style. *Christ*. Simon resisted the momentary urge to whistle in appreciation. “So here we are,” he said instead, pitching his voice low so that it wouldn’t echo. He stopped a good three feet away and leaned casually against Lincoln’s chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Here we are,” Jeremy echoed. “Terribly touristy of me, I admit it, but I *am* just visiting . . .”

“Nah, it’s great,” Simon said, glancing up over his shoulder at Abe. “Personally, I prefer the Jefferson Memorial, but I’ve always been a fan of the Revolutionary War.” Jeremy laughed softly, and Simon let a smile twitch across his face and vanish before he got down to business. “So.”

“So,” Jeremy said, and like warped mirror images of each other they glanced around, making sure no one was close by. A stray tourist wandered by, too intent on the inscription over Lincoln’s head to pay them much heed, and then they were alone. By the time Simon turned to look at Jeremy again Jeremy was studying his face like he had something vitally important written on his cheek.

Simon suppressed a twitch of nerves. “So what do you want?” he asked, easing a step closer. They were less than two feet apart now, close enough that he was sure he could grab Archer by the throat if he had to—half a second before he got gassed again, of course. Still, it was a reasonably pleasant thought, and Simon enjoyed it while it lasted.

Jeremy was silent for a moment. His eyes flickered down to where Simon’s

arms were crossed, then back up, ticking over the side of Simon's throat before meeting Simon's own eyes again. "The last time we met, you suggested that my employer had something in mind for the Star. Judging from your reaction, he didn't mean to put it in a display case and admire its beauty."

"You could say that."

"Care to explain?"

Simon looked away and rubbed his chin, pretending to think about it. "Well, I guess I *could* go telling you all kinds of classified information and get myself fired, but I'm not exactly fond of that idea. For some reason."

"Ah. Pity." Jeremy straightened up, reaching up to flick his sunglasses back into place and render his expression opaque. "Well, it's been quite nice to see your handsome face again, but I really must be going—"

Simon reached out and grabbed Jeremy's arm before the thief could do more than feign leaving. "Before I tell you anything, tell me this: *do* you still have the Star? Straight answer."

"Not on me, just in case you were thinking about tackling and strip-searching me. But I haven't given it over to my employer, either." Jeremy stopped and favored Simon with a lazy little smile, spreading his hands as wide as he could with Simon's hand clamped onto his upper arm. "And if you'd still like to tackle and strip-search me, by all means, be my guest."

Simon snorted and declined to rise to the bait. "But it's in a secure place?"

"No, of course not, I threw it in a trash bin outside the Smithsonian—what do you take me for, Simon? Yes, it's quite secure." Jeremy tugged ever so lightly against Simon's grip on his arm. "And you're rumpling my sleeve."

Simon didn't let go. "I'll pay for your drycleaning."

"Chivalrous of you."

"Call it part of your extortion. So what are your demands?"

"I don't have any demands quite yet." Jeremy crossed his arms, one hand falling to lay casually half-atop Simon's. Simon resisted the urge to roll his eyes and didn't let go. "Tell me what you think my employer intends to do with the stone and I'll decide whether to ransom it back to you or not."

Simon glanced around again, purely for show this time. "Have you ever heard of the tactical satellite system MORNINGSTAR?" Simon asked, his voice dropping to a low rumble. Jeremy leaned in to hear him, so close that Simon could feel the warmth of him against his cheek. "Smallish fuss in Congress about three years ago?"

Jeremy tilted his head to the side. "Can't say that I have," he murmured.

"It's a satellite-based fission-powered laser system. Very powerful and *incredibly* precise. The plans boasted of being able to fire on moving targets less than a foot in diameter, from all the way up in Earth's orbit. A laser sniper rifle, basically. Not exactly the sort of thing that particular administration wanted to be associated with, so the plans were shelved—but a year or so ago we got

word that a certain someone had gotten hold of a copy of the plans. The people responsible for that little slipup have been, ah, dealt with, and we've been trying to cockblock that certain someone ever since." Simon halted, eyed Jeremy, and went on, deliberately leaning on every word. "Not that it should have mattered in the first place. The plans for the thing called for a focusing lens that was almost impossible to get: a diamond of exact and highly unusual size and cut."

Silence fell. Jeremy's expression was unreadable, his eyes still hidden. Finally he sighed softly and looked down, then back up at Simon, his smile wry. "So. Would you care for a cup of coffee, Simon? I prefer to do all my most sensitive negotiations over coffee."

"Is that a 'yes, I'll ransom the diamond back to you'?" Simon asked.

"Let's call it an 'I'm thinking about it'." Jeremy patted Simon's hand and let his hands drop. "I suppose you'd best treat me very nicely until I decide."

Simon blew out a breath, determined not to be relieved quite yet. "In that case, hell, I'll even spring for the coffee. Unless you're some kind of damned tea-drinking Englishman, in which case you can buy your own dirty leafy water."

"Drink tea in America?" Jeremy's eyebrow twitched upwards in disbelief. "I'm not that sort of masochist. Coffee, at least, has the benefit of being horrible the world over, so it doesn't matter where you get it."

Simon eyed him narrowly. "And to think I was almost not hating you."

Jeremy blinked, feigning confusion. "Goodness. Did I say something wrong?"

"Nothing." Simon caught himself almost enjoying this and made himself back off. "Never mind."

"Well, then, this would be me, never minding." With a faint smile, Jeremy snapped his captured arm inwards and brushed the other arm straight down along it, and knocked Simon's hand off his sleeve with something like trained ease. "Shall we go? I'm certain there's some sort of coffee place within spitting distance of here."

Simon flexed his dispossessed hand and made a mental note: next time, hold on *tightly*. "Sure. Sure. There's a Starbucks on damned near every corner."

"I love America," Jeremy said, moving past him.

"One million dollars," Jeremy said fifteen minutes later, calm as you please, and even though he'd been fearing worse Simon had to exhale hard through his nose to keep from coughing out his mouthful of coffee.

A three-minute walk, with Jeremy keeping up a light and idle stream of chatter that didn't really require much from Simon beyond the occasional snort or shrug, had indeed brought them to a Starbucks. It was well-lit, cheerful, and nearly deserted, but by mutual unspoken agreement they'd chosen a tiny booth off in one corner, as far away from both the counter and the front door as they could possibly get. Simon was, belatedly, very glad about that, despite the fact

that they were jammed so closely together that one of Jeremy's knees was pressed between his. "Excuse me?" he said, after swallowing his coffee and swiping the back of his hand over his mouth. "I must have heard you wrong. I could have sworn you said 'a million dollars'."

"I did." Jeremy's smile didn't so much as falter. "However, if you weren't such pleasant company, I would have to inform you that you did indeed mishear me, and that I had really said 'two million dollars'."

Ouch. Countered. Simon symbolically retreated by taking another sip of his coffee. "Seems like an awful lot of money for just taking a rock out of the sock under your mattress and putting it in my hands."

"Well. I'm told that the Mornings paid close to eight million dollars for it in the first place, and they didn't have nearly so pressing a need for it as you do. Indeed, I think you're getting a bargain."

"Damn, I was hoping I could buy it off you for used-diamond prices—" Simon let the sentence trail off there and leaned back in the booth, closing his eyes against the early afternoon sun. "One million dollars to buy a rock you've already been paid for. Christ, they don't pay *me* that kind of cash, and I'm the defender of the free world over here."

Jeremy's smile bloomed. "Really? What a shame. Maybe you're working for the wrong side—"

"—*hey*," Simon broke in warningly.

Jeremy held up his free hand to forestall Simon's outburst. "Joke, Simon. Just a joke." He sat back in his seat, slightly, and the little motion made his leg shift against Simon's.

"Makes me wonder how much you charged *Rupp*," Simon muttered, taking another sip of coffee and ignoring the physical contact.

"Four million dollars, in advance."

Simon was prepared for it this time; he only choked a little. "Christ!" he said, once he'd managed to successfully swallow.

"You did ask."

"Actually, I sort of muttered. But yeah, guess I did."

Jeremy took a sip of his own coffee—it was black, surprisingly. Simon, who had been expecting him to be either a cream-and-sugar man or, worse, the froofy-coffee type, had ended up scoring him a point for proper coffee respect. Jeremy's point total was getting perilously high, to the point where Simon was almost required to *like* him. Two more points and Simon would have to rate himself as officially intrigued, and that boded well for no one. "I told you you were getting a bargain," Jeremy said over the rim of his cup.

"Out of the goodness of your black little heart, I'm sure."

"Of course! What can I say? Your All-American good looks have won me over."

Simon put his coffee cup down. "Okay, what's with this?" he asked, eyeing Jeremy narrowly.

Jeremy blinked. "What's with what?"

"This. You know. This." Simon gestured back and forth between them. "This... this..." Suddenly and belatedly remembering the mike taped to his chest, he stopped before he could say what he was thinking.

"This what?" Jeremy prompted, suddenly all innocence again.

Simon glanced back and forth and leaned in, jaw tightening a bit. "This flirting," he hissed under his breath, making a mental note to kill his techs if they ever mentioned this part of the conversation to anyone, ever.

"Was I flirting?" Jeremy looked away and hid a little smile behind his hand. "I hadn't noticed."

Simon studied Jeremy for just long enough to communicate his general disbelief. "Oh, so you're just *like* this, is that it?"

"Like what?" One of Jeremy's fingers slid along his lower lip. Simon couldn't help but notice. "I assure you, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah. Uh huh. No idea. Sure, I'm buying that." Simon let it drop and finished off his coffee. "So! Anyway! Business! I assume you have some kind of ridiculous and overcomplicated demands for the exchange?"

"Not at all!" Jeremy said, dropping his hand and becoming something close to professional again. "I'll give you an account number, you wire the money there, and once I confirm that it's there I'll return the Star. To you personally, of course."

"I never knew that threatening somebody at gunpoint could inspire that kind of trust. Fine. Give me the account number."

Jeremy slid a little notebook and a fat silver fountain pen out of the inside pocket of his jacket. "If I got all snitty every time someone threatened me at gunpoint, I wouldn't have anyone left to talk to at all. The money first, Simon. Once it's safe, I'll contact you again."

"You'd better." For just a moment Simon dropped the light tone entirely and became entirely, freezingly serious, his voice like steel. "You queer me on this and I swear to God you won't be able to so much as look at a postcard from America without it trying to put you in cuffs."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Jeremy said, writing a neat line of figures on a blank sheet of notepaper. He seemed unimpressed. "I'm ever so hurt that you'd even think I'd cheat you."

"You're cheating the shit out of Rupp," Simon was quick to point out.

"My former employer apparently lied to me about his intentions and attempted to use me as a pawn in some sort of terrorist plot, and as such, I consider any contract I might have had with him null and void and his deposit forfeit. Not to mention the little problem of his siccing the FBI on me. No offense meant." Jeremy tore off the sheet of paper, neatly folded it in half, and held it out.

“Hey, none taken.” Simon reached for the paper, but stopped just short of taking it. “So we have a deal, then. One million dollars American for a certain shiny rock.”

“A deal,” Jeremy echoed, smiling faintly. “Would you like to shake on it?”

“No, no, that’s okay. Don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

“And that would be . . . what, exactly?”

Simon pretended to consider this until Jeremy poked the piece of paper at him again. This time Simon took it, and with a mental sigh, gave Jeremy those last two points, mostly on principle. “Well!” he said. “It was a pleasure doing business with you, I’m sure.”

Jeremy’s fingers slid lightly along Simon’s as he let go of the paper. “Yes, it *was* a pleasure, wasn’t it?”

Simon threw open the back doors of the van and jumped in, the rear shocks complaining under the sudden addition of his weight. “We’ve got a *deal*,” he said, exulting. Rich and Nate both blinked at him like moles.

Nate recovered first, reaching up to pull off his headphones. “That’s great, Templar—”

“—what we *don’t* have is a recording,” Rich broke in, angrily.

“Shit,” Simon said, his good mood deflating just a bit. “What happened? Was it that jamming thing of his again?”

“Oh, got it in one, Templar,” Nate said. “We’ve got you loud and clear until you say, uh . . .” He turned around and consulted his notes. “‘I live in a goddamned spy movie, where are you, Archer?’ and then we can hear you walking and suddenly it’s nothing but static.”

“Nearly popped my eardrums,” Rich added sullenly.

“Shit,” Simon said again, and then he thought of their little side conversation in the coffee shop and found himself somewhat glad of the loss, after all. “Well, we’ll just have to suffer along without it. If he’s half as professional as he pretends to be we won’t need it.” Simon stripped off his jacket and tossed it at the passenger seat.

“I hate him,” Rich said, reflectively.

“Eh,” Simon said, dropping onto the floor of the van and pulling his shirttail out from his jeans. “He’s not so bad as criminal scum go. Hell, according to his file he’s almost a Boy Scout. Least he’s not going to be shooting at us. Any day I don’t get shot at counts as a good day.”

“I still hate him,” Rich said, his jaw tightening stubbornly. “He made me look like an idiot.”

“He made all of us look like idiots,” Nate pointed out, messing with the dials in front of himself. “Not just you.”

“Still,” Rich said. “I hate him.”

“I was starting to get that idea, yeah,” said Nate. Rich scowled at him.

“Well, this is just a fascinating philosophical discussion,” Simon said cheerfully, picking at the ends of the tape on his chest. “I sure don’t want to interrupt you, Plato, but I just gotta know: has the tracer kicked in yet?”

Nate shot up straight in his seat, nearly smacking his head on the roof of the van. “You planted it on him?” he asked, his voice halfway between ‘urgent’ and ‘exhilarated’, and he had his headphones on before Simon could even answer.

“Sure did.” Simon tugged up an inch of the tape and hissed. “Grabbed his arm, got the beacon stuck to his jacket. With any luck he won’t notice it.”

Nate’s hands flew over the console in front of him, excitedly at first, then more slowly. Finally he took off the headphones and scowled at the blank monitor. “Nothing yet, Templar. He’s still got the jammer on, I bet.”

Rich shoved his glasses up. “Bet he’ll turn it off, though. He wouldn’t just leave it on all the time.”

“Hope so,” Simon said, resigning himself to the inevitable and digging his fingers under one edge of the medical tape still stuck to his chest. “Anyway, what’s really important is that he’s agreed to a pretty sweet deal. Upstairs had me authorized to go to two million but Archer set his price at half that—*yowfuck!*—so I think my point is, we’re in business, and Art Theft can go screw. Also, *ow*, is this duct tape or something?” He tossed the unwieldy mass of microphone and discarded tape at Nate, who promptly fumbled it.

“We good to go?” Rich asked, ducking past Simon and heading for the driver’s seat.

“Good to go,” Simon said, tucking his shirt back in as Nate scrambled after the microphone. “Let’s head back to base and tell everyone the news.”

Five minutes later, they were (unsurprisingly) stuck in traffic. Pedestrians, mostly of the tourist variety, streamed along the sidewalks and across the streets, sometimes so close to the sides of the van that Simon could have reached out and snagged himself an ugly straw fedora if he’d wanted one. Traffic was moving at a sluggish twenty miles an hour or so and Rich was glaring out the windshield and muttering imprecations every time the battered brown subcompact in front of him put on its brakes. Simon was slumped down in the passenger seat with his hands laced together over his stomach and his eyes shut against the glare, making a desultory effort to review his negotiations with Archer but, in the end, not really thinking about much of anything.

“Ha!” Nate suddenly crowed from the back, startling Rich, who nearly drove the van up onto the sidewalk before swearing and hauling it back into traffic. The wheel under Simon’s feet bumped up against the curb and he grunted a little.

“Oh, good one, Nate,” Rich snapped, shoving his glasses up with the heel of one hand. “My day wouldn’t be complete without driving over a class of pre-schoolers and a couple of stray nuns. Thanks so much.”

“What’s up, Specs?” Simon asked, not bothering to open his eyes. “Tracer kick in?”

“Tracer’s on!” Nate cried, leaning forward to squint at the screen in front of himself. The van’s tires thumped over a mended pothole and Nate left a neat noseprint on the glass. “Signal’s pretty strong, Templar, and . . .” He trailed off there, watching the little screen like a hawk.

“And?” Simon prompted. “He didn’t just go into a shop named ‘Stolen Diamonds R Us’ or anything, did he?”

“Not a clue,” Nate said cheerfully. “However, the tracer’s *moving*, which means that he didn’t just find it and ditch it.”

Simon couldn’t help but laugh. “Didn’t find it, huh? Some professional. Minus a point for Shadow!”

“So what was his point total anyway?” Rich asked, easing the van to an equipment-preservingly gentle stop at a red light. “You never said.”

“Pretty high,” Simon said casually, after a nearly unnoticeable hesitation. “Man’s got some class, I have to admit, much as it pains me to do so. Plus there was the whole ‘not shooting at me’ thing.”

Rich eyed Simon narrowly. “You can’t give criminals points for *not shooting at you*. Once we start giving them points for *not* doing things, we might as well abandon the whole system.”

“Yeah,” Nate said from the back. “Didn’t you ever take statistics in college? Everyone who isn’t the most total scumbag will end up earning a bunch of freebie points right off the bat and the system’ll get all screwed up.”

“Well, first of all I don’t care and you’re both nerds,” Simon pointed out, drumming his fingers absently on his stomach, “and second of all it’s less of a scientific system and more of a casual rating thing, kind of like a drinking game without actual alcohol involved, you know? And third of all, light’s green.”

Rich jerked his head around, swore again, and eased the van back into traffic.

“Did you make the deal?” Sandra asked the second Simon pushed open the door. Without really waiting for an answer she swung to Nate. “Was there a deal?”

“What?” Simon said, injured. “I don’t even get to enjoy keeping you guys in suspense any more?”

“No,” Sandra said crisply. “No more suspense for you, Templar.”

Johnny added, “Heart can’t take it.”

“Well?” Mike said from his seat in the windowsill. Nate opened his mouth. Simon shot a glare in his general direction. Nate’s eyes widened and he shut his mouth again. “Okay, now, that’s just not fair,” Mike protested, vaulting down and landing more or less gracefully. “You can’t be using your scary-ass boss mojo to shut up the stool pigeons.”



“‘Stool pigeons’?” Simon asked the room in general. “What is this, *Drag-net*?”

“I notice no one is answering my question,” Sandra said loudly.

“Yes, there was a deal,” Rich said irritably, shoving past under Simon’s arm and heading for his computer. “We’re going to pay Shadow a whole bunch of money because he’s such nice criminal scum, and Templar managed to plant a radio tracker on him in the process so we at least have the faintest hope of actually catching him later, and can none of you keep your minds on track for five seconds?”

Simon gaped after Rich, then threw his hands wide in a gesture of supplication. “Why don’t I ever get to have any fun?” he asked the ceiling.

“Because you suck and we hate you,” Mike said. “Duh.”

“Oh. Right. I forgot. Thanks, Mike!”

“Any time, boss.”

“Anyway!” Simon clapped his hands together, then pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. “Rich! I’ve got a bank account number for you to play with. Get me everything you can out of it, and if you can finagle me some kind of hookup into the transaction history, I swear I won’t ask if it’s legal.”

“Probably a good thing, Templar.” Rich slapped his hand against the concrete wall next to him and thumbed his computer on. (Mike shot a glance at Sandra and mouthed, “See?” Sandra rolled her eyes.) “I’m on it. How long do I have?”

“I figure that given my own disinclination to do Archer any extraordinary favors, the general speed of the bureaucracy around here, and the airspeed of an unladen swallow, probably until about noon tomorrow.”

Rich snorted. “Hell, by that time I could probably tell you what kind of deodorant the account manager is wearing. Gimme.”

Simon slung the folded bit of paper at Rich sidearm like a Frisbee. It flew in a high looping arc, almost touching the ceiling before fluttering to the floor at Johnny’s feet. Johnny eyed it, swept it up, and leaned as far back over the back of his chair as he could, his hand outstretched towards Rich. Rich didn’t quite roll his eyes, but he leaned forward and snagged it. “Good throw,” said Johnny.

Simon shot an exasperated look in Johnny’s direction. “Shut up,” he said, mostly on general principles, since he couldn’t actually tell if Johnny was being sarcastic or not. “And I’ll need that back, Rich,” he added. “After all, we wouldn’t want Shadow to not get his money.”

“Shit, no,” said Mike. “Wouldn’t want that at all.”

[wednesday]

“Can I hold it for a sec or something? Before you send it off?” Simon craned forward over the back of the chair, squinting at the monitor. “I’ve always wanted to hold a million dollars in my hands. It’s a dream of mine.”

"There's nothing to hold," the girl from accounting said apologetically, glancing nervously up at him and twitching out half a little smile. "It's all done by computers..."

"He asks that every time, Linda," Sandra said, leaning against the wall by the door. "He's just being silly. Ignore him. I always do."

Simon straightened up, and Linda sagged a little in relief. "I keep *asking* because none of them ever *let* me," he informed Sandra patiently. "Maybe *Linda* here will be nice enough to let me, huh?" He patted Linda's shoulder.

She quivered a little. "I... Mr. Drake, there's nothing to hold, I'm sorry..."

"Nah, it's okay," Simon said, leaning forward over the back of her chair again and making her tense up. "I just have to ask, you know? Can I touch the monitor where it says 'one million dollars' or something?" He pointed, the inside of his arm nearly touching her cheek. "That'll do okay, I guess."

"Um..." Linda reddened, suddenly and completely unable to move one way or the other.

Simon scored himself a mental point and relented. Almost. "Heh. Don't worry about it. You know I only tease you 'cause I like you so much."

And now she was *red*—another point for Simon—but she swallowed and nodded. Her fingers stumbled over the keys, filling in the blanks on the screen, both account numbers, her personal ID and password, the department's password, a tracking number, amount... Simon let out a low whistle as she filled in the amount. **\$1,000,000.00**, there in glowing black and white. It seemed a lot more substantial when he saw it spelled out like that.

"It's a lot," Linda said, twitching out another nervous smile at him.

Simon nodded. "Hell of a lot," he agreed, watching Linda fill out the rest of the fields on the screen.

A box popped up on the screen, asking Linda to confirm the transaction. She glanced back and forth, making sure no one was watching too closely, then lowered her voice to a breathless whisper. "Would you like to... to okay the transaction yourself? It's *like* holding the money, sort of..." She trailed off there, coloring again.

Simon glanced at her, startled, then his expression softened into something like a smile. On the other side of the desk, Sandra rolled her eyes. "Actually, yeah, I think I would. You really going to let me?"

Linda nodded and scooted aside, just a little. "Just hit the enter key..."

Simon leaned forward, eyes on the screen. One million dollars. Would he like to personally send one million dollars of the government's money to a known felon, with his own hands? asked the monitor. Sure would, Simon thought. "Hope you enjoy it while you can, Archer," he muttered, and reached across Linda to tap the enter key. The confirmation screen vanished, and the computer whirled for a moment, and then a transaction record popped up.

“That’s it,” Linda said as Simon pulled his hand back. “The money’s gone. You’ve sent it.”

“Wow,” Simon said, and he laughed a little. “Kind of a rush. My skin’s tingling.”

She giggled, a tiny nervous sound. “It is, kind of, isn’t it?”

“Can we do that again?” Simon asked, miming reaching for his wallet in his back pocket. “Here, I’ve got my personal account number right here, we can just send a couple million dollars to me, I swear I’ll send it back again in a day or so . . .”

“Mr. Drake!” Linda clapped both hands over her mouth to hush her horrified giggles. “You’re terrible!”

“That’s a no, huh?” Simon grinned at her and patted her shoulder one last time, just to watch the flush crawl over her cheeks again. “Oh, well. Guess I stay poor but honest.”

“Poor, anyway,” Sandra added, checking her watch ostentatiously.

“You’re awful,” Sandra told Simon as they headed back. “I just want you to know that.”

Simon grinned, ambling down the hallway with his hands in his pockets. “Aww, Sandy-pookins, what’d you want to go and say a thing like that for?”

“Terrible,” Sandra said frostily. “Horrible. That poor girl.”

“What? She was cute. I couldn’t resist. Did you see her turn pink? Adorable!”

“She’s going to be crushing on you for *months*. Just like little what’s-her-name down in HR—”

“—Vicky—”

“—right, Vicky, the both of them all googly-eyed over you, you big irresponsible hunk of handsome field agent, you. And you do that on *purpose*. ‘I only tease you ‘cause I like you so much,’ ” Sandra mimicked, her voice dropping for a moment into a throaty near-basso that didn’t sound a thing like Simon. “Shit. I almost wish you *were* trying to get in their pants, at least then you’d have an excuse for flirting like that.”

“I think someone’s jealous,” Simon caroled, edging a step or two away in case Sandra came after him.

“You’re fucking right I’m jealous,” Sandra told him, socking Simon’s shoulder hard enough to make him yelp and grab his arm. “I’ve got dibs, boss. Any other ladies want a piece of the Templar action, they gotta come through me.”

“Aww, Sandy, don’t be like that,” Simon pleaded, rubbing his shoulder. “You’re gonna scare all the girls off! Then what am I going to do for fun?”

“That’s the point.”

“Awwwww, Sandy—”

“—don’t you ‘aww Sandy’ me, Simon.”

Simon rolled his eyes, then ambled back over and threw an arm around Sandra's shoulders. "You know you're the only girl for me, right, Spring?"

"Damn straight I am," Sandra snapped, elbowing Simon in the stomach, and then she made a highly undignified snorting sound, and a second later they were both howling with laughter.

"I really am awful," Simon gasped.

"The worst," Sandra agreed, wiping her eyes.

"Well?" Simon demanded, holding the saferoom door open for Sandra, who punched him lightly as she went by.

Rich's head swiveled and he blinked at Simon owlishly. "You are not going to believe this, Templar."

"Oh, boy, but I hate it when you start a conversation like that, Specs Two." Simon loped across the room and skidded to a stop behind Rich, leaning over the back of his chair. Rich, unlike Linda, felt perfectly free to elbow Simon in the gut to get him to back off. "Oof," said Simon. "So what's up?"

"Money's gone," Rich said.

"... what?"

"Money's gone," Rich repeated, patiently. The program on his screen was not pretty or easy to use and understand like the one Accounting had been using; this was chunks and chunks of raw text in a terminal window, a bunch of numbers that didn't make any sense to Simon. With the aid of Rich pointing, Simon picked out two particular lines, though:

**+ 1,000,000.00 11:23:25**

**- 1,000,000.00 11:26:02**

"Holy shit," said Simon, blinking at the screen. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"He moved the money right back out," Rich confirmed, tapping something that might have been an account number (or a phone number from a foreign country, or just a random string of digits). "Two minutes or so after it came in, it was gone, to this account here."

Simon whistled. "Boy, he doesn't trust us any further than he could throw us, does he?"

"Probably smart of him," Rich said.

"Yeah," Simon said. "So can you tap into that account? You know, just to satisfy my curiosity?"

Rich started to nod, then changed his mind and shrugged. "It's an offshore bank. I *can* trace it if you want me to, but the money is gone, out of our jurisdiction, and this is getting less legal by the second—"

Simon slapped both hands over his ears. "I didn't hear that!" he half-sang, closing his eyes.

"—I mean, we're edging into an international incident here—"

"I'm still not hearing this!"

"—but I can keep going if you want, I mean, what do I care if we all get fired and possibly put in jail—"

"Still not hearing this!"

"—so I'm guessing you want me to stop, then."

"Not that I heard you," Simon said, dropping the singsong, "but yeah, you can stop now. Whatever it was that you were doing. Not that I knew anything about it or, God forbid, asked you to do it."

Rich nodded, closed the terminal window, ejected a CD from the CD drive, and snapped it neatly in half. "Whatever it was I just did," Rich said, "it was completely legal and a-OK, and no way this CD is going to tell anyone any different."

"That's what I like about you, Rich," Simon said, patting Rich on the shoulder. "You speak my language."

"Of course, he also speaks assembly," Nate added from across the room, where he was watching the tracer beep.

"You speak *Klingon*," Rich pointed out.

"Not any more!" Nate flushed a little. "I mean, come on, that was in *college*, it was a long time ago . . ."

Rich snorted. "*Verengan Ha'DIbaH!*"

"*Mu'qaD!*" Nate automatically snapped, then yelped and pointed a shaking finger at Rich. "Oh, you jerk, and you were making fun of *me* for speaking Klingon!"

"I am seriously becoming geekier just by sitting here," Mike informed Sandra. "I think my dick is shrinking."

"Mine too," Sandra said.

"Mine's good," Johnny said, patting it affectionately.

"Okay!" Simon said, clapping his hands together. "I've got a radical idea: how about we all keep our Klingon in our pants where it belongs?"

"Awww, man," Mike said, leaning back in his chair and fumbling ostentatiously with his zipper, "aren't we gonna have a dick-size contest? I mean, why else did I come into work today?"

"You know it'd just get me all turned on," Simon told him. "And then I won't get *anything* done for the rest of the day, what with lusting over you and all."

Mike settled back into his chair with a little grunt. "Well, long as we're all clear on who'd win."

"Yeah," Rich said, dropping the halves of the CD into the shredder. "Sandra."

The screeching grinding sound of the heavy-duty shredder reducing evidence to confetti put an end to the rest of that conversation, although Sandra looked particularly smug for several minutes afterwards.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day dragged on cruelly. Simon spent a couple of hours typing up a report on his negotiations with Archer, filed it, dealt with the daily crap, and spent an entertaining fifteen minutes or so dreaming up horribly inconvenient places to make Archer meet him for the exchange. The top of the Washington Monument, maybe, or he could requisition a jet and tell Archer to meet him somewhere in Texas, maybe the Bahamas, force him to spend some of that ill-gotten cash . . . nah, that one would probably get him fired, even though he wasn't a congressman or anything.

After that it was just a question of waiting, which Simon had always hated. Cruel and all too usual punishment. He spent an hour down at the firing range with Johnny, killing the shit out of paper targets and waiting for the phone on his hip to vibrate, which it didn't do. He spent half an hour with Nate watching the tracer ping and shooting the breeze, trying to guess where Archer was *now* without cheating and looking at the map; after a few minutes Simon started insisting everywhere Archer went was obviously the men's room, which led to a particularly entertaining conversation about *why* Archer would need to spend so much time in men's rooms, which led to Nate's ears going scarlet. Which was always fun.

And still Archer didn't call. By six o'clock Simon was bored right out of his skull and starving to boot, and he eventually gave in and flattered Sandra into taking a dangerously bored Mike and Johnny and running out to get pizza for everyone. To keep himself occupied while he waited, he turned on his own seldom-used computer and got Nate to send over the recordings from the day before. A little irritated fumbling with the playback software and then he was able to sprawl out in his office chair, feet up on the desk and a pair of headphones clapped to one ear, to listen to himself and to Jeremy.

*"Let's just say that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I've stolen,"* Jeremy purred in his ear, and Simon closed his eyes and heaved a deep sigh.

At the pause that followed that line Simon reached out and blindly hit the mouse, setting the recording back three seconds. *"Let's just say that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I've stolen,"* Jeremy purred in his ear again.

Simon hit the mouse.

*"Let's just say that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I've stolen—"*

Simon hit the mouse.

*"Let's just say—"*

"Hey, Templar?"

Simon looked up, letting the headphones fall to dangle from one finger. Jeremy was left insinuating at nothing but air. "What's up?"

Nate shifted from foot to foot, one hand resting on the doorframe. "It could be nothing, Templar."

"If you really thought that, you wouldn't be standing there." Simon could hear the faintest buzz of the recorded conversation still echoing from the headphones.

“Anyway, I’m just trying to chase down a hunch. No big deal. What’s up?”

“Well . . .” Nate hesitated and looked over his shoulder at his computer. “I think Shadow may have found the tracer,” he finally said all in a rush.

“What? Shit.” Simon swung his legs down and sat up. *Shit*. What happened?”

“The beacon hasn’t moved in a couple of hours. And it can’t be because he’s not wearing the jacket, Templar, because I just cross-referenced the location on the map, and the tracer’s in a *bank*.”

“A bank, huh. Well, now we know where the Star was.” Simon tapped his fingers rapidly on the desk, thinking. “Okay, Nate. Thanks for letting me know. Hopefully he won’t let this fuck up the deal.”

“I hope not,” Nate said, worried.

Simon swung his feet back up onto the desk. “We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it. Keep an eye on it, just in case.”

“Right,” Nate said, moving away.

“Sandra and the others back yet?” Simon called after him.

“Not yet!”

“Right.” Simon rubbed his face, then put the headphones back up to his ear and hit the mouse.

*“Let’s just say that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I’ve stolen,”* Jeremy purred in his ear.

“Let’s hope you still feel that way,” Simon said, under his breath.

“Templar, the beacon is moving again,” Nate said breathlessly, sliding to a stop in the doorway not fifteen minutes later. “Something’s not right, Templar, he was in there for too long . . .”

Out in the main room, the direct line rang. Simon and Nate stared at each other wide-eyed for half a second, then Simon bolted out of his chair, nearly bowling Nate over. Rich was in his corner, blinking owlishly at the phone in anticipation as Simon grabbed for it. “Took you so long?” he said all in a manic rush, spinning around to lean against the wall. “So, what’s the deal? Decided not to skip the country after all?”

From the other end there was only silence, and somewhere deep in Simon’s mind alarm bells started to go off. He ignored them as best as he could and waited. Finally, with an odd terseness to his voice, Jeremy said, “I believe we need to speak, Simon. Now.”

“Funny, that’s what I thought we were doing,” Simon said, trying to hold on to that lightness. “Or did you mean, like, on the lecture circuit? I understand my talk on the care of hydrangeas is both fascinating and controversial . . .”

That, at least, earned him something like a laugh, although there wasn’t much actual humor in it. “Normally I’d be all too pleased to chitchat with you, Simon, but I’m afraid I’m not in the mood for pleasantries.” Jeremy paused. Simon could hear the rush of traffic in the background, and the alarm bells in his mind were

getting harder and harder to ignore. Finally, Jeremy broke the silence. “Your merchandise has been taken from me,” he said, his normally pleasant English voice completely flat.

“Shit!” Simon snapped upright and whipped around, bracing one hand against the wall above the phone. Every last bit of that amusement vanished in a flash, leaving him with only steel in his voice. “What the fuck happened, Archer?”

“I was sandbagged inside a *bank vault*, Simon,” Jeremy said, his voice still utterly flat. “Here’s where I desperately hope that you’re about to laugh in my ear and tell me those were *your* men, because then I can simply call you a few choice names and hang up on you.”

“Oh, *motherfucker*,” Simon breathed, clenching his free hand into a fist.

“I take it that’s a no,” Jeremy said.

“That’s a no,” Simon agreed, thumping his fist against the wall. “Not ours. Which means—”

“My former employer,” Jeremy finished for him, and now he was breathing hard in Simon’s ear, and it sounded angry.

“Rupp. Christ.”

They both fell silent. Simon thumped the wall again, his mind working fast. When Jeremy spoke again, breaking into Simon’s frantic reverie, what he said almost didn’t make any sense. “Do you happen to know where my esteemed ex-employer is building his device, Simon?”

“What? No. If I knew, I wouldn’t have given a fuck about you in the first place,” Simon snapped. With tacked-on patience he added, “Why do you ask, Jeremy?”

Jeremy laughed. It was a short and fairly unpleasant little sound. “Because I do, Simon,” he said. Suddenly he had Simon’s full attention. “I’ve been there.”

“Okay!” Simon said, his skin tingling with sudden electricity. “Well! This is the point where we have to have some words, Archer!” Whipping around he snapped his fingers at Rich and pointed at the tracking screen, still cheerfully beeping on Nate’s computer, and then jerked his thumb at the door. Rich immediately scrambled for the keys to the van.

“I thought as much,” Jeremy said. Rich bolted out the door, address in hand. Simon barely noticed, every bit of his attention focused on the phone. “How about these words, Simon: you’ve paid me for that merchandise, and I intend to see that you get it, because to do otherwise would violate my professional standards. For one thing, I have absolutely no intention of giving you back that money, and for another, I have been both used and abused by my former employer, and I do not take kindly to that at all. Therefore, I’m at your command until the Star is in your hands.” And then, incredibly, Jeremy laughed, a low breathless sound that punched Simon straight in the gut. “I’m your man, Simon.”

For the first time in a minute Simon was able to breathe. “That’s good,” he said, exhaling hard. “Because I dispatched someone to pick you up forty-five



seconds ago.”

There was a moment of startled silence, then Jeremy chuckled softly. “You’ve put some sort of tracking device on me, haven’t you,” he said, although it didn’t sound like an accusation. “I should have known.”

“Yeah, well,” Simon said just as Mike and Sandra and Johnny came banging back in, bearing pizza. Simon’s hand flashed up, silencing them. “What can I say? Just doing my job.”

“Mm.” Jeremy was silent for a moment. “And apparently I wasn’t doing mine terribly well. How embarrassing.”

“Lost you a couple of points, yeah,” Simon said. “Pity, too, you’d been doing so well.”

“Had I? I’m almost flattered.” Simon could hear Jeremy’s lighter ratcheting, followed by a long exasperated exhalation—of smoke, Simon assumed.

“Don’t be,” Simon told him. “I’m not just utterly thrilled with you right now. Lost all your points when you let some dirtbag mug you.”

“Mm. I suppose that’s fair.”

“It’s more than ‘fair’. It’s exactly what you deserve. A pointless existence.”

Jeremy laughed dutifully, although his attention was apparently elsewhere, and then they both fell silent. Simon glanced at the monitor; the little dot that was Jeremy was still. On the other end of the line, Jeremy was still breathing a bit hard, still angry.

“Ah. Well, this will be interesting,” Jeremy finally said, breaking the silence. “White van? Driven by . . . ah . . . some sort of small and angry bespectacled troll?”

“He’d probably shoot you if you said the troll part to his face, but yeah. Get in. I’ll see you in three.”

“He may shoot me anyway. He looks very upset.” The phone clicked in Simon’s ear, and Simon slammed it into its cradle and turned to face the rest of his team.

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## ◆ Coalition

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[wednesday evening]

They could hear Rich coming before he got there, his rapid footsteps an impatient scurry that echoed off the walls of the empty corridor outside. Simon looked at Sandra once, significantly, and then vanished into his office.

Not a moment later the door slammed open. “In here,” Rich said crossly at someone behind him, holding the door open, and everyone in the room tensed.

Jeremy Archer walked straight into a waiting square of FBI agents. Johnny was lounging against the desk to his left, arms crossed lazily over his chest, eyes closed to slits; Sandra was directly in front of him with her hands on her hips; from his right Mike cracked his knuckles and offered Jeremy a grin that was somewhere between ‘sunny’ and ‘manic’; and a thoroughly pissed-off Rich, coming in behind him, unwittingly completed the formation.

Jeremy stopped at the center of the square and let his hands drop to dangle loose at his sides, his shoulders pulling into a straight line. Something about his stance made Sandra change hers, one of her feet sliding forward, her hands rising to hover, ready, in front of her stomach.

The door closed behind Rich with a soft chunking sound.

“Well,” Jeremy said softly, glancing back and forth, “here we all are.”

“Jeremy Archer! My man!” Mike caroled, his left arm dropping heavily onto Jeremy’s shoulders in a parody of friendliness. Jeremy staggered forward half a step, his hands twitching up, stopping, and falling again. “Man, it is just so good to see you again,” Mike went on, grinning widely enough to show all his teeth. “I hope you can stay a bit this time, huh? Whaddaya say?”

“I suppose it’s too much to hope that we can get this part over with quickly,” Jeremy said, glancing over at Mike. Rich snorted and slid around behind Mike, heading for the back of the room.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Mike said, squeezing Jeremy’s shoulder just a little too hard and leaving the imprints of his fingers in Jeremy’s leather jacket. “I just wanted to tell you, man, that sure was one nifty trick you nailed me with at the Mornings’ place. Texas and I, we are just so impressed, isn’t that right, Texas?”

“Yep,” Johnny said, opening his eyes just a crack. “Impressed as all hell.”

Jeremy opened his mouth to say something, but Mike rode right over him. “In fact, I am just so damn impressed that I wanna shake your hand, whaddaya say, Archer?” Leaving his left arm curled around Jeremy’s shoulders Mike poked his right hand at him.

Jeremy looked down at Mike’s hand until Mike poked it at him again. “I’d take it as a personal favor if you didn’t dislocate anything,” Jeremy finally said, closing his eyes in resignation, and he brought his own right hand up.

Mike’s grin immediately went manic. Instead of shaking Jeremy’s hand he grabbed Jeremy’s wrist and yanked it back and up, forcing Jeremy to either bow deeply to Sandra or have his shoulder popped from its socket; Mike’s left hand slammed down on the back of Jeremy’s head, keeping him down. “Man,” Mike told the room in general, “I have been wanting to do something like this for *days*.”

“Charming,” Jeremy said from somewhere around Mike’s knees, dotting his left hand off the floor to help him keep his balance. “Also rather blatantly uncomfortable, in case you were wondering.”

“Nah, I wasn’t wondering,” Mike said happily, and yanked Jeremy’s hand an inch or so further up toward the ceiling, forcing Jeremy to stumble forward half a step. Sandra slid back quickly to avoid a collision; Mike winked at her. “Whoops! Sorry, Springheel.”

“Yes, I do beg your pardon,” Jeremy told Sandra’s shins.

Mike ruffled Jeremy’s hair. “Aw, he’s so well-trained! Lookit, Springheel, isn’t he cute?”

“Adorable,” Sandra said, her expression somewhere between amusement and disdain.

“I don’t think Springheel thinks you’re cute any more,” Mike told Jeremy, then looked up at Johnny. “Hey, where are our manners, Texas? Get the man a chair!”

“Momma’d be ashamed of me,” Johnny said, shaking his head. Hooking his foot into the rungs of the desk chair he kicked it lazily in Mike’s general direction. The chair skittered across the floor and bounced lightly off one of Jeremy’s legs.

Mike hooked his own foot into the rungs and shoved the chair forward into the back of Jeremy’s knees, using his twin grips on Jeremy to yank him backwards at the same time. Jeremy sat down in it abruptly, his feet popping neatly out from under him; almost before he hit Johnny snatched his left hand out of the air, handcuffs appearing in Johnny’s other hand like a magic trick. Johnny slapped one bracelet onto Jeremy’s left wrist, wrenching it inwards towards Mike. Mike caught the other bracelet and crunched it down around Jeremy’s right wrist, and then they both let go and stood back to admire their handiwork: Jeremy half-sprawled and semi-stunned in the chair with his hands cuffed neatly behind him. From his vantage point by the equipment closet, Nate whistled in admiration.

“Well?” Johnny asked Sandra.

Sandra considered. “8.9,” she finally said.

“Whaaaaat?” Mike clutched at his heart and staggered back half a step. “Come on, that was in perfect sync!”

“Yes, but you messed up his hair.” Sandra shook her head mournfully. “I mean, look at that—”

Jeremy shook his head as if to clear it. His hair fell back into near-perfect order. Sandra stopped, closed her mouth, opened it again, and said, “8.9 for you guys, and *he* earns a point for style.”

“Gotta get the name of your barber,” Johnny told Jeremy.

“Nn.” Jeremy shook his head again and essayed a small wry smile. “Well! Your synchronization is excellent, but I believe your form is a tad sloppy.”

“You stay out of this,” Sandra told him, slapping a restraining hand against Mike’s chest as Mike moved in, intent on cheerfully crushing something.

Jeremy rolled his eyes, struggling to sit up with a little more grace. “I’m ever so glad I decided to do this good deed. So, what’s next? A little friendly bruising?”

“Actually, I told them not to leave any marks,” Simon said, wandering back out of his office now that the fuss was over. “And hey, you look pretty unmarked to me. Good work, team. Bonuses all ’round.”

“Could punch him in the kidneys a couple of times,” Johnny offered. “Won’t bruise but he’ll piss blood for a while.”

“I’d really rather you didn’t,” Jeremy said.

“They always do,” Johnny said mournfully.

“So!” Simon said with slightly forced cheer. “Bring him over here, will you, Honda? Can’t have him blocking the door.”

“Sure thing, Templar.” Mike grabbed the back of Jeremy’s chair and shoved it forward, the legs screeching loudly over the floor. Simon winced. Jeremy yanked his feet up and rode the impromptu ride out as best he could, settling warily back into his seat once it stopped moving.

Simon spun one of the other chairs around and slung himself into it, straddling the back. Jeremy’s eyes immediately dropped to take in the loose-limbed sprawl of Simon’s legs, lingering for a moment on his crotch before they traveled back up. Despite everything, the faintest hint of a smile twitched across his face and vanished again. “So,” Simon said, just a bit nettled, “I hear you’ve got some fascinating information for us.”

“Yes, and I’m ever so enthused about sharing it after my warm welcome,” Jeremy said, eyes darting back and forth, keeping an eye on the ring of people looming over him.

Simon sighed, then reached out and snapped his fingers in front of Jeremy’s face. Jeremy’s eyes flicked back to him. “You talk to me now,” Simon said softly. “They’re done. Fun’s over for them. It’s my turn.”

Jeremy was silent, studying Simon’s face.

"I thought about just going ahead and arresting you and doing all this officially, since Rupp's already got his hands on your last bit of leverage," Simon went on, carefully keeping his voice soft and reasonable. "But since I'm such a nice guy and all, I thought maybe I'd keep it off the record, give you a chance to cooperate, you know?"

Still Jeremy didn't say anything, although his eyes flicked back and forth once.

"So now that that's clear," Simon said, "tell me where Rupp's building his satellite, Archer."

Jeremy's eyes returned to Simon, and incredibly, he smiled. "No," he said, settling comfortably back in his chair and crossing his legs.

Mike sucked in a breath and let it back out in a nearly-silent growl of "Oh no he did *not*."

"I'll hit him if you want," Johnny offered, flexing his fingers experimentally.

"No thanks, Texas. Appreciate the offer, though." Simon rubbed a hand down his face and made a noise that was mostly a sigh. "'No' is not exactly the official definition of cooperating, Archer. Stop being such a gigantic pain in my ass and just tell me what you want in exchange, if it's reasonable we'll do it, and then we can all get the fuck out of each other's lives, what do you say?"

"I refuse to tell you anything as long as they're all looming over me and scowling like I was a ten-year-old schoolboy who'd just done something very naughty," Jeremy said, eyes flicking first to Mike, then to Johnny, then to Sandra. "The rest of you shoo."

Everyone in the circle looked at Simon. Simon's shoulders slumped and he buried his face in his arms for a moment. "All right," he said, his voice muffled. "All right." He looked up again, face set, his eyes boring into Jeremy's. "You guys take the pizza down to the cafeteria. Come back in fifteen. I'll handle this."

"Are you sure?" Sandra asked.

"I'm sure." Simon narrowed his eyes at Jeremy. "What's he going to do that I can't handle?"

"Uh, well, I hate to bring it up, but he's, uh, he's got that gas shooter..." Nate put in.

"I'm not wearing it," Jeremy said, holding Simon's gaze. "Oddly, I didn't think I'd be needing it today. Ever so foolish of me, in retrospect. You can have someone check if you like."

"Nah," Simon started to say, "I'm not—"

Johnny hunkered down behind Jeremy, checking one cuff and then the other. "He's not carrying," he reported.

"I repeat for your benefit," Simon said, leaning on each word, trying to stare Jeremy down, "what's *he* going to do that *I* can't handle?"

"Templar—" Rich started to say. Simon cut him off with a quick glare—losing the staring contest—and jerked his thumb towards the door.

"You hear that?" Mike asked Sandra. "That's Templar-ese for 'step offa my dick'."

"I heard it," Sandra said. "You going to help me with these pizzas or what?"

The door shut behind Rich. The living commotion that was Team Templar faded off down the hall in a mess of thumping footsteps, catcalls, and the occasional yelp of laughter and/or pain. Neither of the men left inside the saferoom said anything, even after the noise had faded to nothing. The silence held, briefly.

"I suppose asking to have these cuffs removed would be pushing my luck," Jeremy said pleasantly, breaking the stillness.

"Off a cliff," Simon told him. "You'll wear them and like it."

"Isn't that a tad kinky for an American?"

"Shut up," Simon leveled a finger at Jeremy. "I'm in no mood for your, your, uh, being yourself right now, Archer. Tell me the details of your spectacular fuck-up."

Jeremy looked over his shoulder at the closed door, then back at Simon, then back at the door, then at Simon once again. Then his smile got a little wider and he jerked his chin up, beckoning Simon closer. "Come here."

"Why?"

Jeremy's smile got just a bit wider and he uncrossed his legs, creating a space for Simon to move forward into. "Perhaps it's a secret."

Simon rolled his eyes and grabbed the back of his chair in both hands. It screeched across the floor as Simon scooted it forward, almost up to Jeremy's. "All right. Better?"

Jeremy looked down at Simon's knees, an inch or so from his own. "Well. That's *better*, yes..."

Simon hissed out a sigh between his teeth and craned forward over the chair's back until their cheeks nearly touched. "It's not like this place is bugged, Archer," he muttered.

"Mm. Probably not. But one or another of your teammates might be listening at the door, and silly me, I tend to err on the side of caution." Jeremy turned his head towards Simon, so that the tip of his nose grazed Simon's cheek. "And you *don't*, I see," he breathed, and his teeth closed with a little click a hair's breadth from Simon's ear.

Simon's breath burst out of him in an exasperated snarl. One hand grabbed Jeremy by his collar and hauled him away, then back up until Simon was up in Jeremy's face, his own face a slit-eyed mask of fury. "You little *cocksucker*," Simon growled, giving Jeremy a single hard shake for emphasis, one that made Jeremy's chair skitter nervously back and forth. "Believe me when I tell you that I no longer have time for any of your little fucking *games*."

Most—most—of the amusement faded off Jeremy's face, leaving him looking resigned. Simon unceremoniously dropped Jeremy back into his chair and sat back, crossing his arms over the back of his own chair and looking expectant.

"All right, all right," Jeremy said, settling back down and rolling one shoulder to resettle his collar. "So. To make a long story overly short, I was delayed for a while before I was allowed to go into the vault. In hindsight, I expect that someone at the bank was placing a phone call. When I finally was allowed in to open my bankbox, someone put a gun against the back of my neck, took the Star, and then struck me."

Simon waited a beat. When nothing else seemed to be forthcoming, he scowled. "... that's it?"

"What? Yes, that's it. I'm not exactly helpless, you understand, but there's only so much I can do when I'm being held at gunpoint."

"You were plenty resourceful when *I* had you at gunpoint," Simon pointed out.

"Well, yes," Jeremy admitted, shrugging slightly. The cuffs clinked against his chair. "But I was in my full working gear then, Simon. With both the gas shooter and the taser—"

"—*taser*?" Simon broke in, both his eyebrows shooting up.

"Yes, taser," Jeremy said patiently, lifting his left shoulder just a bit and flexing the fingers of his left hand as if to say *here*.

"You had a taser." Simon looked away and scruffed one hand over his face. "Christ."

"Yes, and a fairly unpleasant one, to boot. My point being, when *you* had me at gunpoint, I had several options open to me."

"Apparently so!"

"I thought about tasing you, I'll admit, but in the end I couldn't quite bring myself to do it—"

"—hey. I said none of your games."

"Of course. My apologies." Jeremy closed his eyes briefly. "But like a fool I wasn't expecting trouble today, and so I left both the taser and the gas shooter behind. Neither of them is something I'd enjoy explaining to your average jumpy policeman, you understand."

"Uh huh."

"And really, he didn't give me much of a chance to do anything." Jeremy opened his eyes again for the sole purpose of rolling them. "Just grabbed the stone and struck me, and when I came to I'd been cuffed, shoved up on top of the row of bankboxes, and left to rot. It took me another hour or so to get free and get out."

"Uh huh." Simon glanced over at Nate's computer. "We noticed you didn't move much."

Jeremy followed his gaze. “Bloody embarrassing,” he muttered. “That’s three times now I’ve been caught out because of you. You’re making a hash of my perfect record.”

“Well, that feeling’s nice and mutual,” Simon said, scowling at Jeremy. “So basically some two-bit thug clocked the great Jeremy Archer and got away scot-free. I’d think that was pretty funny if my ass weren’t on the line here. As it is, it just sounds thin.”

“It does, I admit it, but it’s still true for all that.” Jeremy paused and inclined his head towards Simon. “Would you like to feel the lump for yourself? Just to assure yourself that I’m telling the truth, of course. It’s somewhat impressive.”

Simon eyed Jeremy narrowly, but in the end he reached out and combed his fingers through Jeremy’s hair in as impartial a manner as he could muster. Halfway down his fingers bumped up across a fat welt and Simon hissed a little in unconscious sympathy, tracing the welt down to where it disappeared just behind Jeremy’s ear. “Well, you sure did get hit by something, anyway.”

Jeremy darted an amused glance at Simon’s hand, curled over the side of his face. Simon rolled his eyes and jerked his hand away. “Fine,” Simon said. “Okay, so you got hit. So, assuming that you are, in fact, telling me the truth, and you’d better goddamned well be . . . do you know where they’re taking the Star?”

For the first time in the conversation Jeremy actually hesitated, and Simon’s eyes promptly narrowed. “Yes and no,” Jeremy finally said.

Simon buried his face in his arms and groaned.

“‘Yes and no’ is not an acceptable answer, Archer!”

Simon’s thoroughly aggrieved voice burst out at Nate as he eased the door open, and Nate squeaked and recoiled. Simon’s head jerked up at the sound and Jeremy Archer looked over his shoulder.

“Ah . . .” Nate said, poking his head back in. “We’re done eating, Templar. Want us to piss off for longer?”

Simon heaved an irritated breath. “No,” he said, rubbing one hand over his face again. “No, that’s okay, Specs. Go on and round up the troops.”

“Okay, Templar.” Nate closed the door softly. They could both hear him as he trotted off.

Simon looked back at Jeremy, his eyes tired. “Fun time’s over, Archer. I’m tired of playing with you. You’ve got sixty seconds left, at most. Either you give me a damned good reason to keep you around before that door opens again, or I’m putting you formally under arrest and washing my hands of you.”

The faint amusement faded out of Jeremy’s eyes. “I don’t exactly have an address,” he said, his voice flat and businesslike. “But if you take me to the Reno-Tahoe airport and put me in a car, I can direct you to my former employer’s compound.”



“Not good enough,” Simon said. “It’ll take more than directions to keep you out of jail.”

“I don’t *have* directions,” Jeremy said, sounding vaguely irritated. “I was blindfolded. Apparently he was under the impression that that would prevent me from knowing where I’d been taken.”

Simon considered this. “So . . .”

Voices echoed ever so dimly down the hallway outside and Jeremy narrowed his eyes. “I can’t provide you with simple directions. I can, however, sit in the front seat of a car and tell the driver when to turn and where. But for that, I have to be with you.”

“I don’t trust you,” Simon told him, bluntly.

“I can’t blame you,” Jeremy shot back. Simon could hear footsteps now. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder at the door, then back at Simon, and his face was as expressionless as Simon had ever seen it. “But I’m telling you the truth, Simon.”

“How do I know that?”

Jeremy’s sudden smile was dry and humorless. “Because that’s what you’ve paid me for.”

Simon studied Jeremy’s face. Jeremy didn’t say anything else. Outside the clamor grew, Mike’s baritone overlaid with Sandra’s dry alto and the scuff of feet, and then someone laughed—it sounded like Nate—and Simon nodded once, brusquely. “That kind of reasoning I can buy,” he said.

“I’d hoped so,” Jeremy said as the door burst open.

“So what’s the verdict?” Mike said, wandering over and dropping a hand casually onto Jeremy’s shoulder. The rest of the team crowded in after him, Sandra taking a halfhearted swing at Johnny, who swayed lazily back out of the way. “We gonna feed this asshole to the sharks or what?”

Simon was silent for a moment, considering Jeremy. Jeremy watched him; the thief’s expression was carefully nonchalant but his eyes were narrowed, and his shoulders were tense under Mike’s hand. Simon huffed out a breath and swung abruptly out of his chair, sending it spinning back to bang into the table with a casual flick of his hand. “Guess what, gang. We’re all going on a road trip!”

“What, all of us?” Mike said, his fingers tightening on Jeremy’s shoulder. Leather creaked. Jeremy gritted his teeth.

“Yes, Honda,” Simon said patiently. “All of us. Mr. Archer’s presence is, unfortunately, required. As is that shoulder of his you’re mangling.”

“Well, I’ll be fucked,” Mike said, taken aback. For a moment he looked disappointed, but he rebounded quickly enough and let go of Jeremy’s shoulder, ruffling his hair instead. “Ah, shit. Welcome aboard, Shadow. You’re a lucky son-of-a-bitch, you know that?”

"I'd gotten that impression, yes," Jeremy told him, jerking his head back to flip his hair back into place. "... Shadow?"

"Yep," Mike said cheerfully. "Stupid as hell, isn't it? Art Theft got to pick your code name way back when you were just a little bitty small-time art thief. If you've got a beef with it, take it up with them, huh?"

"Ahh, Art Theft." Jeremy rolled his shoulder tentatively, wincing. "I've always been ever so impressed with their brilliance. The stories I could tell you—"

"He's coming *with* us?" Rich broke in, too astonished to be irritated.

"Yep, he sure is," Simon said. "Anyone here got a problem with that? Speak now or forever hold your water!"

No one else said anything. Rich sputtered, his face reddening. Simon waited patiently. When Rich had sputtered his way back to silence, Simon prompted, "Well?"

"I don't like it," Rich said angrily. "I don't like him. I don't trust him. But if you say we need him for some reason—"

"I do," Simon said.

"—then that's good enough, I guess." Rich subsided into a vicious sulk that told the world—and Simon—very clearly that it wasn't good enough, actually, but since when had anyone ever listened to him?

Simon noted this and proceeded to ignore it. "So!" he said brightly. "Let's do this thing, people. I'm going to call Upstairs and get us some kind of flying thing, hopefully with wings on it. Specs! We're flying to Reno, landing at Reno-Tahoe. Arrange the usual van and collect anything that you can't replace on-site. Specs Two, help Specs, and if you've got some theoretically useful yet highly illegal shit lying around, for God's sake don't tell me. Texas, I don't know what kind of reception we can expect, so bust out the dangerous toys. Springheel, help Texas, and if he goes for the rocket launchers again, smack him one. Honda, we're going to need some serious car *fu* once we get there. Get Archer out of those cuffs and get him to tell you what you're driving into. Any questions?"

"Reno, huh?" Mike said. "Any chance we can fit in some hookers and gambling once we've made the world safe for democracy and all that noble shit? Hey, Texas, slide me your keys—"

Jeremy shifted in his chair, then tossed the undone handcuffs onto the table in front of him. The clatter silenced the entire room.

"Nobody's impressed," Rich told Jeremy, scowling furiously.

[wednesday night]

The night breezes and the wash of air from the commuter plane's propellers blew Simon's hair into his eyes as he jumped out of the back of the van, and automatically he narrowed his eyes and raised a hand to deflect the wind. "All right, people," he called over the noise, reaching back into the van to grab one

end of the drab metal footlocker that he'd been sitting on. "Let's hustle. I want to be in the air in half an hour."

Johnny grunted in acknowledgement and grabbed the other end of the footlocker, and together they wrestled it out of the van. Simon staggered a bit as the full weight of the thing hit him. It was only half-feigned. "Shit, Texas. What's in here, lead? We going to bludgeon people to death the old-fashioned way?"

"Some lead, yep," Johnny acknowledged. "Mostly the firin' kind."

"Suits me," Simon said. "Suits me fine."

The driver's side door slammed and Mike loped up behind Johnny, stuffing the keys in his pocket. "Lemme get that, Templar," he said affably, and proceeded to bodyslam Simon out of the way, grabbing the footlocker's handle from him in the same movement.

Simon stumbled a step or two sideways, then snorted and punched Mike hard in the shoulder. "Shit. What? I can't carry things any more? Am I getting feeble in my old age or something?"

"Aw, hell no, Templar." Mike fell into step with Johnny, trotting backwards and looking over his shoulder. "But, see, I'm thinking you're wearing the official 'Criminal Wrangler' badge tonight, and you better go wrangle him out of the van before Specs Two bites him."

Simon rolled his eyes. "Oh, *Christ*," he told the sky. "I knew I was going to regret this."

"Something big's up Specs Two's ass," Johnny put in. "Bigger'n usual, anyhow."

Mike promptly gagged and pretended to stagger. "Oh, shit, thanks so much for that mental image, Texas."

"Any time," Johnny said as Simon jogged past him, heading back the way he came.

Jeremy Archer slid out of the back of the van just as Simon arrived. The rest of them, not knowing what to expect of the next few hours, were all dressed drably; Jeremy was a slash of utter black in the night. "Well," he said, turning his face into the breeze and letting it blow his hair back. "Tell me where you want me."

"'The hell out of my life' would be nice, but that's not really a luxury I can afford right now," Simon said without any real malice. "Come on, I'm putting you on the plane."

"An escort! How lovely." Jeremy fell into step beside him. Behind him Rich poked his head out of the van, noticed them both, and glared after Jeremy before scrambling out. "I could, in theory, walk up those steps and find a seat without your help, you realize."

"Oh, sure, but I've got to talk to the pilot anyway, and I want to make sure he knows you're criminal scum and not to be listened to." The noise of the plane's

engines got louder as they approached, and Simon had to raise his voice just slightly. “Also, I wanted to ask: what did you do to Specs Two?”

“Specs Two . . . oh. The, ah, nice bespectacled fellow. I assure you I don’t know why he’s so angry. I was entirely my usual charming self.”

“Oh, well,” Simon said, catching the handrail and gesturing for Jeremy to precede him up the steps into the plane, “that explains *everything*.”

“He made a fool of me—I mean us—once already, that’s why,” Rich was telling Simon a few minutes later, standing in the open belly of the plane and irritably lashing down a couple of heavy hard-sided briefcases. Nate waited patiently behind them, carrying a fat black metal box. “I don’t trust him at all and I think you’re crazy if you do.”

“I don’t,” Simon said. “Normally I wouldn’t trust him any further than, uh, Nate could throw him. But we’ve got him at one hell of a disadvantage right now and also, I point out, outnumbered six to one.”

“How do we know he’s not going to lead us on a wild goose chase?” Rich pointed out, shoving his glasses back up and scooting back out of Nate’s way. “Are we really going to go haring off in any fucking direction he says?”

“Yeah, because this could be the first real break we’ve gotten, and I’d have to be even dumber than I am to ignore it for the sake of my ego,” Simon said. “And anyway, how stupid has he got to be to deliberately piss off the six of us, Rich? He’s got to know that if he’s fucking with us he’s going to go to jail looking like he got hit by a heavily-armed bus.”

“He was fucking with us pretty hard in the saferoom,” Sandra called from the front of the plane’s undercarriage.

“Aw, Sandy, that wasn’t *fucking*,” Simon said. “That was just, I don’t know, really obnoxious foreplay or something.”

“Whatever,” Rich broke in. “I’m just saying that Rupp paid him four million bucks, and that’s enough money to make a guy take one hell of a convincing-looking fall for you.”

“Normally I’d agree with you,” Simon said, leaning back against the curving wall of the plane to let Mike and Johnny wrestle another footlocker past him. “But . . . come on, Rich, this is Jeremy *Archer*, and if Interpol can be believed that’s his idea of pocket change—how did I wind up in the position of having to defend Archer to my own team?”

“Dunno,” Johnny said, stowing the footlocker next to the first one. “Maybe ’cause you’re the one brought him in on this.”

“Maybe,” Simon said, heaving out a frustrated breath. “Okay. We’ve established that none of us trust him and he’s no-good criminal scum. That’s peachy. I’m good with that. My concern is, is this going to keep any of you from working with him?”

Everyone was silent for a minute. "I'm good with it," Nate finally said. "Templar's right. He might be, uh, messing with us, but we still have to check it out. Just in case." Rich stared at Nate incredulously, then scowled and jerked his chin down in some kind of grudging acknowledgement.

"We've worked with a lot worse than him in the past," Sandra said. "I'm down with it."

Johnny grunted, which Simon took for agreement.

"That's true," Mike said. "I'm down too, long as he's not leading us into some kind of trap with bullets in it. I hate those."

Simon rubbed one hand down his face, thinking about it one last time. "I don't think so," he finally said. "You're all as familiar with his file as I am. He's strictly for-hire and he's never been violent before."

"Yet," Johnny put in, vaulting over the stowed footlockers and thudding heavily to the tarmac.

"Yet," Simon acknowledged. "My gut says he's on the level here, though."

"My gut says your gut's full of shit," Mike said, but he was grinning as he slapped his stomach.

Johnny whistled, soft and low, rubbing two fingers over the polished wood conference table in the center of the little plane. "Nice," he said.

"Yeah, beats flying cattle class," Mike said, pushing past Johnny and flopping out in one of the monstrous executive chairs. "Damn, Templar, whose plane is this? Can we keep it? We'll just say it was 'lost', huh?"

"Yeah, I'll tell Upstairs it fell behind the washing machine, how's that?" Simon said. "We all aboard?"

"I'm the last," Sandra said, yanking the curving door shut behind her and spinning the wheel until it chunked into place. "Are we ready?"

"Yeah, go tell the pilot we're good to go, will you, Spring?"

Sandra vanished forward, ducking under the curtain into the cockpit. Simon took a quick headcount: Rich and Nate at one end of the big table, heads together over a laptop that was making their glasses shine a weird bluish-white; Mike and Johnny across from each other in the middle, Mike sprawled out like he was thinking about having a beer and watching the game and Johnny, as always, apparently asleep; Sandra in the cockpit; and, tucked away in a conversation pit up front, Jeremy Archer, folded neatly into a deep leather armchair and fiddling with the cuffs of his jacket.

The intercom crackled to life. "We'll be taking off in about five," the pilot said. "Might want to find yourselves some seats."

Sandra reappeared, glancing briefly at Jeremy before heading back to join the rest of the team, picking a seat beside Johnny and leaving the head of the table free for Simon. Simon considered it for a moment before rapping his knuckles

briefly on the back of his chair. “We’ll talk some after the plane’s safely in the air,” he said. “I’m going to go have a little chat with our temporary buddy.”

Rich looked around Nate at Jeremy, then made a little snorting sound and settled back into whatever it was he was doing. “Yeah, good luck with that,” he said.

Simon dropped into the seat next to Jeremy, settling back into it with a grunt. “You all set?” he asked.

Jeremy’s little answering smile was distracted as he ran the tips of his fingers under the lapels of his leather jacket. “As set as can be expected,” he said, sliding a pair of familiar mirrored goggles out of an inside jacket pocket and buffing them against his t-shirt. “I’m a little underequipped, alas. I wasn’t precisely expecting this when I got up this morning.”

Simon glanced down. Jeremy’s jacket was hanging open, the lining visible, and he could see dim shapes silhouetted against it, as well as something glinting around Jeremy’s side—with a little widening of his smile Jeremy casually pulled the jacket closed. Simon acknowledged the countermove with a little snort. “As long as you’re on the level about telling us where to go, don’t worry about it,” he said. “We’ve got your back.”

“The FBI has my back,” Jeremy mused, making the goggles vanish into his jacket again. “And to think, all these years I’ve been trying to avoid you.”

“See how much easier everything is when you cooperate with the authorities?” Simon leaned back and closed his eyes as the plane lurched slightly under them, taxiing out to the runway. “Sorry about their attitude. They just—”

“—don’t trust me,” Jeremy finished for him. “I can’t blame them.”

“Just see that you don’t give them any more reason not to. If anything happens to any of them because of you and your shenanigans . . .” Simon let the sentence trail off there, meaningfully.

“Mm.” The lights flickered out, casting them into dimness. “You have a way of making me ever so glad I volunteered to help you,” Jeremy said, and Simon glanced over at him. Jeremy had his face turned away, looking out the little round window.

“Heh.” Glancing past the side of Jeremy’s face Simon found his attention caught by the window as well, and by the runway lights gliding silently by outside. “Never thought you’d be doing anything like this, huh?”

“Never.” Jeremy sighed a bit and shifted in his seat, crossing his legs. “I’m just a thief, Simon. Quite a good one, even if I do say so myself, but that’s all.” Abruptly he looked back at Simon, his expression guarded but neutral. “I’m no terrorist. I don’t give a damn about his foolish politics. I just take pretty things for rich people.” His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. “I can’t forgive him for forcing me into something like this.”

Simon thumped his knuckles companionably against Jeremy's shoulder. "Well, you're in the big leagues now, Archer, like it or not," he said. "See that you don't fuck it up."

Jeremy looked away again, his jaw still tight, leaving Simon wondering if he'd missed something. Eventually he closed his eyes and settled back in his seat. "Your faith in me is overwhelming, Mr. Drake."

Simon considered Jeremy for a moment, and then the rising roar of the plane taking off took the ability to converse away from them both.

The lights came back on five minutes later. Jeremy hadn't said anything else. Eventually the plane nosed out of the clouds, and a minute or so later the intercom popped on overhead. "We're leveled off at cruising altitude. It's safe to move around now if you need to," the pilot said.

Simon glanced up at the speaker overhead and its disembodied voice, then heaved himself up out of his seat. "C'mon," he said, clapping Jeremy on the shoulder. "Meeting time."

"Eh?" Jeremy looked up at him, plainly caught off guard. "Me?"

Simon made a show of glancing around. "I don't see anyone *else* here, Archer."

One of Jeremy's eyebrows lifted. "I hadn't expected to be included in your strategy session."

"Yeah, well, I'm going to use you pretty hard while I've got you," Simon told him, manfully ignoring the thoughtful look that Jeremy gave him. "So come on already, we're going to pick your brains and *then* exclude you like the useless civilian that you are."

"Civilian?" Jeremy said, standing up and ducking past Simon into the aisle. "Why, Simon, you called me a civilian and not a criminal. That's positively heartwarming."

"Slip of the tongue," Simon said.

"Mm," said Jeremy, and Simon rolled his eyes and gave Jeremy's shoulder a little shove.

"Right!" Simon said, dropping into the empty chair at the head of the table and gesturing for Jeremy to take the seat next to him. Sandra's glance was plainly startled, and Nate did one of the most perfect double-takes that Simon had ever seen as Jeremy slid into the indicated chair. "Brain-pickin' time," Simon said cheerfully, ignoring his team's reactions. "Listen up, folks, because I don't know what's going to be important and what's not."

Johnny swung his feet down off the table and opened his eyes about halfway. Rich spun around in his chair and put the laptop on a side table, flicking off the backlight.

Simon glanced at Jeremy. "Okay. So. Tell us your story. You flew into Reno-Tahoe?"

"That's correct." Jeremy folded his hands neatly on the table in front of himself and looked back at Simon. "I'd already spoken to Conrad Rupp twice by that point, once by phone and once in a neutral location. I had a tentative offer on the table by that point. The meeting at his compound was meant to provide me with information and finalize the deal."

The recital of facts was smooth and unemotional, without any kind of apology to it; whatever else Jeremy Archer had done in his life, Simon noted, somewhere along the line he'd learned how to outline events like a lawyer. Unsurprising, considering his vocation. Simon nodded. "All right. Just tell us what happened from there."

Rich cleared his throat. "Actually . . ."

Simon glanced at Rich. "Eh? Specs Two?"

Rich shot Simon an unreadable look, then shifted his gaze to Jeremy, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Can you describe the guy you were meeting with? Same guy both times, right?"

Jeremy inclined his head towards Rich. "I met with the same man both times, and as far as I can tell he was the same man that I spoke to on the phone. He was . . . I would have to say early to mid-forties, tall, taller than I am but not quite as tall as Simon here, and fairly slim. His hair was white to light gray and straight, cut short and parted in the center—" one of Jeremy's hands drew an arc down his forehead, miming the fall of Rupp's hair "—and he wore glasses with silver rims. Very pale-skinned, very, er, shall we say well-preserved, and both times he wore a white suit. His voice was a bit clipped. I believe he must have been German, although his English was close to perfect."

Simon exhaled. "That's Conrad Rupp, all right. Good-looking bastard."

"Yes, that's him just exactly," Jeremy said, letting just the ghost of a smile show. "Good-looking, and a bastard."

Simon looked at Rich. "That tell you what you wanted to know, Specs Two?"

Rich sank back into his chair. "... I'm good, Templar."

"Great." Simon looked back at Jeremy and prompted, "So. You were at the Reno-Tahoe airport . . ."

"I was met by the man that Rupp had told me to look for. One of his drivers, a large man with dark hair. I don't know his name." They were all listening to him now and Jeremy's attention strayed from Simon, so that he spoke to each of them in turn. "The driver confirmed who I was, and then I was shown to a car outside and blindfolded."

Johnny opened his eyes a little more. "Blindfolded?" he asked.

"Rupp specified it as part of our deal." Jeremy shrugged. "It isn't all that unusual in my line of work, you understand."



Johnny grunted and nodded a bit. Jeremy waited a beat, then went on. "At any rate, I made a point of telling the driver that I was very tired—jet-lagged—and that I would probably doze off in the car even without the blindfold. He didn't see fit to question that. Sloppy, really. And so he didn't bother trying to make conversation while I pretended to sleep, which left me free to memorize the route he was taking."

That drew an audible snort from Rich at the other end of the table. Jeremy ignored it, although Simon shot a glance in Rich's direction. "The drive took approximately seventy-five minutes," Jeremy went on. "He didn't *seem* to be driving in circles to confuse me. Again: sloppy. As far as I could tell we were heading generally north and gaining altitude, although you must understand that I can't know that for sure. The driver was quite good and the car was in excellent shape; I couldn't miss an actual turn but I may have overlooked some of the gentler curves."

"So skip ahead," Simon said, making a little 'hurry up' gesture. "When you arrived . . . ?"

"We crested a large hill and the driver told me we were almost there, and I, er, 'woke up'." Jeremy smiled faintly and made the quote marks with his fingers. "We drove downwards for about . . . call it two minutes, and over some sort of metal grating that I took to be a gate. There was a bit of slow maneuvering within the compound before the car stopped, and then I was led out of the car and into a house of some sort before my blindfold was removed."

Everyone else was silent, intent on Jeremy. "And?" Simon prompted, softly.

"Rupp provided me with blueprints of the Mornings' mansion and satellite photos of their property and various useful diagrams, which I studied for a few hours. I came to the conclusion that what he was asking for was possible and named my price, which he accepted. We handled the various details, then I was reblindfolded and taken back the way we'd come." Jeremy fell silent, looking from face to face, and then finally back at Simon. "Anything else?"

Simon considered. "Did you see anything interesting while you were inside the house?"

"The house itself was nothing special, old and run-down. Not the sort of place I'd expect a man of Rupp's means to live, normally, but I'm quite used to the wealthy being, er, eccentric." Jeremy shrugged. "They kept the curtains drawn for the most part. There was a smallish window in the bath, however, and they didn't deign to follow me in there."

"And of course you just had to stick your curious little nose out." It wasn't a question. Simon smiled ruefully and shook his head. "What did you see?"

"Warehouses," Jeremy said, and a reflection of that smile appeared on his own face. "Corrugated tin warehouses, several of them. The old roundish kind. Quonsets? A few large trucks. A chain-link fence around the entire place. And, further out, mountains."

Sandra caught her breath. “Shit,” Mike breathed reverently.

“Sounds like we have a winner, folks,” Simon said softly.

For just a moment the silence held, everyone at the table caught up in their own thoughts. Simon broke the spell by rapping his knuckles sharply on the tabletop. “Okay, people,” he said, and his voice sounded loud to his ears. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to do a quick round of introductions for Archer’s sake—codenames only, anything further is solely up to your own discretion, don’t *glare* at me like that, Specs Two—and then we’re going to split up. We’re going to have to land and refuel once, so we’ve got about four hours of plane time ahead of us. Do whatever you can to prepare yourselves and then get some sleep. Okay?”

There was a murmur of assent. Simon glanced at Jeremy and gestured at Johnny. “Okay. First up, to your left there, that’s Texas. Texas handles weapons and general ass-kicking for us. Chances are pretty good that if it’s got a trigger or a firing sequence Texas can hurt things with it. That is, if someone doesn’t knock his ass out first.” Johnny balled up a piece of paper and slung it lazily at Simon, who batted it aside without missing a beat. “On his left you’ve got Springheel.”

“Oh, we’ve met,” Jeremy said, and he smiled at Sandra. “I hazard a guess that your name isn’t really Tiffany.”

“And you’re right, thank God,” Sandra said. “Templar picked that alias, for the record. Personally I’d have gone with something a little less Bond-girlish.”

“Hey,” Simon said, mildly. “I was so befuddled by that big-ass diamond that I nearly went with Crystal, so count your blessings. Anyway, Springheel there does a lot of undercover work, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, she’s nominally my second-in-command, and she knows about four hundred ways to break your arms if you try anything funny. So, you know, if you’re going to try anything funny, tell me first so I can get the video camera.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, glancing at Simon, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement.

Simon’s pointing finger moved on. “At the end of the table there we have Specs and Specs Two. Some of our codenames are ever so fucking creative. First, that’s Specs, the blond one—”

“—you can just call me Nate,” Nate volunteered, raising his hand in an uncertain wave. Rich groaned under his breath. “You know, as long as it’s in person. I’m okay with that. You have to call me Specs if it’s over frequency, though.”

“Mm. Nate. I see.” Jeremy inclined his head. “Thank you.”

“Uh . . . sure?” Nate said.

“Hey, you two, flirt later,” Simon broke in. Nate went red and ducked back behind the laptop’s screen. Simon grinned a little before glancing back at Jeremy, who raised an eyebrow at him. “Anyway, Specs is our hardware guy and

electronic-doodad wrangler. Also our own personal bomb disposal unit and the team mascot. Next to Specs, er, next to Nate, we have Specs Two.”

“We’ve also met,” Jeremy said, his voice cooling a great deal. Rich scowled at him.

“Specs Two handles software,” Simon said, ignoring the interruption. “And he’s a fucking genius, too, and if I hadn’t told you he’d have found a way to let you know.” Simon flashed a quick grin in Rich’s direction. Rich snorted out an unwilling laugh. “Seriously, he talks to computers and they talk to him, sometimes in highly illegal and unethical ways, not that I know anything about that, being a model citizen and all.”

Mike’s snort of laughter was immediate. Simon jerked his thumb at him. “The bruiser there, who you’ve not been properly introduced to, is Honda.”

“Mike,” Mike told Jeremy, shrugging unconcernedly. “Figure I’ve already tried to break your arm so we might as well be on a first-name basis, huh?”

“Mike,” Simon amended. “When he’s not roughing people up for me he does a lot of our undercover work, seeing as how he’s ever so ethnic—”

“—haaaay, *cabron*, you better not be steppin’ to my momma,” Mike broke in. “You know us Japs’d take that as a slur on our honor.”

“Stepped to your momma last night, Honda,” Johnny said, and Mike gleefully kicked him under the table, making him grunt.

“And he’s also our designated driver,” Simon said, smoothly talking over the ensuing kicking fight. “The man can drive like fuck, as you’ve seen.” Simon pointed at himself. “And finally there’s me. I try and keep these crazy bastards in line, and all I get for my trouble is the codename ‘Templar’.”

“Ah. Yes,” Jeremy said. “About that . . .”

“Specs’ fault,” Simon said immediately, metaphorically pinning Nate to the wall with a pointing finger. “He’d just seen that movie when I was forming the team. He found out my name was Simon and he hung it on me and it *stuck*.”

“Um. Well.” Nate fidgeted. “It could have been worse?”

“That’s true,” Simon admitted. “I didn’t get hung with a handle like *Bobcat*.” Everyone at the table promptly burst out laughing, except Jeremy, who glanced around with a quizzical smile on his face. “I’ll explain some time,” Simon said, once he managed to stop laughing. “It’s a long story. Okay, guys, let’s break. Get some sleep if you can. I’ll go tell the pilot to douse the cabin lights.”

Twenty minutes later, with the lights off and most of Team Templar bedded down, it was almost peaceful on board the small plane. Simon kicked off his sneakers and padded from one end of the plane to the other, checking up on everyone one last time: Sandra and Mike sprawled out on the two couches in the tail section of the plane, Rich burrowed into the row of emergency seats in front of the bathroom, Johnny still at the conference table with his head buried in his

crossed arms, and at the foot of the table, Nate, still awake and curled up in a little ball with Rich's laptop on his lap.

"Okay?" Simon said in an undertone, hunkering down by Nate.

"I'm good, Temp'lar," Nate whispered, frowning at the computer. "I'll try and sleep in a minute."

Simon considered the computer screen, then pointed. "Move that stack onto the red five."

Nate laughed a little, embarrassed, and dragged the little pile of cards over. "It helps me relax," he offered awkwardly. "I play a lot of solitaire when I can't sleep."

"Yeah, I know," Simon said, and patted Nate on the shoulder. "Seriously, you okay?"

Nate nodded, uncovering an ace and moving it to the top row of empty slots. He glanced up over the top of the laptop, toward the little grouping of chairs at the front of the plane that Jeremy had retreated back to. "He's not so bad," Nate added. "I kind of want to like him, except for the part where I really shouldn't."

"Eh," Simon said, shrugging a little. "I know what you mean. He's pretty likeable, for what he is."

Johnny shifted and grunted in his sleep, and both Nate and Simon started and looked up guiltily. Nate ducked his head. "Guess I'll get some sleep," he whispered, shutting the laptop.

"Good idea." Simon gave Nate's shoulder one last encouraging squeeze and stood up, heading towards the front of the plane.

Jeremy had nodded off with his arms crossed protectively over his chest, tucked neatly into the same seat he'd been sitting in at takeoff. Simon stopped where he was and watched Jeremy sleep for a little while, then caught himself doing so and snorted. "Yeah, sleep well, Archer," he muttered, padding over and settling gingerly into the seat next to the thief. "You're going to need that rest once we get to Nevada." Then Simon sprawled his legs straight out in front of himself and slumped down in his seat, letting his head fall forward and nodding off himself.

Jeremy Archer's eyes opened just a crack, and he smiled a thin little smile before closing his eyes again.

[midnight local time]

The plane taxied to a slow halt and the engines shut down, leaving the cabin almost quiet. "Reno," the pilot said over the intercom, unnecessarily. "They'll have stairs out to us in a minute or two."

Simon shrugged into his jacket and went looking for his shoes, edging past Mike. "Right, people," he said, knuckling a bit of sleep out of one eye. "Let's do this thing. . . . Christ, they put a real wood conference table in here and there's no coffee in the kitchenette. It's un-fucking-American, is what it is."

“There’s a jar of instant in the equipment box,” Nate volunteered, blinking nearsightedly at Simon and groping for his glasses. “I figured it couldn’t hurt to bring it.”

“And that’s why I love you so damn much, Specs,” Simon said, stepping into his sneakers. “I’d drag you down to Las Vegas and marry you right now if I wouldn’t have to convert to do it.”

Nate’s cheeks went pink and he nearly fumbled his glasses trying to put them on. Point for Simon. “My mom said to hold out for a nice Jewish doctor,” he said, and by the end of the sentence his voice was almost steady again.

“And Templar loses on all three counts!” Mike crowed.

The small terminal they’d landed in back of was almost completely dark. The bulk of the Reno-Tahoe airport sprawled in a sea of lights off to the south, but out here there were only the lights of their plane and the one overly bright white spotlight that illuminated the tarmac between their plane and the building. A couple of sleepy-eyed airport workers gave the metal stairs one last cursory glance before retreating to a covered doorway.

An older man with a body like six feet of knotted rope and a face like a hatchet detached himself from the side of a parked van and ambled into the light. “Templar?” he said, shielding his eyes against the glare.

“Here,” Simon called. He jogged out to meet the man halfway, sticking out his hand when he got close enough.

The other man hesitated, then shook it. “Tomahawk. I’m with the Carson City branch. Christ, boy, you caused a hell of a scramble out here.”

Simon’s jaw set hard at the word ‘boy’. “Things weren’t exactly all fun and games on our end, either,” he said, trying not to bristle visibly. “This our van?”

“All yours,” Tomahawk said, jerking his head towards it. “We’d kinda like it back in one piece, it’s all the same to you.”

Simon shrugged. “Yeah, well, I’d like a million dollars and a pony myself, but it so happens I’m shit out of luck on both counts.” The belly of the plane opened with a hiss and both Simon and Tomahawk glanced toward it. The rest of Simon’s team was ranged around the cargo bay, Mike just now clambering in. Jeremy Archer was lurking around the side of the cargo doors, out of the way, casting a long black shadow over the tarmac that stretched nearly to Simon’s feet.

Tomahawk’s eyes narrowed a bit. “You got an extra body in your group,” he said, his tone offhand, as if he weren’t fishing for information.

“Yep,” Simon said, taking some minor revenge by completely refusing to elaborate.

Tomahawk glanced over at him, then shrugged. “There’s a thermos of coffee in the front seat, although it’s probably half-cold by now and nasty shit in any case. You’re welcome to it. Here, keys.” He tossed the keys in Simon’s general direction.

Simon flicked out a hand and caught them easily. "You're a lifesaver," he said, his tone offhand, and then turned his back on the older man without a second thought. "Hey! Honda!" he called. "Man here says they want their van back in one piece! Think you can handle it?"

"Shit, Templar," Mike called back, "why you gotta be makin' all these unreasonable requests?"

Simon turned back to Tomahawk and shrugged. "You see how it is," he said. "Still, I'll do what I can to keep the kids in line. Anything else I can do for you before you have to go?"

Tomahawk's jaw jutted out sharply, making him resemble his namesake. "Christ," he said again, and shook his head.

The taillights of Tomahawk's car flashed red, once, as he turned out of the parking lot and vanished, much to Simon's general relief. "Hairball," Simon muttered after him, then turned around and stalked back to the van. "We loaded?" he called as soon as he got close enough.

"Almost," Sandra called back, handing one of Nate's equipment crates to someone inside the van. "You rough him up any?"

"Nah," Simon said, waving the thought away. "I don't hit senior citizens unless they force me to. Or one steals my parking spot."

"Shit, what a fucking hairball," Mike added in disgust, mimicking Simon's own thoughts as he dropped out of the back of the van. "That the best they can do out here in the sticks?"

"Hey now, let's not be busting the man's balls in front of the civilian," Simon said, mildly enough. "Yo, Honda, keys." He weighed the keys in his hand for a moment, making them jingle, then abruptly whipped them at Mike.

Mike snapped them neatly out of the air. "Whoo, didn't think a kid like you could throw that hard," he said, ostentatiously shaking his hand and wincing.

"You're dead to me," Simon said genially. "Get in the van." Mike sniggered and jogged around the van to the driver's side. Simon turned to the rest of his team, stretched in a ragged line across the tarmac, and made shooing gestures, herding them and their burdens towards the van. "Okay, okay, hustle, people. Archer, you've—fuck. Where's Archer?"

"Here," Jeremy said, poking his head around the far side of the van. There was a black-papered cigarette jutting from between his fingers, the tip glowing orange.

"Shit, I thought you'd booked. You've got shotgun. Get us there."

"My pleasure," Jeremy said, dropping his cigarette to the pavement in a shower of sparks and grinding it out.

"That's littering," Simon pointed out, grabbing a somewhat-overburdened Nate by his belt and giving him a boost into the back of the van. Nate squawked, startled. "Just another offense on your long list of heinous crimes."

“Do let me know if you feel obligated to write me a citation,” Jeremy said, vanishing around the far side of the van again. Simon heard him knock on the passenger side window. Mike leaned across and popped the lock.

“Okay! One, two, three, criminal, five, six, and Templar makes seven—” Simon climbed into the van and slammed the rear doors closed behind him. “—we’re all in, Honda. Whenever you’re ready.”

“This van’s a piece of shit,” Mike complained, waggling the steering wheel with one hand. “Fucking boonies.”

Simon slung himself onto the footlocker next to Sandra and pulled the back doors shut. “Yeah, yeah, you say that every time, Honda. Funny how you’ve never once actually had any trouble once we got underway.”

“ ‘Cause I’m one masterful motherfucker, Templar,” Mike said, starting the engine. “Shit, thought you knew that.”

“Oh, is that what it is?” Simon said. “And here I thought you were just bitching to cover your ass.”

“Bit of that, too,” Mike said. He turned to look at Jeremy. “So, Archer, where am I going?”

Jeremy finished doing up his seatbelt and blinked at Mike for a moment. “Ah. Pull around to the front of this terminal, please.” He held up Tomahawk’s thermos so that the people in back could see it. “I seem to have been sitting on a thermos of something. Anyone want it?”

“Pass,” Simon said, and when the coffee made its way back to him he chugged off half of it, despite it being every bit as cold and nasty as advertised.

“Here?” Mike said, bringing the van to a gentle stop in front of the small terminal’s main doors.

“Mm. Close. Pull forward about twenty feet, please.”

Mike let the van roll forward. “Tell me when.”

Jeremy looked out his window for a few seconds. “Mmm . . . stop . . . here.”

The van halted. Jeremy peered out the front windshield, then out the passenger window, then nodded. “This is the place.” He turned halfway around in his seat, cocking his arm over the back, and smiled an apologetic little smile at the five people clustered back there. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you all to be as quiet as possible. This will take some concentration on my part.”

“You heard the man,” Simon said after a pause. “Let’s have quiet. If you really need to share something, whisper it.”

There was a general murmur of “Right, Templar” and then it was all quiet. Jeremy turned to look at Mike. “Shall we?”

“I say, old bean, let’s,” Mike said, flexing his fingers on the steering wheel. “Pip pip, cheerio, and all that rubbish, eh wot?”

Jeremy just barely smiled before nodding and settling back into his seat. “Very well, then. Shall we see how much I’m worth?” He bowed his head—it was

an odd, almost formal gesture—and closed his eyes, clasping his hands neatly in his lap. “All right. Pull away from the curb slowly. Once the road begins to curve to the left, shift over a lane.”

Mike nodded, then shot a glance at Jeremy with his eyes closed and amended that to a grunt, and the van pulled away from the curb. “A touch faster than that,” Jeremy said. Mike increased their speed by a hair, pulled into the curve, and shifted over a lane.

They left the small terminal behind in the dark. Streetlights whickered by overhead. Mike glanced at Jeremy and then back at the road.

Jeremy’s breath came in small whispers, one of his fingers tapping rhythmically against his knuckles. “Shift over to the left here,” he said after a moment, and Mike grunted in acknowledgement and did so. “Slow a bit. You’ll be turning left—” Mike put on the blinker “—in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . .”

Mike slid the van easily into a left-turn lane. “One . . .” said Jeremy. The van heeled over to the left and onto another, larger road just as Jeremy said “Now.” Mike let out his breath in a rush.

From the back someone whistled softly and Simon couldn’t help but close his eyes in relief.

Jeremy, his eyes closed, led them more or less smoothly out of the airport area and onto I-395, heading vaguely north, just as he’d said. After the first minute or so Mike stopped making any noise at all and just followed Jeremy’s directions; to Simon, in the back of the van, it seemed as if the van was directly obeying Jeremy’s voice and Mike wasn’t there at all. The only sounds in the van were the occasional dry click of the turn signals and the constant soft monologue of Jeremy’s English-accented voice. “Just a bit faster. Ah. There. Shift over a lane to the left. The road *should* curve gently to the right here . . .”

It was nearly hypnotic. To keep himself from dozing off Simon looked out the back windows, watching 395 slide away from underneath him. At this time of night the road was only sparsely populated, a few other cars spaced out at irregular intervals behind them. Occasionally one would grow larger, catching up and passing them with the soft rising rushing sound of tires on pavement. *Doppler effect*, Simon thought, randomly, and then let the thought go.

Sandra sat beside him, lacing her fingers together and separating them again, over and over. Beyond her Johnny lounged bonelessly back against the wall of the van, chewing on a toothpick and staring off at nothing. 395 unspooled before and behind them as the van drove on through the night; Simon listened to Jeremy’s soft narration with half an ear and flexed his hands against his thighs.

“Shift over a lane to the right. The road will start to rise slightly—there. Bear to the right here, it will be a fairly obvious curve.”



Mike looked from the straight freeway ahead of them to the curving right exit and took it, flicking on the right turn signal almost as an afterthought. To either side of them were the low, semi-identical shopping centers and apartment complexes that populate American suburbs everywhere, adjusted for gambling; they were heading north out of the city now, Reno proper starting to recede behind them. Simon glanced away from the window and at Nate, sitting opposite him; Nate nodded in acknowledgement and gave him a slight smile, then looked away, looking at the back of Jeremy's head. Beside him Rich crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at the floor, his lips moving silently as he muttered to himself.

"You'll be turning left in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . now. Slow a bit. A bit more. Yes, that's it. There should be a rough spot of road—there."

The van rumbled over the rough spot and stretched out on a new road, dark and deserted, blank desert on the sides as often as battered low buildings. Far, far off in the distance a red light turned green.

Sandra's hip bumped up against Simon's as she resettled herself on the footlocker and she flashed him a quick smile of apology. She smelled pleasant, like herbal shampoo and some kind of clean soap. Letting his head fall back Simon stared at the bare metal roof of the van.

The green light turned yellow and then red as the van approached it; Mike glanced from left to right and then casually ran the light, choosing Jeremy's directions over the traffic laws. Simon snorted softly and looked out the back windows, keeping a wary eye out for flashing blue lights. There was only the red light, receding impotently into the distance.

"The road will begin to rise and curve to the right. Shift over to the left as you take the curve. There should be raised lane markers as you go."

The van's tires thumped over the little bumps in the road right on cue. Simon's lips twitched up in a bit of a smile. The lights of the city were entirely behind them now, and the narrow two-lane road wound completely unlit through empty land. The only lights in the world were the van's headlights, illuminating two stretched ovals of road in front of them, and the moon overhead.

"There will be a wide curve here and the road will continue to rise. We're going in a semicircle, I believe. Keep going. There's a patch of some sort in the road—there."

Simon found himself in danger of drifting off, shook his head, and looked out the back window again. Reno was just a blot of light in the distance, and between the city and their van there were no headlights at all. He stopped listening to Jeremy after a while; the thief's pleasant low voice became just so much background noise as Simon let his mind go empty. He held that state for a minute,

like holding his breath, then began to go over everything from the beginning, considering each bit of evidence again.

*Let's just say that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I've stolen,* Jeremy purred once again in his mind, and Simon listened to the mental replay as if it was for the very first time.

When he abruptly became aware of his surroundings again, later, it took him a moment to figure out why: Mike had snapped off the headlights. They were running by the light of the moon alone, now. Jeremy's monologue was still going, but starting to sound a little rougher, like he'd been talking for a while.

"The road curves to the right again. Now back to the left. Slow down, please, and mind how you go. There's a hard curve to the right—I believe it's a switchback—in four . . . three . . . two . . . one."

The van bore to the right. The little road was snaking upwards through a narrow valley. Mountains loomed to either side. There were no other headlights in sight. No other lights at all, in fact.

Across from him Rich shifted and leaned forward, putting a hand on Simon's knee to get his attention. Simon blinked and leaned forward until his forehead nearly touched Rich's.

Rich glanced at Simon meaningfully and then held up his hand between them. A flash of bright blue light half-blinded Simon, and he blinked like a mole until he could focus on it: the face of Rich's wristwatch. 89:43:02, it said. Rich tapped it, nodded towards Jeremy in the front seat, and looked back at Simon.

Simon watched the numbers spin upwards. 90:00:00 came and went, and abruptly he realized what Rich was trying to say: the trip had taken seventy-five minutes, Jeremy had said in the briefing. Seventy-five minutes. But they had been in the van for over ninety minutes now, and while it was possible to dismiss that as a function of how they were traveling . . .

Simon glanced from Rich's watch to the back of Jeremy's head. The after-image of the watch's backlight hung like the moon in Jeremy's hair and Simon blinked his eyes twice to clear them. Jeremy's voice was a soft and roughening drone, and Simon considered it, and him, for a moment. Then he looked back to Rich and held up one hand, flashing his fingers three times. *Fifteen more minutes*, the gesture said. *We'll give him fifteen more minutes and then see where we are.*

Rich hissed in irritation, but shut off his watch's light and sat back. The little silent conference had broken the stasis in the back of the van, though, and all around Simon his team shifted and moved and came to life once more. Sandra sat forward and gathered her hair into a ponytail, and Nate's glasses sheened with moonlight as he turned his head, and Simon felt the last of his lethargy drain away, anticipation coiling coolly in his belly like a snake.

"We should be entering a long straight stretch of road now," Jeremy went on, seemingly oblivious to the rustling from the back of the van. "It'll begin to rise

fairly steeply in three . . . two . . . one . . . now.” The tires bumped up against the rise. “There will be a number of rough patches in the road,” Jeremy said, and he swallowed and cleared his throat, and Simon felt a quick stab of sympathy, which he dismissed. Jeremy went on, his voice actively raspy now. “Bump—there, and another—there, and then several—there.”

Sandra shook her head experimentally, making her ponytail lash against the back of her neck. Johnny sat up and stretched like a cat, back arching, hands groping straight out in front of him. Simon felt these things more than saw them. His senses were all tingling with the beginnings of the pre-game rush. In ten minutes they’d either be there or they’d be demanding one hell of a good explanation from the thief, and either way—

Suddenly Jeremy’s head snapped up and his eyes opened. “If we keep going like this we’ll crest the hill in about thirty seconds,” he said in a normal tone of voice. “However, if we do that, we may be visible from the compound—are we driving without headlights?”

“You just noticed?” Mike said, his voice rusty with disuse but still amused. He was slowing the van now, the gravel at the side of the road crunching roughly under the tires. “Yeah, we’ve been running dark for about ten minutes. Haven’t seen another car in about that long, either. Sure you haven’t been fucking with us?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Jeremy said gravely, splaying a hand out on his chest. And then he coughed, even as Mike stopped the van. “I don’t suppose there’s anything to drink still laying about, is there?”

Simon groped down by his feet and came up with Tomahawk’s thermos. It was still half-full. “Here,” he said, his own voice a little rough. “One thermos of nasty-ass coffee, coming up.” He poked Johnny in the side with the thermos. Johnny took it and dangled it over Jeremy’s shoulder until Jeremy took it.

“My favorite,” Jeremy said, unscrewing it and taking a deep slug of the stuff. “. . . gah,” he said a moment later, his lips skinning back from his teeth in a grimace. “That’s *foul*.”

“Gift horse, mouth, *et cetera*,” Simon said, stretching his legs as best he could. “So we’re there?”

“More or less,” Jeremy said. “If you go to the top of this hill you should be able to see the compound.”

“Right!” Simon felt for the door handles. “I’m going to go scope it out. Honda, you’re with me. Archer, stay put. The rest of you stay here and get ready to go, and be on your guard. Stealth is the order of the day, folks, let’s keep it quiet.” His blindly groping fingers hit the handle and Simon squeezed it gently, easing the door open.

His sneakers hit gravel with a soft crunch and Simon eased the back door shut again until it clicked against the latch, leaving it caught but not shut all the way. A second gravelly crunch from around the side of the van announced Mike’s exit,

and Simon slid around to meet him, jerking his head towards the top of the hill. Mike's grin was a flash of white in the night as he fell in behind Simon. The night swallowed their footfalls.

"Think he's been straight with us?" Simon muttered as soon as they were well away from the van. "You're the one who'd know."

"Yeah, I think so, boss," Mike said, glancing warily from side to side. His right hand hovered in front of his chest, ready to grab for his gun if needed. "Least, he sure did have this route memorized just like he said. That shit was dead easy. Don't know where we *are*, precisely, but he brought us to some specific somewhere..."

The crest of the hill lay just ahead, and they slowed. Mike glanced at Simon and raised both eyebrows. Simon spread his fingers and brought his hand down: *stay here*. Mike nodded and hunkered down, his hand sliding into his jacket to rest on the grip of his pistol. Simon crouched and crossed the last ten feet at a careful stealthy duck-walk, occasionally shifting to all fours. "C'mon," he muttered almost silently, not really aware that he was speaking. "C'mon, c'mon..."

Gingerly he poked his head up above the top of the hill. For a moment he saw nothing, nothing at all, just darkness, and something in his belly constricted. "Shit—" he hissed, and then it clicked, what he was looking at. Those long pale shapes just now resolving from the darkness were old-fashioned quonset huts, all right, and he counted twelve, ranged in neat rows of three around a smaller white shape that he took to be the house that Jeremy had mentioned. The road he was on flowed down the hill directly into the compound. A handful of eighteen-wheelers were parked off to one side, and a trail of exhaust rose from one of them, dirty in the moonlight. When he held his breath he could hear the far-off rumble of its engine. Tiny figures scurried like ants from the truck to one of the buildings and back.

And there were no lights. Not a single light showed in the entire place.

*Got you*, Simon thought in cold triumph, clenching one hand into a fist. *Shouldn't ought to throw away your tools so lightly, Rupp.*

Simon threw open the back doors to the van and he and Mike scrambled in. "Bad news, kids," Simon said softly, pulling the doors gently closed behind him again. Everybody in the van became very still, and Johnny shot a speculative look at Jeremy, whose face magically cleared of any emotion at all. Simon enjoyed that immensely for a moment before he added, "We don't get to beat the shit out of him after all, looks like. Sorry about that. I know you guys were looking forward to it."

The corner of Jeremy's mouth twitched upwards and Simon silently scored himself a point.

"It's there?" Sandra demanded. "We're here? What is it?"

“Some kind of old military installation,” Simon said, getting back to business. “I’m guessing it got abandoned after World War II and Rupp moved in later. Someone’s there, all right, and they’re running under blackout conditions. Something’s going on down there and it looks pretty damned suspicious, whatever it is. We’re going in.”

Adrenalin swept through the van like a hot breeze. Simon crouched in the circle of his teammates and knocked his knuckles lightly on the van floor, and suddenly he had everyone’s full attention. “Here’s how it’s going to go down. We’ll be splitting up. Specs, Specs Two, you stay with the van. Springheel will be leading the second team as usual. Spring, take Honda and Texas and head around to the right side. Shadow and I will take the left side.” A rustle of surprise ran through the van and more than one person glanced at Jeremy before looking back at Simon. “Keep it as quiet as you can at all times,” Simon went on, now speaking directly to Sandra. “Avoid confrontations and reconnoiter. Our goal is ultimately to recover the Morning Star, and if we can do that without them noticing, so much the better.” Sandra nodded, and Simon looked at the rest of his team. “Questions so far?”

A couple of his teammates glanced at Jeremy again, but in the end, no one said anything. Jeremy himself was silent, and he was watching Simon thoughtfully. Simon exhaled the breath he hadn’t noticed he’d been holding and went on. “We’ll take earpieces and radios, but I don’t want anyone talking unless they’re asked a direct question or have something vitally important to relay. Remember: quiet unless it can’t be avoided.”

Johnny grunted. Mike nodded. Sandra said, “Got it, Templar.”

“Which brings me to armaments,” Simon said, and paused, thumping his knuckles against his forehead. “Handguns only, except for Texas. Texas, take an assault rifle, couple of clips. Don’t use it unless you need it to cover your escape. No shots fired unless you absolutely have to. If you have to shoot, shoot to kill. Don’t let anyone raise an alarm. If you take someone down, hide the body. Shadow. You need a gun? Whatever you’re used to, chances are we can outfit you.”

“Thank you,” Jeremy said, waving his hand dismissively. “I’m good as I am.”

“Fine,” Simon said, relentless. “Specs Two, I want blueprints of this place. They’ve got to exist somewhere. Get a GPS reading and then see what you can find. Raise me on frequency as soon as you find anything. Specs, keep us all in touch and see if they’re broadcasting anything you can tap into. If you hear someone outside the van and it’s not one of us, raise the alarm and shoot if confronted. We’ll always let you know via frequency if we’re coming.”

“Got it,” Nate said, touching the gun holstered in the small of his back. Rich nodded.

“We’re after two things here: the diamond, primarily, and the destruction or sabotage of any potential satellites should we happen to trip over them. Nothing

else.” Simon paused and looked from face to face. “If you run into *any* sort of trouble that’s bigger than you are, or if the alarms start going off, drop everything and get the hell out. I refuse to lose any of you. Won’t stand for it. Get me?”

“Got you, Templar,” Sandra said.

“Right!” Simon clapped his hands together like a benediction—or a gunshot—and suddenly he was calm. “Let’s do this thing, folks. Gear up. I want us on the move in five.”

[early thursday morning]

Simon eased his head up to peer down at the darkened compound again. It was largely the same. That truck was silent now, the people that had been unloading it gone. If they’d been spotted—if the alarm had been raised—he couldn’t see any signs of it.

He turned to look across the road. It took him a moment to pick out the second team, even though he knew they were there, and he nodded to himself in satisfaction. The faint bright circle of Sandra’s face turned towards him.

Simon counted to three, silently commended them all to luck, then swept his hand forward. *Go*. Sandra flowed over the top of the hill like a snake, staying low, Mike and Johnny like wolves after her. Their running footsteps, stealthy and careful to begin with, faded almost instantly.

Simon glanced over his shoulder. Jeremy Archer knelt about three feet behind him, silent and still, and when their eyes met all he did was raise an eyebrow. Simon jerked his chin up towards the top of the hill and took off in the same motion, cresting the hill and falling away quickly before the moon could silhouette him against the top of the ridge.

Behind him all was silence. Simon didn’t look back, intent on staying low and out of sight. Either Jeremy had followed him or he hadn’t, and either way Simon was committed now. The road curved away to the right and Simon struck out across open country, trusting to the shadows of the scrubby trees around them to hide him.

A small dark knot of trees off to his left caught his eye and Simon angled towards them, the loose and sandy soil shifting a little under his feet as he made his way across the mountainside. He caught a single glimpse of Jeremy as he went, just a slight flicker of movement sliding into the shadow of a jutting boulder not five feet behind him. Simon relaxed, imperceptibly.

Simon slipped into the darkness of little knot of trees and stopped several feet in. He took a single deep breath, mentally counting to three; on the count of three he smoothly turned around and put out his hand.

Jeremy, intent on ducking around one of the scrub trees without stepping on anything noisy, walked right into it. Simon’s fingers splayed out across his chest, stopping him. After a single swift glance at Simon Jeremy looked away,

scanning the area; finding nothing threatening he looked back to Simon, raising both eyebrows.

Simon leaned in, leaving his hand where it was. Jeremy automatically turned his head to the side, giving Simon his ear. "When we spoke on the phone last," Simon breathed against the side of Jeremy's face, "you said you were at my command until the Star was in my hands."

Jeremy nodded, slightly. Simon felt it more than saw it. "You *meant* that," Simon went on, glancing at Jeremy's profile. "Didn't you." It wasn't really a question. Simon had replayed that conversation in his mind twenty times on the drive down, until he was convinced.

Jeremy nodded again. He glanced to the side, meeting Simon's eyes for a moment.

"You're kind of a lousy criminal, what with this honorable crap, you know that?" Simon noted softly, and his fingers flexed against Jeremy's chest. "Anyway, now you get to prove you were telling me the truth. I'm done second-guessing you, Archer. You trust me and I'll trust you, at least until we're out of here. Get me?"

Jeremy nodded a third time, then turned his face up towards Simon's, as if to respond. Simon half-closed his eyes in expectation. Jeremy's cheek grazed against his, breath warm against Simon's ear, and Jeremy opened his mouth as if to say something. In the end, all he did was breathe out the ghost of a laugh and twitch his head towards the compound.

Simon exhaled hard and nodded, letting his hand drop. Silently he turned and headed out the other side of the little stand of trees. If he was being followed, he couldn't hear it ... but suddenly Simon was convinced that he was.

It took them another half an hour to get to the bottom of the hill. The compound itself filled only about half of the wide, shallow valley; from the bottom of the hill to the compound's high chain-link fence was a matter of a hundred yards. The final approach would be excruciatingly slow. While Rupp's crew had been less than thorough about cleaning out the scrub brush, they were so close now that they would have to watch out for guards on top of everything else.

Side by side they crouched in the shadow of a tangled low shrub while Simon studied the compound, looking for a way in. Beside him Jeremy cleared his throat, once, pointedly. Simon pretended he hadn't heard a thing.

One of the outermost buildings, perilously close to the fence, was throwing the long jagged finger of its shadow out over a patch of scrub growth nearly at the fence's foot. Simon tapped Jeremy on the shoulder and pointed to the scrubby trees, then pushed at his shoulder lightly. Jeremy nodded, one hand rooting around in his jacket; something glinted in his hand the instant before he

vanished, slipping away from Simon's side and gliding like oil into the shadows. Simon lost track of him almost immediately.

Alone now, Simon took a deep breath and glanced up. The night was clear—too clear—and there wasn't so much as a cloud to dim the constant blue-gray glow of the moon. Nothing for it. Simon broke cover, heading the opposite way, expecting at any moment to hear a yell, a shot, something that meant he'd been seen. Nothing happened. Gritting his teeth against the surge of his nerves, Simon made for the scrubby trees in a long, punctuated scramble that ended with him crouched under the crooked trees, alternately watching for guards as best he could and studying the fence.

There was a sound behind him—a single, soft, deliberate sound, like fingers scraping through sand—and then Jeremy slid in beside him. “Took you long enough,” Simon muttered, glancing sideways at Jeremy, then looking at him again. Jeremy was wearing his goggles now, his eyes hidden behind a single smooth rectangle of blackened glass. From here, beside him, Simon could see what looked like the edges of dials on the side. “Oh, stylish,” he noted, and went back to looking at the fence. “Fence is our first problem. Probably alarmed, possibly electrified. Ideas?”

Jeremy reached up and touched the side of his goggles, turning one of the dials. There was a click, and then a hum so low as to be almost subliminal. “Mm . . . no,” he murmured, studying the fence. “No alarm, no electrified wires. See?”

And before Simon could stop him Jeremy put a hand out of the scrub and hooked his fingers into the wire mesh.

“Shit!” Simon hissed, knocking Jeremy's hand free with a convulsive movement. “Are you *trying* to trip the alarm before we even get in? Or fry yourself?”

“Actually, I'm simply trying to prove it to you as quickly and painlessly as possible.” The heavy rectangle of Jeremy's goggles turned to stare blankly at him. “I suspect they had one too many false alarms with the desert animals,” Jeremy said, reaching up to touch the side of his goggles again. The faint hum stopped. “There's no electricity running through the fence at all, not even enough to power an alarm system. I've a certain set of lenses that make electric current visible. And look.” He held out his hand. His fingers were printed with narrow brownish stripes. “Look at that rust. It's my guess that that's the original unmodified fence. He's been spending his money elsewhere.”

“Like on you.”

“Like on me.”

“Fine,” Simon muttered, dropping it. “Christ, try not to give me a heart attack next time.”

“Yes, sir,” Jeremy said softly, with a slight smile. He turned to study the fence again. “How shall we get in? Over the top?”



Simon looked at the fence. Old and rusty it might be, but there was still barbed wire over the top. “No,” he said, tracing out the line of the fence to the north with his eyes. “There.”

Jeremy studied the battered and leaning bit of fence that Simon was pointing to. “Tunneling under, then? Or will we be cutting through? I’ve a small pair of wire cutters . . .”

“If we have to,” Simon said, flexing his fingers absently. “But I think I can lift it long enough to get us under. Can those things see in the dark?”

“Oh, yes. What am I looking for?”

“Guards,” Simon said, dropping lightly to his knees. “Let me know when we have a window at least two minutes long.”

Jeremy nodded and turned the blank rectangle of his eyes on the compound again, adjusting the dials on the sides of his goggles and making that slight hum start again. “Not many guards this far out,” he murmured after a moment, scanning the area. “Either he’s overconfident or running out of money.”

“Or there’s a fuss on the other side of the compound,” Simon muttered.

Jeremy smiled faintly. Dimly the sound of crunching footsteps reached them both, and Jeremy’s head turned slowly as he followed them; Simon, for his part, could only see bits and flashes of them, hidden as they were in the building’s shadow. “There,” Jeremy finally breathed. “I think we’ll have two minutes now.”

“Good,” Simon said shortly. “Go.” And he broke cover, running along the fence to the broken section and staying low, grateful for the bits of scrub brush that broke up that harrowing run. Dropping to his knees in front of the fence Simon hooked his fingers in the chain-links and hauled upwards, gritting his teeth. The fence squealed out a complaint but tilted inward, the center of it lifting grudgingly upwards. “Go,” Simon grunted again, the muscles of his arms bulging.

Jeremy didn’t need to be told twice. Hands shot out from between Simon’s knees, clawing into the dirt on the far side of the fence. Jeremy pulled himself neatly between Simon’s legs and under the fence in the same smooth motion, rolling onto his feet within the compound a second later.

“Shit,” Simon muttered, adjusting his grip. The fence was sturdier than he’d hoped. Getting himself under it without getting speared in the chest was going to be a problem—Jeremy’s fingers linked with his through the fence, startling him and momentarily scattering his thoughts.

“I’ll hold it for you,” Jeremy breathed, sliding his feet a little further apart. “Let it go slowly.”

Simon was privately dubious about this, given their relative sizes. Still, *you trust me and I’ll trust you*, he’d said. Nodding briefly Simon let his arms relax in small increments, transferring the weight and the pull of the fence to Jeremy.

Jeremy squared his shoulders, his fingers going white. By the time Simon let go entirely Jeremy’s teeth were clenched and the cords were standing out on

his neck, but the fence was still up. Simon didn't hesitate. Dropping onto his belly he clawed his way under the fence and between Jeremy's feet. Bits of wire ripped at the back of his jacket but a moment later he was safely through and helping Jeremy ease the fence back into its place. It landed back in its original place with barely a jangle.

Jeremy heaved out a deep breath and rolled both shoulders, already scanning the grounds. "Invigorating," he said softly. "Where to?"

Simon pointed to a deeply shadowed doorway in the nearest hut. "There." Without waiting for a response he loped off.

Jeremy followed him, silently.

The doorway niche proved to be about five feet long and two feet deep. Simon flattened himself out against the wall nearest the door and waited until Jeremy joined him. "Guards?" he hissed, hand hovering over his holstered gun.

Jeremy leaned out and scanned the shadows. "None coming."

Simon exhaled and let his hand drop. "Keep a lookout. I'm going to call in."

Jeremy nodded, already intent on his task. Simon fished the radio handset out of his jacket. "Specs, this is Templar."

"Got you loud and clear, Templar," Nate immediately said in his ear, relief in his voice. "What's your status?"

"We're inside the fence," Simon said softly, watching Jeremy. Jeremy was completely calm, his stance relaxed. "No static so far. Team Two, what's your status?"

"They haven't radioed in yet, Templar—"

"—this is Springheel," Sandy said, her voice queerly choked as she muttered into the radio. "We are not in, repeat, not in, but that'll change in five minutes. No static so far."

"Good to hear," Simon said. "Any luck on scanning the frequencies, Specs?"

"Normal guard chatter," said Nate. "I'll keep scanning in case they say anything worth hearing. They haven't twigged to you yet, in any case."

"That's something," Simon said. "Specs Two."

"Specs Two here, Templar," Rich said.

"Tell me you've—" Jeremy's hand flashed up. Simon stopped talking and let his free hand drop to the butt of his gun. After a painful interval Jeremy relaxed and nodded, letting his hand fall again. "Tell me you've got blueprints of this place for me, Specs Two."

"Wish I could, Templar," Rich said. Keys clicked gently in the background. "I know where we *are*, but there aren't any documents on official file for this place beyond the basics. The records are sealed for some reason. Anyway, I've got a call in to HQ and I'm preparing to do something you don't want to know about in case they drag their feet too much."

“Good man, Specs Two,” Simon said. “Keep me posted. I’ll radio again once I’ve got something to report. Springheel, report once you’re safely inside the fence.”

“Copy that, Templar,” Sandra said.

“Keep it close, team,” Simon said, and he closed his eyes for just a fraction of a second. “Templar out.” Tucking his radio back into his jacket he leaned over to where Jeremy stood. “We good?”

“We’re fine,” Jeremy murmured. “I estimate we have about two minutes at the outside before the guards come around again.”

“That’ll have to do,” Simon said. “I’m thinking we head for one of the warehouses nearest the center.”

“That seems to be about Rupp’s style,” Jeremy agreed. “I daresay there will be more guards there, though.”

“Can’t be helped.”

“I agree. Toward the center.”

“It’s settled, then.” Simon slid out of the niche and followed the wall of the warehouse towards the center of the compound. Stopping about five feet shy of the corner he reached blindly back behind him, groping until his fingers hit leather; catching Jeremy’s shoulder he drew the thief forward, pointing silently at the corner.

Jeremy slid around him and crept forward, hugging the wall so tightly that Simon could barely see him. Simon gave him until the count of five, then moved forward, picking his way carefully; Jeremy put a hand on his chest, stopping him, and Simon stopped breathing in order to listen.

Voices. Simon’s hand fell to the butt of his gun. The hand on his chest pressed down harder, then suddenly snapped closed around a handful of his jacket. Without stopping to explain Jeremy yanked him forward, out into the alleyway between two of the warehouses, toward the voices and approaching footsteps.

Simon was suddenly certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that he’d placed his trust in the wrong man entirely. Jeremy Archer, Rupp’s well-paid pet, was about to betray him to a pair of heavily armed guards and he’d walked like a sheep right into their trap. A voice in his head cursed him for a fool and he grabbed for his gun . . . then Jeremy shoved them both into another one of those deeply shadowed doorway niches and let go of Simon, sinking into the shadows.

Simon automatically did the same, drawing his gun, just in case. Jeremy shrugged halfway out of his jacket and pulled one side up to cover the white gleam of his face and the glitter of the goggles. Simon darted a glance at Jeremy and then pressed himself as far back into the shadows as he could, his gun up.

The two guards passed within four feet of their hiding place. Simon tracked them with his eyes, the barrel of his gun cold against his cheek. Drop the one who spotted them first, from here he couldn’t miss, and then drop the other before

he could bring that rifle to bear . . . the guards walked right by, keeping up their aimless conversation, and rounded the corner where he and Jeremy had been not fifteen seconds ago.

Five seconds later Simon dared to breathe again, and almost immediately he heard a matching exhalation from Jeremy. “Well!” Jeremy breathed, pulling his jacket back on. “That was exciting. . . . are you all right? You seem a bit put out, for some reason.”

“I’m good,” Simon muttered, reholstering his gun. “By which I mean that I just had another fucking *heart attack*, Archer. Don’t take a risk like that again. I’d rather retreat to a known hiding place than take chances like that.”

Both of Jeremy’s eyebrows rose from under his goggles, but in the end he just nodded and said, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Simon studied what little of Jeremy’s face he could see. “What?”

“What what?” Jeremy asked, leaning forward cautiously to scan the narrow alleyway.

“What’s with the eyebrows?” Simon gestured at his own face.

“Ah—” Jeremy signaled the all-clear and they both raced across the alleyway and a good thirty feet down, sheltering in the doorway of the next warehouse over. “It occurs to me that I owe you an apology, Simon,” Jeremy breathed once they were safe.

“Eh?”

“That particular move didn’t strike me as terribly risky. Or, at least, not as risky as you thought it was. By my estimation we had close to ten seconds to get into the niche and hidden, and we only used . . . say, six of those.” He shrugged. His smile was thin. “But you needn’t worry. I’m certain you’ll get better at this with practice.”

Simon glared at Jeremy for a moment, then snorted. “Shut up, show-off.”

“Absolutely.” Jeremy pressed a hand to his chest and bowed over it before sliding back out of the niche and creeping forward to the corner of the warehouse.

“We’re in,” Sandra muttered in Simon’s ear. “That’s some crap fence there. Guards are totally complacent. Bet they’ve had no trouble for months. Springheel out.”

Simon didn’t bother to fish out his radio and respond. He and Jeremy were crouched behind a pallet full of metal barrels, their destination—the warehouse closest to the center of the compound—clearly in sight. The doorway niche directly across the dirt road was much like any of the others, except that new metal gleamed from the door’s handle. It looked like paydirt to Simon.

So did the pairs of patrolling guards, now passing by every sixty seconds or so. It was going to be close. Jeremy’s head kept flicking back and forth as he watched them go by. “Don’t bother asking,” Simon finally muttered. “Just grab me and go when you think we can make it.”

“Mm. If you’re sure,” Jeremy breathed, glancing from left to right. “. . . ah. Get ready.”

Simon tensed, gathering his legs under himself. The voices of the last pair were still vaguely echoing in his ears when Jeremy plucked at his jacket and dashed out from under cover. Simon unfolded like a sprinter and took off after Jeremy, leading with his gun out and ready. The muzzle of his gun stabbed south, then north, and then he was in the niche and pressed against the back wall beside Jeremy.

No one shouted after them, and after a few seconds in which they did not get shot at Simon relaxed a bit. “We’re good,” he breathed. “So. You’re the famous burglar. Get us in.”

Jeremy looked up, then leaned out and scanned the area one last time while fishing around in the cuff of his jacket. A narrow beam of light stabbed out from a penlight in his hand and Simon automatically shielded his eyes against it, then squinted down at what it was pointing at. “Shit,” he breathed.

“Kawa combination lock,” Jeremy said in apparent agreement, touching the gleaming metal of the doorhandle. “Ten digits. Very nice.”

“Archer, stop *appreciating* it and open it—hsst!”

The penlight clicked off, leaving Simon’s eyes dazzled. They both pressed back into the niche while the guards went past, Simon with his gun out, Jeremy with his head ducked down low. As soon as their footsteps faded the penlight clicked on again. “Have you got a spare hand?” Jeremy breathed. “Hold the light here, please.”

Simon glanced edgewise at him, then took the penlight from Jeremy and trained the light on the last two digits of the lock. Jeremy produced a pair of tiny screwdrivers from his sleeve and forced the wedge-shaped tips in between the ninth and tenth digits. Simon alternated between watching and keeping an ear open for guards.

Jeremy pulled the handles of the screwdrivers sharply outwards, levering the two metal wheels slightly apart. “Ah, that’s what I was afraid of,” he murmured, staring into the tiny gap he’d just created.

“What?” Simon edged closed, squinting.

“Do you see that red wire?” Jeremy asked, levering the wheels slightly farther apart. Simon moved the light until he could just barely make out a flash of red within the lock. “The lock is wired into the base’s security systems,” Jeremy went on, letting the gap fall shut and tugging his screwdrivers free. “The Kawa Corporation’s alarmed locks have three settings: either it will set off the alarms on the fifth wrong try, the third, or the very first.”

Simon shut off the penlight and handed it back to Jeremy. “So . . . can you break in?”

“If we had . . . hm . . . about six hours, completely unobserved,” Jeremy said, absently making the little screwdrivers disappear into his sleeve again. “Or,

alternately, five minutes, given the freedom to make an awful lot of noise. I'm assuming we haven't either?"

"No. Shit." Simon raised his gun and Jeremy ducked his head, and they both fell still until the next set of guards had passed them by.

"So," Jeremy said once it was all quiet, leaning back to study the door at more length. The quiet amusement was back in his voice. "Here we are."

"Yes, Archer, here we are," Simon agreed warily. "In a compound full of heavily armed terrorists. I *really* don't have time for your games—"

"I find terrorist compounds so romantic, don't you? Perhaps it's the excitement. Or the moonlight." Before Simon could respond to that, the penlight popped on again. "Let's use that," Jeremy said.

Simon looked up at the louvered air vent, caught neatly in the little circle of light. "Good idea," he said, resolutely sticking to business. "We'll find a ladder or something. Maybe drag one of those barrels over."

"Actually . . ." Jeremy let that trail off.

"Actually?" Simon asked, making a little 'come on, spit it out' gesture.

"If I could just borrow your shoulders . . ."

Simon hesitated, then rolled his eyes and dropped into a crouch. "Go ahead," he said. "If we get caught like this, I'll kill you myself. Fair warning."

"I'll keep that in mind," Jeremy said, putting a knee on one of Simon's shoulders and climbing on.

"Well?" Simon growled, braced under Jeremy's weight.

"Easy enough," Jeremy said, kneeling astride Simon's shoulders and investigating the grate. "Give me a minute or so and I'll have us in."

Simon nodded—in this position he had *no* doubt that Jeremy could feel it, and he hoped to God that little shiver had just been his imagination—and turned his attention back to the pathway, now slightly obscured by Jeremy's shoes. The thief wasn't all that heavy but he kept moving around, and Simon ended up grabbing one of his ankles just to keep him still.

"So nice of you to grow these lovely broad shoulders just for me," Jeremy murmured.

"Shut up," Simon suggested. "You've got about thirty seconds until the next set of guards comes around. Why don't you do something useful?"

"Slave-driver," Jeremy said, but he didn't say anything else, for which Simon was grateful. Simon went back to watching for the guards, his right hand flexing on the grip of his gun, his left hand tight around Jeremy's ankle.

*Chhow!* Simon tensed, gun whipping up. "What was that?" he hissed.

"Cordless screwdriver," Jeremy whispered down. "I never go anywhere without one."

Simon rolled his eyes. “Oh, great, why don’t you go ahead and make all the noise you want,” he growled. “Christ, you’re going to bring every guard in the complex down on us.”

“Psh,” Jeremy murmured, and then they both fell silent. The guards were approaching again, their footsteps crunching faintly on the packed dirt. Simon let go of Jeremy’s ankle and caught his gun in both hands, bringing it up and ready. For a miracle, the thief was utterly, perfectly still.

... *crap, they can’t see his legs, can they?* Simon glanced at one of Jeremy’s shoes. It didn’t *seem* to be sticking out into the moonlight. Still, Simon burned with new adrenalin until the guards had walked by, and just as he was cooling again a second *chhow!* made his heart thump once hard against his ribs. “Christ,” Simon growled.

“Only one more,” Jeremy breathed. “You needn’t worry. The sound doesn’t carry as badly as you think.”

“Suppose you’d know,” Simon ungraciously allowed.

His only answer was another muted *chhow!*. There was a pause (during which Jeremy shifted around entirely too much for Simon’s peace of mind) and then the grate let out a soft metallic squeal as Jeremy eased it downwards, letting it hang from a single screw. “There,” he breathed.

Simon promptly grabbed Jeremy’s ankle again to prevent him from climbing into the vent. “I’m going in first,” he said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

Jeremy barely hesitated. “As you like,” he said, and before Simon could kneel again to let him off, Jeremy slid backward. Simon abruptly found his face pressed hard against the inside of Jeremy’s hip as Jeremy climbed down, his hands on Simon’s shoulders, his knee against Simon’s chest... Jeremy dropped gracefully to the ground in front of him and spun into the shadows, but not before Simon caught the barest end of a smile.

“The hell am I, some kind of tree now?” Simon muttered.

“Shh,” Jeremy murmured, and he sounded far too pleased with himself.

Simon fell silent until the guards had passed. “Okay,” he said, reminding himself *business, business, business, strangle him later*. “I’m going to jump for it—”

“I’ll give you a leg up, if you like,” Jeremy offered, dropping to one knee and linking his fingers together.

Simon eyed him askance. “I’m a bit heavier than a couple of Botticelli drawings,” he pointed out. “I don’t want to dislocate your shoulders unless it’s on purpose.”

Jeremy laughed faintly. “I suppose you’ll just have to trust me, Simon.”

“You know,” Simon said, slamming his gun back into its holster, “you are gonna make me so sorry I said that—” He caught his breath and rocked back a step, backing out of the niche and out into the pathway. The moonlight felt like a

blaring alarm as it fell on him and Simon didn't pause before launching himself forward and vaulting into the stirrup of Jeremy's hands.

The muscles of Jeremy's shoulders bunched as Simon's other foot left the ground. With a soft grunt the thief heaved Simon upwards, adding to his already considerable momentum, and Simon was almost flying when he caught the lower edge of the open air vent in both hands. His feet scrabbled at the wall, sneakers scraping and finding purpose, and a moment later Simon managed to haul himself entirely inside. He huffed out a breath. Made it.

There wasn't enough room to get up on his hands and knees, he quickly discovered, although he had a reasonable amount of elbow room. Simon resigned himself to sore shoulders in the morning and started dragging himself forward on his forearms. Behind him there was a brief and quiet scramble and then a repeat of that soft metallic whine. "There," Jeremy murmured a moment later. "That ought to cover our tracks nicely, as long as they aren't paying *too* much attention."

"Good," Simon muttered. "Hang on." Working his radio out of his jacket, Simon breathed, "Specs, this is Templar. We are in building three, repeat, in building three. Team Two, don't touch the big silver locks, Shadow says they're alarmed. Look above the doors, find an air vent."

"Got it," Nate said. "The radio traffic's picked up some, Templar. You've given them the heebie-jeebies."

"Shit," Simon said.

"We're going for building ten, repeat, building ten," Sandra hissed. "I'll report when we're in. Guards are seriously antsy now. Sixth-sensing us for sure."

"Yeah, well, fuck 'em," Simon said, closing his eyes. "You guys have never let me down yet, and this isn't going to be the time that you do. I've got faith in you."

"Copy that, Templar," Sandra said, and Nate echoed, "Copy that."

"Templar out." Simon tucked the radio away and glanced over his shoulder at Jeremy, on his belly in the vent behind him. The heavy glass rectangle of the thief's goggles glinted at him. Simon jerked his chin towards the dark tunnel in front of him and pressed his forearms to the metal sheeting, hauling himself forward.

Ten feet in, a smaller vent branched away in both directions. Simon glanced over his shoulder at Jeremy and pointed to it, raising his eyebrows. Jeremy immediately shook his head and pointed onwards. Secretly relieved—he wasn't sure if he would have *fit* in the smaller vent—Simon dragged himself on.

There were branches every five feet thereafter. Simon stopped asking after the third one and just kept moving resolutely forward. Sweat stood out on his forehead and the burning ache he'd been expecting between his shoulderblades had arrived; the cramped metal walls seemed to amplify every sound that he



made, until it seemed like a miracle that no one had heard him thumping around. Behind him, Jeremy was silent. Too silent. *Annoyingly* silent. Simon gritted his teeth and inched on.

Sixty seconds of agonizingly slow progress later Simon was rewarded by the sight of light shining up from a grating in the bottom of the duct, and he thankfully dragged himself toward it. Easing forward he peered cautiously down through the grating; almost immediately he flinched back, stifling a hiss of dismay. Five feet below the vent stood one of Rupp's guards, this one standing with the stolid acceptance of a long-time soldier, listening to his walkie-talkie and occasionally speaking into it. Simon got the sinking feeling the man was planning to be there for a long time.

Simon sighed noiselessly and edged back. Swiping the back of his hand over his forehead—*Christ*, but it was hot, he was almost dizzy, weren't these supposed to be *air-conditioning* vents?—Simon rolled onto his side, wedging himself into half the vent as best he could, and motioned Jeremy forward.

Jeremy edged forward, wriggling neatly into the tiny space Simon had left for him with a minimum of fuss. Once he was chest to chest with Simon, Simon jerked his head down at the grate and the guard beneath. "All right, Mr. Cat Burglar," Simon breathed, forcing Jeremy to lean in to hear him. "I'm willing to entertain any bright ideas you might have on how to handle this situation."

Jeremy pushed his goggles up and glanced down through the grate, taking in the situation in question. Then he looked back up at Simon, smiled, shrugged slightly, and lunged forward, crushing his mouth to Simon's.

Simon strangled a startled "Mmph!" in his throat and clutched reflexively at Jeremy's arm, making an abortive attempt to shove him away. Wedged as tightly in the vent as they were, there wasn't room; there was simply no place to shove Jeremy *to*. Faced with this sudden onslaught and the critical need to stay quiet, it wasn't easy—there wasn't enough room in the vent to do much of *anything*—but eventually Simon managed to worm his way out of the fierce kiss, breathing hard. "Not flirting with me, my *ass*," he hissed, even as Jeremy's mouth traveled over his cheek and back down to the corner of his mouth.

Jeremy barely hesitated. "It's a nice one, too—" he breathed, and then he dove back into the kiss, one hand grabbing for Simon's ass as if to illustrate his point. Simon's fingers clenched on Jeremy's arm. He made one last half-hearted attempt to shove Jeremy away, then choked on a growl and sank his other hand into Jeremy's hair, dragging him close.

Jeremy rolled up against him, one knee pressing in between Simon's thighs, and Simon squeezed his eyes shut and grabbed for anything he could catch. Jeremy's hip bumped sharply up into his hand and then there were hands on his chest and one of them found its way under his damp t-shirt to press against bare and sweaty skin and somehow Jeremy was almost on top of him and the kiss was sloppy and frantic and wet for a few glorious seconds before Simon jerked his

head back, breaking it. Jeremy came away open-mouthed and licking his lips and Simon had to look away from the spectacle. “Okay,” he growled, catching Jeremy’s upper arm again, almost gently. “I get it. Okay? I *get* it. But, fuck, not *now*.”

Jeremy’s eyes glittered, but eventually he nodded. “Not now,” he breathed in agreement, and reached up to pull his goggles back down.

Simon took half a second to catch his breath, rubbing a hand over his face. It came away wet. He tried not to think about it. “So,” he eventually muttered. “Any *other* bright ideas?”

The little *snrk!* sound that Jeremy made came dangerously close to making Simon do one of two things: hit him, or start snickering himself. Instead he squeezed Jeremy’s arm warningly and fought both impulses down. “*Business*,” he hissed.

Jeremy fought down his little smile and nodded towards the grate. “Well! Mission accomplished. Shall we go?”

Simon blinked at him, then looked down. At some point during the last minute—during which he had been highly distracted, to say the least—the guard had left his post. The hallway was empty as far as Simon could see in both directions.

Simon rested his forehead on his knuckles for a moment and blew out an aggravated breath.

Hooking his fingers into the vent grating Simon pulled, and it lifted out of its moorings with nothing but a muffled screech for his troubles. Gritting his teeth against its weight and his lack of leverage Simon edged it away from him to rest on the far side of the opening, leaving the vent open beneath him.

He waited a beat, his right hand resting on the butt of his holstered gun. No shouts came at him from below, no shots, nothing. He glanced over his shoulder. Jeremy, once again safely behind him, paused with his fingers touched to the dials at the sides of his goggles and cocked an eyebrow, then nodded. The light from below picked out Jeremy’s little smile only faintly.

Simon nodded in response. He took in a deep, steadying breath and held it for the count of three, then grasped the edge of the vent and pulled himself forward, rolling through the hole headfirst and letting his momentum and his grip on the vent’s edge roll him upright once more. Doing a tight flip in midair Simon landed in a neat crouch, the carpet muffling the thud of his impact.

His gun was already out of its holster before he’d quite finished landing, trained down the northern corridor by the time he grew still. Nothing to the north—Simon and the gun whipped around—nothing to the south. Automatically flicking the gun’s safety back on Simon rose warily to his feet.

“C’mon,” he called softly, and edged out of the way. A second or two later Jeremy dropped in a blur of black beside him, landing almost silently on all fours.

He rose to his feet, touching one newly-gloved hand to his goggles; his leather jacket now hung open, revealing a pair of slim leather toolcases hooked to his belt and just the barest glint of something un-weapon-like holstered under one arm.

Simon eyed this vision askance for a moment before reassuming his watch. "You were a Boy Scout, weren't you," he said, putting his back to the wall.

"Don't be absurd, Simon," Jeremy told him cheerfully, glancing left and right. His goggles hummed slightly. "I was a *rentboy*. That way." He pointed down the southern corridor.

Simon spared a second glance for Jeremy, who looked as unruffled and innocent as ever. "Why that way?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Call it instinct, and also, I can hear voices coming from the other way."

"Ah. Solid thinking." Unable to argue with that logic, Simon let his gun fall to point at the ground and they both loped off down the southern corridor.

"You know," Simon muttered after a minute, "I was thinking."

"Were you now?"

"Shut up. As I was saying, I was thinking: what the hell kind of corrugated-tin warehouse has *carpeting*?"

Jeremy slowed. "... you know, Simon, that's a damned good question."

"Drywall and paint, too. He's made it into an office complex." Simon reached out and touched one of the walls as they went. "The hell?"

"Well." Jeremy smiled faintly, glancing over his shoulder to check behind them. "Now we know where his money and time went."

"But we don't know why. Door." Simon stopped, bringing his gun up to point at the door.

Jeremy studied it, then shook his head. "It's not right."

"No?" But Simon's own gut was agreeing, and eventually he nodded. "No, you're right, door's not right. Let's go." Without waiting for Jeremy to respond Simon jogged on down the hallway.

Jeremy fell into step with him quickly. After a moment, he said, "... Simon?"

"What?"

"What sort of corrugated-tin warehouse requires a down staircase?"

"The kind with paydirt in it."

"Pay—ah. Precisely. And as I always say, when in doubt—" Jeremy smiled thinly and touched the side of his goggles "—go down."

"Why does that saying of yours make me tingle in all kinds of uncomfortable ways?"

"Possibly because it was meant to—" Jeremy started to say, but Simon caught Jeremy's shoulder, both halting and silencing him.

"I'm going first," Simon informed Jeremy, stepping smoothly around him. He spun out onto the head of the stairs and snapped his gun down, all in the same

motion. No one there. Lifting his gun back to ready, he reported, “Clear.” and jogged down the stairs, Jeremy on his heels.

The stairs doubled back on themselves at a landing and Simon stopped Jeremy again, again sliding smoothly out to cover the way with his gun. The stairs slid down into blackness and Simon immediately whipped back, breathing hard and waiting to see if shouts—or shots—would come at him from the darkness. Nothing did. After a moment he relaxed and looked at Jeremy, who was still smirking faintly.

Simon rolled his eyes. “Come on,” he said, “and also, for a revolutionary idea, why don’t we drop the subject for now?”

“Pity,” Jeremy said, lightly preceding Simon down the stairs, his goggles glinting in the dark. “I was hoping to hear all about the ways in which you were tingling—hell-o.”

“What?” Simon said, straining to see in the darkness. “Someone leave a really huge diamond lying around in a shoebox? I have fantasies about that kind of thing sometimes.”

Jeremy’s penlight flashed on, dimly illuminating the area. They were standing in a small alcove that ended in a sturdy-looking metal door. The penlight flashed down. The door had no handle. Simon stopped on the lowest step, balancing on the balls of his feet, ready to turn around and leave. “Fuck. Try another way?”

“On the contrary!” The penlight flicked away, illuminating a control panel with a telephone handset mounted by the door. Jeremy slid one finger under the earpiece, neatly pinning the disconnect lever down, and then lifted the dead handset out of its cradle. “I can get us through this,” Jeremy said, unscrewing the mouthpiece with his free hand, “if you can buy me five minutes.”

In answer, Simon thumbed off the safety of his gun. Jeremy became very still, but after a pause, he nodded.

Simon closed his eyes for half a second and took a deep breath, holding it. He fished the radio out of his jacket. “Team Templar, this is Templar,” he said in a perfectly even voice. “Found a suspicious basement and I want in. There’s a good chance that I’m going to start making some noise in a few minutes. The situation is probably going to change shortly. Be ready.”

A moment of silence, then Nate said, “Copy that, Templar.”

Simon put the radio away again and put his back to the wall opposite Jeremy, bringing his gun up and ready. “So,” he said conversationally, glancing from the door to the staircase and back. “Were you actually a rentboy?”

“Mm-hmm. Until I was fifteen or so, anyway.” Jeremy dropped the plastic cover of the mouthpiece onto the carpet by his feet.

“Ah. At which point you took up your career in petty crime, I take it.”

“I resent that, Simon, *petty* crime was merely a hobby—” Jeremy shook the handset. A metal disk tumbled out of the phone’s mouthpiece and drew up short, dangling on its wires. Jeremy caught it and ripped it free.

By the time he eased the disconnect lever up, they could both hear the voices coming. Jeremy didn't so much as look at Simon. Simon glanced at Jeremy, once, then muttered, "Stay put. Keep working. I'll handle it."

Jeremy nodded, jamming one of his small screwdrivers between the cover of the control panel and the wall and wrenching the entire panel open with a muted squeal of tortured metal. Simon slid up the stairs, pressing himself against the wall just before the corner, and listened to the voices coming. He could pick out two different voices, neither one sounding very concerned. Well, he'd soon change that.

*Turn. Drop. Aim. Breathe. Fire.* Simon dragged in a deep breath and held it, touching the barrel of his gun to his cheek. Still holding it, he spun around the corner and dropped to one knee, his gun snapping out.

There were, in fact, two of them, with rifles. The one on the left spotted him first and his mouth opened to shout a warning, and Simon exhaled to steady himself and shot the man through one eye. The side of the guard's face vanished in a pulpy mess of dark red. His head jerked and his limbs spasmed and he staggered backwards a step, reeling but still upright in the center of the hall.

The second guard's head snapped towards Simon and he grabbed for his rifle, but before he could bring it to bear Simon's gun twitched right and he shot the man in the throat. The guard made a wet little "Hgk!" sound and clutched at his throat instead. The first guard finally collapsed. The second guard choked for a heartbeat longer and then fell on top of the first guard. Simon's long, steady exhale ended.

He was rising to his feet when the door they'd passed earlier crashed open and a third man stuck his head out. "What was—" the third man said and Simon's gun cracked again and the top of his head exploded. He fell straight down in the doorway like someone had cut his strings.

Simon stood just where he was for the space of another deep breath, staring down the barrel of his gun. No one else appeared. Slamming his gun back into his holster Simon grabbed the first two guards by their ankles and dragged them to the open doorway, kicking the third guard into the room as he went. It was an office of some sort, mostly empty, with a computer sitting dark and covered on the desk.

In his ear, Nate said, "... what was that?" For the time being, Simon ignored it.

Leaving the three bodies in an untidy pile on the floor, Simon stepped over them, whipped the cover off the computer, and thumbed the machine on, leaving the monitor off. Lights bloomed on the front of the computer case. Simon dropped the cover on the pile of bodies and stepped back over them. He didn't spare them a backwards glance; they weren't important any more. Instead he put his back against the wall by the door and then spun out, covering the corridor in front of him. No one was coming. Simon kicked the door shut and loped back to

the staircase. *Thank God for red carpeting*, he thought aimlessly.

“Crap,” Nate muttered in his ear. Both of Simon’s eyebrows shot up. Anything that would drive Nate to actually curse was certain to be bad news. “Templar, Springheel, I heard what might have been a couple of shots on their frequency. They’re discussing it now. You may be made.”

“Shit,” Simon hissed, taking the stairs two at a time. By the time he got back down to where Jeremy was, Jeremy was very pale, but still working. The control panel’s cover was missing entirely now and wires and circuitry were jutting messily out in all directions. Jeremy had the mutilated handset caught between his cheek and one shoulder and was neatly dissecting the innards of the control panel with a pair of strange little hooked tools, occasionally letting a piece of scrap metal fall. The screwdrivers jutted straight out between his first two fingers like a pair of cigarettes, out of the way but ready. Just as Simon reached him the control panel sparked and snapped, and Jeremy hissed “Blast you—” and blew on his fingers.

“We’re good,” Simon said. “By which I mean that I think I’ve roused the entire compound and I don’t suppose you could hurry it up some before we get shot to death a lot?”

Jeremy glanced at him over the handset. “Well!” he said, his voice just the slightest bit uneven. “I suppose there are certain drawbacks to your *modus operandi*. Four more minutes, I estimate.”

“Gotcha. I can do four if I have to. Step on it.” Simon went for his radio. “Noise is made,” he said. “Three down. Tracks are covered for a few minutes, but we won’t be missed for long.”

“Copy that, Templar,” Sandra said.

“Copy *that*,” Nate said. “They’ve finally accepted that they heard shots, although they haven’t the faintest idea from where, yet. Channels have exploded. You’re made, but you’ve got time.”

“One of them must have had his radio on,” Simon said. “Fuck.”

“We’ll draw them off you, Templar,” Sandra said, and dimly Simon could hear a *large* gun cocking in the background. “We’ll make some noise they can’t miss.”

Simon thumped his forehead with his free hand. “Copy that, Springheel. Make a lot of noise, but stay safe. Buy us as much time as you can and pray that we’ve hit paydirt.”

“Will do. Springheel out.” Simon heard a single chattering burst from Johnny’s rifle before Sandra shut her radio off.

“Specs Two,” Simon said, turning to point his gun back up the staircase. “Tell me you’ve got the plans to this place by now, Specs Two.”

“Specs Two here,” Rich said. “Got the official blueprints of this place. Fucking worthless. Whatever Rupp’s done to the place, it’s not code and it’s not on file. I’m still looking.”

“Good man. I found a local terminal and turned it on. See if you can tap in—” Simon started to say, and then Jeremy made a little noise in the background and grabbed the phone handset with both hands, and Simon glanced over his shoulder at him.

Jeremy listened for a breathless few moments, then turned to Simon. “Simon. The satellite and the Star are both in Warehouse Delta, whichever one that is—” Simon immediately started relaying this to his team “—and someone’s going to be coming for the Star in a few minutes, diversion or no. We don’t have much time. I’m going to do something a little loud.”

“We’ve been way the hell in the middle of loud for two minutes now,” Simon said impatiently. “You had loud up your sleeve and you were still wasting time with stealth? Get on with it, Archer.”

Jeremy nodded, let the handset of the phone drop to bang uselessly against the wall, and caught both tiny screwdrivers in his fists like daggers. He jammed both of them into the control panel’s guts, a few inches apart. There was a loud *bang* and a brilliant flash that nearly blinded Simon, and the control panel was smoking slightly when the metal door slid softly open, revealing utter blackness.

“Well,” Simon said, pressing himself up against the wall and blinking the flash out of his eyes. “You weren’t lying.”

“I try not to lie too much,” Jeremy said, scanning the darkness beyond the door. “It’s a bad habit.”

Simon snorted at that. After ten seconds in which Jeremy was not shot at, he leaned in and squinted at the darkness beyond the door. “So, if you were Warehouse Delta, where would you be?”

“Somewhere between Charlie and Echo, I daresay. Also known as ‘right here.’” The beam of light from Jeremy’s little flashlight stabbed out into the darkness. At the end of it, there was a glassy flash and a sparkle. “There’s our baby,” Jeremy purred at the Morning Star, glittering under its glass case not fifteen feet away.

“Well, would you look at that?” Simon craned his neck, studying the case. The Morning Star rested in a simple metal armature instead of the lush display cushion the Mornings had had for it, its glitter almost blinding in the tiny circle of light. It left angular shards of light printed on his retinas and Simon was blinking when he turned back to the radio. “Team Templar, this is Templar, I have found our baby in Warehouse Three,” Simon said, not bothering to keep the triumph out of his voice. “Repeat, found our baby in Warehouse Three. Springheel, whatever you’re doing, make it louder. Tell Texas to stop pretending he didn’t bring some extra bang and use it. I need you to remove all obstacles with as much crankiness as you can muster.”

After two seconds Simon winced as there was a staticky explosion of gunfire in his ear. “Copy that, Templar,” Sandra half-yelled. In the background he heard Mike yell something and Johnny’s rifle chatter. Sandra’s voice faded slightly as

she leaned away from the radio. "Texas! Templar says give 'em some bang for their buck!"

Mike whooped in glee. Johnny's rifle shut up. "Springheel out," Sandra said, and her radio cut off, leaving Simon's ear ringing in the sudden silence. Five seconds later there was a thudding *crump* sound that he could feel more than hear, the ground quivering under his feet.

"That's my crazy, crazy boy," Simon muttered. He glanced at Jeremy, who was still intently scanning the room, goggles sweeping slowly back and forth. "That's that. So. What kind of alarms do you think they've got on that thing?"

Jeremy pointed the penlight at one of the walls. It was farther away than Simon had been expecting; this basement was larger than he'd originally thought. "Well, for a start, there's that," Jeremy said, the light centering on a small round gray thing with a glassy black eye in the center, mounted a few inches above the floor. "That's a red-eye laser. The floor's nicely crisscrossed with them." The light flicked about six inches away, to pick out a second red-eye, and then a third, and a fourth.

"Shit," Simon said. "The floor's rigged, too?"

"The floor's rigged," Jeremy confirmed, already shrugging out of his jacket, revealing a set of black web harnesses strapped to his bare forearms. "Possibly booby-trapped as well. I suspect not, but still, best to be careful."

"Yeah," Simon said, squinting against the darkness. "Plus if we set off those alarms Springheel's distraction is bound to get a lot less distracting all of a sudden, and I don't know about you, but I'd really prefer to get out of here without getting shot full of holes."

"Well, I'm all for trying new things," Jeremy said, dropping to one knee and snapping his jacket out to lie flat on the ground, exposing the (somewhat more lumpy than factory standard) silk lining. "Still, this is probably not the time."

Simon looked at him askance. "Judging from your busy little beaver act, I'd say that you have some sort of plan. Care to share it with me, or are we going to play Twenty Questions?"

Jeremy waved that away. "I'll go in over the ceiling," he said, casually, as if this were an everyday thing for him, which Simon could only suppose was true. "I suspect that any alarms on the case itself will only go off if I lift the glass, so I'll burn through the top..." By this point Jeremy was talking more to himself than to Simon, his tone absent as he dug a small metal vial out of one of the jacket's pockets, sliding it into a pocket on one of his forearm harnesses. "The ceiling clearance appears to be about four feet from the top of the case. I won't need any sort of rope, which is always a nice bonus." Jeremy raised his voice slightly, no longer just thinking aloud. "I can do this in—mm—six minutes, Simon."

"What, you want me to time you or something?"

"Well, you can if you like, I certainly won't stop you—" Jeremy produced a small blade from out of nowhere and matter-of-factly slashed open the lining of



his jacket right down the middle. “—but all I *really* require of you is to buy me that much time.” The knife vanished again. Hooking his fingers into the lining of his jacket Jeremy ripped it open, revealing four large saucer-shaped things sewn into the back of the jacket. Jeremy pulled them free, one after the other; with a faint smile he snapped one through the air and it caved in on itself with a soft *thoop* sound, becoming a large and familiar-looking suction cup.

Simon rolled his eyes with all the force he could muster. “Jesus Christ, 007. I’m impressed already. Stop showing off and get in there before I shoot you myself.”

“Yes, yes, there’s no need to get so *excited*, Simon.” Jeremy strapped two of the suction cups on just below his knees. “Be a love and keep an eye on my jacket, will you? It was terribly expensive and I’d hate to lose it.”

“You get me that diamond in less than five minutes and I won’t even snoop in your pockets,” Simon promised.

“Well!” Jeremy said, catching the other two suction cups in his left hand and making a final adjustment to his goggles. “How could I turn down an offer like that?” Before Simon could think of a suitably devastating comeback Jeremy leaned in and nonchalantly cupped one hand over Simon’s crotch, making his thoughts scatter like startled birds. “For luck, hm?” Jeremy breathed, and he gave Simon a quick kiss and a *hard* squeeze, and before Simon could regroup one of Jeremy’s suction cups vacuum-sealed itself to the wall and Jeremy swung into the room, gone.

“You know,” Simon told the empty antechamber, just the slightest bit breathless from the squeeze, “you just aren’t *normal*.”

“Really?” Jeremy called back over the soft *thop-thop-thop* of his progress up the wall. “What was your first clue?”

“Oh, well,” Simon said, “the whole ‘being one step away from a comic book supervillain’ thing? Was a huge tipoff. No, shut up, we’ll talk philosophy later. Go earn your money.”

Jeremy laughed softly but, obediently, did not answer, inching out onto the ceiling and leaving Simon behind.

Simon stood guard in the doorway, watching Jeremy’s (agonizingly slow) progress and listening intently for unwelcome company, the muzzle of his gun pointed at the floor between his feet. “Hustle,” he muttered, absently checking the safety on his gun, thumbing it on and back off. Another *crump* made the floor shake under him and Simon snorted. “Christ, Texas,” he said under his breath. “We both get out of this alive and we’re going to have a long talk about exactly how grenades fit into the definition of ‘handguns and assault rifle only’.”

Jeremy swung to a stop, on his hands and knees over the glass case. Simon caught his breath and narrowed his eyes further. Above the case Jeremy uncoiled slowly, stretching down, one hand reaching up—down—above his head. His

fingertips brushed the top of the glass case, once, and Jeremy nodded. The other hand reached down, one suction cup still nestled in its palm. *Thoop*.

"This is starting to look a little familiar," Simon noted.

"Mm, yes. Ever so nostalgic. Do feel free to *not* point your gun at me this time." Jeremy's other hand traced a slow circle around the suction cup. There was a hissing sound so soft as to almost be subliminal, and Simon could smell something burning.

"What *is* that stuff?" Simon asked, glancing back at the stairs once.

"Horrible," Jeremy said succinctly, wiggling the suction cup. After a moment it came loose, trailing strings of melted glass after it. Jeremy snapped them all with a jerk of his wrist, then paused. Simon could hear him inhale, a long, slow, controlled intake of breath, then hold the breath as his other hand darted downwards, through the hole, toward the diamond.

In the end, it was just that easy. Jeremy's gloved fingers closed on the Morning Star and lifted it out of its setting, the diamond vanishing into his palm as his hand pulled back out. No alarms went off that Simon could hear. Both Jeremy and Simon let out their caught breaths, almost simultaneously. "Loud noise," Jeremy said in warning, and fitted the melted-out circle of glass back into the hole from where it had come. He did something—Simon could see his wrist work—and the glass fell free from the suction cup to fall into the case, crashing into the metal armature with a ringing sound and knocking the whole thing down inside the glass case.

Simon couldn't help but wince at the clatter. "Shit," he said, hands flexing on the grip of his gun, "good thing Rupp's private army is off getting blown to pieces by Texas."

"Terribly sorry," Jeremy said, his voice a bit strained. Slowly he curled back up, his stomach muscles bunching under the thin fabric of his t-shirt, the suction cup in his left hand straining for the ceiling. Finally it connected with a soft *thop* sound and Jeremy hissed in a quick relieved breath, hanging from the ceiling by his knees and one hand and cradling the Morning Star protectively against his chest.

"Hurry the fuck up," Simon said, measurably more cheerful now that Jeremy actually had the diamond. "Don't just *hang* there, lazyass."

"Do keep your pants on, Simon," Jeremy said, also sounding fairly pleased with himself. "Well. For now, at any rate—"

The lights popped on.

Simon automatically jerked back from the doorway, slamming back against the wall. His heart thumped in his chest. "Shit!" he hissed. "Jeremy, get out of there!"

"Too late," Jeremy said, sounding oddly calm. "The alarms will go if I drop—"

“Fuck the alarms! You’re busted anyway! Just get out of there!”

Somewhere on the other side of the room a door hissed open. Before he could even think Simon whirled around and back into the doorway, his gun stabbing out as he sought the sound. With all the lights on Jeremy’s black-clad form was hideously obvious against the low white ceiling, kneeling upside-down with one hand still curled against his chest. Beyond him there was another door, and beyond that an expanse of pristine white room far, far larger than Simon had first suspected, and at the far end of the massive room, a tremendous metallic *thing*—

“Stop right there,” a clipped voice said from beyond the open door, and there was the ominous click of a gun cocking. Simon hissed a breath through his teeth. Rupp. Almost definitely. From this angle Simon couldn’t see him, but he’d know that voice anywhere.

Simon leveled his own gun at the doorway anyway, squinting against the glare. “I’m afraid that’s my line,” he announced crisply. “I am a representative of the United States government, so all clichés fall under my jurisdiction. I’ll demonstrate. *Drop it, Rupp.*”

Whoever it was beyond the doorway ignored him. “Archer,” said the voice, sounding almost surprised. “When I hired you, I was assured by your impressive reputation that you were the sort of man who stayed bought. I see that I was wrong to believe your hype. Foolish of me.”

“Now that’s hardly fair! I’ve always dealt honestly . . . with those who deal honestly with me,” Jeremy said, still sounding far too calm, even amused. Somewhere in the back of his mind Simon wondered which one of them Jeremy was talking to.

“Fair? Honest? I find that childish of you, considering your vocation. But that’s hardly the issue right at this moment, is it?” Something white moved beyond the other doorway and Simon tracked it with his gun, gritting his teeth. If he could just get a damned *clear shot*— “It’s not too late. Don’t be any more of a fool than you already have been, Archer. Toss me the diamond and I’ll forgive you this one little transgression.”

“Well, see, I’ve got a problem with that,” Simon put in. “If he does that, I’ll shoot him myself. So you can see the predicament he’s in, I’m sure.”

Silence from beyond the doorway for a moment, then Rupp laughed, soft and scornful. “Such company you keep, Jeremy Archer. Four million dollars and you double-cross me for *that*. I’d had more faith in your business sense, if not in your intelligence.” The bantering tone fell out of his voice, leaving it sharp and clear. “Throw me the diamond, Archer. Last chance.”

Simon started to say something, but Jeremy overrode him. “Well,” he said wryly, letting the Morning Star roll up to glitter in his fingertips. Simon watched not the lure but the doorway beyond it, straining his eyes for a hint of that white. “I suppose this belongs to you now, doesn’t it?” Jeremy asked, his voice clear and calm and pitched to carry. He let go of the suction pad and let himself fall upright,

hanging by his knees from the ceiling, and at the apex of his arc he whipped the Star away from himself.

Simon nearly fumbled it. The Morning Star clattered against the grip of his gun as he caught it awkwardly, two-handed, the muzzle of his gun tracking away from the doorway. “Shit!” Simon hissed. Before he could bring his gun back to bear Rupp’s own gun cracked, a flat and deadly sound.

Jeremy Archer was ripped off the ceiling by the impact of the bullet. He hit the opposite wall, hard enough to jar his goggles loose, and crashed to the floor with none of his usual grace. As soon as he hit the tripwired floor every alarm in the place went off, and Simon shouted “*Archer!* Shit, Jeremy!” over the sudden cacophony and dashed into the room, instinct momentarily winning out over his better judgment.

He skidded to a halt in front of the fallen thief and whipped around, finally, finally able to get a clear shot down the hallway where Rupp had been not a second ago. There was no sign of the man; he’d probably bolted the moment he shot. For five seconds longer Simon stood over the fallen Jeremy, the muzzle of his gun tracing a slow, steady arc from one end of the room to the other. No Rupp. No guards. Nothing. Dimly, under the cacophony of the alarms, Simon could hear Jeremy panting for breath; the sound meant he was still alive, which was about the only halfway decent thing that had happened to Simon in the last three minutes. Steeling himself for anything, Simon turned around.

Jeremy was crunched up in a graceless little huddle against the far wall, his teeth gritted and his eyes shut tight. Both gloved hands were clamped tight over his side a few inches over his hip. Dark blood welled sluggishly up between his fingers. “Shit,” Simon hissed, dropping to his knees and reaching for Jeremy, then and only then realizing that he still had his own gun in one hand and the Morning Star in the other. He wavered, the hand holding the Morning Star hovering helplessly a few inches over Jeremy’s clutching hands, his eyes darting from the blood to Jeremy’s agonized face and back. “Shit!” he said again, dropping his gun onto the floor by Jeremy’s hip and grabbing for his radio instead.

A flash of white from over by the bank of computers that divided the room in half caught Simon’s eye, and instinctively he dropped the radio and lunged for his gun—too late. Rupp erupted from his hiding place behind the console, his ugly little snubnosed pistol pointed unerringly at Simon’s eye. Simon jerked to a halt, his fingers inches from the butt of his own gun. Rupp smiled and bore down on the two of them, Jeremy huddled against the wall, Simon crouching off guard by his side.

“Your little friend just might survive if he gets immediate medical attention,” Conrad Rupp said, nodding at Jeremy and almost smiling. He extended his free hand toward Simon, gesturing peremptorily. “Give me the Star and tell your men to retreat, and I’ll let you take him out of here.”

“You do such a thing,” Jeremy panted, “and I’ll never forgive—” His foot

lashed out, heel thudding unerringly into Rupp's knee. Behind his little wire-rimmed glasses Rupp's eyes went wide and startled, and he staggered, the gun jerking away from Simon for a fraction of a second.

Simon hit the floor, rolling away from Jeremy, and gained his feet right beside Rupp. No time to go for his gun—his left hand whipped up, slamming the Morning Star as hard as he could into the side of Rupp's head. The diamond's faceted edge scored a long gash in Rupp's cheek, knocking his glasses askew, and Simon drove the heel of his other hand into Rupp's pistol, knocking it from his hands. It went clattering across the floor and slid under one of the computers. Rupp stumbled back, clapping both hands to his face as blood cascaded out of the long cut, and he darted a glare of pure malevolence at Simon before wheeling and running out the door he'd come in through.

"This is Templar!" Simon bellowed into his radio, dropping to one knee beside Jeremy again and putting his hand on Jeremy's chest to keep him still. The Morning Star pressed against Jeremy's t-shirt, over his heart. "Shadow is down, repeat, Shadow is *down*! I have the Star! Team Two, get your asses down here *pronto*! Disable anything that moves between you and me! Specs, Specs Two, I need you! Repeat, this is Templar, everyone converge on my location *now*!"

"Copy, Templar!" Nate said. "On our way!"

"On our way, Templar!" Sandra echoed. "We're in Warehouse Ten but we are *en route*!"

"Springheel," Rich snapped, even as the van started up in the background. "Look for a down staircase in Ten. It should lead into the same room Templar's in. Everything's fucking connected, he dug out the entire middle of the compound!"

"Got it," Sandra said. "Staircase. We're coming!"

Simon stuffed the radio back in his jacket and grabbed his gun again. "Jeremy," he said, and then stopped.

"Go," Jeremy said, his eyes closed to slits.

"Fuck that," Simon said with alacrity, his hand spreading out over Jeremy's chest. "I've got the Star, that's all I came for. He's out of luck without it. Just hold on, we'll get you out of here."

A third door, on the far end of the long white room, suddenly dented inwards. Simon's head and his gun both jerked up. A second dent appeared, then a third, and then the door more or less burst open and Sandra's team spilled into the room. Simon heaved out a relieved breath and pointed his gun elsewhere.

"Christ," Johnny said, shifting his grip on his assault rifle and spitting out his toothpick. "That there's a satellite."

"Sure is," Mike said, his voice alive with adrenalin and hilarity. "That or a VW Bug what had a really bad day!"

"Templar!" Sandra cried, skirting the monstrous silver thing at the far end of the room and running toward him. "How bad is it?"

“Bad,” Simon said shortly, tossing the Star at her. “Hold on to that for me, will you, Spring?”

Sandra caught the diamond reflexively, blinked at it, and then shrugged and thumbed it into her cleavage. Behind her, Mike whistled a low sound of appreciation. “What’s the plan, Templar?” Sandra asked, hunkering down next to Jeremy and hissing at his wound. “Honda!” she snapped, whirling on Mike. “Give me your shirt.”

“Whoo, she-devil, this ain’t the *time*,” Mike said, but he was already pulling off his shirt while he said it.

“Specs and Specs Two get the van down here, we load Shadow in, and we get the fuck out of Dodge,” Simon said, training his gun on the door that Rupp had both entered and left through, just in case. “Anyone got any problems with that?”

“Shit no,” said Johnny, aiming his own, much larger gun at the same door.

Sandra grabbed Mike’s shirt from him, wadded it up, and peeled Jeremy’s hands away from the wound. Simon spared a glance at the bullet hole, ragged and pulsing and deep and a dark meaty red against the black of Jeremy’s t-shirt, and he winced. Sandra just stuffed the shirt against it, ignoring Jeremy’s hiss of pain. “Hold it there, as tight as you can,” she instructed Jeremy. “It’ll hurt like fuck but deal.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jeremy said, his voice faint. “Dealing.” His bloody hands closed on the shirt, pressing it to his hip, and he hissed again. Blood rapidly soaked through the fabric.

“Aw, man,” Mike said. “Why you gotta use *my* shirt, Spring?”

“Because I’m not about to take mine off in front of you,” Sandra snapped.

“Not the time, kids,” Simon started to say, and then every computer in the room lit up, the blaring alarms strangling and dying just in time to be replaced by the oddly ominous sound of ten computers all playing their cheery boot-up sound in choral unison. Simon whipped around, the muzzle of his gun menacing a monitor that was not in the least impressed. Deep within the belly of the satellite a monstrous thing coughed sullenly to life, filling the room with a deep rumble. Smoke eddied out.

A window opened on one of the two largest monitors, filled with large green numbers. 00:10:00:00, it said. A beat later the other monitor developed an identical window, except this one said 00:12:00:00. The rumble increased just a little, like a car’s engine revving, and both countdowns started to whirl, seconds and hundredths of seconds slipping away.

“Shit,” Johnny said, eyeing the monitors. “That ain’t good.”

Simon spared a glance for the huge bay doors built into the ceiling. They remained tightly closed. The little eddies of smoke were starting to gather under them, seeking a way out. It didn’t take him but a moment to realize what Rupp intended. “*Fuck!*” he snarled, leaping to his feet. “Springheel, Honda, Texas,

stay here, hold the room! When Specs and Specs Two get here, make them turn that thing off or at least open the ceiling to let it out!”

“That thing explodes in here—” Mike said, all his amusement leaching away.

“—bye-bye us,” Johnny finished for him. “Bye-bye Tahoe if those booster rockets still got warheads on ’em.”

“Got it,” Sandra told Simon. “Where are you going?”

“After Rupp,” Simon said, his eyes going flat and deadly. “He started this. He can stop it.”

Sandra nodded shortly. All she said was “Be careful, boss.”

“You too,” Simon said, flicking the safety off his gun. “Stay alive, Shadow. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Jeremy said weakly, but Simon was already gone.

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## ◆ Conflict

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[0:9:42:39] [0:11:42:39]

Simon loped down the dark hallway, almost, but not quite, running. His gun was up, cocked, and ready, muzzle pointing at the ceiling as he went.

His nerves were as taut as wire, his eyes and ears straining to catch any hints of Rupp. Adrenalin had him feeling fast enough to catch a bullet in his fingers, and he surrendered to it with a vague relief. Those two whirling counters had told him, very clearly, that there was no more time to proceed carefully. From here on out, he would count on his reflexes to make him react in time.

The hallway stretched out before him, straight and empty. There weren't any doors leading off to the sides, either. Wherever this hallway was taking him, it was the only place to go.

He considered for half a second, then yanked out his earpiece and stuffed it into his pocket, still moving. He couldn't risk any distractions now.

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"Just lie there and be still," Sandra told Jeremy, snapping her fingers at Mike and pointing at the far door, through which they'd come. Mike nodded and jogged off to guard the door. "Keep the pressure on as best you can," she went on. "We'll get you out of here as soon as we can, but right now you have to look after yourself, because I have other things to worry about."

Jeremy nodded, hissing breath through his teeth. His eyes were closed, and his face was drawn and pale. "Go," he said shortly.

Sandra absently touched his shoulder and then jumped to her feet. "Texas, stay here, guard this door," she said, jerking her chin at the door that Jeremy and Simon had originally come through. "I'll take the door that Templar went through."

"Right," Johnny said, shifting the big gun to rest more comfortably on his hip. Sandra ran across to the third door.

At the far end of the room, behind the rumbling satellite, Mike's gun cracked twice, producing a spate of confused yells. Jeremy's eyes snapped open at the



noise, but Johnny barely glanced in that direction. “Fuck off,” Mike called genially through the busted door. The guards apparently did.

Jeremy took a deep and shaky breath, and gasped in the middle of it, and didn’t do it again. “If you . . .” he started to say, and then had to stop and swallow. “If you . . . pull the screwdrivers . . . out of the . . . control panel . . . the door will . . . close,” he eventually managed to say, panting shallowly rather than taking another real breath.

Johnny glanced down at him. “Will it open again?”

“No,” Jeremy said.

Johnny nodded. “I’ll wait ‘til the others get here.”

“ . . . good plan.” Jeremy closed his eyes again, and his bloody fingers flexed around the folded shirt.

[0:9:07:02] [0:11:07:02]

The hallway ended abruptly in a single empty doorway, gaping open blackly in front of Simon. Tiny lights glowed in that dimness, computer lights, and ever so vaguely beyond them he could see the other side of the room and a second door, standing open to reveal a dimly-lit staircase. Simon’s upper lip skinned back to show his teeth in a little snarl.

Simon’s eyes fixed on that doorway and the staircase and he burst into the darkened room, nerves thrumming. He didn’t stop. He didn’t even slow down. Rupp already had enough of a head start. Still, as he came into the room he checked the room, out of habit, left to right, and so his head was turned away when Rupp sprang his ambush from behind a pile of crates to his right.

The little triangular blade—a belt knife, most likely, sharpened somewhere beyond sanity—slashed through the air in a single murderous arc, aimed at Simon’s throat. It fell short; instead it slashed its way cleanly through one of Simon’s upraised forearms, opened a deep but hair-thin six-inch-long gash across his chest, nicked the underside of his jaw, and jarred hard against the bone in the heel of his other hand, knocking his gun away to clatter on the floor somewhere about ten feet away.

Simon sucked in a shocked breath and instinctively threw himself back and away from the blade, casting about desperately for his gun. The wounds didn’t hurt yet but they stung, in a deep, cold way that screamed about the extent of the damage done.

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“Any time now, Specs, Specs Two,” Sandra said into her radio. A moment later, she snorted. “Yes, we noticed that, Specs Two. Thank you. I’ll send someone to help.”

“I’ll go,” Johnny volunteered. Without saying another word he leaned out into the hallway and grabbed at the two screwdrivers still jutting out of the control

panel. They came free in another shower of sparks and the door started to slide closed with a grating grinding sound. Almost as an afterthought Johnny swooped down and hooked two fingers into Jeremy's discarded jacket, bringing it in with him as the door slid shut. "Here," he said offhandedly, dropping the jacket and the two screwdrivers next to Jeremy, and without another word he jogged off towards the far end of the room, where Mike still guarded the far door.

Jeremy huffed out a ghost of a painful laugh. "Thank you," he whispered, even though Johnny was long gone.

[0:8:19:11] [0:10:19:11]

Crouching, Simon clung to the wall and forced himself to be still, ignoring the deep burn of his cuts. He could hear Rupp breathing, almost panting, from somewhere, but the room was long and oddly shaped and stacked six feet deep with metal crates, and every sound was so distorted as to be almost untraceable. He couldn't tell where Rupp was. At least that meant that Rupp probably didn't know where he was, either.

Simon's right arm was numb from the elbow down, although dimly he could feel blood running over the skin and dripping from his vaguely tingling fingers. The blood didn't seem connected to him. It felt like warm water. The heel of his left hand ached abominably, like a dislocated joint. His chest burned constantly, and screamed every time he moved. He gritted his teeth and ignored it and started sweeping his hands over the floor, leaving bloody handprints on the floor as he groped after his gun.

"What do you hope to accomplish?" Rupp suddenly said from somewhere, and Simon jerked. "Do you think I *need* the diamond? Is that it? Do you think you've stopped me now that you've stolen it back?"

"'Stolen it back' my ass," Simon said through gritted teeth. "We *will* stop you, Rupp."

"Oh? How?" The echoes changed slightly, became stealthy padding footsteps. Rupp was on the move. Simon edged back against the wall, ducking his head under the computer shelving. "By stealing back the diamond? Is that supposed to stop me?"

Simon didn't bother answering. After a moment Rupp went on, now sounding a bit petulant. "The diamond is just a focusing lens. Surely you know that. Oh, perhaps without it the satellite will not be capable of pinpoint accuracy, but how much accuracy do we need in order to target unmoving buildings? A cannon instead of a sniper rifle, that's all you've bought yourself."

Still Simon didn't answer. Let the man talk himself hoarse if it bought Simon time to find his gun.

"Or is it that you think your friends can stop the launch? Hah!" Rupp clapped his hands together sharply. It sounded like a gunshot in the weird maze of the room and Simon reflexively threw himself flat, choking on a hiss when the gash

in his chest screamed. “That’s it!” Rupp crowed. “You do! You think your pitiful underpaid government drones can stop in ten—no, eight—minutes what I’ve spent millions and months creating! I’ve planned this for years, you fool, I’ve invested my entire fortune, I’ve hired the best men that money can buy—and you intend to stop me with what?”

“The best people that money *can’t* buy,” Simon retorted, painfully pushing himself back up onto his knees.

Rupp snorted in disdain and Simon forced himself to slide along, sweeping one hand in a wide and bleeding arc in front of himself.

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Everything had been quiet in the launching room for a while—quiet, that is, save for the satellite revving itself—when there was a long stuttering burst of gunfire from Johnny’s rifle from somewhere entirely too close by. Mike jerked like he’d been stung, his gun whipping up. Sandra tensed, ready to duck behind the computer console for some ready cover.

Nate and Rich shoved past Mike thirty seconds later, Johnny hard on their heels. Rich had his own gun out; Nate was wielding a crowbar like some sort of demented medieval knight. “Left you some,” Johnny told Mike as he ran by, and Mike beamed at him before snapping three blind rounds off through the door. There was some shouting and then everything was quiet again, more or less.

“Specs! Specs Two! Either shut that thing down or get that ceiling open!” Sandra said, passing on Simon’s message. Nate blinked twice at the satellite itself, then turned to the console, flexing his fingers. Rich spat out a curse, slammed his gun back in its holster, and threw himself at the closest keyboard.

“Why are there two countdowns?” Nate asked the room in general, not expecting an answer. Instead he glanced at Rich. “You get the satellite. I’ll get the roof.”

“Do that,” Rich said, typing frantically. Windows bloomed into existence on the monitor in front of him, one after the other, and the machine made cranky little negating sounds, and Rich swore inventively at it.

Nate threw himself to his knees and wedged the crowbar into the underside of the console, slamming the palm of his hand into the other end and levering the front panel off with a shriek of tortured metal. Rich jumped back before the falling panel could crash into his toes, lunging forward to keep his hands on the keyboard. Nate didn’t bother to apologize. “Whoa,” he breathed instead, touching tentative fingers to the knot of wires inside. “You’d think Rupp could afford better work than this . . .”

Sandra glanced over her shoulder at the knotted mess of yellow wires, all alike, that looped in around themselves like a sagging Gordian Knot. “Ugh,” she said. “That’s a mess.”

“Hmm,” Nate said in agreement, no longer really listening to her. Above his head Rich snarled at the monitor and banged the space bar, so hard that the keyboard jumped in its tray.

Sandra’s eyes traveled on, from Nate to Rich, from Rich down along the metal console, and finally to Jeremy, still crumpled where he’d fallen. “Dammit,” she muttered, and slammed her gun back in its holster, racing across the room. Johnny watched her go, then silently took up a post near the door she’d been watching, rifle trained on the open doorway.

Jeremy’s eyes fluttered open and he looked up at her, dazed and uncomprehending, panting shallowly for breath. His bloody gloves flexed around the sodden mass of Mike’s shirt.

“You’re completely exposed over here. We’ve got to get you to some better shelter,” Sandra said. “Hold the compress tight and help me move you.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, blinking slowly, twice.

Sandra sighed and bent down, hooking her hands under Jeremy’s arms. “Come on,” she said impatiently. “Work with me, Archer.”

Jeremy’s little confused noise turned abruptly to a gagging moan as Sandra hauled at his shoulders, but the fog in his eyes cleared. Struggling a bit he managed to get his feet more or less under himself and together they duck-walked him backward to the shelter of the long computer console, carefully keeping his torso more or less parallel to the ground.

“Anything?” Sandra asked Nate as she settled Jeremy in under the lip of the console. “I got it, Texas.”

Johnny grunted and ambled off in Mike’s general direction. “Hmmm,” Nate said, his hands hovering around the knot as he followed wire after wire to its end. “It’s . . . that’s weird, there’s too much wiring . . .”

Sandra caught Jeremy’s shoulders and helped him lean back against the console, half sitting, half laying down. “Stay still,” she told him.

“ . . . thank you,” Jeremy told her, swallowing.

Sandra blinked at him, then jumped to her feet and jogged back to where Jeremy had been laying, scooping up the scattered mess of his things and wrapping them all haphazardly in his jacket. One of the enormous suction cups remained stuck to the ceiling; she left it where it was and returned, dumping Jeremy’s things in an untidy pile beside him. “You’re welcome,” she finally said, grudgingly. “Now stay awake.” And pulling her gun back out she turned once again to face the door that Simon had vanished through, her shoulders thrumming with tension.

She nearly shot a hole in the floor when Nate cried “*Damn!*” two seconds later. Jeremy jerked and hissed at the sudden noise, and Nate flushed a little and ducked his head in apology. “It’s all daisy-chained together! Crap, I can’t touch any of this, not without setting everything off!” he babbled in explanation, his fingers describing little circles around the mess of wires without ever quite

touching them. “He didn’t bother color-coding any of it, why should he, he’d want to make it hard to disassemble, not easy to repair . . .”

“Shut up,” Rich suggested tensely, punching the ENTER key like he found it personally offensive.

“This guy was good,” Nate told Sandra. “I can’t do anything from here. I’ll have to start at the bay doors and work my way down.”

“Shut up,” Rich said again, ominously.

“So stop talking about it and do it!” Sandra told Nate, jerking her head at the bay doors. “We need those open pronto, Specs.”

“Right!” Nate cried, jumping to his feet and grabbing for his discarded crowbar. “Wow, but this guy was good . . .”

“Rupp always . . . did like to . . . hire . . . the best,” Jeremy wheezed at Nate’s feet, and Nate glanced down at him, startled.

Sandra rolled her eyes. “Your egotism is noted for the record,” she told Jeremy, who summoned up a weak smile from somewhere.

“Shut up!” Rich barked, throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation before lunging at the keyboard once more. Nate yelped and bolted, heading toward the satellite and the closed bay doors overhead.

[0:5:53:31] [0:7:53:31]

“Leave now,” Rupp suggested, his voice echoing from somewhere else now. “Take your people—and the diamond, if you must—and leave. Archer won’t survive another hour with a wound like that, and you won’t last much longer. You might still be able to save his life—and your own—if you go now.”

Simon shook his head to clear it and forced every bit of his waning energy into his voice. “I don’t think so,” he said, hoping that he sounded as confident as he wanted to. “But as long as we’re bargaining, let me make you a counteroffer: give up now and stop the satellite launch, and maybe, just maybe, you’ll spend the next ten years in a nice cushy minimum security facility instead of some filthy hellhole. Sound good?”

“I take it that’s a ‘no’, then?” Rupp asked, a sneer evident in his voice. “Ah, well. I should have expected that.” Simon caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye—Rupp’s shadow, splashed against the wall by one of the tiny computer-case lights—and he edged under a desk, forcing himself to breathe silently and shallowly. “You’ll die here, then,” Rupp went on, and he turned cautiously about, and the shadow of his knife whickered across the wall before it, and Rupp, slid out of Simon’s view again. “And your friends, too. Even if you’re correct and they do by some *miracle* manage to stop the satellite from launching, well.” A single stealthy footstep made Simon freeze again. “Why do you think there are *two* countdowns?” Rupp asked, and incredibly, he laughed, a soft but jagged sound.

“No warheads,” Johnny reported, casually standing on one of the satellite’s guidance fins and peering into the empty nose-cone of one of the booster rockets. “That’s somethin’.”

“Hooray,” Mike said, thumbing his nose out the open door and firing a single desultory shot after it. “Thousands of tourists can sleep safe!”

“Yep.” Johnny leaped down, landing with a heavy thud on the concrete beside the satellite. “We die in here, we die alone.”

“That’s . . . terribly comforting,” Jeremy wheezed from his spot under the console.

“Stay still, Archer,” Sandra said. “If you die after Templar told you not to, he *will* kill you.”

“Mm.” Jeremy closed his eyes, then opened them again. “. . . Springheel . . . was it?”

“Eh?” Sandra craned her neck, staring down the empty hallway after the long-departed Simon. “What? I’m busy here, Archer.”

“You’ve . . . seen the plans for . . . the satellite?”

“What? Yes.”

“Tell me . . . how the diamond fits into it. Please.”

Sandra glanced at Jeremy in disbelief, then visibly gave up. “There’s a metal armature at the bottom that holds it centered. There are four major laser batteries around the outside, and when they fire a series of polished titanium mirrors direct the lasers down into the diamond in the center. Four lasers go in—” Sandra clapped her hands together “—one comes out.”

By the time she was done Jeremy appeared to have passed out. His eyes were closed and his breathing was shallow. Sandra studied him worriedly before turning her attention back to the door, and then jumped when he said, “. . . may I . . . see the diamond?”

“Shit!” Sandra hissed, automatically grabbing for the little eight-million-dollar lump in her bra.

[0:4:22:07] [0:6:22:07]

“Are you dead?” Rupp asked, almost pleasantly.

The sound of his voice jarred Simon from his daze. He discovered he’d been leaning against the wall for several seconds, light-headedly patting the same sticky arc of floor in front of himself over and over; anger, mostly at himself, flooded through him, waking him up. He knew it wouldn’t last long. The loss of blood was beginning to tell on him. “Afraid not,” he called back, willing himself to sound alert. “I’m sorry I’m such an *inconvenience*.”

“Ah haaaa, you’re still alive!” Rupp said, smugly. “I have to admit that I’d been wondering. That was quite a cut you took!”

“Stop the launch, Rupp,” Simon said again, his groping fingers touching a second wall. He was in the corner. In the wrong corner. Easing himself from one

wall to the next Simon strained for any hints of Rupp's presence. Where *was* he? ... to hell with that, where was Simon's gun?

"Even if I wanted to, I can't, not from here, not by myself," Rupp said, his voice suddenly sounding far too close, and Simon made himself be very still. "It's far too late." Simon eased himself away from the wall and behind a stack of crates. "In just over six minutes the satellite will launch itself, and nothing you or I can do from here will stop it."

"Well!" Simon said, stretching out to pull himself across a narrow walkway formed by the stacks of crates, "I guess my team'll just have to stop the launch for you, since you're such a helpless lamb."

"By all means," Rupp said. "Stop the launch. Make the booster rockets shut down. In just over *six* minutes the *other* countdown will reach zero, and the satellite's own computers will tell it to test-fire itself, and if it's still sitting on the ground when the lasers fire..." He trailed off there.

It was like a dash of cold water in Simon's face. Abandoning his stealth he cast about for his gun, no longer caring about the noise he was making. If he didn't find it soon he'd have to take on Rupp bare-handed, knife or not.

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"Are you nuts?" Sandra said, her hand still pressed over her heart and the diamond above it. "I'm not *giving* you the Morning Star. That's how this whole fuckup got *started*, remember, 'James Crown'? Besides, Templar told me to keep it safe. Giving it to you does not count as 'safe'."

Jeremy didn't argue with that. Instead he coughed weakly and grimaced. He swiped the back of his gloved hand over his mouth. It came away bloody. Bloodier. "Please," he said, when he could speak again. It was a breathless gasp of a sound. "I... think it could be... important."

In the end, astonishingly, it was Rich who came to his aid. "Let him see the damn thing, Spring," he said, his eyes never once leaving the computer monitor. "What's he going to do, run off with it?" Sandra blinked at Rich, plainly startled.

Jeremy rolled his head to the side, looking crookedly up at Rich. "... thank you," he said, mildly surprised.

Rich rolled his eyes. His hands flew over the keyboard. "Don't fucking thank me, Archer. Just shut up, stop distracting me, and do whatever it is you think is so important you'd bleed to death for it."

"Fine," Sandra said, tugging open her shirt collar and sticking her hand into her bra. Jeremy politely looked away, even as he caught one glove in his teeth and yanked it off. Mike, having no such reservations, whistled at her from across the room. "But you pull any shit with me and I swear you'll be longing for the days when *one* bullet hole was the extent of your problems."

"I can... see why you're... Simon's second-in-command," Jeremy said, his customary dry delivery a little marred by the wheezing. He spat out one bloodied

glove, pinned Mike's sodden shirt to his abdomen with his elbow, and yanked off the other glove in the same way. "You . . . sound quite like him."

[0:3:03:22] [0:5:03:22]

"I can hear you," Rupp almost sang, and Simon jerked back half a heartbeat before Rupp appeared, pacing cat-like down the narrow aisle formed by two rows of crates. Crouched in the shadows, his head spinning, Simon watched Rupp go by, the man's immaculate white pants and bloodied knife not a foot from his nose. He could attack now, risk the knife—the cold numbness in his arms and the fog settling in around his mind convinced him not to. He'd waited too long. By now he needed the gun just to even the score.

Instead he waited until Rupp had vanished, then crawled across the aisle the other man had just vacated. "You *do* know that the launch doors didn't open, right?" he said, and now he could hear the faintest hints of wavering under those words that even his irritation with himself couldn't erase. "Your precious satellite won't get far if it can't even get off the launchpad."

"That's right," Rupp said, in the tones of someone who'd just been reminded of a chore they'd been putting off. "I *did* forget to open the bay, didn't I? Well. We can't have that."

Even as Simon scrambled to put some distance between himself and the last place he'd spoken from, he heard Rupp take a few steps and do something at one of the computers. There was a long groaning sound, like a lever being pulled, and a moment later the ground shook under him. Rumbling filled the air.

"There," Rupp said with evident satisfaction. "Launch bay doors are open. I wonder how many of their precious seconds your friends wasted trying to make them open?"

Simon gritted his teeth and didn't respond, once again patting the ground in front of him.

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"God *damn* it!" Sandra said with feeling, dropping to her knees and shoving the Star into Jeremy's bare hands. Grabbing Mike's shirt in both hands she pressed it down hard against Jeremy's side, making him choke on a horrible breathless sound. "I can't watch the door *and* keep you alive, Archer. Keep a hold on the *compress* like I *said*!"

"I'm . . . sorry," Jeremy gasped, but his eyes were only for the Star. It spun glittering in his fingers as he turned it over and over, fingers ticking off one facet after another. He counted under his panting breath, stopping occasionally to wheeze in a slightly deeper breath and always, always grimacing afterward.

"Sorry's going to kill you, even if Templar doesn't," Sandra tartly informed him, but she didn't stand back up, either. Instead she raised her voice. "Honda!



Come keep an eye on this door while I babysit this idiot! Let Texas deal with that one!”

“Yes’m!” Mike called, scrambling over. Rounding the edge of the console he took it all in, Jeremy crumpled under the console with Sandra kneeling beside him, and he laughed. The sound had a hint of hysteria in it. “Aww, that’s cute, Spring. Fifty years ago they’d have called that ‘giving aid and comfort to the enemy’, you know?”

“Fifty years ago they’d have called that ‘really asking for it’, Honda,” Sandra said sweetly.

Mike was saved from having to answer that by the rumbling of the launch bay doors opening. It shook the entire room, and Mike fell back a step and whooped. “Way to go, Specs!” he yelled, taking up his post by Sandra’s door.

“It wasn’t me,” Nate said irritably, jumping down from his tenuous perch on the fusebox. “I barely managed to get to the wiring. Someone else opened them.”

“You, someone else, who gives a fuck,” Mike said cheerfully. “They’re open now, and the giant toaster can get out if it has a mind to, instead of just blowing us all up.”

“Hope it doesn’t do either,” Johnny put in, turning to look at Rich.

Rich didn’t answer. Indeed, he didn’t seem aware of any of them. The bluish-gray glow of the monitor lit his face and his glasses with a freezing cold glow, and his hands were a blur on the keyboard. “Stop fighting me, asshole,” he muttered, as windows opened and closed on the monitor, sometimes in the same heartbeat. “Give the fuck up. I am so much better at this than you.”

Mike sniggered. Rich either ignored him or didn’t hear him. His fingers rolled forward over the keyboard, and this time a patch of jagged code appeared in one of the winking windows before it could wink back out. “Deal with that,” Rich suggested to his unseen rival, sneering at the monitor.

“Guards are gone,” Johnny said, craning to peer out the door.

Sandra glanced up at the first countdown, then went back to pressing the shirt against Jeremy’s side. “They’re clearing the area for launch,” she said, matter-of-factly. “Texas, leave the door. Come get behind the console. When—if—that thing goes up we’ll need it for shelter.”

Johnny nodded and edged backward, keeping his rifle trained on the empty door while he moved back to join the rest of them.

[0:1:41:17] [0:3:41:17]

“Two minutes,” Rupp said.

Simon lifted his head. He was cold and tired, and he was still losing blood fast despite having forced his left hand to close around his right arm. Stubbornly he still kept looking for his gun, fastened on it like a talisman. Sometimes his numbed fingers would touch blood-sticky floor and then he knew that he’d already searched this area.

“Are you dead?” Rupp asked again, and this time Simon didn’t bother to answer him. After a moment, Rupp went on. “Well, if you are, it’s surely only a matter of time before I find you,” he said, mostly to himself. And then he raised his voice again. “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

When Simon’s fingers brushed over something, he barely noticed, concentrating as he was on avoiding Rupp and staying awake. A few foggy seconds later he blinked and moved his hand back, and his fingers fell on the muzzle of his gun, just barely poking out from beneath a loading pallet. Simon gasped in a breath in immense relief and fumbled the gun free. It took both hands to lift it, and the grip was sodden with blood by the time he managed to wield it.

“Oh ho, so you’re not dead,” Rupp immediately said. “Not yet, at any rate. How much more blood can you lose? Your stubbornness has killed you, I hope you realize.”

“But not yet,” Simon said, and he winced at how weak he sounded. Rupp’s only answer was a laugh.

Flexing his bloody fingers on the grip of his gun, Simon looked dazedly around. He was close to the center of the room—closer than he liked—and the main walkway between the pallets gaped open and empty next to him. He thought for a few fevered seconds, then thrust his right arm out into the aisle and clenched his fist, hard.

The gashed muscles in his arm screamed as they opened again, pouring blood onto the floor in a dark puddle. Computer lights gleamed in the depths of the puddle. Simon hissed in agony and swayed forward as a surge of fog came up, threatening to drag him away. Instead of letting it he crouched in a tiny niche overlooking the pool of his blood and fumbled the gun up, the cold of its muzzle like an icy kiss against his cheek.

Closing his eyes Simon let his head fall backward, the back of his head resting against one of the cool metal crates, and he waited, the room spinning slowly around him.

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Nate wedged the end of his crowbar under one of the small locked panels on the console and stomped hard on the other end. The lock broke with a sharp *spang!* sound and the panel flipped open, revealing a small red key marked MANUAL LAUNCH 2. The crowbar flew away to clang noisily on the floor.

“Not what I was hoping to find, exactly,” Nate said, scurrying over to reclaim the crowbar and wedging it under another small locked panel. “Pretty much the exact opposite, in fact. Five bucks says this one says MANUAL LAUNCH 1.”

“Ain’t takin’ that bet,” Johnny told him. Nate grinned at him and stomped down on the crowbar again, breaking the lock and revealing an identical small red key marked MANUAL LAUNCH 1.

“You’re the man, Specs,” Mike said. “And I mean that.”

“Keep it the fuck down,” Rich spat. His lip bled where he had been biting it, and he wasn’t so much typing as he was assaulting the keyboard. Nate ducked his head and ran after his crowbar again.

Jeremy’s fingers flew on while Sandra grimly held the compress in place. The diamond spangled gaudily in his fingers. Eventually he ran out of facets and numbers and the diamond spun to a stop. “Yes,” he murmured, and carefully he turned the diamond over, rubbing the pad of one finger over the point at the very top. “That’s . . . absolutely right.”

“What’s right?” Sandra asked him.

In answer, he held the diamond out to her, carefully held upright. “I need you to . . . put this in the satellite,” he said.

“What?!” Sandra’s voice was incredulous. “Put it in the—you are insane, Archer! We’ve just spent the last week ensuring that it wouldn’t *go* into the satellite!”

“No, I . . .” Jeremy’s breathless voice cut off there and he broke out into a fit of coughing, a long and protracted bout that left him spitting out blood. His entire body went taut with pain for a second. The choked sound that he made was almost a groan. “I’m *right*,” he insisted, after he caught his breath, and he let his head fall back to hit the console with a bang. Sandra jumped. “If it . . . launches . . . we have . . . other problems. If it doesn’t . . . you can . . . remove it again. Simon . . . needn’t know.”

“Templar—” Sandra started to say, her eyes riveted to the blood-soaked mass of Mike’s shirt.

“I’ll . . . take full responsibility,” Jeremy said, overriding her. “He can put me in . . . prison if he likes. Please.”

Sandra hissed out an annoyed sound. “This is against my better judgment,” she told him, reaching out to take it.

“Put it in with . . . the point *up*,” Jeremy said, pushing her finger over until it rested against the point in question. “It may not . . . want to fit. Force it to.”

Sandra nodded shortly. “Hold the compress,” she told him. They traded, diamond for compress, and Sandra scrambled out from behind the computer console, the Morning Star in her hand.

[0:0:52:03] [0:2:52:03]

Step. Step. Step. *Splash*.

Simon’s eyes flew open. How long had he been out—? It didn’t matter, as long as the launch hadn’t happened. Even as Rupp said, “. . . my, look at this blood,” Simon gathered his aching limbs under himself and sprang to his feet.

He nearly went right back down again. The room went black for a moment and spun around him, his oxygen-starved legs screaming in pain to match his arms, but Rupp was there, framed neatly in the main walkway not five feet away,

disdainfully wiping Simon's blood off his shoe. Simon's trained reflexes, older and deeper and more demanding than this trivial mental fog, kicked in.

The gun snapped out with no regard for his wounded arms and even as Rupp whipped around Simon pulled the trigger. The room was spinning, but his aim was true. The gun's recoil drove him back against the crates, knocking the wind out of him. A fresh splatter of blood flew from both of his abused arms.

Rupp's face exploded.

The older man wavered in place for a heartbeat before collapsing in a jerking pile of limbs, Simon's blood and his own soiling the immaculate white of his suit. Simon forced himself to stay upright, shaking his head to try and make the room stop spinning, until he was certain that Rupp was dead. Then he sagged down after him, dropping weakly back into that crouch. "I feel like I should be saying something witty right now," he told the empty room and the corpse in a shocky little voice, leaning back against the crate behind him and closing his eyes.

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"Come on," Rich said, his voice a soft growl. "Come on, come on, come on come on come on you *bitch*—"

Sandra crouched under the satellite, her eyes half-closed against the roiling smoke as she fumbled blindly with the armature. "Someone tell me when it hits ten seconds," she yelled over the noise of the engines. "Honda, Specs, take Archer and get down that hallway, keep the door clear."

"Come on," Rich snarled, even as Mike holstered his gun and moved towards the mostly-unconscious Jeremy. He bared his teeth at the computer. "Fuck you, fuck you, *fuck* you, I am *better* than you, you cannot win this game—*yes!*"

The engines deep within the satellite chuffed like air brakes and began to settle again, whirring down. Above his head the first countdown flashed twice, then halted. [0:0:21:00], it said, before it stopped entirely and said [—:—:—:—] instead. Mike let out a war whoop that echoed through the entire room. "Aw yeah, Specs Two, you da man!"

Jeremy's eyes flickered open at the noise. "What . . . ?" he whispered, licking his lips.

"Launch is aborted!" Mike told him gleefully. "Specs Two does it again!"

"What?" Jeremy said again, and then the fog magically cleared from his eyes. "No! No, that isn't . . ." He trailed off in another burst of painful coughing.

"It's off?" Sandra demanded, vaulting over the console and landing beside Nate. "Launch is stopped?"

"It's off," Rich said in triumph, shoving his glasses up. "Fragged that mother-fucker."

"I love a good deathmatch," Nate said, high-fiving Rich.

Rich snorted. "Here I had you pegged for a Capture the Flag man . . ."

"Second countdown's still going," Johnny pointed out.

The congratulations trickled off as they all turned to stare at it. [00:1:46:53], it said, and it was still spinning.

“So what’s that?” Nate asked.

“No clue,” Rich said. “It’s not controlled from this computer.” He scowled at the second monitor.

“So now what?” Nate said, looking at Sandra.

“Clear the room, let the second timer run out when we’re not here,” Sandra said, at the same time that Jeremy said, “Launch it.”

“What?” two or three of them said in disbelieving unison, turning on Jeremy. “Are you out of your cotton-pickin’ mind?” Mike added. “We just stopped it from launching!”

“*Launch it*,” Jeremy insisted, wheezing. “What do you . . . think the second . . . countdown *is*? It’s going to . . .” Again his words got choked off in a frenzy of coughing, even as his eyes bulged with the need to talk.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:49:27]

Simon’s eyes snapped open. *Pass out later*, he told himself savagely. Clenching his jaw he shoved himself to his feet, staggering. Stumbling past Rupp he nearly fell, catching himself clumsily on one of the piles of crates and nearly knocking it over. The hallway lights gleamed at him, beckoning, and leaving Rupp in an untidy pile on the floor Simon half-ran half-stumbled down the hallway, heading back the way he’d come.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:42:28]

“You are out of your *mind*,” Sandra told Jeremy testily.

Jeremy whooped in a deep breath. “—test-fire!” he choked out as soon as he was able, his face going red with the effort. “It’s . . . a countdown to test-fire the lasers!”

“Holy shit,” Nate breathed, spinning around to stare distrustfully at the satellite.

“You don’t know that,” Rich pointed out, even as he went back to the computer and called up a few windows.

“Gut instinct,” Jeremy wheezed.

“Your gut’s been shot,” Mike pointed out, but he looked uncertain.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:35:21]

Simon staggered and bounced off the wall, leaving a bloody armprint on the paint. He could see the door into the launch area, he could hear voices, he could still hear the satellite rumbling . . .

\* \* \*

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:34:16]

“Please,” Jeremy said, forcing his eyes open again. “Launch it or . . . it will explode . . . and take us . . . with it!”

“What should we do?” Nate said, looking wide-eyed at Sandra. “I can launch it from here, we have the manual keys . . .”

Sandra hesitated, eyeing Jeremy narrowly.

“Please,” Jeremy said again, as loudly as he could seem to manage. “Please believe me—”

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:32:01]

“—and . . . launch it,” he heard Jeremy croak, and Simon bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. The new pain of it cleared the fog just enough and Simon put on a final burst of speed, exploding through the door just behind Sandra.

Three guns were drawn on him before he could even blink. He ignored them. “DO IT!” he roared, clumsily slinging one arm around Sandra’s waist and bearing her to the floor with his sheer mass. He landed with an ignominious thud on the ground next to Jeremy, one that made the cut across his chest scream. “LAUNCH IT!”

Nate looked at Rich. Rich looked at Nate. “*Get down!*” Nate cried, and both Mike and Johnny threw themselves flat, slinging their arms over their heads. Simon left one hand on Sandra’s shoulder and grabbed for Jeremy, his instincts screaming at him to *shield the wounded, shield the wounded . . .*

Rich and Nate both dropped to their knees and reached up, grabbing the manual override keys. “On three,” Nate said, and Rich nodded. “One, two, *three!*”

Both of them twisted their keys to the right. On the other side of the heavy metal console the satellite roared to life like a dragster being revved, and Nate and Rich barely had time to drop flat before fire and smoke roared out over their heads, blackening the walls and deafening them all. The satellite lurched up from the sunken launch pad, its four booster rockets digging huge melted holes full of slag in the floor.

Simon pulled Jeremy’s face tight against his shoulder and squeezed his own eyes shut as the world exploded around them.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:23:41]

Even after the satellite was gone all Simon could hear was the roar of its boosters. The heavy metal that the computer console had been sheathed in was warped and blackened, but it had held, even though the computers inside them would never work again.

He became aware of a faint, faint buzzing noise, and a moment later, of Jeremy’s hand clutching weakly at his shoulder. Abruptly Simon let him go

and Jeremy sagged away, still panting. Simon could see it, could see Jeremy's chest rising and falling quickly, but he couldn't hear it. By turning around he discovered that the faint buzzing noise was every single one of his team members all shouting at the tops of their lungs, unable to hear each other.

Simon swept one bleeding arm around in a circle and they all stopped and blinked at him. Sandra sucked in a breath and asked him something that he could barely hear, dropping to her knees and grabbing for his wrist. Simon let her have it, relieved to transfer at least one of his problems to someone else.

There was a touch on Simon's shoulder and Simon looked around. Jeremy smiled weakly at him. He looked awful, pale and sweating, with blood on his lips and two hectic spots of color high in his cheeks. His mouth rounded. *Thank you*, Simon read on Jeremy's lips, even though he couldn't hear it, and then Jeremy's eyes sagged shut and he slumped back against the console.

Simon blinked twice and then his free hand swept out, cracking against Jeremy's cheek and leaving a smear of his own blood there. Jeremy's head snapped to the side, but his eyes fluttered open, dazedly.

*"Stay awake!"* Simon yelled, barely able to hear himself. *"Stay with me, damn you!"*

Jeremy's eyes could barely focus on him, but after a moment he nodded and made an effort to push himself up. Simon nodded back, tightly, his eyes rising helplessly to the launch bay doors, gaping open to the night.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:10:00]

The four boosters drove the satellite skyward, four plumes of flame in the sky. Inside its belly four laser arrays sparked to life, glowing a dull red.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:05:00]

The onboard computer sent the laser arrays into their final warmup. Four cherry-red coals glowed at their points, reflected dimly in the mirrors set at an angle below them, making the Morning Star glitter in its armature. Glimmering red lights danced over the interior of the satellite as the diamond, wedged upside-down in its armature, waited.

[—:—:—:—] [0:0:00:00]

Four powerful banks of lasers fired simultaneously, before the satellite could even reach low Earth orbit.

Four brilliant red beams of light stabbed out, bounced off the waiting mirrors, and lanced into the heart of the Morning Star. Inside it was like a maze, or a supremely complicated prism, and the four lasers bounced from facet to facet, seeking the single way out of the heart of the diamond and in the process combining into one highly focused beam of light strong enough to destroy a building or turn an unsuspecting person to ash—

That powerful beam of light shot from the slightly pointed tip of the upside-down Morning Star, up into the satellite's own guts.

[—:—:—:—] [—:—:—:—]

The explosion rocked the floor under their feet and lit the night sky a hellish orange, the boom of it reverberating off the canyon walls. The compound was showered with tiny bits of glowing twisted metal, and within a minute the ancient wooden house in the center was on fire, sluggish orange flames crawling over the walls.

For a moment or two the night sky was lit up as bright as day, and even after the light had faded a huge cloud of smoke hung like a pall over the compound. By the time they could drag their eyes away from the remains of the spectacle they could almost hear again, and Simon closed his eyes in profound relief, sagging against the console next to Jeremy.

"Holy shit," Johnny said reverently. "Hell of a bang."

"I hear you, Texas," Simon said, not bothering to open his eyes. "I hear you."

[early thursday morning, later]

"—plar?"

Simon forced his eyes open just as Sandra grabbed his shoulders and repeated, "*Templar!*"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm here."

Relief flooded Sandra's face even as she whipped around and snapped her fingers at Johnny. "Shirt," she said.

"Yes'm," Johnny said, shrugging out of the rifle's shoulder strap and stripping off his shirt. The t-shirt underneath was streaked with sweat.

"We need to get out of here pronto," Simon said, dispassionately watching Sandra rend the seams of Johnny's shirt with her teeth. "Think both Archer and I could do with a little immediate medical supervision."

"We're working on it, Templar," Sandra said shortly, grabbing for his right arm and winding what had once been Johnny's sleeve around the deep laceration there. Simon grunted as she pulled the impromptu bandage tight. "Honda and Specs Two went to go get the van in as close as they could. Hopefully we can bust ass out of here before the guards regroup."

"I'm not too worried," Simon said. In truth, he wasn't worried about much. He felt as if he were watching the situation from a long way away, and although he knew that was a bad sign, he couldn't bring himself to care. "Most of them won't stop running until they're miles away. That explosion is going to bring down every local lawman in Tahoe and they probably know it."

Sandra blinked, then whirled on Nate. "Specs," she said. "We'll need the way clear."



"I'm on it," Nate said, pushing his glasses up and nodding. "As soon as I get back to the van."

Sandra wrapped the other sleeve tight around Simon's left wrist, then folded up the rest of the shirt and pressed it hard to Simon's chest. The lacerated muscles there screamed their displeasure and Simon winced. "Hold that," Sandra said briskly, guiding Simon's arms in until they crossed over his chest. Simon hugged the compress to his chest awkwardly. "And sit up," Sandra went on, catching his shoulder and pulling at him. "Sit up and try to stay awake, Templar, we'll get you loaded into the van as quick as we can."

Simon scowled faintly and let Sandra sit him up. "I can walk," he protested. "Two of you will need to carry Archer, though."

"Like hell you can," Sandra said. "Honda and Specs will get Archer and you'll lean on me. Texas will cover our retreat."

"I can walk," Simon insisted.

"Maybe so, but you don't have to, so shut up and deal with it, boss."

"Nnn," Jeremy said weakly.

"I can *walk*," Simon insisted again, louder, and the effort of raising his voice dumped him right down into blackness.

He woke up again when they were loading him into the van. Sandra's voice was so brisk and businesslike that Simon thought he could probably cut himself on its edges. "Sit him up against the front seats, we'll hold him up," she was saying, and the lip of the van's back doors thumped hard against the backs of his legs, and Simon blinked groggily.

"Thought I told you I could walk," he grouched, his voice thick.

"Templar," Sandra said, all in a relieved rush, and squeezed his leg. She and Johnny sat him on the van's floorboards and leaned him back against the front seats, and Simon hugged the compress to his chest again and dazedly settled in.

Outside there was some kind of fuss. "Careful!" Nate was saying, and Mike said something that Simon couldn't quite make out, and then Mike scrambled backwards into the van, half-carrying half-dragging Jeremy behind him while Nate supported Jeremy's legs. Rich threw an armload of Jeremy's things in beside him, the goggles glinting from the folds of his battered and singed leather jacket. Simon nodded absently and blacked out again.

"Get us the fuck out of here, Honda," Sandra was saying when next he was aware of anything, and there was a heavy weight in his lap, and Simon forced his eyes open just a crack. Jeremy was laid out on the floor of the van with his head in Simon's lap.

Simon considered this unusual situation for a moment, then let one hand drop to Jeremy's cheek. The thief's eyes fluttered about halfway open and he raised an eyebrow at Simon. He looked exhausted.

“Stay awake,” Simon told him, even as Mike gunned the van.

Jeremy mouthed something that might have been “I will,” but the words were lost under the revving of the engine. The van leaped forward and two people grabbed at Simon’s shoulders from either side, holding him up. Somewhere in the distance Nate was saying something over and over and the big radio was squawking back at him whenever he paused.

Lights, both white and colored, flickered over Jeremy’s face as the van raced out of the compound. Simon watched them, idly wondering where they’d come from, when the compound had been so dark before. They were almost hypnotic. Dimly, in the back of his mind, he remembered that Jeremy shouldn’t go to sleep, and so he stroked his thumb absently over Jeremy’s cheek and told the thief to stay awake again, and Jeremy smiled a painful little smile and pointed out that he *was* awake, and Simon nodded, because it was true, and then the world mostly slid away from him and he graciously let it go, leaving his hand curled lightly over the side of Jeremy’s face.

[later]

The ceiling was white plaster. That was the first thing that Simon noticed. The second thing that he noticed was that he was *starving*.

“Unh,” he said, and rubbed his face with both hands, which he regretted almost immediately, as the *third* thing he noticed was that both his arms hurt like hell. “Ow!”

“Templar!” Mike cried. His chair screeched against the tile floor as he bounded to his feet. “Hey!”

“Mike,” Simon said wearily, leaving his hands tented over his face. There were clean bandages wrapped around the palm of his left hand, and they smelled like rubbing alcohol and disinfectant. “How long was I out?”

“Thirty-six hours, give or take,” Mike said. “We got you back to Reno and they stitched you up and gave you a bunch of blood. We got a couple of rooms at the hotel across the street and we’ve been waiting for you to wake up ever since.”

“And here I am,” Simon said. “How’s Archer?”

“Alive,” Mike said. Simon heard footsteps, and Mike’s voice faded a bit. “Still out, though. They claim he’ll recover.”

“Good to know,” Simon said. “So what’s *my* status? You going to sit on me if I try and get up?”

On the far side of the room, Mike snorted. “You’re in pretty good shape, all in all, except for your right arm. The doc had the vapors at it, says you’ve got a little PT coming once the muscle tears are on the mend.”

“Not physical therapy *again*,” Simon said, tugging grumpily at the IV stuck in the back of his right hand. “Didn’t I do that last year?”

“Afraid so,” Mike said cheerfully, wandering back over. A cold glass, wet with condensation, tapped against Simon’s shoulder, and Simon grabbed for it

without thinking and yelped as his right arm twanged like a bowstring. Mike yelped right along with him.

“Let’s try that again,” Simon gritted out, carefully curling his left hand around the glass. The heel of his hand immediately set up a bone-deep bellowing clamor that made his arm ache all the way up to his elbow, but he managed to force it closed.

“Aw, shit, boss, just use the straw,” Mike said, half-pleading. “I’ll hold it. Sandy’s gonna kill me if you pop a stitch.”

“I’m not an invalid,” Simon said with asperity, tugging weakly at the glass until Mike grudgingly let it go. He drained off half the glass in a single gulp and promptly had a coughing fit, which made his chest wake up and start throbbing. “Ow,” a red-faced Simon said once he’d managed to stop coughing. “Ow, ow, crap, *ow*.”

“See, Sandy would say that’s what you get,” Mike said, perching on his chair again, “but since I’m such a nice guy and all—”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘nice guy’, that’s enough out of you,” Simon said, draining the glass. “Any chance of some food? I’m hungry enough to go begging at the maternity ward.”

“Aw, gross, chief!” Mike made a horrible face. “Yeah, sure, I’ll run down to the cafeteria and score you a sandwich or something.”

“My man,” Simon said. “Make it two. Something with meat in it. Real meat, none of that ‘chicken salad’ stuff. And coffee, goddammit.”

“Will do,” Mike said, standing up and stretching. “Your clothes are pretty much a bust, but Sandy hit a mall yesterday, grabbed you some replacements. They’re in a bag around here somewhere.”

Simon carefully put the glass back down on his bed tray, then grabbed for the bedrails and hauled himself up into a sitting position. It hurt like hell; he gritted his teeth and dealt with it. Mike squawked and grabbed for him, either to make him lay down again or help him up; Simon let go of the bedrail with his left hand and knocked Mike’s hands away. “I’m *fine*,” he growled. “You want to help? Go get me my food.”

“Is this gonna be like last time?” Mike asked, hands flexing impotently in midair. “Because shit, man, I’ll stop on the way back up and get myself a weapon if you’re gonna be like you were when you broke your leg. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Why are you still here?” Simon asked with tacked-on patience.

Mike shot out of the room.

By the time Mike came back, Simon was up, de-IVed, and mostly dressed, wearing new jeans and a whole lot of white bandages and staring sourly at the brown t-shirt that Sandra had picked out. COME SEE SCENIC LAKE TAHOE, it said. Someone (judging from the handwriting, Simon suspected Johnny) had taken a marker and added AND THEN BLOW IT THE FUCK UP.

"Cute," Simon said, gingerly shrugging into it and pulling it down over the bandages on his chest. "You guys? You guys are just adorable. Seriously, I don't know what I'd do without your charming and sophisticated wit."

"We aim to please," Mike said, upending a paper bag onto Simon's bed tray. Two plastic-wrapped sandwiches tumbled out, and a bag of potato chips, and Simon gave up trying to tuck his t-shirt in and lunged for the food.

"Coffee?" Simon said, unwrapping one of the sandwiches and trying not to sound like he was pleading.

"Coffee, boss," Mike said, digging a tall travel mug out of his jacket pocket and adding it to the pile. Simon made an inarticulate sound around his mouthful of sandwich and fumbled the mug's flip-top open. Mike snickered and flopped back out in his chair.

"So," Simon said, once the vicious beast in his stomach had stopped growling and the first sandwich was almost gone. "How long did it take? I know you're dying to tell me."

Mike beamed. "Forty-one minutes," he proclaimed, giving Simon a thumbs-up. "I got that rattletrap up to a hundred and forty-three on the straightaways."

Simon whistled, a low, sliding sound. "Ninety minutes to get out there and forty-one to get us back? Not bad at all. When we get back to Washington I'm going to see about having you named Employee of the Month. I hear there's a five-cent raise involved."

"Five whole cents?" Mike beamed insincerely. "And to think Mama said dealing was where the money was."

"Keep it up and I'll see if I can't get you your green card," Simon told him, unwrapping the second sandwich.

"*Hai, hai, oyabun*," Mike said, flicking a desultory salute in Simon's direction.

"So," Simon said, attacking his second sandwich with scarcely diminished appetite. "Tell me the rest. Do we know why the satellite blew up?"

"Well, not officially, but if I had to guess, I'd say it had something to do with Archer getting Sandy to wedge the diamond into it backwards."

Simon stopped eating. After a moment, he forced himself to swallow his mouthful of sandwich. "...the diamond was in it when it blew?" he asked, rubbing the back of his hand over his mouth.

"Yeah," Mike said, flipping one hand over negligently. "Upside-down, you know? That had to have fucked *something* up."

"Christ," Simon said, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead. "We just blew up an eight-million-dollar diamond that didn't technically belong to us?"

"Guess so! But hey, we're all alive and the satellite and Rupp aren't, so technically we're a huge success!"

"There is that," Simon said, going back to his food. "Yay for us. I'll let Upstairs break it to the Mornings. He gets paid the big bucks for a reason. What else?"

Mike considered this for a moment, sinking down in his chair and lacing his fingers together over his belly. "Lemme see. The Nevada cops picked up about ten or so of Rupp's guards, all roaming the mountains, and another ten or so turned themselves in. They've been singing the finger-pointing song ever since. Some of 'em have been singing it in Russian."

"Russian, huh?" Simon chugged off about half the coffee and sighed out steam. "Figures Rupp was hiring out of the country. We get any names?"

"None besides Rupp's. They get pushed for more names and they clam right up. Not a single one'll say a word."

"Which means—"

"Karpol," they both said in unison, and then Mike shoved a hand through his hair and nodded, adding, "Yeah, s'what the local bureau figures."

"Makes sense to me too," Simon said. "Rupp had to have gotten those rockets from somewhere."

"Uhh, next. The press is going nuts, but when does the press not go nuts? Washington's pointing fingers like mad, trying to magically not blame anybody for anything. I think the official party line's going to be that Rupp was squatting illegally."

"Well, of course he was." Simon snorted and finished off his second sandwich. "None of our esteemed leaders would have ever done something so lucrative as sell him an abandoned World War II military base under the table."

Mike snickered, then thought for a minute. "That's about all I can think of offhand—"

"Tell me about Archer," Simon interrupted.

"Oh, right," Mike said, then shrugged. "They had to operate to dig the bullet out, but the doc says it's all muscle damage, pretty much. Says that with some time and exercise he'll live to be a pain in Art Theft's ass again."

Simon grunted in acknowledgement, stuffing his trash into the paper bag. "So where is he?"

"Archer? Next door." Mike jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "He's not awake yet, though. Doc says it'll probably be tomorrow morning before he really comes around, and then he's gonna be *hurtin'*."

"Funny thing, that," Simon said. "Bullets usually do hurt. I'm an expert on this subject."

"You and me both, boss." Mike leaned forward and snagged the paper bag, dropping it into the trash can huddled in the corner of the room. "So what are we gonna do with him?"

"Do with him?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, the Bureau's been jonesing for his ass for years, you know? When Sandy sent them her preliminary report, she damned near had to throw down to keep them from storming right in and sweeping his ass up, letting him wake up in some prison infirmary somewhere."

“Shit,” Simon said tiredly, finishing off his coffee. “You know what that is? It’s not fair. That’d be a great way for me to say ‘thank you’, wouldn’t it. ‘Hey, thanks for volunteering to help us and getting shot for your trouble, now go directly to jail, do not collect two hundred million dollars.’”

“Heh,” Mike said. “Yeah, since you put it that way, it does feel kinda low, putting a wanted criminal in jail. That’s just not right.”

“I find your pitiful attempts at sarcasm so endearing, Honda. But to tell you the truth—” Simon flipped the lid of the travel mug closed and set it down next to his empty water glass. “—I don’t feel particularly inclined to do Art Theft any favors right now. None of *them* ever stepped up to get shot for me.”

Mike nodded. “I hear that, boss. I figure you might not have much of a choice in the matter, though.”

“Yeah? I figure it’ll be a cold day in hell before I bend over and let them fuck me up the ass like that.” Simon said offhandedly, brushing a few stray crumbs off his new t-shirt. “If they want him so bad, they can catch him themselves.”

The sun was setting by the time Simon let himself into Jeremy’s hospital room.

Jeremy slept the sleep of the heavily drugged in the midst of a bunch of beeping machines, a plastic tube stuck up his nose, a pair of sensors glued to his chest, and an IV attached to one wrist. His face looked thin, his cheeks sunken and his skin pale, and the faded blue-and-white hospital gown wasn’t doing him any favors.

His hair, however, still lay swept back in more or less perfect order, and after confirming for himself that Jeremy was indeed nearly comatose with painkillers Simon cheerfully succumbed to his long-denied urge to mess up Jeremy’s hair until it stood up and fell over his forehead in fluffy brown spikes.

He felt a little guilty afterwards and smoothed Jeremy’s hair absently back into place. “You look like hell,” Simon informed the sleeping Jeremy, who didn’t seem to have anything to say about that. “And I mean that. I think you’d probably shoot *yourself* if you could see what you were wearing right now.”

Simon paused, not really expecting an answer and not getting one. He cast about until he found the single visitor’s chair and dragged it up to the side of Jeremy’s bed, sprawling out in it and eventually finding a clear spot to kick his legs out into. “Rupp’s dead,” he told the unconscious Jeremy with no further ado. “His men are giving themselves up left and right. Art Theft are damned near pissing themselves in their need to get their hands on your comatose ass, but, despite you losing me one eight-million-dollar diamond, I’m thinking I’m not going to let them have you.”

Simon waited a beat, then quirked an eyebrow towards the thief. “What, no ‘thank you, Simon’? That’s gratitude for you.”

Jeremy still wasn't saying anything. After a moment Simon sighed heavily and slumped down in his chair a little more. "You know," he said, "it sure is a big job to carry on all this witty repartee by myself. I thought you Brits were supposed to have such great manners. Shouldn't sheer propriety be forcing you to wake up and banter with me or something?"

Simon paused again, hopefully. Still nothing. The machine that seemed to have nothing to do besides beep regularly beeped regularly. "Pfft," Simon said, closing his eyes. "Lazyass."

For a little while Simon lounged there beside Jeremy's bed with his eyes closed, listening to the various machines click and sigh and hum and beep. Faintly, underneath all the mechanical noise, he could hear Jeremy breathing evenly. Eventually the quiet started to get to him, just a little, and Simon sighed and opened his eyes. "And I suppose I ought to say thank you before I forget," he told Jeremy. "So: thank you. Thank you for stepping up to help us fix your little gaffe. And, you know, thanks for taking a goddamned bullet just to prove your point. I mean, I really do believe that you were telling me the truth now. That? That is very convincing—"

He broke off there as Jeremy stirred. Jeremy sighed a little and turned his head away from Simon, but the timbre of his breathing didn't change a bit. Simon waited until he was certain that Jeremy was still asleep, then rolled his eyes at the back of Jeremy's head. "Oh, yeah," he said. "That would have been just like you, to sleep through all the insults and wake up just when I was being all grateful at you."

Jeremy still didn't say anything, and after a minute Simon let his head fall forward, resting his chin on his bandaged chest and thinking he'd just close his eyes for a minute. "I *am* glad you're still alive," he muttered absently, just before he fell asleep.

Simon dozed, lightly, sprawled out in the visitor's chair like he owned it and all the space around it. The pain in his arms receded to a dull nagging itch, just enough to keep him from falling into a deep sleep but not quite enough to keep him awake; for lack of anything else to do, his mind wandered. His dreams, if he could call them that, were faint, fragmented things, playing sluggishly out to a soundtrack of soft mechanical beeps and footfalls in the hallway outside.

The slight rustling sound, when it intruded, didn't seem dangerous, just annoying. Simon mumbled irritably and tried to get away from the intrusive noise, his head rolling bonelessly aside. "Well," a familiar English voice breathed against his cheek, so softly that it didn't quite jerk him out of his daydreams. "I believe I should have charged you more, Simon."

*Yeah, you probably should have, Archer,* Simon thought. There was a faint sliding touch against his lips, not quite a kiss but close; it almost brought him up out of his doze. Then there was a faint *pop!* and an unpleasantly fusty smell and

Simon swirled away into a much deeper sleep, the little not-a-kiss still tingling on his skin.

“—plar? Templar! Come on, Templar . . .”

“Wuh?” Simon blinked his eyes open—they felt gritty—to find a thoroughly frantic Nate shaking him. “Gerroff, Nate,” Simon said, stifling a yawn. “I jus’ closed my eyes for a sec . . .”

“Templar, I’ve been shaking you for five minutes!” Nate said. “Shadow’s gone!”

“What?” Just like that, Simon was completely and totally awake, and he shot upright in his chair. The muscles in his right arm screamed, and his chest started throbbing again, and then, just for variety, someone slammed his head into a vise and tightened it. Simon hissed and grabbed for his temples with his left hand, making his left hand start aching again to complete the set. “My *head*—oh, you little *bastard*!”

“Templar?” Nate asked, worried.

“Archer gassed me! *Again*!” Simon clutched at his head and hissed in another breath. “Let me guess. Someone left Shadow’s jacket in here, didn’t they? Put it in the little clothes closet?”

“ . . . yeah, probably,” Nate admitted. “But we thought he was unconscious! He’d just been gutshot, Templar, you don’t just walk away from that—well, I guess *he* did, but still, my point stands!”

Simon glanced out through his fingers at the empty bed. The IV needle was punched into the thin mattress, merrily dispensing painkillers into the cotton batting in an ever-widening wet circle. That mattress was feeling *no* pain. The heartbeat machine was still beating strong and steady, and this confused Simon until he realized that the sensors had been tucked into the bandages on his own chest. With a heartfelt groan Simon grabbed the sensors and jerked them loose, and the machine promptly flatlined and started screaming for help. “Shut up,” Simon told the machine, heaving himself to his feet.

He strode over to the tiny clothes closet, Nate at his heels like a worried puppy, and threw it open. Empty, completely empty, except for an empty glass ampoule with a broken neck, glinting at him tauntingly from the floor of the closet. Simon slammed the door shut.

“Christ,” he said, not without some admiration, and shook his head. “Jeremy Archer, you really are unbelievable, you know that?”

The door to Jeremy’s hospital room slammed open, admitting a hurrying nurse and a pair of interns towing a crash cart. One look at the empty bed and they all skidded to a confused stop.

“Sorry, folks,” Simon said, spreading his hands wide. “Nothing more to see here. Move along.”



“Elvis has left the building,” Nate muttered at his elbow, and Simon bit down on a bitter little laugh.

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## ◆ Coda

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[four months later]

The steaming battered car sat half-inside and half-outside the traumatized post office, canted drunkenly to the left on three flat tires, all four doors and its bent hood sprung wide open. Thousands of tiny little blue-green cubes of safety glass were scattered over the car and the surrounding area, a glittering cover for the four shallow steps that had once led up to the post office's glass doors and now led up to a gaping hole in the building's front. Twisted metal bars that had once been part of the doors jutted rudely out into thin air.

Simon shielded his eyes against the August sun with one hand and scowled at the pedestrians. Despite the yellow CRIME SCENE tape and the three uniformed police officers keeping the area cordoned off, a sea of colorfully-dressed DC tourists surged around the area and crushed up against the perimeter, three and four deep, fascinated. It was enough to give him retina damage. "Christ," he muttered. "What part of 'possible incendiary device' don't you sheep understand?"

Mike, beside him, snickered. "Think maybe if I ran at them screaming 'BOMB!' they'd scatter?"

Simon considered this. "No," he eventually said. "They'd sure as hell panic, but they'd just riot and scream and trample each other and get the street all bloody. Not that this wouldn't be deeply, viscerally satisfying."

"So you're saying—"

"Great idea, Mike. I'll sure keep it in mind for if things get too boring around here."

"What's a great idea?" Sandra asked, arriving with a cardboard carry-tray full of drinks. "Seeing how many of these sub-moronic tourists we can shoot before we run out of ammo or tourists?"

Both Mike and Simon turned to look at Sandra consideringly. "I vote for her idea," Mike said. "It's too hot to run anywhere."

Simon snatched one of the cardboard coffee cups from Sandra's tray. "I love you guys," he said affably. "Have I told you that lately? Every time I start worrying that maybe this job has driven me insane, all I have to do is look at you all and I realize how much worse off I could be."

“Aww, Templar, that’s just sweet,” Mike said. “Let’s you and I ditch this scene and go make hot monkey love in one of those carts full of letters.”

“Keep telling you you’re not my type,” Simon said, taking a swallow of his coffee. “Johnny called back in yet?”

“Yeah, a few minutes ago,” Sandra said. “Our fellow’s singing like a bird, wearing Rich’s transcribing fingers right off. Johnny claims the guy hasn’t shut up long enough to take a breath since he got loaded into the car.”

“Nuts?” Simon asked.

“Whole jar full of nuts,” Sandra confirmed. “Of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean that his bomb sucks.”

“True,” Simon admitted, “but it does even the odds a bit.”

The dead car suddenly belched a hissing cloud of steam and pissed some kind of blackish fluid all over the concrete steps. Simon and Mike and Sandra retreated with alacrity—not failing to reclaim their coffee first—and even the tourists flinched back, oohing and aahing, as if they were watching a fireworks show instead of tempting fate.

A chunky apparition stumped out of the steam, a once-ordinary red metal toolbox clamped gingerly in his fat lead-lined mitts. The toolbox was wreathed in duct tape and trailed a bunch of random wires from every surface, and the tourists oohed again, a couple of them actually clapping.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Mike said. “That’s a bomb.”

“Looks that way,” Simon said. “I’ve got an idea: let’s back up a little more, huh?”

The lead-suited figure bent stiffly over, carefully placing the toolbox—the bomb—on a lead blanket that had been spread out by the side of the car. The tourists held their collective breath, as if they were watching a movie stunt; Simon and his crew watched with a much more jaundiced eye, but didn’t get any closer, just in case. The toolbox-cum-bomb vanished under a second heavy lead-lined blanket, and then the apparition straightened back up and lifted off its heavy lead mask. A second, louder wave of applause swept the crowd. “Yeesh,” a red-faced Nate said, swiping the back of one of his gauntlets over his forehead and leaving a smear of sweat on the industrial fabric. “Why do the mad bombers have to come out in August, Templar? Can’t they wait until October?”

“Well, I guess they *are* mad,” Simon said. “Wave to your fans, Specs. Maybe they’ll throw panties.”

Nate barely spared the crowd a glance, stripping off the lead gauntlets and letting them thud to the ground at his feet. “It should be safe to winch the car out now,” he said, fumbling with the velcro straps that held his bomb-squad apron on, and Sandra nodded and waved to the tow truck, parked out at one side of the cleared area. Its engine coughed to life a moment later.

“Here, turn around, I’ll get it,” Simon said, and Nate obligingly turned around. Simon grabbed the velcro tabs and yanked them open. “So what’s the verdict?”

“Eh,” Nate said, shrugging out of the heavy lead apron and dropping it onto the pile at his feet. His shirt was wringing wet with sweat and Nate wrinkled up his nose and plucked at it. “I won’t know for sure until I get it back to base and break it open, but it looks pretty by-the-numbers, boss. If I had to guess I’d say it’s just another nutjob with a grudge and Internet access.”

“Oh, you mean like half the country?” Simon asked dryly, glancing at the swaddled form of the bomb. “Gosh, kids. Remember when the public library was your only source of dangerous information?”

“Oh, yes,” Sandra said. “Back in the Dark Ages. Tell us about the fabled ‘80s’ again, will you, Templar? Is it true that our ancestors didn’t have ATM machines?”

Simon shook his head sadly. “Kids these days,” he said.

“And their twenty-four-hour access to a vast cultural wasteland full of porn, illegal downloads, and bomb schematics,” Sandra added.

“... there’s porn on the Internet?” Simon asked. “You don’t say!”

“Hey, now,” Mike said. “That’s not nice, Sandy. I mean, you shouldn’t oughta talk about Rich’s girlfriend like that.”

“Why not?” Nate asked, scruffing his damp hair back with both hands and fighting back a snicker. “I mean, she’s pretty loose. I mean, twenty bucks buys you access to all her ports for a *month*—”

“Argh!” Mike’s eyes popped and he ducked behind Sandra, peering nervously out at Nate over her shoulder. “Aw, Nate, man, you know I’m too damn manly for geek humor!”

“—but sometimes she’s just phoning it in, you know,” Nate finished with glee, riding right over Mike’s words.

Mike cawed out a protest and hunkered down on the steps, putting both arms over his head. “Make him stop, Templar,” he pleaded.

“That’s enough heatstroke humor out of you,” Simon told Nate mildly, fanning his free hand in Nate’s direction. Nate shut his eyes and leaned blissfully into the vague approximation of a breeze. “Have some water already.”

Nate moaned. “A better idea I’ve never heard, boss.”

“We all done here?” Simon asked, wandering over to inspect the eviscerated car.

“Should be,” Sandra said, poking Nate’s shoulder with a bottle of water. “The locals should be able to handle the rest.”

“Right!” Simon said. He leaned down and peered into one of the car’s ex-windows, studying the glass strewn across the faded seats. “Nate’s in charge, folks. Let’s try and get this baby back to base without blowing anybody up, what say you? After that, I think we’re done for the day.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Sandra said.

Simon straightened up, his eyes traveling idly over the crowd. “Let’s roll, then—” He broke off there, his attention neatly caught by a contrasting splash of purest black in the midst of all that cheesy tourist color.

Jeremy Archer had traded in his leather jacket and pants for something lighter, but otherwise he was exactly as Simon remembered him, right down to his perfect hair and that utterly infuriating little smile. Simon’s eyes widened, and then narrowed. For a moment they were both still, considering each other, Jeremy with his sunglasses tilted down and Simon with his arm on the roof of the dead car; then Jeremy flicked his sunglasses back up, breaking the deadlock and hiding his eyes. His little smile curled in on itself. Unhurriedly he turned and melted into the crowd, sifting through the sea of hurrying tourists as he moved away.

“Templar?” Nate asked curiously from behind him, and Simon belatedly realized they’d been waiting for him to say something else.

Simon didn’t turn around. Eyes still on Jeremy’s retreating back, he absently put his coffee cup down on the car’s roof. “You guys finish up here and then go on home,” he said over his shoulder. “There’s something I need to follow up on.”

There was a pause, then Nate dubiously said, “... okay, Templar.”

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Simon said, then loped down the steps and ducked under the crime scene tape, wedging himself into the crowds.

Jeremy was a building’s length ahead of him by now and slowly but steadily pulling away, gliding through the crowds like water and barely leaving a ripple behind him. Simon, five inches taller and forty pounds heavier, had to bull his way through, plowing through masses of hot and irritated pedestrians and leaving them grumbling in his wake. “’scuse me. ’scuse me. Pardon me. ’scuse me. Fuck you too. Ex~cuse me,” Simon muttered, eyes riveted to Jeremy’s back. Fortunately Jeremy didn’t seem to be in any particular hurry, but keeping him in sight was still taxing Simon’s patience. Finally he gave up and dug his leather ID folder out of his jeans pocket, flipping it open. “FBI, ’scuse me, coming through, ’scuse me, FBI, coming through,” Simon said, flashing the ID left and right and looking grim. The crowds gave way for Simon-with-the-badge much faster than they had for just plain Simon.

They were a good three blocks away from the scene when Jeremy abruptly turned and vanished into an alley, without so much as a backwards glance. Simon dodged the last few people at the edge of the thinning crowd and broke into a run, covering the last half a block as quickly as he could.

He skidded to a halt at the mouth of the alley, shoving his badge into his front pocket and grabbing automatically for the gun holstered in the small of his back. The alleyway was quiet and deserted, as far as he could see. Rusty fire escapes cast their lengthening shadows down on the damp asphalt and the little huddles of trash cans that stood here and there, but there weren’t any international jewel thieves standing in plain sight with their hands up. Not that Simon had really

expected there to be, but it might have been nice.

Simon's hand fell away from the butt of his gun, leaving it holstered. Instead he took a deep breath and turned his hands palm out, showing them to the empty air. He waited like that for the count of three, then started down the alley, nerves tingling, hands hanging loose and ready at his sides.

The shadows of the buildings to either side brought a welcome cool respite from the heat of the day. By the time he was ten feet in, it was almost pleasant. With every step he looked left and then right, his ears straining after every sound. Simon made a routine check over his shoulder every few steps. Nothing behind him. Nothing in front of him. Nothing to the left, or to the right, or behind this clump of garbage cans, still nothing behind him . . .

Half a second after Simon made his last check over his shoulder there was a soft crunching sound right behind him. Before he could spin around someone jammed something metallic into the small of his back. Simon froze. "Well!" Jeremy said from behind him, sounding as amused as ever. "Good afternoon to you, too, Simon."

Slowly, resignedly, Simon put his hands up, letting them hover open and empty beside his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know," he said, staring resolutely down the empty alleyway. "Right now I'm thinking I've had better afternoons."

"So!" Jeremy said cheerfully, ignoring that. The metal thing in the small of Simon's back never wavered. "I *am* sorry you weren't able to retrieve the Morning Star, Simon, although whatever's left of it is probably decorating some farmer's field somewhere. I'm certain you could find it if you looked hard enough."

"It's no longer my problem," Simon said, flexing his fingers slightly and drawing in a long, steadying breath. "My real, ultimate goal was to stop Rupp's satellite from being deployed. I can't say we did that with any finesse, but we did it. It's over. In fact, it's over, reported on, typed up in triplicate, passed around, filed away, and forgotten. I have a whole other set of problems now and they're all less . . . less *you*. We're out of each other's hair, Archer. Unless, of course, you shoot me." He paused. "Do I actually need to point out that that's not a good idea, what with the whole FBI thing and all?"

"So we're quits, then?" Jeremy asked. "No Team Templar hot on my heels for the rest of my life?"

"As far as I'm concerned we're square," Simon said, patiently, mentally reviewing his options.

"Oh, good. I was hoping you'd say that," Jeremy said with some satisfaction, and the metal thing pulled away from Simon's back. Simon blew out his caught breath and let the tension melt from his shoulders before turning around and letting his hands drop.

Jeremy was smiling lazily at him, spinning something silvery in his fingers. "Are you certain we're quits, Simon?" he asked. "I'd simply hate to have to pull a

pen on you again.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “You are an *idiot*,” he said, rocking back on his heels. “I was about three seconds from taking that damned thing away from you and blowing your head off, you know that?”

Jeremy unconcernedly tucked the fountain pen back into his jacket. “Mm. Well. I trust that your *superb and extensive training* would have allowed you to—how would you put it, ‘re-evaluate the threat level’?—before you actually removed my head from my shoulders.”

“There’s a distinction between ‘threat’ and ‘annoyance’ that I’m not always willing to make, Archer, and don’t think I didn’t hear that sarcasm.” Simon leaned one shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest and giving Jeremy a thorough once-over. “But, anyway. What brings you back to DC? The Reflecting Pool?”

Jeremy nonchalantly pulled off his sunglasses, flicking them closed with a snap of his wrist. “What brings me back to the States is, in point of fact, the question I just asked you,” Jeremy said, leaning against the wall an arm’s length from Simon and threading the sunglasses into the collar of his t-shirt. “I’d wished to make absolutely certain that I wouldn’t have you and your team on my tail for the rest of my natural life, and what better way to find out than to go right to the source and ask?”

“Well, you do have this pesky habit of what’s technically referred to as ‘breaking the law’, but you’re in no way under my unit’s usual jurisdiction. The only people in the Bureau who still have a beef with you are in Art Theft. Although I have to admit they are just mad as hell at you.” Simon raised an eyebrow. “I’m kind of surprised you didn’t know that.”

“Mm.” Jeremy looked away, then back at Simon. “Well. I’ll admit I suspected as much, but in my business it’s always prudent to make absolutely sure, Simon. And I have. You say that we’re quits, and I, of course, am entirely prepared to trust you on this matter.” He paused. Then that familiar little smile bloomed on his face as if it had been waiting there all this time, and thus Simon was almost prepared for it when Jeremy reached out to lay a hand casually on his chest. “And you and I?” Jeremy asked, tilting his head to the side and studying Simon’s face curiously. “Are we also quits?”

Simon glanced down at the hand resting on his chest just above where his arms crossed and snorted out a soft laugh. “You’ve actually been thinking about that, haven’t you?” he asked, feigning surprise. “The great Jeremy Archer pulling petals off a daisy going ‘he loves me, he loves me not’. Damn, a guy could almost be flattered.”

Jeremy’s smile got just a tiny bit wider. “And what if I have?”

Simon shrugged lazily and pushed himself off the wall, taking a couple of idle steps closer and forcing Jeremy’s arm to give. “Then I’d tell you that I wasn’t aware there was ever a ‘you and I’ to begin with. Let alone a ‘we’.”

Jeremy splayed his fingers out over Simon's chest, stopping him less than a foot away. "So that's a 'yes', then?" he said softly, glancing down at his own hand and then back up at Simon. "That's a damned shame."

"Now see here," Simon said patiently, grabbing the back of Jeremy's neck. "it's a bit late in the game for you to start listening to what I *said* instead of to what I'm *saying*. I'd repeat myself out loud but it loses something in translation and also I don't wanna."

"That's quite all right," Jeremy breathed, "you're not terribly subtle—" and then he grabbed Simon's face in both hands and kissed him fiercely.

Simon groaned into Jeremy's mouth and shouldered into him, backing him up against the brick wall and pinning him there. Unconcernedly Jeremy wound both arms around Simon's neck and left the sweep of his torso open to Simon, and Simon stuck both hands under Jeremy's black linen jacket and got nice and familiar with the shape of him, running his hands idly down Jeremy's sides as he sank into the frantic kiss. When Simon reached Jeremy's belt he grabbed a handful of t-shirt and pulled it free of Jeremy's pants, working his hands under and getting a couple of good solid handfuls of Jeremy's bare skin, finally returning the favor—his hand ran across an unevenness on Jeremy's hip and Simon broke away from the kiss, glancing down.

A star-shaped scar shone in the space between his palm and his thumb, nestled neatly between the rise of Jeremy's hipbone and the flat muscled plane of his stomach. The dimpled center of the star was still the shiny pink of new scar tissue, the lines radiating from it thin and white . . . Simon ran the ball of his thumb over the indentation at the center, making Jeremy catch his breath and bite at the side of Simon's throat. "You left before," Simon said, his voice thick.

"I wasn't certain what you planned to do with me once I was of no further use," Jeremy said, breathing hard, his t-shirt rucked up all the way to his chest on Simon's wrist. "I thought it might be—nnn—prudent to do my—nnn—recuperating elsewhere . . ."

"I get you," Simon said, almost panting himself. He was jammed up against Jeremy with Jeremy's thigh wedged firmly between his own, his hands roaming greedily over the thief's bared chest and trying to eke out a few more of those sounds, and it was a struggle to keep the warning in his voice. "Might be prudent not to stay too long this time, either."

"Not for long, no," Jeremy said, his own hands skimming down Simon's chest, one of them cupping Simon's crotch and giving him a quick, hard squeeze. Simon's breath roared out of him, ruffling Jeremy's hair. "But I thought that perhaps with a little luck it might be a few hours before—nnh!—you could get to a phone and report my presence . . ."

"Like I said," Simon said breathlessly, grabbing the collar of Jeremy's jacket and trying to yank it off one-handed while leaving his other hand shoved up under Jeremy's shirt. He was grinning. He couldn't help it. "You're not under



my jurisdiction.”

“What?” Jeremy shrugged halfway out of his jacket, leaving it caught on his elbows instead of actually letting go of Simon. “Not even as a concerned citizen? Eager to do his—nnnnnah*God*Simon—part for national defense?”

Faced with this bounty Simon didn’t even think twice, just bit Jeremy’s exposed shoulder right through the t-shirt and hooked a hand under Jeremy’s thigh, tugging at it. Jeremy made a little noise and wrapped his leg around Simon’s hips, making Simon’s hand just sort of naturally slide up to clench around a handful of his ass, instead. “Not my country’s business if some French museum misplaces a, a bronze ballet dancer or two,” Simon said, chewing on his mouthful of Jeremy’s shoulder, then trading it on a whim for the side of Jeremy’s throat. “And as for your *local* outstanding warrants, well . . . well . . . well . . . what was I saying?”

“Local outstanding warrants?” Jeremy prompted, all in a rush, closing his eyes.

“Right. If Art Theft shows up at the mouth of the alley and demands I hand you over, I, I will. In a heartbeat.” Simon shut his eyes and slammed his hips forward, grinding into Jeremy’s waiting hand.

“Fair enough,” Jeremy gasped, nudging Simon’s chin up and kissing him again. “If only more officials were this—nngh—understanding.”

Simon dug his fingers into Jeremy’s ass, nearly lifting him off the ground. “What can I say? I’m an un-unusual guy.”

“Mm. I’m ever so glad of that,” Jeremy breathed against Simon’s lips before kissing him again, harder, effectively ending the conversation.

Simon bit at Jeremy’s lower lip and pinned him against the wall again, trying to get his hands on everything at once and nearly succeeding, and it was only when Jeremy popped the button of Simon’s jeans and made a blind grab for the zipper that Simon broke the kiss and gasped, “. . . my place.”

Jeremy groaned out a heartfelt sound before managing to stop, his hands clenching white-knuckled in Simon’s shirt for a second before falling away. “Your place,” he agreed, grudgingly unwinding himself and standing up, irritatingly steady on his feet even though he was breathing hard. “I haven’t a car handy. I hope to God you do, I’m in no fit state for public transportation . . .”

Simon jerked his head at the mouth of the alley, yanking his shirt back down. “Back there.” Grabbing Jeremy’s arm as gently as he could bring himself to, Simon took half a step back. “Come on.” Jeremy shrugged back into his jacket and made a single abortive attempt to smooth down his t-shirt, and then Simon half-dragged him down the alley and back out onto the street.

It was barely half a block to where Simon’s Jeep was parked, fortunately. Simon wasn’t certain if he’d have been able to walk much further than that. He dug the keys out of his jeans with his free hand and made the Jeep chirp out its welcoming song without breaking stride, and pushed Jeremy towards

the passenger side door before jogging around to the driver's side and slinging himself in.

Jeremy sprawled out in the passenger seat, riding low enough that he'd barely be visible out the Jeep's windows. Simon noted this in passing, automatically putting on his seat belt and stabbing the key into the ignition. And then he stopped, hand on the key, and gave Jeremy an irritated look. "Jeremy."

"Mm?" Jeremy asked, rolling his head to the side and eyeing Simon, the very picture of lackadaisical innocence.

Simon nodded at the hand resting possessively high up on his thigh. "Do you actually want to get to my apartment, or do you want to die because I wasn't paying attention and drove off the road?"

"Is this some sort of trick question?" Jeremy asked, squeezing once.

"No, actually, it's me pointing out that that is *extremely distracting*," Simon pointed out, gritting his teeth.

"Is it? That's good," Jeremy said smugly. "It's meant to be." And he squeezed again, hard, the side of his hand sneaking up a monumentally riveting bit.

Simon just rolled his eyes and started the car.