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Shadow of the Templar:  
**Double Down**

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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  
as usual

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## ◆ Prologue

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*The watch on his wrist vibrated and he woke in darkness, raising his head only slightly out of the cradle of his arms to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling of the vent. The glowing blue face of his watch read 2:00 AM. He shut off the alarm.*

*The very first thing he did, automatically, was let his fingers play over the dials at the sides of his goggles, checking the air-conditioning vent with every pair of eyes he still owned. Green low-light, red filter, rainbow thermals, blue current sensors—he saw nothing he wasn't expecting, just the long dull metal corridor of the vent receding into the distance in front of him. It had looked just the same when he first crawled in here seven hours ago, after stashing his orange workman's coverall and toolbox in a damp janitor's closet. He relaxed imperceptibly and switched his goggles back to the greenish low-light display.*

*He was stiff after his sleep, but not too stiff. Flexing the muscles of his legs, right leg first, then left, he listened intently; all he could hear was the faint whirr of the central air. It was only March, but Savi-Ten Industries was located deep in the South and it was already warm and humid enough to require the air conditioning. He'd enjoyed that gentle current of cool air over his face as he slept. Really, air vents were more comfortable than most people gave them credit for being, as long as you weren't claustrophobic, and you didn't get far in his business if you were.*

*The muscles in his legs tingled as they reawoke, and he had to stifle a little noise. He repeated the process with his (much stiffer) arms, rolling his fists over in mid-air, then pressing his gloved palms to the metal of the vent. His neck and shoulders were next, the maneuver made tricky but not impossible by the lack of room. His neck responded with a soft crackle as he twisted his head, and again he had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from groaning. Pressing the palms of his hands to the vent he raised up as much as he could, loosening his back and shoulders. The back of his head just barely brushed the vent's ceiling.*

*Settling back down in the vent he slid two fingers into the little pocket on one sleeve and wriggled out a heavy chunk of ink-dark chocolate wrapped in waxed*

*paper. He ate it over a cupped hand without much care for what it tasted like; it was caffeine and sugar and food enough to pacify his stomach into silence, and nine hours pressed against his warm bicep had left it just soft enough to be eaten without any trouble. The waxed paper went back into the pocket it had come from, and he sucked the few crumbs from the palm of his glove, grimacing at the taste of latex.*

*By the time he was done, loose and ready and awake, it was closer to two-fifteen than two, and he still hadn't heard a sound. Not that he expected any. Savi-Ten's security force was entirely too dependent on its video cameras and motion detectors, especially this far out in the maze of employee cubicles. He'd been scoping this place out for close to two weeks, and not once had he seen one of the security guards do even a cursory walkthrough.*

*No sense wasting any more time; he wanted to be out of here before four, long before the first of the technicians would arrive. Lashing one hand as far out in front of himself as he could he spread one latex-gloved hand out on the metal sheeting and used the friction to haul himself forward, the rest of his body slithering along behind as easily as if it were oiled. His shoulders were going to ache by the time he reached his goal, a mere five hundred meters away, but he was used to that.*

*One, he thought, knowing that the length of his arm plus the length of the tilt of his shoulder was close to a meter. When he hit nineteen he'd round it up to twenty, and stop, and stretch his shoulder muscles again.*

*Two.*

*It was all going according to plan. Smooth as silk.*

*A little over an hour later he had the prototype safely stashed in the large padded pocket over the small of his back and was feeling pretty damned cocky despite himself. As jobs went Savi-Ten was proving to be almost laughably easy, the professional-league equivalent of cutting a cheap bike chain instead of picking the formidable lock. Whoever had installed Savi-Ten's security system hadn't had the faintest idea of how to keep a real thief out. He'd bypassed no fewer than three electronic locks and all of the cameras in the hallways outside by using the completely unsecured ventilation system, sloppy enough; the motion detectors were sloppily placed as well, almost two feet apart and low to the ground. Anyone with a pair of cheap infrared goggles could have crossed that room undetected, as long as they paid attention and stepped a little high.*

*The security cameras in this room were an entirely standard model, one that he could bypass or short out blindfolded; they were all blind eyes now, showing each other fifteen pre-recorded minutes of old footage in case any of the security guards happened to glance at their monitors. The hideously expensive alarm system that Savi-Ten Industries had been using to lock up the prototype hadn't been much more difficult to defeat. It was technically excellent and very secure,*

*in theory; in practice it was also mass-produced tech, available freely through half the security companies in the nation and thus available freely to anyone interested in learning how to hack it. Crowbar it open, fiddle with some of the wiring, and you could override any of these access panels with a frigging Palm Pilot. Granted, a Palm Pilot running a snippet of highly illegal code, but still, the ease of it amused him.*

*So much money and no God-damned sense, that was America, and more to the point, that was Savi-Ten. They'd almost been asking to be taken advantage of.*

*As quickly as he could he rolled up the stripped and cut wires, jamming them into the empty space behind the panel. He checked his watch. Four minutes left before the cameras came back on. No problem. Fetching a blob of clear putty out of his thigh pocket he glued the broken access panel shut with it, fingers darting in here and there to push escaping wires back in. He leaned his shoulder against the panel until the putty spread and set, then checked his handiwork. The crowbar marks were clear from here, but on the tiny screens of the security cameras the room would look pristine; by the time someone came in here and saw the damage he intended to be at least thirty miles away.*

*Two minutes left. He padded carefully back across the floor, stepping high over the infrared beams of the motion sensors (really, what idiot had placed these? hopefully after this incident they would fire their current security consultant) and grabbed for the rope, climbing hand-over-hand up to the open vent in the ceiling that he'd come out of.*

*He was already sliding his legs back into the ceiling vent and anticipating his retreat from the building complex when the putty holding the panel temporarily shut abruptly gave way and his smooth-as-silk plan went entirely and abruptly to shit.*

*The jury-rigged panel sprang back open with a clatter, all the bits of spliced and mangled wire he'd painstakingly rolled up and hidden behind it falling free. He jerked and nearly fell out of the vent again, his hands closing compulsively tight on the rope. He spared a glance for the exploding panel, twenty feet away and ten feet straight down, and glanced at the watch nestled against the inside of his left wrist—less than a minute of prerecorded tape left on the security cameras. He'd never make it.*

*"Jesus Christ," he hissed, and wriggled his hips into the vent. He'd leave it. The security here wasn't the best; he'd probably have enough time to make it out and get away before they looked closely enough at the cameras to see the mangled panel. Anything was better than getting himself caught on tape.*

*He pushed hard against the rope and shoved himself backwards into the vent, the prototype an ungainly weight pressing against the small of his back. Twenty seconds now—he hauled the rope in after himself and reached down to grab the louvered vent cover, yanking it up. It caught with a soft click that was nevertheless loud enough to echo up and down the narrow air vent.*

*Even with the spectre of the telltale console panel lurking in the back of his mind he spared a moment to take a long, deep breath, checking his watch again as he tried to quell his momentary panic. The luminescent face painted his cheeks and forehead an unearthly blue. Ten seconds to spare. He closed his eyes in relief. The blue light clicked off, leaving him in darkness.*

*Fifteen minutes later, shoulders aching again, he had the black glass of his goggles pressed lightly against the louvers of a different air vent, scanning the deserted parking lot. He was burning with adrenalin, jumping at every sound, the image of the battered access panel continually in the forefront of his mind. How could they not have spotted it? And yet as far as he could tell they hadn't; the night was still and quiet.*

*Maybe he'd make it out of here before the trouble started. He could only hope. His fingers played over the side of his goggles, flicking through the various lenses and seeing nothing of import through any of them. Time to go.*

*Slamming the heel of his hand into the vent cover knocked three of the bolts free (he'd sheared them off last week) and they fell noiselessly into the shrubs that hugged the building's side. The cover itself shuddered for a moment, then fell to swing uselessly off the single well-oiled bolt that remained intact. Even as it fell he was already rolling over, writhing around inside the vent to lie on his back, the prototype's hard case pressing against his spine; the rough scrape of the vent cover chipping at the concrete barely registered as he grabbed the upper lip of the opening and pushed himself backwards.*

*He shot out of the duct. Catching himself by his knees he hung upside down for a moment, like a child on the monkey bars, then reached up and grabbed the lower edge of the vent in both hands. Pulling his legs free, he dangled from the vent for a second before dropping into the bushes after the bolts, crouching instinctively and listening. Nothing. Nothing yet.*

*The three cinderblocks lay where he'd left them last week, an arm's length away, innocent enough in and of themselves. Dragging them over he rebuilt his impromptu 'steps', the rough concrete snagging at the thin latex over his fingers and making him hiss "Christ!" again. One quick scan of the parking lot through the infrared lenses revealed nothing—quickly he climbed up on the cinderblocks and grabbed the vent cover, rotating it back up and into place.*

*He'd just jammed the pencil into the empty lower bolthole and broken it off when the lights all snapped on at once, turning early morning into high noon. He dove for the bushes again, hissing a prayer; the pencil held and the vent cover stayed tremblingly upright, proving that someone up there had heard him. It'd hold long enough. Besides, now he had larger problems. Already he could hear voices, raised in alarm, and the slap-slap-slap of running footsteps.*

*Leaving the cinderblocks where they were he bolted from the bushes, hugging the side of the building as well as he could, running for the back fence and the*



*nearly invisible twisted coathanger he'd left hanging from one of the spikes, the coathanger with a loop just large enough for his foot to fit through. Every sound, including the ones he made himself, made him cringe and duck, expecting a yell or a shot or something—but the voices faded. A stroke of luck, they were running to check the front gate first, maybe he'd make it after all . . .*

*The coathanger bit cruelly into the sole of his foot through the thin suede surface of his work shoe, but it gave him the impetus he needed to get his leg over the fence, and wriggling over the fence was a matter of three seconds' work. He was going to make it. Out of the compound and less than twenty feet to the alley where the car was hidden—high on exhilaration and adrenalin he burst round the corner without checking and nearly ran smack into one of Savi-Ten's uniformed security guards, kneeling by the back wheel of his car to clear off the mud he'd carefully spattered by hand onto the license plates earlier this morning.*

*"What?" said the guard in confusion, struggling to get to his feet, turn around, and draw his pistol all at once, and thank God, thank God the man was older and heavy-set. Nerves screaming he grabbed for the gun hidden in his thigh pouch and shot the security guard on the upswing as he'd been taught, not pausing to aim, shooting from the hip.*

*The bullet took the kneeling guard squarely between the shoulderblades and the man convulsed like he'd been electrocuted, crashing face-first to the ground by the car and flopping around on the gravel. He ran forward and slammed a foot onto the man's back, bloodying the sole of his shoe and not caring; it steadied the thrashing guard long enough for him to put a bullet in the back of the man's head. The security guard jerked once and stilled.*

*Throwing himself into the car he grabbed the keys from the sun visor and keyed the engine to life with a roar, his bloodied shoe slipping on the accelerator as he got the hell out of there—*

“—leaving one Mr. Frank Charpentier, age 42, dead at the scene,” Simon finished with a faint flourish, voice pitched loud to be heard over the constant low-level commotion that was his team. He flicked the last page back down into the folder it had come from. “And that was three weeks ago, boys and girl.”

Mike whistled, tossing his pen up into the air and catching it again. “Damn, boss, one in the spine and one in the back of the head? We got ourselves a hitman with a hobby or something?”

“Hell if I know,” Simon said, settling comfortably in his chair and swinging his feet up onto the conference table. “All right, floor’s open for stupid jokes, folks, let’s get it out of our systems before we go on.”

“A multiclass fighter/thief?” Nate chirped, blinking rapidly and trying to look innocent. Rich groaned under his breath. Mike looked from Nate to Rich and back, then chucked his pen at Nate, bouncing it off his forehead.

“Ow!” Nate said, wincing and rubbing the little blue mark above his eyebrow. “What was that for? You didn’t even get the joke!”

“Maybe not,” Mike said, “but Specs Two got it, so it had to be one of those *nerd* jokes of yours. Gimme back my pen.”

Simon waited. Sure enough, after a couple of seconds Nate scooted his chair back and chased off after Mike’s pen, scowling. “Anyone else?” Simon asked the room in general as Nate scurried back to his chair and lobbed Mike’s pen back to him.

“I’m good,” Johnny said, cracking an eye open.

“Are you ever *not*?” Mike asked. “I mean, you say that every fucking time, Texas. You oughta expand your repertoire a little, maybe pick up some new vocabulary words.”

“Picked up your momma last night, Honda,” Johnny said laconically.

“Well, yeah, duh, but the question is, did you tell her you were good after you shot your wad?”

“Nah, figured she already knew.”

“Well, this is all just fascinating,” Sandra broke in, scowling, “and by fascinating I mean stupid and generally disgusting, but my question is, what does this have to do with us? I didn’t hear anything that put this under our jurisdiction, unless our thief crossed a state line in the process.”

“Good question!” Simon said, swinging his legs back down. “See, normally you’d be right, Springheel, but I left out this one little detail, just to make you look stupid and all.”

“He just can’t stand it that you’re smarter than him,” Mike told Sandra.

“‘Smarter than he is’,” Sandra said. Mike snickered.

“Anyway!” Simon said brightly. “See, one of the local cops had a brainstorm and sent one of the bullets off to the NIBIN—”

“A smart local cop? Are we still doing the stupid jokes section of the program?” Mike asked.

“Hey now,” Johnny said, kicking Mike’s shin under the table. Mike squawked.

“Anyway,” Simon said, leaning on the word this time. Everyone fell silent, even though Mike was still grimacing and rubbing his leg. “Turns out the gun our boy was carrying has a bit of a history! See, here it is at Savi-Ten in Atlanta, where our thief stole himself this prototype low-pull trigger housing, and here it is again at Byways Security in Portland, where someone walked out with a brand-new bioelectric sensor system and took a potshot at a gate guard, and—wait for it—it turns up again in Indianapolis, at Philips Lock and Key, just after someone shot a lab tech and took off with the plans for a, get this, temperature-sensitive keypad mechanism.”

His team was silent. Simon clasped his hands on the table in front of him. “Once the local folk knew what to look for and stopped squabbling over jurisdiction, they started turning up industrial thefts left and right with this joker’s method of operation all over them. Right now we’re up to twelve separate thefts for certain, in ten different states, all with the same M.O., none of them ever closed. Also got—” Simon broke off there and shuffled through his papers “—about nine more that they can’t be certain of. These thefts stretch back over a couple of years, one every month, almost like clockwork. Four people dead, two more wounded.”

He stopped there and waited. After a quiet moment, Johnny whistled, long and low.

“All right, I consider myself answered,” Sandra said. “The next question is, why’d you volunteer us for this?”

“Because—no, wait, I want to make sure I’m not just seeing things here.” Simon pushed the fat pile of case folders into the middle of the table. “You guys each take one and check it out. I want to see if any of you see what I was seeing.”

His team stared at the pile of blue folders, daunted by the sheer size of it (and possibly by the unwanted burden of having to work for a living), until Nate commandeered the stack and started handing the folders out. They were

generally received with all the enthusiasm of flaming sacks of dog shit, but eventually everyone had had one forced upon them.

“Hoo, listen to this,” Mike said, setting his folder on the table and picking up one of the pages. “Arrived on the scene at 8:23am. No sign of forced entry or exit. None of the building’s alarm systems had been set off. The card readers had logged no attempts at access since 5:43pm the previous day, and nothing was visible on the security tapes.’ Holy shit, guys, we’re up against Casper The Unfriendly Ghost!”

“I can beat that,” Sandra said. “The heavy door on the front of the security vault was untouched and the retinal scanner access system had not been used. The thief instead cut into the un-alarmed back of the safe from the unused storage room behind the laboratory and removed the prototype that way. Fingerprinting revealed blank marks characteristic of latex gloves around the hole, but the heavy layer of dust on the floor of the storage room had not been disturbed.’ ”

“Oh, gross,” Nate said, and read from his. “Upon closer examination the drain leading from the boiler room into the city sewers had been pried up and replaced later. Small marks, as from a crowbar, were visible around the edges of the drain cover. Some unusual marks were also visible in the layers of muck on the drainpipe, but neither Officer Greggs nor I could be convinced to enter the pipe and look further.’ ”

“Ewww,” Mike said. “I knew this case stunk.”

“Stank’,” Sandra said, “but I take your point.”

“Huh,” Nate mused under his breath, flicking rapidly back through the papers in his file. “You know, call me crazy, but it kind of looks like—”

At the head of the table, Simon zeroed in on that sound and looked up expectantly. “Nate?”

Nate, abruptly thrust into the spotlight, reddened and hedged. “Well, I mean, I’m not sure, but if you take everything together . . .”

“Na-ate,” Simon said again, drawing it out coaxingly.

“ItkindoffitsJeremyArcher’sprofile,” Nate said all at once, and turned bright red, and swallowed. “I mean, we spent a whole week with all his files back before the Morning Star thing, and they looked a lot like this . . .”

Everyone fell abruptly silent. “Holy crap,” Mike finally breathed, awestruck. “They *did*.”

“That *fucker*!” Rich said with enormous venom and satisfaction, loud enough to make everybody else at the table twitch and look at him. “Can we nail him for these? Tell me we can nail him for these. At least twelve counts of breaking and entering in ten states over two years *and* at least two murders committed during the crimes? We’ll put his ass in the chair!”

“Well, I hate to rain on your victory parade, Specs Two, but I’m pretty positive it’s not Archer,” Simon said. “See, first of all he’s never been involved in industrial crime *or* been known to be violent—”

“—as far as we know,” Rich broke in, still hopeful.

“As far as we know,” Simon conceded. “But secondly, look here, this one in Texas happened just a week after Archer caught a bullet for m—us out in Tahoe, and while he *was* technically out of our hands and on the lam at that point, I don’t think he’s actually, you know, Superman.”

“It’s still possible,” Rich said, stubbornly. “Just barely, but Templar, he walked out of the hospital under his own power less than forty-eight hours after he got shot. I’m just saying that it’s not outside the bounds of possibility.”

“Well, all right, that’s true, I suppose he might at least be *Superboy* or something—”

“Captain Britain,” Nate muttered. Rich shot Nate a glare that was nothing short of malevolent.

“—but if we go back a couple of years, this theft here? Out in Phoenix? Happened just three days before a certain someone is *known* to have strolled into one of the smaller museums attached to the Vatican and strolled back out with a nice handful of da Vinci cartoons, and considering how much time he likes to spend planning his escapades, I think I can say with some certainty that our thief isn’t actually Archer.”

“All right, fine.” Rich subsided grumpily and picked up his mug. “I admit it’s extremely unlikely, but! Not outright impossible.”

“Granted. However,” Simon said, pointing his finger at Nate and dropping his thumb like the hammer of a pistol, “I do agree with Specs there, as you might have noticed, given how I had all those facts right at my fingertips. It does look an awful lot like Archer’s standard M.O. and you can bet I spent about half an hour trying to pin it on him before I gave up.”

“So . . .” Sandra said, trailing off inquiringly.

“So even if it’s not him, I’ll bet you anything he can tell us who it is,” Simon said. “A goddamned carbon copy of Archer? He’s got to know who this guy is. Maybe they went to the same, same, uh, thief school or something.”

There was a moment of silence and then they all caught Simon’s drift at once. “Aw, boss, no!” Mike moaned, clutching at his head. Rich, next to him, choked on a mouthful of coffee.

“Oh yeah,” Simon said with satisfaction. “I’m thinking we ought to call him in on this one. Play our trump card. He gives us the right kind of help and we’ll have our thief in under a week.”

“Aw, boss, *no!*” Mike wailed again.

“Aw, c’mon, Honda,” Simon said, now thoroughly enjoying this. “You don’t want to set some kind of land-speed record for catching this guy? Make at least twelve different police departments look like idiots? I mean, hell, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I kind of like it like that.”

“ . . . that does get me kinda hard,” Mike admitted, peeking out from behind the screen of his hands.

"You know I love it when you talk dirty," Simon said cheerfully. At the foot of the table, Nate turned a little pink. "Anyway," Simon said. "Anyone object to this idea? Speak up, now's the time."

"I don't like it," Rich said.

"Not surprised," Johnny said.

"Well, I don't," Rich insisted, glaring at Johnny. "I don't trust him. I know the rest of you have trouble seeing past *Nevada*, but I don't, and he's still a criminal. A career criminal!"

"We've worked with criminals before," Sandra pointed out.

"But we always had *leverage* then," Rich shot back. "They did what we wanted or we'd put them in jail, that's how we knew we could trust them! We weren't paying them most of our remaining budget for this fiscal quarter to come in and be all, all..."

"English?" Johnny put in.

"English at us!" Richard immediately repeated, then shook his head violently. "I mean *superior*. I don't like him at all. And despite what some of you seem to think he's not part of this team, he'll *never* be part of this team, and for all we know he'd try to work against us. We've all seen his record! It's a mile long, and that's just from the burglaries that we know of! And you guys—" Rich snapped one hand out in a furious gesture that took in the entire table "—want to ask this asshole to come here and play around in all our confidential information? And probably sell it to the highest bidder when he's done? What the hell makes you think he's going to side with the *FBI* against a fellow criminal, anyway? What's to stop him from warning this other asshole off and costing us our entire case?" Rich slammed both hands onto the table in front of him, nearly spitting in his fury. "So yes, I object to this idea! I think it's idiotic!"

Everyone else was silent, hypnotized and wide-eyed. "Whoo," Mike finally said, breaking the silence. "I been *told*."

"I believe Specs Two has a couple of minor objections, Templar," Sandra added.

"I'm getting that," Simon said.

"You guys can make fun of me all you want," Rich spat, thudding back into his chair, "but you have to admit that I have a goddamn *point*."

"Several of them, actually," Simon said, taking a deep breath.

Before he could go on, Mike broke in. "His hat hides them nicely, though."

"Mike," Simon said with tacked-on patience.

"Sorry, boss."

"So, let me see," Simon went on, as if nothing had been said. "Point the first. Yes, it's true that we don't have much immediate leverage, but believe me, if Archer thinks he can fuck around with us, I'm not above having him forcibly deported and telling Interpol where to pick him up. And I'll make sure he knows that. Good?"

Rich grunted, hunched up in his chair like an angry gargoyle. After a moment his chin jerked up, then down. It was something like a nod.

“Good. Point the next: nobody’s asking him to be a member of this team. Hell, I wouldn’t do that to you guys, and if you seriously think I would, I am *hurt*. He’s being paid to come in and give us the benefit of his admittedly impressive professional skills, just like any overpaid private contractor. When he’s done, we’ll hand him his check and kick him out the door just like that.” Simon snapped his fingers. “So don’t go bonding with him or anything. He’s not our new puppy. Good?”

Rich was a little ball of sullen fury by this point, but he grunted and nodded again. Nate watched him, looking worried.

“Good. Point the three: if you think I’m letting Archer go *anywhere* in this building without a chaperone and a, a *leash*, you’re nuts. Just keep your computers passworded and exercise a little basic caution and I’ll take responsibility for the rest. He’ll see what we need him to see and that’s it. Good?”

Rich was silent. So was everyone else. Both of Johnny’s eyes were open, a minor miracle for this time of day.

“Good. And finally,” Simon said without relenting a bit, “point the last: he’s going to side with us because we are going to pay him a metric ton of money to do so. If there’s anything Nevada did teach me—other than the fact that even the great Jeremy Archer can’t sleaze his way past a bullet—it’s that the man may have the morals of a US senator, but once paid, he likes to stay bought. It’s his big ego thing. And I intend to buy him, or at least, uh, rent him. Good?”

Rich sighed gustily and let his head fall forward, conceding defeat. Sandra studied Simon for a moment in silence, then said, “Well, I don’t have any particular objections that haven’t already been answered.”

“Me neither,” said Mike. “Hell, I vote to bring Shadow in just to see if Specs Two actually bites him. I just loves me some geek fightin’.” Rich’s head jerked back up and he stabbed his middle finger in Mike’s general direction. Mike grinned back, unabashed.

“I’m good,” said Johnny again, closing his eyes.

“I’m fine with it, Templar,” Nate said after an uncomfortable pause, glancing from Simon to Rich and back.

“Guess we’ve got us a consensus, then! Socializing pants, folks.” Simon said, clapping his hands. “Now, as for the next thing—”

Mike groaned and flopped out in his chair. “There’s more?”

“And I guarantee it’ll take your minds off the Archer problem,” Simon said. “Actually, I was going to bring this up before the Archer thing, but Springheel had to get all smart with me, so them’s the breaks.”

“Uppity little woman one, Templar zero,” Sandra said, but she didn’t quite smile.

Simon immediately held up both hands in surrender. “Sorry, Spring. Anyway, here’s the deal: those prototypes and plans and demo models that have been disappearing? Well, the thing is, they started turning up again.”

“Turning up where?” Sandra asked.

“Oh, you guys are just going to love this one,” Simon said, instead of answering.

“...you waiting for a drumroll or something?” Mike asked, jabbing himself ostentatiously in the cheek with his pen. “C’mon, Templar, spit it out, I’m on pens and needles!”

“Texas, kick him again for me, will you?” Simon asked. Johnny slid down in his chair and half a second later Mike jerked and yelped, his pen popping out of his grip to go flying through the air. Simon tried not to smile. “Hey, thanks, I owe you one. Anyway, as I was saying, and God forbid I should attempt to keep you guys in suspense, mass-produced knock-offs have been turning up all over good old Mother Russia with amazing regularity. They don’t work so well, usually, but they sure as hell sell over there—and they’ve started turning up over here, too, in the hands of some really unpleasant folks.”

Simon stopped and waited expectantly. Two seconds later Nate’s forehead hit the table with an audible thud. “Karpol,” he moaned, folding his arms protectively over his head. “The thief’s working for Karpol. Gotta be. And that means—”

“—that means that we get to run this investigation in tandem with an assigned contact from the CIA,” Simon finished for him, and then twitched back as the entire table erupted in babbled protest all at once.

“Oh hell no!” Mike said, staring at Simon. “We have to run errands for the fucking spooks now? Thanks a lot, Templar!”

“Shoot me now,” Sandra said, spreading her hands wide and directing her martyred stare at the ceiling.

“Hell no,” Johnny told Sandra. “Who’s gonna shoot me, then?”

“Children,” Simon said patiently.

“They treat us like fucking helmet kids,” Rich snapped, shoving his glasses back up.

“Are we gonna start a pool on how many times we hear someone say ‘need-to-know basis’?” Nate said, his head popping back up out of his arms. “I’ve got ten bucks on ten to fifteen times—”

“*Children!*” Simon said, and smacked his palm flat on the table. The babbling cut off abruptly. “*Thank* you. Now, look, I don’t like it any more than you do, but we’re not actually working *with* the CIA here. We’re just going to keep them posted on what we find out, all right? I’m just going to pop over there every couple of days and drop a fat file folder on someone’s desk, and the rest of you aren’t going to have to so much as look at an operative if you don’t want to. So will you just chill?” Simon swept his gaze over the table and his somewhat sullen team, waiting. No one said anything. “Okay,” he finally said, relaxing. “Okay.



I know it means extra paperwork, which sucks, but it also means that we have access to their files on a—”

“—need-to-know basis,” said everyone else in chorus. Nate held up a finger and added, “That’s one!”

“Need-to-know basis,” Simon finished dryly. “Ha very ha. Anyway, if Karpol’s bankrolling our thief that could be important, and you all know that.”

“Fucking CIA,” Mike muttered, but not loudly enough for Simon to bother paying attention to it.

“Okay,” Simon said again, and looked around. “Any more objections? Anything else before I call this meeting done?” No one said anything. “Okay, then, here’s what we’re going to do. Specs Two, I need to know how our thief is picking his targets when all these prototypes were supposedly top secret. See if you can find some sort of common source. Specs, I want crime-scene blueprints. Aaaaall of ’em. Get a list, go talk to the library division, flirt or whine as appropriate. Springheel, Texas, the two of you take that pile of folders and put ’em all together on paper. For the Agency, the more paper, the better, but for us, leave it lean and mean. Honda—”

“Aw, crap, *no*, boss!”

“Honda,” Simon said mercilessly, “you’ve got yourself phone duty. Call the catching officers, brief ’em on what’s going on, give ’em your number, see if they remember anything else about the burglary in question. You spot a hole somewhere, I want you to fill it in. Do what it takes short of actually flying out there yourself.”

“Fuck, I hate this part of the job,” Mike wailed, slumping down in his chair. “Can’t I just go get shot at?”

“Later,” Simon said. “As for me, I’m going to leave a message for Archer and then see if I can’t get in touch with our new best buddy over at the Agency. I’ll probably be out of the office this afternoon. Springheel’s in charge while I’m out.” Simon paused, checked his watch, and sat up, listening to his spine crackle. “Right. It’s almost noon. Let’s break for lunch before we get cracking.”

The commotion, always either present or waiting, exploded again as his team threw themselves out of their chairs, insulted each other, dumped the file folders back on the pile, closed up their computers, traded blows, and did all the other mundane things that were just background noise to Simon’s ears by this point. Simon stood up and stretched, making his spine crack again, and then wandered into his office to wait.

Mike and Sandra were the first to leave. Johnny followed shortly thereafter, then Nate, and a minute or two later Rich finished shutting down all three of his main computers and followed, letting the door slam behind him. Simon waited until Rich’s footsteps had faded and then flicked open the top drawer of his desk, shuffling through the mess of old memos and dead pens and rubber stamps until he found an empty and crumpled envelope that had been stuffed haphazardly

in the back corner. Once upon a time it had contained his electric bill; now the only thing of any import about it was the ten-digit number written neatly across the back flap. Whoever had written the number was in the habit of crossing his sevens. It still made Simon roll his eyes.

Smoothing the crumpled envelope out on the top of his desk, Simon fetched out his cell phone and stabbed the number into it, hitting 'Call' and once again refusing to let the phone save the number in its memory. The phone clicked four times and rang twice before someone picked it up. "Answering service," said the by-now-familiar female voice.

"Yeah," Simon said, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. "I'd like to leave a message for Jeremy Archer."

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## ◆ Two

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*The trail began with a black linen jacket left crumpled in a careless heap by the front door.*

*Someone had kicked off his sneakers nearby, too, and a pair of black shoes of no particular type stood neatly together against the very edge of the front door, as if their owner had been shoved up against the door when he stepped out of them and abandoned them there.*

*Things took a touch for the unusual, if not the ominous, shortly thereafter: a heavy gray holstered pistol lay on the floor near the door, tangled up in a complicated snarl of black webbing and Velcro, the whole mess nearly hidden under a discarded black t-shirt. A blue-and-white shirt straggled down the back of the chair to fling one rolled-up sleeve out across the carpet, pointing towards the couch and the doorway beyond as if to leave a sign. This way, the sign said, but the trail petered out there—at least, until the bedroom door.*

*In there it was a wreck. A pair of black linen pants (that would have, on further inspection, matched the jacket by the door) lay against the wall where they'd been thrown, the leg of a pair of discarded jeans flopped empty across them. As is usually the case in this situation, there was no sign of anyone's underwear, but a pile of blankets and pillows had fallen or been shoved off one side of the bed, and it was likely that said underwear was in, under, or on top of that pile, somewhere.*

*The sheets had pulled free at one corner, revealing the bare mattress, which neither of them had roused themselves to care about yet. Instead Simon lay sprawled full-length and sideways across the bed, still breathing hard, a single pillow rescued from the pile of discarded bedding to give him somewhere to put his head. The somewhat-battered Jeremy was flopped out on Simon like a blanket, too drained to even slide off, not that there was anywhere for him to go. Simon was determinedly occupying as much of the bed's surface area as he could, arms and legs everywhere, just to prevent Jeremy's retreat—if he had been capable of rational thought, he would have been strenuously denying that he sort of liked having Jeremy up there.*

*Simon, staring at the ceiling and not really seeing it, eventually said, “Knees.”*

*“Mm?” Jeremy said, not opening his eyes.*

*“Knees,” Simon said again. “I used to have some. Two, I think. I wonder where they went. Did you steal them?”*

*“Mmmmm,” Jeremy said again, a long satisfied purring note. “Not guilty, although I might have had a hand in misplacing them. In point of fact, however, I’d have to say that they’ve run off with my spine.”*

*Simon absently reached up and squeezed the back of Jeremy’s neck. “I hope they’re very happy together.”*

*“Perhaps they’ll send us postcards.” Jeremy stretched, a long, thorough, rolling motion that made Simon just sort of naturally grab for his ass, and then dropped his head back onto Simon’s chest. “Mm. Well. That was worth waiting for, I’m certain.”*

*Simon couldn’t help it—he started laughing, hard enough to nearly dislodge Jeremy, who braced his knee against the bed to prevent himself from getting tumbled off. “Jesus Christ. Yeah.”*

*“So glad you agree.” Jeremy smiled lazily, his eyes slitting half-open. “So tell me, is this scandalous for you, or is it just a poor career choice?”*

*“Neither, if I can help it,” Simon said, shutting his own eyes. “You think I’m ever going to tell anyone about this, you’re nuts.”*

*“Mm. Probably for the best. I’d be ruined if it got about that I was, er, ‘collaborating with the authorities’, as it were.” Jeremy lifted his head again, looked over at his pants crumpled against the far wall, and let his head fall with a sigh.*

*“What?” Simon asked.*

*“For some reason I find myself rather in the mood for a cigarette,” Jeremy said, “but I’m not terribly enthused about going to fetch them.”*

*“I don’t have an ashtray anyway. Smoking’s a disgusting habit. And besides, then I’d have to bum one off you and I’d hate to owe you a favor.”*

*“Aren’t we a little beyond tallying up favors by now, Simon?” Jeremy asked, but he trailed off there and found a place to roll off Simon, sprawling out on his back at Simon’s side and stretching again. The scar on his lower belly shone pink in the fading afternoon light, a beacon of sorts. Simon let himself follow it, propping himself up on one elbow over the thief and slinging a leg over his, and spent a few moments admiring the trail of red marks that he’d left behind on Jeremy’s throat and shoulders. Some of them were already discoloring and turning purple.*

*“If news of this ever reaches my superiors or God forbid my team,” Simon said, catching Jeremy’s face in one hand and making him tilt his chin up, “I intend to claim that you have some sort of, I don’t know, mind control serum or something. I’ll be exonerated for, for . . . going above and beyond the call of duty, I suppose. Willingly exposing myself to an unknown hazard. That sort of thing.”*

*“Mind control serum!” Jeremy reached up and touched the bite mark on Simon’s shoulder curiously, just as if he hadn’t left it there himself. “What a fantastic idea. I’ll have to get right on that.”*

*“Well, you haven’t disappointed me yet, much as I hate to admit that out loud and all.” Simon bit Jeremy’s ear, making the thief twitch under him—it felt kind of nice—and added, his tone still light, “The team could use someone like you, you know.”*

*“Oh, yes, and I’m certain you’d have no trouble at all in getting me a position with the Bureau,” Jeremy said, smiling that familiar little smile and spreading his hand out on Simon’s chest.*

*“Not really, no,” Simon said, the bantering tone fading, watching Jeremy carefully out of the corner of his eye. “Not if we hired you freelance. You know, as an expert on, uh, things. Which I’m led to believe you are.” Jeremy’s hip was right there, so he put a hand on it, just to keep it where it was. The ball of his thumb ticked over Jeremy’s scar again. “I’m speaking purely in a hypothetical sense, you realize.”*

*“Oh, hypothetically,” Jeremy said, falling still under Simon, the last remnants of his smile vanishing. “I consider myself fluent in hypotheses. What is it that you are theoretically proposing, Simon?”*

*“Hypothetically, I was wondering how you’d feel about working on the side of the good guys. On a purely contractual and highly erratic basis, mind you.”*

*“The good guys’ side! How very reductionist of you.” Jeremy paused, considering. “Well, just for the sake of argument, could the Bureau afford my going rates?”*

*“The Bureau could afford to buy and sell you a couple million times over, Archer.”*

*“Hypothetically.”*

*“No, I’m pretty sure we could do that in real life, too.”*

*“I think you’re drastically underestimating my resources, Simon.” Jeremy opened his eyes and smiled faintly. “But in any case, assuming we were actually having this conversation—which I’m led to believe we aren’t—I would have to tell you that I would, therefore, accept your hypothetical freelance offer under one condition.”*

*“And in this freakish bizarro world, what would that condition be?”*

*“A trade, Simon. I would, in theory, trade you a phone number where you could reach me at any time in exchange for a few piddling little files in the FBI’s computers going quietly missing.”*

*“Then, theoretically, I’d say that I’d have to clear it with Upstairs but I don’t see a reason why that couldn’t be arranged.” Simon paused, tracing out the curve of Jeremy’s hipbone with his thumb, and added, “And of course if you found yourself in the States in this fictional alternate universe, you might ought to come check in with me, just to make sure I didn’t have any imaginary work for you.”*

*“Mm. Well. As I was actually about to say, I do get to the States every few months on, ah, shall we say ‘business’? So that would be theoretically possible, of course.” The spell of stillness on Jeremy broke, almost audibly, and he pressed up against Simon, the movement full of lazy promise. “We should have hypothetical discussions like this more often, Simon.”*

*Simon just shrugged and moved the hand on Jeremy’s hip inwards, making Jeremy catch his breath and bite his lower lip. “Eh. I can think of better things we could be doing, Jeremiah—”*

*“—don’t nn call me that,” Jeremy said, the corner of his eye twitching ever so slightly, and before Simon could respond to that (or indeed do much of anything) Jeremy wound both arms around his neck and pulled Simon down, putting one hell of an end to their transaction.*

*When Simon woke the next morning, stiff, sticky, and very sore, he found himself alone in his completely disheveled bed with one of the sheets tossed negligently over him. Of Jeremy Archer there was no sign at all except for a few interesting dried spots on the sheets, a particular taste in Simon’s mouth, and an empty envelope on the kitchen table, weighted down with a bowl from the sink.*

*Written on the envelope was a ten-digit phone number with no name attached, its sevens neatly crossed. The area code put it somewhere in New York City. The bowl contained a tiny mound of ashes and a dead cigarette butt, and the kitchen still smelled slightly of both smoke and something sweet and harder to place.*

*Simon fed the ashes to the garbage disposal, scowling, and scrubbed out the bowl thoroughly—then, refusing very firmly to think about what he was doing, he put it back on the kitchen table just where Jeremy had left it.*

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## ◆ Three

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"I can take that message for you, sir," the cheerful woman on the other end of the line said.

"I'd appreciate it," Simon said, not opening his eyes. "Just tell him to call me as soon as possible. My name's Simon Drake, and he had better damned well have my number."

The cheerfully professional voice on the other end of the line warmed a little, for no reason that Simon could discern. "Yes, sir, Mr. Drake. I'll pass that along. Is there any more to the message?"

Simon thought about it long enough to kick his legs up and put his feet on his desk. "Nah, that's it. Thanks a bunch."

"You're welcome, Mr. Drake," she said, and Simon could almost hear her smile as she hung up.

Simon pulled the phone away from his ear and eyed it, bemused, before hitting the CALL CANCEL button and flipping his phone closed. "What was *that* about?" he muttered, snapping his phone back into its belt clip and settling back in his chair to wait.

Ten minutes later he cracked one eye open to check the time and snorted. "Any day now," he said under his breath. He'd just closed that eye again when his phone buzzed, startling him; rolling his eyes, he pulled his phone back out and flicked it open. "About damned *time*, Archer—"

Silence. Simon frowned, waited a second just in case, then looked at his phone. Its screen rather smugly informed him that he had one (1) new text message waiting. Simon snorted (mostly at himself) and negotiated with his phone until it coughed up the message on its little screen, with an absurdly cute little 'document attached!' paperclip icon in one corner.

DRAKE—DRIVING IN THIS PM. MEET ME NAT'L ARBORETUM 2:00.  
MAP INCL. D. LANGRIDGE, CIA.

For a moment Simon was too taken aback to do anything but stare at the message. When it finally registered his eyebrows slammed down and he scowled blisteringly at the screen. "Jesus *Christ*," he hissed, smacking his phone closed

with such vehemence that it nearly bounced back open. The phone immediately buzzed again, like it had just been waiting for him to close it. Simon jumped about two inches into the air, popped his phone open with an irritated snap of his wrist, and snapped, “*What?*”

Aside from a faint crackle and hiss, the line was silent. Simon was just about to pull the phone away from his ear and look for another one of those high-handed text messages when Jeremy’s tinny voice said, “In my defense, Simon, I point out that you called *me*.”

“Archer,” Simon said in something not unlike relief, pinching the bridge of his nose in an effort to get the remnants of his slight headache to lessen. “What can I say? It’s been a day.”

“Mm. I didn’t *think* I’d had the leisure to irritate you yet. Except inasmuch as my very existence seems to aggravate you, which can’t be helped.”

“You are a pain in my ass and no mistake, Archer,” Simon said before he really thought about it, and hurried on to fill the thoughtful silence that he’d created. “So! I understand that you’ve been building a collection of little bronze ballerinas recently! Ballerina statues. Jesus. You really are a fruit.”

Jeremy, graciously or not, seemed willing to let it go. “Well, yes, but currently a rich fruit,” he said, the connection hissing and popping once. “A very rich fruit. I believe your Bureau could only buy and sell me about, oh, nine hundred thousand times over at this point. An accomplishment of sorts!”

“You just keep on reaching for that dream, little toaster. As long as you don’t do it in the States.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Jeremy said, sounding so utterly innocent that it made Simon grit his teeth. “And in any case, I have much better things to do when I find myself in the US, haven’t I?”

“Pain in the ass,” Simon repeated, shifting around in his chair a little and making the springs complain. “And enough with your ridiculous angelic act. It’s making me want to throw up.”

“Oh, well, if you insist, Simon, you know I’ve never been able to say no to you.” Jeremy laughed faintly before clearing his throat and getting down to business. “So, what’s the occasion? I can’t imagine you just missed the sound of my voice.”

“How much do you know about the political situation in Russia these days?” Simon asked, slightly nettled.

After a startled pause, Jeremy said, “Not bloody much. I try not to get involved in politics. Bad for the complexion. What on earth—”

“I’ll buy you some moisturizer,” Simon said, rolling right over him. “Some joker who thinks he’s you has been burglarizing industrial sites all over the country and shipping the stolen tech overseas. Matches your S.O.P. right down the line, except for the bit where he shoots people dead, and, well, Upstairs has dumped him in my lap—don’t even *think* about saying it, Archer.”



Jeremy was mercifully silent. After a moment, Simon went on. "Therefore I am officially requesting your freelance help, despite your exorbitant rates, you swindler. How soon can you be in the States?"

Jeremy was still silent. Just before Simon was about to ask if he was still there or dead or what, Jeremy said, "Ten hours, at least. Damned shame about the Concorde."

"That'll have to do, then," Simon said, letting out a breath he hadn't really been aware he was holding. "If I don't hear from you by midnight one way or the other, I'll assume your plane went down over the Atlantic and you were eaten by sharks."

"Mm," said Jeremy, a teasing note buried in that noncommittal little noise. Business time was apparently over; Simon's nerves all prickled. "And would that break your ice-cold heart, Simon?" Jeremy said—nearly purred. "Or would you be glad to be rid of me?"

"Hell, I'd just feel sorry for the *shark*," Simon growled, and slapped his phone shut to disconnect the call.

"Shit," Simon said, slamming back into the still nearly deserted saferoom half an hour later, no longer hungry but still cranky.

Rich's head snapped up and he regarded Simon warily over the monitor of his (second, smaller) computer. "What?" he said, shoving his glasses back up.

"Shit," Simon said again, patiently. "What, didn't you hear me the first time?"

Rich eyed Simon, his lips drawn into a tight and disapproving line. "You're going to make me drag it out of you, aren't you?"

"Well, not if you're not going to be any *fun* about it," Simon said, kicking a chair over and dropping into it. "I've got a map of some sort that I need to get off my cellphone and into a usable format," he went on, waving his cellphone at Rich like it offended him, "and the company wants me to shell out for some kind of fancy-ass cable to do so—"

Rich rolled his eyes and more or less snatched Simon's cellphone out of his hand. "Cell phones are such a scam," he said. "I'll do it."

"That's what I like about you, Two," Simon said genially, sprawling out in his chair to watch Rich work. "It's so easy to irritate you into solving all my problems for me."

Rich just snorted and kicked open one of his desk drawers, retrieving a huge and terrifying mass of heavy black cables held together with electrical tape, twist-ties, and something Simon was reasonably sure had once been one of Sandra's ponytail holders. Silver and gold plugs hung from the Gordian knot at seemingly random intervals; Simon counted close to twenty before he gave up. "Fancy," he said, leaning over to pick up one of the random plugs and stare at it. Rich scowled at him until he put it back down.

Settling the mass of wires comfortably in his lap Rich flicked rapidly through the plugs and compared them one after another to the output jack on the side of Simon's phone. "Nate calls it my cable-tribble," he eventually grudgingly volunteered. "It's a misleading name. It's never reproduced, asexually or otherwise."

"Christ, I'm glad of that," Simon said, watching this process with vaguely queasy fascination. "I'm terrified enough just knowing that *one* of those things was living in here."

Rich grunted, presumably in agreement, and shoved one of the gold plugs into the side of Simon's phone. Dropping the newly violated phone on top of the writhing mass of black cables (Simon could not help but think of tentacle porn, even though such jokes were generally Mike's province) Rich stuck his hand into the knot and extracted a single large black plug, which he connected to a port in the front of his computer.

The computer whirled and spat and thought and eventually kicked up a window, which Rich promptly ignored. A few seconds later the first window vanished, replaced by about ten others, one of which was a crude but serviceable replica of the screen and buttons of Simon's cell phone. Simon whistled in appreciation. "Nice. So, what's the, uh, cable-tribble usually used for?"

"Extracting information from cellphones and most kind of PDA, generally by force and despite security measures," Rich said, selecting one of the windows and typing something into it. "This, in other words."

"Legally, of course."

"As far as you know, Templar."

"My man, Specs Two," Simon said. "Let's keep me stupid. The map's attached to a text message."

"Right," Rich said, and did something else that Simon couldn't quite follow. All the windows vanished, replaced by a single progress bar; Rich squinted at the screen like he didn't quite trust it, but eventually nodded and leaned back in his chair to wait.

Simon gave him five seconds of silence before looking away and clearing his throat lightly. "Hey."

Rich grunted, not looking at him.

"About Archer," Simon said. He was rewarded by a faint sheen of light off Rich's glasses, like Rich had turned his head ever so slightly towards him. It was something. "You know I'm counting on you to play nice, even though you know and I know that you don't like this idea."

Rich grunted again.

"I'll put you on the record as disagreeing with this decision if you want me to," Simon pressed on. "All official-like. That way if it blows up in my face your ass will be covered. Okay?"

Rich looked down, shrugged one shoulder, and looked back up at the computer screen. Simon waited, patiently. “Don’t bother,” Rich finally, unwillingly said. “I don’t like it, but I guess I trust you, even if I don’t trust *him*.”

“You sure?” Simon asked.

“No,” Rich said, just as the computer beeped and vomited up a long list of incomprehensible file names. With something like a sigh of relief Rich popped up a second window and typed ‘map’ into it, reducing the list of file names to seven; the third one was, simply, ‘namap.GIF’. “There we go,” Rich said, and dumped that file to his desktop. “What’s this a map of?”

“The National Arboretum,” Simon said, unable to keep the scorn out of his voice. “Our oh-so-thoughtful Agency contact decreed that there would be a meeting there at two, without so much as bothering to ask me if that was a good time for me or anything. Of course not! That would be, I don’t know, *polite*. And, you know, he could have at least told me *where* in the Arboretum, it’s not *huge* or anything—”

“—right here, by Beech Spring Pond,” Rich broke in, tapping the screen to draw Simon’s attention to the somewhat gigantic map that he’d opened up. He sounded a bit cocky. Simon stared at him, piqued. “I can zoom in some more,” Rich went on, “it looks like he’s actually marked a particular spot and a good parking lot nearby . . .”

“Oh, shut up,” Simon said. “And give me back my damn phone.”

“Hang on,” Rich said smugly, shutting the program down and freeing Simon’s phone from the morass of cords.

Simon accepted it gingerly. “Christ, my poor phone. Orifices violated. Tentacle-raped by a tribble. What a horrible way to go.”

“Blame the CIA,” Rich said, shoving his glasses back up. “I do.”

---

## ◆ Four

---

Simon checked the clock on the dashboard even as he threw the Jeep into park and shut off the engine. 2:15. “Right on time,” he muttered, twitching out half a completely humorless smile.

Even at two in the afternoon on a cloudy cool March weekday there were still a few die-hard nature lovers wandering around in the Arboretum, and Simon passed two or three of them as he ambled down the path towards the lake, taking his own sweet time about it. Everything around him was beginning to turn green again, and the pathways were damp and sparkling with the recent rain; Simon discovered that he was almost enjoying himself, which wasn’t exactly the idea. Firming his jaw and reminding himself that he wasn’t having any fun at all, Simon strode towards the lake, ducking under the dripping trees.

The path he was on eventually turned into a wooden walkway, bridging one of the lake’s little outcroppings. Simon stopped in the middle to rest his elbows on the handrail and look out over the lake and the heavy gray clouds reflected in it. A rain-heavy breeze blew damply in his face, ruffling his hair and blowing it away from his face. “Nice,” he grudgingly admitted under his breath.

“I *do* appreciate you joining me, Drake,” someone said briskly behind him.

Simon clamped his jaw shut and absolutely one hundred percent refused to whirl around to face the owner of the voice. “D. Langridge, I presume,” he said after a tense moment, letting go of his sudden death grip on the wooden railing. “I’d apologize for being late, but you didn’t exactly check with me to see if my schedule was open.”

“Dorothy Langridge, actually. Just ‘Langridge’ is fine,” the voice’s owner said, answering a question he hadn’t asked as she joined him at the railing, one hand rummaging about in her jacket. “And I assumed that if you had an actual schedule conflict, you’d have texted me back to say so. I haven’t got time to waste, Drake, especially not on inane ‘when’s good for you?’ ‘whenever’s fine!’ IM conversations.” She dropped her sturdy steel-sided briefcase on the boards at her feet with a dull thud, as if for emphasis.

“Yeah,” Simon said, blowing out an irritated breath, “I can tell ours is going to be a *beautiful* friendship, Ms. Langridge.”

“Just Langridge,” she said again, pulling out her ID folder and flicking it open. “And that’s fine. I don’t particularly care for you either.”

Simon automatically dug out his own ID folder in response. “Well, as long as we’re *sharing*, Langridge, I hate being called ‘Drake’. I’m not your goddamned dog. Mr. Drake, or Simon, or Templar—hell, I wouldn’t object to ‘sir’, except it seems kind of wrong to make a lady of your mature years call me that.”

Langridge snorted. It didn’t exactly sound amused. “Do you have any idea who I am?” she asked without preamble, stuffing her ID folder back into her jacket. When her hand slid back out there was a battered hard pack of cigarettes in it, and she wasted no time shaking out a cigarette and a cheap plastic lighter.

Simon blinked, snappy comeback lost in his surprise. “You know,” he said, “I really don’t think you’re technically allowed to smoke in the Arboretum—”

“If a flower wrangler comes by and tells me to put it out, I will,” she said, shielding the lighter’s flame with a cupped hand and sucking in the smoke like she was hungry for it. “Are you ignoring my question or just taking your time coming up with a suitably insulting response?”

Simon bit his tongue and counted to ten, slowly, reminding himself that at least *one* of them should try and remain professional about this. “I’ve got an idea,” he said, exhaling hard. “Why don’t we start over and pretend neither one of us has done anything incredibly irritating yet?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Langridge said, flicking the filter of her cigarette with her thumb and knocking ash into the lake. “Why don’t we just let it go, do our business, and get the hell out of each other’s lives?”

“Fine,” Simon said, rolling his eyes. To hell with professional. “Fine with me. All right, then, Langridge. Who are you?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” she said, and almost smiled, a hard and humorless expression. “I am the CIA’s foremost State-side expert on Viktor Karpol.” The unpleasant smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. “Would you like to know how I got this plum job?”

“Not really,” Simon said, “but tell me anyway.”

“You’re learning, Mr. Drake,” Langridge said, narrowing her eyes at him—*now* she looked amused, despite the lack of a smile. “Six months before I graduated with my BA in Russian literature, I attended a job fair on campus. The CIA was hiring people who spoke Russian. Now, this was likely before you were born—”

“Oh, Jesus, here we go,” Simon broke in, throwing both hands up in the air. “Look, Langridge, I’m obligated to eat a lot of shit from you because of my orders—”

“Simmer down, Mr. Drake,” Langridge snapped, grinding the butt of her cigarette out on the sole of her sensible brown low-heeled shoe and dropping

the dead filter back into the pack. “I really don’t care if you’re nine or ninety, as long as you’re competent, and everything I’ve read about you suggests that you are. All right? I am *stating a fact*. As of two months from now I’ll have spent *twenty-three years* sitting in a damp basement room in Langley learning everything there was to know about Viktor Karpol.”

“I’m twenty-nine,” Simon gritted out.

“I don’t care.”

“Christ, of course you don’t care—are you *trying* to irritate me?”

“Yes,” she said, narrowing her eyes in amusement again. “I hate wasting time, Mr. Drake. I could have bent over backwards trying to be polite and accommodating to you and you still would have come to this meeting predisposed to dislike me, because I’m CIA. So to hell with it. I don’t need you to like me. Once you stop snarling at every little tiny irritating thing I say and just accept that I’m going to be irritating no matter what, we can both stand down and get on with this.”

Simon eyed her narrowly. “So you’re purposely trying to irritate me so that I’ll build up a *tolerance* for it?”

“That’s more or less the size of it,” Langridge said. “Anyway, as I was saying, for twenty-three years I’ve sat in a dank little basement room with a red pen and a Russian dictionary. It used to be that they’d bring me piles of paper in Russian, I’d translate it, they’d take it away again. Fifteen years ago suddenly it was all on the computer. Five years after that someone managed to tap into the lines leading out of one of his larger offices and suddenly I was being fed copies of every single email flowing in and out of his disgusting little empire. These days I have four bright young things on their computers doing the actual translating for me, and I sit in my little basement room and collate everything I’ve ever read, heard, seen, or translated into a single three-dimensional portrait of Viktor Karpol. I’ve never met the man. Hell, I’ve never been to Russia, and after the things I’ve learned in the last twenty-three years, I don’t particularly want to go. But if you want someone who can tell you anything you need to know about Karpol’s organization, and you don’t want to go all the way to Russia to find him, I’m your agent, Mr. Drake.”

“You know,” Simon said after a pause, “for someone who hates to waste time, you sure do run off at the mouth a lot.”

“Occupational hazard,” Langridge said. “I *am* CIA, Mr. Drake, no matter what kind of desk jockey I may be. You don’t think we’re in a goddamned national park because I like trees, do you?”

“You know, I’d been planning to say something rude to that effect,” Simon said, looking out over the lake.

“Sorry to spoil your punchline,” Langridge said. “I’m about eighty-five percent sure that my office is bugged, and almost a hundred percent sure that my computers are. You can make snippy jokes about my paranoia all you want, but

twice in my life I've been woken by agents in the middle of the night because they thought there was a bomb in my apartment, and at least once they were right."

"Huh," Simon said, not really wanting to dignify that with any sort of answer but feeling that *something* was called for.

"Every morning they sweep my office for transmitters," Langridge went on inexorably. "Once a week I check my car and my apartment with one of the handheld sweepers. Even if you weren't paranoid to begin with, Mr. Drake, in that sort of environment you learn to be. Or you die. Even if the most dangerous thing you're trained to wield is a cigarette lighter."

"Okay, okay, I get your point," Simon said in exasperation. "You live a dangerous life despite the disappointing lack of, of Hollywood-style glamor and I'm just a snotnosed kid who's only good for chasing mini-thugs across state lines. Fine and dandy. I give in. I surrender. I acknowledge my place in the pecking order. You win. Can we stop having the dick-size contest now and actually talk about the reason we're here?"

After a pregnant pause, Dorothy Langridge burst out laughing. Simon, already irritated, hunched his shoulders slightly and gritted his teeth until the laughter tapered off. "I take it back, Mr. Drake," she said, coughing and wiping her eyes with the back of one hand. "I think I may like you after all. 'Dick-size contest'. My goodness."

"I'm so glad you're amused, really, I just live for your smile," Simon said. "The thefts?"

"Yes, yes, the thefts," Langridge said, picking up her briefcase and resting it on the handrail. "I've brought you everything that I could find about the knockoff items in question, although I'm afraid it's not much just yet. I'll be able to provide you a lot more once you have places, names and dates for me to look at—on a need-to-know basis, of course."

"That's two," Simon muttered, looking away politely while she worked the briefcase's combination locks. There was a small flock of ducks just now landing at the far end of the lake. He watched them instead.

"Hm?"

"I said, 'of course,'" Simon informed the ducks.

"Of course you did," Langridge said, dropping a fat file folder on Simon's knuckles and closing her briefcase again. "Shred anything that you don't need and anything you're done with. There's also a list of ten email addresses in there. They'll all reach me. Don't use any of them more than once. If you need more, I'll generate another ten."

"Christ," Simon muttered, flicking open the folder and giving the contents a cursory looking over.

"Welcome to my world," Langridge said dryly, pulling her cigarettes back out and lighting another. "We should meet once a week, at least, to keep each

other apprised.” She paused, breathing a cloud of smoke out over the lake, and then put on that hard and humorless smile again. “Tell me, Mr. Drake, would Fridays at two be *convenient* for you?”

“So *nice* of you to ask,” Simon said, equally dry. “I believe that will be acceptable. Obviously you have my cellphone number—”

“And your work email address, and your *personal* email address, and your home address, and your landline number,” Langridge said, still smiling.

“Yes, fine, thank you, I surrendered already, remember? I bow before your obviously superior information-gathering skills. Jesus. As I was *saying*, the cellphone’s probably your best bet. It’s always with me.”

“Understood. We’ll meet here,” Langridge decreed briskly. “Unless you have an objection, of course.”

“I’d *love* to have an objection, but the sad fact of the matter is that it’s really no more of a hassle than anywhere else. This is fine. If I come and it’s raining, I’ll wait in my truck. It’s a—”

“—black Jeep Wrangler,” Langridge said.

“Black Jeep Wrangler,” Simon finished, irked. “Obviously you don’t need the plate number.”

“No, I’ve got that.”

“Of course you do. Anything else, or can I leave now?”

“I think that’s it,” Langridge said, taking another deep drag off her cigarette. “I’ll stay here for a bit. It’s always pretty this time of year.”

Simon paused in the act of turning around. “I thought you said you didn’t like trees.”

“No, I asked if you thought we were meeting here *because* I liked trees. The answer is, actually, yes, we are, because I do like trees.” Dorothy Langridge tapped another length of ash into the lake, prompting a swarm of minnows to investigate. “But you never bothered to pursue that line of questioning, did you? Good afternoon, Mr. Drake.”

“A *beautiful* friendship,” Simon muttered under his breath, stalking back up the path towards his Jeep.



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## ◆ Five

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Simon let the door to the saferoom slam shut behind him, waited patiently until every eye in the room was on him, and then spread his arms wide and calmly, rationally said, “Argh.”

“That bad?” Johnny said.

“... Jesus H. fucking Christ in a *sidecar*.”

“That bad,” Johnny concluded, and shut his eyes again.

“Yeah, I really needed to spend the next couple of weeks having my ass ridden by some superior old battleaxe with a bad attitude and a higher security clearance than mine,” Simon said, pacing back and forth in front of the door to burn off some of his irritation—just recalling his conversation with Langridge was making it all come welling back up again. “And she thinks she’s funny, for a bonus. Yeah, this is just what I needed. Archer call?”

Sandra and Mike glanced at each other, Mike mouthing ‘she?’. “No,” Sandra said cautiously, looking back at Simon. “Was he supposed to?”

“Nah, not really,” Simon said. “However, since he didn’t call here and he didn’t call me, I’m going to assume he managed to catch a plane. So guess what, boys and girl!”

“Overtime?” Mike squealed in an ear-grating falsetto, clapping his hands together in mock glee.

“Overtime!” Simon announced, pretending to ignore Mike. “Unless Archer’s plane goes down in the Atlantic, and don’t think I’m not subconsciously rooting for that, he’ll be here and ready to get to work tomorrow morning. So we’re going to hunker down in here until we’ve got all our ducks in the proverbial row, because I’ll be damned if we’re going to look like less than the perfectly organized and synchronized team that we are in front of *Jeremy Archer*.”

“Shit,” Rich muttered. “He’s not even here yet and he’s already pissing me off.”

Simon promptly swung on him. “Two. Got something else for you to do.”

“Me and my big mouth,” Rich grumpily told his monitor before glancing over at Simon. “Can it wait? I’m kind of *busy*, as you might remember.”

“It’s not so important that you have to stop doing what you’re doing. I think your working deadline is Friday morning.”

“Right,” Rich said, heaving a deeply irritated breath. “What’s up?”

“Think you can tiptoe around the edges of the CIA without causing us any interdepartmental strife?” Simon asked, instead of answering.

Rich blinked twice and then yanked off his glasses, scrubbing the lenses on his sleeve. “I think so,” he said cautiously, blinking near-sightedly at Simon, “but that’s a hell of a tall order, Templar. Depends what you need.”

“I just need some basic information, anything, on one Dorothy Langridge. I mean, I’m looking for things like her home phone number, her home address, what she drives, where she went to college, anything.”

“Oh, profile and background crap? I can get that without too much hassle. Why?”

“Because,” Simon said, gritting his teeth slightly, “I never want to be caught so off-guard by that woman again.”

After a significant pause, Rich said, “Got it, Templar.”

“Knew I could count on you, Specs Two,” Simon said, and wheeled to face the conference table. “Specs still off fighting the librarians?”

“Yep,” Johnny said.

“Great. He’d better come back with his blueprints or on them. Anyone need me for anything? If not, I have a folder full of crap that is probably useless to study.” Simon paused and looked around. “Right, then. I’ll be in my office. Scream if you need me.”

“Jesus *Christ*.”

“You said all of them,” Nate said defensively, hunching his shoulders and vaguely trying to shield the stolen library cart behind his legs.

“No, no, good work, Specs,” Simon said absently, still staring at the hundred-some-odd pounds of blueprints draped heavily over the top of the cart. “It’s just—Jesus *Christ*.”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “That’s why I stole the cart.”

Simon clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s my boy. Okay! Your next job? Mailing tubes. Go hit up an office supply store and get enough big-ass mailing tubes to hold all this stuff. Bring me the receipt so that I can get you reimbursed. Try not to run over any pedestrians on your way, it looks really bad if you do that on the clock.”

“Right, Templar,” Nate said, blushing a little.

“Once you get back, organize the prints, roll ’em up, label the tubes. Place, date, number of theft, the works. Springheel and Texas should have a master list you can refer to by the time you get back. Think you can fit all those in the supply closet once you’re done?”

Nate turned around to look helplessly at the door to his supply closet. “Maybe,” he said dubiously.

“Right,” Simon said. “Try. If you can’t, put everything in the mat room. Let’s keep the cart. If Documents comes for it, we’ll pretend it got blown up or something. They’ll buy that. It’s us.”

“Got it, Templar,” Nate said, obviously relieved.

“Takemura,” Mike said into the phone, sprawling out in his chair and crossing his eyes at Johnny, seated across from him. “Mike Takemura. I’m with the FBI. Yes’m. FBI. You heard me. Oh, you *can* get me that information? Isn’t that sweet? Yes, I’ll hold.”

“Enjoying yourself?” Simon asked, pouring the last of the coffee into his mug.

“Oh yeah,” said Mike, pumping his hips once and making his chair screech backwards an inch or so. “Abusing my position and terrifying civilians totally gets me hot—what? Yes’m, go ahead, I’m ready.”

Simon snorted, put the empty pot on top of the coffeemaker (one of the privileges of leadership) and headed for his office.

“Now isn’t that interesting,” Mike drawled half an hour later, letting the phone fall back into its cradle with a loud clatter.

Rich scowled at Mike over the top of his monitor. “Spill it, goddammit, it’s after seven.”

“Well, now,” Mike said, a lazy grin crawling across his face, “seems that at least one of our stolen top-secret prototypes was so very top secret that they put a little non-specific PR blurb about it in their quarterly report.”

Rich stared at Mike. Mike beamed at Rich. Everyone else in the room fell silent. “That’s it,” Rich breathed, even as Simon stuck his head out of his office to see what the lack of fuss was about. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Simon demanded. “It’s what? What’s what?”

“Karpol’s a *stockholder*,” Rich said, whipping back to his keyboard. “Bet you anything he’s got some kind of dummy corporation set up—mutual funds or something—with stock in every tech company that looks interesting, and he scours their quarterly reports for hints of things he might want to steal . . . Honda!”

“Right, right,” Mike said, filching the handset back off the base again. “Confirming, sir!”

“I love you guys,” Simon said, shaking his head.

“Templar?” Sandra said, appearing in the doorway to his office.

Simon rubbed his eyes and looked up from the pile of completely useless emails that Langridge had so thoughtfully provided. “Yeah.”

“We’re all set. Specs Two is still arguing with the shareholders’ reports but I think the rest of us have done all we can do for the day.”

“Shit,” Simon said tiredly, stretching. “What time is it?”

“Almost ten.”

“That late? Christ. Okay, those of you who are done can probably take off.” Simon raised his voice. “Specs Two!”

“Yeah?” floated back in from the outer office.

“How long you going to be?”

“Another couple of hours! If I’m not done by midnight I’ll break for the night, come in early!”

“Right!” Simon shoved his chair back and stood up, wincing as the muscles in his thighs complained. Crossing to the door he squeezed Sandra’s shoulder and addressed the room. “You guys are great and I don’t say that enough. Go home and get some sleep. I don’t know when Archer’s due in—some time in the next two hours, I hope—and he’s likely to be jetlagged all to hell, so I’m declaring tomorrow a partial fuck-off day. Don’t bother coming in until ten unless, like Specs Two, you have a concrete reason. Okay?”

“Sweet,” Mike said, chugging off the last of his coffee. “My throat feels like sandpaper had sex in it. Fucking phone duty.”

“How does sandpaper have sex?” Sandra asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Roughly,” said Johnny.

After a startled pause, Mike whooped out a groan and slid under the table, sprawling out on the floor. “I hate you and everything you stand for, Texas,” he wailed.

“I have to admit, that was pretty fucking terrible,” Simon said. “And when Texas breaks out the puns, that’s how I know I’ve kept you guys too long. Go on, piss off, all of you. You too, Specs Two. Come in early if you have to, but for now? Go home.”

“But . . . !”

“No buts. Jesus, look what you made me do, I sound like your mother.”

Rich shot a glare at Simon, but started shutting down his computers. Simon watched him for a moment, just to make sure he wasn’t faking it, then wandered back into his office to gather up his own things.

What with one thing and another—it was always one thing or another—it was close to eleven at night before Simon actually slung the file folder of stolen emails into the passenger seat of his Jeep and crawled in to go home. His was almost the last car in the lot, aside from a little huddle of cars off in one corner that belonged to the sad souls that kept the place running overnight.

Simon slammed the door and then let his head fall back against the headrest, staring up at the Jeep’s roof. “What a fucking day,” he said aloud, listening to the words echo oddly in the empty interior, and shut his eyes for just a moment.

Fifteen minutes later he was jerked out of his impromptu nap by the insistent buzz of his cellphone at his waist. He scrabbled at his jacket with sleep-clumsy hands and eventually pawed out the phone, thumbing it open. "Yeah. Drake."

"Well, well, here I am." Jeremy, sounding much closer and clearer than he had eleven hours ago. "America the beautiful, land of the free and all that ultra-patriotic rot. Where's my baseball and my apple pie?"

"You didn't get it when you went through Customs? I were you, I'd call and make a fuss," Simon said, rubbing at his eyes.

"Ah, well, that would explain it," Jeremy said. In the background Simon heard a faint click and a couple of thumps. "I didn't precisely come in through Customs. I tend to find it an unnecessary hassle."

Simon snorted and started the Jeep. "Why am I not surprised? I'm not surprised."

"At any rate, I'm in town and all checked in, ready to start earning an honest dollar," Jeremy said over a chorus of muted chunking sounds.

"For a change," Simon said, wheeling the Jeep around towards the exit. "What's that sound?"

"Having a bit of trouble opening this door one-handed," Jeremy said. The chunking sounds abruptly stopped, followed by the soft *scree* of a door opening. "Ah, that's got it, then."

"Ha. Jeremy Archer having trouble with an ordinary door lock. I never thought I'd hear the day," Simon said.

"Well, I suppose now you have," Jeremy said. "So! What is the plan, precisely?"

"The plan? Well, I'm going to go home and drop off some things, and then I'm going to come to your hotel and make sure that you're actually *in* the US and not trying to pull some kind of fast one. Not that I don't trust you, but . . . I don't trust you. Also I have a temporary ID badge for you, and don't think getting that out of Security wasn't *loads* of fun."

"Ah, that's the good old-fashioned Simon Drake take-charge mentality that I remember so fondly. Do you know, I find it oddly arousing?"

Simon's fingers spasmed on the steering wheel and he shifted slightly in his seat. "Christ, Archer, you are *such* a pain in the ass. Where are you staying?"

"The Old Line."

Simon whistled in appreciation, most of his attention centered around changing lanes. "Fancy!"

"A bit larger and more public than I usually like, actually, but since I'm not planning to get up to any sort of . . . what would you say? Hijinks? Shenanigans?" Jeremy let the sentence trail off there, questioningly.

"We Americans tend to call them 'felony crimes'," Simon said.

"Ah, of course, how silly of me." Jeremy laughed softly, just a faint exhalation in Simon's ear.

“Wouldn’t expect a stuffy Brit like you to understand our simple colonial ways, of course,” Simon said. “All right, I’ll meet you there. What’s your room number?”

“Why don’t I just meet you in the lobby?” Jeremy countered. “Much easier, all ‘round.”

“What? Don’t you trust me?”

“Might I assure you, Simon, that I trust you entirely as much as you trust me.”

“... I suppose I deserved that. Fine, be that way. I’ll be about twenty minutes, maybe half an hour.”

The momentary silence was all the warning Simon needed to brace himself. “I’ll be waiting,” Jeremy said after his pause, his voice suddenly low and amused, shifting gears at speed just before he broke the connection.

Simon scowled at his phone before tossing it onto the folder in the passenger seat.

By the time Simon pulled into his allotted space in front of his apartment it was close to eleven-thirty, and despite his little impromptu nap he was still fading fast. “Coffee,” he muttered, grabbing the folder and his phone and sliding out of his Jeep. “Secure the files, splash some cold water on my face, have some *coffee*, meet the *bastard*...”

He trudged up the stairs, yawning once despite himself, and spent entirely too long fumbling with his keys in front of the door before he managed to get one into the lock. Finally he managed to unlock the door and swing it open—and froze.

The light in the living room was off. It was *never* off when he wasn’t at home. And even if both bulbs had burned out by some malevolent trick of fate, there was light spilling into the hallway from the bedroom, and he never left that light on—*twice in my life I’ve been woken by agents in the middle of the night because they thought there was a bomb in my apartment, and at least once they were right*, he heard Dorothy Langridge say again in his mind, and suddenly he was wide awake.

Tossing the file folder into his left hand he drew his gun with his right and flipped off the safety, scanning the darkened main room over its barrel as best he could. Nothing. Simon took one careful step into his apartment, then another, nudging the front door shut behind him until it closed with barely a click. Everything was silent, and still—dropping lightly to one knee Simon put the folder down on the carpet and slid it under the couch. It’d be safe there for the time being. He stood again, slowly, listening hard.

First things first. Steadying the gun, left hand over right, Simon flattened himself against the wall and counted to three before spinning into the doorway to

the kitchen and snapping his gun out. Nothing; as far as he could tell the kitchen was just as he'd left it that morning, dishes in the sink and all.

Simon whipped the gun back to its ready position and eased across the main room, heading for the tiny hallway that led into his bedroom and its suspicious light. All he could hear was his own tightly controlled breathing and the faint creak of his footsteps. They sounded phenomenally loud to his ears, but he knew better.

Putting his back to the wall Simon sucked in a deep breath through his open mouth, counted to two, and whipped around into the hall to half-fill the doorway to his bedroom, gun whipping left before jerking to bear straight down on the target sitting cross-legged on the foot of his bed—

Jeremy raised one eyebrow and didn't say anything, his hands already raised, open and empty.

Simon seized up for half a second, gun still trained directly on Jeremy's face. The roar of nervous energy crested and ebbed away, leaving him twitchy and spent; after a long and breathless moment he thumbed the safety on and let his gun drop to point at the floor. "Jesus fucking *Christ*, why do you keep *pulling* crap like this on me, it's like you *want* me to shoot you or something, not that I'd mind too much right now in any case," he said all in an adrenalin-fired rush.

"Well, no," Jeremy said, letting his hands drop back into his lap. "In all honesty I could quite do with never being shot again, but I *have* learned to have some faith in your reflexes."

Simon rolled his eyes and ignored that, slamming his gun back into its holster and flexing his hands to rid himself of some of the residual twitchiness. "Christ. And while I realize it's an easy mistake to *make*, Archer, this isn't the lobby of the Old Line."

"Mm? My bad." Jeremy slid bonelessly off the end of the bed and stood up, brushing imaginary lint off his shirt. He was still fully dressed, down to his shoes and jacket—black leather again, in deference to the season. "I suppose the presence of the bed should have been my first clue?"

Simon shook his head, and as an afterthought, shrugged out of his own jacket. "Your inability to follow such simple orders doesn't bode well for your future with the Bureau," he told Jeremy, half-closing the bedroom door so that he could hang his jacket on the robe hook and abandon it there.

"Mm." Jeremy didn't move. "What a pity. Apparently I'm absolutely terrible at doing what I'm told."

"No sense of discipline," Simon said sadly, pulling his holstered pistol from the waistband of his jeans and putting it on the dresser. "We prize obedience at the Bureau." He added his keys and wallet to make a little stack.

"Well! It's a good thing I'm merely a contractor, then, isn't it?" Jeremy looked away, directing that infuriating little smile at the far wall. "Or do you intend to try and *teach* me obedience?"

“I’m not patient enough and I’m sure not crazy enough,” Simon said, kicking off his sneakers. “But I think you’ll get a crash course or two along the way.”

“Will I now,” Jeremy said, and brought his little smile back to bear on Simon.

“It’s always possible.” Abandoning his casual act Simon crossed most of the distance between them in a single stride and grabbed Jeremy by the back of the neck, giving him a (mostly) friendly little shake. “You’re not totally stupid. You’ll pick it up as we go along.”

Jeremy craned his neck back into Simon’s grip and put his hand on Simon’s chest. “Well, then, shall we? Er, ‘go along’?”

“Let’s do that,” Simon said, and leaned down to bite the front of Jeremy’s exposed throat. “Take off your jacket,” he growled, in a tone that brooked no resistance.

Jeremy closed his eyes and made a single deeply satisfied sound low in his throat. A moment later the jacket hit the floor.



“What time is it? I can’t see the clock with you up there.”

“Mm . . . a bit before two.”

“Christ, no wonder I’m so tired.”

“I do hope you don’t expect me to apologize,” Jeremy said, leaning over Simon to flick the ash from his cigarette into the bowl on the bedside table. It was dark, or at least as dark as it ever got in here—Simon was long inured to sleeping despite the faint bars of orange-and-blue light from the parking lot lights shining through his miniblinds—and the glowing coal of Jeremy’s cigarette was a beacon in the dark.

Simon reached up and caught Jeremy’s wrist as it passed back over him, pulling it up. Jeremy obligingly flipped the cigarette up and out before it reached Simon, presenting him with the filter end instead of the fire; Simon shut his eyes and took a deep drag, Jeremy’s fingertips against his lips, before letting go of Jeremy’s wrist. “I never *expect* you to apologize,” he said, and then breathed the smoke back out. “Is there any tobacco in those things at all?”

Jeremy studied the glowing tip of the cigarette, wreathing it in exhaled smoke. “I expect there’s some,” he said eventually.

“And the rest is what, dried fruits and exotic spices or something? ’Cause I don’t care what you’ve heard, banana peels won’t get you high and neither will oregano.”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Jeremy said, then paused to take another mouthful of smoke. His chest failed to noticeably rise against Simon’s, even though the tip of the cigarette glowed brightly enough to illuminate his face and the tousled mess of his hair. “I must admit, I don’t particularly care what’s in them. I’m just fond of them. I enjoy having something to do with my hands.”

“You even *smoke* like a pansy,” Simon said, shutting his eyes. “Be a man, Archer. *Inhale*.”

“Whatever for?”

“So you don’t look like a goddamned faggot?”

"Now that's just tacky, Simon," Jeremy said reprovingly, stretching back over Simon to stub out the cigarette.

"Suppose so," Simon said, idly running a hand up and down along Jeremy's side, since it was there and all. "Why aren't *you* tired? Aren't you supposed to be jet-lagged or something?"

"I slept on the plane," Jeremy said, and he shifted subtly, pressing his hip into Simon's hand. "It's just one of my rules, you understand. You should never do anything on a plane except sleep, if you can help it."

"So while I spent the afternoon running around and being a productive member of society, you were having yourself a nice little nap. No wonder I don't like you," Simon said, squeezing his handful of Jeremy appreciatively.

"Oh, is that why? I'd wondered." Jeremy heaved a deep and contented sigh, half-closing his eyes. "Well, if you dislike me so much, I suppose I can get dressed and go."

"Nah," said Simon. "Still want to go over some things with you before tomorrow. We'll get up. Here in a sec."

"Mm," Jeremy said. "Yes. Here in a second."

"Shut up, I mean it, in a second."

"No one is doubting you, Simon."

"Bullshit. I can hear it in your voice: doubt."

"Well, then, prove me wrong. Get up."

Simon reached up (with the hand that was not currently playing with Jeremy's thigh) and pawed vaguely at the air for a moment before letting his hand drop again. "I can't. There's somebody on me."

"True," Jeremy said, his leg rising lazily under Simon's trailing fingers. Obliging Simon let his fingers follow the line of Jeremy's thigh, not really paying attention to them—until suddenly they came to rest in the crook of Jeremy's knee and got caught there, the inside of Jeremy's thigh pressed most distractingly down across Simon's hips. "So," Jeremy said, "are you intimating that I have you *trapped*, Simon?"

"... course not," Simon said after a slightly breathless pause. "I'm saying that I'm just too nice a guy to disturb you, since you seem to, to like it up there so much and all."

"Mm. Well. It *is* nice up here, I'll admit it. Lovely view. All the amenities."

"Buuuut," Simon said, squeezing Jeremy's thigh once more before reluctantly wriggling his trapped fingers free, "I need coffee. And a shower, but that's going to wait until tomorrow morning. You hungry?"

"Starving, actually," Jeremy admitted, moving his leg away and sitting up.

"Great! Me too. I'll make us scrambled eggs. Or, if you'd prefer, scrambled eggs. Oh, hell, you came all the way from Europe, I guess you could even convince me to make scrambled eggs."

“Well!” Jeremy ran both hands through his hair, putting it more or less back to rights. “In that case, I suppose scrambled eggs would be lovely.”

“Cozy,” Jeremy said lazily, picking one of the two kitchen chairs and sprawling out in it, barefoot and shirtless. Rather than put his ridiculous leather pants back on he’d brazenly appropriated a second pair of Simon’s pajama pants, cuffing them deeply to make them fit. That was all he was wearing, save for a scattering of bitemarks. He put the bowl back in its usual place on the kitchen table and dropped his pack of cigarettes next to it.

“Little too cozy, if you ask me,” Simon said, ignoring the rumpled and contented Jeremy as best he could, which was not all that well. He could feel Jeremy’s eyes on his back and it was making his skin prickle. He was starting to wish he’d put on a t-shirt. “Don’t get used to it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Jeremy said, smiling like a contented cat.

Simon just snorted and very firmly turned his attention to poking at the melting butter with a spatula. It popped merrily, leaving a pinpoint burn on Simon’s bare stomach; Simon winced and turned the heat down a little. “Make yourself useful for once,” he said over his shoulder. “Go put on some coffee.”

“Mm? Well, if you insist, although you must understand coffee isn’t precisely my strong suit.” Jeremy slid back out of his chair and padded over to the coffeemaker, poking through the cabinets above it.

“Hell, I used to eat instant coffee crystals straight out of the jar during stakeouts. As long as it’s blackish and caffeinated, it’s coffee, period, end of story. Other cabinet.”

“Ah!” Jeremy fetched down the can and pried off the lid. “Also, that’s positively disgusting.”

“It’s effective, though,” Simon said, staring straight down at the butter sizzling in the frying pan and cracking the first egg into it. “That was all I cared about at the time.”

Jeremy slid the filter tray in, put the pot back underneath, and poked disdainfully at the coffee maker until the red light came on. “There, that’s got it, I think,” he said, then leaned against the counter and dipped his head, trying to meet Simon’s eyes. “Anything else I can help with, Simon? I so seldom get to be domestic, you understand. It’s so charmingly rustic.”

Simon took one sideways glance at that pleased little smirk and snorted. “Sit down and get out of my way. No, wait, get me the bread first, *then* sit down and get out of my way.”

“Demanding!” Jeremy breathed in mock awe, but he turned around and fetched the bread off the top of the fridge, putting it on the counter next to Simon before completely failing to go reclaim his chair. “If it’s a matter of toast, Simon, I’m eminently capable of working a toaster.”

“Fine,” Simon said, bristling a bit. Jeremy was lurking nearly at his elbow; it was very distracting. “Toaster’s over there. I like mine half-burnt. If you don’t, cope.”

“You certainly do know how to make a man feel *welcome*, Simon,” Jeremy said, and then he was crossing behind Simon with the bread in one hand, running his fingers lightly across Simon’s bare shoulders in passing. Simon nearly lurched forward into the burner to get away from them. Jeremy, pretending not to notice, simply added, “I do so enjoy being a guest in your lovely home.”

“You’re not a *guest*,” Simon said, scowling at the scrambling eggs and poking them with the spatula. “Guests are invited. *You* broke into my apartment. By all rights I *should* be dragging you down to the police station in handcuffs. Or possibly shooting you.”

“Can it wait until after breakfast?” Jeremy asked, dropping two slices of bread into the toaster. “Actually, can it wait until after we’ve eaten, showered, and dressed? I’m only thinking of our respective reputations, you understand . . .”

“Do you ever shut up?”

“Only when there’s something in my mouth,” Jeremy said innocently.

Simon hunched his shoulders slightly. “In that case, why don’t you go have one of your stupid froofy cigarettes.”

“Spoilsport.”

“You are *ruining* my *appetite*.”

“Here, salt, pepper, butter. Knock yourself out,” Simon said, plunking a plate full of toast and scrambled eggs in front of Jeremy.

“All that and I get breakfast too. You could spoil a man,” Jeremy said in mock wonder, grinding out his cigarette. “So tell me. Or *brief* me or whatever it is you do.”

“So, have you ever heard the name Karpol?” Simon asked, ignoring the first bit.

“Can’t say that I have,” Jeremy said, picking up his fork and raising an eyebrow. “Sounds Russian.”

“It is. Viktor Karpol’s been one of the prime movers of Russian organized crime for, uh, close to forty years now, I think. And when I say ‘organized crime’, I mean it. He has his fingers in *everything* over there, and a bunch of things over here to boot.” Simon slung himself into the chair opposite Jeremy and dug into his own breakfast; he was ravenous. “He’s filthy rich, impossibly well-connected, completely without morals, and very dangerous, kind of like if you crossed a Fortune 500 CEO with the dictator of a large and wealthy country and then bred the result to a shark.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said thoughtfully, tapping the tines of his fork against his lower lip. “How rich are we talking? Does he collect art? Rare gemstones? Is he hiring?”

“You are *vastly* overestimating this man’s class. He’s not an art fan. Not enough explosions and casual sadism for him.”

“Oh, one of those. I don’t get on well with philistines. Never mind. Very well, go on.”

“Thank you, I think I will,” Simon said, swallowing a huge bite of toast and eggs. “Anyway, what Karpol does in his own country isn’t any of my business, and thank God for that, because I’m allergic to getting blown up. But what he does in *my* country, that’s a different story. I can’t prove it or anything but I’m pretty positive that Karpol had about two and a half fingers in Conrad Rupp’s satellite-based pie, for example. And that? That was my business.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said noncommittally.

“Anyway, these industrial crimes that I was telling you about, he’s definitely the driving force behind them. He picks the targets, he hires the thief, he manufactures the bootleg goods, he distributes them. This is the first time he’s actually managed to get a decent foothold in black market arms here in America, and that? That is emphatically my business.”

“But not mine,” Jeremy said, pulling a corner off his toast and eating it.

“Nope, not yours. Karpol’s none of your concern and I’ll thank you to keep your nose out of that end of it. All I want from you is this thief.”

“Who . . . reminds you of me, you said?”

“Well, personally speaking, I find him a lot less *infuriating*.”

“Mm. Quite. But professionally, Simon?”

“Yeah, professionally he’s almost exactly like you, only he shoots people with real live bullets instead of with stupid little toys like yours. Matches your M.O. *straight* down the line, otherwise. Like someone stuck you in a copy machine.”

“I see,” Jeremy said, sitting back in his chair and becoming very interested in his plate.

Simon leaned forward. “Yeah? Anything you want to share with the class there, Archer?”

Jeremy was silent. Simon considered poking him with his fork to make him talk, and had come within a hair’s breadth of putting this plan into action when Jeremy looked up. “Quite possibly,” he said, smiling—it almost looked natural. “But I refuse to make an official guess until I know more, you understand.”

“We’ll brief you in excruciating detail tomorrow,” Simon promised, mopping up the last of the butter from his plate with his toast. “So! I assume you don’t mind lending a hand?”

“I *am* getting paid, I trust . . . ?”

“Ah,” Simon said. “One-fourth now, the rest upon completion of services. Funny thing, my superiors don’t trust you all that much—can’t imagine why—and they’re afraid that if they pay you up front you might grab the money and bail.”

Jeremy sighed. "I don't *do* that sort of thing, Simon," he said with weary patience.

"Hey, I know that, you know that, we all know that," Simon said. "But they don't know that. If that's going to be a problem I can try to renegotiate, but I'm not that big a fan of bashing my head into brick walls."

"It's not my preferred method of doing business, but I suppose I can grant you some leeway since it's some sort of *legitimate* business transaction," Jeremy said, faking a sigh that faded into a little knowing smile. "So! I assume you're the one who decides when my services are . . . complete?"

"Mm-hmm," Simon said, watching Jeremy, and that smile.

"Well!" said Jeremy, slithering down in his chair. "I suppose I'd best try to stay on your good side, then, hadn't I?"

Simon sighed, reached down, and grabbed Jeremy's ankle, halting the lazy progression of Jeremy's foot up his calf. "Okay, now, just to get things straight: this? This is not one of the services you're being paid for."

Jeremy's other foot slipped neatly past Simon's blocking arm and pressed lightly against the inside of his thigh. "And I've told you, Simon, I don't charge for this any more. I consider it a . . . shall we say, 'a pleasant bonus'."

Simon watched him for a moment, then nodded slightly and scooted his chair forward a little. "In that case, I'm glad we've come to an understanding."

"Mm." Jeremy's smile was a brilliant little thing, even as the ball of his foot came to rest pressed hard against the front of Simon's pajama pants. Simon's eyes fought to close. "So, it's two-thirty now . . ."

"We need to, to leave here no later than nine-thirty tomorrow morning," Simon said, a bit breathless again.

"Are you asking me to stay the night?" Jeremy asked, arching an eyebrow and running his foot down and back up again.

Simon's chair went spinning back abruptly to bang against the oven door, and Simon lunged around the kitchen table to grab Jeremy by the back of his neck and drag him up into a fast, hard kiss. "I'm suggesting that you may be too sore to *leave* in the near future," he said when he was done, heading for the main room and dragging Jeremy behind him. "Bed."

Jeremy slid bonelessly out of his chair and allowed Simon to drag him off. "Yes," he said, pleased and purring, "I'm certain your kitchen table couldn't take the punishment . . ."

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## ◆ Seven

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Between one thing and another—it was *always* one thing or another—it was close to ten-fifteen by the time they made it to headquarters the next morning. The very act of Jeremy Archer pushing open the door to Team Templar’s saferoom cleanly cut off all the chatter from inside, and the heavy door swung back to reveal five silent people staring warily at them both. Jeremy stopped short in the doorway; Simon, ambling along two steps behind Jeremy, nearly ran over him.

The silence held for a painful three seconds before Mike snickered and warbled a slightly off-key “Oo-ee-oo-ee-ooo...” Without taking her eyes off Jeremy Sandra reached over and smacked the back of his head; Mike yelped and ducked, arms flying up in a belated and useless attempt to shield his head, leaving it to Johnny to end the musical phrase by providing a singularly mournful and matter-of-fact “Wah *wah* waaah.”

“You guys? You guys are hilarious,” Simon said, nudging Jeremy’s shoulder lightly to get him moving again.

Jeremy’s shoulder rolled bonelessly forward and back under Simon’s fingers. “I’d forgotten all about the prevailing sense of humor around here,” Jeremy said softly, not exactly moving.

“Blocked it out in order to stay sane, probably,” Simon said, pushing his shoulder again, a little harder. “C’m on, move, they don’t bite hard unless you startle them.”

“Or ask,” Mike added.

“Mm,” Jeremy said thoughtfully, finally allowing Simon to herd him into the room proper. Simon lingered behind long enough to catch the heavy door and ease it closed; Jeremy sauntered over to the conference table and laid a hand on the back of one of the chairs. “So! Where do you want me, Simon?”

“There’s fine,” Simon said immediately, instinctively overriding whatever it was that Mike had been about to say. Mike shut his mouth and looked injured. Simon ignored him and glanced around the room. “How we doing? People? ... Specs Two? You about done there?”

Rich gritted his teeth and hunched over his keyboard, staring resolutely at his monitor. Eventually, grudgingly, he admitted, "... five more minutes, Templar. One last thing."

"Right, then," Simon said, yanking out the chair at the head of the table and dropping into it. After a moment Jeremy followed suit, claiming the spot at Simon's right and pulling off his sunglasses. Silence fell again, uncomfortable and heavy, broken only by the rattling bursts of Rich's typing.

Jeremy glanced over his shoulder at Nate, then down at the opposite end of the table where Mike and Sandra were. "You know," he said pleasantly to no one in particular, "you're more than welcome to handcuff me to the chair again, if it would make you all more comfortable."

Mike, normally the first to jump on that sort of statement, just coughed—or snickered—into his hand. Sandra immediately started inspecting her nails. Johnny studied the situation for a moment, then heaved himself off the wall and wandered over to sit down next to Jeremy; the faint scrape of his chair's legs against the ground, so loud in the uncomfortable silence, made everyone look at him. "Kinky," he said appreciatively, folding his arms across his chest.

"Well," Jeremy said with a faint smile, "people do embark on a life of crime for all *sorts* of strange reasons."

Johnny considered this for a second, then snorted out a slight laugh and let his chin drop to his chest, apparently considering his contribution to the conversation finished.

"Coffee!" Simon said brightly, then spun out of his chair and beat a hasty retreat to the coffeemaker, patting it affectionately before rummaging around in the cabinet under the machine. "All right, where's my mug?" he asked after a moment, voice muffled. "Remember, I promised broken fingers if you guys used it for target practice again."

"I think it's still on your desk from yesterday, Templar," Nate said, finally wandering over to take his usual place at the foot of the table, next to the stolen library cart now stacked high with fat mailing tubes. "Hey," he said to Jeremy, raising a hand in a tentative wave. "So, uh... how's your hip? Better?"

"Nah, Specs, he's still bleeding to death," Mike said, incongruously cheerful about this prospect. Simon snorted and leaned into his office to reclaim his mug.

"I wish," Rich muttered, just loud enough to carry to Simon.

Nate turned bright red. "I, uh, yeah, that was a stupid question," he said. "But, I mean, did it heal up okay?"

"Eventually, yes," Jeremy said. If he'd heard Rich, he gave no sign. "It's still not particularly attractive, but it's more or less healed. Lost a bit of my range of movement on that side, but I've been assured that I'll regain it almost entirely in time, assuming I work at it."

Nate ducked his head. "I'm sorry," he told his tightly clasped hands.



“You haven’t a thing to be sorry for,” Jeremy told him. “Entirely my own fault. Well, and Conrad’s. I suppose I have to bring him in for a portion of the blame.”

“Yeah, for that insignificant little detail where he’s the one who pointed a gun at you and pulled the trigger,” Simon said, putting his steaming mug down on the table and sitting back down. “And what, don’t I get some of that blame?”

“Why, did you want some?”

“Not particularly.”

“But I’m still sorry it happened,” Nate insisted, looking up. “I mean, you were there to help us and all.”

“Yeah, help us clean up the mess you made yourself,” Rich said, glaring at his monitor.

“It’s true,” Jeremy said, spreading his hands in mock surrender. “More fool I. . . did you actually wash that out before you put more coffee in it, Simon?”

“What?” Simon asked, blowing on his coffee and sending a little puff of steam floating towards Jeremy. “No. Why should I? It’s all coffee.”

“Oh, God,” Jeremy said, putting a hand over his eyes. Mike sniggered.

“Someone always eventually breaks down and washes it out before it can grow fur or anything,” Sandra told Jeremy. “And by ‘someone’, I mean ‘Specs’.”

Nate pushed his glasses up. “Well, I don’t want him to get *sick* . . .”

“You guys have been *washing* my *mug*?” Simon said, scandalized. “Christ, no wonder I’m not getting the full-bodied taste I used to.”

Jeremy shuddered and looked away. “I’m so very glad I didn’t ask for coffee.”

“You haven’t earned coffee privileges yet anyway,” Simon told him. “Specs Two? You about done?”

“Just finished,” Rich said, unplugging his laptop from his large primary computer and carrying it over. Nate fished around under the table and came up with the end of a power cord; Rich took it from him and made a great show of plugging in his laptop and fiddling unnecessarily with the cord rather than look at Jeremy. “I’m ready when you are, Templar.”

“Right!” Simon said, putting his mug back down on the table with a faint thump. “I’ve given Shadow here a brief overview of what we’re up against already, so what we’re going to do now is take it all in order and in painful, practically proctological detail. That was entirely too many ‘p’s.”

“Also a metaphor I could have happily lived my entire life without hearing,” Jeremy said, wincing.

“You know I just live to cause you pain,” Simon said before he really thought about what he was saying (and to whom), and he plunged into the briefing without a pause to try and gloss over the familiarity. “Here’s what we’re going to do, folks, so listen up. Springheel, I want you to sum up the police reports, while Specs handles the blueprints so we can follow along. Honda, Specs Two, speak up if you’ve got anything to add from your research yesterday. Specs Two, I

designate you Speaker To Laptop and Taker Of Notes, which leaves Texas for the general look-shit-up detail. Any questions?"

"Yeah," Johnny said, shifting the toothpick he was chewing on to the other side of his mouth. "Dunno about the rest of you, but I want to ditch the codenames. No point any more."

"That's not a question," Mike pointed out.

"Neither's your mom," Johnny said.

"... what?" Mike asked, momentarily flummoxed.

"I agree with Texas," Nate said, carefully not looking at Rich, who was stewing beside him. "I don't think our first names are going to be any sort of enormous security breach."

"I don't—" Rich started to say.

"I'm Sandra," Sandra told Jeremy, riding right over Rich. Rich's protest ground to a halt in a rattle of spluttering. "Sandy's fine. Anything else at your own risk."

"Johnny," Johnny added, raising one hand briefly before tucking it back into his folded arms.

"We've been introduced," Mike said, "but, you know, I'm still Mike and all."

"Nate," Nate said, wiggling his fingers. "In case you forgot."

Silence. One by one the rest of the team turned to look at Rich, hunched over behind the screen of his laptop like he was trying to hide behind it. Finally, reluctantly, he raised a hand and said, "... Rich."

"I think you and I have been sufficiently introduced," Simon said dryly, finishing things off.

"Well!" Jeremy said. "Thank you all. I appreciate it. Every time someone calls me 'Shadow' I can't help but wonder who they're speaking to. 'Jeremy' is much easier all round."

Johnny shifted in his seat. "That your real name?" he asked.

Jeremy flashed him a thin smile. "No."

"Thought not," Johnny said. Rich rolled his eyes.

"Is that going to be a problem?" Jeremy asked.

Johnny shrugged and rolled his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. "Nah."

"What *is* your real name?" Simon asked, just to see if he'd get an answer. Jeremy's smile twisted in on itself, but he didn't say anything, which was an answer all by itself. "Never mind," Simon said.

"It's as close to a real name as I have, and the one I'm accustomed to answering to," Jeremy said with an air of finality. "Well, then. Shall we get started? Simon's led me to understand that we have a lot to cover."

Simon rapped his knuckles on the table. "Much as I hate to admit it, Archer's right. Bring us out the first case, folks, and let's get down to business. We'll try and cover year one before we break for lunch. First case!"

"First case is . . . Future Secure," Sandra said, consulting her chart.

"Future Secure," Nate echoed, and pulled out one of the mailing tubes, producing a thick roll of blueprints.

" . . . none of the motion detectors were tripped at all, and the security cameras didn't show anything," Sandra said, looking from the case file to the blueprints and back. "Which is odd, because unlike some of our other targets, this company actually did *not* have its security system installed by a chimpanzee."

"Mm," Jeremy said, the first sound he'd made since they started.

Simon looked at him. "'Mm' what?"

"Mm," Jeremy said again, biting his knuckle. Simon tried not to watch him do it. "This room. I'm going to hazard a guess that it's between fifteen and twenty feet high and the ceiling is solid—not any sort of acoustic tile."

"Blueprint says eighteen feet," Johnny said, cocking his head to the side to read the numbers. "Dunno about the acoustic tile. I can check."

"Mm," Jeremy said, and fell silent. Simon stared at him narrowly for a moment, then shrugged and gestured to Sandra to continue.

"Mm."

"What?"

"Glass brick, you said."

"Set in concrete. Doesn't move or open in any way."

"Did the police look at it at all?"

"The report doesn't say anything about it."

"Mm."

"I'm going to hazard a guess and say that a security guard quit abruptly one or two weeks after the theft."

"Wait, after?"

"After."

"I can check."

"Mm. Please."

"The cleaning service."

"What about it?"

"Do they contract it out?"

"I can check."

"I suspect that you'll find out they do."

"The security cameras—what make and model?"

"Brand? I don't know. I can check."

"Please do," Jeremy said, and Johnny grunted and jotted down yet another note.

"And that's it for the first year," Nate said, tugging the marked-up blueprints out from under people's coffee mugs and letting them spring closed. "Were we going to break for lunch? It's after two..."

"Yeah, this is as good a place to pause as any," Simon said, closing his eyes and arching his neck until it crackled. "So. Archer. What's the verdict? I mean, I could be imagining things, but it seems pretty obvious to me that you know what's going on here."

"I think so," Jeremy said absently, rubbing a finger along his lower lip. He was still staring blankly at the bare table where the blueprints had been.

"Great. So do you actually know who this guy is?"

After a significant pause, Jeremy's eyes cleared. He didn't answer right away; instead he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, still not looking at Simon. "Yes. Yes, I believe I do."

"Great!" Simon said, and paused expectantly. Jeremy didn't say anything, just stared down at his crossed arms. After a moment, Simon prompted, "Well?"

"Well what?" Jeremy asked.

"Are you going to tell us who this guy is already, so that we can get on with the business of catching him?"

Jeremy finally looked up. He didn't exactly move, but he seemed to... *ripple* was the first word that jumped into Simon's head, like he was suddenly looking at Jeremy through a slightly distorted lens. "Mm," Jeremy said, and smiled a smile without any humor in it at all, and Simon realized that the strange rippling motion had been Jeremy tensing in anticipation. "No, I'm not."

The room went thick and silent with shock for a pregnant heartbeat. Rich, unsurprisingly, was the first to react, throwing up his hands and saying, "Jesus *fuck*, I *knew* it..." and then the rest of the room exploded right behind him. Sandra groaned and put a hand over her eyes, shaking her head; Johnny jerked like he'd been punched and then snorted; Nate made a high-pitched sound of disbelief and blinked rapidly, his hands fumbling with the mailing tube he was still holding; Mike squawked out a singularly heartfelt "Fuck!" and spiked his pen at the table hard enough to snap off some of the plastic.

Simon slapped his hand down onto the table, fighting for and regaining control of his momentary flare of anger. "Okay, people, rein it in—"

For once, it didn't quite work. It almost did—Simon was entirely used to having the last word and they were accustomed to giving it to him—but then Rich turned his furious attention to Simon and snapped "I *told* you this was a bad idea!", and the sheer loathing in his voice shocked the room back into motion.

Sandra promptly turned on him. "Don't take this out on *Simon*—" she started to say, and that was as far as she got before Rich snapped "How did I know you were going to jump right in to defend him—", which made Mike lunge halfway

out of his seat and roar “*Hey!*”, and then Rich and Mike were yelling at each other while Sandra jerked upright and went as cold as ice, snapping “I can handle this *myself*, Mike, and just what are you *insinuating*, Specs Two—” and Johnny was tensed to spring in nearly any direction, and over it all Simon could just barely hear Nate calling thinly for everyone to please calm down, please—

Simon bolted out of his chair, sending it skittering back a few inches, and slammed both hands on the table as hard as he could. “*Enough!*” he bellowed, digging down deep for enough volume to *force* them to shut up. They all flinched away from him as one, all of them except Jeremy, who was still taut as a wire. Simon’s ears rang in the sudden silence. “Enough,” he said again, in his normal tone of voice. Mike sank back into his chair, abashed. Simon looked around at them, one by one, waiting to see if anything would flare up again; when it did not he fetched his chair back and sat down, his palms stinging. “So,” he told Jeremy, “what you’re saying is that you’ve always secretly wanted Mike to beat the shit out of you.”

“Not particularly, but I always try to keep an open mind about new experiences . . .” But Jeremy gave up right about then, the last remnants of that unpleasant little smile fading. “I won’t give you his name,” Jeremy said, his voice pure business. “That wouldn’t be cricket.”

“Cricket,” Rich said with vast, infuriated disdain. Simon shot him a warning glance to keep him from erupting again.

“*Can* I beat the shit out of him, Templar?” Mike asked, his grin gone crazed as he punched his fist into the palm of his other hand. “C’mon, I really wanna—”

Jeremy’s hand whipped up so quickly that Simon didn’t actually see it move. One minute it was gripping his upper arm, white-knuckled; the next it was quivering in mid-air, palm out, like a policeman halting traffic. Simon’s team, wound tight, literally recoiled from Jeremy as if he’d gone for a weapon. Mike jerked backwards, grabbing for the gun in his shoulder holster by sheer reflex; he stopped with his palm on the butt of his gun, shook his head, and let his hand fall again. He wasn’t the only one at the table who’d made a move towards their weapon, either, but Simon noted this only peripherally, still staring narrowly at Jeremy.

“It was my understanding that I am here as a consultant in my professional capacity, not as some sort of . . . *police informant*,” Jeremy said, his voice dripping with distaste. He let his hand fall again, resuming his death grip on his upper arm. “I will not give you his name. What I *will* do is help you stop him. Catch him, if you like, or just drive him off, if you prefer that. That much I can do—” and here he looked straight at Simon, locking eyes with him “—without betraying my professional ethics.”

“‘Professional ethics’,” Simon said derisively. “And we’re paying you more money than God for this.”

“If you’ve changed your mind about hiring me, Simon, just say so, and I will

consider our entire arrangement null and void. I'll *gladly* return the money that I've already been paid, and I'll soak the cost of my plane trip." Jeremy's voice was as completely devoid of emotion as the rest of him. "As a concession to *wasting your time*."

Rich made a wordless, strangling angry noise. Simon flexed his fingers and thought very fast. "No," he finally said, although it hurt to say it and it made a wave of disbelieving sounds race down the table. "You're determined to be a gigantic pain in my ass and not do the one thing that could earn you your money in a matter of minutes? Fine. I hope you're prepared to work like hell, because I intend to get my money's worth out of you. Tell us," and here he could not stop the irritation from leaking into his voice no matter how hard he tried, "how to catch him."

"Weren't you planning to break for lunch first?" Jeremy asked, without the faintest hint of humor creeping back into his voice.

Simon exhaled heavily, bowed his head for a second, and then made a small frustrated gesture of concession. "Lunch, everyone. Go ahead and take a full hour. It sounds like we'll be working late again."

For a moment, no one moved. Then Rich snarled something unintelligible, slapped his laptop closed, and stood up, pushing his way past the back of Johnny's chair and stalking out the door. The slam of the heavy saferoom door behind him broke the tension without actually dispelling it; the others came to, shaking their heads like they were just now waking. They left alone or in silent pairs, not really speaking beyond a few terse words, although Sandra's voice rose briefly and angrily from behind the saferoom door as it closed behind Mike.

Finally it was just Simon and Jeremy left at the abandoned conference table strewn thickly with papers and folders, and abruptly Simon couldn't stand the sight of Jeremy for a moment longer. "I'm going to get some lunch," he said brusquely, and left Jeremy sitting silently behind him. He made it as far as the door before he stopped, and hunched his shoulders awkwardly, and half-turned around. "... you want anything?"

"Thank you," Jeremy said quietly, reaching out to flip through one of the file folders in front of him instead of looking at Simon. "But I'm not particularly hungry. Perhaps, though, you'll let me buy you dinner tonight, after we're done for the day."

"Yeah," Simon said, and blew out a breath. "Yeah, that sounds fine. I'll be back in fifteen. For God's sake don't touch anything."

"I won't," Jeremy said, still putting on a very convincing show of concentrating on the papers he was not exactly looking at.

Simon nodded and turned back around, letting himself out. The door had almost—almost—closed behind him when he heard the little murmur, just loud and odd enough to make him poke his head back in. Jeremy was still sitting

where Simon had left him, but he'd abandoned the pretense of looking at the papers and let his head fall forward, a hand over his eyes.

"... what'd you say?" Simon said after a moment.

Jeremy's shoulders went tense again, but he didn't look up. "Nothing, Simon," he said tiredly. "Go have your lunch. I promise I'll behave."

"Right," Simon said dubiously, but he let the door swing shut, and after a moment headed for the cafeteria.

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## ◆ Eight

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At a quarter past two in the afternoon the building's cafeteria was only sparsely populated. A few people were having late lunches here and there, but Simon pretty much had the run of the place when he emerged from the line, his tray held nonchalantly over one shoulder like a waiter's.

His team—or about half of it, anyway—was clumped up in one of the larger booths off in the far corner, and after a momentary bout with indecision Simon snorted at himself and headed over, dodging the occasional roving desk worker adroitly. “Mind if I join you guys?” he asked, spinning his tray down onto the table without really waiting for an answer. “Or is this currently a No-Templar Zone?”

Sandra rolled her eyes, scooting over. “Sit down, damn it, no one's mad at you.”

“No one that's here, anyway,” Mike said.

“Where's Archer?” Johnny asked, glancing around behind Simon. “He with you?”

“Nah, he's back in the saferoom,” Simon said, dropping into the seat that Sandra had just vacated and stuffing half a sandwich in his face. “I'm not feeling particularly like shepherding his uncooperative ass around at the moment.”

Johnny grunted and poked absently at his half-eaten chicken. For a few minutes they ate in silence, looking down at their food rather than each other; inevitably, it was Mike that broke the stalemate, bursting out with “What I want to know is, what the hell's up Specs Two's ass? *This* time?”

“Archer?” Johnny suggested.

Simon choked on a mouthful of his sandwich.

“Lame double entendres aside, Johnny's right,” Sandra said, glancing at Simon as she slowly but surely reduced her napkin to a little pile of paper shreds. “Rich was against this right from the start and he doesn't like Archer. You know that.”



"Well, shit, Sandy, I'm not Archer's number-one fan either, 'specially not now," Mike said, still aggrieved. "But there's no call to be getting all ass-nasty at *you* 'cause of him. You know?"

Sandra shrugged and rubbed her fingers together until a sticky bit of napkin let go and fell to the tray. "It's Specs Two," she said, like this explained everything.

"At his Specs Two-iest," Mike said, putting his head down and absently rubbing the back of his neck. "Damn, this sucks. Maybe you shoulda taken Shadow up on his offer to be un-hired, Templar, if he's not gonna tell us shit and Specs Two is going to be a pissant. It'd save us a fuckton of budget."

"Much as I'd like to right about now, I can't," Simon said, taking the last bite of his sandwich.

"Why not?"

"Too late," Simon said. "See, here's the thing. Do you guys trust him?"

Mike snorted. "Shit, no."

"Yeah," Johnny said. Mike blinked at him. Johnny shrugged.

Sandra made a little see-sawing motion with one hand. "Not exactly . . ."

"I trust him," Simon said carefully, cleaning his fingers on his napkin instead of looking at any of his teammates. "You know why I trust him?"

Silence. Finally, grudgingly, Mike said, "... okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"Because we've paid him," said Simon, putting his napkin down and finally looking up. "He *stays bought*. He is *all* wrapped up in that. You guys can give me all the shit you want about it, but he got himself *shot* over it, and that's something, you know? But if we magically un-buy him . . ."

"... he doesn't owe us a thing," Sandra finished for him as the light dawned.

"And then he'd probably feel free to tip off this friend of his, whoever he is," Simon concluded. "I mean, Christ, you heard him with that 'consider our contract null and void' shit. So . . . it's too late now."

"Fuuuuck," Mike wailed, loudly enough to make one of the nearby cafeteria workers look up sharply. "So we're gonna pay him to sit on his ass and *not* tell us things? Damn, Templar, I want that job, where do I apply for that job? I wanna get paid to be no goddamn good to anybody!"

"You already . . . no, no, it's too easy," Sandra said. "You could at least give me a *challenge*, Mike."

Mike's mad grin bounced back up like it had never left. "Hoo, I'll give you a challenge any time, Sandy, baby, honey—"

"Shut up," Sandra said crisply, slamming the heel of her hand into the edge of Mike's tray and driving it squarely back into his breastbone. Mike coughed out a breath through his grin.

"Plus it's bullshit," Johnny said.

"... eh?" Sandra said.

"Not you. Him. Bullshit," Johnny said again, patiently. "Think about it."

"Fuck, Texas, they don't pay me to think," Mike said, still a bit breathless.

Johnny's face creased up in something close to a smile. Without a word he dug the little memo pad out of his pocket and tossed it into the center of the table, open to a page full of notes in his narrow, crabbed handwriting. "Already got all that off him, easy as anything."

"That from this morning?" Mike asked, turning his head to the side to try and make sense of Johnny's chickenscratch.

"Yep," Johnny said. "Got ten things to follow up on already and he's not even *trying* to help us yet."

Sandra picked up the memo pad and flipped through it, frowning. "It's not much," she finally said.

"Nope," Johnny said. "But it will be, I bet. When he's done."

"Eeh," Mike said, reaching over to grab the top of the memo pad and tug on it until Sandra rolled her eyes and let go. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Johnny shrugged.

"We'll see how it goes after lunch," Simon put in. "I mean, it's not like he'll be *completely* useless. Sounds like he can at least tell us how this guy operates."

"Still wish he'd just give us a fuckin' *name*," Mike said, tossing the little notebook in Johnny's general direction. Johnny caught it and stuffed it back into his shirt pocket. "I mean, shit, it's not like we're gonna run right out and tell the world he told us, right?"

"Yeah," Johnny said, "but informers are scum."

"Yeah, so?"

"So he's not scum," Johnny said. "Probably insulted that we think he is."

"I don't think he's *scum*," Sandra said. "Sleazy, maybe. But not scum."

"And I'm sure he'd be happy to hear that, Sandy," Simon said, heaving himself out of his seat. "I'm gonna head back and make sure he's behaving himself. See you guys in half an hour or so."

"See you, Templar," Sandra said, and Mike waved, and Johnny grunted, which was Johnny all over.

Simon could hear the raised voices before he was halfway down the hall, and he rolled his eyes at the ceiling and broke into a jog. "Fuuuuuck," he muttered under his breath as he got closer and the sound got louder, and then he shouldered open the saferoom door and Rich's aggrieved voice burst out at him loudly enough to make him wince.

"—no telling *what* he was up to!" Rich finished telling—yelling at—a semi-frantic Nate, who was making little useless shushing gestures. Jeremy still sat where Simon had left him, with his arms crossed protectively over his chest and his head down, saying nothing.

Rich wheeled on Simon, infuriated, freeing Nate to escape into the 'safe' spot by his computer. "He was *alone* in here, Templar! Alone! I thought you said you'd make sure he wasn't ever left alone in the building!"

Simon immediately raised both hands in surrender. “You’re right, Two. Okay? You’re right. My bad. I’m sorry. I was pissed and I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Rich subsided about halfway, grumpily. Jeremy didn’t move, just shut his eyes.

“So what’d he do?” Simon asked, putting his hands back down.

“I don’t know what he did,” Rich snapped. “I don’t know if he did anything. I’m just saying he had a long time in which he *could* have done just about anything he wanted to—”

“Archer,” Simon said, overriding Rich, who snapped his jaw shut and retreated into fuming.

“Mm?” Jeremy said, opening his eyes and looking over at Simon. He looked tired. “Yes?”

“Did you behave yourself like I told you to?”

“Well, despite my general distaste at being treated like a naughty child, yes, I did,” Jeremy said. “In fact, I haven’t moved from this chair since you left. I did look through these folders here. I trust that was all right.”

“There,” Simon told Rich. “You see?”

Rich gaped at him. “You’re just going to *trust* him when he says that?”

Simon sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Nate.”

“Eh?” Nate said—squeaked—from his hiding place, blinking nearsightedly at Simon. He’d been cleaning his glasses on his shirttail; now he just clutched them to his chest like he was trying to hide behind them.

“Take Archer down to the main building, show him the courtyard where the smokers hide and pretend they’re being sneaky,” Simon said. “He’s probably jonesing by now.”

“I, ah, sure, Templar . . .” Nate said nervously.

Obligingly Jeremy stood up, plucking his sunglasses from the table and threading them into the collar of his t-shirt. “That’s be lovely, actually. It’s been a long morning. I could stand to walk about.”

“Just don’t try to walk about anywhere Specs tells you you can’t go—and wear the damned badge, Archer. If you get booted out of the complex I’m docking your pay.”

Jeremy sighed and reached into his jacket, fetching out the little plastic ID badge with its lapel clip. Simon wheeled on Nate. “Don’t let him take that thing off again, don’t take your eyes off him for a second, and don’t take him anywhere interesting. If he makes a break for it, I hereby authorize you to shoot him.”

Nate squeaked and fumbled his glasses, nearly dropping them before he could put them on again.

When they were gone and the door had closed behind Nate, Simon turned to Rich. “So,” he said. “I’m thinking we need to talk.”

Rich huffed out a breath and crossed his arms over his chest, looking away. Simon paused, considered him, and then spread his hands wide. "Want to call me an idiot? I deserve it."

"No," Rich said unwillingly, hunching up his shoulders.

"Okay, then." Simon paused again, then ambled over to the cluttered table and sat down. After a moment, Rich did the same, staring down at his hands. "I'm guessing this is still bothering you," Simon eventually said, after the silence had gone on for a bit.

"Yeah," Rich said, lacing his fingers together and pulling them apart.

"Mm," Simon said, and then realized how much that sounded like Jeremy, and amended it to "Yeah."

"We're paying him more than I make in a year to sit on his ass and decide what he feels like telling us!" Rich spat all of a sudden, still staring down at his hands.

Simon took a deep breath. "Well, first of all, I'm not paying him anything, and neither are you. Uncle Sam's taking that hit for us, fair and square. And secondly, yeah, okay, he's clearly off in his own little world with only his own little agenda for company, but that doesn't make him useless, not by a long shot. Frankly, we need him for this, and I didn't realize how much until you guys started laying everything out like that this morning and showing me the holes."

"Yeah," Rich muttered.

"But we need *you* a hell of a lot more, because you're part of the team and he's just this guy," Simon said, leaning forward. "I know you're not too damn thrilled with anybody right now, least of all him and me, but if you can't dig your head out of your ass and do your part, we are so screwed I don't even want to think about it."

Rich chewed on his lower lip a little, lacing his fingers together again and cracking one of his knuckles. "I guess, Templar, but..."

"But nothing," Simon said, interrupting as gently as he could. "Look, I don't give two shits if you want to call me every name in the book, okay? In fact, let's do some of that. Call me an idiot."

"What?" Rich said, glancing up.

"Call me an idiot," Simon repeated patiently.

Rich blinked owlishly at him, then yanked off his glasses and started scrubbing them on his shirt. "Templar..."

"Go on," Simon said.

Rich glanced up at him, then looked back down at his glasses. "Idiot," he finally muttered.

"There you go!" Simon said. "Now tell me I was irresponsible."

"... you were irresponsible," Rich said grudgingly.

"Tell me I broke my promise."

"You broke your promise," Rich said, finally getting into it, putting his glasses back on.

"Tell me not to do it again."

"Don't do it again," Rich said. Although he didn't actually smile, he stopped scowling quite so enormously, which was almost the same thing, for Rich.

"Now tell me that I owe you an apology and I better get down on my knees and grovel for your forgiveness."

"Templar," Rich said in exasperation.

"Okay, okay, enough of that," Simon said, grinning a little despite himself. "So I'm an irresponsible idiot who broke my promise and I'd better not do it again. I get you. I swear to you that Archer will never be left unattended in this building again. Scout's honor. And I was an Eagle Scout so that counts triple. Okay?"

"... I guess," Rich said. "It's just..."

"Just?" Simon prompted.

"I still can't believe you're putting this much trust in a *criminal*, especially a career criminal like Archer," Rich said. "That's insane."

"That's true, on the face of it," Simon admitted. "But as criminals go he's about one step shy of being a Boy Scout himself, and, I might add, one who's personally saved *your* life."

"Well, yeah, but..." Rich trailed off there and made an irritated gesture. "I just don't get why you *trust* him so much."

"Because right now? I—we own him," Simon said. "We bought him. He's ours."

"But—"

"And if by some chance he does try and fuck us over, I am prepared to hit him where it hurts, over and over," Simon went on, riding over Rich again. "Right now if I wanted to I could make one phone call and he'd spend the next twenty years locked up in some hellhole prison in Asia somewhere. You know that. Hell, he knows that. I told him so."

"Yeah," Rich said, subsiding. "Yeah, I guess."

"It sucks, I get you, I sympathize, but try to at least be civil," Simon said. "We've all got to work together for a while and it'd be great if it wasn't, you know, actively painful for everyone."

"I'll try," Rich muttered.

"And Rich?"

"Yeah?" Rich asked, looking up.

"I don't care what your problem is with Archer, or with me, don't ever take it out on the others again," Simon said gently. "You want to yell at me, that's one thing, but snapping at Sandy like that, that's another. Don't do it again."

"She—" Rich broke off and hunched his shoulders again. "Right."

"I don't just want us to look like a team in front of Archer for my ego," Simon said, looking down at his own hands. "That was one hell of a show of disunity

this afternoon, and now he's going to think he's found some kind of lever to use to manipulate us. You get me?"

Rich swallowed. Something clicked in his throat. "Yeah. I get you."

"Okay," Simon said, and looked back up at Rich. "Okay. We cool?"

"We're cool," Rich said. After a moment, he looked down again. Simon watched him for a few seconds, then nodded.

The low buzz of conversation in the hallway barely registered with Simon, sitting in his office and pretending to work in order to give Rich some alone time to decompress. But the laugh, a whooping bubble of helpless embarrassed noise, that was unquestionably Nate's laugh; *that* caught Simon's attention neatly. After the way the morning had gone, it should have been good to hear Nate laughing again. Instead, Simon frowned, uncertain that he liked what that laugh portended.

"—sounds a lot like Simon," Nate was saying as he pushed the door to the saferoom open, still chuckling a bit. Simon froze, the skin on the backs of his arms prickling a bit. Now he *knew* he didn't like it.

"Not that I blame him, mind you," Jeremy said cheerfully. The outer door closed softly behind him; Simon could just barely hear it. "It's just the sort of thing he's required to say. But still, it's not the sort of pleasant mealtime conversation I'd had in mind . . ."

"Nobody likes a tattletale, Archer," Simon called, gritting his teeth slightly against the rush of heat that was trying to reach his cheeks.

After a startled moment of silence, Jeremy's voice floated back, light and clear. "Least of all the bully he's tattling *on*, I suppose." A moment later Jeremy appeared in the doorway, glancing about Simon's office curiously. "I was simply telling Nate about your promise to ship me off to Interpol if I tried anything—how did you put it—'funny'."

Simon eyed Jeremy narrowly. After a moment Jeremy's smile softened and he shook his head, ever so slightly, laying a finger across his lips for a fraction of a second before that hand moved on up to run through his hair. It didn't precisely leave Simon entirely comfortable with the situation, but it was enough to make him stand down from his mental red alert. "I assume I'm not supposed to ask why there's no door on your office," Jeremy said, reaching out to touch one of the empty hinges.

"It broke in half," Simon said shortly, retreating into the truth, if not all of it. "Occupational hazard."

"Apparently our occupations have more in common than I originally thought," Jeremy said. He swung about halfway into Simon's office to investigate the small vaguely-triangular burn scar on the wall by the upper hinge; Simon scowled and turned over the paper he'd been reading, just on general principles. "Oh, this is lovely," Jeremy said, touching the burn.

“Yes, well, if we repainted in here every time someone blew something up, we’d never get anything else done,” Simon said, trying to propel Jeremy out of his office by sheer force of will. It wasn’t working.

“No, I mean that in all seriousness,” Jeremy said, measuring the burn scar with his extended fingers. “Who’s the explosives expert? This burn mark is *perfect*.”

“Perfect,” Simon echoed, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, Simon, perfect,” Jeremy said patiently, crouching to look at the matching burn scar by the lower hinge. “It’s nearly textbook. The door was blown off both hinges simultaneously while barely scarring the wall around it. That takes some skill.”

“Uh,” Nate said from the other room, sounding embarrassed, “that was me.”

Jeremy straightened up just as Nate appeared at the door, his cheeks already on fire. “Really!” Jeremy said, sounding impressed. From his vantage point Simon couldn’t see the look that Jeremy gave Nate, but Nate’s face went from pink to red, so it must have been something. “Semtex?”

“C-4,” Nate said, sounding vaguely surprised. “And Kevlar to control the blowback.”

“Ah, of course you’d have access to military-grade explosives, that makes sense,” Jeremy said. “And breaking the door in half?”

“Blasting caps and flash powder,” Nate said, his blush fading as he shoved his glasses up. “We were going for maximum flash and bang and it really wasn’t that strong a door, especially not after Mike got thrown into it that one time . . .”

Jeremy considered this for a moment, then whistled softly. “I rather wish I could have seen it.”

“I wish I hadn’t,” Simon said, irritated. “So help me God I’m never ever working on April Fool’s Day again. Out of my office, the both of you. Scheme somewhere else.”

Nate ducked his head and vanished from the doorway. Jeremy glanced at Simon over his shoulder, then smiled just a touch and followed Nate, leaving Simon alone in his office again.

“Why did I ever think this was a good idea?” Simon muttered under his breath.

Ten minutes later Simon finished scowling at the last of the Karpol emails and slapped the folder closed, only to realize that the conversation from outside had fallen to an intense muted hum. That alone was enough to make him nervous.

When he appeared, folder full of useless paper in one hand, Rich was a sullen silent lump in the midst of his lair, which was unsurprising but, still, a bit disheartening. Nate and Jeremy were sitting together at one corner of the table—Nate was actually sitting in Simon’s chair—and their heads were so close together that Simon estimated that if he hit Jeremy in the back of the head,

Jeremy's forehead would bounce off Nate's like two pool balls colliding. This made Simon *very* nervous, and also just a little bit sad that he currently had no real reason to hit Jeremy in the back of the head.

"You know, when I said 'scheme somewhere else', I kinda sorta didn't mean it," Simon said instead. Jeremy and Nate both looked up at him, and Simon blinked. Nate was wearing Jeremy's weird techno-goggles, eyes and glasses alike hidden behind a gleaming rectangle of black glass. Now Simon knew he'd been right to be so nervous. "Not the best look on you, Specs," he said, leaning in the doorway.

"Wow," Nate breathed, which didn't sound like a response. Simon waited patiently. After a moment Nate looked back at Jeremy, which was not the response Simon had been waiting for. "That's *amazing*," Nate said fervently.

"And if you do this—" Jeremy reached out and put his hands on the sides of Nate's head, which made Simon grit his teeth "—you'll bring up the electrical current sensors." Jeremy's fingers flickered rapidly across the sides of the goggles, producing tiny clicking sounds; every time that the goggles clicked Nate twitched, just a little, his hands rising to hover uselessly in mid-air.

The moment Jeremy let go, Nate craned up to peer over his shoulder, looking at Rich in his lair. He promptly recoiled, hands flying up in front of his face. "Whoa!" he cried, delighted.

"Mm?" Jeremy turned halfway around to see what Nate had been looking at. "Oh. Well, yes, that's probably quite bright without the dampers on. Here, let's see . . . Simon, are you wearing a watch with a battery in?"

Simon silently raised his hand in answer, flashing them the face of his watch. Nate turned around and trained that rectangle of black glass on him again. "Ohh, yeah, I see it," Nate said in fascination, gesturing vaguely at Simon. "It's really sensitive, huh?"

"Sometimes painfully so," Jeremy said. "If you'd like, I can take off the outer housing and let you see the wiring."

"Please!" Nate said, yanking the goggles off over his head and making his hair flop messily back into his eyes. "Wow, I want a pair of these," he added, holding them reverently by one of the side pieces to keep from smudging the glass. "Can I have a pair of these? Hey, Templar, buy me a pair of these, I'll use 'em for work and everything . . ."

"Uh, how should I put this," Simon said. "Oh, wait, I know: no, Specs."

"Aw, but Templar—"

"No," Simon said again, regaining a modicum of his usual good humor. "Bad techie. Bad!"

"Unfortunately they're quite expensive to produce," Jeremy said in something like agreement. "Over the years we've sunk, hm, something like two million dollars US into their development—" Nate squawked and recoiled, his fingers spasming, dropping the goggles. Quick as a lightning strike Jeremy darted his



hand out to catch them before they could hit the table. “—and perhaps I should have waited to tell you that until you weren’t holding them,” Jeremy finished.

Nate flushed pink. “Um. Sorry. Yeah, that’s—two million?”

“Well, over the years,” Jeremy said, laying the goggles on the table in front of himself and prestidigitating a tiny screwdriver from the sleeve of his jacket. Simon ambled a bit closer, trying not to appear too curious. “My mentor built the first pair from stolen military tech in the early seventies, and he and I have been constantly refining and updating them ever since.” Jeremy slid the flat end of the screwdriver under one side of the goggles and levered it outward, making the housing lift up and out. “So really this particular pair is only worth a hundred thousand or so, now that infrared lenses and the like are relatively easy to get one’s hands on—ah.” The housing clicked free on the other side as well and Jeremy simply flipped it up like a lid, revealing a complicated mess of glass lenses and circuitry that put Simon in mind of eye tests and optometrist’s chairs.

Nate hunched over the exposed goggles, his eyes going wide and fascinated. “Wow,” he said reverently, touching the metal rim of one lens. The fascinated expression didn’t last, though, as Simon knew it wouldn’t; after a moment Nate’s eyes narrowed again and his fingers started to tic over the goggles, tracing arcs in midair as he traced wiring to its source. “Where does this part connect?” he asked after a moment, picking up Simon’s pen and using it to point to a seemingly random bit of circuitry. “It’s not connected to anything right now, unless I’m missing something . . .”

“Ah,” Jeremy said. “Here.” Pushing the pen’s tip aside Jeremy reached across Nate and flicked at one of the dials, and one pair of the lenses lifted up and flipped over with a muted whirring sound, carrying a bit of circuit board over to mesh seamlessly in with the bit that Nate had been asking about. “And now they’re able to see into the ultraviolet portion of the spectrum, which I hate and only use to confirm authenticity and such. Gives me such a headache.”

“That’s *sweet*,” Nate said, awed.

“Yeah, that’s amazing, I think I spontaneously converted to your religion in my pants or something,” Simon said, a good deal less awed. “Hey, Specs, I don’t want to rush you, but you’re in my seat.”

“What? Oh! Uh, sorry, Templar.” But Nate didn’t spring guiltily out of Simon’s chair like Simon had been expecting; instead he brushed a finger across the metal housing of one of the lenses again, fascinated, only vaguely attempting to push the chair back and stand up. Simon sighed and waited with something less than perfect patience.

The door to the saferoom more or less exploded open at that very moment, Mike bombing through it with Sandra trailing in his wake. Rich’s head jerked up; Nate jumped about a mile in the air, which at least had the benefit of getting him out of Simon’s chair. “—*have* street cred,” Mike was saying, completely and utterly indignant. “I am *street* as *fuck*.”

"You have all your clothes professionally cleaned," Sandra pointed out, catching the rebounding door.

"So I don't have time to do laundry!" Mike cried. "That doesn't mean I'm not representing!"

"And you pronounced the 'g' in 'representing'," Sandra said, not unkindly.

"... fuck." Mike rubbed a hand down his face.

Jeremy tilted his head to the side. "What on earth is 'representing'?" he asked Mike. "Somehow I doubt it has anything to do with being a representative."

Mike immediately leveled an accusatory finger at Jeremy, who blinked. "Now *there*," Mike said, "there is a man with no street cred at all."

"Cred?" Jeremy asked Nate, apparently assuming (correctly, in Simon's opinion) that he wasn't going to get any sort of useful answer from Mike.

"Credit, maybe? It's some gangsta thing," Nate said, shrugging.

Mike rolled his eyes. "*Credentials*, Specs."

"Gangster?" Jeremy asked, still ignoring Mike in favor of Nate. "Humphrey Bogart, bootlegging, concrete overshoes, all that?"

"Gangsta. Tupac, rap, expensive sneakers, bling." Nate, unable to help himself, made little air-quotes with his fingers around the last word.

"... this is one of those peculiarly American things, isn't it?"

"Probably," Nate said. "But hey, I'm down. I'm a thug. I'm *Jewish*."

Jeremy's face went absolutely blank. Mike boggled at Nate for a minute, then shrugged. "That's so incredibly fucked that I can't even think of where to start arguing with it, so I'm gonna allow it."

"Whereas I don't think I care enough to argue with it," Sandra said.

"Oh yeah," a beaming and satisfied Nate said. "I'm officially bad."

"Bad," Rich said derisively from his corner. "The closest you'll ever come to street crime is *gold farming*."

"That's bad!" Nate protested. "Actually, that's kind of really bad, not 'bad' bad. Well, okay, it's more like tacky than bad."

"What's gold farming?" Sandra asked Mike.

"Something really nerdy," Mike said confidently.

"In other words, you don't know," Sandra concluded.

"Damn right I don't know, Sandy," Mike said. "I'm not down with all that nerd shit."

Sandra opened her mouth and then shut it again (apparently deeming this whole conversation not worth continuing) and it was into this momentary lull that Johnny walked, face-first, so to speak. Mike promptly wheeled about and flung a hand in his direction. "Now Texas here, Texas is *not street*. You cannot be street if you grew up within three miles of a cow. It's the law or something."

Johnny snorted and ambled in, letting the door swing shut behind him. "Cows," he told Mike. "Always comes back to those cows with you."

“I figure they were such a vital part of your childhood and all, Texas, it’d be cruel of me not to recognize and legitimize your roots.”

“Yeah?” Johnny said, fetching a fresh toothpick from his pocket and sticking it in his mouth. “Shit. When you gonna admit you’re a furry?”

“No!” Sandra immediately snapped. “We are *not having the furry discussion again*.” She wheeled on Rich. “And *no examples*. You go anywhere near Google and I will break all your fingers.”

Simon, figuring that now was as good a time as any, cleared his throat loudly. All eyes turned to him. “As I am a white Midwesterner and have absolutely no street in my soul,” Simon said, “I’m going to make myself feel better about my shortcomings by oppressing you. Shut up and let’s get to work.”

“Aw, fuck, the man’s keepin’ us down again,” Mike wailed, but he and all the others started making their way back to their places at the table, which was really all that Simon could ask for.

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## ◆ Nine

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“So,” Simon said, settling into his seat with another cup of coffee. It was either his fourth or fifth. He’d lost count. “Where were we? Number fourteen, I think?”

“Number fourteen,” Sandra said in agreement, picking up yet another blue folder off the top of one stack. Nate nodded and pulled a mailing tube off the library cart, fumbling with the plastic cap on one end.

Jeremy coughed softly. “Actually . . .”

It unnerved Simon somewhat, how quickly the room grew still and attentive, all eyes turning to Jeremy. After glancing around at his silent teammates, he looked at Jeremy. “. . . what?”

Jeremy folded his hands neatly on the table in front of himself and met Simon’s gaze levelly. “Before we begin again, may I say something?”

“Do you have any idea how tempting it is to say ‘no’?” Simon asked, but he was already making a little ‘get on with it’ gesture. “Go ahead.”

“Thank you,” Jeremy said, and then proceeded to characteristically abuse Simon’s good nature by not saying anything, choosing instead to look at each of Simon’s teammates in turn. Nate smiled uncertainly at him, Simon couldn’t help but notice, and none of the others looked actively hostile, at least, although in Rich’s case that was probably with an effort.

The silence lengthened. Simon gave it five seconds before prompting, “Well?”

Jeremy took a deep breath. “I’d wanted to apologize for earlier,” he said, exhaling. “I’m afraid I handled that quite poorly.” Half a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth and vanished again. “I can’t imagine why I might be so on edge today, locked up in a room deep in the bowels of the FBI with six agents of the law.”

Mike snorted. It sounded something like a laugh. Jeremy smiled at him, briefly, then knocked his knuckles on the tabletop in what Simon abruptly recognized as his own ‘calling this meeting to order’ gesture. “I’ve already told you what I can’t do, to, er, shall we say ‘less than universal acclaim’? Before we go any further I’d like to tell you what I *can* do for you, so that you can make an

informed decision about where to go from there. I'd like to think I can be of some use."

Simon couldn't help it; he darted a glance at Johnny. Johnny didn't look any more smug than usual, but then, he also looked about half-asleep. "Okay," Simon said, looking back at Jeremy. Nate promptly put the mailing tube back in its place and settled in at the foot of the table.

Jeremy settled back in his chair and looked back to Simon; their eyes locked with a click that was almost audible. It was as if the rest of the room ceased to exist. "I can give you a basic profile of the man in question," Jeremy said, softly. "I can give you a somewhat outdated list of the tools and skills he has at hand, and how he's likely to use each one. I can go back through these case files that you've compiled and show you exactly how he carried off each theft, and—" he was now speaking over a faint startled ripple of reaction—"if you can provide me with a certain amount of information, I can show you how he would probably go about breaking into any given facility and tell you how to stop him in each case."

After a long, silent, startled moment, Simon whistled in appreciation. "Can you bring about world peace, while you're at it?" he asked. "'Cause man, that would be great."

"World peace is easy, Simon," Jeremy said, and he didn't smile. "What I can't do—what I am *unable* to do—is tell you where he'll strike next, or what his target will be. I'm afraid I don't know a thing about this sort of industrial crime."

"Wait," Sandra said. Simon twitched slightly, startled; Jeremy, for his part, blinked rapidly, breaking the deadlock of eye contact. They both turned to look at her after a moment, Jeremy raising an eyebrow inquiringly. "You said 'how to stop him'," Sandra went on. "Not 'how to catch him'."

Jeremy hesitated for a moment before nodding, slowly. "Ah. Slip of the tongue, I'm afraid."

"Was it?" Sandra asked, her voice noticeably cool.

"Mm. Well. Not so much a 'slip of the tongue', precisely, as an error in my thinking. I was thinking, first of all, of preventing the actual theft, not bringing the thief to justice. As it were."

"Both would be ideal," Simon put in. "You know. In case you were wondering."

"The process of catching him is also something of a stretch for me," Jeremy said, slowly, rubbing a knuckle against his lower lip. "I've never tried to catch a person before, not like this. I can show you places where you can lie in wait for him, certainly, and places where he will be exposed, but..." He fell silent.

"But?" Simon prompted.

"He's obviously dangerous," Jeremy said, looking back at Simon. "And I'm not certain what sort of... requirements you'd have."

"Like what?"

“Well. Such as how many agents you would want to have in a given place, or if you’d want to catch him before he stole the item or afterwards . . .” Jeremy trailed off there and made an abrupt dismissive gesture. “None of that is important right this moment. We’ll speak about it again once you’ve managed to pinpoint his next target.”

Simon held the silence for a moment, then slowly nodded. “That’s fine,” he said. “As long as you’re not trying to jerk me around. You *are* going to help us catch him. Not just stop him. He *is* going to be arrested. None of that is open to negotiation.”

“Jerk you around?” Jeremy asked, with the barest flicker of amusement. “I wouldn’t dream of it, Simon.”

Simon snorted and got very interested in his coffee all of a sudden.

Mike leaned over the blueprints and stabbed a finger at a red ‘x’, drawn over one of the walls. “So we don’t exactly know how he got *in*, ’cause he literally had to blow a hole in the wall at this point to get out, so he couldn’t have come in that way . . .”

Jeremy considered the blueprints, spreading his fingers out over Future Secure Ltd.’s research wing. “Security guard,” he said after a moment. “Security guard or cleaning staff.”

“He bribed one?” Sandra asked.

“No,” Jeremy said musingly. “I believe he was one.”

“ . . . what?”

“Does Future Secure employ its own guards and cleaning staff, or does it—what’s the word—outsource?”

“Uhhh,” Mike said, shuffling through his notes. “Guards are regular Future Secure employees, none of them had been hired any more recently than fourteen months beforehand. Don’t know about the cleaning staff.” Johnny grunted at that, shoved his chair back, and disappeared into Simon’s office without a word.

“Mm,” Jeremy said, a faint line appearing between his eyebrows. “No one pays any attention to janitorial staff, you see. Including other cleaning staff, usually. In the States, particularly in the southern areas, you can generally count on the majority of a janitorial firm’s employees being illegal aliens, most of who don’t speak much English, and the turnover is remarkably high. All he would need to do is steal or jury-rig a uniform, and then slip into the truck or just walk in with the rest of the crew. And with a complex this size . . . I suspect they hire on the order of fifty or sixty custodial staff per night. No one is going to notice if sixty go in and fifty-nine go out, particularly if they don’t all use the same entrance.”

“You say that like you’ve done it before,” Simon said, speaking for the first time in ten minutes.

"I have," Jeremy said, darting a quick, thin smile at Simon. "I cut a positively inconspicuous figure in a baseball cap and a navy-blue coverall, and the coveralls may be hideous polyester things but they're loose enough to hide a multitude of fascinating items."

"Like half a pound of explosives?"

"Among other useful devices, yes."

"Custodial services contracted out to one Clean Sweep Of Phoenix Janitorial Services Company," Johnny reported, ambling back out of Simon's office. Rich made a faint noise of assent and typed that down. "Didn't check, but I bet they'd get real nervous if I started lookin' at their staff rolls too hard."

"Bet so," Mike said. "Huh."

"I'll bet you anything you'd care to name that this room has a high warehouse-type ceiling, probably between twenty and thirty-five feet," Jeremy said, tapping the outline of one large room a hundred feet away from the scene of the crime. "Exposed steel girders and ventilation pipes, corrugated metal, the works."

Nate squinted at the blueprints, tilting down his glasses until he could read over them. "Thirty feet, it says here."

"If they sent someone up there, they'd discover that the dust on the beams was all disturbed from here—" Jeremy touched a ventilation duct "—to here—" he touched another "—and somewhere right around *here*—" he picked up the red pencil and drew a faint circle on one corner "—there will be a large square of metal sheeting that's been spot-welded back into place, and above that an actual hole in the roof. He probably wouldn't bother to cover that with more than a tarpaulin, to keep light and rain from revealing it. I suspect Red Arrow Security has been wondering why their heating bills are so much higher than usual."

"Through the ceiling?" Rich asked in disbelief. "How'd he get up on the roof, then?"

"Grappling hook, probably. Old-fashioned, but it's quick and reasonably easy to carry and use. A ladder's also possible, but harder to hide from security—unless he came in with the groundskeepers, or some such."

Johnny grunted and made a note.

Jeremy frowned at the blueprint, spun it around, traced his fingers around the outside of the building, and said, "This isn't his work."

"You sure?" Simon asked. "It fits the timing and everything."

"Almost positive," Jeremy said. "Causing a blackout may *seem* like an excellent idea, but in reality it's either a last-ditch effort or part of a very carefully laid plan. He wouldn't do it, not like this. Not only does killing the electricity put all the guards on edge and advertise the thief's presence to any police cars that happen to be passing by, but most security systems have a backup power source

these days. Alerting the guards and failing to disable the alarms all in one go? Not generally my idea of a stellar job.”

“It could still be him,” Rich objected. “I mean, everything else fits pretty well.”

“That’s true.” Jeremy traced his fingers over the blueprint again, then picked up a pile of photographs and sorted through them. “But if it were me—and I assure you that it was not—I would have caused a series of blackouts over a two-week time period before ever, ever going inside. It works beautifully, particularly if you time them correctly; not only do the guards get used to the loss of electricity, but sometimes they’ll actually turn off part or all of the electronic security systems, thinking they’re at fault.”

Mike whistled. “Whooo, I sure am gettin’ an education here.”

“About time you got one,” Nate said, shoving his glasses back up.

Mike sucked in a breath, then bellowed out a happy noise and grabbed Nate in an enthusiastic headlock. “And the Nate-man scores a fucking point!” Mike crowed, giving Nate a thorough noogie-ing. Nate squawked and flailed, coming within an inch of knocking his mug over.

“Asking for it,” Johnny noted.

“Ventilation system,” Jeremy said thoughtfully from over by the coffeemaker. He’d apparently assumed he deserved coffee now, and, not bothering to ask, had gone over and rooted out a styrofoam cup from the cabinet.

Simon snorted. “This isn’t a *movie*, Archer. Those are too small to crawl through.”

“No, no, humor me,” Jeremy called over his shoulder, putting the pot back in the machine and running a finger over the coffeemaker’s battered nametag. “How small is too small?”

“Well, it depends. You mean for humans or trained weasels? . . . do you *have* trained weasels, Archer? I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Jeremy sighed and carried his coffee back to the table, the rim of the cup caught gingerly in his fingertips. “Let me see,” he said to Nate, making a little ‘come on’ gesture. Nate spun the blueprints around and tapped the duct in question with the tip of his pen.

Putting his coffee down Jeremy leaned over and read off the numbers. “Simon, that’s *plenty* of room for . . . that’s *plenty* of room, assuming the thief doesn’t have those enormous gorilla shoulders of yours. Which, I assure you, he does not.”

Sandra chewed absently on her pen. “So we should check the ventilation system on this side of the complex—”

“—do not have gorilla shoulders,” Simon muttered defensively.

“—for traces of lubrication in the vents, probably,” Sandra finished, ignoring him.



“Not necessarily—and you have so,” Jeremy told Simon without bothering to look back at him. “Bloody overgrown Americans with your proper nutrition and all. Anyway, as I was saying, with numbers like those he ought to have been fine as he was. Here, shall I show you?” And, so saying, he stripped off his jacket.

Simon, who’d been about to say something derisive about this not being a strip club, thank you, Archer, stopped. Under his t-shirt Jeremy was wearing some kind of tight dull grayish-black undershirt, with long sleeves that stretched over his forearm harnesses. Jeremy fished about in the sleeves, fetching out what proved to be little attached fingerless gloves, and slid his hands into them, and *then* Simon realized what he was looking at.

“Unless he’s gotten very unlucky he still has a couple of these,” Jeremy said, nonchalantly pulling his t-shirt off over his head and revealing the upper half of his catsuit, clinging to and outlining his torso like a thin coating of volcanic ash. Simon took a long swallow of his coffee, burning his tongue.

The collar was folded down strangely over Jeremy’s chest; he slid his fingers up along the side of his throat and zipped it into place, somehow, until he was covered with the grayish stuff from high up on his throat to where the catsuit disappeared into his pants. “It’s a full-body suit—I trust I don’t need to prove that to you—”

“—oh please, Christ, no,” Simon broke in, a little too fast. “Keep your frigging pants on, Archer.”

“As you will, then,” Jeremy said, not exactly smiling. “In any case, normally the suit’s glovelets go *over* a pair of latex gloves, and the friction he can get from those plus the frictionless suit would be all he’d need. As long as he physically fits in the vent and doesn’t mind getting terribly sore he can drag himself along by his fingertips.”

“What is that stuff?” Johnny asked, reaching up to grab one of Jeremy’s wrists and pull it down. His fingers nearly slid right off before he managed to catch hold. “Some kinda polydermal—”

“It’s actually a terribly clever teflon derivative, which is embarrassing to admit,” Jeremy said, holding out his other hand to Sandra. Sandra hesitated for a moment, then reached up to touch the back of Jeremy’s hand. “Every time I admit that someone asks me if I can fry an egg on it.”

“Can you?” Mike promptly asked.

Jeremy quirked an eyebrow at Mike. “Do *you* like your eggs fried in melted rubber?”

“...euwgh,” Mike said, making a horrible face.

“Christ, I remember that thing,” Simon said reflectively, staring in the vague direction of one of Jeremy’s shoulders. “Of course, last time I saw you in it you weren’t being nearly so cooperative.”

“Well, you did have a gun on me, as I recall, and that tends to make me quite balky,” Jeremy said, withdrawing his hands and poking about in one of the wrist

slits. "Here, I'll leave you a few fibers for comparative analysis, shall I, just in case he snagged himself on something."

Nate blinked, then scurried over to the equipment closet and popped out with a plastic bag. "Here," he said, popping it open and holding it out to Jeremy, who rubbed his fingers together and sent a drift of black fibers wafting down into the waiting bag. "Lemme just bag-n-tag," Nate muttered, zipping the bag shut and wandering off in search of a marker.

"Okay, drama queen, you've made your point," Simon told Jeremy. "Put your shirt back on already, no one wants to see that."

"That's hardly any fun," Jeremy said, but he did wriggle back into his t-shirt, which was something.

Simon rubbed one hand down his face, scowling at the prickle of stubble. "Christ. What time is it?" he asked, and then glanced at his watch, answering his own question. "After eight. Damn. How many more do we have to do?"

"Just the one, Templar," Nate said, pulling out yet another mailing tube. "Savi-Ten's the last."

"Right," Simon said, stretching over the back of his chair and listening to his spine crackle. "Tell you what. Let's go over Savi-Ten and then break for the day. Tomorrow morning we'll let Archer profile the guy and his equipment for us, and then we'll split up for the afternoon and do what needs doing. Sound good?"

A tired mumble of assent rose from around the table. Simon thumped back into his chair and glanced at Jeremy. Jeremy's eyes flicked up from Simon's stomach to his eyes and then away; Simon resisted the urge to check and make sure his shirt hadn't pulled free of his jeans when he stretched.

"Savi-Ten," Nate said, spreading out the last set of blueprints and then pushing his hand up under his glasses to knuckle at one eye.

"Security ensured by leaving huge wads of cash lying around and hoping that thieves trip over them and break their necks," Sandra said. "So, as usual, we aren't certain how he got in, but after listening to the rest of these cases, I'd have to guess this is another one of those where he walked in during the day and hid himself."

"Mm," Jeremy said.

"Looks like another vent-n-duct job to me," Mike put in. "I mean, shit, none of these cameras out here were messed with and none of them caught him."

"Mm," Jeremy said, now starting to look a bit amused.

"Right," Sandra said. "So he tampered with these cameras here and came out through this ceiling vent here, and these motion detectors are for crap since he can see the beams, and he hacked or disabled the electronic lock, although I don't know how, exactly."

"Mm," Jeremy said again, hiding a smile behind his hand.

"... what?" Sandra asked Jeremy, eyeing him narrowly.

"Oh, nothing," Jeremy said. "I'm just wondering if I need to be here for this."  
"I *have* been listening," Sandra told him.

"I wasn't trying to insinuate that you haven't!" Jeremy said. "Anyway, the electronic lock . . . if it's the make I believe it is, it's easy enough to override it with a bit of wire-stripping and the proper program."

"On the money," Sandra said, tossing out a sheaf of Polaroids. "Anyway, apparently he tried to glue the panel shut again, but the glue didn't hold, as you can see, so they spotted the damage pretty quickly."

Jeremy picked up the Polaroids and leafed through them, wincing a bit. "He's still using clear museum putty, I see," he said, mostly to himself.

"What do you use?" Simon asked.

"Oh, clear museum putty," Jeremy said. "And epoxy, if I have time. A combination of the two works nicely: the museum putty holds until the epoxy has time to set, and they're both perfectly clear, so they're hard to spot."

"Epoxy," Johnny said approvingly. "Better'n duct tape."

"Blasphemy!" Nate cried, clutching at his heart.

"So why's it so important that he uses it?" Simon asked.

"I suppose it's not," Jeremy said, shuffling the pictures back into a stack and handing them to Sandra. "It's just a bit . . . nostalgic, I suppose."

"Nostalgic," Simon echoed.

"Mm," said Jeremy. "Anyway, please, do go on."

"Anyway, the guards noticed the damage and raised the alarm and he shot the security guy less than two minutes later, so I'm guessing he was trying to get the fuck out of there," Mike said. "And still he doesn't show up on camera, so back into the vents, I think."

"Which means that one of these grille covers is probably just wedged into place," Sandra said. "And given where the car was parked and the guard was shot, he probably climbed the back fence and got over the spikes somehow."

"Rope or something," Johnny put in.

"Wire clothes hanger," Jeremy said.

"What?" Johnny said.

"Wire clothes hanger," Jeremy said again. "Bend it downwards, twist in the middle, hang it over one of the spikes. It's hard to see, easy to reclaim, looks utterly mundane, leaves no fibers, and you can toss it away immediately afterwards. It's not likely anyone will connect it to you, particularly if you mangle it a bit before tossing it."

"Huh," said Johnny.

"Of course you can't trust your weight to it for more than a second or two and it bites into the sole of your foot something fierce, but it works well enough," Jeremy said. "Well! I think you've all got the hang of it! Is that all?"

"That's it for today, anyway," Simon said, clapping his hands together. "Let's break, people. Usual time tomorrow."

Simon groaned and let his head fall back against the headrest of the driver's seat, staring up at the roof of his Jeep. "Christ, what a day. Okay, first of all *food*, and then I am dumping you at your hotel and going home to get nine hours of extremely well-deserved and overdue sleep."

"I did promise to buy you dinner," Jeremy said, fastening his seatbelt and settling back into his seat.

"And I'm taking you up on that," Simon told the roof. "Any preferences?"

"I don't deal well with excess plastic, tacky polyester uniforms or fluorescent lighting. In point of fact, if it doesn't have a wine list, I'm not terribly interested."

Simon snorted and started the Jeep. "Well, hell, if you're gonna get all *high-class* on me . . . do you even drink wine?"

"No," Jeremy said, "but the existence of a decent wine list generally means the food is at least edible. Come along, Simon, you're not in the proper spirit of things. Think of it as an opportunity to gouge a large amount of money out of me."

"Oh, well, if you put it that way." Simon tapped his fingers on the steering wheel for a moment, thinking, then shot the Jeep into drive and wheeled it around, heading for the exit. "Steak," he announced. "Got no idea if the food's any good, but it's sure as hell expensive. Plus I arrested a senator in their parking lot once, *after* he ate there, which sounds something like a recommendation to me."

Jeremy laughed. "With a clientele like that, it should at least prove interesting. Drive on, then."

Simon tapped his forehead in a little half-assed salute. "Yessir."

Jeremy smiled and fell silent, turning his attention to the view out the passenger window. Simon (who didn't feel much like talking either, after the long day) concentrated on his driving, only peripherally aware of the man in the other seat. It wasn't until almost ten minutes later, when they pulled up and stopped at a red light governing a deserted intersection, that Simon glanced over and asked, "Tired?"

“Mm,” Jeremy said, and looked back at him for the first time since they’d pulled out of the parking lot. “What makes you say that, Simon?”

“Well, for one thing, you’re not flirting with me, and that’s damned well nearly a first,” Simon pointed out. “And for another, you haven’t tried to grope me once even though my leg is *right there*. And, you know, as long as I’m listing things, you haven’t even said anything or looked at me since we left. Uh, that I’ve noticed.”

“Would you *like* me to put my hand on your thigh?” Jeremy asked, smiling just a little. “I’ll admit it wasn’t the first thought on my mind at the moment, but far be it from me to deny you such a little thing—”

“No, no, that’s all right,” Simon said, getting bored with sitting at the red light and accelerating through it. Jeremy raised an eyebrow but said nothing. “I’m just mentioning it because *usually* when you are sitting there you are at least making double entendres, and to be perfectly honest I’m entirely uncomfortable with, with, uh, this companionable silence thing.”

Jeremy eyed Simon in silence for a moment, and then smiled, a long, slow, measuring thing. “Ahh, I see.”

“What do you ‘see’?” Simon asked, paying more attention to steering the Jeep around a pothole than the conversation.

Jeremy didn’t answer him. Simon negotiated the pothole and then glanced at Jeremy and repeated himself. “What do you ‘see’, Archer?”

“Nothing,” Jeremy said, still smiling that entirely unsettling smile. “Would you mind terribly if I had a cigarette?”

“Yes,” Simon snapped, darting a glare in Jeremy’s general direction. “You light one of your stupid faggy cigarettes in my truck and I’m pitching you out the window, I don’t care what kind of dinner you’re buying.”

Jeremy, laughing, held up his hands in surrender. “Could you be a little more *clear*, Simon, I’m afraid I didn’t quite understand—”

“Christ, you’re a pain in the ass,” Simon informed him, “and don’t think I didn’t see you dodge my question there, either.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t think it for a minute,” Jeremy said, and there, finally, was the little twist of amusement in his voice that Simon was used to, and it was almost with relief that he braced himself for whatever was coming next. “And I suppose you’ll insist on sitting in the non-smoking section?” Jeremy asked.

“Of course!” Simon said. “You think I give a shit about your addictions?”

“Addictions,” Jeremy echoed. “Well, honestly, Simon, if I’m to pay for our dinner at a place of your choosing and I have to sit in the non-smoking section just to make you happy, I certainly hope you plan to at least put out—”

“—you know what, I lied, let’s go back to that ‘companionable silence’ thing, the benefits are starting to dawn on me,” Simon said, but he was already pulling into the parking lot of the restaurant and the point was rendered more or less moot.

"Nice," Jeremy remarked, craning his neck to look at the high walls of their booth that curved around to enclose them, nearly walling them off entirely from the rest of the restaurant. "Very, er, private."

The restaurant was half-deserted because of the hour, and they were the only people seated in this section; Simon suspected it was technically closed, but he'd seen that little flicker of folded bills pass between Jeremy and the host (despite Jeremy's admittedly quite practiced attempt to be subtle about it), and so being led back here hadn't come as any surprise at all. Apparently Jeremy was just about as enthused about being seen with Simon as Simon was about being seen with Jeremy. Or, equally as probable, Jeremy wanted privacy for some illicit and probably perverted reason. Simon resolved not to worry about it until he was fed.

"Most decent restaurants are like this in DC," Simon said, closing his menu and setting it aside. "Nobody wants to be seen eating with anybody because everybody's in bed with the wrong somebody, if you follow me."

"Ah. 'Politics makes strange bedfellows', as it were."

"And dirty politics makes for extremely private lunches," Simon said. "Add in all the bored political wives screwing around on their husbands, and, well, welcome to DC."

"Crooked *and* perverted," Jeremy said. "Rather a city after my own heart." Somewhere behind him voices were raised in a muffled argument. His eyes flicked to the side briefly, but otherwise, he ignored it.

"Isn't it? A handful of our less upstanding citizens want privacy and the rest of us reap the benefits."

"Benefits," Jeremy echoed meaningfully, but Simon was saved from whatever he was about to say next by the appearance of their none-too-happy waitress, and Jeremy's attention turned to her, instead.

The waitress took a deep breath and didn't look up, staring at her order pad and mumbling. "Welcome to Savarin's my name is Thea can I get you something from our bar—"

"Actually," Jeremy said, interrupting her bored monologue with a smile, "might I apologize first?"

The waitress blinked and looked up, knocked out of the well-worn groove of her recitation. Jeremy's little smile curled in on itself sheepishly. "I rather suspect that this section was closed and you supposed yourself finished for the night—I'm terribly sorry, I only wished a decent table and I suspect your maitre d' was a little too enthusiastic about it."

"Maitre d'," Simon muttered under his breath. "Frigging Eurotrash."

"No, sir," the waitress said with a notable lack of enthusiasm, "it's no trouble at all—"

“Nonsense!” Jeremy said, interrupting her again. “Of course it’s trouble. When am I not trouble?” Simon snorted and the waitress twitched out a tiny smile almost against her will. Jeremy just smiled. “If you ask my friend here—”

“I’m not your friend,” Simon hastened to point out.

“—you see?” Jeremy told the waitress. “At any rate, if you ask my *dinner companion* here, he’ll tell you: I am most certainly trouble, and a pain in the ass to boot. But I do try not to be unreasonable about it, so here, let me give this to you right up front . . .” Jeremy casually unfolded his hand, a folded note magically blooming from it, caught neatly between his first two fingers. The waitress blinked and then plucked it hastily from his hand, stuffing it into her apron, but not before Simon caught sight of the ‘50’ in one corner. “There we are!” Jeremy said, sounding entirely pleased. “Now, then, I hope that will serve as a halfway-decent apology, and we can go on to have a reasonably pleasant evening.”

“I’ll do my best,” the waitress said, now sounding a good deal more lively. “Can I get you two gentlemen something to drink? We have an excellent wine list—”

“Club soda, please,” Jeremy said, once again interrupting her. “With lime, if you could.”

Simon gave Jeremy a singularly disgusted look before looking back at the waitress. “You have Sam Adams on tap?”

“Yes, sir.”

“One of those, then.” Simon looked back at Jeremy and, with the mental image of that fifty appearing and disappearing like smoke still foremost in his mind, couldn’t resist. “You realize you haven’t impressed her, Archer.”

“ . . . er, what, sir?” said the waitress, who hadn’t quite left yet.

“This is DC,” Simon went on, paying no attention to their waitress, just watching Jeremy. “I bet she’s gotten tips four times that size from petty politicians who want her to forget she ever saw them. I’m just saying, you’ll have to tip better than that to make an impression on your average DC waitstaff.”

“Simon, I’m surprised at you,” Jeremy said reprovingly. “That wasn’t her *tip*. That was an apology. I plan to leave her her tip with the bill, as is considered appropriate, assuming that the service is generally timely—”

The waitress disappeared towards the bar so fast that Simon expected to see smoking tracks in the carpet. Jeremy stopped there and looked at Simon, his usual little smile quivering around the edges as he struggled not to laugh.

“You’re a bastard,” Simon said, but he was grinning a little. He couldn’t help it. “How come you never try to bribe me like that?”

“Because you’re an agent of the law and far, far above taking a petty bribe from a known criminal?” Jeremy theorized.

“You could at least *try*,” Simon said. “I mean, I’d really get off on loudly turning you down and threatening to arrest you for it.”

Jeremy paused for just a moment to consider that, just long enough to let Simon regret it. “Really,” he finally said, almost purring it.

“Ho-kay, bad choice of words there, but still! My point stands.”

“No, no, Simon, please do go on, I’m always interested in hearing about what gets you off—” Jeremy broke off there just a bare second before the waitress reappeared with their drinks, but his little smile stayed just where it was, continuing to irritate the hell out of Simon while they ordered.

Their food arrived so fast Simon barely had time to do much more than sip his beer and deflect a few raised eyebrows and pointed remarks, leaving him wondering if their waitress hadn’t been sharing the wealth with the kitchen staff in hopes of extorting a bigger tip from Jeremy later. Once the food was there, of course, Simon lost all interest in everything else, and Jeremy had the common decency to shut up and eat instead of forcing Simon to keep up a pretense of a conversation.

The steak was excellent and the beer was like heaven after the long day, so much so that Simon bent his usual rules and had a second, firmly refusing to consider whether it was a good idea or not. Two beers and an immense amount of beef later the last of the day’s tension had mostly melted away, leaving him tired and reasonably cheerful.

When their waitress came by to see if they needed anything else, Simon held up a finger. “Coffee. Thanks.”

“Why am I not surprised? Make it two,” Jeremy said, turning to the waitress. “And the bill, when you have a moment.”

“Sure thing,” she said. “You fellows just take your time, there’s no hurry at all.” Smiling, she vanished with their empty plates.

“Well! That was quite good,” Jeremy said, dropping his napkin on the table. “Beefsteak is one of the few things that’s best eaten in the States—well, or Japan, but that’s something else entirely and not nearly so filling.”

“Hey,” Simon said, not really putting much energy into the reproof. “I’m too full to play the patriotism game with you right now, so you can just take your ball and go home.”

Both of Jeremy’s eyebrows rose at that one, but he failed to otherwise rise to the bait, instead just smiling and falling silent. The waitress dropped off their coffees and the check, which Jeremy picked up, looked at, and then proceeded to grandly ignore, instead curling both hands around his cup of coffee and closing his eyes. It made him look tired.

“Gonna need this just to make it home,” Simon said, gesturing at Jeremy with his mug and then chugging a third of the contents off at a gulp. “... whoo. Damn. That’s good coffee.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, not opening his eyes.



“Fine, *don’t* say something nice about the one I love,” Simon told him, and settled back to finish off his coffee at a more leisurely pace.

“Mm,” Jeremy said again, eventually picking up his own coffee and sipping it.

Simon finished off his coffee and spent a more or less agreeable ten seconds watching Jeremy drink his. “Hey,” he finally said.

“Hm?” Jeremy finally opened his eyes.

“Who is this guy we’re after, anyway?” Simon asked, and then promptly held up his free hand. “Off the record, swear to God. Scout’s honor. I’m just curious is all.”

The faint smile fell off Jeremy’s face like Simon had wiped it off, leaving him looking exhausted and somehow old. “He’s . . . someone I used to know quite well,” Jeremy finally said, temporizing. He became very interested in the contents of his coffee cup, holding it up in front of him with both hands like a distraction, or a shield.

“Well, duh,” Simon said. “I mean, I figured that much out all by myself, what with the two of you being these adorable little clones and everything. So what is he, your big rival or something like in all the movies?”

Jeremy took a deep breath and sighed it back out again, but Simon, starting to get wise to him by now, couldn’t help but note the slight twitch that suddenly developed in Jeremy’s upper eyelid. Simon eyed him for a moment, then poked at him again. “Twin brother, maybe? Two of you growing up learning your skills at daddy’s knee, is that it?”

“Simon,” Jeremy said in sudden desolation, his eyelid still twitching. The look on his face could almost be called ‘pained’; Simon narrowed his eyes at it. “I’m not going to tell you, I’m afraid. Please stop.”

Simon put his empty cup down in the saucer with a clatter and leaned forward, suddenly struck by an unpleasant thought. “Ex?” he asked, his voice low and containing slightly more venom than he’d meant it to. He gritted his teeth and continued. “We up against one of your old boyfriends? That why you’re so willing to help us catch him?”

Jeremy finally looked back up at him, but the total lack of surprise on his face told Simon everything he thought he needed to know. “That *is* it, isn’t it,” Simon breathed, watching Jeremy’s eyelid for the telltale twitch. It wasn’t long in coming. “Fuck. I should have known.”

“It isn’t that simple,” Jeremy said, closing his eyes and visibly stilling the twitch. “In fact, it’s very complicated, and it’s not a story I intend to tell you, now or ever. I’d be ever so obliged if you’d let it drop.”

“I’m sure you would,” Simon said, a bit of that venom creeping back in. “There are a lot of things you don’t intend to ever tell me, aren’t there.”

“I can’t imagine why you’d be interested in my life story,” Jeremy shot back, and then tossed off the rest of his coffee and bared his teeth at the empty cup.

“Isn’t that a little too close to *pillow talk* for you, Simon?”

Simon jerked his chin up slightly, acknowledging the shot. “When details of your ‘life story’ have a clear and obvious link to information I need to do my job, you’re damn right I’m interested. Other than that, no, I don’t particularly care.”

“I know,” Jeremy said softly, putting his cup down. “Believe me. I think perhaps we should go.”

Simon scowled at him. “You’re riding with me, Archer, it’s not like you can run away from this conversation.”

“I know that,” Jeremy said patiently, sliding his wallet out of the inside pocket of his jacket. “However, we seem to be the last customers, and I’m sure they’d like us to leave so that they can close up and go home.”

Simon blinked, his scowl fading, then checked his watch. After ten. “Shit.”

“Mm.” Jeremy flicked out three bills and tucked them into the folder with the check. The wink of hundreds caught Simon’s eye nicely, despite his determination not to be impressed.

“That’s a hell of a tip,” Simon said.

“I generally tend to err on the side of generosity, Simon, as you may have noticed,” Jeremy said tartly, and he slid out of the booth and headed for the exit before Simon could respond, leaving Simon no choice but to glare after him and follow.

“Hey,” Simon called after Jeremy, jogging a few steps to catch up to him. “Hey, dammit, Archer.”

The parking lot was well-lit and Jeremy came to an unwilling halt directly under one of the sodium-vapor lights, outlining himself in a weird orange glow. “Yes?” he said over his shoulder, not turning around.

“... you know what, I’m not going to apologize,” Simon said, catching up to him and circling around. Jeremy’s face was hard to read in the harsh overhead glare, his eyes lost in pools of shadow. “But I *am* going to drop it, okay?”

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said after a long moment. “I promise you, Simon, I don’t intend to withhold anything helpful from you that I don’t feel I have to. What he was, or is, to me, though... I sincerely doubt it’s important.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, stuffing his hands in his pockets and letting that little ‘is’ go by unremarked for the moment. “It’s not. I was serious when I said I was just curious. C’mon, a guy can be curious about a mystery, can’t he?”

Jeremy smiled faintly. “I suppose so.”

“Yeah,” Simon said again, looking away. “C’mon, I’ll take you back to your hotel.”

He’d actually taken about five steps towards his Jeep and pulled out his keys before he realized Jeremy wasn’t following him. “What?” Simon asked, turning back around.

“Yes,” Jeremy said, looking down at the pavement. His face was entirely lost in shadow.

Simon waited a moment. “. . . yes what?”

Jeremy looked back up. He wasn’t smiling. “I thought I’d answer one of your questions from before.”

“Okay,” Simon said, going very still. “Which one?”

Now Jeremy smiled, a particularly humorless and unpleasant expression. “*That* will have to remain a mystery, I’m afraid.”

For five seconds all was silent, Simon in the dark by the side of his Jeep staring in disbelief at Jeremy, outlined in an unearthly brilliance. “Fine,” Simon finally said, and looked away with an effort, hitting the button to unlock his Jeep. It chirped in oblivious welcome. “Get in.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, and stepped out of the pool of light, nearly vanishing into the darkness. Simon snorted and rounded the Jeep, pulling open the driver’s side door, lost in thought.

“I do hate to be a bother,” Jeremy said five taut and silent minutes later, “but the hotel is the other way.”

“I know,” Simon said, settled low in his seat and steering one-handed, letting the steering wheel slide through his fingers.

Jeremy said nothing, merely waited expectantly.

“Changed my mind,” Simon said tersely, and hit the turn signal, taking the exit for his apartment.

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## ◆ Eleven

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Simon was alone in the rumpled mess of his sheets when his alarm went off the next morning, which was, really, something of a relief. After a shower and some coffee, it would fail to be a relief and become somewhat alarming, but that was still in the future and Simon was able to drag himself into the shower without a backwards glance at the thoroughly disheveled bed.

When he finally wandered out into the main room, buttoning up his shirt, Jeremy was there, nestled cross-legged in the big armchair and reading the newspaper. Or at least holding one up in front of himself. Possibly for concealment. He looked far too pristine and crisp for this hour of the morning—and he'd traded his t-shirt in for a black turtleneck of some sort, Simon noted with immense sleepy self-satisfaction.

"My bad," Simon said smugly, wandering towards the kitchen. Jeremy put the newspaper down in his lap and watched him go, but didn't say anything.

Simon slowed and stopped in the doorway to the kitchen, looking over his shoulder. "... you go back to the hotel and change?"

"Mm? Yes," Jeremy said, lifting the paper up again. "All my things are there, after all."

"Guess so," Simon said, and vanished into the kitchen. There was already coffee in the pot, waiting for him. It warmed his heart just to see it. "And you made coffee," he said, reappearing in the doorway a moment later with a full cup. "A guy could almost get used to this."

"Best not to," Jeremy said, turning the page with a little rustle of newsprint. "It can't last."

"Yeah, yeah," Simon said, leaning in the kitchen doorway and drinking his coffee, sleepily blissful like a cat in the sun. For the moment all was right with the world and he was inclined to be conciliatory. "Sorry I made you have to call a cab," he eventually said, idly watching over the rim of his mug as Jeremy discarded a section of the paper and selected a new one. "You'd told me, I'd have set my alarm for a little earlier and run you over there myself."

“That’s kind of you, Simon, but I didn’t call for a cab,” Jeremy said, flicking open the fresh section of newspaper. It rose like a barrier, hiding him from Simon’s eyes. “I stole your car.”

Simon came within an inch of spraying the living room carpet with a fine mist of coffee.

“Morning, boss, Archer,” Mike caroled as Simon came stomping into the saferoom, followed closely by Jeremy, who was probably not radiating as much smugness as Simon was inclined to think he was. “How’s it hangin’? Little to the left or what?”

“He *stole* my truck!” Simon said, by way of answer. Suddenly he had everyone’s attention; Sandra appeared from Simon’s office and Rich abruptly sat up straight in his lair, blinking like an owl behind his glasses.

“What?” Mike said, his eyes going wide. “When was this?”

“Last night!” Simon snapped, and then belatedly realized just what he was on the verge of *telling* his team, and he stopped, gritting his teeth against the sudden roar of heat trying to flood into his cheeks.

“I did bring it back,” Jeremy pointed out, quietly (but apparently extremely) amused.

“Okay, okay, you can’t say something like that and not explain,” Mike said. “Why’d he steal your truck?”

“Because it was there?” Jeremy asked, all innocence.

“Ohhh no, that’s not nearly good enough,” Mike said, his fascinated attention switching from Simon to Jeremy. “C’mon, spill.”

Jeremy shrugged and stopped trying to look innocent. Simon clenched his fists, preparing for *anything*—“I bought him dinner as an apology for yesterday, he had a couple of beers, and then I drove him home just to be on the safe side,” Jeremy said. “And then I thought, where’s the point in calling a cab when there’s already this perfectly fine car at my fingertips? So I drove myself back to my hotel and picked him up this morning.” That explained, Jeremy moved past the somewhat thunderstruck Simon and sat down in his chair. “I don’t quite see where the problem lies. I put petrol in it and everything.”

Johnny, already sitting at the table, cracked an eye halfway open. “Sounds like the problem is that you stole his truck,” he pointed out, logically enough.

“I suppose so,” Jeremy agreed. “Who’d have ever thought that I was a thief? It’s positively shocking.”

Simon, recovering, snorted. “Suppose I’m lucky you brought it back at all.”

“Yes,” Jeremy said thoughtfully. “I’m not known for that, am I?”

“Next time? You could try asking,” Simon pointed out, mentally cancelling his red alert.

“At which point you’d say no?”

“And laugh in your face,” Simon said. “Aaaanyway. Are we ready to get down to business, folks? ... where’s Specs?”

“Not here yet,” Johnny said, shrugging a little.

“Huh,” Simon said. “Right, then. I’ll go deal with today’s toilet paper. Find some way to entertain yourselves that doesn’t involve breaking anything, and I include Archer under the heading of ‘anything’.”

“Aw, but boss ...!” Mike wailed.

“Yo, no buts, homeboy. Keep it real, word,” Simon told him, and vanished into his office, leaving Mike gagging noisily behind him.

Twenty minutes later the saferoom door slammed behind Nate, just as Simon finished chucking the last bit of worthless paper into his trash can. “Sorry I’m late!” Nate cried, juggling his briefcase, his crowbar, and a small paper bag.

“You get in another fender-bender?” Mike asked.

“... no,” Nate said, flushing pink. “C’mon, Honda, it’s been *months*!”

“Since the last one,” Mike pointed out, leaning back and trying (again) to balance his pen upright on his forehead. “It’s been, what ... hey, Texas, what’s the current Specs Crash Count?”

“Nine,” Johnny said without opening his eyes. “Ten if you count the one that wasn’t actually his fault.”

“Niiiiine,” Mike drawled with great satisfaction, catching his pen before it could hit the floor and looking up. “Nine in four years. Daaaamn. Thought it was *women* who were supposed to be—”

“Hmmm?” Sandra said, nearly sang, pinning Mike to the wall with a bright-eyed malevolent stare.

“—uhhh ... really, uh, nice people ... who’d forgive a guy one little unfortunate slip of the tongue?” Mike said, clearing his throat. Sandra eyed him for a moment before punching his shoulder. Mike yelped, his chair skittering backwards an inch or so.

“Nice save, Honda,” Rich said, rolling his eyes. “Never would have believed for a moment you were going to say something else.”

“Yeah, I am totally Mr. Smooth or something, chicks dig me,” Mike said with reasonably good cheer, rubbing his shoulder and scooting his chair back into place.

“Uh, anyway,” Nate said, shuffling his burdens into his left hand and fishing around in the paper bag with his right, “I got you this ...” He pulled a heavy black mug out of the bag and held it out awkwardly in Jeremy’s general direction. Jeremy raised an eyebrow and accepted it, after a moment of hesitation.

“You bought him a mug?” Simon asked in disbelief from the doorway to his office.

“... no?” Nate squeaked, going crimson. “I-I mean, we have to pay for those styrofoam ones and he’s probably going to be here for a while ...”

“You bought him a mug!” Simon said again. “Don’t try to tell me you brought that one from home, Specs.”

“Um,” Nate said, shoving his glasses up with the heel of his right hand and nearly spilling his belongings everywhere. “I, uh.”

“Keeping in mind that you’re a terrible liar and we all know it,” Simon said, “would you like to try and answer my question again?”

Nate made a little squeaking noise and clammed up. Jeremy flicked his eyes in Simon’s general direction and then stuck two fingers into the mug and magically produced a gleaming white paper receipt for everyone to see.

Faced with this evidence, Nate wilted. “...okay, I bought him a mug,” he admitted, staring at the floor.

Mike hooted with laughter. “Oh, man,” he choked out, “I think Specs is in love...”

“I am not!” Nate squawked, with enough indignation in his voice to even make Rich start snickering. “Anyway he doesn’t get to keep it, he can leave it here when he goes, we need a spare mug for visitors anyway...”

“Aw, you’re already plotting how to make him come back to you?!” Mike said, nearly whooping with laughter, and now Sandra was hiding a little grin behind her hand and Johnny’s face had creased up into something like a smile. Simon had to look away before he could start snickering himself. “You know what they say—”

“‘If you love someone, set them free’?” Rich put in, and that did it, *Rich* finally deigning to rejoin the banter broke down the last of Simon’s defenses. Simon banged his forehead on the doorway to his office and burst out laughing, and then they were *all* laughing, save for the perfectly crimson Nate—and Jeremy, who was smiling vaguely down at the mug in his hands.

“It’s even black,” the all-black-clad Jeremy said in mock awe as the hilarity died down, running the ball of his thumb down the mug’s gleaming black side. “How ever did you know?”

And that set them all off again, even Nate this time, and a moment later Jeremy stopped playing it cool and joined in himself.

“Okay, well, that was entertaining, by which I mean mortally embarrassing for someone who wasn’t me,” Simon said once the laughter had wound down, dropping into his chair. Nate flushed and scurried to his own. “So!” Simon said. “We ready to get some things accomplished?”

No one said anything, which was as good as agreement. Simon nodded once, sharply, and knocked on the table. “Right, then. I think let’s start with the profile crap. Archer? Tell us things about this guy.”

“Any preference as to where I should begin?” Jeremy said, putting his new mug aside and folding his hands on the table.

“Um . . . how about a physical description,” Simon said. Rich popped open his laptop and waited.

“Physical description,” Jeremy said musingly. “All right. But before I get started, I must admit that I haven’t seen him at all in close to five years, and it’s been closer to ten since we were in constant contact.”

“Constant contact,” Simon repeated, the last of his good mood starting to evaporate. He didn’t much care for the sound of that ‘constant contact’ . . . Simon blinked as something else occurred to him. “Wait, wait, okay. Ten years ago? So . . . you were, what, seventeen?”

“Nineteen, actually,” Jeremy said. “But only just.”

Simon eyed him for a long moment, then shrugged. “So your information is a few years out of date. I don’t think his basic physical traits are going to have changed all that much.”

“Probably not,” Jeremy agreed. “So. He’s just about this much taller than I am—” Jeremy waved a hand a couple of inches over his head “—so . . . call it six feet even.” From the other end of the table Rich grunted and his rapid-fire typing started up. “He’s fairly slim, slimmer than I am, quite wiry.” Jeremy paused, his eyes glinting a bit. “Narrow shoulders.”

Simon snorted. “Fine, dammit, I give up. I’ve got gorilla shoulders.”

“Ook,” Mike put in.

“He’s reasonably strong for his size, though, or at least he used to be,” Jeremy went on, his eyes slowly unfocusing as he gazed down at his own folded hands. He paused. It was a long pause. The room went quiet around him, save for the angry clatter of Rich’s fingers on the keys. “Stronger than I am,” Jeremy finally went on, his voice low and distracted. “Only not so quick, you understand. He was never terribly quick. I don’t know why. Just looking at him, you’d have thought he’d be . . . quick.”

“Uh huh,” Simon said, softly, so as not to disrupt Jeremy’s little half-trance. He held up his hand to forestall anyone jumping in; this was his game now. Everyone else fell still at his signal, and even Rich’s typing modulated itself to something quieter.

“I can’t tell you what he looks like now, mind you, because disguises are so very easy to come by and discard, but in his natural state he’s very pale, with blond hair and pale gray eyes.” Jeremy laughed a little, his eyes almost focusing again before he drifted away back into his own little world. “I advise you not to count on that. Darkening his skin and hair would be child’s play for him.”

“Uh huh,” Simon said again, lowering his head a little to watch Jeremy’s eyes.

“He has much the same skills that I do, and a fair number of the same tools, but . . .” Jeremy stopped there, a faint frown crossing his face.

“But?” Simon prompted after a moment.



Jeremy's eyes cleared and he looked back up at Simon, abruptly, with no expression on his face at all. The leading edge of a small round bruise slid out from under the high neck of his shirt and Simon had to fight not to look at it. "He isn't as good as I am," Jeremy said, like it was just a fact.

"Not even after ten more years of practice, huh," Simon said, a touch nettled.

"It isn't precisely a question of practice, Simon," Jeremy said, one of his hands drifting up to pinch the bridge of his nose before falling again. "As a thief he suffers from two basic flaws that I do not believe he will ever overcome, and judging from the things I heard yesterday, he has not."

"And those are . . . ?" Simon asking, making a little 'out with it' gesture.

"He's never been terribly imaginative," Jeremy said, and the faint little smile that came and went on his face made all of Simon's innuendo alerts go off. "And he tends to panic, or at least to stop thinking very clearly, if something goes wrong with his plan."

"And you don't," Simon said flatly.

"No, I don't," Jeremy agreed.

Simon, who had been expecting some sort of modest demurral, blinked. "Huh," he said after a moment, mostly to be saying something.

"As you, er, have personally experienced, I believe," Jeremy said, almost smiling.

"... yeah, okay, shut up," Simon said, not admitting to anything. "How old is he?"

"I can't see how that's important."

It was like rounding the corner and coming smack up against a wall. Simon blinked, then scowled. "All right, fine, you don't have to tell us his exact age, just give us a ballpark figure. And if you try and tell me you can't see why it's important for us to know if he's thirty or fifty..." He trailed off there, meaningfully.

Jeremy hesitated, then nodded. "Late twenties."

"Fair enough," Simon said. "He English?"

Jeremy shook his head.

"So what nationality is he?"

"Er, actually I meant that to mean that I wasn't going to confirm or deny that, Simon."

Simon made a frustrated little gesture. The brief moment of connection with Jeremy that he'd been milking was starting to fragment, and his spellbound team started to come back to life with faint shiftings and mutterings. Rich made a little irritated noise and hit the backspace key several times. "Fine," Simon said. "What else *will* you tell me?"

"Shall I move on to the tools that he has at his disposal?"

"Might as well, seeing as how you've decided sharing time is over," Simon said, sitting back in his chair.

“Wow,” Nate said, staring deep into the bowl of the huge suction cup he was holding as if he was trying to divine the future.

“I don’t know for certain if he still *has* these,” Jeremy said, flicking the cut lining of his jacket back into place, “but he certainly had a set when he left.”

Simon noted that little ‘left’ but didn’t bother to pursue it, instead flipping over the one he was holding and studying the double handle on it. “Yeah, I remember *these*,” he said, pressing it down on the table and make it burp out the air trapped inside.

“How strong are they?” Rich asked, watching Nate play with his. “How many do you need to hold you?”

“Oh, just one,” Jeremy said, folding his jacket over the back of his chair. “If Simon were to pull up on that one he’s got without pushing the red thumb-button—” Simon made a grab for it, out of pure curiosity; before he could do anything more than grab the handle Jeremy laid his hand firmly on top of Simon’s, stilling him. “—then he would pick up this end of the table with it and send all the papers and such spilling down towards you and most likely dump your laptop, well, in your lap.” Jeremy smiled, slightly, and ever so slightly tightened his hand on Simon’s.

Simon shot a sidelong glance at Jeremy and jerked his hand free, scowling. Jeremy took hold of the suction cup’s handle and pressed the red button in, and the cup popped loose with a faint hissing *thop*. “Perhaps a less messy demonstration is in order,” Jeremy said mildly, holding the suction cup out towards Simon. “You’re a nice tall fellow—would you be so good as to attach that as high up on the wall as you can reach? Be sure to press out as much of the air as possible.”

Simon eyed Jeremy in exasperation for a few minutes before kicking his chair away and standing up. Ignoring the wall he stalked to the exact center of the room and looked up, gauging the height of the concrete; then he rose onto the balls of his feet and drove the suction cup against the low ceiling, punching his knuckles up into the heavy rubber to force the air out. “That do?” he deadpanned, letting go and dropping back onto his heels.

“It wasn’t what I’d had in mind, but it’ll do nicely,” Jeremy said, irritatingly unfazed. “Please do move back a bit.”

Simon resisted the urge to bow and backed a few feet off, crossing his arms over his chest. Jeremy moved under the abandoned suction cup, flexing the fingers of his right hand almost absently, and looked up at it for a few moments. “Pardon me,” he finally said, and dropped to all fours, uncoiling to launch himself at the ceiling half a heartbeat later.

His right hand whipped up. Even as he caught the handle he folded in on himself again, drawing his knees up to his chest rather than letting his legs kick uncontrollably and grabbing his right wrist with his left hand. The suction cup

held against the vicious jerk of his weight suddenly coming to bear on it; Jeremy, for his part, fell still with an almost ridiculous lack of flailing around.

"There we are," Jeremy said, uncoiling once he was still and dangling from the ceiling with thoroughly obnoxious aplomb. "When I'm faced with a high ceiling I'll generally attach a line to one of these and lower myself down that way."

"Like with the Morning Star," Simon said, very carefully not impressed at all.

"Like with the Morning Star," Jeremy agreed. He pressed the red button and he and the suction cup fell with another one of those soft *thop* sounds, Jeremy sinking into a neat crouch for a moment before rising.

"That really shouldn't work," Rich pointed out, apparently annoyed beyond all belief at how his beloved physics had abandoned him. "How does a suction cup of that size *do* that? A collapsible one!"

"I'm fairly light and not prone to thrashing around much," Jeremy said, shrugging a little. "Besides, I must admit that I wasn't entirely certain it would hold me, there. I don't generally jump for them. But apparently our Simon's quite strong—"

"Our Simon?" Simon said incredulously. "I'm not your anything, Archer."

"Surely you're my *something*," Jeremy said innocently. Simon fought down a momentary impulse to hit him.

"Gonna make Honda jealous," Johnny said, chewing on his toothpick.

"Damn straight," Mike said happily. "He's mine, you hussy. Simon and I are gonna make beautiful babies some day, you just watch."

The sudden total lack of expression on Jeremy's face was . . . pretty amusing, actually, Simon thought. "So who gets to actually carry the child to term?" Nate asked, pink in the face but not letting that stop him. "Or are you going to switch off? . . . how does that work, anyway?"

"I'll show you!" Rich said with a positively disturbing (and most un-Rich-like) amount of good cheer, typing something.

Upon hearing that Sandra immediately rocketed to her feet and leaned across Nate, slamming both hands into Rich's and pinning them to the keyboard. Rich yelped. "*No!*" Sandra said savagely. "*We are not having the mpreg discussion again.*"

"M-preg?" Nate asked, wide-eyed. "Did I miss that one?"

"Guess so," said Johnny, shaking his head grimly. "Lucky, lucky man."

Simon cleared his throat. "Keep telling you you're not my type, Honda," he said, putting an end to that discussion, "and also, let's try and keep our minds on business, shall we?"

Jeremy was looking at him thoughtfully as he shrugged back into his jacket, but fortunately, he didn't say anything else.

\* \* \*

“Well, if he’s actually using a gun now, I doubt he’s still using my—how did you put it, Simon—‘stupid little toys’,” Jeremy said.

“Still, can’t hurt to tell us, just in case,” Simon said. “Share.”

“Well, if you insist,” Jeremy said. He hadn’t quite lost that irritating little smile since his demonstration of the suction cups and it was making Simon decidedly wary. “Well, for starters there’s the gas shooter, as some of you are aware—”

“Mm-*hmm*,” Mike said.

“—it fits in this pocket here,” Jeremy said, pulling up his shirt sleeve to reveal one of his complicated forearm harnesses and tapping a small (and fortunately empty) pocket on the inside of his arm. There was another small round bruise hidden in the bend of his elbow, nearly entirely covered by his fingers. “The tube runs up under my watchband and can fire either just like that or out through the wrist slit of my working suit. The safety is disarmed by jerking my right hand forward or pressing on the face of my watch, and then the actual weapon is fired by jerking my right hand *back*.”

“Range?” Johnny asked, cracking an eye open.

“Twenty-five feet, assuming there’s no heavy interference. High winds or rain, that sort of thing. I can get to thirty if I’m willing to shoot in a higher arc, but then my aim suffers.” Jeremy pulled his sleeve back down. “The particular gas that I use is heavier than air and reasonably cohesive. It doesn’t spread out or rise; it stays in a fairly narrow spray and falls to earth quickly.”

“Not bad,” Johnny allowed. “How’s it work?”

“I’m not entirely certain of the chemical details, but the target generally staggers about for a second or so and then passes out,” Jeremy said. “It works faster on a target who’s breathing hard, or whose heart rate is up, because it allows the gas to spread into his system faster. For example, at the Mornings’ residence—”

Simon cleared his throat, pointedly.

“—well, let us just say that it worked much faster on the fellow holding a gun on my face than it did on the one who didn’t know I was there,” Jeremy said, casual as anything, as if it wasn’t *them* he was talking about. Mike snorted a little but didn’t say anything, particularly not after Sandra elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

“I want to see!” Nate said, shoving his glasses up. “Can you bring it in tomorrow?”

Jeremy hesitated. “Normally I’d say yes, but I don’t particularly want to get caught bringing biochemical weapons into an FBI enclave...” He trailed off there and looked inquisitively at Simon.

Simon shook his head. “Nope. I’m not taking that fall for you, either. Don’t bring it. You want to see it, Specs, you and Archer make arrangements on your own time.”

“Oh,” Nate said dejectedly.

“That it?” Johnny asked Jeremy.

“... is what it?” Jeremy asked, blinking.

Johnny rolled his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “What other weapons you carry?”

“Oh!” Jeremy’s eyes cleared. “Well, normally that’s it.”

“That’s *it*?” Johnny sounded scandalized.

“No, nothing else, except for particularly high-risk jobs and jobs where I expect guard dogs. For those, I carry a taser,” Jeremy said, pulling back his left sleeve to reveal that harness and its slightly larger pocket.

“You *taser* those poor *dogs*?” Sandra said, aghast.

“Taser’s good,” Johnny threw in. Sandra glared at him like he’d just expressed an appreciation for the taste of baby.

“Well, I mislike gassing dogs. The gas affects animals oddly; I can never quite tell what it will do to any given guard dog.” Jeremy tugged his sleeve neatly back into place over the harness and folded his hands on the table. “The taser is vaguely legal in many places, you understand, and causes no real harm, and yet will drop almost any dog in its tracks.”

Sandra seemed somewhat mollified by the part about ‘no real harm’, at least until Jeremy added, “And they do twitch in such a lovely manner,” with a smile that was almost angelic. Sandra jerked up her chin; Mike guffawed and earned himself another vicious shot in the ribs for his pains.

“Awfully small for a taser,” Johnny said.

“Well, yes. Adapted it myself, got rid of all the extraneous safeguards and such. The voltage is terrifying. I’m almost afraid to wear it.” Jeremy paused to consider this. “That, I can probably bring tomorrow, if you’d like to see it...”

“No,” Simon said immediately, but Nate said “Yes! Please!”, obviously not listening and rubbing the underside of his left arm. “Something like that could be so much fun! I mean, uh, so useful,” Nate said, stars in his eyes.

Simon sighed, balled up a piece of scrap paper, and threw it at Nate, bouncing it off his forehead. “*No*,” he said again. “You are a *very bad Nate*. No cookie.”

“Ow! Aw, c’mon, Templar, wrist-mounted taser!”

“Like to see it myself,” Johnny threw in.

“I said *no*,” Simon said. “We do not encourage the criminal to bring weapons to class. You kids behave or I’m turning this saferoom around and we’re going home.”

“Awww, dad,” Mike chimed in from across the table. “They started it!”

“That’s it,” Simon proclaimed to the room in general. “No dessert for any of you. Now shut up and do your homework or there’ll be spankings.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, suddenly *all* amusement, and Simon’s attention jerked helplessly towards him. “You promise?”

Simon stared at him in disbelief. "Shut up, Archer," he finally said, not able to think of anything snappier at the moment.

"It simply isn't fair, getting me all hot and bothered like that," Jeremy said, not *dropping* it this time, and Simon was painfully aware of Mike sniggering in the background.

"Christ," Simon said, his upper lip curling in what he hoped looked like disgust. "We are getting you *neutered*."

Jeremy's eyes gleamed, but all he said was "Woof."

"What, no puppies?" Mike asked.

"No puppies!" Simon snapped, completely unsettled. "Archer here would just taser them anyway."

Sandra sniffled dramatically. "Poor puppies."

"But as I said," Jeremy said, thankfully getting back to business, "if he's carrying a gun now, I doubt he'd still be fussing with the gas or the taser. They're both excellent weapons if you want to do no lasting damage, but, well, obviously he doesn't care about that any more."

"Yeah," Simon said, latching onto the new turn of conversation gratefully. "So! Anything else we need to know about his offensive capabilities?"

"One more thing," Jeremy said, and then hesitated.

"...you know, when you say 'one more thing' and then fall silent all meaningful-like, it makes me damned nervous," Simon said. "C'mon, out with it."

"I don't know how well he's kept up with his training..." Jeremy said, and trailed off into meaningful silence again.

"Oooooout with it," Simon said again, making impatient little 'come on' gestures with both hands.

"Well, I hesitate to call it 'martial arts'..." Jeremy said, trailing off into meaningful silence a third time, possibly just for the hell of it. He was smiling a little, anyway.

"Martial arts," Simon repeated. Sandra's attention sharpened.

"No particular style, mind you," Jeremy said, shrugging slightly and abandoning the teasing. "It's a strange little grab-bag of moves, mostly defensive, blocks and breaks and throws. It's meant for breaking out of holds and throwing opponents off-balance, for the most part. Preventing arrest, disarming, buying time for him to bring his weapon to bear."

"Brit *fu*!" Mike told Johnny, his eyes wide.

"Thief *kwan do*," Johnny said in apparent agreement.

"Oh, well, that's just great," Simon said, effortlessly ignoring the Danger Twins with the ease of long, long practice. "So we shouldn't get too close or he'll throw us, and we shouldn't keep our distance or he'll shoot us, is what you're saying."

“That does seem about the size of it,” Jeremy said. “Still, if you’d care to know more about his fighting style, I *could* demonstrate—”

“Not right now,” Simon broke in. “I think we’ve had just about enough of your dramatics for one morning, Archer. Or at least I have.”

“Show me some time, whenever we get a minute,” Sandra said, after a quick glance at Simon. “Sounds like something I’d like to know, just in case.”

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said. He smiled at Sandra; she didn’t quite smile back. “When we have a moment, then.”

“—and on top of anything he’s carrying for his particular plan he’s likely to have a fairly comprehensive tool kit,” Jeremy said, shrugging. “Personally I never go anywhere without a few useful tools.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen,” Simon said. “You wanna show them?”

“Why not?” Jeremy slid his fingers into the sleeve of his jacket. A pair of tiny eyeglass screwdrivers fell to the table a moment later, followed by a tiny sheath knife and something with a suction cup at one end and a pen cap at the other and a few hinges along its length.

“What’s that?” Nate said, craning forward.

“Glasscutter,” Jeremy said, switching sleeves and pulling out a handful of long metal pen-shaped tubes that appeared to unscrew in the middle. “This one’s an extremely concentrated acid that will eat through most glass, wood, and soft metal,” Jeremy said, holding up a dull gray tube with a hammered surface. “This brass one with the rings on is epoxy, the copper one is machine oil, and this one’s, er.”

“Oh, that’s just great,” Simon said sourly, eyeing the last one in its polished silver case. “So much for not bringing biochemical weapons.”

“Erm. In my defense I rather forgot I was carrying it,” Jeremy said, adding all four tubes to the little pile in front of him. He actually did look a bit embarrassed. “And at least I haven’t got the shooter on.”

“What *is* it?” Sandra said.

“Knockout gas,” Simon said. “Like he uses in the gas shooter. You wanna know how I know? Because that’s the thing he gassed me with before he escaped from the *hospital*—”

“—actually, technically, in this state it’s a liquid—” Jeremy threw in.

“—what the fuck ever,” Simon told him. “Don’t bring that back here tomorrow.”

“Yes, of course,” Jeremy said, apparently chastened.

Simon sighed heavily and rubbed his temples for a moment. “Okay, go on.”

“Right. There’s a roll of electrical tape up inside my left sleeve, but I can’t get it out without slashing the lining.” Jeremy’s fingers slid under the lapel of his jacket and slid back out again with a braided . . . something or other . . . that had been looped around his neck like a scarf. “One-meter ruler, solder, length of

fuse,” Jeremy said, tapping each of the cords in turn. Simon twitched. Jeremy’s hands dipped into his jacket, starting with the pockets in front and working their way around back. “Cordless screwdriver—” *thunk* “—battery-powered soldering iron—” *thunk* “—two penlights—” *tak tak* “—laser pointer—” *tak* “—Swiss army knife—” *chunk* “—Leatherman—” *THUD*

“Whoa,” Nate said. “Can I see that?”

Johnny fished the big battered silver tool out of the rapidly growing stack and handed it over, and both Rich and Nate huddled up over it, soon muttering things like “Wire strippers?” and “Ooh, a tape measure . . .” at each other. Simon eyed them warily. He didn’t particularly like it when his techs got respectful of things.

Jeremy’s hands fell to his belt. “—collapsible crowbar—” *thack* “—miniature hammer—” *thud* “—lockpicks—” *clink* “—lockpick gun—” *clank* “—pouch of assorted odds and ends: museum putty, pens, rubber bands, matches, et cetera—” *thap*

“I’m amazed you don’t clink when you walk,” Simon said.

“Well, I *have* had some practice. However, I advise you not to toss me down any stairs,” Jeremy said. “At any rate, that’s it, save for the goggles, which I’ve already spoken to Nate about.” And those came out, although Jeremy didn’t put them on the neat little stack of tools. “Well, and I have the usual things in my pants,” Jeremy added. Mike hooted. “By which I mean a wallet, a keyring, a cellphone, my cigarette case, and a lighter,” Jeremy clarified, quickly.

“Yeah?” Mike said. “Hey, me too, ’cept the cigarettes and lighter! Hey, we could be twins, almost!”

“He got a pair of those?” Johnny asked, cocking a thumb at the goggles in Jeremy’s hands.

Jeremy hesitated. “He did at one point.”

“But?” Johnny asked.

“But,” Jeremy said, “they require a lot of upkeep and like to break more or less for their own amusement, so I’m not entirely sure if his will still be functional. And even if they are, he probably hasn’t managed to significantly upgrade them.” His thin smile came and went like lightning. “He was always more interested in benefitting from technology than actually creating it.”

“Heh,” Johnny said instead of actually laughing. “So he’s got the ten-year-old kind.”

“As far as I know,” Jeremy said, temporizing. “These are less than a year old, although the technology hasn’t really changed significantly in . . .” He paused and ticked off a finger or two. “. . . three years. As I said, they really do enjoy breaking.”

“So . . .” Sandra said thoughtfully. She was holding the braid from under Jeremy’s lapel in her hands, picking gingerly at the length of fuse with her short nails. “You carry fuse but no explosives?”



“Well, on some jobs I do use explosives,” Jeremy said, “but, actually, I thank you for reminding me . . .” Shifting in his chair he pulled out his cigarette case and flicked it open. “I forgot about those,” he said, putting the open cigarette case on the table.

“Yes, we all know cigarettes are very dangerous to your health,” Simon said. “You know, though, as a weapon I think they’re a bit overrated.”

“Unless you put one out on someone, which would probably just enrage them,” Jeremy said, seemingly in agreement. “However, a few of these are special . . .” So saying, he picked a cigarette out of the case, seemingly at random, and slid his short thumbnail under the paper.

“What,” Simon said, “you got some treated with your knockout crap?”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t love to,” Jeremy said absently, peeling the paper away to reveal a slender metal tube. “But the gas doesn’t last long once it’s exposed to the air. No, I have these, disguised as cigarettes.”

“What are those?” Sandra asked, holding her hand out for the little metal thing.

Jeremy just smiled faintly and didn’t hand it over. The pause lengthened until Simon rolled his eyes and said, “Look, drama queen, quit making such a huge production out of this and just tell us what they are already.”

The pause (and Simon’s general snarkiness) was enough to disrupt the little geek trance going on at the other end of the table, and Nate looked up, spotted what Jeremy was holding, and yelped. “That’s a blasting cap!” Sandra abruptly lost all interest in looking at it.

“Ho-lee shit,” Mike said in admiration. “Better hope you never light the wrong one.”

“I’d hope that I’d notice it was made out of metal before I lit it,” Jeremy said, tucking the little metal thing back into the cigarette case. “But, at any rate, I always carry a few of those and the fuse even when I haven’t got anything stronger, because little explosions make an *excellent* spontaneous distraction.”

“Uh, yeah,” Simon said, shaking his head a little to clear it. Jeremy had rifled through that loaded cigarette case while *lying* on him, had lit his stupid froofy (and apparently potentially lethal) cigarettes in Simon’s *bed*—Simon shook his head again. “Tomorrow, Archer? Leave the explosives at home. Bioweapons and *explosives*. Upstairs would have my ass.”

“In all honesty, I really hadn’t been thinking about it from that perspective, and I’m terribly sorry,” Jeremy said, looking a bit abashed. “Usually I’m not giving away all my dirty little secrets.”

“And I sure as hell doubt you’re giving them all away now,” Simon retorted. “Christ. What the hell time is it?” He checked his watch. Almost 11:30. “Okay, folks,” Simon said, knocking on the tabletop. “Let’s break for lunch a little early, go ahead and take a full hour. When we get back we’re going to spend the

afternoon catering to the CIA's little whims in as obnoxious a manner as possible, and I know you're looking forward to that as much as I am."

All around the table, people groaned. Jeremy sat very still for a moment, then started rapidly redistributing his arsenal and toolkit about his body; Rich reluctantly closed the massive Leatherman and passed it to Johnny, who passed it to Jeremy, who made it vanish somewhere around the small of his back.

As the meeting broke up and people shuffled things around, preparing to leave, Simon leaned over to Jeremy. "So!" he said brightly underneath the commotion, baring his teeth in something not entirely unlike a grin. "C'mon, Archer, I'll buy you lunch."

"That's very kind of you, Simon," Jeremy said absently, more involved in slinging his braid of doom back around his neck than he was in the conversation. "Although I must admit I'm not terribly hungry—"

"I'm buying you. Lunch," Simon said, even more brightly, leaning on the last word.

*That* made Jeremy look up quickly, even as he tucked the braid back into its place. "Ah," he said after a short pause. "Well. When you put it that way, how can I refuse?"

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## ◆ Twelve

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Simon exploded just as soon as the door of his Jeep had slammed shut. “Jesus H. Christ,” he said, throwing his hands up with such intense irritation that Jeremy was obliged to catch one before it could hit him in the face. “Explosives!” Simon said, yanking his hand out of Jeremy’s loose grip. “Knockout gas!”

“I *am* sorry,” Jeremy said again, fastening his seatbelt. “It never even occurred to me.”

“Into headquarters! Into *my saferoom!*” To punctuate this, Simon grabbed the steering wheel in both hands. It kept him from beating his head against it. “Christ, Archer, I *vouched* for your good behavior to security. *I* vouched for you! It would have been my ass if anything had happened—what in the hell was I thinking?”

“I don’t know,” Jeremy said, the hint of patience in his voice irritating the hell out of Simon. “Again, I’m sorry. I won’t bring those, er, certain items tomorrow.”

“Good!”

“If you’d like, I can leave them in your car instead of taking them back into the building this afternoon—”

“—like hell you will,” Simon broke in, clutching protectively at the steering wheel. “I am taking you to your hotel right now and you will go put them in your room. The gas, the acid, the fuse, and the blasting caps. *Especially* the blasting caps. If the *hotel* blows up I will still have a little something known as ‘plausible deniability’ and, I might add, I will also still have my *truck*.”

“As you like,” Jeremy said, after a pause that was just a millisecond too long. “Is there anything else you’d like me to remove while I’m about it?”

“Don’t even start,” Simon warned him.

“... I’ll wait in the truck, Archer.”

“Are you quite certain, Simon? I mean, you *are* more than welcome to come up...”

“Ohhhh yeah. This is me, being smart for once, waiting in the truck.”

“All set?” Simon said as Jeremy let himself back into the Jeep, ten minutes later.

“Quite,” Jeremy said. “I left behind the blasting caps, the gas and acid, the length of fuse, and just to be on the safe side, the soldering iron. I suppose I could do a bit of damage with the crowbar or what have you.”

“Bludgeoning weapons I can handle,” Simon said, and he let out a breath. “Hell, I handle them every day. Let’s grab lunch, then. I’m starving.”

“You sure you don’t want anything else?” Simon asked, sliding his tray onto the table and wedging himself into the booth. The little sub shop was packed to the gills (it was in the middle of DC, it was just after noon, it was a place that sold food) but one of the tiny booths in the back near the soda machines had opened up just as they’d entered and he’d promptly sent Jeremy to camp out in it while he ordered. Well, he’d *said* ‘steal it’, but Jeremy had barely shot him a look before making his way back to claim it.

“This is fine,” Jeremy said, plucking the bottle of water off the tray and twisting off the cap. “I’m really not very hungry.”

Simon shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, unwrapping half his sandwich and doing his very best to demolish it. The place was packed and noisy. More than once someone on their way to the soda machine bumped up against the edge of the table or came within a hair’s breadth of jostling Simon’s elbow, but he was entirely involved in his food and not paying much attention to anything else.

It took him almost ten minutes, or approximately half a sandwich’s worth of time, to realize that Jeremy was quite cheerfully watching him eat. “. . . what?” Simon asked suspiciously, picking up his coffee and prying off the stupid little to-go lid.

Someone bumped up against the table’s edge and Simon instinctively flowed with it, the coffee cup moving in a flat arc in front of him without spilling a drop. Jeremy’s little smile got a bit wider. “Nothing,” he said innocently, picking up his bottle of water and drinking from it.

“. . . I can’t even begin to explain why that is so, so, so *infuriating*,” Simon said. “Why are you watching me eat?”

Jeremy shrugged a little. “Perhaps I enjoy watching you.”

“It’s weird, is what it is,” Simon opined, ignoring that. “Watching me *eat*.”

Jeremy didn’t respond right away. Instead he upended his bottle of water and tilted his head back, draining off about half the water that was left. Simon, who’d been just about to attack the second half of his sandwich, found himself instead holding it forgotten in front of his face while he watched Jeremy’s throat work.

The leading edge of that little round bruise slid out from under Jeremy’s high collar again, followed by a little arc of smaller bruises like a constellation, but Simon was certainly not paying any attention to *that*.

"There," Jeremy said, putting down the bottle. The tip of his tongue slithered quick as a shot across his wet lower lip, and Simon's eyes flicked to follow the little motion before he could stop them. "Now we're even," Jeremy said, sounding horribly, terribly pleased with himself.

Simon eyed Jeremy narrowly before making a little disgusted sound and firmly turning his attention to his food. "That's another thing," he muttered, swallowing, pretending that he was paying more attention to tucking an errant tomato back into his sandwich than to Jeremy.

"Mm?"

"They don't know," Simon said, and took another huge bite to fortify himself. "About that," he muttered around his mouthful of sandwich. "You. Me." He didn't say 'us'. He didn't even particularly like *thinking* 'us'.

"I know," Jeremy said.

Simon paused, swallowing again. "What do you mean, you know?"

"It seems to me that if they *did* know, they wouldn't be half so quick to make jokes about it," Jeremy said. "Is the next bit of this conversation going to be 'so don't tell them'?"

"Well, yeah," Simon admitted, "but I'd been planning to phrase it more like a threat."

"I always have enjoyed your particular brand of sweet talk," Jeremy said dryly. "But you needn't worry. I doubt any of them could even conceive of you having such tastes, manly as you are—"

"—hey," Simon said warningly, just in case.

"—and I'm certainly not going to come right out and say 'oh, and by the by, I *am* having quite a lot of enthusiastic sex with your chief on infrequent occasions—' "

Simon nearly choked on his sandwich. "You wanna maybe say that a little louder?" he asked acidly, when he could breathe again. "I don't think the guys out in the parking lot heard you."

"No one here is paying any attention to us," Jeremy said, still maddeningly calm, although he was smiling down at his water and not at Simon. "Or, at least, they weren't before you made that godawful noise. And even if they are, they don't care. None of them care."

"Yeah, that's easy for you to say," Simon shot back. He put down the rest of his sandwich. Suddenly he didn't have much appetite. "You come and go however the hell you want but it's me that has to live and work here, and for all I know I could get *fired* for this shit if they find out."

"Mm," Jeremy said, picking at the label on the bottle. "And yet you still do it."

Simon started to answer that, then stopped, picked up the remains of his sandwich, and mechanically finished it off. "It's a risk I'm willing to take," he said evenly, once he was done.

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “Goodness, Simon. In a . . . strange, backwards, denial-ridden sort of way, that was almost romantic of you.”

Simon snorted and finished off his coffee, not deigning to respond to that.

“But, since I can consider myself duly and horribly threatened should I expose you, I suppose I have no choice but to keep your dirty little secret,” Jeremy said, with a great put-on sigh. “Oh, I’ll continue to give you a hard time. It seems to be the done thing, at any rate.”

“That’s fine,” Simon said, piling the trash back on his tray. “But don’t push your luck.”

Jeremy smiled, even as he added his empty bottle to the pile of trash. “Just your buttons, Simon.”

It wasn’t until they were in the Jeep, with the doors closed, that Jeremy added, “Of course, I might have chosen to keep your secret regardless of your threats, simply because I find myself rather oddly fond of you and wouldn’t want to cause you undue trouble.”

“Hah,” Simon said sourly, starting the Jeep. “Yeah, I’m totally buying that.”

The silence was just a hair longer than Simon was expecting, but in the end Jeremy’s smile was as quick and effortless as ever. “Yes, well, I thought it worth a try,” he said, settling back into his seat.

“You’re just doing this to get back at me for last night, aren’t you,” Simon said, most of his attention on navigating the cramped parking lot.

“I suppose you caught me,” Jeremy said. “You can’t blame a fellow for trying.”

“Sure I can,” Simon shot back, swinging the Jeep out into traffic. “Hell, I blame you for global warming just because I can.”

“Right!” Simon said even as he burst into the room, making everyone jump. “Let’s do this thing, people, I’d like to get out of here before the ass-end of time today.”

“Whoo, here we go,” Mike said.

“Springheel, Texas, Honda, all three of you type up and collate everything we’ve got so far, put it in folders, make it look bulky. I don’t care so much about how much is actual content. I’m looking for *weight* here. I want it to go *thud* when I drop it on her. In fact—” Simon thought fast. “—Specs, you take Archer here and the blueprints, go down to the copy room, run her off a set. Why the hell not? Archer, you feel like adding important notes or drawing arrows on those blueprints as you go, I won’t complain a bit.”

“Clerical work!” Jeremy said. “My goodness, Simon, when I said I was always open to new experiences I didn’t quite mean it that way . . .”

“Shut up,” Simon said cheerfully, finally beginning to enjoy himself again. “Just think of yourself as the highest-paid secretary in history. Specs Two, have you got that background stuff on Langridge that I asked you for?”

“Not yet,” Rich said, poking his head around the edge of his laptop. “Templar, I’m *really* close to something here . . .”

“Finish chasing it down, then,” Simon decided, “but I’m still going to need that background information by the end of the day. Not tomorrow morning. *Today*.”

Rich’s lower jaw juttled out a bit. “Right,” he finally said, grumpily.

“Good man, Specs Two,” Simon said. He looked around the room. “Well?” he asked. “What are you people waiting for? Let’s do what they pay us to do!”

“Type?” Mike asked, but he was already booting up his own, much less impressive laptop.

Simon didn’t precisely buy himself three hours of peace and quiet, but he did buy himself three blessedly Jeremy-free hours, which by this point was almost as good. It was in a mood close to optimism that he sent Upstairs his progress report (looking much better now than it had two days ago, Jeremy’s annoying boundaries notwithstanding).

Once he’d done that and finished shredding the last of the useless Karpol emails that Langridge had so kindly given him, it was close to three. Simon eyed the clock thoughtfully for a moment, trying to fight down a vicious little grin. “Why the hell not?” he finally said under his breath, turning to shuffle through the sadly depleted CIA folders on his desk until he came up with a specific bit of paper.

Typing the topmost string of nonsense numbers and letters into his email program was, of course, a pain in the ass, just as was pretty much everything about Dorothy Langridge. Still, eventually he got it all down correctly—he was pretty sure, anyway—and then grabbed his pen and crossed off that email address. One down. Nine to go.

**Langridge:**

**Attached please find—**

Simon chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment and then deleted that ‘please’. Wouldn’t do to set the wrong tone.

**Langridge:**

**Attached find company names and locations plus dates of burglaries for all known thefts relating to Karpol’s mystery boy. Will bring complete dossiers, blueprints, etc. to meeting tomorrow; in return**

**ask anything in Karpol's correspondence or own files dealing with same.**

Simon considered this and decided it would do, with a little extra prodding:

**Need ASAP. According to pattern mystery boy likely to strike before we meet again.**

Yeah, that would do. Simon gave some consideration to the proper salutation, and settled for:

**Templar**

Apologize for the disastrously short notice?

"Nah," Simon said, with something very close to glee, and on a whim tinkered with his standard .sig file before he attached the proper file and hit Send.

=====  
**Simon Drake/Templar - (Mostly) Fearless Leader, Team Templar,  
FBI Field Division**  
**"Which one was yes, go ahead and destroy Russia ... or number 2?"**  
**- Mission Control to Buckaroo Banzai**  
=====

"Hey, Rich?" he hollered, not bothering to stand up or go to the door.

"Yeah?" Rich hollered back after a moment.

"Just wanted to let you know that you teaching me to mess with my .sig file is going to get us all fired or killed some day!"

The silence was unsurprisingly brief. "That's what they're for, Templar!"

The pile of folders at the end of the conference table was starting to look pretty satisfactorily enormous by the time Nate and Jeremy returned, Nate pushing the stolen library cart, Jeremy carrying an armload of papers. Simon, now lounging in the doorway to his office with a cup of coffee, whistled. "Damn, will you look at that, we got some *honest work* out of the man."

"It does make a nice change, doesn't it?" Jeremy said peacefully, setting the pile of papers down on the edge of the table.

"I shrank the copies to normal size," Nate said, shoving his glasses back up his nose and looking pretty proud of himself. "They're still *entirely readable*, technically!"



Simon wandered over, picked up the topmost copy, and squinted at it. “Daaaamn,” he finally said. “I’ve already got a headache. Good work, Specs!”

“I’ll get them sorted and stashed,” Nate said, taking Simon’s chair at the head of the conference table. “Should I put a couple in the wrong place, Templar?”

“Eh, don’t go to any trouble,” Simon said, flapping a hand casually at Nate. “I don’t want us to come across as too disorganized.”

“Got it, Templar,” Nate said, shoving the first handful of nigh-unreadable blueprints into an already-fat folder.

“This is really very illuminating,” Jeremy told no one in particular, picking up his brand-new black mug and carrying it to the coffeemaker. “It’s always so nice to see that there’s someone you dislike more than you dislike me.”

“Aw, hell, Archer, don’t be that way,” Mike drawled. Simon, knowing what was coming, hid a grin behind his raised mug. “Fact is, I was just about to propose that you and I go have hot filthy monkey sex in the supply closet, I love you so damn much.”

The measuring quality of the brief silence that followed this announcement was familiar to Simon, who’d seen them pull something like this on half a dozen poor unsuspecting people; even Rich had mostly stopped typing, to see how Jeremy would take it. Personally, being privy to some of Jeremy’s predilections, Simon was trying not to crack up or, alternately, choke to death.

Jeremy finished pouring himself coffee before he bothered to break the silence. “Really!” he said, putting the coffeepot back. “Well! I suppose I haven’t anything better to do at the moment . . .”

“Aw yeah, he wants me,” Mike said with great good cheer. “Told you guys.”

“Think Templar’s jealous?” Johnny asked.

“Eh, I always knew Mike would leave me for someone sleazier eventually,” Simon put in. “All those times he told me I was too good for him? He was right.”

“Sleazier!” Jeremy said, his eyes widening in mock affront. And then he turned to Mike. “Are you going to let him say something like that about me?”

“Oh, probably,” Mike said. “On account of how he’s right and also my boss who could fire me.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, and the sheer amusement in that little noise made Simon brace himself for impact. “Well, if you’re that quick to surrender in general, I suppose you’ll be expecting me to top?”

Mike’s grin fell right off his face. The room went dead silent for half a second, taut and breathless. Simon clamped a hand over his eyes and tried desperately not to start laughing, and the little snorting noise he ended up making instead cracked the silence. “Oh man, *owned*,” Nate said, even as his ears and cheeks went scarlet.

“Aw shit,” Mike said, still boggling a bit. “I mean . . . aw, shit.”

Sandra shook her head sadly. "I hate you all," she said, although there was just a hint of suppressed laughter bubbling behind the words. "Oh, God, I work with adolescents."

"You're just figuring this out now?" Rich asked.

"I thought maybe it bore repeating," Sandra said.

Johnny leaned over and socked Jeremy's shoulder. "You're okay," he said genially.

"On occasion, yes," Jeremy said, and drank his coffee.

"Tha-tha-that's all, folks," Nate said, closing the last folder around a handful of nigh-unreadable blueprints and carefully balancing it on the top of the stack. "This good enough, Templar?"

Simon measured the stack of folders with his eyes as Nate pulled his hands away gingerly. A good seven inches tall, full of every last little useless detail his team could think of and then some, and dangerously prone to tipping over and spraying paper everywhere: perfect. "Think it'll do," he said, reaching over to corral one sliding folder before it could start an avalanche. "Someone get me some string or something, quick."

Nate slithered out of his chair and zipped over to his desk, pawing rapidly through the drawers until he located a spool of twine and some scissors. With Simon holding the stack steady (and on one occasion having to make an ungraceful lunge to stop the middle of the pile squirting out of his grip like the contents of an overloaded cheeseburger) Nate managed to get the whole thing more or less bound up. "Put your finger here," he told Simon, pulling the initial knot tight.

"Don't make 'em too tight, I'm gonna want to take this string off," Simon said, putting his finger in the indicated spot. The tip of Nate's tongue poked out of his mouth as he completed the knot. "After all, all this paper is already so heavy, it'd just be rude of me to make her carry four whole feet of string too."

"Evil," Sandra said, clucking her tongue. "I completely approve."

"Right!" Simon said, thumping the stack of folders. They shifted uneasily, but the binding held. "Specs Two, how's that background stuff coming?"

Rich grunted.

"Specs Two?"

"Almost got it," Rich muttered, and then belatedly realized he was being spoken to. "Uh. Five more minutes and then I'll get it printing, Templar."

"Good man," Simon said. "Right. The rest of you can go home. And it's not even completely dark yet! Love me or something."

"I love you, man!" Mike immediately caroled, slapping his laptop shut.

"Tomorrow morning I want all three of you to get on the phones and finish confirming as much of this stuff as you can," Simon said. "I doubt this case'll ever be airtight, but I'd sure like it if it at least held water. Specs, I'm going to put you at Specs Two's disposal—"

"I've got to be in court tomorrow morning," Rich reminded him. "I'm testifying in the Phire thing, remember? I should be in by two or so."

Simon slapped his forehead. "Aw, hell, I forgot. Right. If there's anything you can leave for Specs to do, then, do that."

"Sure," Rich said, turning back to his computer. "I'm going to stay late tonight and do some perfectly legal things that you probably don't want to ask me about in any detail, Templar."

"Uh oh," Simon said. "Yeah, I'll definitely be leaving, then. I sure don't want to watch you strictly obey the laws of this great nation of ours. The rest of you, go home, get some sleep."

The level of background noise rose to its usual pitch as Simon's teammates shut their computers down and started gathering up their things. In the far corner of the room the big printer whirled to life, sheets of paper dropping into the bin one after another; Rich sat up in his chair and stretched, his back cracking like a shot. "Printing now," he said, unnecessarily. "It's not all that exciting but it's about as good as I can get without playing freeze tag with their security."

"Hey, I'll take what I can get," Simon said. "Anything's better than nothing." Picking up the huge and unsteady stack of folders Simon carried it gingerly into his office, putting it squarely on the middle of his desk and watching it mistrustfully until he was sure it wasn't going to go sliding around and overbalancing itself. His computer was still on, the email program still open; there was nothing new in his inbox. No reproachful little missives from Langridge. Either she was working on it or she wasn't, and either way, it had surely annoyed her, which meant that in some way Simon won this round. Simon quit everything and shut his computer down, absently listening to the lessening commotion from the main room and the repetitive boom of the outer door.

By the time he came back out there were only the three of them. Rich was still hunched up in his lair, busily plucking freshly-printed pages from the printer one by one and adding them to the thin stack of papers in his hand; Jeremy was sitting at the table, his hands folded around his empty mug, gazing blindly down at the table and lost in a world of his own. The silence had an odd, stretched, tense quality to it, one that instinctively raised the hairs on the back of Simon's neck.

"Don't everyone talk at once," he said, the first thing he thought of. Even pitched low his voice sounded too big, and the weak joke slid through the looming silence and vanished without a ripple. Jeremy blinked twice and then looked up at Simon; he smiled faintly but didn't say anything.

The printer hummed to a stop and Rich turned it off. Dossier in hand he wheeled his chair around, his eyes flicking blindly across the back of Jeremy's neck, not stopping until he was staring resolutely at his second, smaller computer. The glare from the monitor sheened off his glasses and hid his eyes. "Here," he said, holding up the stack of papers, still focusing intently on his computer.

Simon hesitated, vaguely wanting to call him on it. In the end, he thought better of it and went over himself, plucking the papers from Rich's upraised hand. He risked a glance at Rich's monitor while he was there; he was sure that it was saying all kinds of interesting and illegal things, but none of them in a language he could read, for which he was acutely grateful.

"Thanks," Simon told Rich, and clapped a hand to his shoulder for a moment. Rich grunted and still didn't look up, and all of a sudden Simon wanted nothing more than to be out of here, to let the man work in peace, to defuse this drawn tension. "C'mon, Archer," he said, dumping the papers into one of the extra folders they had lying around. "I'll give you a ride back to your hotel."

"I'd appreciate that," Jeremy said, standing up. Simon imagined he could hear something like relief in Jeremy's voice, but he wasn't sure.

The rattling of Rich's typing started up again a fraction of a second before the heavy door closed; then the door settled into its frame with a soft *whoomph* of displaced air, cutting off the sound with almost surgical precision.

Simon drove past the exit that led to his apartment without taking it. Jeremy turned to watch the exit recede in the distance, his reflection raising both eyebrows in mild surprise; Simon had been watching for just such a reaction. "Mm," Jeremy said after a moment, turning back and settling down.

"What?" Simon asked, as if he didn't know.

"Nothing," Jeremy said. "So, dinner?"

"Not tonight," Simon said, switching lanes to move around an ancient trundling Ford. "Tomorrow I have a meeting with one of the very few people in the world that I hate more than I hate you, and I intend to go home, order in a pizza, memorize everything in that file, and then get a good nine or ten hours of sleep in preparation. No unnecessary distractions."

"Ahh," Jeremy said, glancing out the window again. Simon could see his dim reflection smiling faintly. "And of course I would *hate* to be a distraction, Simon."

"Don't," Simon said. "Don't even try and tempt me. This is important."

"I don't know what you think I could tempt you *with*—"

"I said *don't*, you know."

"Oh, I know what you *said*, but apparently tonight I have to make my *own* fun."

Simon knew he ought to resist the impulse, but in the end, he just couldn't. "Damn, did those lessons in obeying orders wear off already?"

"I suppose so," Jeremy said, his little smile curling in on itself. "It's such a pity you haven't the time to reinforce them properly—"

"Okay," Simon broke in, "I was totally asking for that, but seriously. No."

"All right," Jeremy said equably. "I suppose I *am* paying for that hotel room and I may as well use it as something other than a storage locker."

“See? There you go. Logic.” The exit to Jeremy’s hotel came up and Simon took it, dropping from the elevated freeway into the darker side streets.

Jeremy smiled and said nothing, and they traveled the remaining few minutes in a more or less peaceful silence. It wasn’t until Simon had pulled up in front of the hotel and Jeremy was getting out that he said, “If you should change your mind, Simon, I’m in suite 904, and should be up for hours yet.”

Before Simon could say anything Jeremy shut the Jeep’s door and turned away, heading into the hotel. The doorman smiled with something more than official warmth and hurried to hold the door open for him, saying something that Simon couldn’t hear; Jeremy said something back, turning that cool smile on the doorman, and then the door was closing and he was gone.

Simon sat there for a handful of seconds before snorting and putting the Jeep back into drive.

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## ◆ Thirteen

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“I suppose you think this is funny,” Langridge said, gingerly balancing the huge pile of untied folders in the crook of one arm and corralling it with her other hand. Her mouth was set in a thin white line.

“Would it piss you off worse if I denied it or if I told you I thought it was absolutely hilarious?” Simon asked cheerfully. He’d gotten ten much-needed hours of sleep the night before and he felt great. “See, as long as I’m trying to be annoying, I’d hate to make a half-assed job of it.”

“I love working with the FBI,” Langridge said sourly. “It reminds me why I didn’t become a kindergarten teacher like my mother wanted me to. Hold this,” she said abruptly, shoving the stack of folders back at Simon.

Simon instinctively grabbed for them (it was that or get punched in the stomach with them) and wound up awkwardly clutching the rapidly telescoping pile of folders to his chest with both hands. “Hey, no need to be such a bad sport about it,” he said, hooking his chin over the top of the stack to stop it erupting into mid-air like a paper volcano. “I’m just trying to be thorough.”

“You’re certainly *trying*, at any rate,” Langridge said, dropping lightly to one knee and popping open her fat steel-sided briefcase. Simon fell still, not really wanting to be the one responsible for dropping ten pounds of paper into Beech Spring Pond.

Langridge took her own sweet time rummaging through her briefcase, paper crackling every now and then. She was obviously trying to irritate him; Simon gritted his teeth and tried very hard not to indulge her. One of the folders was digging sharply into the bend of his elbow, though, and half the stack was threatening to squirt out of his grip if he breathed too deeply, so he wasn’t really having that much luck with that.

Finally Langridge pulled a plain white paper shopping bag out of the depths of her briefcase and stuck her hand in, producing a stack of nearly identical folders that was only marginally smaller than the one Simon was currently wrestling with. Dropping that pile of folders on the bridge beside her she stood back up, snapping the white paper bag open with both hands and holding it out.

Simon risked a sideways glance down into the empty bag, then looked back up at Langridge. Langridge jerked her head down at the bag. Simon looked back down, smiled, shrugged, and let go with both arms.

The resulting whispering avalanche of papers sliding gleefully free of their suddenly-redundant folders was the most satisfying thing Simon had seen all day. Through some miracle of gravity (and Langridge lunging forward at just the right moment) everything slid *into* the bag, but it was a close thing. “Whoops,” Simon said. “Sorry, I didn’t really have so good a grip on those. Guess if you’d handed them to me more carefully—”

“That’s what I pay my underlings for,” Langridge said carelessly, putting the bulging bag down by the side of her briefcase and nudging the other pile of folders towards Simon with the toe of her sensible pump. “It isn’t as if anything in there is going to be really important to me, Mr. Drake. It can wait until someone has time to reassemble it.”

“Hey, that’s great,” Simon said. He didn’t make a move to pick up the other stack of folders. “I’d hate to think I’d caused you trouble or something. And hey, I really appreciate you putting all this together on such short notice.”

“That’s also what I pay my underlings for,” Langridge said, poking her hand into her jacket and pulling out her cigarettes. “Seniority is a wonderful thing, Mr. Drake, as I’m sure you’ll learn in another twenty years or so.”

“Yeah, well, God knows I’ll never have as many years of experience on me as you do,” Simon said, watching her shake out a cigarette and light it with a jerky snap of her lighter. “Hell, just looking at you for the first time, I told myself, now there’s a woman who’s lived through a lot.”

“Insulting my age, now? Are you running out of ammunition, Mr. Drake?” Langridge asked tiredly, dropping the pack on the bridge railing.

“Aw, nah, nothing like that,” Simon said. “I just take my conversational openings as they come.”

“How nice for you,” Langridge told him, narrowing her eyes in that strange little not-a-smile and sighing smoke out of her nose. Simon waited a beat and then bared his teeth in the most insincere grin he could summon up.

“I like you, Mr. Drake,” Langridge said abruptly, turning to look out over the lake and leaking smoke like a steam engine. “I don’t know why. You’re not particularly likeable. But you’re willing to be both immature and counterproductive in the service of defending your precious male ego, and I like a man who has the courage of his convictions, even if they *are* stupid ones.”

“See, that’s what I like about you, Langridge, you’re such a sweet talker,” Simon said. He wasn’t particularly irritated by this latest volley, and he couldn’t figure out why not. “But, hell, why don’t you come right out and say what you really mean some time? No need to waffle! I can take it!”

Langridge paused long enough to grind out her half-smoked cigarette on the sole of her shoe. “Ah, that explains why I like you, Drake: you’re not funny, and

you're not particularly articulate—" she dropped the dead cigarette butt back into the pack and put the pack away "—and it's always nice to feel like the intelligent one in any given conversation."

Somewhat to his consternation, Simon was actually grinning for real by the end of this little speech. "Yeah, well, so's your mom," he said cheerfully.

Langridge blinked at him twice and then burst out laughing. Simon snorted, trying not to join in and, eventually, failing. "Well, this has all been excruciating," Langridge said once her laughter had choked to a smoky stop, kneeling down to close up her briefcase again. "But I really must be going. I've already wasted more time on this nonsense than it really requires."

"Flirt," Simon said, modifying the accusation with half a grin. "I'll keep in touch. Don't think it hasn't been a little slice of heaven."

"Because it hasn't," Langridge said, supplying the second half of the line without so much as blinking, and she grabbed the briefcase in one hand and the fat paper bag in the other and strode off before Simon could call her on it. Simon watched her go, his grin fading, before he turned his attention to the ticklish problem of picking up the pile of folders at his feet without spilling anything.

Simon could hear the whooping—and, more disturbingly, the thudding—while he was still halfway down the hall and he rolled his eyes, switching the bundle of folders from the crook of one arm to the other. It only got louder as he approached; bracing himself he gingerly nudged the handle of the saferoom door down with his elbow and then bumped it open with his hip, edging into the room with the new stack of folders clutched grimly to his chest.

Rich was sitting huddled in front of his largest computer, wearing his suit from that morning's court business and the largest pair of headphones Simon had ever personally seen. As Simon let himself into the room Rich's head slowly swiveled towards him and Rich gave him the flat, patient, long-suffering stare of a tortoise waiting to be put down before turning back to whatever it was he was doing.

Simon sighed and edged first into his own office, *away* from the commotion, abandoning the pile of folders on his desk with a little groan of relief. That done, he rolled his shoulders to dispel the vague cramp and headed over to the mat room (or, as certain other field teams were prone to calling it, 'Templar's padded cell').

Nate was leaning in the doorway, absently hugging one of the cardboard mailing tubes to his chest and physically cringing every few seconds, generally right around the same time as each new outburst of whooping and thumping. Nothing new there. Simon clapped Nate on the shoulder. Nate yelped and nearly jumped out of his skin, whipping around to face Simon and almost dropping the cardboard tube.



“Hey,” Simon said, edging past Nate so that he could get into the doorway to see what was going on. “You realize I could hear you guys all the way out on—”

Sandra hit the wall with an appalling thud not two feet from where Simon was standing. Simon yelled a little himself and ducked back, even as Sandra went windmilling down to the mats that stretched from one end of the room to the other, landing catlike on her hands and knees and heaving in two deep breaths. “*Bastard!*” she hissed as soon as she’d caught her breath, exploding up off the mats and back towards Jeremy, who was standing in the center of the room with his hands hovering in front of his chest and a polite little smile on his face.

One of Sandra’s feet whipped up and out in a vicious flat arc that meant all kinds of nasty business; Simon yelled “Hey!” but it was already too late for anyone to stop it. Jeremy swayed back. Sandra’s heel missed him by a matter of inches. Sandra’s left foot thumped to the ground and her right foot left it at almost the same moment, her right foot blurring into that same vicious arc. “*Hey!*” Simon bellowed again, putting a hand on Nate’s shoulder to push him aside and let himself into the room, to try and stop this fight before someone got hurt, because the *next* thing Sandra would do was take the tremendous momentum she’d raised from two high circle kicks and sweep Jeremy’s feet out from under him with a low one, Simon had seen it a hundred times, and Jeremy’s head would almost certainly collide with the concrete wall at that point and brain tissue was so hard to get off even institutional gray paint—one of Jeremy’s hands whipped up into the flight path, Sandra’s ankle smacking into his palm with a loud and painful sound. His shoulders bunched under the close-fitting fabric of his shirt, and Sandra jerked to a forced halt with her ankle caught in both of his hands, and Jeremy threw her foot back the way it had come as hard as he could. Sandra pinwheeled like a dancer who had just stepped on a banana peel, went cartwheeling over, landed on one hip, and spun to a sitting halt five feet away, gasping. Mike and Johnny, prudently holding up the far wall, whooped in unison.

“Goddammit,” Simon told Nate, who seemed to be the only person listening to him at this point, “what did I tell you guys about breaking Archer?”

“I, uh, don’t think you have to worry,” Nate said, shoving his glasses up. “He’s not really letting her break him much.”

“Are you all right?” Jeremy asked Sandra. He was rolling his shoulders to loosen them, and no wonder, Simon thought.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Sandra said breathlessly, wobbling to her feet. “Again?”

Simon stuck his thumb and forefinger into his mouth and whistled like a referee. The screech tore through the room and echoed off the bare walls, and every head in the place whipped towards him—except Sandra’s and Jeremy’s, which only followed once they mutually dropped their guard. “Okay,” Simon said, looking back and forth. “This a fair fight?”

“Hell no,” Johnny said from the far side of the room. “It’s a *good* one.”

“It’s all right,” Jeremy said, pushing his hair back and rubbing a hand over

his lightly sweating face. “We *were* only going to spar a bit, but, well, where’s the fun in that?”

“‘Sides,” Mike said, “Sandy keeps losing, and you know how she hates to lose!”

“I’m *not* losing,” Sandra snapped, flexing her hands.

“We’re actually fairly well-matched,” Jeremy agreed. “Plus she has the more difficult job, since my style is almost entirely defensive.”

“Quit trying to butter her up, Archer, she’s totally losing,” Mike said with manic glee. Sandra promptly spun about and kicked him in the stomach—not too hard, to Simon’s general relief—and Mike whooped out a shocked breath and folded up, coughing.

“Okay,” Simon said, leaning in the doorway. “Just *don’t break anyone*. Christ. One of you gets your neck broken and where am I going to find a decent replacement on such short notice?”

“As you will, Simon,” Jeremy said cheerfully, turning to face Sandra. “Again?”

Sandra spun to face him again and nodded, tersely.

Jeremy smiled, an expression gone suddenly remote. “Again,” he said, and he slid his feet apart and squared his shoulders and *changed*. There wasn’t a better word for it, although Simon, leaning in the doorway, spent a couple of seconds casting after one.

“I’ll get you this time,” Sandra said, almost conversationally, and her hands flicked up and folded almost double, leaving the first joint of her fingers rigidly extended with the rest of her fingers tucked safely away. Phoenix fist, Simon thought it was called. Something like that. Sandy’d never been one for fancy names or repetitive practice drills or anything like that. She just kicked a whole lot of ass with whatever body part was currently available. Granted, it was usually Mike’s ass she was kicking, but she could also generally be counted on to hit the people Simon told her to hit, and that was almost as good in the grand scheme of things.

Jeremy’s eyed flicked down to Sandra’s fists for a fraction of a second, then back up. “All right,” he said, and didn’t move, his arms hanging loose by his sides.

Johnny glanced down at Mike, shrugged once, and said “Go.” around his mouthful of toothpick.

Sandra uncoiled like a spring before Johnny had time to shut his mouth again. She closed the distance between them in a single controlled lunge, both hands pistoning towards Jeremy’s chest, one just behind the other—and the blows thudded with twin dull noises into Jeremy’s upraised forearms, suddenly *there*, crossed a few inches above his chest. Sandra hissed in momentary dismay and immediately drove one fist down at Jeremy’s thigh instead, and Jeremy pivoted on the ball of one foot like a dancer might and took the blow on his jutting hip, instead. Sandra made a little choking sound as her fingers unexpectedly struck

bone and pulled that fist back to hover in front of her stomach, her other hand driving up in as vicious an uppercut as Simon had ever seen. Jeremy leaned back. Sandra's fist passed harmlessly through the space where his chin used to be, her knuckles nearly grazing his nose.

She'd struck too hard. Simon could see it, her hand stabbing up into the air like she was preparing to flip the bird to someone a long way away, which was something she did do on a fairly regular basis.

Jeremy darted forward into the space left open by Sandra's upraised arm and without stopping slammed his open palm up into Sandra's chin, shoving up and backwards while his left leg whipped into the space just behind her right. For a heartbeat of time they might well have been dancing for real, coiled about each other, Jeremy dipping Sandra smoothly before pulling her back up . . . then Sandra, already suffering from a bit of upward momentum, started to tip over backwards, encountered that leg, and fell over it, and so much for that metaphor, thought Simon, a touch uncomfortably.

She made a creditable attempt to grab at Jeremy's shirtfront and bring him down with her, throw him over her head, but Jeremy's shirt fit him too closely for it to work; all she managed to do was slap his chest open-handed, and then her back hit the mat and the breath roared out of her.

Jeremy darted back half a step and pointed his right arm down at her, his hand whipping down and then back up. Sandra stared dazedly up at the palm of Jeremy's hand; Simon was confused until Johnny shifted his toothpick to the other side of his mouth and said, "And you're gassed."

"Damn," Sandra wheezed, shutting her eyes. "My teacher's going to laugh at me."

"Do you need a hand up?" Jeremy asked, leaning over and offering one.

Simon winced, knowing what was coming. Mike (who knew even better because it was usually happening to him) yelped "*Don't*—" but it was too late. Sandra's eyes popped open and her hand closed on Jeremy's wrist like a handcuff, her foot shooting up into Jeremy's gut; Jeremy's breath whooped out of him as Sandra yanked him forward with every ounce of strength in her body and sent him flying over her head.

Simon had to give Jeremy credit: he got his hands out quick, slamming them both into the mats and turning the free-fall into a flip. The end result, however, was never in any doubt. Even as Jeremy landed in a crouch Sandra slammed into him from behind, knocking him full-length on the mats almost at Simon's feet. Sandra pounced on Jeremy, straddling his waist, grabbing his right arm and jerking it up behind his back as high as it would go, knotting her other hand in his hair and grinding his face into the mat with it for good measure. "Ha!" she crowed.

"Ouch," Jeremy wheezed, a bit muffled by his mouthful of mat, thrashing around under Sandra. It never worked, but everyone had to learn that for himself.

“All right, that’s a lesson learned, I’ll never do *that* again.”

Mike made a great show of fanning himself with one hand. “Daaaamn,” he cried, “that’s just fuckin’ *hot*.”

“Christ,” Simon breathed in general agreement, hunching his shoulders a bit and bringing the tails of his bomber jacket in, trying to cover his unfortunately physical reaction. He coughed a little. “You kids play nice now. You need me, I’ll, uh, be in my, my office. Paperwork. You know.”

“No fun in playing *nice*,” Sandra rasped, jerking Jeremy’s right arm up another inch or so. Jeremy hissed out a sound like a teakettle about to boil and bucked his hips up under Sandra’s, trying to fight his way up onto his knees, and then Simon got the hell out of there before he could actually start whimpering.

After about ten minutes of staring blindly down at one of the new Karpol emails and steadfastly ignoring the general hullabaloo from the other end of the saferoom, Simon got to the point where he could at least sit comfortably. It would only have taken five except that *something* that happened right about then involved a lot of fleshy slapping noises and rhythmic grunting, and Simon had caught himself staring into space and listening intently, trying to determine who was making which noise, for which he hadn’t quite forgiven himself.

Fortunately, he reflected, turning a page, nothing in this world was so dry and unarousing as a folder full of someone else’s business emails translated from the Russian by the CIA, and once he wasn’t physically distracted he was able to more or less tune out the ruckus and actually comprehend the things he was looking at. Not that they were terribly exciting, or even informative:

**Good day to you! It is my honor to report that the trouble in Miz-eribaht has been taken care of just as you required. My expenses were well within the allotted limits, although I will gladly show you the books if you request.**

Despite everything, Simon had been secretly hoping to see something like “Thiefy McThiefperson will be breaking into Positively Stupid Security at exactly midnight tonight on your express orders, Mr. Karpol’. Unfortunately, he wasn’t getting it. As far as he could tell Langridge had just given him every single email that was sent in a four-day window around each theft, hundreds of them, without caring what they were about. The emails were a cesspool of useless information, oblique and nameless references to hundreds of activities that Simon wasn’t interested in. “Thanks for nothing, Langridge,” Simon muttered, turning a page.

**Sir: A problem has arisen with your network in the southern states. To deal with it would require firing three people; however, one is in**

**the local military and another is an agent of the law. I await your response.**

“‘Firing’,” Simon said, and snorted, adding that useless page to the rapidly growing stack by his elbow. Someone slammed into the wall hard enough to make the papers on his desk shiver. He jerked his head up, startled, and then rolled his eyes and went back to work.

——BEGIN PGP MESSAGE——

**hQEOA1e+1x6YuUMCEAP/dqrx0t1KmwQz9/nZTQfXaYRs  
KCK7nbFtVvVcSBYkCS5F87jl81D+QGTmCwPHK6wkqXM  
FoJ6WOKoHyEZKvo96moer726Cgp4iHTveLQVq7ty+uh1  
/jz3xg8G4jfxRG9PkMxQxXdfI448g3P72UqGAKXbrp0JxJtV  
MliVzDYrHb96n+Qvy2uk87BsN6Ion2radk3ecrvvoxjr6Ej5GM  
uQGoB5qnGOM...**

“What the hell?” Simon muttered, squinting at the gibberish for a moment before giving it up as a bad deal. He raised his voice. “Hey! Rich!”

No answer from Rich, although something in the other room made Mike whoop appreciatively. Simon waited a bit, impatiently, then remembered the fat headphones Rich had been wearing and nearly slapped his forehead.

Rich looked up when Simon waved him over, his jaw set beneath the massive headphones, looking more like a put-upon turtle than ever. He held up a finger—*one sec*—did something else to his smaller desktop machine, and then took off the headphones and came over, shoulders hunched balefully against the noise. “Yeah?”

Simon waved the paper at him. “What’s a P-G-P message?”

“What?” Rich said irritably, grabbing the email out of Simon’s hand and scowling at it.

“And let me know if you need to see it or anything,” Simon said. Rich shot him a glare. Simon played dumb.

“Means it’s encrypted,” Rich finally said, handing the paper back. “One of those semi-nasty unbreakable codes. Can’t read it without the key.”

“And is it?” Simon asked. “Unbreakable?”

Rich shrugged a little. “So far.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “Now let’s have one of those conversations we never had. Unbreakable?”

“... I can’t break it without the key,” Rich eventually admitted. “Maybe if I had one hell of a lot more computing power and a couple of years. Always wanted to try.”

“Crap,” Simon said. “Guess I gotta hope this isn’t the email we needed.”

**Greetings. I hope this email finds you well. Your agent of purchase has brought the foreign goods that you require to me. I will be shipping them through the usual channels as soon as your driver makes contact.**

“... huh,” Simon said. Agent of purchase. Foreign goods. Automatically Simon checked the date of the email. November 23rd. A quick glance at the master timeline confirmed Simon’s memory: the break-in at NRG Electrical had taken place on November 21st.

“Huh,” he said again. Rapidly he leafed back through the printed emails, looking for that phrase. Quickly he hit one that referred to a ‘purchasing agent’ and he cursed under his breath, goddamned multiple translators... ‘foreign goods’ was still the same, however, and Simon started skimming through the papers, pulling out anything that mentioned ‘foreign goods’.

In the end he had a stack of about a hundred pages. Half of them were easy to discard, they didn’t mention an ‘agent of purchase’ or anything even remotely like it, but the rest contained both phrases and hit as regularly as the thudding punches from outside, one-two, one-two. One on the date of the theft itself—‘your purchasing agent has left for his meeting re: your foreign goods’—always, always followed two or three days later by a second—‘your agent of purchase has brought the foreign goods to me’—

—one on the date of the theft itself—

Simon swore, loudly, and flipped to the end. The last email that Langridge had provided him was dated Wednesday, just two days ago, but the last email that mentioned Karpol’s ‘agent of purchase’ was dated three weeks ago, delivering Savi-Ten’s ‘foreign goods’ to Karpol’s American agent... Simon stabbed his computer on without looking at it, his eyes going wide. “Got you now,” he breathed.

Now he just had to get Langridge to cooperate.

**Langridge:**

**Please let me know the instant a message comes your way containing both the phrases ‘agent of purchase/purchasing agent’ and ‘foreign goods’. (For reference see the email you have numbered as #KAR-1009178.) THIS IS VITAL. I MUST KNOW ASAP.**

Simon chewed on his lower lip, but in the end, he left the ‘please’ in. It wasn’t going to hurt anything but his ego.

**S. Drake/Templar**

He considered the email for a second, then on a whim added

**P.S. Will buy you your choice of carton of cigs or jar of wrinkle cream as thanks.**

and sent it before he could think any better of it. “Not my sig that’s going to get us all killed,” he muttered, spreading one hand out protectively on the pile of important emails.

The shredder in Simon’s office wasn’t quite as heavy-duty as the one in the main room, so it took him close to five minutes to finish feeding it all the emails that hadn’t turned out to be important. Dimly, over the racket the shredder was making, he could hear the rest of his team having a spirited conversation—apparently the beatings were over for the moment—but it wasn’t until he finished and turned off the shredder that the voices became clear again.

Of course, the first thing he heard was Nate saying, petulantly, “What’s wrong with calling it a ‘pie-a-pult’?” and Simon snorted out a laugh.

“It’s a stupid name,” Sandra said shortly, “and anyway, it doesn’t matter what you call it, because if you ever build another one I will break both your arms.”

“I said I was sorry!” Nate said. Simon shook his head and picked up the stack of important emails that was still lying innocently on his desk. “Hey, Templar,” Nate said as Simon came out. “What’s that?”

“Tell you in a minute,” Simon said cheerfully, taking his usual seat at the conference table. “Go on. Finish telling Archer about the pie incident. Man needs all the warning he can get about you.”

Nate flushed pink, but after a minute turned to Jeremy and went on. “So, anyway, I’ve got the range all set and I’m going to test it with a full payload, right? Honda picked up like ten pounds of day-old rhubarb pie from some grocery store, we’ve got it all loaded up, and then Springheel *opens the door* right as I fire the catapult.”

Jeremy’s face went absolutely blank. Simon was beginning to recognize it as a survival mechanism.

“It wasn’t funny,” Sandra said, more as a warning than anything else. She was pacing around at the front of the room, burning off the last of the adrenalin she’d generated while sparring.

“I thought it was funny,” Johnny volunteered, not quite grinning.

“That’s because you were *behind* Nate’s blast shield,” Sandra snapped. “*And* I was in undercover gear for that thing at the governor’s mansion—that was a Versace ballgown right off the spring line and *it did not belong to me*. Eighteen thousand dollars, right out of the team’s quarterly budget!”

Now Jeremy reacted, hissing in sympathy. He turned around and crossed his arms on the back of his chair, gazing at Springheel. "Out of curiosity, which one?"

Sandra blinked. "Which one what?"

"Which gown? Was it the white one with the little sleeves or one of the gold ones?"

"The gold sheath with the lace-up back," Sandra said promptly. "And the cutouts over the hips." And then she stopped and gave Jeremy a very strange look.

Mike, perched on the empty desk at the front of the room, sniggered. "Whoo, we got a *crossdresser* in our midst or something? Score another one for affirmative action!"

"For, er, reasons of my own I generally attend the spring runway show in Milan," Jeremy said, waving it away like it didn't matter. "I have several reputations to uphold, you understand." And then he fell silent, giving Sandra a most thorough and *critical* once-over. "Excellent choice, particularly for a figure like yours," he finally said, approvingly. "I get so *tired* of women who can't be pried away from their basic black—"

"There's nothing wrong with basic black," Sandra started to say, but Mike leaned in about that time and waved a hand in front of Jeremy's eyes. "Hey," he said, almost sternly. "You wanna ogle Springheel, you need a higher security clearance, a'ight?"

Sandra punched Mike lightly in the shoulder. "What can I say? I'm highly classified information."

"Really!" Jeremy said, draping himself over the back of his chair and nearly purring the word. Simon found it prudent to become *very involved* with the emails in his hand, biting the inside of his cheek. "So there's a point to political espionage after all! I suppose I'll have to branch out..."

Mike turned to Simon, his lower lip ostentatiously wobbling. "Templar, are you listening to this?"

Simon shrugged, still firmly staring down at the papers in front of him. "I'm okay with the flirting as long as I get a written promise that they'll never produce offspring," he said. "I don't think the world could take it. Hell, I know I couldn't."

"Damn!" said Jeremy, snapping his fingers. "There go all my plans for the rest of the afternoon."

Without slowing down Sandra grabbed a pen off Nate's desk and whipped it sidearm at Jeremy's head. Nate squawked a protest; Jeremy snatched the pen out of the air with a little flicker of fingers, looked at it, and then dropped it gently on the table beside him. "It was just a thought," he said innocently.

"Sorry, Archer," Sandra said, finally stopping and leaning against the desk next to Mike. "We'd make beautiful babies but I am destined to only marry a



man that can drink me under the table—and you are *far* too scrawny to be in the running.”

“Alas,” Jeremy said, faking a little half-assed bow over the back of his chair. “You do indeed most likely have me there—although I point out that no one said anything about *marrying* you, per se . . .”

“Hey!” Mike interrupted, sounding aggrieved.

“Children,” Simon said warningly.

“Awww, dad,” said Mike, but he didn’t hop down off the desk and go try to kill Jeremy, which was Simon’s basic goal in life right now.

“Sandy’s kind of a local legend,” Johnny said, kicking his boots up to rest on the table. “One time at poker night she drinks *twelve tequila shooters* and still wins two hundred bucks off Nate.”

Jeremy whistled, glancing over his shoulder at Johnny. “Really! Hollow leg? Higher body fat percentage?” But he was already turning back towards Sandra as he said the last line, and he was smiling, loose, *ready* . . . Sandra immediately and very sincerely tried to kick him in the face, of course, but Jeremy caught her foot less than two inches from his nose. “Poker?” he said over his shoulder, not letting go.

Sandra scowled and tried to yank her foot free. The muscles in Jeremy’s shoulders squared, his hands tightening on her ankle. “Well, yeah,” Johnny said, shrugging a little. “Team tradition, kinda. Every Saturday ’cept when we’re working weekends. Get together at Sandy’s, get shitfaced, lose a lot of money to Rich, on account of having no lives.”

“Excuse me!” Sandra said, grabbing at Mike’s knee to get better leverage for kicking her foot free of Jeremy’s grip.

“You oughta come,” Johnny told Jeremy. In the corner Rich’s head jerked up with such vehemence that he nearly lost his glasses, and Simon groaned inwardly. *Now*, of course, when it was too late, Johnny looked at Simon for permission. “Okay if he comes tomorrow? Can always use someone new and rich to cheat.”

Simon shrugged warily. “If the man can stand to be around you guys when you’re drunk and broke he deserves a Congressional medal of honor,” he said, no kind of answer at all. He glanced at Jeremy, silently willing him to do the polite (and smart) thing and turn Johnny down—

“Mm. Well. We’ll see when our friend decides to pick up his next souvenir, but I believe I’d enjoy that,” Jeremy said, dashing Simon’s momentary hopes. And then he let go of Sandra’s ankle abruptly and her sneaker whipped past Simon’s ear, Sandra herself turning one more or less graceful pirouette before she spun to a stop. “I warn you, though,” Jeremy said, going on as if nothing had just happened, “I am absolutely *terrible* at poker. Still, perhaps losing a lot of money to you lot would be the politically sensitive thing to do.”

“Also nationally appropriate,” Nate put in. Everyone looked at him. “What?” he said, wilting a bit. “So I made an English joke! I trample over the cultures of

others and feel no regret! I told you I was bad!”

“That a Jewish thing?” Mike asked brightly, and Sandra spun around and whacked him.

“Anyway,” Simon said brightly over Mike’s token yowl, figuring it was far past time to regain control of things. “If you’re all quite done being politically incorrect, I have something that’s not terribly important to share with you all . . .”

\* \* \*

**Drake:**

**Will do. Nothing as of five pm today. Glad to be of service. Pretend you believe that.**

**Langridge**

**P.S. Will take wrinkle cream, since obvious you’re too young to legally buy cigarettes.**

**P.P.S. Second thought: will instead accept sincere thanks and possible lessening of hostilities.**

**P.P.P.S. Brat.**

Simon snickered a little and shuffled the message into his saved folder, then looked up at the clock. Almost six—she’d taken her own sweet time getting back to him, and he’d gone ahead and sent everyone home just to buy himself some peace and quiet. Well, almost everyone. Jeremy was still sitting at the conference table, sipping his coffee and making yet another foray into the dossiers, waiting for his ride home. Or something like that.

“So,” Simon said, raising his voice slightly as he shut everything down. “You want to do dinner? Hell, I’ll treat you to the best Burger King has to offer, I’m such a nice guy.”

He could sense rather than see Jeremy’s little shudder. “I wouldn’t mind dinner,” Jeremy called back, “but I think rather than take you up on your so-generous offer I’ll go ahead and treat again, just to preserve my poor delicate stomach.”

“Delicate,” Simon said, and snorted, stepping out of his office and turning off the light. “From what I’ve seen you’re about as delicate as a Mack truck. I thought for sure Sandy was going to put you in traction or something.”

“She certainly did try, didn’t she? Don’t tell her I said so, of course, but she beat the bloody stuffing out of me,” Jeremy said, hooking a hand behind his neck and cracking it. He winced a little. “I’m taking more than my fair share of lumps, working with you.”

“And getting paid well for them,” Simon reminded him, and on a whim he crossed behind Jeremy and grabbed the back of his neck, not so much rubbing it as crushing out the knots. Jeremy made a high-pitched groaning noise and

collapsed forward against the edge of the table. Simon found he rather liked that. "I think she gets a little soft, working with us big slow guys," he said, happily mangling his way out along Jeremy's shoulders, trying to discover if he could make Jeremy's collarbones touch each other. "Probably did her good to go up against someone who fights differently."

"Mmmmm," Jeremy said, a low sliding grateful purr of a sound. His shoulders went limp under Simon's hands.

"Still, I'm pretty sure *I* could beat the shit out of you, it came to that," Simon said, knuckling the back of Jeremy's neck again. "All that chop-socky stuff is nice, I guess, but I've got fifty pounds on you and, oh yeah, I fight like a man."

"Misogynist." Jeremy cracked an eye open, eyeing Simon with blissful sleepy amusement. "Would you like to find out?"

"Eh, I don't think I need to prove myself to you," Simon said. He was starting to see where this was going and suddenly he was wide awake. "Besides, I don't want to kill you. Who'd pay for my dinner?"

"Well, if you're so afraid . . ." Jeremy trailed off there, already smiling back at him, just waiting for him to say the next bit.

Simon slapped the back of Jeremy's head, lightly, just enough to make his point. "I'm not afraid of you," he said, obligingly supplying the next line. He was grinning slightly.

"Then prove it," Jeremy said lazily, completing the ritual challenge, ducking out from under Simon's hands and standing up in the same motion. "It's too early for dinner in any case."

"Fine," Simon said with exaggerated reluctance, cracking his knuckles. "I'll just beat hell out of you for a while before we go, then?"

"Or something like that," Jeremy said, heading for the mat room and stepping out of his shoes as he went.

*He'd always hated the way that the empty hallways here picked up sounds and bounced them around, amplifying them until they felt deafeningly loud. A low profile, that was key. He liked to keep a low profile. It was just . . . safer. It was a lesson he'd learned the hard way.*

*So on nights like tonight he tried to walk softly, stepping on the balls of his feet to minimize the echo down the hallway. He'd gotten pretty good at it. He suspected he also looked ridiculous, but there was hardly ever anyone around to see after hours, so he didn't care.*

*He caught his breath as he slid his key into the handle to the saferoom door, easing the handle down until it clicked. Even that faint sound ricocheted down the hallway, and he held his breath until it died away. Pressing his shoulder and his hip against the heavy door, he eased it open, holding himself braced for the squeal of hinges. It had never happened, but some day it would.*

*He heard no squeal. Instead he heard stealthy shifting noises, rhythmic wet sounds, murmuring, groaning, gasping—he froze with the door barely open an inch, staring blindly into the darkness of the saferoom, his slight form blocking most of the light from the hallway behind it.*

*It wasn't that he didn't know what the sounds were. Despite everyone's jokes to the contrary he knew quite well, thank you, but it horrified him to hear them here, and his mind whirled, trying to decide who could be so . . . so bold about this kind of effrontery. Just don't let it be Simon and Sandra, not again, please, it was bad enough last time—*

*“Fuck, Jeremy,” he heard Simon say in a queer choked breathless voice. What a way to answer his prayer. He could almost laugh at the irony of it. If it was irony. He'd never gotten the grasp of that English-major stuff.*

*“Yes, Simon, that's the nn idea,” Jeremy murmured in response. Dismay broke his paralysis.*

*Swallowing as quietly as he could he inched back, the light sheening off his glasses as he eased the door shut, a millimeter at a time. His heart pounded in his chest. Don't let them catch me, he thought wildly, letting up on the door's handle at the approximate speed of plate tectonics. Just please don't let them catch me, five more seconds and I'm gone—*

*This prayer, at least, was granted without another twist of the knife, and he gingerly wriggled his key from the door's handle and scurried away back down the hallway, remembering to shift his weight to the balls of his feet. By the time he hit the door leading out to the parking lot he was running, as if for his life.*

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## ◆ Fourteen

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Jeremy was waiting out front when Simon pulled into the turnaround, leaning casually against one of the hotel's massive planters and smoking (or pretending to smoke) one of his stupid cigarettes. Simon scowled at him through the windshield; Jeremy just smiled and straightened up, stubbing the half-burnt cigarette out in the heavy cement ashtray next to him. Simon jockeyed the Jeep in between a parked limo and a waiting taxicab and made an impatient little *come on, let's go already* gesture.

Before Jeremy even reached the Jeep the hotel's doorman darted forward and pulled the passenger side door open for him. Jeremy turned his smile on the man and said something that was drowned out by the roar of the Jeep's engine, a brief flicker of green passing swiftly from his hand to the other man's; then Jeremy swung into the passenger seat and belted himself in while the doorman shut the Jeep's door, stepped back, and touched the brim of his hat in salute.

"Christ, I'm in the wrong business," Simon muttered as he pulled away.

"Well, if you'd *like* a tip, Simon, I can think of any number of things you could do to earn one—"

Simon broke in on that one quickly, before it could get out of hand. "*Here's* a tip, Archer: cigarettes can be hazardous to your health, particularly if you light one in my truck. Okay? Okay." Simon smacked on the turn signal, waited impatiently for an opening, and shot into traffic. "You need to hit an ATM or anything?"

"No, no, I'm all set," Jeremy said, touching the breast of his jacket. "And judging by the bag that's occupying my floorboard, so are you."

"Uh huh," Simon said, pulling up to a stoplight. "Actually, thanks for reminding me, here's the deal: I figure that you're probably not going to be drinking, since you're a giant pussy—"

"—hadn't planned on it, and I am not—"

"—so since you've already proven that you're capable of driving my truck, you thieving bastard, *I'm* going to relax with a few beers and *you're* going to drive me home afterwards."

“Am I now?”

“Yup.”

“Well, then, it’s kind of you to warn me in advance,” Jeremy said, slithering comfortably down in his seat and flicking his sunglasses up.

Simon waited expectantly, but Jeremy didn’t make a grab for his thigh. After a moment Simon relaxed again. “Think of it as apologizing to me for stealing my truck on Thursday,” he said.

“Would it also be acceptable to think of it as a prime opportunity to take advantage of you while your inhibitions are low?”

“Nope.”

“I thought not.”

“Very nice,” Jeremy said in general approval, tilting his sunglasses down and looking up at the building.

“Yeah, we get together at Sandy’s because she’s got the best place,” Simon said, switching the bag with his six-pack in it from one hand to the other. “I mean, Johnny lives in a hole, Mike doesn’t have air conditioning, Nate still lives with his *mother* . . .”

“And Rich’s flat is wall-to-wall computer bits and power cords and bookshelves and very little actual furniture?”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “How’d you know?”

“Educated guess,” Jeremy said, flicking his smile on and off. “So why not your place?”

“Because Sandy’s got the best place,” Simon repeated patiently. “Plus she likes that kind of entertaining shit, I guess ’cause she’s a chick or something.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said.

He could hear them halfway down the hall, as usual. By the time he was actually at the door he could almost make out what they were saying—well, hollering—and Simon listened for a second before knocking, just on general principles. What little he could hear didn’t sound too incriminating, so he knocked, triggering a chorus of whooping from inside. Dimly he could hear Sandra yelling for someone to go let whoever it was in, and the heavy-footed thud of running footsteps, and then Mike jerked the door open and beamed at them both. “Yo! C’mon in, we’re just waitin’ for Texas.”

“You mean I’m not the last one here? Damn, I’m good,” Simon said, pushing the bag into Mike’s hands. “Go put that in the fridge for me, will you?”

“Sure thing,” Mike said affably, and loped off towards the tiny kitchen, leaving the two of them to show themselves in. Jeremy shut the door behind himself and, Simon couldn’t help but notice, spent a few seconds either studying or admiring the fairly complicated mess of locks and deadbolts that Sandra had on it.

Sandra stuck her head out of the kitchen. “Hey, you two. Make yourselves comfortable, I’ll be done here in a sec. Archer, if you feel the need to smoke, do it out on the balcony or I’ll break all your fingers. Okay?”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jeremy said, raising his hand in a brief wave. Simon snorted and shrugged out of his bomber jacket, abandoning it on the coat rack in the corner.

Everybody else was in the main room, and a little ripple of greeting ran through the room as Simon wandered in with Jeremy in tow. Simon threw himself into the big chair and sprawled out, sticking a hand up into the air and making vague little grabby motions; five seconds later someone came up behind him and slapped a cold can of beer into his hand. Simon sighed in contentment, bringing it down and popping it open. “Thanks, Mike, you’re a pal.”

“Any time!” Mike said, dropping onto the floor. “Aw, crap, Archer, I forgot you were here. You want one?”

“Perhaps later,” Jeremy said, waving the idea away. He’d found a reasonably out-of-the-way spot to lurk in, leaning against the wall next to the little table thing that Sandra persisted in calling a ‘buffet’. “I suspect I’ll need all my wits about me this evening, in any case.”

“Careful, folks,” Simon said, “he’s a card shark.”

Jeremy sighed. “I am *not* a card sharp, Simon.”

“*Shark*,” Simon emphasized, stressing the last letter so hard that it came out ‘shar-kuh’. “Shark. And you’re just saying that to put us all off guard before you cheat us out of all our hard-earned and, might I add, legitimately acquired money.”

“Ha,” Rich said sourly from his end of the couch.

Nate, curled up at the other end with his own can of beer nestled in his lap, blinked at him. “What part’s the ‘ha’? Not a card shark, not putting us off guard, not cheating us out of our money, or the idea that our money’s hard-earned?”

“Pick one,” Rich said, shoving his glasses up.

“Rich always wins,” Mike informed Jeremy, kicking his legs out under the coffee table. “Well, okay, not *always* always, but he almost always goes home with more money than he came in with. He’s got this big brain thing going. Counts cards or something.”

“That’s *blackjack*, idiot,” Rich said irritably. “I just have a system.”

“Probably involves spreadsheets,” Mike said. “Equations. Math shit.”

“It probably helps that we all drink a lot and get stupid and excitable,” Simon added, taking a deep pull off his beer as if to illustrate.

“That doesn’t hurt,” said Rich in agreement.

Someone knocked on the door. “Someone get that!” Sandra yelled from the kitchen.

“I’m already up, I’ll get it,” Jeremy said, holding up a hand to forestall Mike scrambling up from the floor and disappearing into the entryway. Mike collapsed

back onto the ground with a sigh. Simon shut his eyes and drank his beer, for the moment just listening; he could hear water running, Sandra clattering around behind him doing whatever it was she was doing, and under that the basso rumble of Johnny's voice from the entry hall, overlaid with Jeremy's smooth tenor and a faint rustling noise.

Johnny appeared a moment later, beerless, to another chorus of greetings. "Yo," he said, claiming the spot Jeremy had been lurking in a moment before. "We all here?"

"You're the last," Simon said. "Whose turn is it to order the pizza?"

"Nate's," Rich said. The water in the kitchen shut off.

"Right," Simon said. "Nate, go find Archer—"

"I'm right here," Jeremy said from directly behind him. Startled, Simon jerked in his chair, although he managed to restrain himself to a controlled full-body twitch at the last moment. Mike snickered.

"Sneaking up on me through the kitchen is *cheating*," Simon said, once his heart had settled back into its normal rhythm. "Anyway, as I was saying, there should be a menu around here somewhere, tell Nate what you want to eat so he can call out for it."

"Here, menu," Sandra said, poking her head out again. There was a little rustle of paper from behind Simon.

"Other than that, we good?" Simon asked.

There was a general murmur of agreement. "I'm done," Sandra said. "First chance I've had to do the dishes all week. This place was starting to look like Mike lived here or something."

"I wish," Mike said mournfully, flopping out on his back on the carpet. "Hey, Sandy baby, can I move in with you? You pay the rent and do all that cleaning shit for me and I'll be your sex slave, swear to God . . ."

"Sounds like she's getting the short end of the stick there," Simon said.

"Literally," Johnny added, flicking one of his everpresent toothpicks out of his shirt pocket and sticking it in his mouth.

Mike kicked out in his general direction and missed by about a foot. "Shit," he wailed. "I don't wanna get up. Someone go hit Texas for me."

Nate looked down at the can in his hand, drained off the last of it, and then threw the can awkwardly, overhand, at Johnny. Johnny tilted his head to the side. The empty can bounced harmlessly off the wall next to his ear. "Whoops," Nate said. "Missed."

"Hey!" Sandra snapped, sharply enough to make Nate yelp. "It is *too early in the evening* for throwing things." Nate hunched his shoulders. Sandra glared at him.

"You all suck," Mike said genially, and rolling up onto his knees he launched himself at Johnny, knocking him backwards into the short hallway leading to Sandra's bedroom with a room-shaking thud.



“Hey!” Sandra yelled over the resulting din. “My neighbors already hate me, you two cut that out or I’m coming in there after you!”

“Woo hoo!” Mike yelled from the other room with mighty good cheer. Sandra stormed in there after them. Half a second before the noise redoubled Simon heard Jeremy trying and failing not to laugh.

“So what sort of poker do you usually play?” Jeremy asked, squeezing in between Mike and Nate at one end of the table. The dining room table was barely large enough for the six of them; with a seventh person at the table it was definitely getting low on elbow room. Simon resigned himself to an evening of playing his cards close to his chest, especially since it looked like he was getting stuck next to Sandra, who played poker with all the fair play and good sportsmanship of a great white shark.

“Eh, we muck around with the fancy shit sometimes, but for the most part we just stick with five-card draw,” Mike said. Sandra swept by and tossed a new pack of playing cards onto the table with a thud.

“Mm,” Jeremy said. “The basics, in other words.”

“That and it’s about all most of us can remember how to play when we’re trashed,” Mike said cheerfully, picking up the box of cards and shaking the plastic-wrapped deck out from inside. “Boss?” he said, holding it up for Simon’s ritual approval.

Simon studied the shrinkwrapped lump for a moment. The plastic looked intact, and the cards had plain dark blue backs that didn’t look easy to mark. “Looks fine to me,” he finally said. “Long as the plastic’s not broke, I’d say we’re good.”

“Anyone want another beer before I come sit down?” Sandra asked, hovering in the doorway to the kitchen.

Johnny picked up his bottle and eyed it. “Yeah, gimme another.”

“I’m good,” Nate said. Sandra disappeared into the kitchen.

“Shit,” Mike muttered, clawing ineffectually at the plastic. After a moment he gave up and raised his voice. “Hey, Sandy, I’m gonna need to borrow your nails, I can’t get this plastic shit open without gnawing on it.”

“I’ll get it,” Jeremy offered, holding out his hand for the deck.

“Shit no,” Mike said. “I’m not gonna be the one responsible for letting you switch the deck out for marked cards or something.”

Jeremy let his hand drop. “I’m really not a card shark, I promise you,” he said patiently. “In fact, it’ll be something of a miracle if I win anything at all.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what you say,” Mike said. “Course, I could totally say that I’m the queen of England and it doesn’t make it true.”

Jeremy raised an eyebrow at him. Mike just beamed and then started ripping at a convenient corner of the shrinkwrap with his teeth, at least until Sandra caught him at it and smacked the back of his head, making him yelp. “Give me

that," Sandra said frostily, leaning over Jeremy's shoulder to pass Johnny another bottle of beer. Jeremy ducked obligingly. "I don't want your germs all over the cards."

"I've *had* my shots," Mike protested, but he held up the cards.

Sandra took them and scraped her short nails along the back of the deck, raising the shrinkwrap in three laddered furrows before one of her nails caught and tore the plastic. "There," she said, peeling the rest away in a long spiralling strip and handing the unwrapped cards to Nate. "Shuffle those," she ordered him and disappeared into the kitchen with the shrinkwrap trailing behind her.

Nate picked out the advertising cards and then looked at Simon. "Jokers in or out?"

"In," Simon decided. "We get into better fights when there are wild cards involved."

Jeremy studied his cards, rubbing one finger absently along his lower lip while he thought. He kept doing that. Simon was trying to ignore it. "I fold," Jeremy finally said, collapsing the fan of his cards and putting them down on the table in front of him.

"I'll see you," Nate said, tossing a white chip into the pile, "and raise you a dollar." He tossed in another.

Sandra wordlessly tossed in two white chips, matching Nate. Simon considered his cards, carefully keeping his face blank. Pair of tens . . . "Eh," Simon said, and tossed in two white chips of his own. He looked at Rich. "You still in?"

Rich's face was completely expressionless. Simon could almost hear the whirring. "I fold," Rich finally said.

"Okay, folks," Simon said. "Show 'em." He put down his cards. "Pair of tens."

"Aw, man," Nate said. "Pair of sevens."

"Three threes," Sandra said, tossing them onto the table one at a time like she was dealing them. "Sorry, boss."

"Night's still young," Simon said, leaning back in his chair and watching Sandra rake in the pot. "Besides, what is that, eight bucks? Yeah, I couldn't do without that, it was gonna feed me all week . . ."

"Big, big talk from a small, small man," Sandra said, making a neat new stack of her winnings. "Whose deal?"

"Mine," said Jeremy. He already had about three-quarters of the deck in his hands. Johnny made a pass over the table and got most of the rest, stretching across Mike to hand them to Jeremy.

"So deal," Simon said, not bothering to sit up. "But be warned, we're aaaall watching you."

"I'm still not a card shark, Simon," Jeremy said, although he'd made the protest so many times by this point that it was starting to sound kind of perfunctory.

He neatly split the pile of cards in two and fanned them back together, then bridged them and let them fall.

Just to live up to his word Simon carefully watched him do it, although if he were being honest with himself he'd admit that he didn't really know exactly what to look for. It looked like ordinary shuffling to him. Still, just to keep things lively, he said, "I saw that."

"Saw what?" Jeremy said, pausing with the deck split.

"I don't know," Simon said, pointing, "but I saw it. It was right there. Whatever it was."

Jeremy hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and riffled the cards back together. "Good on you," he said.

Simon raised his beer can in wordless salute and then drained it off.

"... so there I am, in sight of my goal," Jeremy was saying an hour later, rearranging his hand. Empty pizza boxes were stacked haphazardly in the corner of the room and the number of empty cans and bottles on the table had tripled; even Jeremy had one lurking at his elbow, although only one, which he'd drunk with dinner despite Simon's warning glance. It was one of Nate's. Simon wasn't sharing. "Everything's gone perfectly so far. The alarms are down, the high-tension wire I'm meant to use to escape is there, the people on the floors below me have no idea that I'm there, and I even have a lovely padded tube—" Jeremy put his cards down on the table, face down, and then held up his hands about three feet apart "—rigged up to hold the blasted thing, complete with a backpack harness to keep my hands free..."

"Too good to be true," Johnny opined, frowning at his cards.

"Isn't that always the way?" Jeremy asked wryly. "So of course when I get into the room where the African art is stored, I discover that the fertility idol in question is almost twice as large as I'd been led to believe—" his hands spread out further, describing an area almost five feet long and nearly putting his hand in Mike's face "—and as such far too large to fit in the carrying tube I'd made for it." Mike sniggered, batting at Jeremy's hand.

"So what'd you do?" Nate asked, and then put down a red chip, adding, "I'll start with five."

Sandra whistled through her teeth. "Too rich for me. I'm out."

"I'll call," Simon said, throwing in five white chips.

Rich whirled a moment in thought. "I'll see you and raise," he finally said, tossing in a red chip and a white one. Johnny wordlessly matched it.

"Well," Jeremy said, now laughing a little. "There was no way I was going to leave without it, after all that trouble."

"I fold," Mike broke in. He put his cards down and settled back in his chair.

"But I needed my arms and hands free to climb out along the wire," Jeremy said, adding, "and I'll see you and raise you." He flicked two red chips into the pot. Nate blinked rapidly and then added another red chip.

Simon spent a moment eyeing Jeremy, considering. He was pretty sure he knew Jeremy's mannerisms better than anyone currently at the table; the question was, was he bluffing? "... I fold," Simon said, putting his three jacks down.

*Whirrrr.* "Call," Rich finally said, taking a white chip out of the pot and putting in a red one. Johnny scowled, scratching at his cheek, thinking.

"So come on, spill," Nate said, now laughing a bit himself in anticipation. "How'd you get it out?"

Jeremy put a hand over his face for a moment in mock embarrassment. "So I take this two-meter-long African fertility idol—"

"Damn," Mike broke in. "Why don't I have stories that start that way? I been wasting my life!"

"—and I wedge it between my thighs, as high up as it can go—" Jeremy snorted out a laugh before he could stop himself "—so I have this massive meter-long wooden *thing* jutting out in front of me—" his hands made an extremely descriptive gesture that Simon could really have lived without "—and another half a meter or so sticking out *behind* me—" Nate's cheeks were pink and Mike was already hooting "—and so I leave the building hanging from the wire, climbing hand over hand with my thighs clamped down as tightly as they'd go and my ankles locked together and what amounts to a gigantic wooden erection leading the way—" Mike lost it at this point, dropping his head to the table and whooping "—and by the time I reached the other building and relative safety I had learned a valuable new lesson: *always* double-check to be certain that your employer gave you the measurements in centimeters and not *inches*..."

"Oh, God," Nate squeaked, his face a brilliant pink, and then he dissolved into helpless hiccuping laughter. Sandra cracked up, and a heartbeat later so did most everyone else, even Simon, who'd heard it before.

Johnny, still snickering a little, threw four more white chips into the pot as the general hilarity died down. "Call," he said.

Jeremy's shoulders were still shaking, the corners of his lips twitching upwards now and then, as he wordlessly spread out his hand: five hearts.

"Aw, man, he's got a flush," Nate said, putting down aces and sevens. "Beats me and my two pair."

Rich's lips thinned. "I had a straight," he muttered, putting down his cards.

"Shit," Johnny said, turning his own over. "Same here."

Jeremy beamed and leaned forward to rake the pot in. "Well! If telling on myself is going to bring me good luck, I suppose I'll have to continue!"

"Shit, so that *was* you," Mike said. "I remember that one 'cause Johnny was dating some chick in Art Theft back then. Oh, uh, gimme two."

Sandra dealt Mike two more cards. "Anyone else?"

"In an attempt to preserve what's left of my dwindling funds, I fold," Jeremy said, putting his cards down in a neat stack on the table. "Yes, that was me, and by God I never want to do it again."

"I'll take three," Nate told Sandra, leaning forward past the forest of beer cans to put his discards in the pile. His cheeks were flushed, and his hand wobbled.

"Shit, what was it, somebody ratted you out to the cops like three days before, right?" Mike asked, absently plucking a card out of his hand and refiling it.

"Exactly," Jeremy said. "One of the people I'd been working with got picked up for, er, passing counterfeit bills? I believe? And in an effort to weasel himself free he sold me out. Fortunately for me he didn't know much, but the panel was only going to be on exhibit for another week, so I couldn't exactly call it off."

"Hey, are we playing cards here or what?" Simon asked, although he didn't really so much care. He'd had three of his own beers and one of Sandra's; everything was warm and fuzzy and pleasant. "I'm gonna open with two," he said, dropping two white chips into the pot.

"I'll call," Rich said immediately, adding his own. Johnny glanced at Rich and silently folded.

"Call and *raaaaise*," Mike said with immense tipsy smugness, flipping a red chip into the pot.

"I'm in," said Nate, accidentally knocking over a stack of white chips as he reached for a red one. He squawked and scrabbled for them, nearly knocking over Jeremy's stacks in the process; Jeremy clapped his hand down over his chips in the nick of time. Nate flushed and threw in five white chips, then subsided into an embarrassed silence while he restacked the rest.

"Hm," Sandra said, scowling at her cards.

"So c'mon, spill," Mike said, elbowing Jeremy in the side. "How'd you do it?"

"Well, it was definitely going to be close to impossible to sneak out with the blasted thing," Jeremy began.

"Oh, what the hell, I'm in," Sandra said, putting in a red chip. Simon dutifully added three more white chips.

*Whirrr.* "I'll see you and raise you two," Rich finally said, flicking out a red chip.

"It was almost four feet tall and painted on wood. Not the sort of thing you can hide under your jacket," Jeremy went on. "And they'd tightened security to ludicrous levels, to boot. So I made a few changes in the plan, called in a few favors..."

"Aw, what the hell," Mike said, tossing in two more white chips. Nate nodded violently and did the same.

"They were going to be looking for someone trying to remove the panel from the grounds," said Jeremy. "So I didn't."

“Wait, what?” Mike said.

“Shit,” Sandra said. “I fold.”

“Yeah, I’m out,” Simon said, tossing his cards at the discard pile. “So what’d you do, hide it somewhere?”

Jeremy shot him a pained look. “Well, *yes*, Simon, but I’d been wanting to build up to that point,” he said. “At any rate! There were so many bloody guards on duty that I simply didn’t have enough time to finesse the alarm system. So I gassed the two in the room after the roving guard had gone, took the panel off the wall, which set off all the alarms, of course, and then went to earth, so to speak.”

Rich irritably cleared his throat and slapped his cards to the table. “Four fives,” he said.

Mike groaned. “Shit, and I had a full house!”

“Oh, man, I only had the three sevens,” Nate said. Rich twitched out a little half-a-smirk and picked up his winnings.

“Let’s break for a second,” Sandra said, pushing back her chair. “I need another beer.”

“Get me another while you’re up,” Simon said absently, gathering up the deck. “So you hid it somewhere in the museum.”

“Precisely. In my experience, museums are rabbit warrens, particularly the older ones,” Jeremy said. “So I’d come in a few days before dressed as a university student on hols . . .”

“Oh, Christ.” Simon shook his head. “. . . no, I can’t even picture that.”

“Flannel shirt, jeans, a pair of trainers, and a backpack—do stop *snorting*, Simon, one does what one must for one’s career—at any rate, no one looks at students twice, especially not in the big museums, and it was child’s play to get ‘lost’ on the way to the restrooms and ‘accidentally’ find myself on the wrong side of a few conveniently unlocked doors.”

Mike raised his voice. “Hey, Sandy! Grab me another too, will you?”

“So I found a dusty and forgotten little niche full of perfectly *terrible* turn-of-the-century ‘works in the style of’ paintings and costumery,” Jeremy said, “and I ‘lost’ my backpack there, hidden under a massive ladies’ skirt. And, well, it’s possible I forgot to relock the doors on my way out.”

Nate blinked fuzzily at him. “So what was in the backpack?”

“Food, mostly,” Jeremy said. “Granola, jerky, all that sort of camping food. Enough to keep me going for a few weeks assuming I wasn’t picky. The police were going quite mad outside, tossing the entire city looking for me, so where better to hide than the one place they thought I’d already left?”

“Slick,” Johnny opined.

“Somewhat nasty, actually,” Jeremy said, shuddering a bit. “I stayed up there in that airless, dusty, hot alcove for the next two weeks, living on the dry food I’d smuggled in in the backpack and sneaking down to use the restrooms and water fountains during the night. God willing I’ll never have to do it again. I was

filthy and sweaty and if I hadn't brought a couple of books and one of those little dynamo-powered radios, I'd have gone mad from boredom."

"Beer," Sandra announced, reappearing with a bottle and two cans. "So what'd you do with the panel?"

"Oh, I put it in the cubby with all the tacky paintings," Jeremy said. "It fit right in."

"Wasn't there some thing about them almost catching you, though?" Mike asked, taking his beer from Sandra and popping the can open. "I remember Johnny's lady friend—crap, Texas, what was her name?"

"Hell if I remember," Johnny said.

Mike paused long enough to give Johnny a high-five. "Anyway, she said you were spotted carrying the thing away but they lost you going, uh, into some French place the name of which I don't remember."

Jeremy smiled. "Oh, you mean that little kerfuffle with a couple of my more trusted business associates running away through the night carrying a big hunk of plywood?"

Mike whistled. "You're a real bastard, you know that?" he asked, more or less admiringly.

"There were at least three teams running around Paris with identical hunks of wood," Jeremy said cheerfully. "There were a *lot* of people eager to reassure me that their associate's little, er, moral failing hadn't a thing to do with them. Plus the ensuing commotion ensured that no one stopped to think long enough to figure out that I might still be in the museum. Very handy."

"And you got one of them to call in that fake ransom demand, right?" Simon asked.

"Well, that was a different friend of mine, one who didn't mind accepting a free vacation to Switzerland for a couple of days," Jeremy said. "But, yes, something like that. By the time I actually picked up the panel and left the museum, everyone thought I was in Switzerland, the museum's security level was even worse than usual thanks to the guards constantly second-guessing themselves, and I was able to walk out more or less free and clear."

"Man," Simon said, shaking his head and chugging off a good third of his beer. "I cannot *wait* to call Interpol on Monday and tell them this shit. They are gonna crap their pants."

"I think you're far too drunk to be clearly remembering the things I'm telling you," Jeremy said serenely.

"I'm not drunk," Simon said, and belched for emphasis.

"That's bullshit," Rich said, interrupting Jeremy and slapping his cards to the table like he was personally offended by them. Two red spots burned high in his cheeks. "There's no way in hell you did that for fifteen minutes."

"Ooooooh," Mike warbled, "someone's a mean drunk."

Rich's glare switched from Jeremy to Mike. "Just because you're drunk doesn't mean I am," he snapped.

"Well, I probably couldn't go for fifteen just now," Jeremy said judiciously. "My right side is still a bit weak from when I was shot. But even now I could almost certainly hold that position for ten, and I hope to be back up to speed in another few months."

"Bullshit," Rich said again, venomously. Even Simon, who was on his seventh beer and feeling no pain whatsoever, roused himself enough to give Rich a warning look, which Rich ignored.

Jeremy considered this for a moment. "Would you like me to prove it?"

"Here we go," Simon said tiredly.

"We are playing *cards* here," Sandra broke in. "Save the macho shit for later. I'm down almost forty bucks and I want to win some back."

"There's no reason we'd have to stop playing," Jeremy said, his eyes unfocusing as he thought. "In fact, it would rather prove my point if we kept on."

"Yeah, I think I want him to prove it too," Mike said, slumping back in his chair. "Mostly 'cause it'd be funny."

Jeremy turned in his chair, looking consideringly at Mike. "In that case, would you be willing to help me?"

"Help you what?" Mike said, immediately suspicious.

"Help me prove it," Jeremy said patiently.

"... yeah, okay, fine," Mike said. "Whaddaya you need me to do?"

Jeremy slid his chair back and stood up, stretching his arms up over his head and sucking in his stomach muscles. "Stand up."

Mike kicked out of his chair and stood up. "Okay. What now? We gonna do the Hokey Pokey?"

"No, all I need you to do is stand there and be a big strong fellow for ten minutes or so—" and Jeremy's hands hit the ground at Mike's feet. Mike barely had a chance to yowp in startlement before Jeremy's legs snapped closed around his neck. "Brace yourself," Jeremy said, his cheerful voice somewhat muffled by his head being under the table. Mike flailed about and bitched for a second before leaning back against Jeremy's weight; after a moment Jeremy's reaching hands appeared, followed by the rest of him, as he did the world's most ridiculous stomach crunch. "Whoof," he said, a little out of breath. "There we are. Parallel to the floor using only my stomach muscles."

"Aw man, get off me, contrary to popular opinion I don't swing this way," Mike wailed.

"Time me?" Jeremy said to Rich, who was scowling at the whole spectacle. "If I fall or grab my legs before ten minutes are up, I'll gladly admit that you were right."



“... fine,” Rich said, rolling his eyes, and poked at his watch for a moment before subsiding into a muttering sulk that prominently featured the phrase ‘really unnecessary’.

“This is so not cool!” Mike said in a panicky voice, leaning back against the burden of Jeremy’s weight and flailing his arms. “I mean, I am not liking this at all, someone get him off me!”

“Eh, you knew what a drama queen Archer is, you got yourself into this one,” Simon said absently, restacking his white chips. “You can just suffer.”

“Men,” Sandra said, rolling her eyes. “Let’s play already.”

“Then could someone please pass me the cards?” Jeremy said. “I believe it’s my deal.”

After a moment a pink-cheeked Nate scrabbled at the table, collecting the cards and passing them up to Jeremy, who shot him an upside-down smile. “I believe I’ll need you to handle my chips, too,” he told Nate.

“Okay,” Nate said, blinking rapidly.

Jeremy lifted his head and surveyed the flat plane of his stomach, a convenient surface, before setting the deck of cards on it. “My deal,” he said again, and split the deck in half, shuffling the cards on his stomach while Mike held his hands up and watched.

“One for me,” Jeremy said, putting it flat on his chest before letting his head fall back to survey the rest of the table, upside down. “Hm,” he said, and skimmed a card along the table to land in front of Nate. Sandra’s followed, then Simon’s, which fell a bit short—Simon snorted and leaned forward, picking it up—then Rich’s and Johnny’s. Jeremy looked back up at Mike. “Catch?”

“Eh?” Mike said.

“Catch,” Jeremy said again, flicking a card off the top of the deck and popping it into the air.

Mike yelped and snapped it out of the air before it could fall. “You could just *hand* it to me,” he said peevishly, now more or less hugging Jeremy’s legs in order to hold onto his card. “I’m *right here*, not that I want to be or anything.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jeremy said, and dealt himself a second card before letting his head fall back and repeating the process.

“I gotta tell you,” Simon said after close to a minute of watching this, “that is awfully cute, you two.”

“Shut up,” Mike wailed. “If I’d known what he was gonna do...”

“You’d still have done it but made it into a big gay joke,” Sandra said, plucking her last card off the table.

“Well, yeah,” Mike said, startled out of his bitching. “I mean, I got a rep to uphold here.”

“Not all you got to uphold right now,” Johnny pointed out. “Start the draw round.”

“Oh!” Nate said. “I, uh, I’ll take one.”

“One,” Jeremy said, skimming the card over to land in front of Nate. “Ms. Leone?”

“I’m going to fold,” Sandra said, stacking her cards on the table. “You deal shit hands when you’re upside down.”

“My apologies.”

“Three,” Simon said, more to watch Jeremy maneuver than anything else. Jeremy’s face was definitely getting a touch pink, although he was also finding his range; Simon’s three cards landed neatly in front of him in something approximating a stack.

Rich’s irritated glare was moving from the face of his watch to Jeremy and back. Simon had to nudge him before Rich blinked and snapped, “Fold,” dropping his cards precipitately on the table and going back to eyeing his watch.

Johnny shifted his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “Two.”

“Two,” Jeremy echoed, flicking out two cards to spin to a stop in front of Johnny. “And for you?”

“I’m gonna fold just so you don’t throw any more cards at me,” Mike said.

Johnny snorted. Jeremy just shrugged—an interesting motion at that angle—and dealt two more cards onto his chest.

“I’ll open with a dollar,” Nate said, tossing out a white chip.

Simon studied his cards. Nothing but a pair of sixes. “I’ll see you and raise you four,” he said, flipping a red chip into the pot.

Johnny grunted, considered this, and tossed in a red chip. “Raise you,” he said, and threw in another.

“Wooooooo, man, it’s gonna be one of those rounds,” Mike said.

“Those rounds?” Jeremy asked, rolling his head back around to look up at Mike. “Never mind. Nate, if you don’t mind, I’ll call.”

Nate fumbled a blue chip out of Jeremy’s (rather pathetic) holdings and tossed it in, then took a white chip out and threw in a blue chip of his own. He glanced from side to side in a parody of furtiveness, then tossed in another red chip.

“You’re bluffing,” Simon said genially. Nate immediately flushed pink, proving it. Simon smiled down at his cards. “Shit,” he said, “let’s see, I put in five . . .”

“Another ten,” Sandra said.

“Right,” Simon said, and tossed in a blue chip. And another. Nate squeaked.

“Shit,” Johnny said. “I’m out.”

“I’ll call,” Jeremy said. “Please.”

Nate moved the chips from Jeremy’s stacks to the pot, then swallowed. “I-I gotta fold.”

“You and me,” Simon said, eyeing the horizontal Jeremy over the top of his cards. “Show me what you got.”

“Alas,” Jeremy said, as serenely as he could while red in the face, “all I have is a pair of sevens.” He held his cards up, or down, or something, upside-down in front of his face.

Simon eyed them for a moment, then tsked. “Well, shit, all I got is a pair of sixes,” he said, spreading out his cards. “Why do we all always try to bluff at once?”

“’Cause we all figured everybody else would be distracted by the floor show,” Sandra said.

“Oh, right,” said Simon. “Nate, pick up the man’s winnings.” He glanced at Rich. “How long’s it been, Rich?”

Rich muttered something.

Simon leaned in. “Sorry, didn’t catch that.”

“Little over five minutes,” Rich muttered.

Everyone else turned a speculative eye on Jeremy. “He’s awfully pink,” Sandra noted dispassionately.

“Not wobbling, though,” Johnny said.

“Hey, Mike, pull up his shirt,” Sandra said. “Let’s see if his muscles are spasming yet.”

“Oh hell no!” Mike said, flinging up his hands in horror. “I’m not gonna touch him any more than I gotta.”

Jeremy dropped his cards in front of Nate, then reached down and pulled the hem of his shirt free of his pants, exposing his stomach to a general explosion of groaning. “Christ, I don’t wanna see that,” Simon said, staring at it. “Put your shirt down, Archer.”

“He’s not spasming,” Johnny reported after clinically studying Jeremy’s stomach. “Think he’s gonna make it.”

“Of course he’s going to make it,” Sandra said. “He wouldn’t have offered to prove it if he didn’t know he could do it.”

“Because he’s a show-off and we all know it by now,” Simon said, rubbing his forehead. “Christ. Your deal, Nate.”

“Oh!” Nate said, twitching a little. “Right!” He looked up at Jeremy. “Should I just hand you yours, or what?”

“Just deal them onto the table in front of my chair,” Jeremy said, a bit breathless again. “I’ll take them from there.”

Nate dealing was much quicker than Jeremy dealing, since Nate was upright and sitting in a chair like a normal person. Jeremy waited until all five of his cards were sitting on the table before reaching down and picking them up, flicking rapidly through them; then he made a little ‘hk!’ sound and his eyes went wide.

“Oh oh,” Johnny said.

“He’s bluffing,” Sandra said, staring at her own cards. “Don’t fall for that again. I’ll stand with these.”

“I’ll take three,” Simon said, and nudged Rich, just to be safe.

“Two,” Rich muttered, darting a glare at Simon.

“Three,” Johnny said.

“One,” said Mike.

Jeremy folded up his cards and put them back down on the table. “I’ll fold,” he said in that same breathless voice.

“If you’re gonna fold, what was that about, then?” Simon said, gesturing vaguely at Jeremy with his new cards.

“Tell you later,” Jeremy said, folding his hands on his chest, demonstrably far away from his legs.

Simon scrutinized him for a moment. “No,” he finally said. “I think I want to know now.”

“I’m not sure that would be fair, Simon—”

“Now, Archer. I’m the boss. I get to cheat once per Saturday. It’s the rules.”

Jeremy sighed a little. “It would seem that Mike here was dealt quite a good hand.”

“Aw, *fuck*,” Mike cried. “Did you peek at my cards while you were down there? That’s just fucking rude, that’s the kind of thing Sandy does . . .”

“Er, no no,” Jeremy said, chewing on his lower lip. “It’s just that, er, you picked up your cards and had a somewhat *physical* reaction.”

Mike went red all the way up to his hairline. Half a second later the room exploded in whooping, and Simon dropped his head to the table and proceeded to laugh himself sick. “I fold,” he wheezed, when he could.

Simon slithered comfortably down in the passenger seat and rolled the window down about halfway, letting in the damp breeze to cool himself off and maybe chase some of the fog out of his beer-blurred brain. “You drive like my grandma,” he said, shutting his eyes and smiling at nothing. “Wuss.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Jeremy said, not speeding up. “How awful of me, to insist on driving the speed limit.”

“Wuss,” Simon said again. “You’d think you didn’t want to get pulled over or something.”

“Oh, it couldn’t be that. I positively adore the close attentions of the law, Simon.”

“Heh,” Simon said. “I saw what you did there.”

“Mm?”

“See,” Simon explained, making idle little grabby motions at the air in front of himself, “I’m part of the law, right? So you were. Uh. Word. Thing. *Insinuating* at me. Again.”

Jeremy didn’t say anything for a long moment, and Simon, his eyes closed, eventually became aware that Jeremy was laughing under his breath. “Oh, you must be *quite* tiddly,” Jeremy eventually said, apparently vastly amused.

"Is that some British faggot word for drunk?" Simon asked, cracking one eye open.

"Essentially, yes," Jeremy said, glancing at him. "It's so nice to see that you've maintained a grip on your ability to insult me."

"It'll be the last thing to go," Simon promised. "Shit, you need someone to knock you down a few rungs ever so often."

"Well, if someone's got to take the piss out of me, I suppose it might as well be you."

"That's *disgusting*," Simon grandly informed him. "I don't know what you've heard but I'm not that kind of girl, Mr. Archer."

Jeremy raised an eyebrow at the windshield. "As far as I can tell, you're not any sort of girl at all, Mr. Drake."

"And I guess you'd know," Simon said.

"... admitting that out loud? You *are* tiddly."

"I only had *eight beers*," Simon said. "And I walked out of there at least twenty dollars up, thanks to your little stunt."

"I'm so happy for you," Jeremy said. "It's a pity I didn't benefit from it. Your team fleeced me like a sheep."

"Still, don't think I appreciate you getting all cozy with Mike like that," Simon said.

Jeremy laughed faintly, flicking on the turn signal and heading up the freeway onramp. "Why?" he said. "You aren't jealous, are you, Simon?"

"No! No no no," Simon protested, waving his hands. "Well, maybe a little bit. But I'm not jealous over you. I'm jealous over *him*. ... shit, that came out really wrong."

Jeremy hunched his shoulders in a transparent attempt not to burst out laughing.

"No, no, see," Simon said, making emphatic pointing gestures to ensure that he was believed, "he's on my team. He belongs to me, see, not to you, and I don't like you taking liberties."

"Apparently he didn't like it either," Jeremy murmured, still smiling.

"Exactly!" Simon said. "Exactly. See, me and him and the rest of them, we're a team, this almighty motherfucking *unit*, and you're ... you're just this guy."

"Just this guy," Jeremy repeated.

"Yeah," said Simon. "And when this is done and you go away again, me and him and the rest of them are still gonna be a team."

"I wasn't arguing that with you, Simon."

Simon let his head loll to the side, squinting up at Jeremy. "Shit, did I hurt your feelings?" he asked with a bit of relish.

"Don't be silly, Simon," Jeremy said, looking away for as long as it took him to shift over a lane. "I concede that you have a point."

"You and your fancy language," Simon said, shutting his eyes again. "You always sound fancier when you're upset, you know that?"

Jeremy paused. "I'm not *upset*, Simon."

"Psh. Sure. Whatever." Simon waved that away. "I'm just saying that you can try and. Uh. Word. Um."

"Protest?" Jeremy prompted after a moment.

"*Insinuate*," Simon said again, grabbing the word out of the air. "Insinuate yourself into the team all you want, but it's not gonna work. They like you okay and all, but you're not one of us. That's all I'm saying."

"... I'm aware of that, Simon," Jeremy finally said. "Believe me, I'm aware."

"Aw, hell, don't be like that," Simon said. The wind was starting to annoy him, so he jabbed at the window button until the window rolled up, abruptly plunging the Jeep into something like silence. "I mean, hell, I like you too, even though you're kind of an attention whore."

Jeremy was silent.

"What?" Simon asked. "What'd I say?"

"I suppose I never thought of myself like that," Jeremy finally said.

"Huh. Well. Okay, maybe you're not usually, but with all of us hanging on you, you keep showing off, you know?" Simon raised his voice into a wobbly falsetto. "Oh, look at me, I'm sooooo good at stealing things, I'm soooo athletic and crap..." He dropped the falsetto as fast as he'd picked it up, reaching up to rub the front of his throat. "I mean, we get it. You're awesome. We're all just impressed as hell, so you can stop now."

"Mm," Jeremy said, his voice cool.

Simon grunted when Jeremy didn't say anything else. "What? Shit. Don't pay any attention to me, I'm drunk. Or tiddlywinks or whatever."

"Are you?" Jeremy said distantly.

"Shit, yeah," Simon said, vaguely groping for a way out of this minefield he'd inadvertently stumbled into. "I mean, if I wasn't drunk off my ass, you know I wouldn't do this," he said, and reached over to put his hand on Jeremy's thigh.

Jeremy didn't drive off the road, for which Simon was generally grateful. In fact, the car didn't lurch at all, leaving Simon to wonder if Jeremy had even *noticed*, but after a moment Jeremy slid down a little in his seat, giving Simon's fingers more room. "Mm," Jeremy said with a good deal more warmth. "You *are* drunk."

"That's my excuse," Simon said, sliding his hand up, "and I'm sticking to it, and if you wreck my truck I'm gonna kill you."

"Mixed messages," Jeremy said, and he laughed under his breath. The Jeep slowed, slightly. "It's always mixed messages with you."

It was a small sound, and if Simon hadn't been half-listening for it he'd have missed it amidst the general confusion. But he *was* listening for it, and so when Rich made the little satisfied noise at his monitor Simon heard it over (or perhaps under) everybody else talking. Simon half-smiled, leaned forward, picked up his empty coffee mug, and banged it on the table twice like an impromptu gavel. A hush fell. Heads swiveled towards him.

"So," Simon said, cocking an arm over the back of his chair and looking over at Rich. Heads swiveled towards Rich. "What have you got for us? Got us a target?"

"Sort of." Rich flicked the backs of his fingers against his laptop screen. "I've got it narrowed down to three and I don't think it's going to get any narrower."

"Three, huh. I think we can handle three," Simon said slowly, considering this for a moment before surfacing again. "Okay. Give us a quick rundown. I'm so sick of this waiting game I could just puke."

Rich nodded, scooping up his laptop and bringing it to the conference table. Before he could actually get started there was the brief ritual of plugging the laptop in (Rich's devotion to preserving his laptop's battery charge at all times being close to obsession) and Simon seized the moment to scoop up his coffee mug and go refill it.

"The biggest problem is mutual funds and crap like that," Rich said abruptly, shoving his glasses up with the heel of his hand. "It's not like I can just look at a list of individual investors and peel a name out of that. Like Future Secure, just for example, is listed with about forty different mutual funds, and of course none of those funds just happened to invest in all the other targets to date. That'd be too easy."

Simon paused long enough to bring his coffee back to the table. "Okay, because investment shit is *incredibly boring*, let's skip the gory details unless we need them. You say 'three', well, I trust you and your legwork. Give us the rundown."

"I don't *actually* think it's going to be Restructured," Rich said. "They fit everything else, but there was that thing—"

"—with what's-his-face selling their big secret thing to, uh, whatever the name of their big competitor was, right," Nate broke in, nodding furiously.

Rich blinked owlishly at him for a long moment. "Right," he eventually said. "But my point is that that was only about six months ago, so their security is still insanely tight and they're really jumped up. I think it'd be more trouble than it's worth for our thief."

"I'd have to agree," Jeremy said slowly, fiddling with his empty mug. Everyone looked at him. After a moment, he looked up. "Assuming he has any say at all in which targets he hits, he wouldn't go for that."

Rich hesitated, then nodded at Jeremy. "Anyway, next up is Annadale Labs. Personally, I don't like that one so much, but I like it better than Restructured."

"Why don't you like it?" Sandra asked. She was fiddling with one of her nails but looking at Rich.

"Because I like Nova Research a whole lot better," Rich said. "Fits everything right down the line *and* it's the kind of thing that Karpol usually goes for. Small, portable security tech. They're trumpeting little hints about their new fillip on the biometric scanner left and right."

"Bio-what-tric?" Mike asked.

"Biometric," Rich said irritably, flapping a hand. "Things that read personal body signatures. Fingerprints, retinal scans, all that sort of thing. Their new tech can tell when a user is under a lot of stress, like from a hostage situation or a theft attempt, and can react accordingly—it's paydirt for Karpol, given his MO."

"Yeah," Simon said, sipping his coffee. "What's Annadale doing?"

"Something with silicon bullets," Rich said. He scowled at his laptop. "Bullets that deliver a light electric shock on contact, act like a taser for better stopping power, something like that."

"What?" Nate said. "That's ridiculous, silicon shatters too easily—"

"—well, they must be working around it," Rich said, talking right over Nate until Nate subsided. "I don't know the details."

"Okay," Simon said. "So . . . give us the odds as they stand."

"I'd say seventy percent on Nova, twenty on Annadale, ten on Restructured," Rich said. "From what I've got now. I'm confident it's going to be one of those three, though."

"Okay," Simon said again, thinking fast. Finally he nodded once, sharply, and knocked on the table. "Okay! Here's what's going to happen next. Nate, go down to the library division again and get blueprints for all three companies. We'll take a look. You three—" he gestured vaguely at the rest of the table "—start looking 'em up. Mike, take Restructured, Johnny, take Annadale, Sandy, take Nova. Rich probably has the basic stuff already but I want histories, news articles, that sort of thing. Don't contact them directly yet, we don't want an idiot stampede. Rich,



you are the *man*, take the next hour or so off, we'll call it a mini-vacation. Archer, you, uh, I don't know, sit there and look pretty."

"I can do that," Jeremy said, just barely cracking a smile.

"Blueprints!" Nate cried, backing into the room with three fresh new mailing tubes clutched in his arms. His glasses had fallen seriously askew at some point and now hung precariously from the tip of his nose, and he ended up bashing himself in the face with the end of one of the tubes to push them back up.

Simon sighed and rescued the tubes before Nate could do himself any actual damage. "Thanks, Specs. Okay, folks, wrap up what you're doing and let's take a look."

Jeremy stood up and started clearing off the table, whisking papers back into their folders and moving them off onto the empty desk by the front door. Simon dropped the tubes on the end of the table and pulled the endcap off Nova Research with a soft hollow *pop*, shaking the rolled-up printouts into the palm of his other hand. "Scoot 'em back, folks," he said, spreading the blueprints out over the table and nudging people's laptops back.

Nate hurried around and took his usual spot. "I didn't look at them too closely but Nova's pretty small, as far as these go; they've only got three actual labs in the building."

"Mm," Jeremy said, already absorbed in the blueprints with his chin in his hand and one finger crooked over his lips. "Is this a high-rise?"

"Yeah," Nate said. "Ummm . . . nineteenth and twentieth floors, it says here. One lab and management on nineteen and the other two labs on twenty."

"Are they leasing this space, then?"

"I . . . guess so? I mean, they sure don't own the whole building . . ."

"Mm," Jeremy said again, a line appearing between his eyebrows.

"What?" Simon asked.

"I don't know," Jeremy eventually said, still frowning. "There are both advantages and disadvantages to that." The line between his brows smoothed out after a moment. "But I refuse to tender an opinion until I've seen all three."

"Fair enough," Simon said. "Anything you want to know about that we can be checking on?"

Jeremy nodded. "I need to know how many floors the building has total, please. And . . . hm. I assume there's building security in addition to Nova's own, I'd like to know about both. Actually, I'd be obliged if you could find out who else rents in the building—a complete list would be ideal, but if not that, then the renters on the floors immediately below and above. Oh, and also if there are any empty, unrented offices, particularly on the floors closest by."

"And would you also like a pony, while we're at it?" Simon asked. "I hear ponies are all the rage in Cannes this year."

"I'm on it," Sandy said, ignoring Simon in favor of leaning back in her chair and digging out her cell phone. "Can we start the idiot parade now, boss, or should I be sneaky?"

"Hm," Simon said. "Start with the building owners. Don't go directly to Nova yet, just in case."

"Got it." Sandy popped open her phone.

Simon picked up the next tube and pried it open. "Let's go ahead and take a look at Annadale while Sandy handles that." Nova Research vanished under Annadale Labs as Simon unrolled the second set of blueprints.

"Mm," Jeremy said, spreading his fingers out on the new blueprints. "That's fairly . . . dull."

"Judging from their mailing address they're in one of those suburban-sprawl complexes," Rich put in.

Jeremy touched the outline of one wall, as straight as an arrow. "They share this wall with another company, I believe." He let his fingers wander out along the outline of one of the connecting walls, all arbitrary dents and bumps. "It's much too straight in comparison with this one."

Simon frowned, then stood up, craning over the blueprints to get a better angle. "Yeah, that does kinda look like half a building, now that you mention it."

"Ground floor," Jeremy mused. "Not many windows, but a single story."

"So tell us what you want to know about this one," Simon said.

"If they share this wall, and if so, who with," Jeremy said, tapping the long straight line. "Mm. If it's a complex, as has been suggested, I'd like to know if it's gated, how many buildings like this one are in it, and if it comes with its own security. Also what kind of exterior lighting and parking surrounds the building."

"Got it," Johnny said, settling back in his chair and fetching out his own battered cell phone. It had an ominous dent in it. Simon was reasonably sure that dent was Mike's doing, but he couldn't remember for sure.

"Wanna take a look at Restructured?" Simon asked, already popping the end cap off the third tube.

"Why not?" said Jeremy. Simon shook the blueprints out of the tube and rolled them out, adding yet another layer to the impromptu tablecloth.

"Those are less than three months old," Nate said. "Apparently they did a lot of renovating to up security after the thing—whoa."

"That's impressive," Jeremy agreed, shaking his head a little. His fingers traced absently over the newly laid walls and gates stretching like rows of soldiers across the building.

"Think it'd keep you out?" Simon couldn't resist asking.

Jeremy frowned slightly at the blueprints. "No," he finally said, "but it would be an extremely *expensive* hassle for my employer. Judging from where they've placed their new walls, I'd have to say that their security consultant knows what he's doing."

"That's different," Sandra said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, to be fair, most of these companies aren't trying to protect against someone like me in the first place," Jeremy said, sounding almost apologetic. "They're chiefly looking to prevent inside jobs. And the occasional brute-force smash-and-grab."

"Still," Sandra said stubbornly, and then her attention was grabbed by the phone at her ear and she turned away. "Ah, yes, thank you, let me give you our fax number—"

"So can we rule out Restructured, do you think?" Simon asked.

Jeremy didn't answer right away, steeping his fingers in front of his face. Finally he said, "If he has any sort of say at all, yes."

"Do you think he's got a say?"

"I'd . . . think so," Jeremy said, and then his eyes cleared and he looked at Simon. "I don't know."

"Well, that's just nine shades of helpful," Simon said. "Man, am I glad I dragged you all the way to the States for this."

Jeremy closed his eyes and spent a moment or two just breathing deeply, with his forehead touched to his clasped, upraised hands. Simon waited patiently, letting the sound of the various phone conversations going on around them fade to background noise. It wasn't until the fax machine in the corner whirled to life that Jeremy's eyes came back open. "It won't be Restructured," he said, flatly. "You might wish to give them some sort of heads-up, but they are almost certainly not his target."

"Huh," Simon said. "Tell me why not."

"I've never met this Karpol or even heard much about him, but anyone who's managed to consolidate and hold that much power for that long didn't do it by ignoring the experts he's relying on. Whatever else your thief is, he's an expert."

"Huh," Simon said again, and waited.

"On the other hand," Jeremy said, rushing right ahead to fill that empty space in the conversation just like Simon had hoped he would, "either he's being paid very well or Karpol holds some sort of leverage on him. He's certainly not freelancing, either. He *does* work for Karpol directly and take orders, after a fashion."

"Huh," Simon said for the third time, figuring it was working for him so far. "Why?"

"He's moving too fast," Jeremy said. "One job of that size a month, all over this ridiculously oversized country of yours—"

"—just on general principles: hey now—"

"—I'd never work on that kind of punishing schedule unless I was being paid an absurd amount or had no choice," Jeremy said, ignoring the weak sally, "and it also suggests to me that someone else is handling the preliminary footwork."

He's a tool, or, if you'd prefer, part of a team effort, which suggests to me that Karpol isn't just terribly interested in listening to his opinions."

"I think you're contradicting your own case there, hoss," said Simon.

"If I had to guess," Jeremy said, ignoring that too, "I would say that your thief was sat down by some mid-level flunky and given this same choice that your Specs Two has laid out for us. Either Nova, Annadale, or Restructured, his choice, and in that case..." Jeremy trailed off there and pinched the bridge of his nose, lightly. "...in that case, I believe he would pick Annadale."

"... Annadale?" Simon echoed. "Not Nova?"

"Again, it's a bit premature of me to make this call, but based on what I know now, Annadale. I'll be able to make a more educated guess once my questions are answered."

"All right," Simon said slowly. "Tell me why."

"It's the location," Jeremy said. "High-rises are trouble. Too many floors, too few exits from the building. If something goes wrong he's trapped himself in an oversized box and doesn't even have the luxury of going up instead of down, unless he has a helicopter waiting. Given enough time he could fix that, but he hasn't *got* enough time. And..." He trailed off there.

"And?" Simon prompted.

"He has a tendency to panic," Jeremy said, almost unwillingly. "If something goes wrong, he panics. When he panics, he tries to escape. And he knows that. Just by being in a single-story building Annadale has a thousand exits."

"Huh," Simon said. He looked at Rich. "What do you think?"

"I can't argue with that," Rich said, in a voice that very plainly said he wished he could.

Jeremy sighed. "I agree that the prize at Nova Research is much more in keeping with previous—and again, I know next to nothing about this sort of industrial crime *or* about this Karpol. It's just that... I know *him*. And I believe he'd pick Annadale."

"Crap," Simon said, drumming his fingers on the tabletop and thinking. "Okay, let's not make any firm decisions until Archer here gets his questions answered."

"I believe it'll all come down to one thing," Jeremy said. "The security detail outside Annadale. If there's a strong security presence, or a decent fence around the whole complex, or parking lots that are well-lit at all hours, I may well change my vote."

Simon looked at Johnny, who was just now folding up his cell phone. "Tell us," he said.

"No fence," Johnny said, clipping his phone back onto his belt. "Complex doesn't have its own guards, although a police car drives by on the hour, sounds like."

Jeremy took a deep breath. “Therefore, unless their internal security is amazing: Annadale.”

Simon hesitated for a long moment, then nodded. “Annadale.” He paused, looking at Rich. Rich made a faint irritated sound but didn’t seem to have any sort of protest to make. “That’s that, then,” Simon said, clapping his hands together with a sound like rifleshoot. “Time to start the idiot stampede, folks. Mike. Call Restructured, get their security head on the phone, brief him about the potential problem. Stress that we’re ninety percent certain they are not the target.”

“Right, boss,” Mike said. “Are we gonna call them and let them know when the guy is moving?”

Simon chewed on that for a moment. “Why not? Yeah, we’ll do that. Sandra, call Nova, same thing without the ten percent part. Tell him that I’m on the phone right now trying to arrange for a field team to come help keep an eye on them.”

“I’m on it,” Sandra said.

“Johnny,” Simon said, and then stopped and thought. “Call Annadale. Don’t get too chatty. Just brief their security chief about the issue—”

“Your thief may be working with or leaning on one of their employees,” Jeremy hastened to add.

“—and tell him to keep a lid on it,” Simon finished smoothly. “Let him know that we’ll be coming in tomorrow morning.”

Johnny grunted (it sounded vaguely like surprise) and reached for his phone again.

“I’m going to go talk to Upstairs,” Simon said, taking a deep breath. “After you make those calls, I want you all to go on home. Tie up your loose ends, get things settled, pack a bag, get some rest, and *be ready*, because if I get an email from Langridge telling me that he’s moving tonight, I want you all at the airport within the hour, no questions. If not, be here by seven tomorrow morning—” suddenly he was talking right over a chorus of muffled groans “—and we’ll fly out first thing and get set up properly. That all applies to you too, Archer. Any questions?”

Everyone was silent. Jeremy, Simon noticed, was actually hiding a faint smile behind his folded hands.

“Let’s do this thing,” Simon said, surrendering with relief to the familiar rush of *finally doing something*. “Get on it. Texas, you live closest to Archer’s hotel, drop him off on your way home. I’ll call you guys if there’s any word.”

“Hall, sir?” Simon was saying dubiously into the phone not five minutes later, even as he checked his email inbox and found it empty. “No, sir. It’s just that we generally don’t see eye-to-eye . . . no, sir. That’s fine. Now, about Cincinnati . . .”

By the time he got off the phone, ten minutes later, everything was quiet from the main room and Simon nodded in approval. Upstairs would handle sending Team Hall to Seattle to keep an eye on Nova Research, his own team’s flight to

Cincinnati was dealt with, there was a plane and pilot on call if they needed to go tonight . . . Simon slung himself into his desk chair and fished out his cell phone. One last thing to handle, and he thought he'd best do it directly. Or he wanted to do it directly. One or the other.

"Langridge," the voice on the other end of the phone snapped. "Who is this? How did you get this number?"

"Nice to hear from you too, Langridge," Simon said cheerfully, enjoying the nice warm glow of oneupsmanship in his belly and making a mental note to give Rich either a raise or an appreciative pat on the back. "Sorry to have to resort to calling you, but I'm not able to reach my computer at the moment." It was technically true, since in order to reach his computer he'd have to turn his chair almost all the way around.

"Mr. Drake," Langridge said, imbuing his name with such a chilly lack of enthusiasm that Simon actually winced through his grin. "What a *pleasant* surprise."

"Aww, Langridge, you sweet-talker you," Simon said. "Anyway, I don't want to waste your time with idle chitchat, so I'll just get right to the point."

"*Also* a pleasant surprise, Mr. Drake."

"We've managed to pinpoint what we believe is the next target and we're flying out soon," Simon said, trying to keep things nonspecific, just in case. "So I'm going to be away from my computer for the foreseeable future—"

"—and I suppose you want me to call you when this fateful email lands on my desk," Dorothy Langridge finished for him.

"Yes, please," Simon said. "On my cell, the very instant you get it, I don't care what time of day or night it is. Hell, I hope you get it at three in the morning just so you can call and wake me up, if that'll make you feel better."

"Fine," Langridge said, after a frost-covered pause. "But I want to make one thing absolutely clear, Mr. Drake: you owe me for this."

Simon shut his eyes. "I owe you, Langridge," he admitted. "The more warning you can give me, the more I owe you."

"We have a deal, then," said Langridge, thawing a bit. "I'll call you. Oh, and Drake?"

"What?" Simon said, scowling a bit at that peremptory *Drake*.

"Good luck," Langridge said abruptly, and the connection shut off with a bang and a beep before Simon could say anything else.

"Get some dinner," Simon muttered to himself, flicking off the lights in his office. "Go home, pack a bag, get some sleep—"

He broke off there. Jeremy looked up at him briefly, nodded in greeting, and then went back to marking up one of the blueprints with a red pencil.

"Goddammit, Archer, didn't I tell Texas to take you home?" Simon said. "What—"

“You’ll want to give this to the other team,” Jeremy said, overriding him crisply. “I can’t be in two places at once so I’m making note of the places they’ll want to watch. I can’t guarantee that they’ll catch him, mind you, but if they look after the spots I’ve marked up, they should at least prevent him from stealing anything.”

“Ah,” Simon said after a moment, leaning over Jeremy’s shoulder to look at the blueprints. Nova Research was sprinkled liberally with red arrows and x’s, complete with several lengthy notes in Jeremy’s small, precise hand. “Good idea, but hell, if he does hit Nova I’d almost rather they fail to spot him. If he’s not warned, we’ll have another chance in a month. If he figures out we’re onto him, though, I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Jeremy’s pencil, which had paused, moved on after a moment. “I leave it to your discretion whether or not to give them this, then,” Jeremy said, blocking out a rectangle in red and filling it in neatly.

“Sneaky bastard,” Simon said, not without some affection.

“Mm,” Jeremy said. “I suppose that goes for both of us.”

“Guess that leaves it up to me to take you to your hotel,” Simon said with a huge put-upon sigh. “Let me know when you’re done—”

“I don’t think you’ll catch him, not this time around,” Jeremy said, as calm as you please, like all he’d said was *yes, Simon*.

“What?” said Simon, taken aback. “Why not?”

“Well, first of all, Annadale’s a sieve,” Jeremy said, putting the pencil down. “And secondly, easily panicked or not, he’s still—he’s still quite good.”

“But we’ve got an ace up our sleeves, which is to say, you,” Simon pointed out.

“And he’s doing something he’s been doing all his life, while I’ve never attempted to catch anyone before, let alone *him*,” Jeremy said. He was twisting the Nova Research blueprints into a thin roll, keeping his hands busy and keeping his eyes on his hands. “You’ll stop him, of that I have no doubt. Throw a massive scare into him, throw Karpol’s scheme into confusion, all that sort of thing—but he’ll get away.”

“Bullshit,” Simon said confidently. “You are *massively* underestimating the skill and sheer class of my team. We’ll catch him and look pretty doing it. That is, unless you plan to sell us out and tip off your ex, in which case we won’t catch him but we’ll still be damned attractive—”

Jeremy looked up at that. His eyes were bleak. “Don’t.”

“... yeah, okay,” Simon said, looking away. “I won’t.”

“Thank you,” Jeremy said, his voice absent and cool, sliding the blueprints into their mailing tube and capping it. He held it out towards Simon, looking at the floor.

Simon automatically took it. "I'll, uh, give this to Hank tomorrow before we go," he said awkwardly. "Not that his team could find their own asses with a flashlight and a map, but still."

"That's entirely up to you," Jeremy said. "Shall we go? Or I suppose if you're terribly busy I could call a cab . . ."

"Pfft," Simon said, setting the mailing tube on the empty desk at the front of the room where he'd be sure to see it in the morning. "If I don't give you a ride back to your hotel how are you going to buy me dinner?"

It took a moment, but finally he heard Jeremy laugh behind him.



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## ◆ Sixteen

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Mike grabbed the roof of the van in both hands and hung from it, his legs going limp, his spine crackling loudly as he stretched. “Jesus God,” he opined, “this ain’t a fit hour for man nor beast.”

“Whiner,” Simon said affably.

“It is six forty-five in the fucking morning, boss. I am *entitled* to whine.”

“Well, yeah, I didn’t say you weren’t. I’m just stating a fact, Whiny McBitcherson.”

Mike sniggered and stood back up, swinging the driver’s side door shut again. Simon turned around, scuffing a hand through his hair. At this time of the morning motor pool was not only deserted but flooded with a weird light, the rising sun just now starting to compete with the flickering fluorescent bulbs overhead. The light was almost unearthly, one that (in Simon’s own personal unshared opinion) made most white folks look like they were made out of Silly Putty and turned Mike a funky shade of raw chicken.

He glanced towards the exit bay and got a faceful of lightly smoke-scented morning breeze for his troubles. Jeremy was standing just outside on the exit ramp having himself a nice little breakfast cigarette in lieu of actual food. “I said I was sorry,” Simon called.

“And I said it wasn’t a problem,” Jeremy called back, glancing over his shoulder. “I’m certainly not in any danger of starving to death.”

Simon wandered over to join him, out of sheer boredom. “Maybe you can get something to eat in Ohio. I hear they have food there now.”

“Oh, lovely,” Jeremy said, dropping the butt of his cigarette and stepping on it. “Corn.”

“*And* beef,” Simon said. “Maybe even corned beef.”

Jeremy drew in a breath, like he was going to say something, and then stopped and eyed Simon curiously. “If I were to say ‘Ah, the Midwest’, would you be more likely to agree with me or tell me that I had no right to be saying such things about your beloved country?”

Simon thought about it. "Actually," he said, "I'd probably start by pointing out, in a deceptively mild tone, that I'm a Midwesterner myself."

"Really! So is this some sort of homecoming for you?"

"Contrary to your weird British ideas about America, there's more than one city in the Midwest. Hate to break it to you."

"Now you're just inventing things," Jeremy said. Nate struggled in through the interior door, carrying a square equipment locker; Jeremy raised a hand in greeting, calling, "Do you need a hand?"

"I got it," Nate said breathlessly, rolling his shoulder to keep his duffel bag from falling off. Simon sighed and went over to take the equipment locker away from him anyway, just in case. Nate immediately grabbed for the duffel. "Thanks, boss," he said, blinking rapidly. "Rich should be right behind me."

"Right," Simon said, carrying the box over to the back of the van and setting it gently down on the metal lip. "How much crap is he bringing?"

"Just a briefcase," Nate said. "Well, and his stuff."

"Amazing," Simon said, shaking his head. "Maybe we'll have room for everything, assuming Texas doesn't try and bring a howitzer."

"Nope," Johnny said, ambling in from outside. "Brought my prom dress, though. Figured you wouldn't mind."

"Hey, you in pink taffeta, what's not to love? Where's Sandy? Usually she's the first one here."

Johnny shrugged and heaved his own duffel into the back of the van. "We gonna armwrestle for shotgun?"

"Hell, no," said Simon. "I called it ten minutes ago. You wanted it, you should have showed up earlier."

"Morning," Sandra called, backing through the door carrying one end of a footlocker with a briefcase balanced somewhat precariously on top. Rich, at the other end, lifted a hand before grabbing the footlocker again and wrestling it through the door.

Simon glanced at Nate. "Just a briefcase, huh."

Nate flushed. "I, uh, must have missed that one."

Simon turned around. "Okay, suitcases out of the back, folks. C'mon, chop chop, I really want to get to Cincinnati before I die of old age."

"Why would anyone *want* to go to Cincinnati?" Mike said plaintively, wrestling his gym bag back out of the van.

"*Déjà vu*," Jeremy murmured, stepping out of the van.

"Yeah, well, your *vu*'s going to get a lot less *déjà* in a moment," Simon said, stretching. He raised his voice. "We all set?"

A chorus of sleepy but generally affirmative mutters rose in answer, and Simon nodded. "Right. Honda, Texas, get the footlocker. Spring, can you get the little one? Thanks. Anyone need help? No? Okay, you know the drill,

folks. Stick together and try not to shoot anyone, I don't care if they *are* airport security."

"Awww, but boss—!"

"I mean it, Honda," Simon said. "C'mon, let's hustle, our flight supposedly leaves at 8:15."

"Oh, joy," Mike said, but he shoved the van's keys into his pocket and grabbed one end of the footlocker.

"Come on, then. Game faces. Let's do this thing." Simon glanced around. Sleepy-eyed businessmen in suits were streaming towards the airport, most of them towing little wheeled suitcases behind them and not paying a jot of attention to anything except where they were going (and in some cases to the phones attached to their ears). Time to give them a wake-up call, Simon thought, and set off towards the airport at a ground-eating stride, his team fanning out into a purposely grim-faced wedge behind him. Simon caught a look at Mike's 'I so totally eat babies' face in the polished surface of the elevator doors as he went striding past and nearly cracked up.

The automatic doors hissed open barely a heartbeat before Simon went slamming through, and he experienced a momentary surge of adrenalin-fueled glee. "Christ, I love my job," he muttered under his breath, driving through the early-morning crowds with his team in his wake, some of them actually jogging to keep up. He dug his ID folder out of his jeans pocket and flipped it open without breaking stride.

The lines at airport security were already long, even at this ridiculous hour. Businessmen. Simon ignored them, heading instead over to the bored-looking security guard watching the exit gate. The guard blinked once and straightened up, his hand dropping to hover near his gun. Simon was sure the motion was meant to have been unobtrusive. "I'm sorry, sir," the guard said warily, "this gate is for exiting passengers only, you'll have to go to the back of the line—"

"FBI," Simon said, flicking his ID folder up and enjoying this way the hell too much. "Simon Drake."

The security guard ground to a halt, frowning at Simon's ID, then twisted halfway around. "Hey, Walt, it's the FBI. What the hell did you do now?"

"I pirate mp3s," said the pudgy Walt, apparently unimpressed with the joke. He waved a clipboard at Simon. "Been expecting you. If you and your party will just step over here, I'll get you sorted out." Mutterings arose from the long line of commuters behind them, which Simon and Walt alike completely ignored.

"*Do* you pirate mp3s?" Simon asked. Behind him a series of slithery noises and hollow thumps heralded the *en masse* dropping of luggage. "I mean, I've got actual important work that I'm supposed to be doing, but if a bust's gonna fall right into my lap..."

"No, sir, I am a paragon of virtue in every way. Hell, I obey laws that haven't been passed yet." Walt handed Simon the clipboard. "All your guns have

trigger-locks on them?"

"Yep," Simon said, reaching for the holster at the small of his back. "Bust 'em out, folks." Six holstered guns hit the table in front of Walt, who barely blinked, just pulled them out of their holsters one by one and checked to make sure that the trigger-locks were in place and locked. The bored commuters in the next line over were now definitely less bored. Simon could tell because they were all trying to pretend they weren't staring, something that most people were so bad at that it made them look like spooked cows.

"Hokay," said Walt, slapping an orange sticker onto each holster with jaded efficiency. "I'm guessing you know the drill: don't show 'em, don't pull 'em unless you gotta, and for God's sake don't shoot any holes in our planes, they're falling apart as it is. Any others?"

"I think that's it," Simon said, looking (as was usually necessary) at Johnny.

"I'm clean," Johnny said.

"Swear?"

Johnny made a face like he'd had a momentary cramp. "Swear."

"Yeah, we wouldn't want to carry any *undeclared* armaments onto the plane," Mike said virtuously. "That would just be wrong and shit."

Walt turned to look at Jeremy, the only one without a gun on the table in front of him. "You got one?"

"No, sir," Jeremy said pleasantly. "I'm afraid I'm completely unarmed." Simon resisted the urge to snort.

Walt shook his head sadly. "Well, sir, that's no good," he said. "You hang out with heavily-armed gentlemen—and lady, pardon me, ma'am—like this, you ought to get yourself a piece, just so you can blend in, you know?"

"Oh, it's hardly that simple," Jeremy said, still pleasant. "I'm in protective custody."

"This is really *not the time*, Archer," Simon said through his gritted teeth.

"Yeah?" Walt said with vague interest. "You some kind of important witness or something?"

"I'm afraid we're not at liberty to say," Simon said, cutting that little flight of misplaced fancy off at the root. He finished scrawling his signature across the bottom of the sheet and handed the clipboard back. "You need anything else from us?"

"I think we're done," said Walt. "You folks have a good flight now."

Simon picked up his gun and shoved it back into its place against the small of his back. "Thanks," he said absently, his mind already on the flight ahead of them. "You too."

Walt had apparently heard it all before, because he just waved them on.

"Simon Drake, FBI," Simon said again at the boarding counter, flicking open his ID. "I think you're expecting us. We'd like to board first and we'll need to

keep these lockers near us.”

“Yes, sir!” said the abnormally cheerful young lady behind the counter, her fingers already stepping delicately over the keys. “This flight isn’t quite full so I’m sure we can accommodate you! I’ll let the gate crew know. If you’d like to have a seat over there?”

“Well, hell, that was easy,” Simon said. “Sure. Thanks.”

“Have a nice day!” she chirped, beaming a happy smile over all of them before Simon managed to round them up and herd them away.

Mike shivered. “That is some kinda crime against nature, that there.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Christ, you know how much coffee I’d need to drink to be that perky?”

“I don’t think I could handle you being that perky,” Sandra said, rising up onto her toes and stretching. “I’d probably have to bust you one. Speaking of coffee, think we’ve got time to grab some before they seat us?”

“I wish,” Simon said mournfully. “It’s almost seven-forty. They’ll be shuffling us onto the plane any second.” He glanced over at Jeremy, currently gazing peacefully out of the massive plate-glass windows. “Hey, it’s a fabulous new adventure for you, Archer: you get to try flying coach like a normal human being.”

“I suppose it would ruin your fun if I told you I’ve done it before,” Jeremy said over his shoulder, putting a hand on one of the heavy steel struts.

“Yeah, and you don’t want to do that,” Simon told him. “It’s not even eight in the morning and I’ve only had one cup of coffee. You *really* want to play along with my little whims right now.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said, after a pause. He turned around and clasped his hands in front of his chest. “My goodness,” he intoned in a voice halfway between ‘sincere’ and ‘BBC announcer’, “what a fascinating new experience this will be.”

Simon eyed him askance for a moment, then snorted. “Shit, that was about the least convincing thing I’ve ever heard. You’d think that you’d be a better liar, being a big-time criminal and all.”

“Oh, I am,” Jeremy said, turning back to the view. “I’m just not trying very hard.”

“Window seat!” Nate cried, diving into one of the rows of three and claiming it. Back here the plane was still empty, although people were starting to move about in first class.

“Dibs on the aisle,” Simon said, “on account of my long legs and all, so I guess that leaves the middle seat for Archer.” He poked Jeremy in the small of the back. “You are getting the *full* working-class-stiff experience today, whoo boy.”

“I’m thrilled,” Jeremy said dryly, sliding into the row and settling into the seat next to Nate. “What’s next? Lunch at McDonald’s?”

“And a room in an anonymous chain motel that you have to share with another person,” Simon informed him with no small measure of triumph. “I am expecting you to break out in hives at any second.”

“Mm.” Jeremy folded his arms loosely across his chest. “I do feel a tad itchy, it’s true.”

Simon wedged himself into his tiny seat, letting his knees spill out into the aisle now before the flight attendants came along and made him tuck them in. “Comfy?” he asked Jeremy, blatantly stealing the armrest.

“Very nice,” Jeremy said. His elbow slid sneakily over to nudge against Simon’s bicep. “Quite cozy, in fact.”

“Man, I love the cozy,” Mike cried from the row ahead of them. “Best thing about flying like this is I get to cuddle up to Sandy all the w—oof!”

“Boys who want to keep their testicles keep their hands to themselves,” Sandra said primly.

“Awww, man,” Mike said, sounding oddly breathless. “Can I keep one ball if I just use one hand?”

“That’s a fascinating premise,” Sandra said, and Simon heard her crack her knuckles. “Would you care to test it?”

“Smart answer’s no,” Johnny put in, “in case you’re wondering.”

“Hate you all,” Rich muttered from across the way. “Can we not do this in public?”

Simon sighed and conceded the point, as passengers were starting to stream in and take the seats around them. “Rein it in, folks. Let’s try not to get shot by jumpy air marshals who think their new powers extend to settling sexual harassment suits.”

“But Sandy’s totally making my work environment uncomfortable!” Mike said. Still, he settled down.

Simon regretfully wedged his knees in behind Mike’s seat, clearing the aisle for the other passengers. “Yeah, you and I will be sharing a room, since I can’t justify inflicting you on anybody else,” he told Jeremy nonchalantly. He was pretty sure he was hitting just the right offhand note. “Usually I get one to myself, but hey, them’s the breaks.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, equally casual. “I do hope you don’t snore.”

For a moment, Simon was seized with the lunatic urge to ask *I don’t know, Archer, do I?*. Instead he shrugged. “I dunno. Never stayed awake to find out.”

“I suppose you have a point there, Simon,” Jeremy said, closing his eyes and letting his head fall forward. “Now, if you don’t mind, I think a catnap is in order.”

“For once, you and I agree on something,” Simon said, settling back and shutting his own eyes. Jeremy’s arm was still warm against his own; it was the last thing he was conscious of for a while.

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## ◆ Seventeen

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The woman standing outside Annadale Labs looked more like a girl, scrawny as a reed, hugging her clipboard uncertainly to her chest and shifting from foot to foot. Simon nudged Johnny as Mike parked their borrowed van out in front. “That who you talked to?”

Johnny grunted. “Nah. Some guy on the board.”

“Christ,” Simon said. “Maybe that *is* their security chief. Think they hired her right out of junior high?”

“Be nice,” Sandra said severely.

“Oh, I plan to,” Simon said, beaming at her. “Trust me, I’ll be so nice she won’t know what hit her.”

Sandra eyed him for a moment, then flung up her hands in surrender. “That’s worse,” she said.

“Yeah, ‘worse’ is totally my official plan now,” Simon said. “Hey, Archer, you seen everything you need to?”

“Mm?” Jeremy glanced over his shoulder. The momentary sheen of light off his sunglasses nearly blinded Simon, who scowled and blocked it with his hand. “For now, yes. I’d like to drive about some more on the way out.”

“I think we can handle that,” Simon said, letting his hand drop again. “Okay, everybody out, and *behave*. Let me do the talking for now. Remember that we are representatives of the United States government and the government does not need to look any more psychotic than it already does, Honda.”

“Man, why are you always singlin’ me out?” Mike asked plaintively. “Just because I’m all crazy. That’s discrimination. I could sue or shoot you or some shit.”

“Okay, you know what, us just sitting here in the parked van is starting to look weird by the second. Let’s do this thing. You guys hang by the van until I call.” Simon opened the van’s back door with no further ado and climbed out.

The early afternoon sun hit him like a sledgehammer and he squinted against it, irritated. DC had been overcast when they flew out; Cincinnati was clear and ten degrees warmer, already through a warm front that wouldn’t hit DC until that

evening. "Afternoon!" he called, loping across the half-empty parking lot while his team collected themselves behind him. The woman waiting for him flinched a little, drawing in her shoulders. She didn't start looking any older as Simon got closer. How old was she? Twenty-three? If that?

"Simon Drake, FBI," Simon said once he was in conversational range, sticking out his hand.

She shifted her clipboard into the crook of her left arm and gingerly shook his hand, leaving Simon with the definite impression that he could snap her arm like a twig just by pumping her hand too vigorously. "I'm, ah, Mercy Kane?" she said, hugging her clipboard to her chest again. Simon resisted the urge to tell her that she didn't have to do that if there was nothing there for him to ogle, regretfully deciding that it would probably be a bad idea. For one thing, she would probably die of embarrassment. "Can I see . . . ?" She trailed off there, making a little nervous gesture with one hand instead of actually finishing her sentence.

Simon stared at her in mute confusion for a second before he abruptly realized what she must be asking for. "You sure can," he said cheerfully, digging his ID folder out of the front pocket of his jeans and flicking it open.

Reaching out a diffident hand Mercy tugged on his ID folder, already wincing back a little like she expected him to rip it out of her hand, and it was half out of surprise that Simon let her have it. Balancing it awkwardly on her clipboard she tugged a pen out of the clip and started copying down the information, and Simon grudgingly awarded her a point for not being a *complete* idiot. "Mr. Timmins, er, that's Darrell Timmins, he's the head of security here?" she said, or asked, and Simon had to bite his tongue to keep from saying *well, hell, I don't know, is he?*. "He said I should show you around and tell you anything you needed to know? So just let me know what you need and I'll do my best to help you?"

"Excellent!" Simon said, flashing her a smile. She flushed and clutched at her clipboard again. Simon turned it down a couple of watts. "That's great, Ms. Kane, I really appreciate your help . . . hey, can I call you Mercy? Would that be okay?"

"Sure?" Mercy said faintly.

"Great!" Simon said. "Hey, Mercy, can I have my ID back? I need that, you know."

"Oh!" She fumbled his ID off the clipboard and held it out. It wasn't quite shaking. Given the way this interaction had gone so far, Simon was pleasantly surprised.

"Anyway," he said, tucking his ID back into his pocket. "So, Mercy, let me take a wild guess here. Mr. Timmins thinks this is all a big wild goose chase, doesn't he? Because if he didn't it'd be him standing out here and not you, is my guess."



Mercy immediately went a shade of red that put Nate's best efforts to shame. *Got it in one*, Simon thought with a certain grim amusement. She started to stammer out some kind of explanation, but Simon held up his hand and she squeaked a little and stopped.

"It's okay, Mercy," Simon said, as kindly as he could. "We'll just have to change his mind, that's all."

"Yes, sir?" Mercy said doubtfully.

"That's the spirit!" Simon said. He almost put a conspiratorial hand on her shoulder, but then decided it would probably crumple her spine. "Anyway, Mercy, what we need first is a conference room of some sort, so that we can explain the problem to you in more detail. Think you can find us one?"

"I think I can do that?" Mercy said, sounding a bit stronger now that she had a definite task to focus on (but not, Simon noted, strong enough to stop from turning every sentence into a faltering question). "Would you and your team like some coffee?"

"Yes, please," Simon said fervently, turning around to wave the rest of his team over.

Ten minutes later Simon had both his conference room and his coffee, the latter brought to him by a receptionist whose disdainful attitude towards Mercy was so painfully obvious that it made Simon's teeth ache. The mysterious Mr. Timmins had almost certainly selected Mercy as his liaison because he knew it would send a very definite message. That was fine. Simon wasn't averse to sending a couple of messages of his own.

But first things first: "Everybody, this is Mercy Kane, she's been assigned as our liaison to security," Simon said once they were all seated and coffee'd, gently stressing the last bit. He saw Sandra's eyes narrow slightly.

Mercy lifted a diffident hand in greeting. "Hi?" she said.

Simon tried to keep on looking benevolent. "I'll just introduce everybody quickly, but you don't really need to worry about it, okay, Mercy? You'll mostly be dealing with me."

"Okay?" Mercy said, sounding a bit dubious. She glanced around, her eyes wide and uncertain. *Like a frigging baby deer*, Simon thought.

"Anyway, that's Mike and Johnny there, they're general-purpose tough guys," Simon said, waving a hand at them.

"Hey," Mike said cheerfully. Johnny grunted. Mercy nodded, still wide-eyed.

Simon pointed. Mercy's eyes helplessly followed his hand. "Down there at the end, that's Rich and Nate, they're our tech experts."

"Hi," Nate said, waggling his fingers. Rich echoed him. Mercy twitched out a smile.

"This is Sandra," Simon said, putting a hand on Sandra's shoulder. "She's my second-in-command—if she tells you to do something, you can consider it to come straight from me."

Sandra cut her eyes at Simon, then reached past him and took Mercy's hand. "It's nice to meet you," Sandra said, vaguely shaking the limp noodle. "Don't worry, they're loud but they're harmless."

That was enough to surprise a tiny giggle out of Mercy, and for a moment she clutched at Sandra's hand like a lifeline. "Nice to meet you?" she asked. Simon could just *see* Sandra resisting the urge to say *is it? are you sure?*.

"And *that* is Jeremy Archer, he's a civilian and a specialist in this kind of thing," Simon finished up, pointing across the table at Jeremy. "If *he* tells you to do something, check with me first, he's a dangerously loose cannon." He was already kicking himself for saying it before he'd even quite finished—Mercy's eyes were huge with deer-like credulous fright—but the strain of coddling her was starting to annoy him.

"Ah, yes, that's me in a nutshell, dangerously loose," Jeremy said, putting a hand on his chest and inclining his head. At the other end of the table Mike made a choking sound but managed to restrain himself. "How do you do, Ms. Kane. It's a pleasure to meet you and I assure you that I'm not nearly so awful as Mr. Drake would have me sound."

By the time he finished this little speech a blush was crawling up Mercy Kane's cheeks. She honest-to-God *simpered* at Jeremy, one hand fluttering up to touch her hair self-consciously. Simon only managed to stop himself from laughing by biting the inside of his cheek. "Oh, yes, and he's English, in case the accent didn't tip you off," he said dryly.

"It's very nice to meet you?" Mercy told Jeremy, her eyes nearly shining. Sandra nudged Simon's knee under the table and he twitched his head down in minute acknowledgment, trying not to snicker.

"Anyway, let me just give you a quick summary of why we're here," Simon said. Mercy nodded earnestly, pulling her pen out of the clipboard. Simon glanced at Jeremy, calculating. "Feel free to jump in and supplement my account, Archer," he said, with a momentary tickle of amusement as Mercy's eyes immediately leapt back to Jeremy.

"I'm sure you'll cover everything," Jeremy said, raising a lazy hand in acknowledgment, "but I'll take you at your word."

"... and that's how things stand," Simon finished. Mercy was staring at him, rapt and utterly convinced. Then again, it would probably be easy enough to convince Mercy that the entire Russian *army* was poised to invade Cincinnati, particularly if he had Jeremy and his English accent primed to leap in with an acerbic little comment now and then.

"I *see*!" Mercy said. "Of course I'll help! If you'll just tell me what you need?"

"Well, we'll certainly have to take a good look around and see what's what," Jeremy said. Mercy's head swiveled back towards him in fascination. Now that she was no longer looking at him Simon nudged Sandra's leg under the table, waited a beat, then tipped his head at the door.

"But first, could you be a dear and show me where the restrooms are, Mercy?" Sandra said right on cue, standing up.

"Oh!" Mercy said, plainly startled, stumbling to her feet. "Of course! They're just down this hall here, I can show you?"

The door closed behind Sandra and Mercy, and for a moment, everything was quiet. Then Johnny put a hand over his face and made a little snorting sound and choked-off laughter swept through the room. "Oh, Christ," Simon said, snickering a little himself, "what the hell is it with women and English accents?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Jeremy said, amused, "but I've never been above taking advantage of it."

"Well, hell, that's okay, I plan to take advantage of it a little myself," Simon said before abruptly sobering. "Quickly. Archer. How's the security here from what you've seen? No guesses. I need something firm enough to bludgeon people with, and now."

"Execrable," Jeremy said, just as suddenly serious. "Utter crap. I haven't seen the actual labs or the storage facility yet, but from what I've seen so far I could quite possibly walk out of here at the end of the day with their precious prototype in my pocket and save our friend the trouble."

"You willing to stand behind that statement?"

"I'll stand behind it and back it up with evidence if you like," Jeremy said decisively.

"Good. I may take you up on that." Simon rapped his knuckles on the table. "Even if Springheel stalls we don't have long, so listen up. When those two get back I'm going to hand you off to Mercy and get her to show you around. I want you to keep her occupied for as long as possible—I figure she's going to want to cling to you like a lovesick barnacle anyway—and ruffle as many feathers around the office as you can in the process. Get her to take you *everywhere*. If someone protests, tell 'em you're under orders and that they can come talk to me, I'm in Conference Room C."

"Done," Jeremy said, nodding once.

"Good," Simon said. "Now. How good a pickpocket are you?"

By the time Mercy and Sandra returned the atmosphere in the conference room was relaxed once more and Simon was leaning back in his chair, fiddling with his pen. "Hey, there you two are," he said. "Anyway. I think the next step is pretty obvious, don't you, Mercy?"

“Yes?” Mercy said, her voice firmer than Simon had heard it be so far. Apparently Sandra had been doing some reassuring. “I think you’ll need to look around?”

“Absolutely right,” Simon said approvingly. “But we don’t all need to go, do we? Really, it’s Archer there who needs to see the building security all up close and personal, so would you mind showing him around? The rest of us have other things we could be doing.”

“Of course!” Mercy said, color burning in her cheeks again. Excitement over the opportunity that had just been tossed in her lap stripped all the doubt from her mind and all the question marks from her speech. “It’s no trouble at all!”

Jeremy flashed her a private little curving smile that came harrowingly close to making the hairs on the backs of Simon’s arms stand up. “You’re a dear,” he said approvingly, pushing his chair back and standing up. “I trust I won’t be too much trouble—” He stumbled as he stood, lurching ungracefully into Mercy’s side (and, surprisingly, *not* breaking her in half like a matchstick). Simon, who’d been watching for it, saw Jeremy’s hand dance about Mercy’s skirt pocket for half a heartbeat before a flicker of blue slid neatly up his sleeve. “Oh *dear*,” Jeremy said, regaining his feet and clucking his tongue. “I do beg your pardon, I’m afraid I’m a touch jet-lagged . . .”

“It’s no trouble!” Mercy squeaked brightly, now so pink that sweat was actually breaking out on her forehead. Simon felt momentarily sorry for her. But only momentarily. “Please excuse us? You can call the receptionist on the intercom if you need anything else?”

“Thanks, Mercy,” Simon said, smiling. “We’ll be fine. Take your time.”

Mercy jerked her head down in an absurd little half-bow half-curtsey and nearly stumbled into the door before she managed to open it. Jeremy followed her out the door, already smiling and saying something else—but the blue thing slid out of his sleeve and into his hand again and he threw it underhand back at the conference table. Mercy Kane’s Annadale Labs photo ID landed on the cheap wooden table with a soft and plasticky clatter. Simon swept it off the table and into his lap.

The moment the door clicked shut behind Jeremy, Simon turned to the rest of his team, the smile falling decisively off his face. “Welcome to the runaround, boys and girl,” he said, tapping the stolen ID card on the table. “The head of security thinks he can fob us off with Mercy Kane and this half-hearted attempt at cooperation.”

“Yeah, this is all pretty much bullshit,” Mike drawled, craning his head to look at Mercy Kane’s ID with interest. “No one’s properly scared of the FBI any more, that ain’t right.”

“It’s not,” Simon said, “and I’m not going to stand for it. For one thing, we just don’t have the *time*.” He flicked the stolen ID at Sandra, who caught it in both hands. “Take that and go poke at things. Split up. Lift up vent covers, look in

closets, poke at computers, ask uncomfortable questions, test locks, let yourself in anywhere that card will let you go. I want you guys to *politely* piss off as many people as possible. If they say anything about it, you just tell 'em you're under orders from the guy in Conference Room C."

"You're going to get her fired," Sandra said, closing her fist around the card. "I hope you know that."

"She doesn't have a future at this company and you know that as well as I do," Simon shot back. "Hell, even the receptionist treats her like a retarded cocker spaniel puppy that can't be trusted not to pee on the rug. Plus since the security chief sent her to us knowing what she was like, he can't be surprised when we eat her alive."

Sandra eyed him narrowly. Simon spread his hands. "I'll take full responsibility. I'll admit that I played her like a fish and that none of this was her fault. But in order to do that I need to root Mr. Darrell Timmins Head Of Security out of hiding. He wants to play games with us?" Simon paused and smiled thinly. "All right, I'll play."

"All right," Sandra eventually said, looking down at the card. When she looked back up, her eyes were gleaming. "You want us to make trouble?"

"All the trouble you want—but politely," Simon said, nodding. "And hey, if you find out anything useful, bonus."

"I do love my job," Sandra said, the beginnings of a smile on her face.

"Great," Simon said. "Go on out there and make a couple of people hate theirs."

They left. Simon settled back in his chair to wait.

Gratifyingly, he only had to wait twenty minutes or so before he heard the thudding, puffing sound approaching the conference room like an oncoming train. Simon linked his hands together behind his head and waited.

The hydraulic system on top of the door prevented it from slamming open, but that didn't stop the guy from trying. The man who thumped and huffed his way into the room was in his fifties somewhere, built like a brick wall and just about as red—Simon could read the incipient heart attack in that face like it was written on his forehead—and walked with a cane to offset his pronounced limp. His iron-gray hair was cut so close to his skull that Simon could see the angry flush of the man's scalp right through it. *Former cop*, Simon decided, and didn't bother to sit up.

Snorting like an offended bull the man stumped to a spot opposite Simon and slammed his free hand to the table between them, leaning forward like he intended to intimidate Simon right out through the back wall and into the parking lot. "What in the hell do you think you're *doing*?" he grated out.

Simon waited a beat just for the insolence of it, studying the apparition opposite him, letting the guy really stew. "Darrell Timmins?" he finally asked.

"I'm Darrell Timmins," the red-faced man snapped.

"Well, Mr. Timmins," Simon said, sitting up and folding his hands neatly on the table in front of him, "apparently I'm doing your goddamned job for you."

Darrell Timmins didn't quite go purple like Simon had been expecting, but it was a close thing. He jerked back like Simon had taken a swing at him, working up a *good* head of steam, and Simon gritted his teeth knowing very well what was likely to get swung at next. "Son," Darrell Timmins pronounced, and there it was, "I was with the Cincinnati Police Department for nineteen goddamned years—"

"Yeah?" Simon snapped, steamrolling right over that bluster before it could really get settled in. "What were you, the guy in the little white hat who ran the donut cart? Because given what I've seen of your security here I can't imagine you doing anything else."

Now Darrell Timmins went purple. For a moment he was so furious that he couldn't even talk properly, so Simon stood up lazily, unfolding to his full height and leaning forward, bracing both hands on the tabletop. "I'd apologize for interrupting your day, but, frankly, I don't care. So! What can I do for you, Darrell? Looking for a refresher course on basic building security? Because I'm not the man for that, really, but I've got people working for me who could teach you a thing or two—"

Timmins' breath roared out of him in a growl. "You've got no business here, interrupting people doing honest work, and I want you and your goddamned little nosey-parker friends out of my facility right now," he growled under his breath, pointing one thick finger at Simon. "I never liked the Feebs when I was walking a beat and I'll be *damned* if I put up with you now."

Simon paused, narrowing his eyes at the hulking apparition opposite him. "Fine," he finally said. He didn't take his eyes off Darrell Timmins for a moment as he unclipped his cell phone from his belt and jabbed his thumb at the buttons.

"Archer," Jeremy said in his ear a moment later, sounding vaguely surprised.

"There's a Mr. Darrell Timmins here who says he wants my 'little nosey-parker friends' out of his facility now," Simon said with heavy irony. "I can't imagine him meaning anyone other than you. Come on back to the conference room."

"Ah," said Jeremy. "Of course. We'll be right there."

Simon broke the connection without another word and folded his phone back into the belt clip. "Anything else I can do for you?" he asked, sitting back down and leaning back in his chair.

"I want *all* of you out of here," Timmins growled, chopping his hand through the air. "I handle the security here, not some bunch of jumped-up kids with toy badges—"

"—my badge is real enough, as you'd know if you'd taken the *basic precaution* of calling the home office to confirm it," Simon broke in, "and you know

what? I really don't think I like you taking all of these mean little jabs at my tender years. It hurts my feelings."

"I don't give a shit," Timmins informed him.

"That's too bad," said Simon, almost enjoying this. "See, Mr. Timmins, that means *I* don't give a shit how many years you spent walking a beat. You're a civilian now. And this here badge I got out of a cereal box—" Simon touched his pocket "—makes me a genuine bona-fide member of the FBI, and that means I outrank you so hard that you couldn't reach high enough up the ladder to touch the sole of my shoe. You don't scare me, and you don't intimidate me, and if you make one more uncalled-for crack about my age I will cut you out of this operation entirely and quite possibly have you escorted off the premises. Is that clear?"

Timmins started to bluster something else but Simon cut him off. "*I said*, is that clear, Mr. Timmins?"

This time Timmins' response was cut off by the door opening, and Simon mentally awarded Jeremy a bonus point for his perfect timing. Actually, thinking about it, he suspected Jeremy might have been listening at the door. He wouldn't put it past him, anyway. "Archer," he said, immediately dismissing Timmins in favor of Jeremy and Mercy, who was more or less trying to hide behind Jeremy by this point. "Tell me."

"It's even worse than I thought," Jeremy said crisply, ignoring Timmins entirely. "Poor Mercy here couldn't find her keycard, but it hardly mattered. I don't think there was anywhere in the building we couldn't go. The actual safe is a laugh. It isn't even bolted down; a strong man with a dolly could wheel it right out of the building."

"Par for the course," Simon said. "And the other thing I asked you for?"

"Don't you dare ignore me!" Timmins roared, obviously going for volume to try and make his point. Jeremy spared him a single cool glance and then his hand flickered over the table, leaving a small Lucite cube shining in a pool of afternoon sunlight right in front of Simon. Timmins' bluster snapped off like a light and something like shock registered in his eyes.

Simon picked up the cube and held it up to the light, appreciatively studying the odd dull gray bullet encased in the plastic. "Nice," he said, turning the cube over, watching it gleam.

"According to the label these are the design schematics," Jeremy said, tossing a Zip disk down after it. Timmins came alive enough to make a grab for it, but Simon got to it first, tucking the Zip disk into his back pocket before turning his attention back to the cube. "It was a simple matter," Jeremy went on, as if nothing had just happened. "One of the techs had the combination to the safe written on a bit of scratch paper in his desk."

For a moment the tense moment held, stretching out. Mercy Kane was staring at the back of Jeremy's head, her eyes huge and wet with betrayal; Simon was

trying to ignore her, studying the little Lucite cube instead. Jeremy stood calmly at the head of the table, waiting.

Darrell Timmins, on the other hand, slowly shrank, some of the redness fading from his bulldog's face. Finally he broke the stalemate, heaving out a thick and unsteady breath and kicking out one of the chairs, settling into it like a landslide. "All right," he said. "You've made your point. Call off the rest of your people and we'll talk."

"I was hoping you'd see it my way," Simon said, putting the little cube down on the table. "Archer."

"Mm?" Jeremy said.

"You and Mercy go round up the rest of the crew. Come back in five." Simon's eyes flicked from Jeremy to Darrell Timmins and back. "I need to have a word with Mr. Timmins and then we'll get things properly underway."

Jeremy inclined his head and turned to go, Mercy dragging her feet after him like a kicked puppy. Once the door clicked shut behind them, Simon looked back at Timmins. "If you want to explain yourself, now is the time."

The older man ran a hand over his close-cropped hair. "Annadale's been in business since ninety-one or so," he said without further preamble. "Three, four years ago we had a big fire. Completely destroyed the building. The board moved us into this place because it was cheap, kept telling us it was temporary, it was temporary . . . wouldn't even give me enough cash out of the budget to buff up the security to basic levels because this place is so goddamned *temporary*."

Simon nodded. He'd known about the fire and the rest made sense. "Explains a lot."

"Frankly, it'd be doing me a favor if someone *did* break in and steal that gizmo," Timmins said, nodding at the Lucite cube parked in front of Simon's chair. "Maybe then the head honchos'd wake up and realize that this place is a security nightmare. Might get me fired, but hell, I've got it documented to hell and back that I've been complaining about the impossibility of securing the area for three years now."

"Technically, someone already did steal it," Simon said, picking up the cube and reaching out to put it down where Timmins could get at it. Timmins took it and cradled it absently to his chest; Simon dug out the Zip disk and passed it over. "I'll put the fear of God into your board before I go, if you want me to. Little *quid pro quo*. I don't know why it is, but people fall over themselves to believe bad news from total strangers that they won't listen to when it comes from their own employees."

"Ain't that a fact," Timmins said after a moment, studying Simon wearily. "I'd be obliged. They keep assuring me that this little doodad here is our ticket to piles of cash and a better facility. Maybe if you weigh in they'll actually start meaning it."



“No skin off my nose,” Simon said. “But in the meantime it’s *this* place we’ve got to turn into a gigantic thief-trap, and we’ve got maybe a day to do it, if we’re lucky. Once my team gets back here we’ll see what we can do, and I’d appreciate your cooperation.”

Timmins was silent for a while, weighing Simon with his eyes. Finally he looked away, huffing out a breath. “Suppose it *is* my job.”

“Glad to hear it,” Simon told him, leaning forward and extending his hand. “I’m Simon Drake.”

His hand hung in midair for only a second or two before Darrell Timmins leaned forward and took it.

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## ◆ Eighteen

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“Springheel, 115,” Simon said, winging her a hotel keycard, which she caught. “Honda, Texas, 117.” Mike lazily knocked Johnny out of the way (and into the wall, with a thud) in order to catch the flying card. Simon barely registered it or the tired kicking fight that followed. “Specs and Specs Two, 119, and try not to blow any fuses this time,” he said, taking pity on the techs and just handing the card to the exhausted-looking Nate. “And Archer and I are in 121,” he finished, waving the last card. “Door’s open if you need anything, but you better need it and not just want it real bad. Get some sleep. I want you all ready to go by 7:30 tomorrow morning, no, groaning isn’t going to change my mind, so knock it off. If we’re lucky we’ll have two more days to set things up, but, you know, somehow I don’t think we’re going to get lucky.”

His team answered him with a chorus of generally unenthused murmurs before shuffling (and occasionally punching) their way off to their rooms. It was late enough that the western sky was only just barely still pink and nobody was looking particularly perky any more. Simon glanced at Jeremy, silent and waiting with his leather jacket flung negligently over his shoulder. “You wanna break us in,” Simon asked, waving the card at him, “or should I just go ahead and do it all legally?”

Jeremy was tired enough to actually look vaguely exasperated. “Considering I’ve just spent the better part of three hours helping to bolt a safe to the ground, Mr. Drake, I encourage you to put that keycard anywhere that excites you.”

“Touchy, touchy,” Simon said, sliding the keycard through the card swipe attached to 121. The door opened on a motel room almost exactly like every other motel room that Simon had ever crashed in on the job: two queen-sized beds with ugly tan bedspreads, a ten-year-old television, and not much else. It smelled of cleaning products and ancient cigarette smoke. Simon bowed Jeremy in with all the grace and irony he could muster. “Welcome to your home away from home, Mr. Archer. I do trust the amenities are to your satisfaction.”

“Oh, I *am* charmed,” Jeremy said, sliding past Simon and into the room. He looked almost completely out of place in the midst of all that inoffensive aging

shabbiness: sharp-edged, tailored, and altogether too new, despite the film of sweat still drying on his forehead and the subtle patches of dampness making his t-shirt cling to his chest. Jeremy dropped his jacket and his bag on the bed nearest the bathroom and moved on to investigate the facilities, his expression neutral.

Simon ambled in after him, picked Jeremy's things up, and threw them onto the other bed. "Whoo, damn, you need a shower," he said, putting his own duffel bag down. "I can smell you from *here*."

Jeremy reappeared just in time to catch him at it, but apart from a raised eyebrow, he didn't mention it. "I most certainly do," he said, plucking at his t-shirt and wrinkling his nose. "Some of us didn't spend the afternoon 'coordinating' things from a comfortable chair, after all."

"Are you *bitching*, Jeremiah?" Simon asked, watching for the twitch of Jeremy's eyelid, which wasn't long in coming. "I think you're bitching! I'll be damned. Another couple of days of this and you'll sound just like one of the team. Only one who's picked up some kind of fake English accent because he thinks it'll piss someone else off."

"I do wish you wouldn't call me that, Simon, it's a ridiculous nickname," Jeremy said in resignation, stripping his t-shirt off over his head. Simon turned back to his duffel, grinning. "At any rate," Jeremy said, "unless you plan to 'coordinate' yourself into the shower before I have a chance at it..."

"Go, go," Simon said, flapping a hand at the bathroom. "You stink. I'll shower in the morning."

Jeremy vanished into the bathroom with an armload of his things, closing the door behind him. The shower started up a minute later. Simon kicked off his sneakers and sat on his bed, automatically putting his cellphone on the bedside table and his gun in the drawer beneath it, evicting the Gideon Bible to the second drawer. He set the alarm for 6:30, picked up the remote control and fiddled with it while considering flipping through the channels, then dropped the remote on his bed and bolted for the bathroom door, flinging it open and getting a faceful of soap-flavored steam for his trouble. "Holy crap, that's your *real name*!" he yelled over the din of the falling water.

From inside the shower Jeremy yelped in surprise and did something that looked suspiciously from Simon's viewpoint like recoiling and nearly falling over, the shower curtain rippling as some random body part smacked into it. After a moment the curtain pulled back a few inches and Jeremy stuck his head out, his wet hair all slicked back tight against his skull. "*What?*" he said.

Not willing to be denied his triumph Simon pointed an accusatory finger at him. "Jeremiah! That's your real name, isn't it? It is!"

The pause that followed might almost have been a little too long, Jeremy squinting at Simon through the steam. "I am trying to have a shower here, Simon,"

he finally said, running a hand back over his hair to clear out some of the water that kept running into his eyes.

“Ha!” Simon crowed. “I was *right*! That *is* your real name! No wonder you’re always bitching when I call you that!”

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “Can we possibly talk about this *later*, Simon?”

“Sure, Jeremiah,” Simon said happily, slamming the door shut again.

Simon was still vaguely smirking at the television by the time Jeremy let himself out of the bathroom, pink and damp in the middle of a cloud of steam, barefooted, barechested, and, for once, wearing his *own* pajama pants. Jeremy, his face set carefully to neutral, picked his way past Simon’s bed towards his own, momentarily blocking the muted television.

“I’m right, aren’t I,” Simon said, flipping through the channels and feeling pretty damned pleased with himself.

Jeremy slid his discarded clothing into his bag, not looking at Simon. “I suppose there’s nothing I can do to convince you otherwise,” he said.

“Nope,” said Simon. “Because I’m right. I can tell. For one thing, my instincts are totally awesome, and for another, every time I call you ‘Jeremiah’ you get all pissy and your right eye twitches.” Jeremy’s right eyelid twitched, right on cue. “See?” Simon said, pointing. “Just like that!”

Jeremy sighed and reached up, massaging the twitch away. “There’s no point in arguing with you, then.”

“None at all,” Simon said. “So what’s your real last name?”

“Leave it be, Simon,” Jeremy said.

“‘Jeremiah Leaveitbe’? That’s a pretty stupid name. I can see why you changed it.”

“Simon . . .”

“All right, all right,” Simon said, now just smug as hell. “Jeremiah.”

Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut, stifling the little tic and regaining control of himself. “What do I have to do to make you stop?” he eventually asked, in a voice that Simon really wished he could classify as plaintive but had to admit sounded more suggestive.

“Eh,” Simon said warily, shrugging. “If you don’t make a federal case out of it I’ll get bored with it in a couple of months, probably.”

“Oh, well, that’s just lovely, isn’t it?” Jeremy asked no one in particular. The shower started up in one of the adjoining rooms and they both glanced in that direction for a moment; by the time Simon looked back Jeremy had that familiar thoughtful expression on his face and Simon got ready for the next hurdle of the evening.

“You are such a prick sometimes,” Jeremy said, almost purred, like he *ap-proved* of Simon’s theoretical occasional prickhood, and two seconds later he was slithering astride Simon’s lap, his knees barely denting the tired old mattress

as he thoroughly blocked Simon's view of the television. "Still, *I* have a couple of ideas as to how to make you stop—"

"Yeah?" Simon said, knowing that he really, really needed to stop this now—but maybe not just *quite* yet. Jeremy's chest was still steaming not three inches from his nose and he was radiating heat like a furnace. Simon could feel it seeping through his clothes.

"Well," Jeremy said, "for a while, at any rate," and then his damp hands were cupped around Simon's face and his mouth was on Simon's and he smelled like expensive soap and he tasted like nothing else on earth but Jeremy—Simon let himself enjoy the performance for a few more seconds before he put two fingers against Jeremy's bare shoulder and pushed him back.

"Not now," he said, brushing Jeremy's hands away from his chest with some regret.

"No?" Jeremy asked, raising an eyebrow as he settled back.

"No," Simon said softly. "Not on the job. Not ever on the job."

Jeremy twisted halfway around, looking at the door. "Is it because of the noise?" he asked, looking back at Simon. "Because if that's the problem I assure you we can work around it—"

"No, it's because of the *job*," Simon said. "My job. Which is, I hasten to remind you, about a hundred times more important to me than you are. As long as I'm here, I'm working. That's all."

Jeremy looked at him for a long moment, blankly curious. "Ah," he finally said, and slithered off as easily as he'd slithered on. "As you will, then."

"That's right," Simon said, shifting around until he found a more comfortable position to sit in. "As I will."

Jeremy had settled in with an oversized book of some sort (from the title it was something about computer security, which by all rights should have made Simon all kinds of nervous) and Simon had lucked into the last forty-five minutes of *The Maltese Falcon* on one of the motel's random movie channels when the shouting started.

Simon glanced up at the wall behind the television, sighed a little, and picked up the remote, turning the volume up a couple of notches. Jeremy continued to eye the wall uneasily for a moment before looking back at Simon. "Er . . ."

"Shut up," Simon said. "No talking during *The Maltese Falcon*."

"But . . ."

Simon picked up his spare pillow and whipped it overhand at Jeremy, who fended it off with a raised forearm and persisted, saying, "But isn't that . . ."

"Specs Two, yes," Simon said rapidly, hunching his shoulders and staring at the television. "He is a very shouty little man, it happens all the time, I'm not their daddy, Nate is a big boy and can handle himself just fine, now *shut up Bogart is talking*."

“A very shouty—” Jeremy broke off there and stared at Simon in amazement. Simon, wholly absorbed in the movie, barely noticed, and the shouting crested a few minutes later and died away without shots being fired or anything.

Simon sighed in satisfaction and shut off the television as the credits started to roll. “You ready to get some sleep?” he asked, rolling to his feet and unbuckling his belt.

“Mm?” Jeremy asked, looking up from his book. His eyes, of course, went right to Simon’s hands working at his belt, and Simon sighed and turned around rather than let him watch the unzipping part. “Any time you are,” Jeremy said from behind him, sounding amused.

“What’s so funny?” Simon asked, kicking his way out of his jeans and diving under the covers before Jeremy could get any ideas.

Jeremy was silent, absolutely radiating amusement, his little twisted smile irritating the hell out of Simon just by default. “What?” Simon repeated in vague exasperation, reaching up to turn out the light.

The room went dark. Jeremy’s little smile vanished into the blackness, to Simon’s general relief. After a moment, his voice picked up where his smile had left off, murmuring, “‘A very shouty little man’.”

“What?” Simon said, confused and blinking in the darkness.

“‘A very shouty little man’,” Jeremy repeated, although it still didn’t make any sense to Simon until he added, “Honestly, Simon, I never thought I’d hear you talk about one of your teammates in that manner.”

“... I said that?” Simon asked.

“You most certainly did,” Jeremy told him. “While the television was going and your Specs Two was shouting in the other room.”

Simon hesitated, trying to remember. He vaguely recalled the shouting, and Jeremy refusing to shut up, and that being *incredibly annoying*... “Now you’re just making things up,” he said loftily. “Go to sleep, Archer.”

Jeremy laughed softly. “Yes, all right,” he said. “Sleep well, Simon.”

Simon’s cellphone blared and Simon jerked out of his half-doze, grabbing for the phone out of pure reflex before he consciously realized what the noise was. His hand landed on the ringing flashing phone and almost at the same moment Jeremy’s hand landed on top of his, pinning his hand and the phone to the table.

For half a heartbeat they stared muzzily at each other in the bare blue light of Simon’s phone and then Jeremy pulled his hand back. “Of course,” he muttered, his voice thick, “it wouldn’t be mine...”

Simon pulled his phone towards him and flipped it open, its screen lighting up and illuminating a tiny area around itself with dirty gray light. The circle of light was just large enough to hold Jeremy and himself, letting the edges of the room recede into nothing. “Drake,” he said, suddenly and totally awake.

“Mr. Drake,” said the voice he’d been waiting to hear. His stomach rolled slowly in anticipation. “I *do* hope I woke you.”

“*Good* morning, Langridge,” Simon said, watching Jeremy watch him. “Good news! You woke me.”

“Oh, I’m so glad,” Dorothy Langridge said briskly. “After all, it’s almost six in the morning. I thought you might already be awake and that would ruin all my fun.”

“Aww, Langridge, don’t be that way,” Simon said, glancing at the clock. 5:56. He looked back at Jeremy. “Wouldn’t it have been just as much fun to root me out of the shower instead?”

“Now that you mention it, yes, that would have been extraordinarily satisfying,” Langridge said. “But I’ll take what I can get, Mr. Drake, and speaking of things that I have gotten . . .”

Simon clenched his free hand into a fist. Two feet away Jeremy watched him like a hawk, his eyes luminous and extraordinarily serious in the faint gray light. “It’ll be tonight, then.”

“Tonight,” Langridge confirmed. “Both of the phrases you were looking for, Mr. Drake. It crossed my desk less than ten minutes ago, timestamped at about 5:20 AM local time.”

“You’re a vicious old battleaxe, Langridge, but you’re a wonder,” Simon said. “I owe you.”

“You most certainly do,” Langridge informed him. “And I certainly wouldn’t hold out any hopes of my not collecting, if I were you.”

“You know, Dotty, knowing you like I do, I fully expect to pay out the nose for this,” Simon told her. “. . . thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Drake,” Langridge said, and her phone banged down, severing the connection. Simon winced a little.

He folded up his phone, cutting off that weird gray light and plunging them both into darkness again. Or very nearly. On the outside of his phone the little blue bar glowed its silent message of date and time and connectivity, and it was just enough to pick out Jeremy’s watchful eyes and the curve of his cheek, hovering in the darkness.

“It’s going down tonight,” Simon told him, and Jeremy shut his eyes and shivered, turning his face away.

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## ◆ Nineteen

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Simon lunged forward and flicked on the bedside lamp, kicking his way free of the covers. Jeremy winced and held up a hand to shield his eyes from the light. “No point in trying to get back to sleep now,” Simon told him, grabbing his discarded jeans off the floor. “Oh, and by the way? Nice hair.”

“Mm? Ah.” Jeremy ran a hand back through his flattened hair, putting it back into order with a ridiculous lack of effort. “And a good morning to you *too*, Simon.”

“Morning!” Simon said, digging in his duffel for clean underwear. “If you want into the bathroom before I go shower, now’s the time.”

“Yes, all right,” Jeremy said vaguely, slithering out of his own bed. “I’ll just be a moment.”

“Put on the coffee, too,” Simon told Jeremy’s retreating back. “They’ve got one of those little coffeemakers in there.”

“Lucky for you, isn’t it?” Jeremy asked, shutting the bathroom door with a firmness that couldn’t quite be classified as ‘slamming’.

Simon paused and straightened up, looking askance at the bathroom door. “Not a morning person?” he called. “Is *that* why you picked this career path?”

“Why on earth do you want to *banter* at this ungodly hour?” Jeremy called back through the door. “If I start your bloody coffee, will you stop?”

Simon snickered and let it go, pulling a rolled-up shirt out of his duffel bag and flapping it around until most of the wrinkles fell out. The coffeemaker was muttering placidly by the time Jeremy surrendered the bathroom, so as far as Simon was concerned, all was right with the world. He locked the door (a gesture which he admitted was largely symbolic) and threw himself in the shower.

By the time Simon unlocked the door and came back out (*after* fetching himself a cup of coffee, because Simon had his priorities in order, and after putting on his clothes, because Simon was also nobody’s fool) Jeremy was already dressed and waiting, gazing out of the window at the bleak and half-empty parking lot. “Good God,” Simon said cheerfully. “The man owns casual pants.”



“Mm? Oh,” Jeremy said, brushing one hand absently against his thigh. He didn’t turn around. “Yes, it’s true. I *have* been known to dress down when appropriate. On occasion there are even *synthetic fibers* involved, although I always get such a rash after.”

“Lies,” Simon said. “Lies and calumny.” He paused, considering. “Wait, what’s calumny again?”

“Something to do with slander, that’s all I know,” Jeremy said, shrugging. “Are we going to go wake the others?”

“I thought about it, but no,” Simon said. “There won’t be anybody to let us into Annadale until eight—” Jeremy coughed into his hand, pointedly “—*legally*, and we’ve got a long-ass day ahead of us, so we might as well let them sleep while they can.”

“It’s your call,” Jeremy said, waving that away.

“That it is,” Simon said, putting his coffee down long enough to wriggle into his fresh shirt and hunt up his sneakers. “So,” he finally said. “Think you’re ready for this?”

Jeremy was silent, which was not precisely what Simon had been expecting. Just as Simon was about to repeat himself, Jeremy laughed, a breathless little sound without much humor in it, and said, “No, I most certainly am not.”

Simon hesitated. He’d offhanded himself right into another one of those sudden conversational minefields, apparently, and as far as he was concerned it was too early in the morning for this sort of maneuvering. “That’s fair,” he said carefully.

“You needn’t worry,” Jeremy told his reflection in the window, flapping a hand vaguely in Simon’s direction. “Ready or not, I’ll do what you’ve hired me to do. Really, I know very well that it’s his own fault, if he’d been more careful or chosen a better class of client . . .” Jeremy’s voice trailed off, first into a hushed whisper and then into nothing at all.

“Yeah, well,” Simon said. “As long as you don’t go running off to explain that to your ex in some kind of, of convenient reconciliation, we’re all—”

“Don’t,” Jeremy snapped, his shoulders jerking into a straight and defensive line. “Either trust me or don’t, Simon, I really could not care less which, but either way you can bloody well stop *joking* about it.”

“Whoa,” Simon said, taken aback. He fell back a step and held up his hands in surrender. “Sorry. *Sorry*. Jesus. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Didn’t you?” Jeremy asked, but he sounded more tired than sharp, and then he heaved a deep breath and forced himself to relax. “I apologize,” he said. “I’m afraid I’m a bit on edge.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” Simon said. “And now, see, I’ve got a problem, because I really mostly want to tell you to suck it up and deal, but I’m getting the feeling that this is one of those times where I ought to be all diplomatic and

understanding in order to avoid starting some kind of, of international incident or something.”

The pause that followed was uncomfortably long, long enough to make Simon wonder if he’d finally pushed Jeremy too far, and then to get cranky with himself for giving a damn if he had. “Mm,” Jeremy finally said. His reflection developed a faint smile. “I suppose I *could*, what was it, ‘suck it up and deal’, but I also thought you said ‘never on the job’ . . .”

“Oh, yeah, you’re gonna be just fine,” Simon said, snorting. “Come on, we’ve got an hour before we’re supposed to leave, let’s go have a horrible greasy breakfast somewhere.”

Jeremy’s reflection made a face.

“Fine, then,” Simon told him. “I’ll have a horrible greasy breakfast and you can watch me eat, like you apparently like to do. And we’ll talk. I want to pick your brain.”

“Pick my brain,” Jeremy echoed. “That sounds a bit serious. Also, disgusting.”

“Yep,” Simon said, chugging off the last of his oily motel coffee. “It’s put up or shut up time, Archer.”

“Ah.” Jeremy inclined his head, for a moment oddly grave. “Very well, then.” And, finally, he turned around.

By the time he and Jeremy returned from their (extremely productive) breakfast most of the rest of his team was clumped up around the back of the van, clutching styrofoam cups of their own and looking sleepy. “Guess what, folks,” Simon said, bombing into the center of the group and flinging a companionable arm around Nate, who was nearest. “I got the call!”

Suddenly he had everybody’s attention and nobody looked sleepy any more. “It’s tonight?” Sandra demanded to know. “He’s moving tonight?”

“Tonight,” Simon confirmed. “Twenty-four hours from now this is all going to be over, one way or another. Of course, I’m hoping that it’s the way that involves us having him in cuffs and singing like a bird, and hell, with awesome guys like you on my side there’s no way I won’t get what I want. ‘Cause you spoil me and all.”

“It’s gonna be a looooong day,” Mike told no one in particular, stretching.

“Oh yeah,” Simon said, wrenching open the back doors of the van and crawling in. “Loooong day. Enjoy the ride, kids, because as soon as we get to Annadale it’s business time.”

The parking lot was almost completely deserted when Mike drove in; it was barely eight in the morning and most of Annadale’s employees wouldn’t be in for half an hour yet. Once again Mercy Kane was waiting for them out front, shifting nervously from foot to foot. Instead of her clipboard she was clutching a

large and unwieldy cluster of keys, almost too large for her hand to close around. “Morning, Mercy!” Simon called as he jumped down, and despite having watched the van pull in, Mercy squeaked and dropped the keyring onto the pavement with a loud and unmusical jangle.

“Hoo boy,” Sandra said under her breath, watching Mercy go scrambling after the keys. “I feel like I ought to be apologizing on behalf of my gender or something.”

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” Simon said, slinging an arm comfortably about Sandra’s shoulders. “You’re all the apology for the female gender I’ll ever need.”

After a moment of consideration, Sandra punched him in the ribs hard enough to make him cough.

“Simon,” Jeremy called over the back of the front seat.

Simon twisted around, still rubbing his side. “Yeah?”

“We’re going to go park the van some place a little less obvious, just in case,” Jeremy said, gesturing absently at Mike, in the driver’s seat. “I wouldn’t put it past our friend to do a reconnaissance run.”

Simon whistled through his teeth. “Yeah, good idea. Think we need to leave someone in there to babysit? ‘Cause, you know, we *do* learn from our mistakes.”

Jeremy smiled faintly and considered this. “It depends on where we end up parking it, I suspect. I’ll handle it.”

“All right, you do that.” Simon waved a hand at Jeremy and then slammed the van’s back doors, following Mercy up to the glass double doors and into Annadale Labs.

“It’s okay, Mercy,” Simon said for about the fifth time. “We’ll call you if we need you.”

“Mr. Timmins said I should help you guys with anything you needed?” Mercy said doubtfully.

“And I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that,” Simon told her. “But right now, what we *need* is fifteen minutes or so to get things underway. And coffee. Is there coffee available?”

Mercy brightened. Simon almost felt guilty. “I can make coffee!” she announced.

“That would be *wonderful*,” Simon said, meaning it. A brief stab of that guilt made him add, “I kinda hate to ask you to do the receptionist’s job, but I guess you’re the only other one here—”

“It’s no trouble!” Mercy proclaimed. “There’ll be coffee and stuff in the kitchen, if you want it?”

Manfully, Simon refrained from asking about the ‘stuff’, figuring that he probably didn’t want to know. “You’re a lifesaver, Mercy,” he said instead, briefly patting her shoulder. She felt as fragile as a baby bird under his hand. “And now we’ve got a lot to do, so we’d best get started . . .”

"I'll be in the kitchen or my office if you need me?" Mercy said, promptly twittering off. Simon sighed, mostly in relief, and shut the door to Conference Room C behind himself.

"Makes me tired just to listen to her," Johnny said.

"She means well," Simon said, "and if she tries to make a career out of building security that'll end up being her epitaph." He made his way around the table and sat down.

The door to the conference room opened and Jeremy came in, carrying a small hard-sided case. He was followed by Mike, who was just now stifling a jaw-cracking yawn. "The van's safe, stashed a few buildings over," Jeremy said, taking his own seat next to Simon's. "I don't think we'll need anyone to babysit it just yet, but if you'd like, I'll make certain it hasn't been tampered with later on."

"Great," Simon said. "Do that. Later. Anything else I need to know before we get started?" No one said anything. "Well, then . . . uh . . . guys, I really don't know how to tell you this," Simon said, folding his hands on the conference table and looking around. "I mean, this is *really hard* for me."

"Here we go again," Mike said, tossing his pen up into the air and catching it. "Ten bucks says it's something like 'I think I got served decaf at breakfast by mistake zzz'."

"It's really sad when a grown man has to resort to manufacturing artificial suspense to add a little spice to his monotonous life," Sandra said in agreement.

Nate glanced at them, frowning, then looked back at Simon. "... what?"

"For the next ten hours," Simon said, and paused, and put his hand over his eyes, "Archer's in charge, folks." Quickly, before anyone could do much more than blink, Simon sat up and slapped his hand on the table. "No one knows more about how to catch this guy than Archer does, and I can't find any significant flaws with his proposed plan of attack, so I'm going to let him execute it. If he tells you to do something that you think is fishy, by all means come ask me about it, I'll be in here for most of the day."

"Coordinating," Johnny said.

"Right, coordinating," Simon said, ignoring the irony that might or might not have been present, given that it was Johnny. "Also somebody's got to call Restructured and Hank's team up at Nova and give them a heads-up, and that's me. Any questions? Problems? Heartfelt bitching?" He paused just long enough to look around at everyone, discovering a lack of objection to this latest development that was (if he were honest with himself) a little unnerving. Even Rich only looked mildly put out, and Simon was convinced that Rich could maintain that particular baseline cranky expression of his through anything, up to and including orgasm, not that he really wanted to think about that ever, because it was Rich, and therefore, ew. Since no one was actually screaming, Simon nodded, thumped

his knuckles on the table, and swiveled his chair around to face Jeremy's. "Floor's yours, Archer."

"Just what I always wanted, a floor," said Jeremy. Instead of starting right away he fell silent, glancing about, and one by one Simon's team fell silent in his wake, waiting. It was a *nice* trick, in Simon's opinion, and he thought he'd have to try it at some point. Once the room was quiet, Jeremy kicked his chair around and sat up, folding his arms on the conference table. "This morning I asked Simon what the optimum outcome for tonight would be, in his opinion. He told me that what he would like more than anything else in the world—I paraphrase—is for you lot to catch our friend as he's leaving, with the stolen materials clearly in his possession, with no shots fired and no harm done to anyone. He said something about a textbook bust, I don't know, I'd mostly stopped listening by that point."

The laugh was weak, but it was there, just a faint ripple in the morning air. Jeremy smiled slightly. "Now, if this were a building with better security, I would be concerned that he is somewhere inside the building already. However, there's no point to that, not with Annadale. Annadale Labs is, er, more hole than cheese, if you follow me. I am . . . let's call it eighty-five to ninety percent sure that he's not here yet."

"But not a hundred percent," Sandra said.

"No, not a hundred percent, and I intend to take precautions against that eventuality," Jeremy said, inclining his head towards Sandra. "Unfortunately, it's hard to be certain about anything just yet. I need more information. I need an *in*. And by noon, with your help, I hope to have it." He paused, briefly, and glanced at Simon. Simon shrugged. Jeremy nodded at Simon like that had been informative and/or reassuring, which Simon privately doubted.

Jeremy's attention returned to the others. "What I need to find, then, with your help, is his entrance point and his exit point. They will not be the same. It's one of the first things we both learned: never leave the same way you entered. . . . as I believe I've said about a hundred times by this point."

"Yeah, give or take," Simon said.

"So I'll be getting most of you to help me with that, but I have a different job in mind for you two," Jeremy said directly to Rich, flicking his eyes sideways at Nate. "You see, Simon wants his thief to leave the building carrying stolen materials, which means that we'll have to let him take something. However, I see no real need to let him have the actual *prototype*. No call for it. Mr., er, Timmins, was it? At any rate, Mr. Timmins has taken the actual prototypes and design specs to a nearby bank and put them in a safety deposit box, where I can only assume they will be safe enough. What I need from you, then, is a convincing set of forgeries."

"Forgeries," Rich repeated, flatly.

"Mm," said Jeremy. He looked at Nate. "Simon assures me that you have fairly extensive machine-shop experience, so . . ." He slid a hand into his jacket

and came back out with a gray plastic case, which he put on the table and slid across to Nate. "There's room in there for three bullets. I need you to mock up the best fake 'silicon bullets' you can using the lab shop and materials. Keep in mind that the thief will probably be in a hurry and looking at them through goggles of some sort, so there's no need to make them utterly perfect."

Nate picked up the little gray case and flicked it open, squinting down at the little empty depressions in the foam rubber lining. "Sure, I can do that," he said, his forehead wrinkling in thought.

Jeremy's attention returned to Rich. "As for you, I would like you to take this empty Zip disk," he said, and paused, reaching into his jacket again, "and turn it into the deadliest viral weapon that you can muster on such short notice." He skimmed the Zip disk across the table to Rich, who automatically fumbled it, dropping it into his lap before coming back up with it clutched in both hands. "I'm sure you'd have much better ideas than I would about what, exactly, to put on that disk. Think about what you'd like to do to Karpol's computer system and then do it. Call it a backup plan in case our friend does manage to get away with the items in question."

Silence fell. For a long moment Rich chewed on the inside of his cheek and stared down at the Zip disk and scowled instead of saying anything else. Finally, he looked back up at Jeremy—and, disturbingly, he came within a hair's breadth of *smiling*. It was not a pleasant expression, hovering as it did somewhere around predatory. "I'm on it," he breathed, running his thumb over the crooked bit of masking tape serving as a label. His hands flexed on the disk's plastic case. "I've been wanting to do something like this for years. I'll assfuck his network so bad that it'll take a team of fucking *spelunkers* to dig it out of the smoking hole it'll become."

"Man, now I'm almost hoping he *does* get away with the disk," Mike said. "If only because I totally want to be there when Specs Two single-handedly destroys the entire fucking internet and catapults the world into a new dark age and shit."

Rich jerked out of his happy place at that and shot Mike a disdainful glance. "I'm a hell of a lot better than *that*," he said. Mike hooted. "No, seriously," Rich protested, now actively irritated again, as usual. "If I can't turn Karpol's network into slag without doing serious collateral damage I'll turn in my fucking badge, okay?"

"Hey, I'm not trying to bust your balls or nothing," Mike said, holding up his hands in surrender. "Shit, if nerds ain't the touchiest people."

"Children," Simon said genially, trampling over Rich's retort before it could properly form. Rich subsided grumpily, still clutching the blank Zip disk in both hands.

"The rest of us will look for things that are out of place," Jeremy said, after a quick nod at Simon. "You two—" he gestured at Johnny and Mike "—I'd like you to go around inside the building and search the ventilation system thoroughly.

Look for holes drilled in the duct floors, missing gratings, little piles of metal shavings . . . you know what to look for already, I'm certain."

"Yeah, like thieves all up in their business taking a quiet nap," Mike said. "What if we find him?"

"Arrest him?" Jeremy said, arching an eyebrow. "But that reminds me: on the off-chance he *is* lurking about, prompt communication is vital, so I'd like us all to wear these headsets of yours. I went ahead and brought them in."

"You see anything suspicious, scream like a girl," Simon confirmed. "Minute we stop laughing at you, we'll be there all guns out like an NRA barbecue."

"Ms. Leone," Jeremy went on, "I'd like you to check all the various storage areas in the building. I doubt he'll actually be in one, but he may have stashed some things; I'd like you to open boxes, look under tarpaulins, check cabinets, all that sort of thing. I trust I don't have to tell you what to look for."

"Easy enough," Sandra said. "I'll need a flashlight."

"I've got one," Nate said, looking up from his fascinated contemplation of the empty gray plastic box.

"Works," said Sandra.

"I'll be working my way around the outside of the building," Jeremy said. "And of course Simon will be coordinating his little . . . heart out from here."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch," Simon said cheerfully. "I'll pitch in after I finish the bosswork."

"How gracious of you!" Jeremy said in feigned surprise. "Are there any questions? No? Wonderful."

"Let's do this thing," Simon said, because that was what he was supposed to say, and it didn't feel right to let someone else send his team off. "You finish the job Archer gave you, you let him know, he'll find something else for you to do. You got a problem with something he tells you to do, you come to me. Well? What are you waiting for? Let's set this mousetrap!"

Two minutes later he was alone in the conference room with a bunch of empty coffee mugs. Alone at last, Simon swung his feet up onto the conference table and fished out his cell phone. For a moment he stared blindly at it, running his thumb absently along one side, considering his options. "Better the devil you know," he finally muttered, bringing up his contacts list.

The other phone rang three times before someone picked it up, assaulting Simon's ear with road noise. "Hank Hall," the voice on the other end of the line rumbled over the sound of the car's engine.

Simon shut his eyes. "Hank," he said by way of greeting. "Simon."

The temperature on the other end of the line cooled off a few degrees. Simon scowled at nothing. "Templar," Hank Hall finally said in gravelly acknowledgment. "This the call, then? You get the tipoff?"

“Gosh, it’s good to hear from you too, Hank,” Simon said. “Yeah, our contact in the CIA roused me out of bed this morning. It’s going down tonight.”

“Good, that’s good,” Hank said brusquely. Simon couldn’t tell if he was being dismissive or if he was honestly distracted by the traffic, but either way it wasn’t exactly making Simon’s morning. “Sooner this wild goose chase ends, sooner I can be back at headquarters doing my *own* job instead of yours.”

“What can I say, Hank,” Simon said, working really hard to sound unconcerned. “All I did was ask Upstairs if there was a team free to work backup on this one, and for some reason your name just came right up.”

“Lucky, lucky me,” said Hank. “There anything else?”

“Well, as much as I’d like to chat, Hank, I’ve got a hundred other things to do this morning, so I’ll let you go. Good to hear from you,” Simon said, hitting the disconnect button with his thumb, “*you uptight asshole.*”

He allowed himself a moment to just stew in his bad mood before flipping his phone open again and trying to remember where, exactly, he’d stored the Restructured number that Mike had given him. Eventually he found it in the R’s, labeled as **Rstd**, and not for the first time Simon vowed to buy one of those stupid little keyboards for his cellphone just so he wouldn’t be tempted to use all these abbreviations. He always forgot what they stood for within five minutes of painstakingly typing them in.

The owner of *this* phone snatched it up on the first ring. “Gavin Tigano,” he said, running his name together until it sounded like a single word, *gavintigano*. No wasting time with this gentleman, apparently.

“Ah, yeah,” Simon said. “My name is Simon Drake, I’m with the FBI—”

“FBI, yes, sir,” the voice’s owner said, interrupting him in his anticipation. “But you’re not the . . .” The voice trailed off. Simon could hear paper shuffling. “. . . Mike Takemura that called me earlier?”

“Mr. Takemura works for me,” Simon said, sort of vaguely impressed despite himself. This was the first guy he’d run into all week that seemed to be even mildly on the ball. Of course, remembering Restructured’s new security system, it made some sense that the man who’d installed them would be at least somewhat capable. “Unfortunately I’m not in the office today, but if you’d like to call the home office, any number of people there can vouch for me—”

“Thanks, I’ll do that,” Tigano said. “No offense, you understand, but this is the first real security threat we’ve faced since I was hired five months ago, and I refuse to take any chances with my career and my reputation potentially at stake.”

“Hey, none taken,” Simon said. “Anyway, as you’ve probably guessed, I’m calling to let you know that it’ll be tonight, wherever he chooses to go. I’m sure Mr. Takemura told you as much, but our analysis shows that it’s highly unlikely to be Restructured—”

“Highly unlikely but not impossible,” Gavin Tigano said, trampling over Simon *again*. “In any case, it’s the perfect opportunity to field-test some of our



new safety precautions, so we'll be treating this potential threat with the utmost seriousness."

"I'm glad to hear it," Simon said, actually sort of meaning it despite his rising bemusement. "Feel free to call me if you need anything—"

"I appreciate your offer, Mr. Drake, but I have absolute faith in our new security precautions. Can't afford not to."

"Fair enough," Simon said. "Good luck to you—"

"Thanks, but if I have to rely on luck I've done something wrong," said Gavin Tigano. "Still, I appreciate the heads-up. Good morning—" and the phone clicked off with a decisive bang.

Simon looked askance at his phone for a long, long moment before folding it up and putting it back in its belt clip. His cordless headset lay on the table in front of him, waiting; Simon picked it up and put it on, flicking the power switch to 'on' and plucking absently at the microphone. "Hey, folks. We here?"

"Yo—" "Yeah—" "Yes—" "I seem to be—" four voices said, more or less simultaneously. It made Simon laugh.

"So I hear," he said, when he caught his breath. "Hey, Shadow."

"Yes, *Templar*?" The undercurrent of amusement in Jeremy's crackling voice was very clear.

"How much do you think you'd charge me just to break into Restructured and give their security guy a much-needed arrogance adjustment? Because, I mean, *damn*."

"Mm," Jeremy said, sounding vaguely amused. "I'm not certain you ought to be soliciting criminal acts on an unsecured network, S—Templar."

"Hoo, sounds like Templar met Gavin-Tigano-my-shit-don't-stink," Mike said, laughing. "Man ain't never once let me finish a sentence 'cause he was too busy flogging his own cock, if you follow me."

"I can only wish I didn't," Sandra said frostily.

"That was indeed the extremely confident gentleman in question," Simon said, digging out his laptop and popping it open. It pinged cheerfully. "Spec Squad not online with us?"

"Nah, they're all locked up in one of the labs safe as houses," Mike said. "Specs Two said it would just be a distraction and plus we might startle Specs into cutting his finger off or something. They've got their cells if you need 'em."

"Fair enough," Simon said. "Anyway, I'm going to send Upstairs his progress report; scream if you need me."

After five minutes or so Simon had grown accustomed to the constant low-level din that was echoing in his ear; four people simultaneously searching a building and broadcasting their efforts made a fair amount of noise, but after nearly four years of ignoring 'high spirits' that often bordered on homicide, Simon found it almost painfully easy to set this particular ruckus aside.

When he closed his eyes he could sort the various noises out: the soft crunching sound of Jeremy's shoes on dry grass, punctuated by the occasional rustle of bushes; Mike and Johnny carrying on a desultory conversation while chairs screeched into place and vent covers clanged open; Sandra opening door after door and shuffling cardboard boxes around, cabinets clattering open and banging shut with rhythmic speed. Simon smiled and turned his attention to his laptop, putting his thoughts in order. *Arrived in Cincinnati with no static*, he typed. *The local bureau was cordial enough about the loan of a van and some equipment—*

He was almost done, frowning at the completed email and trying to decide if he'd left out anything important, when an ear-splitting screech and bang nearly made him jump right out of his skin. "What was that?" he demanded, grabbing the microphone of his headset in one hand. "People, talk to me!"

"Well, I'll be *buggered*," Jeremy said in his ear. "...er. Please, no volunteers necessary."

"Aw, *damn*, way to get me all worked up for nothing," Mike said, just as Simon had known he would. "What's up, Shadow? You find something?"

"One of the larger vents out back has had three of its four bolts cut and replaced, as I have just discovered by knocking it out of its frame," Jeremy said. "That's just *sloppy*, if you ask me. He's so confident no one's onto him that he's still breaking by the book."

Simon clenched his hand into a fist, his skin suddenly tingling. "You've got an exit? Or an entrance? What?"

"I'm not sure which," Jeremy said, sounding oddly breathless. In the background there was a dull thudding, and then a drawn-out screech that sounded a lot like the last one. "It could be either. I'll need to find the other one in order to be able to have a chance of telling you."

"So it's here," Simon said. "It's definitely Annadale. He's coming *here*."

"He's coming here," Jeremy said in agreement.

"...aw, God, I'm so fucking hard," Mike said all in a gleeful rush. "Hey, Shadow, you sure you don't need a volunteer?"

"Well, see, I *could* call Restructured and Nova, let them know that they're off the hook, but frankly I don't feel like doing either of them any favors at the moment," Simon said, leaning back in his chair and touching two fingers to one of his earpieces. "Besides, there's always a slight chance we might be mistaken, and I'd *sure* hate to look like an idiot. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"As you say, er, Templar," Jeremy said to the accompaniment of banging metal. "Anyway, there, that's got it. The vent cover is propped back into place for now."

"So what are we going to do about it?" Simon asked.

"That depends," Jeremy said. "If it's the entrance, we'll want to leave it alone. If it's the exit, well, that's different."

"So I guess we have to find the other one!" Simon said. "C'mon, folks, let's do this thing. We are gonna catch ourselves a *thief*. Well. Another one."

"Guess then we'll have the complete set," Johnny said. There was the familiar screech of a chair being shoved along, followed by a metallic bang. "Kinda like salt and pepper shakers *FUCK*—!"

"*Texas!*" Mike shrieked over the sudden and ear-splitting din, and Simon was already out of his still-spinning chair and halfway across the room. In his ear Mike was still bellowing, "*FBI, freeze, drop your weapon and stay right where you are*" and Sandra was yelling "*I am en route*" and Simon threw the conference room door open and yelled "*Honda, Texas, you speak to me goddammit*" while drawing his gun and he only vaguely noticed Mercy Kane in the hallway with her mouth open as he blew past her . . .

"*False alarm!*" Johnny yelled a moment later, gasping for air. Simon screeched to a halt, breathing hard. A second later Johnny was howling laughter in his ear, that high-speed revving breathless laughter that always came on the heels of a close call, and he choked it out again, "*False alarm! Oh Jesus, oh crap, I'm fuckin' sorry, false alarm, there was a fuckin' raccoon in the vent, I pop in and he's maybe six inches away from my fuckin' nose . . .*"

Simon whooped out a relieved breath and half-collapsed against the wall. "Oh, Christ, Texas, don't you pull that shit on me," he said, but he was already catching the hysteria and his shoulders were shaking. "Nearly had a fucking heart attack, scared the hell out of Ms. Kane . . ."

"Scared me so bad I fell off the goddamn chair, scared the fuck out of Honda," Johnny said, still wheezing. "Scared the fuck out of everyone including the fuckin' raccoon, aw crap, I'm sorry."

Simon heaved a deep breath and straightened up. "Whoo. No harm done, assuming you didn't hurt yourself."

"I'm good," Johnny said, swallowing once and catching his breath. "Landed on my ass but that's what it's for."

"A raccoon!" Mike cried. "A fucking *raccoon*! Holy shit, just when I think the security around here can't get any worse I find out they can't even keep out the *animals* . . ."

"Poor thing," Sandra said. "If I woke up with Texas' ugly mug in my face I'd sure as hell have the fuck scared out of me."

"Or into you," Johnny said, making Mike whoop again.

Simon rolled his eyes and started ambling back towards the conference room, raising an apologetic hand at the terrified Mercy Kane as he went by. She stared owl-eyed at him before peeling herself off the wall and fleeing. "Well, that was all extremely exciting," Simon said, closing the door behind himself. "Sure hope you enjoyed that display of consummate professionalism, Shadow."

Jeremy was silent.

“Shadow?” Simon said again, stopping.

“I need to get onto the roof,” Jeremy said, his voice low and urgent.

“Found it,” Jeremy said after a tense five minutes. Simon exhaled loudly, abruptly realized he’d been pacing, and made himself stop.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said, dropping into the nearest chair. His momentum carried him halfway around on the chair’s oiled casters and he didn’t pay any attention. “What have you got?”

“He’s unbolted one of the big vent covers up here, right off what I can only assume is the main air-conditioning unit,” Jeremy said, speaking a little rapidly. Gravel crunched under his feet, somewhere. “I found two of the three missing bolts, so I think he’d originally left it wedged shut like the other one. Either it fell of its own accord or the raccoon knocked it askew—it’s hanging open now. I can see right down into the main ventilation shaft.”

Simon shut his eyes and slid down in the chair, wriggling his shoulders deep into the thick padding of the chair’s back. “So we’ve got the entrance, and we’ve got the exit. I’ll be *damned*.”

“You needn’t sound so surprised, Si—Templar,” Jeremy said, piqued. “I think I’m hurt.”

“I’ll buy you an aspirin,” Simon promised. “Hell, I’ll buy you a whole bottle, and not the generic kind, neither, because that’s just the kind of generous guy I am. Now, for the bonus round and the brand new car: which one is the entrance?”

“This one,” Jeremy said without a moment of hesitation. “It’s perfect. Can’t be spotted by a police car doing a drive-by or by anyone on the ground. It could sit wide open for months before someone noticed. He could go in this way and spend hours inside without anyone being the wiser.”

“Are you sure?” Simon asked. He dug his fingers into the chair’s padded armrest. “Tell me you’re sure.”

“I’m positive, Simon,” Jeremy said. Simon didn’t even bother to remonstrate with him about using his real name over frequency, just bit his lower lip absently. “Templar,” Jeremy said a moment later, correcting himself, and then he laughed, soft and low. “Trust me.”

“You know what, I think I will,” Simon said. “So what now?”

“Well, first of all, the rest of you can stop for now,” Jeremy said. “Templar, are you free?”

“Hell no,” said Simon. “Just cheap. Bu-ut, I’m also not busy at the moment. What do you need?”

“A business park complex like this one will have a central maintenance facility,” Jeremy said. “I’d appreciate it if you’d go over there and suggest, in your own inimitable fashion, that they stop whatever they’re doing and come fix

the broken vent cover on the back wall immediately. Oh, and don't mention the one on the roof."

"And by 'inimitable fashion' you basically mean 'threats, pressure, and general thuggery'?" Simon asked.

"Without a doubt."

"Oh man, can I come?" Mike broke in. "C'mon, Templar, let me come, I haven't gotten to be a general thug in *weeks*!"

"You need him, Shadow?" Simon asked.

"No, no, for the moment all I need is myself," Jeremy said.

"C'mon, then, Honda," Simon said, heaving himself to his feet. "Let's go pull some rank."

"Aw, *yeah*," Mike said, sounding deeply satisfied. "Man, I just love pulling my rank."

The maintenance guys folded like paper pretty much the instant Simon showed them his badge. Feeling a bit sorry for Mike (the poor guy hadn't had time to thug at *anybody*) Simon left him there to escort the maintenance team back to Annadale's building. He patted Mike's shoulder as he left. "Don't let 'em dawdle," he told Mike, loudly enough to ensure he'd be overheard. "Matter of national security, after all." Then he jogged back to Annadale Labs feeling pretty damned good about things.

He found most of the rest of his team in the rearmost lab, Lab F, the one with the safe in it. Jeremy was slowly pacing a path back and forth across the middle of the room, alternately counting on his fingers and looking up at the ceiling. Simon, curious, also looked at the ceiling. It was white acoustic tile. He didn't feel enlightened.

"Hey," he said, pulling the door to behind him. "Maintenance is on their way as fast as Mike can kick their asses along. What's up?"

Jeremy held up a peremptory finger, silencing him. Mulishly Simon shut his mouth with an audible click of teeth and ambled over to lean against the workbench next to Johnny, who was watching Jeremy pace. "Give a guy a little taste of power and he gets all dictatorial on your ass," Simon told Johnny, who shrugged.

"I can't imagine you're referring to yourself," Sandra said.

"Course not," said Simon. Jeremy dug his goggles out of his jacket and put them on, and they all watched this process in momentary fascination before going back to waiting. "*I* can handle a little power," Simon went on. "I'm talking about other people. Whose names start with a 'J'." Johnny glanced at Simon and cleared his throat. "And aren't Johnny," Simon promptly clarified.

Jeremy came to a halt directly under one of the ceiling vents and looked up, the room's fluorescent lights sheening off the black glass of his goggles. "Mm,"

he said under his breath, and then looked back down, turning a full circle on his heel and studying the room.

"It's like attending the ballet or some shit," Simon told Johnny. Johnny grunted.

Jeremy frowned, crossed to one of the desks, stooped down to look in its knee-hole, then straightened back up, still wearing that distant and distracted frown. Simon was just about to demand an explanation when Jeremy abruptly left the room, heading out into the back hallway without a backwards glance. Simon looked at Sandra, rolled his eyes, and followed.

"Anybody ever tell you you look like a Cylon in those goggles?" he said to Jeremy's retreating back. "All you need is that bouncy red light."

Jeremy paused, his hand on a doorknob. "A what?"

"Never mind," Simon said. "What's up?"

"I'm setting up your trap," Jeremy said. He tried the doorknob. It rattled, locked. Jeremy frowned absently down at it and dug around in his jacket, coming out with his lockpick gun.

"I can go get the key from Mercy—" Simon started to say, but Jeremy stuck the metal pin into the lock and pulled the trigger and twisted his wrist in almost the same moment. There was a rapid metallic buzzing sound and then the door swung open.

"No need to bother the lady," Jeremy told him, sounding a bit smug.

Simon snorted. "That can damage the lock, you know," he pointed out, more to be an ass than anything else.

Jeremy paused. "As a matter of fact, I did know that," he said. "Fancy that." And then he vanished into the newly unlocked room.

Simon naturally followed him. "But of course I guess you don't care about that—" he started to say, and then broke off as he rather abruptly found himself nearly nose-to-nose with Jeremy, wedged into a small supply closet. There was barely room for both of them to stand inside.

"Well, hello," Jeremy said, fighting down what looked suspiciously like a smile. "Fancy meeting you here."

Simon hesitated, then reached blindly behind himself and shut the door with a click, plunging them both into darkness. "You want to watch it," he said, quietly. "You're coming within an inch of busting my balls in front of my team, and I won't put up with that." He paused. "... shit, did the door just lock again?"

"Yes, actually," Jeremy said.

"Well, crap," Simon said. "Guess I've done smoother things in my life."

"I suppose so," Jeremy said. He tilted his head, or something, and the faint seam of light seeping in under the door caught fire along the glass surface of his goggles. "I assure you I had no intention of, er, 'busting your balls', Simon. I was only a bit preoccupied."

“Yeah, well, see that you don’t,” Simon said, edging back half an inch or so. His shoulders bumped against the locked door, stopping him. “See, when I *say* you’re in charge, I mean that *I’m* in charge. Only you’re more in charge than anyone else who isn’t me. Follow?”

“Ah, yes, I always forget that you speak *Simon* English,” Jeremy said. “So, please, translate that to the Queen’s English for me: what is it that I’ve done wrong, and what should I do to remedy this?”

“Next time I ask you a question, you stop, and you answer it,” Simon said. “That’s all. I don’t ask you questions because it’s my hobby. I ask because this is my job, I’m in charge and I’ve got the right to know.”

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said, after a pause. “For the record, I apologize.”

“Sure,” Simon said, twisting halfway around so that he could look over his shoulder at the door. He could just barely make out the doorknob, silhouetted by the light coming in under the door. “Now, I’m sure that being locked in a dark storage closet with you has its positive side, but it’s a positive side I don’t really want to explore right this moment, what with being on the job and all. We need to switch places or something so you can let us back out?”

There was a taut little pause and then Jeremy’s hand settled lightly on Simon’s waist, the tip of his little finger sliding under the waistband of Simon’s jeans. It barely hit skin before Simon bit back a squawk and grabbed that hand, peeling it away; Jeremy twitched his hand back and out of Simon’s grip, then reached past his hip and twisted the doorknob. The door sprang open an inch or so. “It’s only a closet,” Jeremy said, his little curling smile now plain in the sliver of light. “It doesn’t lock from inside.”

Simon opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. “I hate you,” he finally said. “No, really, I really hate you.”

“I suppose I deserved that,” Jeremy said, slithering bonelessly past Simon and back out into the hallway.

“Someone really did a number on this vent,” the maintenance chief said, shaking his head. “I mean, look at this, these boltholes have had most of their threads stripped. What’d he use to take the bolts out, a crowbar?”

“Mm,” Jeremy said noncommittally, obligingly tilting his head in to study the indicated bolthole. Simon, waiting a few feet away to lend some official threat to the discussion, didn’t bother. “So . . .” Jeremy said, trailing off.

“So I can’t really fix it without taking the entire assemblage out,” the maintenance chief said. “And I can’t do that in less than two, three days.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, considering. “What’s really important is that we reattach this vent cover in such a way that it can’t be easily or quietly removed,” he finally said, opening his eyes again.

“I can weld it into place,” the chief said dubiously. “It won’t be pretty, but it’ll sure as hell hold—”

“Unfortunately, it also has to look like no one’s touched it,” Jeremy said apologetically.

“Oh,” said the maintenance chief. “I can fill the boltholes with epoxy, I guess, use that to hold the bolts in. It’s crap as a long-term solution but it’ll hold pretty well for a while.”

Jeremy considered this for a long moment, turning one of the sheared-off bolts over and over in his hand. “That will have to do, then,” he finally said, handing the bolt back to one of the waiting maintenance men. “Thank you very much.”

The conference room was flooded with the midday sunlight by the time they returned to it. “I could be wrong,” Simon said, sinking into his chair with some relief, “but it sure sounds to me like you’ve got a working plan.”

“I rather think so,” Jeremy said. “What time is it?”

“Uh . . .” Simon checked his watch. “Little after eleven. We’ll break for lunch soon, but we’ve got time to hash out your plan before we do.”

“I’d really prefer not to have to explain twice,” Jeremy said. “Could we possibly get the others in here—”

“Unfortunately, you’re going to have to,” Simon said, overriding him. “I want to hear your plan before you throw it out in front of the others, so that I can veto if I have to.”

Jeremy hesitated, his face going blank and still for a moment. Then he nodded. “All right.”

“Not bad,” Simon said, once Jeremy had finished. “I like it. As long as we have enough time.”

“That’s always the consideration, isn’t it?” Jeremy asked wryly. “I’ll handle the welding myself. I wouldn’t want to ask anyone else to go up there.”

“There’s only one thing I’m going to have to insist on changing,” Simon said.

“And that would be . . . ?”

“I want you in the van with Specs and Specs Two, and I want you to stay there,” Simon said. “We’ll all have headsets, so you’ll still be in contact and able to help, but *under no circumstances* are you to leave that van and enter the area. Not even if he’s getting away, which he won’t, because we’re awesome.”

“May I ask why?” Jeremy asked.

“Because I don’t want him knowing you’re working for me,” Simon said. “You’re my secret weapon, Archer. In case we fail—hell, even if we succeed—I don’t want him walking away knowing that you’ve been collaborating with us.”



Jeremy was still for a moment. "And you also don't want to run the risk that I might intercept him and warn him," he finally said, like it hurt him to drag that sentence out.

"I wasn't going to say it," Simon said. "In fact, I'm pretty damned convinced you wouldn't do it. But it's something I have to consider."

"Mm," Jeremy said, noncommittally.

"It's my job," Simon said. He caught himself actually attempting to justify his official decision and got a little cranky about it, but as long as he'd started . . . "I have to consider *everything*, Archer. Not just your finer feelings. I have to consider the risk that someone's going to get killed tonight, and that it might be one of my team. I don't *not* trust you, don't get me wrong. But the only five people in the world I trust without reservation are the people on my team, and for all that you've been one hell of a lot of help, you're not one of them."

"Mm," Jeremy said again.

Simon sighed. "Come on. What do you want from me?"

Jeremy's smile flashed on and off like a lightning strike. "Do you really want me to answer that question, Simon?"

Simon started to say 'no'. He really did. And then he paused and considered the question, looking at it from all the various angles. Finally he shrugged. "Some day? Yeah. Not now, not tonight, but some day when this mess is all over and we've sorted the baggage? Tell me."

Jeremy was silent, studying Simon from across the conference table. His smile, when it came this time, was slow and real. "You *do* live dangerously, Mr. Drake," he said.

"It's all part of the job," Simon said, picking up his headset and putting it on. "Let's get the others in here."

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## ◆ Twenty

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Despite Simon's almost desperate need to watch Jeremy attempt to cope with McDonald's food, the closest source of lunch turned out to be a little sandwich shop, and in the interest of saving time, Simon gave in. The team ate a hurried lunch and piled back into the van. "Go ahead and get things started without me," Simon told Jeremy once Mike turned into Annadale's parking lot. "Do your thing. Whatever that is."

"Actually, I plan to spend a bit of time standing about with my arms spread wide looking like a lunatic," Jeremy said. "Are you positive you don't want to watch? I'm certain it would entertain you no end."

Mike pulled the van up in front of the building and put it in park, waiting. "Much as I'd love to watch you make a fool of yourself, I need to do some boss crap real quick," Simon said, hopping out of the back of the van after the others. "Go on and 'measure' without me. I'll survive somehow."

"We'll go park the van elsewhere," Jeremy called after him. Simon flapped a hand vaguely in Jeremy's direction and headed in, waving absently at the receptionist as he headed back to the conference room to check in.

The email he'd been expecting was already waiting when he logged in:

**Templar:**

**As per your recommendation I gave Accounting the go-ahead to pay off the rest of what we owe your consultant. I hope you're certain about this. Personally, given the nature of your freelancer, I feel that it may be premature, but generally your judgment in these matters proves sound. And, after all, it's your quarterly budget to beggar.**

"Can always count on Upstairs to be supportive," Simon muttered to himself before reading on.

**I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you, though. Word from On High. Maculhy's been in contact—**

Simon read the rest of the email in a mounting state of disbelief. “Hell with this,” he finally muttered to himself, shutting everything down. “Don’t I have some *real* work to do?”

“You want the camera *here*?” Nate said uncertainly. A warm breeze was blowing across the roof, ruffling his bangs. “I mean, I can do it, but wouldn’t it be easier just to mount it over there in the corner?”

Jeremy reached up and tapped the side of his goggles. “The problem is that if he stops long enough to examine the rooftop for electrical current, he’ll spot the camera if it’s over there. If you put it over here the camera’s power draw will be lost in the air conditioner’s and he won’t be able to see it.”

“Oh!” Nate nodded vigorously and shoved his glasses up. “Okay, I get you. That’s why you got me to stick the other camera under the computer monitor like that.”

“Exactly,” Jeremy said.

“Should we close this vent cover back up?” Simon asked, nudging one of the sheared-off bolts with the toe of his sneaker.

“Leave it,” Jeremy said. “If he discovers that it’s fallen open and hasn’t been put back into place, it’ll just reassure him that no one’s spotted it yet.”

“Plus then the raccoon can get back out!” Nate said happily, and both Simon and Jeremy turned and stared at him until he turned pink and went back to fiddling with the camera.

“Gratings,” Mike said, holding up two medium-sized squares of something that resembled matte-black chainlink fence. “Specs says the black stuff will rub off if you handle it too much, so keep that in mind.”

Jeremy’s arm snaked out of the open vent and took them, turning them slightly to fit diagonally through the square opening. “Mask?” his disembodied voice said from somewhere inside the ceiling.

Mike grabbed the welding mask and gloves from Johnny and held them up for Jeremy to take. They vanished into the ceiling and then Jeremy stuck his head out. “Hang about, I need to distribute these things and then I’ll come back around for the tank. Tell Ms. Leone to go ahead and turn the fan on as high as it’ll go.”

Johnny nodded and loped off. Thirty seconds later the air conditioner’s giant fan roared to life, loud enough to make the building settle a bit, blowing Jeremy’s hair back as he leaned out of the open vent to take the welding tank from Mike. A couple of little black things that looked suspiciously like dead bugs or raccoon droppings blew out of the open vent from the other side and Simon couldn’t help but grin.

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Simon said. “You want—”

“Emptied aluminium cans and coarse sandpaper,” Jeremy said, handing the tank back down to Mike. There was a large pinkish dent in his forehead from the welding mask and he looked a bit damp and smoky. “Oh, and a tube of epoxy. I know I saw one in the workbench.”

“What the hell *for*?”

“Insurance,” Jeremy said shortly. Then he relented, even before Simon could tell him to get the hell over himself. “There’s just the slightest possibility that he might, with luck and speed, get through one of those gratings before we realized what he was up to. The least I can do is make it impossible for him to do so without making a racket.”

“Okay, so that explains the cans,” Simon said. “But the sandpaper?”

“He can’t slither over a sufficiently rough surface the way he can slide along polished metal,” Jeremy said. “Sandpaper will chew his suit to bits. Not as badly as brick, but I can’t precisely brick up these sub-shafts.”

Johnny, already rifling through the workbench in search of the epoxy, whistled in appreciation. “Nasty.”

“I do what I can,” Jeremy said, handing down the welder’s gloves and mask. Mike took them.

“Empty Coke cans and sandpaper,” Simon said, shaking his head. “Christ, and here I used to think you were all fancy and high-tech. I think I was more impressed with you back when you were some kind of supervillain. Now you’re just the, the, I don’t know, MacGuyver of crime.”

“Well, Simon,” Jeremy said, crossing his arms on the vent’s edge and resting his head comfortably on them, “if I worked for the government and had trillions of dollars handed to me by sufficiently paranoid taxpayers, I suppose I could invest a couple of million dollars into some sort of highly-engineered vent-blocking apparatus that only functioned seventy percent of the time. However, I’m not, and I only have a few hours to boot, so I’m afraid I’m stuck with embarrassingly low-tech solutions that actually work.”

“You know, I think that was a subtle dig at our beloved government,” Simon told Mike.

“You know, boss, I think you’re right,” said Mike. “I for one am all hurt and shit.”

By the time Rich tottered out of the lab he’d commandeered his hair was standing straight up all along the right side of his head, a sight Simon was familiar with but never failed to find amusing. “Nice hair, Two,” he said affably, smoothing Rich’s hair back down for him. “I sense a lot of general hair-pulling in your immediate past.”

“One might go so far as to call it ‘a hair-raising assignment’,” Jeremy said dryly, earning himself a patented Specs Two glare, which he ignored. “Is it finished?”

“Oh, it’s finished,” Rich said rustily. He swallowed. “I don’t even like touching this goddamn Zip disk with my *hands* and nothing can save that laptop, but it’s finished.”

“My man, Specs Two,” Simon said, slapping him gently on the back. “Pass over the disk and go get yourself something to drink. You’ve earned it.”

Rich nodded, too wiped out even to grouse, and put the Zip disk down on the table, giving it one last little possessive little pat before he stumbled off. The masking tape label was just barely curling at one end, nearly obscuring the final ‘s’ in ‘Design Specs’; Simon half-expected the disk to be smoking, but it wasn’t. “I’ll go put this in the safe with Nate’s fake bullets,” he said, picking it up gingerly and bearing it off like a particularly unstable letter bomb, which, in a sense, it was.

“I mean it,” Simon said sternly. “Just tell me which keys are which and then *go home*.”

“Well, if you’re sure?” Mercy Kane said, clutching the enormous keyring to her sparse chest with both hands. “I mean, I want to help? Mr. Timmins said to?”

Simon sighed, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, then reached out and closed both hands over Mercy Kane’s twiglike biceps. She squeaked in surprise like a mouse. “Mercy—Ms. Kane—the best thing you can possibly do for me right now is go home, lock all the doors, and stay there until tomorrow morning,” Simon said, digging down *deep* for enough earnest sincerity to sell this. Judging from the blush that flooded Mercy Kane’s cheeks, he found it. “This man is *dangerous*, Mercy. I think we’ve got a plan that’ll keep him from hurting anyone, but I can’t be sure, and I’d never forgive myself if I fucked up and let you get hurt, okay?”

“O-okay,” Mercy Kane said in a tiny and breathless little voice, too small to even contain a question mark. Her fingers fumbled through the keys. “They’re . . . they’re all labeled? But here’s the front doors, and the back door, and here’s Lab F?”

“Thanks, Mercy,” Simon said with all the warmth he could muster, gently taking the keyring before Mercy could drop it again. “I really appreciate it. You’ve been a huge help.”

“You’re welcome?” Mercy Kane said—asked—and not for the first time Simon bit back the urge to ask, *well, I don’t know, am I?*

“Aw, man,” Mike said, collapsing into one of the chairs with a huge whooping sigh and squinting against the late afternoon sun. “Are we done?”

“I think we’re done,” Simon said in wonder. “How about that.”

“I’m sure there’s more we could do, but right now I’m too bloody wiped to think of anything,” Jeremy said in agreement, closing his eyes. “Either it will work, or it won’t.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do, folks,” Simon said, clapping his hands and effortlessly reclaiming the mantle of ‘in charge’ from Jeremy. “Archer here assures me that he won’t be lurking around beforehand—”

“—he wouldn’t want to risk drawing attention to himself by loitering,” Jeremy put in, his eyes still closed. “He might drive by once, but I doubt he’ll do anything else.”

“—so I don’t think we need to get in position for a while,” Simon went on, as if Jeremy hadn’t said anything. “I want us back here and in position by ten o’clock tonight, which is probably way too early, but I want to be on guard from full dark onwards. That gives us about five hours. Let’s go grab some dinner and head back to the motel for a few hours. I want you all to rest up, as much as you can. It’s going to be a long night.”

There was a vague tired rumble of agreement from everyone. Simon looked around. “Any questions? Everybody clear on what they’re going to be doing tonight?”

A few heads around the table nodded, but that was about all the reaction Simon managed to eke out of them. He waited a moment, and then nodded, dropping his voice. “You guys? You guys are awesome. All of you. Yes, even you, Archer, stop looking at me like that. If we can just keep it up we’ll bag this bad boy without breaking a sweat. We get back to DC with this joker in cuffs and dinner’s on me. Hell, I’ll even spring for the strippers.”

A faint and tired laugh rippled through the room. Mike sniggered sleepily and said, “Woo!”

“Okay, okay,” Simon said, snapping back to normal and making a broad herding gesture with both arms. “C’mon, let’s get out of here. *Eat* something. Up, up, up, c’mon, let’s go, out the back door, one at a time . . .”

Simon had barely managed to swipe the room key through before Jeremy pushed past him and collapsed face-down on his bed. “I’m exhausted,” Jeremy said into his faceful of pillow, half-heartedly trying to scrape his shoes off without actually sitting up to deal with them. “Unless you have a strenuous objection I’m going to sleep for a bit. Would you wake me at nine?”

“No problem,” Simon said, stretching. “I’m way too keyed up to sleep. Always am. Will it bug you if I go shower?”

“Go on,” Jeremy said. “I’ll have one before we go.”

“Hey, don’t take this the wrong way or anything, but thank God for that,” Simon said, flapping a hand pointedly in front of his face. “Shit, the way you’ve been sweating you’d think you’d been working for a living or something.”

“Once again I marvel at your keen grasp of the obvious,” Jeremy said, eventually giving up on his shoes.

Simon snorted and grabbed one of Jeremy’s ankles. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you never to put your shoes on the furniture?” he asked, yanking Jeremy’s

shoe off for him. Jeremy flopped his head to the side just enough to watch him quizzically, one tired brown eye peeking out of the folds of his thin pillow. "I mean," Simon said, trading one of Jeremy's ankles for the other one, "it's not like you could make the furniture in here significantly uglier—" he pulled off Jeremy's other shoe "—but it's the principle of the thing."

"Thank you?" Jeremy eventually said.

"You're welcome," Simon told him, dropping his shoes by the foot of his bed. "I'm not going to do your pants, so don't even ask."

"You're a bloody tease," Jeremy said comfortably, shutting his eyes. Simon smiled to himself and leaned over to flick out the overhead lights.

By the time he got back out of the shower Jeremy was a little huddled shape under the blankets, silent and still. Simon stood blinking in the bathroom doorway until his eyes got used to the dimness and then gingerly picked his way over to the foot of his bed, groping for the clothes he'd laid out. After a moment of thought he left his shirt laying where it was—he was still sweating slightly from his shower—and just wriggled into his pants, then eased around the corner of his bed and sat down on it, reaching automatically for the remote on the bedside table.

The television popped on with a faint sound and a crackle of static, and Simon muted it quickly before the volume could catch up. The picture on the screen evolved out of the darkness, painting the room and Simon a dirty flickering blueish-gray. Simon put the remote back down.

On the screen a couple of anonymous women were standing around in a generic kitchen, silently being a little too enthused about something. Simon proceeded to ignore them, instead staring down at his hands in the faint and flickering light. He flipped his hands over and opened them, gazing at his palms, then rolled his hands back into loose fists and stared at his knuckles. He let his mind go empty, watching his hands move, clearing his mind.

Then he began at the beginning. He ran Jeremy's proposed plan of attack through in his mind again, looking for holes. There were always holes. Over and over Simon ran himself and his team through their paces, poking at every corner, trying to break out. In the end, he decided he was satisfied. There were holes and he could see them, but as plans went it was pretty good. Not airtight, but what was? And hell, he even had a back-up plan of sorts now. Just in case.

He exhaled, long and slow, and folded his hands together before glancing at the clock. A little after seven, the red numbers told him. He glanced past the clock at Jeremy. Jeremy's eyes were open, gleaming blue in the light from the television, watching him.

The back of Simon's neck prickled, and then just as quickly as it had started, it stopped. "Can't sleep?" he murmured, unwilling to disturb the peace by speaking louder.

“Apparently not,” Jeremy murmured back a moment later. “Odd. Usually I can sleep through nearly anything.” He sighed and rolled over, staring at the ceiling, his face composed in the flickering light. “I suppose this isn’t ‘nearly anything’, however.”

Simon laughed under his breath and looked back at his hands. “Sorry,” he said.

Jeremy slid a hand out from under the blankets and rubbed his face, making a scratchy little sound. “I don’t see what you’re sorry about.”

“Me neither,” Simon said after a moment. “Forget I said it. I’m not sorry at all.”

Jeremy huffed out a faint laugh. “Now that’s more like the Simon I’m used to.”

“Yeah, well,” Simon said, leaning back against the headboard and staring up at the ceiling. “It’ll all be over soon. We can sleep after that.”

After a moment Jeremy laughed again, putting an arm across his eyes. “And I suppose we can always catch up on our sleep once we’re dead,” he said. Then he frowned. “Do you know, that sounded particularly bad under these circumstances?”

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” said Simon. “We’re always slipping up and saying really tasteless things by accident before a mission. This kind of anticipation really makes you overanalyze everything you say at the same time it makes you prone to say even stupider shit than usual.”

“I suppose so,” Jeremy said.

“I mean, hell, you heard Mike this afternoon,” Simon said. “Everything he says from now until tomorrow morning will count as either sexual harassment or a death threat or both. It’s just how he copes with tension. Don’t worry about it.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said. “And he differs from the normal Mike how?”

“Normal Mike talks about food sometimes.”

“Ah,” said Jeremy. He was silent for a long moment before adding, “I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve *forgotten* something.”

“Yeah, I know how that is,” Simon said. “I don’t think so, though. I’ve gone over your plan about fifty times now and I can’t really see any holes. Pretty good plan, really.”

“Mm. Thank you. It’s kind of you to say, at any rate.”

Simon snorted softly. “I’m not trying to preserve your overblown *ego*, Archer. I said it’s a pretty good plan and I meant it.”

“Then thank you,” Jeremy said. “I can only hope it works.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Still think we won’t catch him?”

There was a long pause before Jeremy rolled back over, propping himself up on his elbow. “Yes,” he admitted. “I’m not sure how he could get away, but I can’t help but believe that he will, somehow. An article of faith, if you will. It’s



like how, when you're very small, you believe that your father can do anything: I believe that he'll get away just because I can't even conceive of the alternative."

"Huh," Simon said. "Good God, did it get philosophical in here, or is it just me?"

"I suppose I sound very silly," Jeremy said, flopping back down.

"I don't know," Simon said, rubbing his face with both hands. "I mean, on the one hand, yeah, you totally do, but . . . do you believe in luck?"

"Luck?"

"Yeah. Do you believe you're lucky?"

Jeremy considered this for a moment. "Well, largely I believe that I create my own luck through being prepared, but . . . yes, I suppose I do believe I'm lucky."

"See, I can't help but think of this one guy . . . okay, see, back when I was a little bitty field agent—"

"—do you know, I find it very hard to believe you were ever *small*, Simon—"

"—shut up and listen, Archer, I'm trying to be profound here."

"Ah. My apologies."

"So, okay, I was . . . twenty-three, twenty-four, something like that. And my team leader is this real old-school white-shirt-and-tie hardcase, thirty years with the Bureau, doesn't like any of us one bit except for the part where he'd take a bullet for any of us without even thinking about it, right?"

"Mm. I know the type, I believe."

"Yeah, they're out there. Anyway, it's like you said, you make your own luck. And I did, and I was racking up a nice string of arrests, getting lucky, getting luckier, and one night, real late, we're sitting in a car together on stakeout and there's nothing to do but talk, so we did. And he tells me how good it is that I'm lucky."

"Mm."

"And I agreed, because I *was*, you know, even if half of my luck was preparedness and half of what was left was having balls of steel, right? And he laughs a little and tells me that there's nothing out there scares your average criminal more than a lucky cop."

"Mm."

"Because, he says, you can prepare all you want but when it comes right down to it everything hangs together on luck. Being in the right place is luck. Finding the right time is luck. Spotting important details is luck. Going left first instead of right is luck. All that stuff. Luck is like the glue that holds your skills together."

" . . . you were right, Simon, you *are* trying to be profound. It's so *charming*."

"Eat me. Anyway. Then he tells me that luck makes its own luck. You're lucky, you get a reputation as being lucky, criminals start thinking you're lucky and react to you like you are, and it just makes you luckier. Christ, if I say 'luck'

one more time it's going to stop sounding like a word at all. But anyway, you get my point."

"I think so," Jeremy said.

"So my point is, I'm lucky. I'm *darned* lucky. I've got a rep in the halls for being lucky that almost equals my rep for being awesome. And you say you're lucky, and frankly, after what I've seen of you, I gotta believe it." Simon paused. "So maybe that's what it's going to come down to. Is he luckier than the two of us or not?"

Jeremy was silent for a long, long time. "I don't know," he finally said.

"Me neither," Simon said. "I mean, I have faith in my team, and I firmly believe that we are going to catch this asshole red-handed. But just because I believe that with all my heart doesn't mean that it has to happen."

"Mm," Jeremy said. "Well, now I feel worse than ever. Thanks ever so."

"Hey, any time," said Simon. "Think you can sleep now or do you want another bedtime story?"

"I can't say I think much of your taste in bedtime stories, Simon."

"Hey, I do a rousing rendition of 'The Three Little Drug Traffickers'. I mean, my impression of the big bad FBI agent who huffs and puffs and blows their meth lab in is all the rage back in DC."

Jeremy laughed, softly. "I think I'll pass, thank you."

"Hey, your loss," Simon said. "I can turn off the TV if it bugs you."

"No, that's all right," Jeremy said. "I rather like the light. It's peaceful, in its way."

"Yeah," Simon said. "You going to be okay without getting some sleep? I mean, I'm counting on you to come through tonight."

"I'll be fine," Jeremy said dismissively. "Most of the rest of the plan is up to you and your team, anyway."

"Yeah, I guess," Simon said. "But still, hey, I'm just sitting here killing time, let me know if I can do anything to help. Within reason."

Jeremy paused. "You could let me blow you," he finally said.

It took half a second for that to sink in before a rush of heat washed over Simon. "Yeah?" he said numbly, sinking down slightly.

"No, no, don't worry, I won't insist," Jeremy said, still just exactly as casual as he'd been a minute ago. "You said 'never on the job' and I *am* willing to respect that."

"Yeah, well . . . good," Simon said, his cheeks still burning a bit. He brought his knees up, camouflaging his extremely direct physical reaction.

"It *would*, however, be a lovely distraction from my worries, and it does tend to pass the time." Jeremy rolled over away from Simon, facing the far wall. "Plus I must admit I rather enjoy doing it."

After a moment, Simon laughed, a very little. "Christ, you never let up, do you."

“Of course not,” Jeremy said. “I wouldn’t want you to get complacent.”

“Complacent,” Simon said, snorting. “Like I was some kind of, of cow in a meadow or something. In any case, all other things being equal, I’d be afraid you’d mess up my edge. I need to be sharp tonight. Hungry.”

“That’s entirely fair,” Jeremy said. “Superstitious, but fair.”

“Shit, I just spent like ten minutes telling you how I secretly believe in luck,” Simon pointed out. “If you hadn’t already pegged me as superstitious, you’re dumber than I give you credit for being.”

“I take your point,” Jeremy said, and he laughed a little and pulled the covers up. “The offer stands, however.”

“We catch him tonight and I might just take you up on it,” Simon promised. “I’ll kick myself for it after, of course.”

“That’s your prerogative,” Jeremy said. “I’m going to try and sleep again. Wake me at nine.”

“Will do,” Simon said. “Because, I mean, Christ, even if I was sleepy ten minutes ago I’m sure as hell not now.”

“You’re welcome,” said Jeremy, sounding a bit smug, and then he fell silent.

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## ◆ Twenty-One

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“That’s done, then,” Jeremy said, rolling out from under the narrow table folded down from the van’s side wall and sitting up. Dust clung to one of his sleeves, white and powdery against the black, and Jeremy slapped at his arm until it was reasonably clean again. “Is it still working or did I knock something out?”

Nate thumbed on one of the monitors and frowned at it, his nose less than two inches from the glass. “Still looks good,” he reported after a moment.

“In that case I can report with some assurance that no one’s tampered with the van,” Jeremy said, glancing at Simon. “As far as I can tell we are good to go.”

“Good,” Simon said, squinting at the darkness beyond the windshield. The van was parked inside the closed-up loading dock of one of the buildings next to Annadale’s, well within range of the headsets’ cordless connection but nowhere near the actual lab. It was perfectly safe, but Simon’s nerves had been honed to that cold, sharp edge and he kept checking, just in case.

After a moment he looked back around at his team, sitting or squatting on the van’s bare metal floor in a loose semi-circle, all save the techs, who had chairs and were, therefore, temporarily the tallest people around. “Everybody who’s going in got their vests on?” Simon asked, thumping the ceramic plate over his heart.

“Hell, yes,” Mike said, thumping his own. “You think I’m doing this without a vest, you’re fucking nuts. Far as I’m concerned Kevlar’s the best girlfriend I ever had.”

“Got mine,” Johnny said.

“Yes,” said Sandra, “although if I stop a bullet with my tit plate again I’m going to wish he’d just killed me.”

Mike sniggered. “Tit plate,” he repeated, and made a vague grab for Sandra’s chest. She backhanded his hand aside without even looking at him.

“That was classless even for you,” Rich informed him.

“Yeah, well, I always strive to hit new lows, Specs Two,” Mike said. “It’s like a hobby of mine.”

“Hit another new low near me and I’ll nail your testicles to the van floor,” Sandra said, smacking Mike’s shoulder in a generally friendly fashion.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea, how about we *don’t* castrate each other,” Simon said brightly, overriding Mike’s whoop of glee. “What time is it?”

Rich glanced at his watch. “9:57, Templar.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “Okay.” He glanced out the side window one last time, letting the rush of excitement flow through him and dissipate before he knocked his knuckles on the floor of the van. “I’m going to go over it one last time, because I’m anal like that, shut up, Honda. According to his files it’s highly unlikely that he’ll begin before about one in the morning, but we’re going in now because I’d hate for this to be the time that he varies his routine. Everybody wears headsets at all times. I want us to keep up the chatter, just so we stay in touch and stay alert, but keep it quiet, just in case.”

He paused long enough to put on his own headset, and after a moment the others followed suit. Simon glanced at Rich. “Let’s test ‘em now.”

“Right,” said Rich, spinning around to face his own console. “Templar.”

“Here,” Simon said into the microphone.

Rich nodded. “Honda?”

“Yep,” said Mike.

“Springheel?”

“Here,” Sandra said.

Rich frowned for a moment, making a few minute adjustments to one of the dials in front of him. “Again.”

“Here,” Sandra said again.

“That’s got it,” said Rich. “Texas.”

“Yo,” said Johnny.

“Specs.”

“Online,” Nate said, fidgeting with his microphone.

“Myself,” Rich muttered, fussing with the dials before raising his voice again. “Shadow.”

“Here,” Jeremy said, his hand cupped over the microphone.

Rich looked at Simon, pulling his headphones down to hang around his neck. “We’re good to go, Templar,” he said.

“Good,” Simon said, nodding once and pulling his own headphones down. “Springheel and I will leave the building first and let ourselves into Annadale via the back door. As per Shadow’s suggestion we will be in the supply closet just outside Lab F, where we will stay until time.”

“Hoo, Templar’s in the closet,” Mike half-sang. Simon tried not to grit his teeth too obviously.

Sandra promptly popped him one, making him yelp and grab his shoulder. “With me,” she pointed out. “Which kind of negates your joke.”

“Aw, man, why does Templar always get the babe?” Mike asked plaintively, effortlessly switching jokes in midstream. “I mean, no offense, Texas, but you ain’t really my type. Being an ugly bastard and all.”

“’Cause he’s the leader?” Johnny pointed out. “And so’s your momma.”

“Honda and Texas will sit just inside the back door there,” Simon said, ignoring the chatter and pointing over his shoulder. “I don’t want you in the van because I don’t want you distracting the techs. When Shadow tells you to move, you leave the loading dock and get into position, as quickly and quietly as you can. Stay low.”

“We will totally be like ninjas or some shit,” Mike said. “Low ninjas. Really low.”

“Specs, Specs Two, and Shadow will all stay in the van,” Simon said. “Specs so much as clears his throat, you all shut up and prepare to listen. Once things start to happen I want silence on this frequency except when reporting in, because we all need to be able to hear Shadow. Got me?”

“Yep,” Johnny said, poking a fresh toothpick into his mouth.

“I love you guys,” Simon said, clapping his hands together with an echoing sound like a gunshot. “Try not to let him shoot you, because I need you all. If you up and die on me, I’ll kill you. Let’s do this thing. Springheel, Honda, Texas—” blindly he reached behind himself and opened the back door of the van “—go.”

“Cozy,” Sandra muttered under her breath, shining her flashlight around, picking out boxes of printer paper and post-it notes in the yellow circle of light. “I’m beginning to think you *do* have some kind of ulterior motive for locking us in here together, Templar. Did I miss us playing ‘spin the bottle’ or something?”

Mike snickered in Simon’s ear. “I knew it,” he said happily. “Hey, Spring, babe, you need me to come over there and defend your honor, you just holler.”

Simon rolled his eyes and edged himself downwards, easing himself into a sitting position wedged into one corner. “She could beat the shit out of me twice before you even got here and you know it,” he said, wriggling back as far as he could. Sandra settled in in the opposite corner and slithered out of her jacket, rolling it up. “You two in place, Honda? Texas?”

“Yep,” Johnny said. “On account of how we moved all of about ten feet. Hell, I can see Specs through the windshield from here.”

“How are the cameras, Specs?” Simon asked, ignoring Johnny.

“Looking good,” Nate said. “No static so far.”

“Headsets are still all in contact,” Rich added before Simon could even ask.

Simon exhaled. “Okay,” he said. “Now we get to sit around for three or four hours. Gosh, Shadow, aren’t stakeouts *exciting*?”

“I have never been so busy in all my life,” Jeremy said dryly. “I’m certain that there are three or four entire square inches of the inside of this van that I haven’t memorized yet.”

“Aww, Shadow’s starting to sound just like one of you guys,” Simon said. “We’ve corrupted him. Good work, team.”

Sandra finished blocking the crack under the door with her rolled-up jacket and slid the cover of the flashlight back, turning it into a small battery-powered lantern. “Just what the world needed,” she said, standing the flashlight up on one of the lower shelves. “Another whiner.”

“We can’t all be tough chicks like you, Spring,” Mike said. “Hell, it’s probably a good thing. I wake up with tits some morning and I’m not gonna leave the house for a week.”

“Only a week?” Johnny said. “You got no imagination.”

“Whoa, hey, my TMI alert is going off,” Simon said. “Plus judging by the specific silence I’m hearing, I think you’ve probably killed Specs.”

“I’m not quite dead,” Nate said, automatically. He did sound a little breathless. Just as automatically Mike added, “ ‘E’s getting bettah!”

“That’s not how it *goes*,” Rich protested angrily.

“Yeah, well, here’s the thing,” Mike said. “No one really cares but you.”

“You could at least *try*—” Rich started to say, but right about then Simon tuned him out, having heard this entire argument before.

Sandra rolled her eyes at Simon and dug in her pocket, coming out with a pack of cards. “Gin?” she asked, holding them up.

“You’re a godsend,” Simon said, holding out his hand for the deck.

“All’s I’m saying,” an aggrieved Mike was saying ten minutes later (just as Sandra swept up Simon’s discarded three and used it to magically produce gin) “is that, you being English and all, you could at least oblige us with a couple of lines in the original language.”

“I’m afraid I really can’t,” Jeremy said apologetically.

“Aw, c’mon!” Mike wailed. “Why not?”

“I’ve never seen the movie,” Jeremy admitted after a pause.

Even Simon had to stop and join in the general “*Whaaat?*” that that admission produced. “How the hell does one get to be your age in an English-speaking country—in England!—and not have seen *Monty Python and the Holy Grail?*” he added, picking up the cards and shuffling them. “That’s like growing up in America without eating Happy Meals or something.”

“Assuming your comparison is exact, I’m better off for it,” Jeremy said with asperity before relenting. “I just never got around to it. I *do* lead a busy life.”

“Not even as a kid?” Nate asked, in much the same hushed and horrified voice that he might use to ask if the deceased had suffered long. “I mean, it was . . . when did it come out, Two?”

“ ‘75,” Rich promptly supplied.

“Over thirty years ago,” Nate concluded. “And you’ve *never* seen it?”

"I'm afraid not," Jeremy said, with impressive patience. "My parents were of the sort who didn't believe in television or other un-Godly pursuits."

"Ewwww," Mike said, even as Simon quietly perked up his ears. "Aw, man, I didn't know they had those in England."

"It's been my experience that they exist everywhere," Jeremy said. "And at any rate, it isn't as if my access to television increased after I left home. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"He's never seen the Holy Grail," Nate said in general awe. "That's *so strange*."

"Have you seen *any* Monty Python?" Simon asked, dealing out the cards again.

There was a brief pause. "I don't believe so," Jeremy eventually said. "I've *heard* of it . . ."

"Heard of it," Simon repeated. "What kind of a sorry excuse for an Englishman *are* you?"

"A busy one?" Jeremy suggested. "I've simply never acquired the habit of watching television. I've always had other things to do. More pressing."

"What about movies? You've got to have seen *movies*," Simon said.

Jeremy laughed a little. "I haven't been inside a movie theatre at all for over five years, S—Templar. And even then it was mostly just a convenient and dark place to make a trade. I haven't the faintest idea what was playing."

"It's not *human*," Nate moaned.

"I'm just . . . busy," Jeremy said. Simon could hear vague slithering noises in the background, as if Jeremy were shifting on the van's metal floor. "I only have a few more years to make my fortune before I lose my edge. I suppose once I've retired I can sit about and find out what I've missed."

"You're weird," Simon said cheerfully. "Dammit, Spring, stop discarding crap I don't need."

"Sorry, boss," Sandra said. "Wait, no, no I'm not."

Sandra stood on her right foot and propped her left foot up on the shelves over Simon's head, stretching. Simon shut his eyes and tried not to look up at the arch of her spread legs above him. "What time is it?" he asked instead.

"Just after midnight," Rich said. "All three of us are watching the monitors, Templar. We won't miss him."

"Never crossed my mind that you would," Simon said. "How's everybody holding up?"

"I'm a bit stiff," Jeremy said. "Still, as hiding places go, this one is almost luxurious."

"I'm good," Johnny said.

Mike groaned, long and low. Simon assumed (or hoped, at least) that he was stretching. "Yeah, I'm cool," he said when he was done.



Sandra dropped back into her crosslegged position, linking her fingers together and stretching her arms straight up above her head. "Another game?" she asked Simon.

Simon shook his head, wrapping his hand around his microphone to muffle it. "It's getting a little too close to time. Let's stop and turn the light off."

Sandra nodded and picked up the flashlight, flicking it off. Simon's eyes dazzled in the sudden lack of light, little staticky supernovas exploding in the sudden darkness; Sandra's knee shifted against his as she reclaimed her jacket and slid back into it, and suddenly it was all he was aware of. He reached out and patted her knee, and she touched his hand briefly before falling still.

"So," Simon said, settling back against the corner of the shelves and shutting his eyes, "I vote that someone tell us a story."

"I vote Shadow," Mike immediately said. "No offense, guys, but I've *heard* all your stories by now."

"Yeah, I agree," said Nate. "Two and I can keep an eye on the monitors. Tell us a story, Shadow."

"Motion carried," Sandra added.

"A story?" Jeremy said, laughing a little. "Oh dear, and here's me without my Brothers Grimm. What sort of story were you looking for?"

"Personal anecdotes? Always good," Simon said. "Me, I'm always up for stories that make you look like an idiot, but, you know, whatever you've got."

"Oh, one of *those*," Jeremy said. "I haven't very many, of course, but . . . hm. Well. All right. Shall I begin?"

"Any time you're ready," Simon said.

"Very good," Jeremy said. He paused and let the silence stretch out for a second or two, and when his voice picked up again it was softer, just a low and lulling sound in the night. "Once upon a time—"

"Oh, now that's just classy," Simon said, laughing in the darkness. "You tell the man to tell us a story and we get a for-real fairy tale."

"I try," Jeremy said. "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away—"

"Shouldn't that be 'a long time ago'?" Rich muttered, but so softly that it barely intruded.

"Nerd," Mike said happily.

"—there was this painfully skinny fourteen-year-old boy who desperately needed a bath, a haircut, and about four meals," Jeremy said. "The boy was a runaway who lived mostly on his wits, which I must admit were not as good at the time as he thought they were, and he survived via petty theft and other assorted sordid crimes."

"Seventh son of a seventh son?" Nate asked. "I mean, if it's a fairy tale."

"Third son of a king?" Simon added, just because.

"Fourth child out of six, actually, and all of them dirt-poor," Jeremy said. "If you keep interrupting I shall never get anywhere."

“Shhhh,” Simon said, as if he hadn’t been the last one to interrupt. “I wanna hear the story.”

“At any rate, one day the boy was loitering around a very expensive neighborhood looking for things to steal,” Jeremy said. “Unfortunately there were no cars parked on the streets and all the local shopkeepers watched him with eagle’s eyes if he tried to go into the shops, so he wasn’t doing very well. He was just about to leave and go commit his crimes elsewhere when he noticed one of the grandest houses had a window that was standing just a little ajar, opening out onto the back garden.”

“Oh oh,” Johnny said. “Witch’s house. Happens all the time.”

“Mm,” said Jeremy. “Getting over the fence was easy enough and the boy found a convenient shrubbery to hide in—”

“You must bring us a shrubbery!” Mike cried in a soft falsetto, making Simon snort with laughter.

“—and he crouched there and studied the window for a few minutes, and he noticed something very strange about it: there was a nearly invisible wire strung across the opening. Now, a boy who was truly wise would have taken that as a bad omen and left the house alone, but our hero was very hungry and, as I said earlier, not very bright, so instead he pulled a battered old knife from his pants and clipped the wire, bending it aside. After that, opening the window was easy, and the boy crept across the room like a mouse, pocketing expensive things, at least until he took hold of the doorknob and was promptly hit with enough voltage to knock him unconscious.”

Someone sputtered with laughter and that set the rest of them off, Simon biting the inside of his lip to keep from laughing too loudly. Even Jeremy was laughing a little when he went on. “The boy woke up later in a strange bed, wearing someone else’s pajamas, with his own clothes nowhere in sight. He may not have been very bright but he also wasn’t completely stupid, and so he decided that he should definitely get out of this odd house right away. And he tried. And this time he made it all the way down the hallway, managing to avoid a tripwire and a particularly obvious motion detector, before falling afoul of, of all things, a pivoting stair riser. At any rate, he went arse over teakettle down the back stairs, once again knocking himself unconscious.”

“Oh, man, I like this story,” Simon said. “It’s ‘The Little Dumbass That Couldn’t’.”

“I thought you might like it,” said Jeremy. “At any rate, *this* time when the boy woke up he was back in that bed, in those same strange pajamas, but there was also someone else in the room with him, waiting for him to wake up.”

“Oh, wait, I know this one,” Mike said. “The evil witch, right?”

“Naw, enchanted princess,” Johnny said. “Maybe she looks like a teapot or something.”

“What?” said Mike.

“Well,” said Johnny, and Simon could supply the shrug even without seeing it. “British.”

“Actually, it was a boy just a little older than himself,” Jeremy said. Simon grew very still. “The older boy looked very unhappy and scowled at the boy when he awoke, and he didn’t say a word to him, just went to the door and opened it and called for someone. The third person, when he arrived, turned out to be an older man, very trim and fit, and after laughing at the boy for a good five minutes proceeded to question him closely about the traps he’d evaded, wanting to know how he’d seen them and what he’d done to avoid them, and after a fit of sullen silence the boy finally felt guilty enough to answer—and all this time the older boy stood behind the man, scowling at the boy as if he were very angry indeed.”

“There are way too many ‘he’s and boys and stuff in this story,” Nate opined.

“Shall we go ahead and call the boy ‘Jeremy’, then? It isn’t as if I’m fooling anyone.”

“Okay,” Nate said, quietly.

“As long as you’re doing that you might as well just tell the rest of it straight,” Simon added, shifting slightly to scratch his back against the shelves. “As fairy tales go this one kind of sucks. No witches or magic animals or anything.”

“Really? I’d thought it had its own peculiar charm,” Jeremy said. “But, well, as you will, Simon. At any rate, he was impressed by me, apparently. And also amused, which I couldn’t blame him for, after the day’s slapstick routine. So he made me a perfectly amazing offer: if I wanted I could stay, live there with the two of them, and have a home, as long as I allowed him to, er, teach me a trade, as it were. He warned me that it would be a ridiculous lot of work, but that I would be fed and sheltered and cared for, and even if I turned out to have no aptitude, well, he would make arrangements for me to do something else instead. He had contacts and such everywhere. I suppose I’d found my fairy godfather, as it were.”

No one said anything when Jeremy paused this time, and after a moment, he went on. “At any rate, I didn’t even have the chance to say yes or no before the other boy started protesting. He didn’t want me there, not at all, I was just some street brat, how did he know I could be trusted at all, on and on and on. It didn’t change his mind, though, and eventually the other boy went storming out and he turned back to me and waited for an answer.” Jeremy stopped and laughed, a little. “I thought he was a pedophile, of course. But, well, by that point I’d been on the streets for four years, and I’d spent those four years consorting with damned near every sort of criminal and pervert already, and I thought that a pervert with a mansion for me to live in and food for me to eat beat out the *other* sort of pervert by a long shot. So I said yes.”

“... I don’t know if I like this story any more,” Sandra said, shifting uncomfortably, disturbing the air around Simon. He could hear her twice, once in person and once, tinnily, through the headphones, like an echo. “I spent two

years working down in Sex Crimes—”

“Oh, no, it’s quite all right, it turns out I couldn’t have been more wrong,” Jeremy said quickly. “The other boy was his adopted son, all properly legal and aboveboard, and while he couldn’t precisely adopt me, he treated us both just the same. Which his son *hated*, of course. Suddenly there was this other boy living in his space and stealing his thunder, so to speak, and the longer I stayed and the better I got, the more he resented me. He’d never had a rival or any serious competition before, and then I turned out to have, er, something of an aptitude for my craft.”

“So you were better than he was,” Rich said, almost like it was an accusation.

“Not just then,” Jeremy said. “He’d been living there since he was two, after all, and he’d been actively training for a little over ten years. I had a lot of catching up to do. It was probably a good thing—if I’d been better than he was from the start, he would never have forgiven me.”

“Go on,” Simon said. Jeremy in this sort of sharing mood was rare enough that he was determined to milk it for all it was worth.

“Right,” Jeremy said, clearing his throat. “At any rate, he despised me for years. I kept hoping he’d come around, because . . . well, I idolized him, to be frank. And I knew it bothered his father that we didn’t get on. So I didn’t give up. I did everything I could think of to win him over and eventually—” and here Jeremy paused, significantly, and the hairs on the back of Simon’s neck abruptly prickled “—well, I did.”

“So what happened?” Simon prompted after a long and breathless moment, trying with all his might not to imagine the truth behind that one simple damned sentence. *Is he your rival, your brother, your ex-boyfriend?* he’d asked Jeremy, prodding for information—it felt like months ago. *Yes*, Jeremy had said.

“Well, nothing much right at first. Five years went by, making me nineteen. I was happy. I had a family that I loved. I was *good* at what I did, better than he was at most things—” Jeremy laughed a very little “—which he didn’t like at all. But neither of us knew just how good I actually was until my master put an arm about my shoulders one afternoon and told me I was a better thief than *he* had been at my age. He sounded so proud that I nearly swelled up and burst from it.”

“Uh oh,” Johnny said, his unused voice like gravel.

“Yes, of course he overheard that,” said Jeremy. “In a household full of sneak thieves you really ought to simply assume you’re being overheard. At any rate, that was the last straw, apparently. That night, he, ah—” Jeremy coughed, once “—let us just say he beat hell out of me before taking everything in the house that he considered his—*hundreds* of thousands of pounds’ worth of equipment and money—and leaving. He never came back. It nearly broke his father’s heart, but, well, he was an adult and he’d made his choice. His father is quite a one for personal responsibility.”

“But you’ve seen him since then,” Simon prompted, softly.

“Oh, yes. We, ah, kept tabs on him the best we could over the years. Worse than I am or not, he’s still extraordinarily skilled, and he’s done quite well for himself. More so, in some ways, because he simply doesn’t have the same scruples that I do. At any rate, we do travel in the same circles, loosely speaking, and about five years ago we happened across each other at a gallery opening in Barcelona.” Jeremy paused. “It was unpleasant, to say the least.”

“Ooh, were there punchin’s?” Mike asked, straining for levity and not quite making it. “I like punchin’s,” he added uncertainly, and fell silent again.

“Oh, no, he was perfectly polite, which was worse, really,” Jeremy said. “There were far too many people roaming about and we both had, ah, business to transact later on, so neither of us wanted to call too much attention to ourselves, you understand.”

“Oh, the tragedy of the criminal’s life—” Sandra said.

“Shh,” said Simon, and he put a warning hand on her knee. “I want to hear this.” Sandra subsided.

“There’s not that much to hear, if I’m to be honest,” Jeremy said. “Eventually he cornered me by the buffet and spent a while quietly accusing me of the most horrible things, some of which were true, I must admit, but most of which were just . . . paranoid fantasies, if you will. I believe he thinks he hates me. I don’t think that’s quite true. I think it’s much more complicated than that. Isn’t it always?”

He paused, as if waiting for an answer, and after a hypnotized moment Simon said, “Huh.”

“At any rate,” Jeremy said, “then he told me that if he ever saw me again, he would kill me. I believed him. And then he left, and I haven’t seen him since, as you can tell, because I’m still alive.”

“Yeah,” Sandra said after a pause. “I don’t like this story any more.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Jeremy said. “Er. And they all lived more or less happily ever after, the end.”

“Shit, I’m gonna have nightmares now,” Mike said. “Thanks a lot. Couldn’t you just tell another story with a dick joke in it?”

“I sense that I have offended,” Jeremy said, suddenly as dry and breezy as ever. “Very well, I’m certain I have something a little less fraught to share—”

“Uh,” Nate said.

“Specs?” Simon said, suddenly all on edge.

“Oh crap,” Nate said urgently. “He’s here.”

Simon sat bolt upright and grabbed the microphone of his headset. Across from him, Sandra stopped breathing, and he could dimly hear the rustle of Mike and Johnny surging to their feet. “Talk to me,” he urged softly.

“Got him on camera one, square on the rooftop. He’s just standing there,” Nate said. “Looking around. He’s got on goggles like Shadow’s and some kind of, I don’t know, ninja mask thing, it’s covering his face and hair.”

“Stupid,” Jeremy said, his voice suddenly almost taut enough to quiver. “*Stupid*. Covering his ears, impeding his breathing, reducing the mobility of his head and neck—”

“He’s touching the side of his goggles,” Nate reported, breaking in on Jeremy without a qualm. “Looking around again. He doesn’t look nervous or anything—okay, there he goes, he’s going in.”

“It’s going down, folks, it’s *going down*,” Simon said, easing himself to his feet as quietly as he could. “Silence on frequency except for reports. Shadow, count us down.”

When he spoke again Jeremy was calm, even a bit remote. “Team two move out on my mark,” he said. “In five. Four. Three. Two. One. *Mark*. Team two, go. Thirty-seven.”

“Gone,” Mike said, and Simon heard a door open and close and the faint scuffing of running feet. Sandra drifted to her feet beside him, touching his shoulder once and then letting her hand drop.

“Twenty-eight,” Jeremy was saying in his ear, almost dreamily slow. “Twenty-seven. Twenty-six. Twenty-five—”

“We’re in position,” Mike growled in a low choked voice, even as Jeremy droned on in the background. “In the bushes, at least partially behind trees, and flat on the ground, waiting for signal. Sight line to his exit point is clear.”

“Twenty-one, good, twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen—”

Simon clenched his fists in the darkness and hissed a breath through his teeth as his stomach turned over. Beside him Sandra was quivering, disturbing the air. Simon put a hand on her shoulder and she fell as still as stone, not perceptibly breathing. “Nine,” said Jeremy in his ear. “Eight. Seven. Six—”

Someone swallowed on frequency. Simon had no idea who it was. “Four,” said Jeremy. “Three. Two.”

“Vent cover is opening,” Nate said.

“One,” said Jeremy. “Mark.”

“Vent cover is open,” Nate reported in a breathless voice. “I don’t see him yet. He’s probably looking around—okay, we have a rope, rope is falling, I see an arm . . .”

“Come on,” Simon breathed, not sure why he was saying it or what he meant by it but needing desperately to say it anyway. Sandra put her hand over his, digging in her nails.

“And he’s coming out of the vent,” Nate said. “I’ve got him clear on camera two. He’s dropping, dropping . . . on the ground now. Looking around.”

“Oh, God,” Jeremy said, his voice ringing with some throttled emotion for just a moment before he choked it back. “No. Never mind. I’m fine.”

“Touching the goggles, looking around again—okay, he’s going for the safe. He is kneeling in front of the safe.” Nate’s play-by-play was delivered in a soft, intent voice. “Studying the safe. Okay, he’s turning the dial, there are no tools in evidence—”

“—either he’s been in here before or he had someone on the inside,” Jeremy said. “He knows the combination. Might have gotten it off the same piece of paper I did.”

“Good,” Simon breathed. “That’s less time I’ve got to wait.”

“Their security is for crap,” Rich said. “I am activating the air conditioner now, Templar.” Half a second later the building’s huge air conditioner roared to life. Simon nodded, although no one could see him.

“Safe is open,” Nate said, his voice going taut and throttled. Simon stopped breathing. “He’s got the disk and the box now,” said Nate, nearly choking on the words. “He’s opening the box, looking at the fake bullets . . . still looking . . . looking at the disk—oh thank God he’s putting both things in the pouch on his back. He’s taken the bait, I repeat, he has *taken the bait*.”

Simon opened his mouth wide and heaved out a deep and silent breath, and beside him he could just barely hear Sandra doing the same. “Team one ready,” Simon sighed after a moment. “Ready to move out on your mark.”

It was Jeremy instead of Nate who picked up the litany, soft and urgent and accented in the night. “He’s closing the safe and resetting the dial. Checking his hands. Looking about again. All right, he’s returning to the rope, climbing back up—”

“—whoa,” said Nate.

“Easing himself back into the vent feet-first,” Jeremy said, not paying any attention. “That will make your window eleven seconds long, team one. Eleven seconds long.”

“No problem,” Simon breathed.

“He’s all in,” Jeremy said. “Get ready.”

Simon reached out and put his hand on the doorknob. The metal was cool against his palm. “Ready,” he whispered on the exhale, and just like that, he was.

“Rope is going, going, gone,” said Jeremy. “Wait for it, wait for it, waaaaait—vent cover has just dropped back into place, he is moving into the mousetrap, team one ready to move on my mark, on three, two, one, *mark*—”

Simon twisted the doorknob and the supply closet door eased open onto a dimly moonlit hall, almost shatteringly bright after the darkness of the closet. In the background he could just barely hear Jeremy counting again, but it wasn’t important, it wasn’t important at all, what was important was sliding down the hallway in long, silent steps, easing open the door to Lab F, waving Sandra through—

“—five,” Jeremy said. “Four. Three—”

Sandra drifted across the room like a ghost, taking up her position to one side, sliding her gun from its holster and aiming it at the ceiling just where it met the far wall. Simon crept three steps in, so incredibly grateful for the roaring air conditioner to cover the noise, and did the same, baring his teeth in the night.

“One,” Jeremy said. “And mark. Specs Two, end the noise, please.”

The air conditioner cut off with an appallingly final sound, making Simon’s ears ring with the total silence. He needed to swallow. He didn’t dare swallow. And then half a second later came the noise he’d been waiting for, a sound that filled him with an incredible rush of triumph: the loud metallic clang of the thief’s hand rebounding off the vent cover. Very clearly, in the still night air, Simon heard him say, “Ouch, *shite*.”

“*FBI!*” Simon roared, gladly, finally filling the night with sound. “*Freeze! We have you surrounded—you are under arrest! You will not attempt to draw a weapon, you will not move, you will not breathe unless I say it is all right!*”

“Team two, *stay down*,” Jeremy said urgently in his ear at almost the same time. Simon ignored him. “The vent *should* be too tight for him to get at his gun but I can’t swear to it.”

“*Do you hear me?*” Simon bellowed.

“Ah, *Jesus*, I hear you!” The voice was oddly accented—*jaysis!*—high and thin with panic, and best of all, not moving. “I hear you, I hear you, ah Christ—” *key-rist!*

“*You will not attempt to escape down the side vents!*” Simon roared, taking a step or two to the side, just in case. The muzzle of his gun remained rock-steady, pointed at the ceiling. “They have been closed off, as has the vent cover in front of you. You will listen to me very carefully now. If there is any deviation from my instructions, I will shoot, and you had best believe that my weapon is of a sufficient caliber to punch through the ceiling. *Do you understand me?*”

“Ah Christ, ah *shite*, yes, *yes*—” The disembodied voice in the ceiling was muffled, panting so hard with fear and adrenalin that Simon could almost believe it was weeping. He thought, briefly, that he’d like to believe that.

“And if you should get any bright ideas about shooting at me, let me tell you right now that there’s a second person in here covering you and two more a short distance away. I advise you to come quietly. Are you ready to listen to what I want you to do?”

“Christ, I’m bloody well *stuck!*” the voice wept in panic. There was a faint clatter that made Simon’s finger tighten on the trigger. “There’s some kind of glue on the vent, it’s snagged me, hang about a bloody second, I give! I *give!*”

Simon rolled his eyes, then narrowed them. “What did he say?” Jeremy said urgently in his ear. Simon gestured blindly at Sandra, who started quietly relaying the thief’s words. “That’s not right,” Jeremy started to say, and then Mike broke in with “... what the hell?”

“What?” Simon said. “*What?*”



"I said I'm bloody well *stuck* ah Christ don't ye shoot I'll come all quiet-like just *give me a bloody moment*—"

"Something's coming out of the vent," Mike said, his voice quivering with controlled nerves. "Some kind of liquid, I can't tell, wait, it's fucking *smoking*—"

"—*he's burning his way through the epoxy*," Jeremy broke in urgently. "Get him out of there *now*, he's trying to burn his way out—"

"*YOU WILL STOP*—" Simon roared at the top of his lungs, but the night was sheared in two by the screech of bending aluminum. Simon swore viciously and put a bullet neatly through the ceiling, but the rapid thudding assured him that it was too late.

"*He's out!* Came tumbling out, landed on his feet—" Mike cried, and then his voice slammed up into the same booming threat that Simon had been wielding a moment ago. "*FBI! Freeze! If you do not*—"

Two flat cracks split the night. Simon and Sandra bolted for the back door even as a third, deeper shot echoed off the walls—Mike, probably, maybe Johnny—and a second later Mike bellowed again: "*I SAID FREEZE! SHOOT AGAIN AND I WILL DROP YOU, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH!*"

"Oh Christ," someone said in Simon's ear—he thought it was probably Jeremy—but he was already wrenching the back door open, heading out into the night, and he didn't have time to be reassuring. He'd barely emerged into the outside air when another one of those flat cracks popped almost in his ear. Simon automatically threw himself onto his belly and at the exact same moment someone made a horrifying whooping choking sound in his ear, and there was a thud, and Mike shrieked "*TEXAS!*" and opened fire.

"*Shit!*" Simon snarled, his stomach doing a nauseous roll in his belly. "Honda! Honda! Cease fire! *I SAID CEASE FUCKING FIRE!*"

"Aw fuck, I'm shot," Johnny said in a shocked little voice.

"You hang on," Simon snapped into his microphone. "You stay down and you hang on. That's an order!"

"Ohjesusfuck," Mike panted, all one word. "He's gone, I don't know where he went, I am commencing pursuit—"

"Like fuck you are," Simon snapped, cold as iron. "He is armed and dangerous and we have a man down, you will *pull back*, that is an order. Do you understand me?" Mike was silent, gulping for breath. "*Do you understand me?*" Simon half-yelled.

"Yes, boss," Mike finally said, under control again, for the moment. "Dropping back now."

"Good," Simon said. "Texas? Texas, speak to me!"

"Got my vest," Johnny said on an outburst of relieved breath. "Hurts like fuck, gonna have a big-ass bruise, but he got my vest, I'm okay, anybody want a bullet?"

"Oh thank God," Sandra said shakily. "Boss?"

Simon spent a moment studying the trees, wanting with all his heart to chase after this fucker, bring him to bay, drag him down—"Pull back," he finally said, and balled his free hand into a fist, thumping it on the ground. "Pull back. We lost him. He's gone."

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## ◆ Twenty-Two

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“Hey, Texas,” Simon said, kneeling on the van floor next to the prone Johnny. “How you doing?”

“Been better,” Johnny said, with a wheezing laugh that turned into a groan halfway through. “Think he cracked a rib. Still, coulda been worse.”

“Yeah,” Simon said in agreement. He stifled a sigh and gingerly patted Johnny’s shoulder. “Hang tight. We’ll get you seen to in a bit, once Mike has taken a swing at me, okay?”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, shutting his eyes.

Simon knelt there for a moment longer, then stood up and turned to face Mike, whose face was contorted with rage. “Shit, Templar!” Mike said, nearly spat, swinging his arms around in huge flailing arcs. “Why the fuck didn’t we go after him? Why the fuck not? We have chased armed criminals across half of Virginia before and now we just *let this one go*?”

Simon squeezed his eyes shut and willed himself not to get angry. “First of all we have a *man down*, possibly with broken ribs,” he pointed out, “and an assailant who is not known for his interstate shooting rampages—”

“Man down, man down, fuck your man down!” Mike yelled. “We were in pursuit of Farraday for three! fucking! *hours*! when you had a *broken leg*, Templar—”

“That was me!” Simon broke in. “Not one of my people. *Me*. *Suicidally* stupid acts, sure, I’m fine with that, but never *homicidally* stupid! Besides, it’s out of our hands now *anyway*!”

“Yeah, it’s fucking out of our hands!” Mike snarled, his hands snapping open and shut again. Dimly Simon was aware of Sandra hopping to her feet behind him. “Whose fault is *that*—”

Simon slashed his hand through the air, cutting Mike off. “Upstairs contacted me this afternoon,” Simon said in a tight voice. “Langridge called in her fucking *favor*. There’s three tracer chips inside the bullet case, the CIA wants Karpol’s network inside the States—”

“What?” Mike said, boggled. “What?!”

“I had my orders!” Simon shouted. He knew he was shouting and he would have liked to stop, but he couldn’t. “If he was getting away I was ordered to *let him go*, Upstairs has *pulled rank*, it is out of our hands!”

“But he—that’s not—*FUCK!*” Mike screamed, wheeling around in a giant circle and punching the corrugated metal wall as hard as he could. A moment later he was hopping around with his fist squeezed between his thighs, yelping. “Owfuck, oh, shit, that was stupid, that was really fucking *stupid* . . .”

“A masterful display of useless machismo, though,” Sandra said, putting her hand on Mike’s shoulder and squeezing until he quieted. “C’mon, let me see your hand.”

Simon waited a moment before spinning around, abruptly coming face to face with Jeremy, who in contrast was still, pale, and composed. “What?” Simon said, still fired with adrenalin. “You want to take a swing at me too? Might as well get it all over with at once . . .”

“What? No,” Jeremy said, taken aback. “I’m just . . . I’m sorry, Simon.”

“What?” Simon said.

“I said I’m sorry,” Jeremy repeated. “It was my plan and it failed and I’m *sorry*.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. Abruptly he found himself pacing, three tight steps back and forth. “It was, and it did, and I would really fucking like to blame you right about now. It was just epoxy and we *knew* he carried some of that acid shit, we should have seen it coming.” Jeremy was a statue in black, his face completely and protectively blank. “But,” Simon said, abruptly stopping in front of him, “I can’t. We had *four guns* on him, we completely got the drop on him, it was beautiful and perfect right up until the point where he became a crazy fast bastard and shot up the place and ran *anyway*. He should not have gotten away and in the end it was no more your fault than it was anyone else’s.”

After a long moment, Jeremy heaved a sigh and let his head fall forward in acquiescence. “As you say, Simon.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “As I say. Come on, let’s get the hell out of Dodge. Texas needs a hospital.”

“So does Honda,” Sandra added, her voice like flint.

The hospital complex’s actual lobby was vast and carpeted and vaguely plush, with little groupings of modern-looking chairs and couches here and there, as if it were trying to pretend it was an upscale hotel rather than a hospital. In this it failed. No amount of hotel trappings could disguise the faint antiseptic smell, or the blank, haunted looks on hurrying visitors’ faces, or the wheelchair tracks that just barely indented the carpet at Simon’s feet. Still, it beat the hell out of the emergency room.

Sandra had picked a dim corner and a particularly deep overstuffed chair to curl up in, sunk so low into the cushions that her upraised knees were higher than

her head. She hadn't bothered to change while she was at the motel, still wearing the drab gray and brown clothes from the evening's stakeout, brand-new grass stains and all. She barely moved as Simon threw himself into the chair next to her, just tilted her head to the side until she could see him. "Well?"

"No cracked ribs," Simon reported, shoving his hand through his hair. "He'll have one monster bruise and is going to hurt like hell, but he's actually more or less fine. Thank God for the vests."

"Yeah," Sandra said. "And?"

Simon hesitated. "... fractured one of the bones in the back of his hand," he finally said. "Somebody's putting him in a cast now."

Sandra was silent. After a moment she made a tired *snrk!* sound, one corner of her mouth twitching up. "Leave it to Mike."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not," Simon said. "Anyway, they'll be out once Mike's got his cast on. Everybody else get back to the motel okay?"

"Yeah," Sandra said. "I dropped everyone off and came right back. For all I know they're already asleep. We're all exhausted."

"Oof," Simon said in agreement, flopping back in his chair and staring stupidly up at the soaring glassed-in ceiling. "Christ, bed sounds good. Bed sounds like the best goddamned idea on earth."

Sandra was quiet for a bit. "You should have told us," she finally said, her voice soft and tired.

"Wha?" Simon asked, lifting his head with an effort to blink sleepily at her.

"About Upstairs and your new orders. You should have told us."

"Yeah, maybe," Simon said, letting his head fall back again. He rubbed a hand over his face and felt stubble. "I thought about it. I decided that I didn't want you guys to be any more on edge than you already were. Maybe it was a bad decision. So shoot me."

"Some day you're going to have to learn to trust us, boss," Sandra said.

"I do trust you!" Simon protested, taken aback. "I trust you guys like no one else, you know that!"

"Yeah, see," Sandra said, "that's what worries me."

"... I think I may be too tired to have this conversation right now," Simon said. "Can we search my soul later, or is this more of an intervention-type dealie?"

"If I wasn't this damned tired I wouldn't be saying anything," Sandra countered. "But *I am* this damned tired. And I'm kind of angry to boot, although unlike some people I'm of the rational gender and I prefer to express my anger through words instead of wall-punching."

"Yeah," Simon said. Suddenly he was too tired to give a damn, so he just shut his eyes. "Go on, then. Everybody else had their shot at me, you might as well take your turn."

“Not that it’ll do any good now that you’re all defensive,” Sandra said, “but . . . okay, yes, you trust us, I get that. You trust us to be able to accomplish anything you tell us to do. Right?”

“Right . . .” Simon said warily.

“So that makes us . . . what?”

“Sandy . . .”

“No, bear with me, come on, what else have you got to do while we wait? That makes us what?”

“Look, just lecture me, okay?” Simon said. “I promise to sit stoically through it and even maybe try to listen some, although I make no promises, but if you want me to think, too, this is really not the time.”

Sandra sighed. “All right, fine. You’re self-centered, Simon. I mean, that’s not news, we all know that—”

“Self-centered?” Simon said.

“—but you divide the world into two halves: things you personally know how to do, and things you don’t know how to do—”

“Self-centered?” Simon said again.

“—if it’s the latter you assign one of us to figure it out for you and bring you the results so you can go on and take responsibility for it—”

“Self-centered!” Simon informed the lobby in general.

“—in the end it’s all about you, really, you and your precious rep and the awesome team of misfits that *you* handpicked to serve your genius, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing because it means you take the heat when there’s heat to take—”

“Self-centered,” Simon muttered indignantly.

“—but it makes us extensions of you instead of people in our own right and would you *stop that*?”

“Self-centered?” Simon asked. “I mean, stop what?”

Sandra sighed, reached over, and flicked a finger against Simon’s ear as hard as she could. Simon jumped and yelped a little before he could stop himself. “Ow,” he said, rubbing his ear. “Okay, okay, I’ll knock it off.”

Sandra dropped her hand again. “Would you prefer it if I called you a control freak instead?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s okay. I totally admit to that,” Simon said. “That doesn’t mean I don’t think you’re not completely full of shit here, but yeah, I’m a control freak.”

“Whatever,” Sandra said. “It’s late, I’m tired, if you confront me about this tomorrow I’ll deny it, *et cetera*. All I’m really trying to say is that if you’d told us about Upstairs pulling rank before we got started, there’s not one of us who wouldn’t have been able to assess that information and deal with it and still perform up to speed.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, heaving out a breath so long that it felt like he was deflating. “Yeah, okay. My bad.”

“And that way Mike most likely would not have fractured his own hand during his traditional post-mission screaming spazmoid fit,” Sandra went on, inexorably. “And it’s not the first time you’ve done this, either. You are *constantly* not telling us things because you don’t think we need to know.”

“Oh, now that is *not true*,” Simon said, stung. “Christ, I am *always* straight with you guys!”

“Well, yes, you’ve never lied to us that I know of, and God knows I’m grateful for that,” Sandra said. “You just like to make these little executive decisions about what we do and don’t need to know to do our jobs, like you’re afraid we’ll get distracted by the shiny or something.”

“Uh, because some of you would?” Simon pointed out. “I mean, Christ, I love you guys like family but a large percentage of you are completely nuts.”

“... yeah,” Sandra finally said, almost visibly running out of steam. “Yeah, I guess so. Shit, I don’t really have a point. I just want you to be aware that I *know* you keep us blinkered like polo ponies—”

“Polo ponies, shit, Vassar girl,” Simon muttered, but softly enough that he thought she probably couldn’t hear him.

“—and sometimes doing things on a need-to-know basis is fine but other times, like tonight, that’s really going to backfire on you,” Sandra finished. “And I went to *Yale*, you bastard.”

“Transferred to Yale, you mean *ow, ow, okay, I’m sorry*—”

Sandra let go of Simon’s ear just as Mike and Johnny appeared, Mike nearly pogoing in place to stay even with the slow-moving Johnny. “Boss! Sandy!” Mike caroled, waving his brand-new cast frantically. “Check it out! *Camo plaster!*”

“How does he do that on as little sleep as I know he’s had?” Simon muttered, heaving himself to his feet. “Bastard runs on pure distilled crazy or something.”

“I don’t know, but I’m about two seconds from punching the bounce right out of him,” Sandra said, standing up a moment later.

A light was still on in Simon’s motel room when he trudged up to it, despite it being closer to four than three. He could see it dimly under the heavy, drawn curtains. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath, taking two tries to swipe the keycard through the lock. “*Way* too tired for this shit.”

Jeremy looked up as Simon came in. He was sitting cross-legged at the head of his bed with that oversized book of his in his lap, his hands folded neatly on top of it; he looked just about as tired as Simon felt. “How are they?” Jeremy asked, straight off.

Simon shrugged out of his jacket and let it fall. “Johnny’s fine. Well, not *fine*, but he doesn’t have any cracked ribs or anything, just a hell of a bruise. Mike,

ironically, is the injured one in this situation, having fractured a bone in his hand. Far as the others go, Sandra's pissy, Nate feels guilty for no goddamned reason at all, and Rich is sitting on a volcano of throttled anger and will blow up at me sooner or later. As for you, I'm guessing you can't sleep."

"Oh, very good," Jeremy said. "Tell me, what tipped you off? Was it my still being awake despite the pajamas?"

"Yeah, that's about the size of it," Simon said, kicking off his sneakers. "Also, can you do me a favor and just . . . not start? I'm way too tired to deal with your usual innuendo-and-dance routine."

"Actually, I hadn't been planning on it," Jeremy said. "It's been much too much of a day for that."

"Aren't we a sparkling pair," Simon said.

"I think we're entitled not to be," Jeremy said. "Special dispensation for extraordinary events and all that."

Simon yanked his shirt off over his head. "You ought to say 'extraordinary' more often. It sounds neat in British."

Jeremy smiled and looked down long enough to mark his place and shut his book. "Are you all right?" he asked, finally, softly, still looking down at the book's cover.

"I've been better," Simon said, tossing his jeans onto the growing pile of clothing at the foot of his bed. "Sandy went off on me at the hospital about how I'm self-centered."

"Mm," Jeremy said, looking up.

"Shut up," said Simon. "She gave me some hell about not telling them about my orders, which I guess I deserved, but then she started trying to tell me that I'm always keeping secrets from them like that, and that's just bullshit."

"Mm," Jeremy said again, raising an eyebrow.

"That's *different*," Simon said. "That's part of my *personal* life and, therefore, none of their goddamned business."

"Mm," Jeremy said for the third time, now smiling helplessly.

"No, seriously, I don't care how it got *started*, it's part of my personal life *now*, and anyway it was *you* who—" Simon broke off, irritated. "Stop doing that," he said instead.

"Stop doing what?" Jeremy asked, still smiling.

"Making me incriminate myself," Simon said. "Bastard. Taking advantage of my exhausted state."

"In my defense, I point out that I haven't actually done a thing beyond make inquiring noises," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, well, well, uh, you're good at it or something, so knock it off," Simon told him, crawling under the covers. Shabby motel sheets or not, they felt so damned good right about then that he nearly groaned aloud. "Turn out the goddamned light and let's get some sleep."



Jeremy reached over and flicked out the light, abruptly plunging the room into darkness. "If I didn't know better I'd say you spent the drive back to the motel justifying certain things to yourself," he said. Simon was glad of the darkness, because he was pretty sure Jeremy was smiling that one particular smile that always made Simon want to punch him in the face.

"Maybe I did and maybe I didn't," Simon said, some random exhausted childish urge leading him to add, "So there. Nyah."

"Mm," Jeremy said a final time, the mattress creaking under him as he settled down. "Do we need to be up at any particular time?"

"Nah," Simon said, burrowing down into the covers and finally, finally letting himself relax. "We'll catch an evening flight out, let everybody catch up on their sleep. Assuming you *can* sleep."

"We'll see," Jeremy said. "I'm tired enough now that it may happen despite me."

Simon was quiet for a minute or so. "Really fucked you up, huh," he finally said.

"It wasn't precisely easy," Jeremy admitted after an awkward moment of silence. "Felt decidedly odd, seeing him again like that, being on the wrong side of the law."

"The right side, you mean."

"Well, I suppose it all depends on your point of view, Simon."

"Like hell it does," Simon said, propping himself up on an elbow. "You *are* the wrong side of the law. The right side upholds it and the wrong side breaks it. It's really simple. Kiddy stuff."

"Are we going to argue, or are we going to sleep?" Jeremy asked.

"... sleep," Simon said, crashing back down. The room was quiet for a few minutes before he added, "You know what really cheeses me off?"

"What's that?" Jeremy asked.

Simon yawned. "I...mmm. I probably still have to go to the Arboretum on Friday and meet with Langridge, even after she fucked us over like that."

"Ouch. Salt in your wounds and all that."

"Saltiest old bag I ever met," Simon sleepily muttered, and Jeremy started to say something in response, but Simon was asleep before he heard what it was.

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## ◆ Twenty-Three

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“No, you’re not listening to me,” Simon said patiently, switching his cellphone to his other ear and wedging a wad of dirty socks into the end of his duffel bag. “Look, what part of ‘your current security setup is nonexistent’ did you not understand? Do I need to rephrase it?”

The bathroom door clicked open and Simon automatically put his back to it, putting his free hand over his ear. A wave of steam rolled out and hit the back of his neck, making him shut his eyes. “Yes,” he said into his phone. “Yes, I’m aware of that. I’m also aware that it’s been more than *four years* since the fire, which you have to admit is making this so-called ‘temporary’ building of yours look more and more permanent by the day.”

The voice on the other end of the line protested, tinnily. Simon rolled his eyes and did something that was closer to waiting than listening, lifting his hand away from his ear long enough to make the universal sockpuppet flapping-mouth gesture over his shoulder. *Yap, yap, yap*. Behind him he heard Jeremy laugh, very softly.

“Nope, I’m sorry, you don’t get to just thank me and dismiss me and hang up,” Simon said, breaking in once he’d gotten bored with waiting. “If you’re going to be stupid enough to try and run a high-profile development lab in a suburban business complex, you at least need to invest more than ten dollars in your security system, and frankly I intend to keep calling board members until I get someone who’ll listen to me. Do I make myself clear?”

The little voice stuttered for a moment. Simon rolled his free hand into a loose fist and made the even more universal gesture for *wank, wank, wank*. The laugh this drew out of Jeremy sounded a good deal more choked.

“No, you got lucky,” Simon said, rolling over the protesting voice again and starting despite himself to feel a little like Gavin Tigano. “And quite frankly my team did a couple of thousand dollars’ worth of work on your building security that you didn’t even have to pay for, which to my mind means that I’ve bought myself about a pound of ‘shut up and think about what I’m telling you’.”

Damp fingertips landed lightly on the back of his neck and traced down over the bumps of his spine. Simon hunched his shoulders and swatted blindly behind himself, not managing to hit anything but a faint warm miasma of steam. “See, I can’t guarantee that he won’t come back, is the thing,” he said, even as the fingers hooked into the back of his shirt collar and pulled it down, not quite choking him as long as he straightened up and leaned back, which he did, if irritably. “And if I have to come back in a month or so to try and save your asses again and nothing at all has been done, I’m afraid I’ll just write the whole thing off as a bad deal and let you deal with him on your own.”

The voice on the other end protested, but Simon wasn’t listening, partly because he didn’t care and partly because *someone* had decided it was a good time to start mouthing the back of his neck, which it really, really wasn’t. After a moment of silent sputtering Simon reached back over his shoulder, grabbed a good-sized handful of wet hair, and hauled Jeremy bodily away. “Yes, sir, I think you *can* safely call that a threat,” he said, giving Jeremy a shake just for good measure. “And here in about five minutes I’m going to call the chairman of the board and repeat it, so you don’t have to. Isn’t that nice of me? Goodbye.”

He hit the disconnect button, folded up his phone, dropped it on the bed, and used his handful of Jeremy’s hair to drag the thief around in front of him. “And just what in the hell was that?” he asked, shaking Jeremy again.

Jeremy, looking very pleased with himself, readjusted his grip on the towel he was wearing slung low about his hips. “Well, if you have to *ask*, Simon—”

“Christ, how many times am I going to have to tell you *not while I’m working* before it sinks in?” Simon asked. “Oh, hell, don’t answer that!”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Jeremy said, the corner of his lips twitching helplessly. “It’s just that listening to you abuse your position of power to put the fear of God into some poor hapless civilian is so *arousing*.”

Simon snorted and let go of Jeremy’s hair, wiping his hand dry against his jeans leg. “Knock it off,” he said without any real rancor. “Get dressed. I just have one more call to make, and if you touch me again while I’m making it, I’ll throw you into a wall. Okay?”

“Well, if you’re going to be that way,” Jeremy sniffed, smoothing a hand back over his hair before turning around and heading towards his own bed.

“Guess *someone*’s feeling better this morning,” Simon said, watching him go. “You’ve gone right back to being your usual obnoxious, irritating self.”

“Ah, well, a good night’s sleep will work wonders,” said Jeremy, flapping a hand breezily over his shoulder. The top edge of the skimpy towel slid down just a fraction of an inch; Simon grabbed his phone and spun around before it could happen to fall any further, concentrating instead on dialing the second number he’d pried out of Darrell Timmins.

The discarded towel dropped gently onto his shoulder a moment later. Simon shut his eyes and very firmly did not turn around.

"I can drive," Mike said petulantly, thumping his cast against his leg.

"Yeah, I don't doubt that you *can*, but you're not *going* to," Simon said, holding out his hand. After a moment Mike sighed and dug his left hand into his jeans pocket, coming out with the van keys and passing them over. "Thank you," Simon said. "Hey, Spring!"

Sandra looked up. Simon threw her the keys. She snapped them out of the air, looked at them, and then looked back at him. "You could ask," she suggested.

"But making high-handed unwarranted assumptions is my calling, Spring!" Simon said cheerfully. One of the doors behind him clicked gently. Simon turned around just as Johnny eased the door shut behind himself and headed gingerly down the steps to the parking lot, carrying himself like a basket full of eggs. "Morning, Texas," Simon called. "How you doing?"

"Huh?" Johnny said, blinking. "Oh. Okay."

"Not too sore? No internal organs belatedly exploding in the night?"

"Um," Johnny said. "Nah."

"You sure you're going to be okay on a regular flight?" Simon asked. "I can still call and get something a little more private if I have to."

Johnny blinked again, one eye lagging just a beat behind the other. "Nah," he eventually said. "I'm good."

Simon studied him. "They got you on the good stuff, don't they?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. Definitely."

"He wouldn't even *share*," Mike said mournfully. "I mean, I'm wounded over here *too*."

"My drugs," Johnny said stubbornly, once this had sunk in, which took a second.

"We all here now?" Simon asked, looking around. "... where's Rich? Hey, Nate, Rich still in there?"

Nate looked up. "Yeah," he said awkwardly. "He said he'd be out soon."

"Huh," Simon said, looking back up at the door to 119. "How pissy is he this time?"

"Oh man," Nate said, scuffing a hand through his hair, "this is like a whole new level of pissy even for him, Templar. A couple of times I thought I was going to have to come ask if I could sleep on your floor or something."

Simon winced. "That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, it's gonna be a big bang when it comes, Templar," Nate said, fidgeting a bit.

"Well, we'll deal with it when it does," Simon decided. "Johnny, you get shotgun by right of being one huge bruise. You think you're going to need help getting in?"

"Huh? Oh. Nah. I'm good," Johnny said.

“Go ahead and get in, then,” Simon told him. “The rest of you give me your keycards and then start loading up. Rich isn’t out in ten minutes, I’ll go get him, God save me.”

Forty-five minutes later Sandra swung the van onto the exit ramp leading to the maze of sub-streets surrounding the Cincinnati airport. “Everybody say goodbye to Cincinnati!” she said.

“Good fucking riddance, Cincinnati!” Mike cried, banging the edge of his cast against the van’s metal roof with a loud hollow sound.

They were already sitting in the terminal, bored (and in at least one case, stoned) out of their minds, by the time Simon’s phone beeped. “Took you long enough,” he muttered under his breath, flicking the phone open. “Yeah,” he said. “Drake.”

No answer. Simon looked at the little screen. There was one (1) new text message waiting, and he couldn’t say he was surprised by that.

#### **DRAKE—SAME TIME, SAME PLACE. D. LANGRIDGE, CIA.**

“Yeah, if I were you I wouldn’t want to talk to me on the phone right now either,” Simon told his phone’s little screen.

“What?” Nate said, blinking at him.

“Nothing,” said Simon, poking at his phone until it deleted the text message. “Wasn’t talking to you.”

“Oh,” Nate said, subsiding into a little huddle in his chair again. “Okay.”

Simon eyed him, then reached out and knuckled Nate’s shoulder, nearly driving him sideways into Rich, who scowled blackly at them both and folded up into an even tighter little affronted lump. “Yo~ou need to stop feeling guilty for nothing,” Simon half-sang at Nate, leaving Rich alone for the time being.

“I’m not,” Nate said, guiltily.

Simon eyed him. “Now why is it that I don’t believe you? Oh, right, because you’re a *terrible liar*.”

Nate started to respond to that but shut up again with a little startled sound when one of the gate crew appeared almost at his elbow. “Sir, we’ll begin pre-boarding in about five minutes, so if you and your group want to board now...”

“Thank God,” Simon said, heaving himself out of his seat. “That’d be great, thanks.”

The flight was uneventful, the drive back to headquarters even more so. It was already after dark by the time Sandra pulled the van into the FBI motor pool garage, and for just a second Simon thought that the black Jeep parked over

against the wall was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "Okay, people," he said, popping open the van's back doors and sliding out into the damp DC air. "Huddle up for a quick meeting before we split. You okay for a few more minutes, Texas?"

"Yeah," Johnny said tiredly.

They formed up in a rough half-circle around the butt of the van, bags and equipment cases filling in the gaps in their formation. Simon looked around at the circle of familiar faces and then nodded. "Okay, folks. We're all tired, so I'll keep this as brief as I can. Since two of you are hurt and I won't have any idea what our next move is until I talk to both Upstairs and Langridge, I'm declaring tomorrow a total fuck-off day. Take a long weekend and we'll start fresh on Monday. Keep your cells close in case plans change abruptly, but otherwise I want you all to rest up and recuperate. Okay?"

The atmosphere lightened significantly at this announcement, and the chorus of agreement was pretty close to immediate. "I'm also gonna call this a no-poker weekend," Simon went on. "We've spent enough time this week wedged into each other's back pockets as it is. Any of you want to argue with me, feel free."

Simon paused. No one protested, not even Mike, who was usually the first to defend his right to poker and inebriation to the bitter end. "Right," Simon said. "Three-day weekend, plenty of rest and alone time. Next up: Sandy, would you see to getting Mike home?"

"Sure, Templar," Sandra said over Mike's affronted squawk. "I was kind of planning to anyway."

"I can drive myself," Mike protested.

"You can shut up and deal," Sandra told him. "You're accepting a ride home if I have to break your other hand to make you take it."

Mike held up both hands, plaster-coated and not, to ward Sandra off. "Aw, c'mon, Sandy, you wouldn't hit a wounded man, would you?" he asked plaintively.

"You want to try me?" Sandra asked.

Mike lit up like a neon sign. Simon immediately edged away from him. "Oh, yeah, I totally want to try you some time!" Mike cried, in total defiance of good sense, as usual. "Can I try you from behind? I always wanted to—"

Sandra shot him a disgusted look and then elbowed him in the stomach. Mike whooped out a breath and crumpled dramatically to the pavement, clutching his belly. "Medic!" he cried, waving his plaster-coated hand frantically in the air.

"Get up," Sandra told him. "The concrete's filthy."

"It's okay," Mike said happily. "I'm pretty darned filthy myself—"

"—we know," Sandra said.

"Anyway," Simon said, clearing his throat. Mike stayed where he was, but he did, at least, shut up. "Archer and I will see to getting Johnny home. If you've got stuff to put in the saferoom, do it, and then go the hell home. Anybody else

got something to say? No? Okay. Guys, I know it looks like a fiasco, but I still want you all to know that you did a hell of a job out there, and even if the crazy fucker got away we still put one fuck of a crimp into his plans. Maybe more than that, if the tracers stay on and some idiot puts that Zip disk into a drive anywhere on Earth. You guys rule. Get me?"

The smiles he got in return were weak, mostly, but real enough for all that, and there was a vague mumble of agreement. Simon paused, nodded, and clapped his hands together sharply. "Okay, let's break. Go home already." He swung to face Jeremy. "Archer, I want you to drive Johnny's truck back to his place. He'll ride with you and I'll follow in my truck, and then I'll take you back to your hotel from there."

"That sounds fine," Jeremy said, after a momentary hesitation which Simon figured was mostly for his benefit. "Assuming you don't mind?" he asked Johnny, who was leaning against the back of the van with his eyes shut.

"Nah," Johnny said, not opening his eyes as he fished around in his pocket, eventually coming out with his keys.

Rain blatted down lazily against the windshield as Simon pulled out of the garage, huge fat drops splattering against the glass. The taillights of Johnny's battered old pickup glowed red in the darkness and Simon fell in behind them, tapping his brights once; the brake lights flashed in answer and then Jeremy pulled out of the parking lot, Simon on his tail.

It wasn't that late but it was wet and nasty, and the waterlogged streets were nearly deserted. Despite this Jeremy was showing a lamentable tendency to drive like he was trying to pass a road test, as usual; by the time he pulled up behind Jeremy at the first red light Simon was grumbling. "Are you obeying the speed limit again?" he asked the taillights irritably. "You are! You're obeying the speed limit! Stop that!"

He considered honking. He was pretty sure it wouldn't get him anywhere, but it might make him feel better—the light turned green and the heel of his hand hit the horn at almost the exact same moment. Somewhat to his general disgust Jeremy didn't lurch out into the intersection in surprise; instead there was a pause and then Johnny's truck proceeded sedately onwards. After a moment the passenger side window rolled down and Johnny flipped him off.

Simon rolled his eyes, smacked the turn signal, and veered around Johnny's truck, accelerating to a much more comfortable fifty miles per hour or so. He would beat them to Johnny's place, park, and *wait*; all in all it would be much less annoying.

"You know, *most* people break *traffic* laws but obey the *real* ones," Simon said pretty much the instant Jeremy yanked open the Jeep's passenger side door. "But not you. No. The career criminal drives like a Boy Scout. You really get off

on being different, don't you?"

"He warned me that you were likely to chaff me about that," Jeremy said equably, hopping into the passenger seat with alacrity and running a hand through his damp hair. Fat wet dots of rain spotted his shoulders. "I told him that I knew."

"It's not even like I'm asking you to run red lights or anything," Simon went on, unwilling to be diverted. "Just a few lousy miles per hour over the ridiculously low posted speed limit, that's all I'm asking. But no."

"And here I thought you'd be *pleased* that I can occasionally be law-abiding," Jeremy said.

"But you abide by the *stupid* laws," Simon said, throwing the Jeep into reverse and backing out of the pitiful little patch of tarmac that served Johnny's apartment building as a parking lot. "I bet you don't make illegal U-turns either."

"It's true," Jeremy said. "I don't."

Simon snorted and dropped it, concentrating on getting back out onto the freeway. The rain had picked up while he'd been waiting, falling on the Jeep's hard top with a sound like fingers tapping impatiently, and Simon found himself obeying the speed limit whether he liked it or not. In the seat beside him Jeremy brushed drops of water off the leather of his jacket before settling back, making himself comfortable.

Five rather pleasant minutes passed in which the only sound was the rain and the hiss of tires on wet pavement before Jeremy raised an inquiring eyebrow and said, "Do I even need to point out that my hotel is in the other direction?"

Simon, watching the road through the rain-spattered windshield instead of looking at Jeremy, could still hear the smile. He couldn't help but smile a little himself. "Nope," he said. "I think I got that."

"Oh, well, in that case, drive on," Jeremy said, making a grandly vague gesture.

"I was planning to," Simon said. "Hey, can you do me a favor?"

The short silence that followed this question was every bit as familiar as Simon had hoped it would be. "Anything at all," Jeremy finally said, low and amused, slithering bonelessly down in his seat.

"Put your hand on my leg," Simon said.

Jeremy blinked, startled at having his innuendo pre-empted. "I can certainly do that," he said, "but I'd been planning to forgo the pleasure, since it's raining—"

"Put your hand on my leg," Simon repeated. "It's been a long, dry, weird week and I would like things to go back to normal as soon as possible, which means you putting your hand on my leg while I'm trying to drive and saying something suggestive. Okay?"

"Well!" Jeremy said, laughing a bit. "I certainly don't wish to argue with your version of 'normal', Simon." His hand dropped lightly to Simon's thigh a moment later and he made a soft sound, some sort of pleased rumbling purr



that made all the hairs on the back of Simon's neck stand up. "I assume we'll be skipping dinner?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," Simon said, just a trifle unsteadily. Carefully, very carefully, he switched over into the right-hand lane and slowed down, five miles per hour below the speed limit. "Deal with it."

"I didn't intend it as a protest," Jeremy said, his fingers slithering up half an inch. "More of a suggestion."

Simon hissed, shifting rapidly downward to free up some room in the front of his pants. Jeremy's fingers promptly buried themselves between his legs, toying with the inseam of his jeans. "And as long as you're dealing with things I think you might ought to start resigning yourself to some carpet burn," Simon said, all at once in a great breathless rush.

"Really," said Jeremy, enigmatically. "On my back? Or on my knees? You understand that they present different hardships to resign myself to—"

"Haven't decided yet," said Simon, his voice almost whittled down to nothing. "But I'm thinking about it."

"Mm," said Jeremy. They drove beneath a burned-out streetlight and in the momentary darkness his hand tightened. "Believe me, so am I."

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## ◆ Twenty-Four

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When Simon finally left for the Arboretum the March skies were still gray and lowering, a chilly wet wind scudding dead brown leaves across the parking lot. The weather suited him fine, even if it made him hunch his shoulders and stick his hands in the pockets of his zipped-up bomber jacket.

The rain burst free with a vengeance when he was on the freeway, not so much hitting the windshield as assaulting it. Simon hissed in irritation and slowed, slapping the lever for the windshield wipers up to its maximum. Fortunately by this time of the afternoon most of the commuter traffic was elsewhere, so he didn't get mired up in a huddle of intimidated drivers going thirty-five miles an hour; however, it was still closer to two-thirty than two by the time he parked his Jeep in the little parking lot next to Beech Spring Pond.

As abruptly as it had started, the rain stopped. Simon ducked down and scowled up at the gray sky through the windshield for a moment. When the rain didn't start up again right away he threw open the Jeep's door and slid out, heading for the pond, not bothering to avoid the shallow puddles that spotted the pavement here and there.

Dorothy Langridge, wearing a trenchcoat in deference to the weather, was already there on the bridge when Simon ducked under the low-hanging branches, staring out at the gray waters of the pond and working on the last of a cigarette. A furled umbrella leaned against the railing at her side, still dripping. The pond's surface ruffled in the constant wet breeze, making the forlorn-looking ducks in the distance bob up and down.

Simon crossed his arms on the bridge's handrail and joined Langridge in her study of the huddled ducks. "Langridge," he eventually said, once that got dull.

"Mr. Drake," Langridge said evenly, grinding out the dead cigarette butt on the sole of her shoe, where it hissed against the wet. She hadn't looked at him yet. "I'm assuming that you're heartily pissed at me right now. Do let me know if that's not the case."

"Wish I could," Simon said, turning his back on the ducks to lean against the railing and stare off into the dripping trees. "But, no, seems to me that I *am* pretty

heartily pissed at you.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Langridge said. It wasn’t a question. “Are you *so* pissed off that you won’t bother listening if I attempt to explain? Because if you are, please do tell me. I’m not one for wasting my time.”

“Yeah, you made that clear right from the start,” Simon said. “You got an explanation, let’s hear it.”

“Well, first of all,” said Langridge, “if you think I *wanted* to waste the favor you owed me on something that inane, Mr. Drake, you’re even stupider than you look.”

“Mm,” Simon said, a little surprised to discover that he felt better already. “I mean, yeah?”

Langridge shook another cigarette out of the pack and lit it before continuing. “I fully intended to hoard that favor you owed me until I really needed it, Mr. Drake,” she said, blowing smoke out in the general direction of the ducks. “If you’d like to picture me rubbing my hands together and cackling in evil glee, feel free, it’s not like I can stop you.”

“Funny how easy it is to picture that,” said Simon. “So what happened to change your mind?”

Langridge snorted out her completely unamused laugh. “I told you that it was likely my office was bugged, Mr. Drake. Not two hours after I called you about the fateful email I was upstairs having it suggested to me that maybe I wanted to call in that favor you owed me on behalf of the Agency’s greater interests, and . . .” She made an irritated little gesture with her lit cigarette. “Well.”

Simon thought about it for a moment. “Yeah, I can buy that,” he eventually said. “Tell you the truth I’d already figured something was up. I mean, it wasn’t like that favor did *you* any favors, and I know you’re not the altruistic type.”

“I’m a selfish old bitch, it’s true, and I like my job enough to want to keep it even if it means screwing with yours,” Langridge said, flicking dull gray ash into the dull gray water. “For what it’s worth, Mr. Drake, I *am* sorry.”

The damp breeze rose and Simon turned his face into it, closing his eyes and letting it ruffle his hair back. “Yeah,” he said. “Sucks, but what can you do?”

“Not much,” Langridge said. “So, are we even?”

“We’re even,” Simon said, blowing out a breath. “I’m willing to call it a draw if you are.”

“Well,” said Langridge, falling back into her old familiar briskness. “I can’t begin to tell you what a load that is off my mind, Mr. Drake. The idea of you being mad at me keeps me up at night biting my nails. So what comes next?”

“See, that’s the thing, I don’t know yet,” Simon said. “Sounds like your bosses and mine have plans that don’t so much include us. I’m supposed to meet with Upstairs at four. Guess I’ll find out then if they’re taking it away from me or not.”

“Oh, that’s the best part,” Langridge said, the little twist to her lips giving a sarcastic edge to it. “The waiting.”

“And having cases you’re starting to take a real personal interest in get taken away from you,” Simon added in agreement. “Did you hear that one of my guys got shot by this asshole?”

“He all right?” Langridge asked with a flicker of vague professional sympathy.

“Suffered massive trauma of the bulletproof vest,” Simon said. “Actually, that reminds me.”

“I hate to think what that could remind you *of*.”

“Well, obviously our boy knows we’re on to him now. I mean, he couldn’t have missed it, we were real obvious,” Simon said. “So, have you seen any mention of it on Karpol’s email network yet?”

“Mr. Drake,” Langridge said reprovingly. “If they had, do you really think I’d be standing here failing to tell you about it?”

“Well, yeah, maybe, if you felt like making me jump for it,” Simon said.

Langridge’s eyes narrowed in amusement. “... touché, Mr. Drake. But, still, the answer is no. No one’s mentioned it.”

“Huh,” Simon said, thumping the heel of one sneaker against the wooden planks. “Have you gotten another one of those ‘agent of purchase’ emails?”

“Not yet,” Langridge said, “and believe me, I *am* keeping an eye out, out of some sort of misplaced sense of slight guilt.”

“Huh,” Simon said again. He turned back around, leaning against the railing and squinting off at the ducks, feigning a nonchalance he was far from feeling at the moment. “See, a *normal* person would think that’s just strange,” he told the ducks, who didn’t care or couldn’t hear him. “Fishy. Wrong.”

“Possibly,” Langridge said, shrugging. “Or possibly it’s too enormous a fiasco to trust to something like email—although, to be frank, they’re generally cocky about it. And by ‘cocky’, I mean ‘stupid and computer-illiterate’.”

Simon slapped the palm of his hand on the wet railing. “Dotty, since you’re being so cooperative, I’m going to make you a little wager.”

“‘Dotty’,” Langridge said, her voice cold enough to make ice crystals spontaneously form in the air between them. “I assure you, *Drake*, that if you’re looking to make me uncooperative again you’ve certainly found an efficient method.”

Simon ducked his head slightly, trying not to grin. “Aw, don’t be that way, Langridge, I thought you and I were pals again!”

“We were never *pals*, Mr. Drake.” A second dead cigarette butt joined the first in Langridge’s hard pack. “And if you call me ‘Dotty’ again, I assure you we never will be. Anyway. What is this wager of yours?”

“Well, actually, it kind of comes in two parts,” Simon said. He couldn’t believe how much he was enjoying this. “See, the first part is, I’m thinking that tonight or tomorrow you’re going to catch one of those ‘foreign goods’ emails just like usual. No change.”

"All right," Langridge said. "Why?"

"Because I have a theory," Simon said, and paused.

Langridge eyed him narrowly, then heaved out a sigh. "All right, Mr. Drake. I'll play your idiotic little game for a minute. Please *do* tell me about your theory."

"Why, Langridge, I thought you'd never ask," Simon said happily. "See, here's the thing. I've never actually met our boy face-to-face but you gotta believe me when I say that I know someone *just like him*."

"All right," Langridge said, making a little 'hurry up' gesture.

"And so our boy probably suffers from a little something I like to call 'way too much professional pride'," Simon concluded. "He's too proud of himself to ever, ever go running to his employers whimpering that he fucked up and nearly got caught because of it. So, since he came away from the crime scene carrying a box full of prototypes and a disc full of design specs, well, I'll bet you anything that he just handed them over calm as could be and didn't mention the part where he was stuck in the ceiling crying like a goddamned baby because the FBI was yelling at him."

"It's possible he's also too frightened of his employer to mention it," Langridge pointed out. "Viktor Karpol isn't precisely easygoing, Mr. Drake. He takes very poorly to being disappointed. And by 'takes very poorly to' I do, of course, mean 'feeds people to his dogs for'."

"Okay, granted, that could also be it," Simon said. "But I like my theory better. You know why?"

"Could you *possibly* stop drawing things out and just tell me?" Langridge asked.

"Nope. Sorry. But I'll tell you why: because hubris is *delicious*."

"Hubris?" Langridge raised both eyebrows. "My goodness, Mr. Drake, that's a smart-people word. Next you'll be telling me that you can read without moving your lips."

"I'll let you in on a secret," Simon said. "I can even walk and chew gum at the *same time*."

"Now you're just lying to try and impress me," Langridge said. "Go on."

"So our boy, our boy who's never failed them before, our boy who's built up a good reputation with his employers... he's going to hand those trusting employers a box full of fake bullets with FBI-issue tracking devices implanted in them," Simon said, "and a disc of 'design specs' that's really this ticking bomb—and he'll fail to mention that there was anything out of the ordinary about this theft at all."

"He's a dead man," Langridge concluded after a slight pause.

"Probably," Simon acknowledged. "Unless he figures out what he's giving them before he hands it over, in which case he may just have a day or two in

which to disappear. Which he may do, given that we at the FBI are pretty sure his involvement with Karpol isn't entirely voluntary."

"He's still a dead man," Langridge said. "Karpol would never just let him go."

"Probably," Simon said again. "And in a week or two here Karpol's computer network may implode most spectacularly, so you may want to tell your guys with the hook-in to be careful their computers don't get caught in the blast radius."

For a long moment Langridge was silent, eyeing the side of Simon's face narrowly. Simon stared out over the lake and played innocent just as hard as he could. "Mr. Drake," she finally said. "What did you do?"

"Remember back like a minute ago when I said 'ticking bomb'?" Simon asked. "See, I wasn't kidding."

"Ah ha," Dorothy Langridge said. "While I must applaud your admittedly childish vicious streak, Mr. Drake, I feel obligated to point out that by blowing up Karpol's current computer network you'll be destroying our link into it and discommoding the CIA a fair bit."

"And, see, on Thursday I felt kind of guilty about that, but right now, after your bosses fucked me and my team up the ass with your 'favor', I can't say that I care at all," Simon concluded.

After a long moment Dorothy Langridge burst out laughing. It was a raspy sound. "I'll think of it as a vacation, Mr. Drake," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Langridge, you may feel free to think of it as whatever you want," Simon said. "Think of it as a heads-up, free and exclusive from me to you. I leave it up to your considerable discretion what you do with that information."

"How *nice* of you, Mr. Drake," Langridge said. "And here I didn't think to bring you anything—" A phone that wasn't Simon's shrilled violently and Dorothy Langridge looked down at her hip with a scowl. Without bothering to excuse herself or apologize she stuck her hand into the depths of her trenchcoat and came out with a cellphone that might have been nice at some point before someone ran over it with a tank. After a quick glance at the cracked screen she flicked it open with her thumb. "Langridge," she snapped. "What part of 'I am not to be called from two until four unless something is on fire' did you not understand, Terry?"

Simon snickered and ambled off a step or two, aiming to give Langridge a sense of privacy. He stared off at the ducks, who looked just as wet and cold and miserable as they had fifteen minutes ago, and (because he wasn't born yesterday) listened in on Langridge's half of the conversation.

"Yes," Langridge said briskly, turning her back on Simon and putting her free hand over her ear. "Yes. Yes—Terry. *Terry*. Shut up. All right, now take a deep breath—good—now, if I hear one more word out of your mouth that sounds like an excuse or an explanation of something I already know, you're fired." She paused. Simon hid a grin in his cupped hand.

“Terry,” Langridge said warningly. Five seconds later Dorothy Langridge jerked bolt upright and made a little shocked sound that sounded like nothing so much as a hiccup. Simon blinked, his grin fading.

“When?” Langridge demanded, suddenly clutching her battered cell phone in both hands. “Do we know who—the *cryptographer*? Oh, I should have—never mind. Listen to me very closely, Terry. This is what you’re going to do now.” Letting go of her phone with one hand Langridge hunkered down, blindly fishing for her fat steel-sided briefcase and popping the locks. “Set it to full headers and send it to the first unused email address on my blue sheet. The *blue* sheet.” Still fishing around blindly Langridge came up with a rectangular something zipped up in a black cloth pouch. “Once that’s done I want you to wait exactly two minutes and then you are to go *personally* to Maculhy’s office and raise the alarm,” she said, tucking the pouch under her arm like a football. “Take a print-out with you. Do not call home. Do not call *anyone*. Do not *tell* anyone. Do not speak a word of this to anyone except Maculhy, tell him you’ve briefed me, and then you and the rest of the team do exactly what he says, do you understand me?”

Simon stood mutely a couple of steps away, barely breathing. Langridge glanced at him over her shoulder, then squeezed her eyes shut and made an exasperated sound. “Teresa Laurence, that had better not be crying that I am hearing—good. There is no *crying* in my division. Have you sent the email? Why not? Get on with it!” Without saying goodbye (or anything else at all) Langridge clapped her cellphone shut and stuffed it in the pocket of her trenchcoat, then slammed her briefcase shut. When she straightened up again she had the black pouch tucked under her arm and the briefcase in her other hand.

“What’s up?” Simon asked, and then remembered whom he was talking to, and amended that to “Anything I need to know about?”

“Come with me, Mr. Drake,” Langridge said briskly, already striding away, her heels thudding dully on the wet wood. Simon blinked after her, grabbed her abandoned umbrella, and followed.

Thirty feet or so from the end of the bridge a small grassy field opened up under the low gray sky. Wooden picnic tables dotted the grass here and there, sodden and uninviting; Dorothy Langridge strode up to the nearest one and dropped her briefcase on the bench. “Do you want the explanation or the summary first, Mr. Drake?” she asked, unzipping the black pouch and producing a dark gray laptop from it.

Simon considered it for half a second. “Give me the whole story in order,” he said. “Otherwise I’m just going to have to ask a lot of questions and nobody wants that.”

“Smart man,” Langridge said, putting the pouch down on the wet tabletop and laying the laptop on top of it. She raised the lid, producing a wake-up sound. “As you may or may not have noticed, occasionally an email enters Karpol’s network

that's been encrypted."

A password prompt popped up on the screen and Simon automatically glanced away. "Yeah," Simon said, staring down at where the grass broke around the toe of his sneaker while Langridge typed something. "There were a couple of those in the printouts you gave me."

"As far as I know, we can't break the encryption that the cryptographer is using. Maybe our nerd squad could break it, or someone over at the NSA, but my orders have always been to file and ignore the encrypted emails." Langridge flicked up a stubby piece of plastic that had been hugging the side of the laptop, pointing one end at the sky. "And it's generally not a problem, Mr. Drake. Do you know why it's not a problem?"

Simon started to obligingly provide the "No, why?" but Langridge just kept on going, talking right over him even as she called up a window on her laptop and started picking options out of menus. "Because Karpol's people are largely computer illiterate, Mr. Drake," she said. "When the cryptographer's contact receives an encrypted email, he decrypts it with his key, produces a chunk of plain unprotected text, and then copies and pastes that plain text into another email, translates it into Russian, and sends it on to *his* contact. We also get a copy of *that* email, completely unencrypted. Our cryptographer is wasting his time. Fortunately, he doesn't know it."

"... if you weren't acting so spooked right now, that'd be hilarious," Simon said carefully.

"Oh, it is," Langridge said, tucking her trenchcoat in and sitting on it. The computer made a bunch of noise; Langridge abruptly looked away from it, staring at Simon with such intensity that he fell back half a step. "Mr. Drake, what I am about to very specifically *not* tell you will not make you happy."

Simon hesitated, then nodded. "Go for it," he said. "Break my heart."

"The cryptographer is American," Dorothy Langridge said. "In fact, he works for the FBI, although in what capacity we aren't certain."

For a moment it didn't really sink in, what that meant. Then Simon abruptly sat on the end of the bench next to Langridge, getting the seat of his jeans sopping wet and not really caring. "You're saying we've got a mole."

"Oh, you've got a mole, all right, not that you heard it from me," Langridge said. The laptop made some more noises, which Langridge ignored. "Karpol planted him about two years ago, as far as we know, and he's been busily funneling Karpol's network as much information as he can steal ever since. Not just classified information, either. Employee profiles, drug test results, HR disputes, background stuff, *everything*."

"You've known about this for two years?" Simon said numbly. "Two *years*?"

"Two years," Langridge confirmed, "and if you ask me some inane question about why the Agency never informed the Bureau, Mr. Drake, then you *are* an idiot."



“No,” Simon said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Internal politics, leverage bullshit, need-to-know, I get it. Doesn’t make me happy, but I get it.”

“Plus we at the Agency have this silly idea that if the Bureau hasn’t noticed their mole, it’s their own fault for not paying attention,” Langridge said, turning back to the laptop and popping up another window. Simon glanced away as she went through the password rigmarole again. “At any rate, that’s all background, Mr. Drake.”

Simon nodded. “So tell me what just happened.”

“Your mole just sold me out,” Langridge said. “Sent his contact in Karpol’s organization an email giving them my name and a summary of what I’ve been doing for you recently.”

“Shit,” Simon said, startled despite himself. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Well, I’m forewarned,” Langridge said guardedly. “Someone may try to kill me again, but *that* can be dealt with. I asked Terry to send me a copy of the email so that I can confirm—ah.”

Simon glanced at the laptop and the new message that was sitting in Langridge’s inbox. As soon as the email program stopped grinding Langridge shut down the modem again, folding away the stubby plastic antenna. “If all the cryptographer’s told them is that I’m working with you and advising you, that’s one thing. If he’s told them about our ever-so-secret link into Karpol’s network, that’s quite another, and it means that we have a couple of field agents who need immediate extraction. Mac will handle that.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Simon said. “Can I read over your shoulder or is that not kosher?”

“Not kosher, which you ought to know by now,” Langridge said immediately. “I’ll summarize.”

“Fair enough.” Simon turned halfway around, the seat of his jeans squelching unpleasantly, and stared off into the trees. Behind him Langridge rummaged around and lit a cigarette before turning back to the laptop.

After a painfully long interval Dorothy Langridge sighed behind him. “Well, Mr. Drake, I have some good news and some bad news. Which would you prefer first?”

“Are you kidding?” Simon asked. “Always give me the good news first. Softens me up.”

“Your mole sold *me* out but doesn’t mention our link into the network,” Langridge said. “I’m still going to have to lay low for a bit and I may develop an acute case of being blown up, but all in all it could be a lot worse.”

Simon blew out a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding. “That *is* good news,” he said, meaning it. “Okay, give me the bad news.”

“I’m not the only person our cryptographer sold out,” Langridge said. “Is this Jeremy Archer one of yours?”

Simon squeezed his eyes shut. “Consultant on the thief thing,” he said tightly. “He’s freelance.”

“Hmph,” said Langridge. “‘Consultant’. I suppose that’s one way of putting it. Well, whoever he is, you’d better warn him.”

“I will,” Simon said. “Is there any way I can see just the part about him? Can you do that?”

“I don’t see why not. Give me a moment.”

Behind Simon Langridge paused, the brief silence punctuated by familiar clicking and tapping sounds. Simon laced his hands together and stared down at them, not really seeing them. “Here,” Langridge eventually said, and Simon turned around. She’d copied the lines into a text file. Simon read them. It didn’t take long.

**>In addition to Dorothy Langridge there’s Jeremy Archer, aka James Crown,**

**>aka Thomas Angobrand, aka several other aliases, see attached file. Jeremy**

**>Archer is a well-known thief and cat burglar working with the FBI to help**

**>them catch the thief working for you.**

“He’s still got a copy of Archer’s file?” Simon said. “Shit, that was supposed to have been deleted!”

“‘Shit’ is exactly the right word for it,” Langridge said, shutting down her computer and closing it. Her lit cigarette poked straight up from between her first two fingers like a tiny smokestack.

Simon took a deep breath. “So,” he said. “You’re the expert. How much danger is Archer in? How much danger is my team in?”

“This Jeremy Archer could be in some trouble, especially if Karpol’s pet thief chooses to pull something,” said Langridge, flicking ashes into the wet grass. “I doubt there’ll be teams of Cossacks out for his head or anything, but still, he’s going to have to watch his step for a good long time. Karpol’s fairly tenacious.”

“Shit,” Simon said again, bitterly. “At least he’s got a lot of aliases to hide behind. And my team?”

“That’s a stroke of luck, actually,” Langridge said. “The email doesn’t specifically mention you by name or codename. As far as I know Viktor Karpol doesn’t know which FBI team is after his thief.”

“That’s something,” Simon said.

“If something rolls across my desk later that changes that, I’ll try and keep you informed.” Langridge picked up her laptop and slid it back into the black pouch, zipping it up. “But you must understand that I have no idea what’s going to happen in the next few weeks and I may be impossible to get hold of.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Yeah. I can imagine. Christ, what a fuckup.”

Langridge slapped the black pouch, shaking off as much of the rainwater as she could before sliding it back into her briefcase. “And now, Mr. Drake, I really must run.”

“Yeah, I guess you’d better,” said Simon, standing up. Wet denim clung uncomfortably to his thighs and he shifted, resisting the urge to tug at his jeans. “Unless you really object, I’ll bring Upstairs in on this. He’d know better than I would who’d have access to that information and I think I can trust him to keep it quiet.”

“What you do with that intelligence, Mr. Drake, is entirely up to you,” said Langridge, sliding off the bench and standing up.

Simon hunched his shoulders awkwardly before sticking out a hand. “Good luck,” he said.

Langridge looked down at his hand for a long moment before switching her briefcase into her other hand and taking it. “Thank you,” she said, squeezing Simon’s hand once. “I’m afraid I’ll need it.” And with no further ado she picked up her umbrella and strode off.

Picking at the wet seat of his jeans Simon watched her go until she disappeared into the trees. Half a hundred thoughts churned in his mind—the need to inform Upstairs pronto, pointless worry for his team, a stab of nerves on behalf of Langridge, of all people—but the thought he kept coming back to was *shit, Jeremy, I fucked up*.

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## ◆ Twenty-Five

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To get to Upstairs' office, Simon had to, unsurprisingly, go upstairs. The only real difference between the first floor, where his own office was, and the second, where Upstairs had his suite, was the carpeting; while the first floor was (wisely) covered in industrial vinyl tile, the second floor had comparatively lavish dull grayish-brown office carpeting. Somehow, it was enough. When Simon edged open the door to the second floor and could no longer hear his own footfalls booming dully against the walls around him, it was almost as if he'd walked off the street and into a holy place of some sort. It was damned near intimidating. He'd never liked that.

He shook it off and headed down to the far end of the hallway, slowing just before he rounded the corner. The door to Upstairs' inner sanctum stood just a couple of inches ajar, invitingly, and his boss' secretary was distracted, frowning intently at her computer and occasionally murmuring a terse "Mm-hmm." into her headset's microphone. Simon slowed further, trying to place his feet as lightly as possible, and actually managed to sneak almost all the way past her before she caught her microphone in one hand and said, "*Simon.*"

Simon rolled to an unwilling halt and grinned sheepishly. "Crap, busted," he said, wandering up behind her and dropping his hands on her shoulders. "Dammit, Danielle, every time. Why can't I ever sneak past you?"

Danielle pulled the headset down to rest around her neck and tilted her head back so that she could look up at him. "Because I'm actually good at my job," she said reprovingly. "Rub."

Obligingly, Simon squeezed her shoulders, making her eyelids flutter. "I know I'm a little early, but is he busy right now?" he asked. "It's, uh, kind of important."

"Ooh. Now don't stop." Danielle sighed, leaning back into the impromptu backrub. "He's not in with anyone but he said he had some things to do . . . if you rub my shoulders for a few more minutes maybe I'll be nice and check with him for you."

“You do that,” Simon said, giving her shoulders one last encouraging squeeze before abruptly vaulting the far end of her desk and whipping into Upstairs’ office. She’d just barely started to squawk in outrage by the time Simon pulled the office door shut and cut her off.

From the far end of the office someone sighed, the sound full of gravel. “Simon,” he said in resignation. “I keep a secretary for a reason, you know.”

“Yeah, because she’s pretty,” Simon said, resisting the momentary and ridiculous urge to genuflect in the presence. “I’m sorry to bust in on you like this, sir, but, uh, it’s pretty damned important.”

It was a wrung-out but fairly reassured Simon who finally stumbled out to his Jeep close to two hours later, relieved to have dumped the problem of their mole on broader shoulders than his own. Somewhere inside that long low quiet building behind him the leak was now being handled, and by people who were far more qualified to deal with it than he was.

However, he wasn’t entirely free and clear, not yet. For one thing he couldn’t quite stop worrying about his team’s safety, a useless, fruitless, conspiracy-theory-level nagging in the back of his mind. For another, the mole was no longer his problem but Jeremy, and Jeremy’s safety, most assuredly still was. At least his jeans had had time to dry; in this whole mess that was just about the only problem that was likely to solve itself, and it had.

He drove home on autopilot, wondering how he was going to do this. By the time he got there, he still didn’t know. “Hey, I’m home,” he called (probably unnecessarily) as he shut the apartment door behind himself, locking it and putting on the chain as a sop to his current low-level paranoia.

The faint creak and thump from the direction of his bedroom was immediate and somewhat reassuring. *Somebody* was still alive in his apartment. “Welcome home and other such overly-domestic greetings,” Jeremy said from the doorway to the hall a moment later.

“Yeah, well—” Simon turned around, face-first into the waiting distraction “—Christ, you’re not dressed *yet*? It’s six-thirty in the *evening*, Archer!”

Jeremy looked down inquiringly, picking at a fold of his borrowed (stolen) pajama pants. “Well, no, obviously not,” he said, looking back up with a lazy smile on his face. “I’m quite showered and clean, I assure you. I just thought that there was a very good chance that you might want to take my clothes off again before dinner, and why make it any more difficult than it has to be?”

Simon laughed weakly, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Oh, damn, I wish.”

“You wish? What, did you have some sort of other pressing engagement?” Jeremy laughed a little himself and padded into the main room, heading for Simon. “If so I assure you that I can be *quick*—”

Simon caught Jeremy’s shoulders before the thief could get too close, holding him at arm’s length. His skin was warm and dry, inviting after the cold, wet day

outside; despite everything Simon couldn't resist rubbing his thumb over one of Jeremy's collarbones, making Jeremy's eyes drift half-closed. "We gotta talk," he said with vague regret.

"Oh, *talk*," Jeremy said, reaching up to wrap his hand about one of Simon's wrists. "So talk. I'm listening."

"Yeah, I—" Simon said, and stopped, pushing lightly at Jeremy's shoulder. "Maybe you ought to go get dressed."

Jeremy arched an eyebrow. "Oh, dear. One of those sorts of talks."

Simon blew out a breath. "Yeah, kinda," he said. "Just . . . go get dressed, okay? I can't do this with you all, all, uh, like that."

"Now you're frightening me," Jeremy said, although he didn't sound frightened. Curious, sure, and flirtatious, pretty much constantly, but not frightened. Still, he obligingly stepped away and headed back into the bedroom. Simon watched him go.

By the time Jeremy reappeared, fully dressed as requested and fiddling with one of his cuffs, Simon had claimed the couch and taken a few deep breaths, trying to decide where to start. Not having come to any sort of decision yet, Simon stalled by waving a hand at the armchair. "Sit."

"Oh, dear. Not only is it the sort of conversation I have to be fully dressed for, it's the sort I have to sit for?" Jeremy asked, folding himself neatly into the armchair and crossing his legs. "Now I *am* frightened. And, just for the record, I'm afraid I'm absolutely terrible at 'just being friends'."

"What?" Simon said, blinking, already thrown off his stride. Then he got it and snorted out a laugh despite himself. "Oh, Christ, no, it's not *that*. If I was going to 'break up' with you—" helpless not to, Simon provided the airquotes—"I would not be *nearly* so considerate of your feelings. So."

"As always, you have a point," Jeremy said pleasantly, folding his hands over his upraised knee. "So."

"Uh." Simon rubbed a hand down his face again. "Jesus, where to start."

"The beginning is usually perfectly acceptable," Jeremy said.

"Right, but, see, it's complicated enough that I don't know where the beginning *is*," Simon said.

"Mm." Still, Jeremy had always been perceptive, and even now Simon could see the flirtatiousness fading along with Jeremy's little smile. "Then you could summarize."

"Yeah," Simon said. "Yeah, I guess. . . . Christ, I don't want to do this."

"Simon," Jeremy prompted, now almost completely serious.

"Yeah," Simon said again, and shut his eyes, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Karpol's got a mole inside the FBI," he said, with no further preamble. "Earlier today Karpol's spy leaked him your name and info."

Suddenly Jeremy was so silent that Simon had to crack an eye open to make sure he was still there. He was, sitting stock-still in the armchair, apparently

not breathing. Simon shut his eyes again. “You and Langridge both,” he said. “Karpol knows you’re both working with us now. Langridge is in a fuckload of danger and I don’t think you’re safe either.”

The long pause that followed this statement gave Simon plenty of time to feel like shit. “I see,” Jeremy finally said, quietly.

Simon slithered down, letting his head fall back against the couch cushions. “It gets worse,” he told the ceiling. “As near as I can tell he sent along a copy of your file. You know. The one you asked us to delete.”

“Ah,” said Jeremy, very quietly.

“No, see, it *got* deleted, I was not fucking with you,” Simon said quickly. “Swear. I had Rich go into the database and make sure and everything. It was gone by the end of August. All that’s left is this little note that says to get in touch with me if you’re suspected of something.”

Jeremy was silent.

“So the mole must have had an old backup copy, or something, I don’t know—shit.” Simon thumped his fist against his thigh. “This is my fucking fault, if I hadn’t brought you in on this—”

“That isn’t important right now,” Jeremy broke in, his voice cool and composed. “Tell me what Karpol knows about me.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, propping his feet up on the coffee table and sprawling out. “What name are you under at the Old Line?”

“Thomas Angobrand,” Jeremy said.

“You’ll have to dump it,” said Simon. “He’s got that alias. And the James Crown one.”

Jeremy winced and looked away. “Damn,” he said quietly. “I liked those two.”

“Yeah,” Simon said awkwardly. “What others do you have handy?”

Jeremy pressed his lips together, thinking. “Edward Plunkett,” he finally said. “Although I don’t much like to use that one. I was being too clever by half when I picked it.”

“No, that one was in the file,” Simon said. “What’s so clever about it?”

Jeremy’s smile ghosted on and off. “Ask one of your techs,” he said. “Hm. Henry Nottingly-Smythe?”

Simon blinked. “You’re fucking kidding me. *Nottingly-Smythe*?”

“I know, I know, it’s horrible,” Jeremy said, waving a hand. “But it’s just the sort of ridiculous surname that Americans expect Britons to have, and I find that living up, or I suppose *down*, to the expectations of the unworldly has certain . . . advantages. Does he have that one?”

“We didn’t have it, anyway,” Simon said. “So he didn’t get it from us.”

“Then it’ll do until I can arrange for a new one,” Jeremy said decisively. “And there’s nothing in my hotel room that I can’t abandon, so I’ll leave it and check out tonight.”

“Oh, yeah, leave some poor maid to get blown up in your stead,” Simon said. “But yeah. Walk away. I’ll get a friendly bomb squad to go over your room once you’re on the record as having checked out.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, flicking his smile on and off again. “The idea of having lead-suited agents rooting about in my unmentionables is . . . thrilling, to say the least.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, glancing at Jeremy. “Least *I* don’t usually wear a lead suit to do it.”

After a long moment he was rewarded with another thin slice of smile, but it didn’t last long. “So, realistically, as an expert, how much danger do you think I’m in?” Jeremy asked.

“As an expert, I have no fucking idea,” Simon said. “Langridge seems to think he’s pretty damned tenacious, but he’s only actually tried to kill her once before this and she’s a way bigger thorn in his side than you are. I think it’s probably one of those things where he’ll only take a swipe at you if the opportunity presents itself, but if he does go for you it’ll be nasty.”

“That isn’t so bad,” Jeremy said thoughtfully, settling back in his chair. “I’m not unused to a certain background level of danger, you understand. If it’s just a matter of not giving him an opportunity—”

“Well,” Simon said.

Jeremy tilted his head to the side. “Well what?” he prompted, after a moment.

“I think he may not be your primary problem,” Simon said. “If Karpol goes to our little friend and asks him about you—”

Jeremy went a little gray, his hands tightening on his knee. “Oh dear,” he said, his voice ever so slightly unsteady.

“Yeah. And hell, Karpol may take a whack at you just to keep his pet thief safe and working. And if our boy then gives him the loaded goods from Annadale and pulls a disappearing act, Karpol may swipe at you in hopes of getting to *him*. I don’t know.” Simon abruptly threw both hands up in defeat. “I don’t know a goddamned thing any more. It’s chaos. Everything’s fucked to shit. Upstairs has good people working to stem the leak right now, for all the good that’ll do us.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, and fell silent again. Simon shut his eyes and let his head fall back again, his hands dropping back down onto the couch to lie there curled half-open like dead leaves. He was wrung out. All he wanted right now was clean pants, food, and sleep, in that order, but it’d be a while before he got to any of that . . . “Do you have any idea at all who Karpol’s mole is?” Jeremy asked suddenly, disrupting Simon’s peevish train of thought.

“Christ, I have no idea,” Simon said tiredly. “I mean, it’s not like I ran through the halls yelling about how I bought myself a pet thief or anything, but any number of people knew that you and Langridge were working with me—hell, there’s some chick down in Accounting who cuts your immense paychecks, if



it comes to that. Upstairs has a way better grasp on the flow and availability of information in the department than I do. I just do what I'm told."

"Somehow I doubt that," Jeremy said dryly, and then paused again.

Something about the silence nagged at Simon, and after a few seconds of it he opened his eyes and straightened back up. "What?" he asked.

Jeremy blinked. "What what?"

"You're thinking something," Simon said, almost accusatorially. "You're never quiet like that unless you're up to something."

"Goodness, I wasn't aware that I was so easy to read," Jeremy said, not quite smiling. "My, my, Simon. Is there *anything* you can't do?"

"Yeah, apparently I can't make you stop joking around and tell me what you're thinking," Simon said. "C'mon. Out with it."

"Well, if you're certain," Jeremy said. He paused again, shifting around in the armchair, getting comfortable. "You see, it's the timing that bothers me."

"What about it?" Simon asked.

"Well," Jeremy said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you said that my FBI file was deleted by the end of August, correct?"

"Yeah?" Simon said, making a little 'c'mon, hurry up' gesture.

"So it's been almost seven months since that file was available, which means that whoever your mole is, he's been sitting on a copy of that file for at least that long without sending it."

"Yeah?"

"And both this mysterious Langridge and I have been working with you for . . . about a week and a half now."

"Yeah?"

"So . . . why?" Jeremy asked, shifting a little, wriggling his shoulders deeply into one corner of the armchair and crossing his arms. "Why now? Why would someone know enough to save a copy of my file before it was deleted and yet not send it along immediately? And even assuming it was because my file had no particular bearing on Karpol's organization, once I became a direct threat to Karpol, wouldn't his spy send my file along immediately, not nine days later?"

"Maybe he didn't find out about your being here until today?" Simon pointed out. "I mean, shit, half the time I don't even know what the hell Team Hall is up to and they're right next door."

"You raise a good point," Jeremy said slowly. "But it still doesn't explain why he was sitting on the file for all those months without sending it."

"Maybe you weren't important until you started working for us," Simon said, and shrugged. "Maybe he'd already sent it once and just sent it again to be sure."

"Possibly," Jeremy said, but he sounded unconvinced. "So, all right, let's look at it from a different angle, shall we? Who knew that my file was about to be purged from the computers?"

Simon thought about it, blowing out a breath. “Well, me and my team, obviously. And Upstairs, since I had to ask him. Anyone else Upstairs might have had to ask for permission or notify. Probably a couple of people over in Art Theft. And whoever Upstairs assigned to actually do the deleting. But it really doesn’t matter. We don’t know how old the mole’s copy of the file was. Hell, for all I know he grabbed it two years ago and just never sent it.”

But Jeremy was already shaking his head. “James Crown was created new for the Morning Star job,” he said. “So that’s last May. And Thomas Angobrind—Simon, Thomas Angobrind didn’t exist until July.”

“July?” Simon asked.

Jeremy nodded. “I was preparing to go to ground in case you were still hunting for me,” he said. “Thomas Angobrind is new, but I tested him out on a quick pickup job in Scotland a few days before I came to see you in August—actually, it’s a bit unnerving that Art Theft spotted him and associated him with me that quickly.”

“Well, remember, they were just mad as all hell at missing their golden chance at you,” Simon said, with a vague stab of pride in *Art Theft*, of all goddamned things. “I bet they were watching for signs of your reappearance like, uh, really incompetent hawks.”

“But, really, that proves my point, in a way,” Jeremy said. “The mole somehow managed to acquire a copy of my file that was probably less than two weeks old, possibly just days before it was deleted, which sounds to me as if he knew it was about to go. And then . . . not only did he keep it around for months, he simply sat on it.”

“All right,” Simon said. “Fine. But I don’t see what that proves.”

Jeremy made a little frustrated gesture. “It doesn’t *prove* anything. This isn’t a court of law. I’m just pointing out that it’s *odd*.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, acknowledging the point. “Okay, I’ll grant you that, it’s odd. So?”

“So, sending it now has the feeling of . . . a reaction,” Jeremy said slowly, his arms tightening across his chest. “Almost personal. As if someone was so angry about our recent failure that he used his connection to Karpol to indirectly strike out at the people he blamed for it: me, for coming up with the plan that failed so spectacularly, and this Langridge, for calling in her favor and forcing you to let the thief get away.”

Simon stared at Jeremy like he’d grown a second head, thoroughly unsettled now. “Christ, that’s some world-class paranoia right there.”

“Is it?” Jeremy asked. “It may be. In my line of work, paranoia is just another indispensable tool.”

“Plus—wait. Wait.” Simon shook his head. “No, okay, it doesn’t work anyway. If somebody’s angry at you personally because your plan didn’t work, that means they knew the plan was yours in the first place. So this crackpot theory

of yours only works if the mole is actually on my team, and that . . . you know there's no way in hell any of my guys'd do something like that."

He paused, waiting for Jeremy to nod, acknowledge the clear idiocy of this, and move on. Instead, Jeremy was silent, his eyes watchful. The hairs on the back of Simon's neck prickled. "No way in *hell*," he repeated, more forcefully.

The strained silence that followed was surely only a second long, but it felt like forever. Finally, Jeremy closed his eyes, making himself look tired. "Are you quite certain?"

"Whoa," Simon immediately said, holding up a hand in warning. "I think you want to stop right now, Archer."

One corner of Jeremy's mouth tugged upwards in a sad half-smile. "I can't," he said, his voice resigned. "You asked me what I was thinking, after all."

"I think you want to stop *right now*, Archer, and you can take that as an order if you want," Simon said, leaning on the words, the first muted flare of anger starting to burn along his spine. "Trust me, you don't want to say whatever it is you're about to say. Some shit I am not prepared to forgive you for, ever."

Once again Jeremy seemed to ripple in front of Simon, his muscles tensing, his shoulders squaring. "What do you think I'm about to say?" he asked quietly.

"I think you're going to make some kind of harebrained accusation," Simon said. "And believe me, you don't have the goddamned right."

"Because I'm a criminal?" Jeremy asked, and there, finally, was the little tic in his upper eyelid, twitching away.

"That," Simon acknowledged tightly, "and also because you have no fucking clue what you're talking about. Shit, you've been here, what, nine days? These guys have lived in my back pocket for *four years*, Archer—"

"And of course," Jeremy said, the sudden bitterness in his voice almost shocking, "no one on *your* handpicked ever-so-special team could ever do wrong, as far as you're concerned. And who am *I* to make accusations, I'm completely untrustworthy and always have been, I would just be doing it out of malice, even if my accusations should turn out to be *true*—"

"Shut up," Simon said warningly. One of his hands was knotted into a fist so tight that his knuckles were starting to hurt. "Last warning, Archer. Whatever you're scheming, I don't want to—"

"—it's Rich," Jeremy snapped, and there it was, out, unforgivable, ridiculous, apocalyptic in its impact. Simon lost the ability to breathe momentarily. "Your Specs Two is the mole—"

"*Shut up!*" Simon bellowed, lunging half-upright before he managed to get hold of himself. He wanted nothing more than to smash in that spiteful lying bastard *face* and it was only through sheer force of will that he twisted aside and drove his fist down against the coffee table instead, hard enough to make the cheap wood crack slightly. The coffee mug he'd abandoned there this morning, a lifetime ago, jumped and shuddered. "Jesus fucking *Christ!*"

Despite the sudden outburst of violence, Jeremy didn't move. "What do you think he's been doing all those evenings when he tells you he's going to do something you don't want to know about?" he said sharply, slitting his eyes half-shut to quell the tic in his eyelid.

"Jesus Christ, that's his way of *protecting* me!" Simon snapped, slapping his own chest. "It gives me plausible deniability—"

"—in case he's caught *doing something not quite legal*?" Jeremy said, raising his voice to finish the sentence for him.

It was exactly what Simon had been about to say and for some reason that infuriated him more than anything else. "I knew it," he said, his voice dropping to a scornful snarl. "It's because he doesn't *like* you. You've never been able to stand it that he's too smart to fall for your goddamned phony act. He sees right through you and you *hate* it!"

Jeremy didn't deny it. "He has a backup copy of my file," he said instead, his voice calm but taut. He was so tense that he was quivering.

"Yeah?" Simon said, sneering the word as hard as he could just to grind it into Jeremy's face. "And how would you know that unless you'd been sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong, just like he's been accusing you of?"

Jeremy heaved out a short and choppy breath as if he didn't dare take a longer one. "Nate told me," he said, all in a rush.

It was enough to make Simon recoil slightly, his mouth hanging open, and Jeremy rushed forward into the silence, squeezing his eyes shut like it hurt. "That's what we heard him yelling about, that night in the motel. I asked. Nate used one of his computers to check his email, and he said my file was sitting there in the Recent Documents list, and then Rich caught him at his computer and had a hissyfit—"

"**SHUT UP!**" Simon roared, and he grabbed that morning's empty coffee mug off the coffee table and rifled it at Jeremy's head with all his strength. Jeremy snatched the mug out of the air a split second before it could hit, but Simon had thrown it so hard that the sheer momentum of it slammed Jeremy's hand back into his forehead anyway, making him jerk backwards. "Don't you *dare* say another word," Simon hissed, his eyes gone to slits. His vision was red around the edges. "Don't you dare. Just get out."

Jeremy lowered his hands, slowly. A pinkening mark shone on his forehead where his knuckles had hit it. "I see," he said after a moment, strangled and breathless. With ridiculous, extreme care he put the mug back down on the coffee table and stood up, taking a quick step backwards to remove himself from grabbing range. "He's never liked me, it's true, but he doesn't want me around *now* because he was afraid the criminal was going to break into his computer and see something he shouldn't—"

Simon's vision misted over entirely with red and he lunged around the tottering coffee table, grabbing for Jeremy, who took two more rapid steps backwards

and just kept talking. “Even Nate says that he’s been more vicious than usual lately, and it’s because Rich is *scared*,” Jeremy said, quick and panting now, groping behind himself for the doorknob. “But he was willing to give me a chance, probably out of respect for *you*, and then I *blew it* and it made him so angry that he sold me out . . .”

This time Simon’s roar was completely inarticulate, drowning out the rest of Jeremy’s staccato protest. Jeremy jerked backwards and blindly yanked the front door open, or tried to; it bounced off the engaged safety chain and slammed itself again. “*Shit*,” he hissed.

“*OUT!*” Simon grabbed the mug again and whipped it at Jeremy’s head. Jeremy ducked, dropping into a crouch, and the mug hit the front door and exploded, shards and chunks of pottery raining down on his back. With a flick of his fingers he disengaged the safety chain and yanked the door open, not so much running through it as diving through it, jerking it closed behind him.

For a few more seconds Simon stood taut and trembling in the middle of his living room, glaring at the front door and just daring it to open again. Prudently, Jeremy didn’t return, not even for a last word. “Son of a *bitch!*” Simon finally exploded, flinging his arms out as if to invite the universe to look at how put-upon he was.

When he finally stalked over to the door to relock it (and kick viciously at the bits of pottery dotting the carpet), he couldn’t resist looking through the peephole. Jeremy was gone. Unsurprisingly, Simon hadn’t heard him go.

Simon rested his forehead against the cool wood of the front door and tried to catch his breath, mostly unsuccessfully. Without really paying attention to what he was doing he put the chain back on, hooking two fingers into the loop of the chain afterwards and letting his hand hang there. He caught himself thinking about how the locks couldn’t keep Jeremy out but at least the chain would slow him down, and furiously banished the thought.

He had no idea how long he stood there just like that. His knuckles hurt, and for a minute or so he couldn’t remember *why*; he couldn’t think clearly about the last five minutes without enraging himself all over again. Eventually the dim memory of punching the coffee table resurfaced, and Simon lifted his hand, studying his reddened knuckles. His upper lip lifted in the ghost of a growl.

He shifted. The carpet crunched under his feet. He looked down. “*Shit*,” he snarled under his breath, and swooped down, grabbing one of the larger chunks of the broken mug and promptly cutting his thumb slightly on it. He swore and whipped the offending piece of pottery against the wall. It shattered into even smaller pieces. Simon felt slightly better.

Eventually, once his thumb had stopped bleeding, he calmed down enough to finish picking bits of pottery out of the carpet. By the time he finished chucking every last bit of the broken mug viciously into the kitchen trashcan and carefully

picking all the tiny chips of stoneware out of the carpet, he thought that maybe, just maybe, he was calm enough to take the next step. His face carefully set, Simon flicked through the white pages, restraining a stab of pure irrational anger when he flipped past the 'o's by mistake.

"Old Line Hotel," said the man on the other end of the phone. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Simon said, his voice sounding remote to his own ears. "Has the man in 904 checked out yet? Thomas Angobrin?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," the desk clerk said immediately, without even having to stop and check. Simon could just see Jeremy tossing the clerk a hundred-dollar bill like it was nothing. "He checked out just a minute or so ago. I'm very sorry."

"Don't be," Simon snapped, and hung up without another word. Switching from his landline to his cellphone Simon hit a number on his speed dial, freeing himself to pace back and forth across the living room.

"FBI, Not Letting Shit Blow Up Division!" someone chirped in his ear, sounding entirely too happy about it for Simon's current tastes. "Also the Blowing Shit Up Division on alternate Thursdays! This is Tesseract, what can I do you for—"

"Robin, it's Simon," Simon said, overriding him. His free hand snapped open and closed as he paced. "Who's catching?"

"Hey, Templar! Me, mostly. Link's around somewhere. What's up?"

"Got a maybe for you," Simon said. He heaved a deep breath and forced himself to start at least *sounding* normal again. "Old Line Hotel, suite 904. Frankly, you ask me, there's gonna be fuck-all there, but you know how people get when it's the rich folks getting blown up."

"Sure, they point and laugh," Robin said, but his latent professionalism took over. Simon could hear him scrawling something. "What am I walking into?"

"Some *asshole* who got on the wrong side of a Russian mobster, basically," said Simon, getting a bit of mean pleasure out of stressing the word 'asshole' until it broke. "Said mobster's got a history of blowing up people he doesn't like, but I don't think he's had time to get out there yet. Still, can't be sure."

"Gotcha," said Robin. "904?"

"Suite and everything," Simon confirmed. "Asshole's doing a runner, so he probably left his stuff behind when he checked out. Go ahead and toss it or bag it for the lab or whatever."

"Gotcha," Robin said again. "We'll head out there. Do they know we're coming?"

"Nope," said Simon.

"Awesome! I love going in cold. You should see the looks I get. You want a report when we're done?"

Simon thought about it. “If you turn up something ticking, call me when you’re done. Otherwise just send a hard copy around to my inbox. I don’t care enough for anything else.”

“Will do!” Robin said happily, and then the phone cut off with a bang.

Simon slowly folded up his own phone and stuck it in his pocket, then abruptly wheeled around and grabbed his jacket off the back of the couch. No point in hanging around here stewing. “Fuck this,” he announced to the world at large, shrugging into his jacket.

He nearly broke the forgotten chain off the door when he jerked it open.

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## ◆ Twenty-Six

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Simon didn't wake up the next morning until nearly noon, and for a long time he didn't quite dare move or open his eyes. As long as he held perfectly still, any hangover that might be waiting for him wouldn't pounce. After about twenty minutes of lying very still his need to pee overtook his need to postpone his hangover, so Simon cringed in anticipation and rolled upright, leaving his eyes tightly shut.

After an uncertain moment or two his body responded with the vaguely uncomfortable sensation of *almost* a hangover, a slight sense of fragility that informed Simon very clearly that he'd had two beers too many but his body was going to let him off with a sour mouth and a warning this time. "Grf," Simon said eloquently, and then stumbled towards the bathroom.

One long shower and two aspirin later the almost-a-hangover had retreated, leaving Simon alone with a gray and nasty-looking March Saturday and, unexpectedly, almost nothing to do with it. Throwing on a t-shirt and a pair of clean jeans Simon wandered out into the main room, reflexively checking the front door first thing: the chain was still on, even if the wood around its base was a little splintered from Simon's own accident with it, and the chair that he only barely remembered shoving under the doorknob was still in place. Simon snorted grumpily at himself and pulled the chair free, carrying it back into the kitchen where it had come from and automatically turning on the coffeemaker on the way.

Leaving the coffeemaker to do its job, Simon grabbed the kitchen trashcan from under the sink and carried it out into the main room. The newly swaybacked coffee table was littered with his empty beer cans; Simon swept them all into the trashcan without counting them or allowing himself to think about them too much. Carrying the now-full trashcan back into the kitchen he eased the bag free and took it over to the kitchen window, shoving the window open and sticking his head out.

He was in luck. Some kind soul had neglected to close the dumpster lid again. Simon promptly dropped the bag out the kitchen window, directly down into the



dumpster. "Two points," he muttered, then grabbed another bag from under the sink and went to get the rest of the trash cans in the apartment while his luck was holding out.

After taking out the trash via the kitchen window trash chute, washing the few dishes in the sink and sticking them in the dishwasher, and running a load of laundry down to the laundry room, Simon caught himself grudgingly contemplating whether or not to run the vacuum cleaner around, assuming he could find it, and immediately decided that no matter how bored he was, or how little he had to do, turning into a frustrated housewife was not the answer to his problems. Next he'd be *dusting* or something. Instead he poured himself another cup of coffee and flung himself onto the couch, pulling out his cell phone.

"FBI, Bomb Squad Division."

"Link?" Simon said. "That you? Shit, weren't you catching last night? Why are you still there?"

"I like it here," Link said. "Better Internet connection than I got at home."

"Crazy man," Simon said. "Anyway. Tesseract there too, by some miracle?"

"Robin's always here," Link said. "Hang on. I'll go find him." The phone banged down on some wooden surface, making Simon wince.

He had time to drink about half his coffee, listening absently to the background noises of Bomb Squad's dispatch room, before someone breathlessly swept up the phone. "Simon!" Robin said. "Oh, man, you gotta send me on false alarms like that one more often."

"Yeah?" Simon asked. "Why's that?"

"Guy left all his stuff just like you said he was gonna," Robin said happily, "and goddamn if he's not just my size and a classy dresser to boot. You oughta see me. I look like the world's smallest leather daddy. Pretty sweet!"

Simon winced hard at the mental image, not precisely the one that Robin had meant to evoke. "Long as you're not wearing his underwear, Robin," he said, balancing his mug on his stomach so that he could rub his temples. "I mean, there's profiting off the misfortunes of the criminal class and then there's just gross."

"Aw, no way," Robin said. "I'm not gonna wear some other guy's used underwear. . . . which is kind of a pity because it was nice stuff."

"Yeah," Simon said, and then blinked his eyes open and realized what he'd said. "So I take it there wasn't a bomb?" he asked, as quickly and as casually as he could.

"Nah, place was completely clean," Robin said. As far as Simon could tell, his little slip hadn't even registered. "I even confiscated all the stuff in the mini-bar just in case it was poisoned or something."

"Thorough!" Simon said in appreciation.

"Hey, I am *good* at my job!" Robin said proudly. "Anyway. Report ought to be waiting in your inbox already."

“My man,” Simon said. “Thanks, Robin. Go the hell home.”

“What for?” Robin asked. “Link’s punched a hole in the firewall big enough for us to play World of Warcraft through. I may never go home again.”

“Christ, you’re all a bunch of nerds over there,” Simon said. “I’m gonna hang up before I find out if it’s contagious. Catch you later.”

“Later!” Robin said cheerfully. Simon heard someone whoop in the background before he hung up. Shaking his head he finished off his coffee and conscientiously carried the mug back into the kitchen before running down to switch his laundry over.

One way or another the afternoon passed, if slowly. Simon never quite succumbed to the vacuum cleaner, although it was a close thing; a stray brush of memory spurred him into washing his sheets, though, erasing the last few signs of Jeremy’s temporary inhabitation. Finally, some time after six, Simon finished remaking his bed, stared sourly out the window at the wet darkness, said “Fuck it,” and grabbed his jacket again.

The parking lot outside the FBI complex was almost completely deserted. A few cars huddled near the main entrance—there were always a few people around to keep the building going, even on Saturday nights, the poor bastards—but there wasn’t a single car near the side entrance. The first few drops of rain were already splatting occasionally onto his windshield as he threw the Jeep into park and shut it off, and Simon had to run for the concrete overhang to beat the latest explosion of rain. He almost made it.

Scruffing his fingers through his damp hair Simon swiped his ID card through the reader and let himself in, his footsteps echoing hollowly down the empty hallway and booming back to him. He already felt better. Get a couple of hours of work done and he wouldn’t feel like he’d wasted the entire day.

Robin’s report, in a manila folder, sat in the Team Templar inbox along with an armload of other paper crap. Simon swept the entire load up and jammed his key into the door, kicking it open to reveal all the lights on—Rich jumped and made a strangling yelping noise as the door boomed open, and Simon yelped right along with him and went reeling backwards, nearly falling on his ass in the middle of the hallway.

“Christ, Two, you scared the hell out of me!” Simon said, clutching at his chest. “I wasn’t expecting anyone to be here!”

Rich scowled bitterly and flapped a hand at his monitor. “I need to keep a watch out for that viral disk, remember?” he said. “Some idiot could put it in a drive at any time, and if it gets out of control . . .”

“Ahhh,” Simon said, edging in and letting the door slam behind him. “I get you. Don’t let me stop you.”

Rich grunted a little and turned back to his computer, squinting nearsightedly at the screen. Simon carefully carried his armload of paper into his own office

and dumped it on his desk, then went back out and got the coffeemaker going. Rain pattered ceaselessly against the saferoom's high, narrow casement windows, a soft thrum of background white noise.

While Simon waited for his coffee he sorted through the stack, filing most of it in the trash can without a second thought. Robin's report he put aside for later. He was deep in the middle of scrawling his signature on the usual sign-and-send-on's when the coffeemaker beeped and shut itself down; grabbing his mug off the desk Simon went back out into the main room and filled it. "You want coffee while I'm up?" he asked over his shoulder.

Rich grunted. Simon assumed that meant 'no' and wandered back into his office. After finishing up with the stuff he was supposed to sign he took a cursory glance through Robin's utterly boring summary of the bomb that wasn't, then booted up his own computer and sent Upstairs a progress report. Not that there was much to report—not that there was much Simon cared to report, anyway—but he figured it couldn't hurt to be conscientious, not as long as he was here on a Saturday night anyway.

Grabbing his empty mug in one hand and the signed papers in the other, Simon loped out to put the papers in the outbox before fetching himself another cup of coffee, then steeled himself and wandered over to Rich's lair, kicking over a chair and dropping into it. "Christ," he said genially, blowing on his coffee. "Is this rain ever going to let up, and other such weather-related small talk?"

Rich grunted again. Simon, long used to this, sprawled out and waited patiently. After a minute or so Rich finished doing whatever the hell he was currently doing and sat back, scowling at a progress bar crawling across his screen. "We had a power flicker an hour ago," he reported, thoroughly irritated. "I keep *telling* you I need a decent fucking backup power supply. They're not that expensive."

"Yeah, yeah," Simon said, mentally bracing for impact. "Tell you what: we've blown our budget for this fiscal quarter pretty damned thoroughly, but if you remind me in April we'll spring for one. Okay?"

"I'm holding you to that," Rich said. "I mean it. This is fucking ridiculous. You'd think the fucking *FBI* would have backup power generators in the basement or something."

"Want me to suggest it to Upstairs?" Simon asked. "'Cause I will. Don't think I won't."

Rich snorted. "What does he fucking care?"

"Ho-kay," Simon said, holding up both hands in surrender. The gesture was somewhat marred by the coffee mug still in one hand. "Since you're currently using the word 'fucking' as some kind of, of punctuation mark, I can tell that you're still royally pissed off at me, 'cause I'm perceptive like that. You wanna blow up at me now or later?"

Rich scowled at him, then subsided. "I'm fine," he muttered, turning his attention back to his keyboard.

"Bullshit," Simon said. "I've known you for, what, seven years now? Eight? Don't even try to tell me I don't know when you're angry."

"Fine," Rich told his keyboard, then jerked his head up towards Simon and repeated, "*Fine*," with such vehemence that Simon twitched back away from him. "So I'm angry!" Rich snapped, shoving his glasses up with the heel of his hand. "Why the fuck shouldn't I be? I told you and I *told* you that I didn't trust that . . . that *thief*, and no, you couldn't listen to me for one fucking second, could you? You left him alone in the saferoom after you promised you wouldn't—"

"—I apologized for that," Simon noted pleasantly under the tirade.

Rich didn't acknowledge it, just plowed right on, his face getting redder and redder. "—you took his advice over mine, you let the rest of the team adopt him like a puppy after you told them not to, and then you fucking put him in charge? Well, look what that got you. This guy who turns out to be his brother, almost, *just so happens* to slip right through our fingers thanks to Archer's *cunning plan*. What a fucking *coincidence*. Texas got shot because you just had to *trust the fucking criminal*." The last few words were delivered in a venomous hiss.

Once it was over—once Rich was reducing to puffing and glaring—Simon heaved a deep and unsteady breath and rubbed a hand down his face. "Okay," he said softly, marshaling his wits. "Okay."

Rich snorted in infuriated disbelief and hunched up over his keyboard, scowling blisteringly down at his own hands. "I think the fact that you're *fucking* him has seriously affected your judgment," he muttered.

Simon froze, his half-formed response falling right out of his brain. A wave of useless adrenaline slammed into him and turned his muscles to stone and static. "What?" he managed to say after a moment, although he could barely hear himself over the roaring in his ears.

"You heard me," Rich snapped, not looking up. "And I heard *you*. In the fucking *mat room*. I'm so fucking glad I never go in there, because that's disgusting."

Simon shuddered, an abrupt full-body shiver that dispelled some of that horrible adrenaline-fueled paralysis. "Oh, Christ," he said weakly.

"If it's the others you're worried about, don't," Rich said scornfully. "I didn't tell anyone. How the hell could I?"

Simon squeezed his eyes shut. "I knew that was a bad idea," he said. His voice was unsteady.

"Didn't seem to stop you," Rich said.

"No, I guess not," Simon said, grabbing for a thin thread of control and somehow catching it. "Christ. I'm sorry, Rich."

"Yeah, I bet you are," Rich said. "I'm pretty fucking sorry myself."

“No, goddammit, I mean it,” Simon insisted. “I’m not just sorry you caught me, okay? I’m sorry it happened. It shouldn’t have. I know better—I should know better, anyway—and I did it anyway. But you can trust me when I say it won’t ever happen again.”

“See, that’s the problem,” Rich said. The red was beginning to fade from his face now, but he still wouldn’t look up at Simon. “I am sick and tired of Archer getting away with murder and then being told that it won’t happen again. So it won’t happen again! So what? It happened once, and that’s bad enough! A whole lot of different bad things happening once is *worse* than one bad thing happening again and again. And I’m sick of it. I’m sick of *him*.”

“You’re not the only one,” Simon said. “Archer won’t be coming back. He’s tried my patience for the last time. He’s out.”

Finally Rich subsided, glancing at Simon briefly. “Yeah?”

“Swear,” Simon said firmly. “We won’t ever be working with him again. He’s not worth this kind of shit.”

Rich looked back down at his hands. After a minute, he nodded. “Okay,” he said hesitantly. “Are you, uh . . .”

“No,” Simon said immediately. “That’s over. He’s out of *everything*.”

“Because, I mean, it’s not a problem . . .” Rich stopped, scowled, and fidgeted in his chair. “I mean, it *is*, but because of *him* . . .”

Simon held up a hand and Rich subsided, more or less gratefully. “Tell you what,” Simon said. “Let’s pretend that we’ve stuttered through this already and you’ve managed to convey that you’re not homophobic, really, you just hate that it’s Archer. Was Archer. And, uh, having it thrown in your face. Is that it?”

Rich went a bit red again, but after a moment, he nodded. “Don’t care what you do as long as I don’t have to deal with it,” he muttered.

Simon waited a beat, then nodded back. “Okay. I promise that I’ll keep my personal life and my personal dick strictly off the job from now on. We good?”

Rich heaved a deep breath. “I think so.”

“Good,” Simon said, and relaxed back into his chair. “Thanks for handling this so well, Rich.” He was able to say it with only a minimum of irony.

Rich grunted and turned his attention to his computer again, making it kick up another progress bar, which he scowled at. “You’re lucky it wasn’t Nate,” he said abruptly. “You’d have found his dead body on the floor with blood leaking out of his ears.”

Caught almost completely off-guard, Simon choked on a mouthful of his coffee. “Oh, Christ,” he said, wiping coffee off his chin. “Or it could have been Mike, who’d have been obligated to pretend he wanted to join in . . .”

Rich managed to gag, groan and snort out a laugh all at the same time, all of which combined to form a frightening choking sound. “Oh, fuck, that’s *gross*,” he said when he could reliably talk again. “Conversation *over*. Forever.”

“Yeah,” said Simon. “I promised, didn’t I? Only, see, you started it.”

“That’ll teach me,” Rich said. His computer made a soft clicking sound and asked for a password and Rich turned back to it, his frowning attention soon locked entirely on the monitor and no longer on Simon at all.

Simon relaxed and went back to his coffee, closing his eyes and listening to the rain. The staccato sound of Rich’s typing was almost lulling, in its rattling way, and Simon might have dozed off except for the occasional muttered profanity leaking out from behind Rich’s gritted teeth. With an effort, he blinked his eyes open again. “Soon as I’m done with this,” he said, gesturing vaguely in Rich’s direction with his mug, “I ought to get back to work.”

“Yeah,” Rich said distractedly, eyes locked on a running column of gibberish. “What’s up, anyway? Just paperwork?”

“Well, yeah, that’s part of it, isn’t it always?” Simon said. “Crap really piled up when we were in Ohio, and as little as I actually care, well, since I’m here anyway . . .”

Rich grunted. The gibberish petered out in a cascade of random numbers. “Fuckers,” he muttered, pulling up a search window and typing what appeared to be another string of random numbers into it. “Can’t keep *me* out.” Either the search or the incantation produced another progress bar, which Rich immediately scowled at, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. Thunder rumbled lazily outside.

It was all so normal and peaceful and, well, *Rich*. Simon shut his eyes against a momentary upswell of relief; things were back to normal. That storm, at least, had passed. “Hey, I’ve got a question,” Simon said.

“Uh?” Rich said vaguely.

“How well are those things protected?” Simon asked, waving a hand in the general direction of Rich’s computers. “I mean, how easy would it be for someone to break into your system and walk off with the team files?”

“Fucking impossible,” Rich said immediately. “There’s no *way*. I am so much better at this shit than anyone within a hundred miles of here—I *pwn*. You have no clue.”

“That I don’t,” Simon admitted cheerfully. “I don’t even know what the hell you mean by ‘pone’. You sure?”

“Of course I’m fucking well sure,” Rich said, sounding irritable. “It’s my job to be sure. What’s up with this?”

Simon tilted his head down and lowered his voice. “Keep it to yourself—confidential as hell—but someone in the building’s been funneling FBI files and shit to Viktor Karpol, and fuck, if Karpol found out what *we’d* been up to . . .”

Suddenly he had Rich’s full attention, and then some. “*What?*” Rich squawked, and the sheer shock in his voice convinced Simon beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jeremy was full of shit. Nobody who was guilty could sound that damned surprised. “Holy fuck. What?”

“He’s got a mole inside the building,” Simon confirmed. “As long as you’ve been careful with your files then *we’re* good, but . . . Christ.”

“Yeah,” Rich said with a shaky little laugh. “Oh, fuck. I, uh. Hang on, I think I’m going to re-encrypt everything. Just in case.” Without waiting for Simon to say anything else Rich spun around to his larger computer and woke it up, bringing up a password window.

“Good idea,” Simon said, watching Rich work. “I mean, Upstairs has people on the spy’s trail already, but it can’t hurt.” The larger computer’s monitor went entirely black save for a large progress bar; Simon sipped his half-cold coffee and watched the bar inch upwards, feeling better already.

Rich spun back around, kicked open the drawer at his side, and fished out a gold CD, which he stuck into the drive of his smaller computer. “How’d they find out?” he asked. Windows popped up on the monitor, four or five of them, and Rich started switching madly between them, scanning them.

“What’s that?” Simon asked instead, gesturing with his mug.

“Uh?” Rich said. “Oh. Making sure no one’s accessed any of the computers in here recently. Activity logs. That kind of crap.”

“Gotcha, not that I have any clue what you just said,” Simon said. “Anyway, turns out the CIA’s known about this mole of ours for two years now and, you know, never bothered to tell us. Well, until now.”

“Fucking spooks,” Rich said, typing on his smaller computer with one hand and flipping open his laptop with the other. “Fucking *politics*. So what changed their minds now?”

“Our mole ratted out Langridge for working with us,” Simon said, watching this sudden flurry of activity with bemused interest. The monitor on the smaller computer went black and popped up a progress bar, just like the bigger one, and Rich turned his attention to the laptop, balanced precariously on the corner of his desk. “Guess that was personal enough for them, huh?”

Rich snorted. “Guess so,” he said. The laptop made a soft protesting sound and then started grinding. “Let me finish this and I’ll go lock down Nate’s computer,” he added, waving a hand at it. “I can do yours, too, if you want.”

“Probably safest,” Simon said. “Do it. Leave Nate a note so he doesn’t freak.”

“Right,” said Rich. “This is going to take a while, so if you want to go finish up whatever you were doing on your computer . . .”

“When I finish my coffee,” Simon said, settling down in his chair to watch the show. Rich was flipping between his computers quickly, trying to keep an eye on all three at once while rooting around in the open drawer at the same time; Simon smiled a little and shut his eyes. “You know,” he said, cupping his mug in both hands and laughing a little at the sheer absurdity of it, “as long as we’re sharing and all that crap, Archer had this crackpot fucking theory that *you* of all people were Karpol’s mole . . .” Just saying it aloud made him stop laughing, abruptly, because it really wasn’t funny. To cover the sudden awkward silence he

tossed off the last of his coffee, now cool and oily-tasting. He opened his mouth to add *what total bullshit, right?*—but he never got to say it.

It was a small but horribly *familiar* little ratchety sound. Simon froze, his animal hindbrain recognizing and reacting to the danger before his conscious mind recognized the sound. His eyes popped open and he found himself looking straight down the barrel of Rich's gun, pointed unwaveringly at his face; Rich himself hunched over the gun protectively, his eyes glittering and angry behind the sheen of his glasses. "See, that's what I'm *talking* about," he said bitterly, as Simon slowly put his hands up. "If you didn't listen to *Archer* instead of *me* all the time you wouldn't make me have to *do* this!"



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## ◆ Twenty-Seven

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“Two,” Simon said numbly, and then he stopped. Adrenalin coursed madly through his bloodstream, looking for an outlet and not finding one. It was *Rich* who had the gun on him—the sheer insanity of the situation had him as frozen and hypnotized as a deer in the headlights, even the highly-trained voice in the back of his mind unable to break his paralysis. Everything else was secondary to the black, dead eye of the gun. He couldn’t think about anything else.

“Don’t move,” Rich snapped, not taking his eyes off Simon for a second as he eased his chair back and stood up. “You’re just going to stay right there and not move.” Still not looking away he took two steps backwards, backing out of his lair, away from Simon.

“I’m not moving,” Simon said, forcing his voice to be as low and calm and reassuring as he could. It was difficult. “See?”

Rich jerked his chin down, once, still glaring at Simon over the rims of his glasses. “You’re going to sit right there,” he said. “I’m leaving. Don’t try and stop me—don’t come after me.”

“I’m not moving,” Simon said again. His fingers flexed slightly in the air beside his head and he had to force them to be still. “Rich . . .”

“Shut up,” Rich said, nearly snarled. He was still backing away, placing one foot very carefully behind the other, moving slowly—his elbow bumped into the door and he reached blindly back to push the handle down, taking a step forward to pull the door open. “Stay the fuck in here. If I see this door open before I get outside—”

“I won’t move,” Simon said, and then he lost it, briefly. “*Christ*, Rich!”

“*Shut up!*” Rich said again, and this time it wasn’t a snarl but damned near a wail, and Simon flinched, expecting a shot to accompany it. “And just fucking *stay there!*” He backed out the door, his gun hand the last thing to leave; Simon caught one last glint of fluorescent light sheening off Rich’s glasses before Rich dropped the door handle and ran. The saferoom door began to swing to under its own weight, Rich’s rapid footsteps clattering away.

Unmindful of anything else Simon shot to his feet and lunged for the door—then stopped short and turned around, a dreadful certainty growing in his mind. Three computers still sat there, their screens identical: black, except for a single window with a slowly creeping unlabeled progress bar . . .

“*Shit*,” Simon snarled, and grabbing the lip of Rich’s desk in both hands he slung himself halfway underneath it, kicking out blindly at the power cords snaking into the walls. The force of his kick wrenched the metal prongs to one side before the bent and useless plugs ripped loose with a momentary flash of white light; two of the three computers made ominous snapping sounds and spun to a halt, their monitors crackling faintly in the silence that followed.

Simon whipped around and flipped the grinding laptop over, slamming the palm of his hand across the laptop’s battery catch. The laptop made a warning sound; ignoring it he grabbed the laptop and brought it down against the edge of Rich’s desk as sharply as he could. The laptop’s battery popped out and skittered across the floor. The laptop popped loudly like a firecracker but shut down.

Dropping the dead laptop on Rich’s chair Simon pivoted and bolted for the door.

He yanked the saferoom door open and burst out into the hall, unmindful of the danger. The hallway was empty, the door at the far end still swinging slowly closed. Simon swore and dashed for it, slamming bodily into the bar handle and forcing it inward, shouldering the affronted door open, overbalancing and reeling out into the night.

It was like running into a wall. The rain struck him like a physical assault, the roar of its fall the only thing he could hear. He was soaked to the bone in seconds; somewhere deep in the back of his mind he was conscious of the cold. He shielded his eyes with one hand and frantically scanned the parking lot, empty except for his own truck—a second glance confirmed that his Jeep was listing visibly to one side, one of the front tires burst and deflating. “*Shit*,” he said again, and spun on his heel, running for the back parking lot.

Rain beat against him, heavy and implacable, and great sprays of water fountained up around him as he plowed through puddles, looking left and right, squinting against the rain and darkness. A flash of white caught his eye and he ran after it without stopping to think. “Rich!” he yelled, his voice lost in the tumult of the rain. “Goddammit, Rich!”

The white thing didn’t stop, or slow, or turn around. By squinting Simon could just barely make it out to be Rich’s shirt, standing out like a beacon in the rain-swept darkness. Simon bared his teeth in an involuntary grimace and ran after it, sucking in great lungfuls of air and trusting to the length of his legs to close the distance between them.

Slowly but surely he drew closer, his mind empty of everything but the need to catch up, to catch *Rich*. Christ, it had been Rich all along . . . Rich’s form

evolved out of the rain, his white shirt nearly transparent and sticking to his skin, his gray pants so wet they looked black, his face almost as white as his shirt.

“*Rich!*” Simon bellowed again. Rich whipped around and skidded to a stop in the same movement, jabbing his gun out at Simon. Simon jerked to a halt fifteen feet away and threw his hands out, showing that they were empty. “Christ, Rich, stop!”

“What the fuck are you *doing?*” Rich cried, his voice a thin and panicky wail that pierced through the storm’s percussion. The muzzle of his gun wavered slightly as he gasped for breath, his chest heaving—Rich made a high whining sound and grabbed his wrist with his other hand, steadying the gun.

“Just *stop!*” Simon yelled, leaving his hands out. “You don’t have to do this!”

“It’s too *late* to stop!” Rich shrieked. Simon could hear the mounting hysteria.

“It’s not too late! We can *deal* with this!” Simon said desperately. Despite himself, he fell back a step. “Jesus, Rich, do you think shooting me is going to make your problem *better?* If you kill me, then it’s really too late! They’ll never stop looking for you then!”

“*I know that!*” Rich was screaming now, shivering in great wracking shudders; even using both hands he couldn’t quite hold his gun steady, its muzzle tracking around in a little aimless and wobbling circle. “That’s why I told you to *stay in the fucking saferoom!*”

Simon swallowed and got hold of himself. The wobbling gun terrified him in a way that the steady one hadn’t. “Okay,” he said, fighting desperately to sound calm. As slowly as he dared he raised his hands, showing Rich his palms. “Okay,” he said again. “Just . . . calm down. Talk to me. Tell me what happened. Why’d you do it?”

Rich whooped in a huge breath, still shivering. The muzzle of his gun steadied, still aimed at Simon’s face. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, and despite everything he laughed, a jagged hysterical arpeggio of sound. “Oh, fuck, what the fuck does it matter now? It’s too late!”

“It matters to me,” Simon said, now completely unnerved. “*Please.* God-dammit, you’re my oldest friend, I want to know what happened! I *know* you wouldn’t do this for—for *money!*”

Rich’s face screwed up into a grimace. “I got fucking well tricked, all right?” he cried, defiance warring with despair in his voice. “Fuck, it was so stupid, I let some guy on a messageboard bait me into posting a confidential memo just to prove that I could crack it . . .”

“And then he told you he’d turn you in if you didn’t keep sending him stuff?” Simon shut his eyes for a fraction of a second.

“He was Russian—it was *already treasonous*, don’t you get it?” Rich’s voice rose to a wavering, cracking high note. “*I thought he worked for Microsoft!*”

A helpless whoop of pained laughter lodged under Simon’s breastbone and he had to fight against it with everything he had. It wasn’t funny—nothing about

this was funny—he wanted to howl anyway. “Why didn’t you come to me?” he asked instead, choking on it. The pent-up hysterical laughter was making it hard to breathe. “Christ, Rich, if you’d come to me—”

“And *admit it?*” Rich’s voice was incredulous. “Don’t give me that shit! I was already looking at prison—”

“How is this better?” Simon jerked his head to the side, clearing his wet hair out of his eyes. Rich’s gun tracked the little movement, his knuckle whitening as his finger tightened on the trigger. Simon froze so quickly that his chin was still lifted, baring his throat. “How is this better?” he asked again, more softly. Rich’s finger relaxed on the trigger and Simon let his head drop again, slowly. “Funneling them everything you could get your hands on for two years—”

“*Fuck you,*” Rich snarled. “I gave them as little as I could get away with. Two years I spent walking a tightrope . . . two years of this . . . you don’t have any fucking idea!”

“I guess not,” Simon said. The wind picked up, whipping the rain sideways across their faces. “Rich,” he said, fighting to sound calm. He flexed his fingers, hands open and empty, and waited until Rich stopped twitching quite so hard. “Look, come on, we’ll handle it, okay? It’ll be okay. Just put the gun down . . .”

“Don’t give me that,” Rich spat, tilting his head down so that he could watch Simon over the rims of his useless rain-spattered glasses. His own hair clung to his forehead in stringy brown clumps. “You of all fucking people ought to know that it’s not going to be *okay*. There’s no coming back from this.”

“Like hell there’s not,” Simon said. As carefully as he could he shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet. “We’ll tell Upstairs you came to me about it of your own volition, okay? Shit, after how long we’ve known each other, don’t you think I’d do that much for you?” Rich started to say something but Simon ran right over him as calmly and reasonably as he could, trying to get the rest out. “Come on, Rich. So you fucked up. Turn yourself in and I’ll go to bat for you, I’ll make it as easy as I can—yeah, there’ll be prison involved, I’m not gonna lie to you, but if you stop this *now* and cooperate we can get you in some country club somewhere, you’ll be out in five—”

“I’ll be dead in a month!” Rich howled, scrubbing his wet hair back from his forehead with his free hand. “Fuck, don’t you *get it?* It’s *Karpol*—if I ‘cooperate’ with you he’ll have me killed! They told me so!”

Simon squeezed his eyes shut against a surge of frustrated anger at being checked. “Yeah. Yeah, of course I get it. Both Langridge and Archer are running for their lives right now, how could I not get it?”

“*Fuck them!*” Rich flailed at the air with his free hand. “They fucked us over—I don’t care! Let him kill them and *good riddance!*”

“Jesus fucking *Christ*, Rich, no one fucked us over!” Simon yelled, losing his temper entirely, for a moment even forgetting the gun. “The only person who’s fucked me over here is *you!*”

Rich's head snapped back in shock. Simon realized what he was doing and choked to a stop. The thought *oh fuck, I'm mouthing off to the guy with the gun* pinballed crazily through his mind and vanished. Then: "Yeah," Rich said, almost normally, his voice barely carrying over the blowing rain. "Yeah. I guess I did."

"Rich . . ." Simon said, wishing he could take it back.

"I'm sorry it's got to end like this," Rich said, and now the normal voice was empty, eerie, quiet. "But you can't help me. I can't count on your 'protection', not against him. I'm going now. Don't try and stop me."

"Rich," Simon said despairingly, "I have to."

"I know," Rich said, his voice still empty. "I don't want to hurt you. But I will. There's only one chance I can get out of this alive and I intend to take it."

"One chance," Simon repeated, lowering his hands a few unobtrusive inches. "You never gave *me* a goddamned chance to help you, Two."

"You couldn't help me," Rich said, with a flash of his usual irritation. It was so Rich of him that it raised a lump in Simon's throat. "No one could have *helped* me. So I did what I had to."

"Yeah, I guess you did," Simon said. His hands dropped another inch and he gently shifted his weight to his right foot. "I guess you did," he said again, and narrowed his eyes against the rain, and gave up, and let it come. "You *fucking coward*."

Rich sucked in a shocked breath and pulled the trigger.

But Simon was already diving aside—the bullet went so close by his ear that he could feel the pull of it on his skin—he hit the wet pavement in a great splash, grabbing for the gun holstered at the small of his back, kicking one foot around in an arc that threw a wave of water up and out to confuse Rich's aim—another shot, another bullet whining off the pavement as it ricocheted and somehow didn't hit him—he rolled to his knees, leaped to his feet, was up, moving—the wind shifted direction and shoved at his back, flinging rain into Rich's face, and Simon heard a third popping shot and saw the muzzle flash before the muzzle of his own, larger gun tracked across a moving blur of white and instinct and training kicked in hard and Simon pulled the trigger—

Half of Rich's face exploded outward, vanishing in a spray of blood, bone and brain matter. He had just enough time to look shocked before he died.

The bullet's impact threw him one way and his own momentum threw him another. Arms and legs flailing limply, Rich, or what was left of him, went tumbling wildly like a flung rag doll into one of the puddles by the back fence. The remains of his glasses spun crazily through the air, catching the sparse light as they went, one earpiece and one lens and one tangled mess of bloody wire. Simon saw the lunatic flashing arc of their flight but he lost them in the downpour before they hit the ground.

For a long moment Simon stood frozen, his gun still out, trained unmoving on nothing at all. First his arms fell, to let the gun point at the ground; then

his fingers relaxed and his gun tumbled out to hit the pavement at his feet; and then his legs gave out, dropping him abruptly to his knees. “Christ, Rich,” he whispered, even as the back door nearest them blew open and men with guns burst out. They were yelling something at him, but he wasn’t listening.

Simon slowly put his hands up again, deaf to everything except the roar of the rain.

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## ◆ Twenty-Eight

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The next eight hours would remain a blur for the rest of Simon's life.

Bits and pieces of those missing hours would occasionally surface, unconnected to each other. He could remember shivering in an anonymous interrogation room somewhere, deeply in shock and soaked to the bone, his clothes sodden and freezing in the air conditioning. Someone must have given him a trauma blanket eventually—he could remember clutching the reflective silver stuff around his shoulders, desperate for warmth but wincing away from the glare—but he didn't remember who brought it, or when.

Simon only vaguely remembered repeating his half of the story again and again to an entire series of people, all of whom remained stubbornly faceless in his memory. The story set, congealed, and hardened through multiple repetitions, until he could repeat it by rote without looking up from the table; the more he told the story, the less it seemed to have to do with what had actually happened, and the easier it got to repeat.

He had a single clear memory of two people putting their heads together over his gun, sealed away in a plastic evidence bag. He also remembered pulling the empty holster from the small of his back and putting it on the table so that they could take it. Neither memory seemed real. What did seem real was the lump of stone lodged under his breastbone. Simon could feel it there every time he breathed in, heavy and painful. Sometimes he thought he was choking on it.

No one told him anything. Later, in hindsight, he could reconstruct what had been happening outside the room, but just then he wasn't able to think clearly at all. It was shock, he knew it was, but he didn't care.

He was hunched up inside his emergency blanket staring down at his laced hands, his clothes already halfway dry, by the time Upstairs arrived. "Simon," the heavy, familiar voice said. It registered in a way that the other voices hadn't, and even though Simon couldn't bring himself to look up he paused to listen. "Simon," Upstairs said again. "Are you listening? Can you hear me?"

Simon was still. After a moment, one of Upstairs' hands floated into his view, dropping onto his own. Simon jerked and then nodded. "Uh huh," he said faintly.

The stone in his chest leaped and settled again.

“Good,” Upstairs said, leaving his hand tented over Simon’s laced fingers. “I want you to listen to me now, all right?”

“Uh huh,” Simon said again.

“It’s being handled,” Upstairs said. Simon couldn’t imagine why Upstairs thought this would be important to him, but he listened, mostly out of habit. “Assuming your story checks out, you’re in the clear,” Upstairs went on. “As of now, you’re officially on paid suspension until we finish the investigation. It’ll be a couple of weeks.”

Simon nodded, again out of habit. Upstairs squeezed his hands in a manner that was vaguely reassuring. “Someone will take you home here in a few minutes,” he said. “I want you to try and get some rest. Will you do that for me?”

Simon nodded again. Upstairs paused, then pitched his voice lower. “I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but you have to listen to me. Until the official investigation is over you are not to attempt to contact any of your team members. Do you understand?”

“Uh huh,” Simon said. His chest ached.

Upstairs nodded encouragingly. “We have to do this by the book and we can’t afford to have their testimony compromised in any way,” he said, as if Simon cared about the reasons. “Your gun will be returned to you once the investigation is complete.” Simon nearly cringed and Upstairs must have noticed, because his hand pulled away. Simon was sorry to lose the comfort of it, but only vaguely. “Do you have any questions?” Upstairs asked.

Simon shook his head. Then he nodded. “Do you know who Edward Plunkett is?” he asked, only half-hearing himself.

There was a pause. “I’m afraid not,” Upstairs said after a moment. “Is it important?”

“No,” Simon said, and he heaved out a breath. “It’s nothing, it just . . . I was thinking about something else.”

“I see,” said Upstairs, not unkindly. “Go home, Simon. Get some rest. And don’t worry.”

Simon couldn’t think of a way to express the idea that there was nothing left to worry about, that nothing could be worse than what had already happened. So he just nodded. “Uh huh.”

The agent who was assigned to drive him home did so in uncomfortable silence, his attention strictly on the wet road in front of them. Simon slumped in the passenger seat and stared off at nothing. He made one small, faltering attempt at communication, asking if *he* knew who Edward Plunkett was; the agent didn’t know, and said as much before falling silent again. Simon didn’t bother to try again.



The man dropped him off in front of his apartment. After that it was just a matter of putting one foot in front of the other, engaging the autopilot, trudging up the stairs and letting himself in. Like a man in a daze Simon kicked off his sodden and ruined sneakers and abandoned them on the welcome mat outside his apartment, then closed and locked his door, putting on the chain. The lights made him uncomfortable, so he turned them off.

Still working on autopilot he stripped in the darkened bathroom, leaving his still-damp clothing in a pile on the floor. The water in the shower was blessedly hot, and he stood under the spray with his hands braced against the wall and his head down until he finally stopped shivering, washing the last of the rain off his skin. After that it was just a question of avoiding the mirror while he dried off.

Then he put on a pair of clean sweatpants and lay down, staring at the wall. He didn't think he was going to be able to get to sleep, especially not with this stone still lodged in his chest impeding his breathing. Five minutes later, he passed out.

He didn't get up again for three days, although at the time he was entirely unaware of time passing.

Occasionally he'd stumble out of bed long enough to use the bathroom, avoiding both the mirror and the pile of damp clothes still heaped on the floor. He didn't really feel hungry but sometimes he'd find himself in the kitchen, eating handfuls of dry cereal right out of the box or drinking milk out of the carton; when he couldn't sleep any more he'd sit in front of the television and stare at it, not seeing much but vaguely grateful for the noise. Then he'd go back to bed and doze again, curled up around the stone in his chest.

Both of his phones rang a few times. He pulled the covers over his head and ignored them. Eventually they would always stop ringing.

At some point during the fourth day, Simon became vaguely aware of the rattling.

It was late in the morning. He was pretty sure of this, because the sun was trying to shine directly into his eyes and he'd buried his face in the covers to get away from the glare. Curled up in his usual spot with his face hidden in the comforter Simon listened apathetically to the rattling and waited for it to stop. Eventually it did. Simon shut his eyes and started to doze off again.

"Hullo?" someone said behind him, standing in the doorway to the bedroom. Simon blinked once, edging towards conscious again, but didn't come out from under the covers. Whoever it was, they could just go away.

Whoever it was, they hadn't gotten the memo. "Hullo!" the voice said again, affable and offhand. "I'm looking for one Simon Drake? Big handsome fellow, black hair, blue eyes? I don't suppose you've seen him."

Under the protective tent of the covers, Simon opened his eyes and ran his tongue over his lips. “Go—” he started to say, and produced only a painful and unintelligible rasping sound. He swallowed, clearing his throat. “Go away.”

“Mm,” the owner of the voice said. “No, I’m rather afraid I can’t do that.”

It ought to have been annoying. Instead Simon just closed his eyes again, dimly certain that if he just ignored the voice for long enough, it *would* go away. He scrubbed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, trying to clear out some of the foul taste.

“I rang you a few times but you weren’t answering,” the voice went on. “So eventually I took the liberty of ringing Ms. Leone instead, and she, ah, told me what had happened.” Simon cringed in vague horror. Heedless, the voice’s owner went on. “In any case, she told me that she wasn’t currently allowed to have any contact with you, so I was under no circumstances to tell you that she said that no one blames you for what happened, Simon.”

It lanced into Simon’s heart like an arrow and he folded up around the pain of it, suddenly and completely unable to breathe. “Go *away*,” he said again, when he could.

There was a pause, just long enough for Simon to catch his breath. “No,” the voice said.

“Fine,” Simon said wearily, and fell silent.

It only bought him a moment’s peace before someone started trying to pull the covers away from his face. Simon fought half-heartedly against the pull for a few seconds before giving up and allowing himself to be brought blinking like a lizard into the sunlight.

“There you are,” Jeremy said, dropping the corner of the blanket and settling back onto his heels. “You look a fright.”

Simon narrowed his eyes against both the invasive sunlight and the last person in the world he wanted to see, looking away. “Can you blame me?” he rasped, reaching up to rub at his sticky eyes.

The faint smile faded off Jeremy’s face. “No,” he said quietly. “I suppose I can’t.”

“Glad we—” Simon coughed, once, clearing his throat and making the stone in his chest push hard against his heart. “Glad we got that settled,” he said. “Go away.”

Jeremy shook his head. “The answer’s still no, I’m afraid.”

“Why’s that?” Simon asked, scrubbing his knuckles over three days’ worth of stubble and surrendering to the fact that, for better or worse, he was awake. Coherence brought with it both all the memories that he’d been working so hard to repress and a sudden implacable bitterness so complete that he could taste it in the back of his throat. “Come to gloat?” he asked nastily, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and sitting up. “Wanted to lord it over me how you were right all along?”

“Not really,” Jeremy said, after a significant pause.

“‘Not really’,” Simon mimicked, pushing a hand through his hair. “Then why *are* you here?”

“Mm,” said Jeremy. He stood up and fell back a step, giving Simon some room. “I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I told you that I’d been worried about you.”

“You know what, you’re right, I wouldn’t,” Simon said. “Get the fuck out of my apartment.”

“Well,” Jeremy said with a jerky little laugh that didn’t sound amused in the slightest. “I can see you’re feeling more like your usual lovable self . . .”

“Shut up,” Simon said, shoving himself upright. He tottered a bit on unsteady legs before catching himself and making a peremptory shooing gesture at Jeremy. “Shut up and get the fuck out of my apartment, Archer. I refuse to deal with you right now.”

Jeremy looked towards the doorway to the bedroom, then back at Simon. “No,” he said again.

And now the taste of bile in the back of his throat was so strong Simon was momentarily afraid he was going to throw up. “If you don’t leave, I’ll throw you out,” he said, very softly, scrubbing the back of his hand over his lips and just barely holding on to his temper. “Believe me when I say that.”

“I believe you,” Jeremy said, equally softly. He squared his shoulders and spread his feet apart. “But I’m afraid I’m not going to leave.”

Simon’s vision went red around the edges again and he grabbed Jeremy’s arm, hard enough to feel the muscle under the leather of his jacket. “Yes, you are,” he said, yanking Jeremy forward and taking a vicious little pleasure in making him stumble. “You’re leaving. Right now. Even if I have to throw you off the balcony to make you go.”

“I said no,” Jeremy said, so calm that it was perfectly infuriating. “Let go.” His free hand rose and snapped down sharply, the edge of it striking Simon’s wrist, knocking his hand off Jeremy’s arm.

Simon wheeled around and drove his fist into Jeremy’s face.

The force of the blow slammed Jeremy back into the bedroom wall, cracking the plaster, and he rebounded off the wall with a hollow boom. Simon grabbed Jeremy by the collar and threw him into the wall again, pinning him there with a forearm across his throat. “*Christ*, I’ve been wanting to do that to you for days now,” he hissed, watching almost dispassionately as Jeremy clawed at his arm and started to turn red. “You should have gotten out when I told you to.”

“I’m getting that idea,” Jeremy choked out, hooking his fingers over Simon’s forearm and wrenching it down just enough to let himself breathe. He dragged in a breath, the flush fading from his cheeks again.

“This is all your fault,” Simon said softly. He was so incredibly angry that he’d never felt so calm—even the stone wasn’t hurting him now. The skin around

Jeremy's left eye was rapidly swelling and turning red, Simon noted with vague approval. "*All your fucking fault.*"

"I'm afraid that's true—" Jeremy started to say.

"Shut up," Simon told him, and hit him in the stomach. Jeremy's eyes bulged and he made a whooping gagging sound. "The problem with *you* is that you don't know when something is none of your fucking business," Simon went on, idly watching Jeremy choke like he was watching the whole scene go down on a security camera somewhere. "No, you pry, and you *poke*, and you *meddle*—" almost absently he pressed his forearm down again and watched Jeremy scramble at it "—and look what it got you," he finished, softly. "Look what you did."

He paused to see if Jeremy had anything to say for himself, easing up on Jeremy's throat almost as an afterthought. Jeremy whooped in a ragged breath and shut his eyes, still clutching at Simon's forearm. "Well?" Simon asked after a moment.

"I'm sorry—" Jeremy started to say. Simon punched him in the stomach again. Jeremy coughed out an agonized breath and shut up.

"See," Simon said, now speaking so softly that he could barely hear himself under the roar in his ears, "it's because you were messing around where you shouldn't have been that Rich is . . . that Rich is *dead*."

He paused again. Jeremy, either learning his lesson or concentrating entirely on getting enough air, didn't say anything. After a moment, Simon nodded and leaned in close, breathing against his ear. "You forced me into that situation," he said, his voice a bare murmur. "You. Did that to me. On purpose. So what have you got to say for yourself?"

Jeremy swallowed convulsively. Simon, waiting for his answer, felt Jeremy's eyelashes flutter against his cheek. Here in the too-calm eye of his rage he was far too aware of it—the oddly intimate little touch stung on his cheek like sandpaper—and he shut his eyes and sighed, anticipating Jeremy's next fumbling attempt at an apology and his own response like this had all been choreographed and videotaped months before. He could see it. He was looking forward to it. He was *exulting* in it. His free hand balled into a fist in readiness.

Instead Jeremy drove his knee up into Simon's stomach, which broke Simon's grip, his sense of distance from the scene, and his thin veneer of calm all at once.

Simon barked out a shocked breath and reeled backwards, clutching at his stomach. Jeremy staggered but managed to keep his feet, reaching up to rub his throat with one hand. "I'm sorry I had to do that," he said, his voice rough but eerily calm. "I'll admit I deserved a fair bit of that but I won't stand for simply being beaten—"

Simon roared and lunged for him again, hands not in fists but in claws this time. Jeremy whipped aside and Simon hit the wall instead, showering the carpet with more plaster. His roar choked off into fast and infuriated panting and he spun, grabbing for Jeremy's throat—Jeremy threw up an arm and deflected Simon's

hand with his forearm and Simon seized his wrist instead, slamming it against the wall over Jeremy's head. Jeremy hissed out a little sound and struck out at Simon with his free hand, trying to dig his thumb into the hollow at the base of his throat; it was child's play to grab his other wrist and pin it up with the first. Remembering the knee in his gut Simon piled bodily into Jeremy, driving his shoulder into Jeremy's chest and pinning him to the broken wall. "And then you come here," he panted, "all calm and fucking *cheerful*, to do what? *Apologize*?"

"Yes!" Jeremy said defiantly, wheezing right along with him. "My God, Simon, of course I came to apologize! Do you really think that I intended for this to happen? I didn't think you even *believed* me!"

"*I didn't!*" Simon bellowed. Jeremy flinched. Simon squeezed his eyes shut and whooped in another breath. "I didn't," he said again. The stone in his chest leaped, thudding against his ribs with every rapid beat of his heart, making Simon have to pant shallowly for enough breath to keep going. "If I'd believed you," he said, pausing to gasp in another breath, "I wouldn't have *told* him!"

Jeremy said nothing. For a long moment the only sound in the room was their breathing, harsh and tearing, while Simon tried not to think about what he'd just said—and failed. His anger drained away, replaced by that same awful numb feeling he'd been sunk in for days. "Oh, Christ," he said faintly, resting his forehead against his upraised arm. "Oh, Christ..."

"It's not your fault, Simon," Jeremy said urgently. Simon winced. Jeremy butted his forehead against Simon's cheek until Simon looked up at him, his eyes flat and haunted. "It's my fault," Jeremy said, holding Simon's gaze like it was the only thing in the world. "All my fault."

"All your fault," Simon repeated numbly. His chest hurt.

"All my fault," Jeremy said again, softly, persuasively. "Go ahead and be as angry at me as you want. It's my fault."

Simon's hands flexed around Jeremy's wrists. "Your fault," he said again, digging down deep to find his anger again. It flared dimly, making the waves of numbness recede.

"There," Jeremy breathed. He shifted, making another shower of plaster dust fall from the cracked wall—abruptly Simon became acutely aware of the rest of him, pinned between Simon and the wall like a flower pressed in a book. "This is all my fault," Jeremy said again, curling a leg around Simon's, "and I'll accept whatever's coming to me now."

Simon squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed. "Christ, you idiot, it doesn't *work* like that," he said weakly, "do you actually think I'm *turned on* by this kind of—" and then he shut up and lunged forward, burying his teeth in the side of Jeremy's throat.

Jeremy wheezed out a sound like a laugh, jittery and nerved up, and lifted his chin to give Simon more room. His leg slid up until it curled around Simon's waist, leather against bare skin, and that was all right, but when he tried to gently

tug his trapped arms free Simon stopped and slammed Jeremy's trapped wrists against the wall once for emphasis. "No," he said firmly.

"No," Jeremy repeated, and shut his eyes, and fell still.

Simon watched him narrowly for a moment, then nodded. "No," he said again, squeezing Jeremy's wrists together and pinning them both with a single hand, splayed wide. Jeremy didn't move or resist again, not even when Simon's newly freed hand clawed down his chest to rip at his belt.

"Bastard," Simon said, astounded at himself, at how *present* he suddenly was, at how this had all inexplicably turned from honest anger to something more complicit. Blood roared in his ears. "Bastard—"

Jeremy slit his eyes open, gazed at Simon from under his lashes for a moment, then shut his eyes again and let his head fall to one side, baring his throat. Simon reached up and put his free hand on the front of Jeremy's throat for a moment, not squeezing, just letting it rest there. Jeremy hiccupped out a startled breath but didn't open his eyes, and after a minute Simon returned to the much more pressing business of yanking open the buttons of Jeremy's pants.

Once the buttons were done, the rest was easy: Simon pushed Jeremy's leg down and shoved at his waistband, and Jeremy rolled his hips from side to side, rubbing his thighs together, wriggling out of his pants and underwear like he was shedding his skin. Simon got them down to about mid-thigh before grabbing both of Jeremy's wrists and throwing him at the bed.

Hampered by the clothes around his thighs Jeremy stumbled and fell to his knees halfway there, throwing both hands out to catch the edge of the bed and break his fall. He sucked in a quick breath and started to crawl forward. Simon watched for a moment, then fell to his knees behind Jeremy and reached around, grabbing both wrists and pinning them to the mattress. "No," he said again.

"No," Jeremy echoed, falling still and letting his head drop to the bed. Simon nodded, letting go of Jeremy's wrists to fumble with his own pants and shove them down.

Jeremy hissed in a shaking and soundless breath when Simon drove into him, his face contorting. Everything else fell away from Simon in a haze; he only dimly noted the dry and painful friction of it, or his own roaring breathing, or Jeremy's fingers knotted white-knuckled in the covers. The stone against Simon's heart swelled, cutting off his breath, threatening to choke him—

—only to crack and shatter as he came, barely aware that he was doing so. Simon brayed out a hoarse sobbing sound against the back of Jeremy's neck and shut his eyes, ceasing to be aware of much at all.

For a few breathless moments they both balanced there, unmoving. Then Jeremy collapsed underneath Simon and Simon fell with him; Simon pulled free as they fell, and in near-perfect unison they both yelped. Jeremy hissed and rapidly shifted his weight onto one hip, leaning heavily against the foot of the bed, breathing hard. Simon just hid his face against Jeremy's shoulder (Jeremy

was still wearing his *jacket*, for Christ's sake) and breathed in the scent of sweat and leather and, dimly, his own stink. How long had he been—was he—what day was—

Jeremy wearily rubbed his cheek against Simon's, interrupting the flow of confused thoughts. "Muh," said Simon, not yet willing to lift his head.

"Invigorating," Jeremy said in apparent agreement. "Perhaps next time you'll do me the favor of shaving first. It's like having sex with an old broom."

"Muh," Simon said again, shuddering a little. "Yeah. . . . need a shower."

"Why don't you go have one?" Jeremy said, curling up a little tighter. "I'll just . . . catch my breath, shall I."

Leaving Jeremy curled up on the floor at the foot of his bed in a disheveled little depantsed huddle (under any other circumstances it would have been funny) Simon stumbled towards the bathroom, automatically closing and locking the door behind him. Without really thinking about it he swept up the abandoned pile of mostly-dry clothes and stuffed them in the hamper, tossing his filthy sweatpants in after them.

The hot water stung on his skin; it felt wonderful. Like being scoured. Leaving his eyes tightly shut Simon washed himself clean, hands moving slowly and mechanically over his body. Simon barely paid attention, not even when the soap got into his light abrasions and made them burn. *What just*, he thought, not letting himself finish the thought. *Did I just*. And finally, a complete thought: *what did I just do?*

His hands hit the tiles under the shower head with an abrupt thump and Simon ducked his head, grimacing under the spray. Now that his rage and its accompanying remoteness was gone Simon couldn't stand up under the returning flood of memories, neither the old ones nor the new ones; he slumped forward until his forehead rested on his crossed arms and breathed the clean and steamy air in great whooping gasps, struggling not to fall apart. It was, eventually, a struggle he lost.

When he was done he raised his face into the spray and washed it clean, only then noticing that the stone that had been lodged in his chest was gone.

Steeling himself Simon swiped his hand across the mirror, wiping the steam away. For a moment the man in the mirror was a stranger, pale and drawn and puffy-eyed with three days' worth of ragged black beard, but the face quickly resolved into Simon's own.

Simon stared into his own eyes for a few seconds just to prove to himself that he could do it, then picked up his razor and got on with things.

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## ◆ Twenty-Nine

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The smell was the first thing that hit him when he opened the bathroom door, and Simon wrinkled up his nose. Wallowing in his own filth for how long—a breath of cleaner, cooler air from behind him made him turn around. The window and blinds in the second bedroom were open, letting in the sunlight and the faint spring breeze. Simon stared at the open window for a moment before slowly turning around and heading into the bedroom.

Mercifully, the bedroom was untenanted, its windows also thrown open to the noontime sun. Carefully not looking at the large and vaguely human-shaped dent in the plaster Simon shut the bedroom door and threw his towel on the rumpled bed, going in search of clean clothes without really caring if people could see in or not.

Clean, shaved, dressed, Simon let himself back out of the bedroom, dropping the towel off in the bathroom. The windows in the main room were also open but he barely noticed as he went by, heading for the kitchen.

The window at the far end of the kitchen was open, too. Jeremy stood in front of it, his back to Simon, leaning nonchalantly against the refrigerator and occasionally flicking ash off his cigarette out the open window. Simon stopped in the doorway, unsure what to do next. He settled for saying, “. . . if you start a fire in the dumpster the apartment complex is going to evict me, you know.”

“If that should happen I fully intend to blame your downstairs neighbors,” Jeremy said, flicking the butt end of the cigarette out the window and turning around. He was holding a bag full of ice and water against his left eye; Simon, who’d been about to say something else, stopped with his thoughts in a jangling disarray. “Well!” Jeremy said, not noticing or pretending not to notice the uncomfortable silence. “You look better.”

“I feel better,” Simon admitted, scuffing one hand through his damp hair. “I, uh. How, uh, bad is it?”

“How bad is—ah.” Jeremy lowered the icepack. His left eye was mostly closed, surrounded by a puffy swirl of reddish-brown bruise. Simon winced. “I



expect it'll be a lovely shade of purple by tomorrow," Jeremy said, putting the icepack back. "Still, I can probably force the swelling down if I'm vigilant."

"Yeah," Simon said helplessly, frozen in the doorway. "I, uh."

"Don't worry about it," Jeremy said, making a little dismissive gesture with his free hand. "I've had worse."

"Yeah, but," Simon said, and stopped again.

"I said don't worry about it," Jeremy said again. "I'll be fine."

Simon scowled a little. "I'm still sorry, dammit."

"You're forgiven," Jeremy said lightly. "There, wasn't that easy?"

"No, it's not that easy, and you know that," Simon said. "The, uh, the bowl's in the dishwasher. If you want to use that instead of the dumpster."

"Thank you, but all in all I think I'd rather stand," Jeremy said, all in a rush like he was embarrassed to be saying it. "Would you do me a favor and come in? You're making me nervous, lurking in the doorway like that."

"Yeah," Simon said awkwardly, but he stood there for a little longer before forcing himself to step into the kitchen. Uncertain of what to do next he sat down at the kitchen table, folding his arms and tapping his fingers nervously against its wooden top.

Jeremy leaned back against the refrigerator, tilting his head back and letting the icepack rest heavy on his eye. "Ow," he said, almost conversationally.

"Sorry," Simon said again, faintly.

"Are you feeling better?" Jeremy asked, either not hearing or ignoring Simon. "Honestly."

"I think so," Simon admitted, looking down at the table. "Christ, it's . . . I still can't wrap my head around it. Any of it. Rich, or . . . or you . . ."

"I can see how that would be difficult," Jeremy said. "It's a lot to take in, isn't it."

"Yeah," Simon said. Something had been spilled on the kitchen table and left to dry; he dabbed his finger at it, scowling at the stickiness. "It doesn't seem real. None of it seems *real*. Like I've had a long nightmare or something."

"I assure you it's quite real," Jeremy said

"Yeah, thanks," said Simon, with just a hint of bitterness. "I wasn't asking to be reminded."

Jeremy coughed. "My apologies."

"But I feel . . . awake again. I guess that's the best word for it." Simon heaved out a breath and rested his chin on his crossed arms, staring vaguely off in the direction of the sink. Jeremy was just a slight black blur in the corner of his vision. "It still hurts pretty bad to think about it, but . . ." He trailed off again.

"Well, then," Jeremy said, covering up the small silence. "I deem this visit a success, in its own odd little way."

Simon snorted and closed his eyes. "Christ, your definition of 'success' is fucked up, Archer."

“Be that as it may,” Jeremy said, “I’m still content.”

“Content,” Simon repeated in vague disbelief. “What the hell would I have to do to you to make you *discontented*? Set you on fire?”

“Mm,” said Jeremy, shifting a little and resettling the ice pack. “Yes, I believe that setting me on fire would discommode me quite a bit, now that you mention it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Simon said, dropping the subject with some relief. For a minute or so they sat in silence—well, Simon sat, and Jeremy stood—listening to the sound of cars outside.

“So what will you do now?” Jeremy finally asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t know,” Simon admitted, sitting back up and rubbing a hand over his face. “It’ll be a couple of weeks before they finish investigating and let me come back to work. Technically, I’m on suspension. Isn’t that funny? . . . no, forget it, that’s not funny.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said. “In that case, allow me to admit that I had an ulterior motive for visiting today. Well. Another ulterior motive.”

“Uh?” Simon said.

“I came to ask if you’d care to come to New York City with me for a few days,” Jeremy said.

It made so little sense that Simon could only sit and blink for a few seconds. “What?” he finally said.

“Come to New York City with me,” Jeremy said again, phrasing it more like an invitation this time.

“ . . . okay, I must not have heard that right,” Simon said. “You want me to what?”

“Oh, what?” Jeremy said, sounding vaguely amused. “You’ve said yourself that you’re on suspension for the next week or so. What else are you going to do, sit around your apartment and rot?”

Simon hesitated. “What are you up to?” he finally asked, suspicious.

“I promise that if they call you in I can get you back to DC within two hours,” Jeremy said, now pretty much blatantly ignoring him. “If necessary I’ll charter a plane. I promise.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Simon pointed out. “What are you up to?”

“Me?” Jeremy asked innocently. “Why do I need to be up to anything? Isn’t it possible that I simply don’t want you to have to mope around here with nothing to do for another week?”

“Nope,” Simon said. “You’re up to something. I can tell.”

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said. “So I’m up to something. If you don’t come, you’ll never find out what it is.”

Simon scowled at Jeremy for a moment, then switched his scowl to his own hands, folded on the tabletop. It was a ridiculous idea, particularly now, after all that had happened, when they might call him back at any time . . . but, he had to

admit, getting out of his little box of an apartment and doing something, anything, definitely held some appeal. Simon glanced out into the main room. "Fine," he finally said, grumpily. "But only until . . . uh . . . what's today?"

"Thursday," Jeremy said.

"Christ," Simon said, startled. "Already?"

"I'm afraid so," said Jeremy.

"Christ, that long," Simon said, and shook his head violently to dispel his thoughts. "Uh. Anyway. I want to be back here no later than Monday."

"I can do that," Jeremy said, shifting upright (with a bit of a wince) and nonchalantly pitching the icepack out the window. Simon heard it land in the dumpster with a faint metallic *bong*. "Go pack a bag. I'll close things up."

Simon heaved himself to his feet. "This is ridiculous," he muttered, pushing the chair back under the table. "New York City. Yeah, sure, why not?"

"We'll stop and have a bit of lunch somewhere along the way," Jeremy said, ignoring him again. "That is, if you're hungry."

Simon paused to consider this. "I'm *starving*," he said, surprised. "Jesus, I could eat a horse."

Jeremy smiled a bit. "I'm reasonably sure that won't be necessary. I know you Americans are a touch backwards, but . . ."

"But we're not French," Simon finished for him. "Americans don't *actually* eat horses. They're fucking *icons* over here. It'd be like eating a, a bald eagle or something."

"Uch," Jeremy said cheerfully, pulling the kitchen window closed and turning the latch. "Go, go. If we leave now we can be in New York before dark, and there I can promise you an excellent dinner. No horses or bald eagles involved."

"Yeah, okay," Simon said, easing around the corner of the kitchen table and grabbing Jeremy's chin in his hand, tilting his head up. Jeremy blinked up at him, although it was more like a wink and a stutter; his left eye was still half-closed and rapidly purpling, and the lids barely moved. "Christ," Simon said again, shaking his head and letting his hand drop. "I'm really sorry."

"Don't be," said Jeremy. "That much, at least, I deserved." The miniblinds rattled down, abruptly casting the kitchen into a grayish gloom.

"You are fucked *up*," Simon told him. "And don't worry. I'll, uh, behave myself while we're in New York."

"Oh, I rather hope not," Jeremy said serenely, edging past Simon and patting Simon's hip as he went. "You're so much more fun when you misbehave."

Simon stared after him in disbelief. "So," he said, gingerly approaching the idea, "even after all that, you . . . we're . . . there's still a 'we' in here somewhere?"

"I don't know," Jeremy admitted, pausing in the doorway. "I do think, however, that there's still a 'you and I'. And, do you know, I think that will suffice for now?"

"Fucked. Up," Simon said again.

Jeremy was quiet for a moment. "If you think it's that easy to be rid of me, Simon, I assure you that you're quite wrong," he finally said.

"That easy," Simon said. "That *easy*. Christ, I *would* have to set you on fire to get rid of you. You're like a, a persistent mildew stain or something, I don't know."

"Oh, I *am* flattered," Jeremy said over his shoulder. "Next you'll be comparing me to athlete's foot. If you'd like, you can pretend I only stick around because you're irresistible."

Simon snorted and followed Jeremy out of the kitchen.

Simon stopped abruptly at the foot of the stairs and slapped his forehead. "Shit, I forgot, my Jeep's still at work," he said. "Now what?"

"That's all right," Jeremy said, edging past him and heading down the sidewalk. He was wearing his sunglasses now; it made him look almost normal, although Simon could see the edges of the bruise if he looked closely. "I thought we'd take mine."

"Yours?" Simon asked, following him. "You have a car?"

"How exactly did you think I got here?" Jeremy asked pleasantly. "There's nothing wrong with walking, I'm sure, but—"

"Yeah, yeah, okay, I get it, wise guy," Simon said.

"Of course, it *is* only a rental, but it'll do," Jeremy said, rounding the corner of the sweetest little silver convertible Simon had ever personally seen.

"Whoa," Simon said, stopping. "Is that a Porsche?"

Jeremy made a pained face, waving the key in its general direction. "It's a BMW, thank you. Hang about, I'll pop the trunk . . ."

"I want to drive," Simon said, watching the trunk slide sedately open, absolutely fascinated.

Jeremy paused. "Far be it from me to belabor the obvious, but it's my car."

"I let you drive mine," Simon pointed out, dropping his duffel bag into the miniscule trunk and shutting it with a faint whuff of hydraulics. "Come on. Let me drive."

"Mm, no," Jeremy said. "You're not insured on it, for one thing."

"What a waste," Simon said, shaking his head. "You have a sweet car like this and you drive like a little old lady going to church. It's a crime or something, I swear."

"So arrest me," Jeremy said, pointing the electronic key at the convertible and making it beep. "I'm still driving."

"Yeah, but you're really in no condition to drive with that shiner," Simon went on. "Reduced eye function and all. It'll be safer if I drive."

"Oh, now, that is just *low*, Simon," Jeremy said, laughing a little. "Is there anything you won't stoop to?"

"It's a nice car," Simon said, shrugging.

“So it is,” said Jeremy. He opened the driver’s side door and slid in gingerly, hissing once. Simon tried to ignore it. “Hop in. We can negotiate driving privileges at lunch.”

“Woo,” Simon said, throwing himself into the passenger seat and settling in with a great sigh of contentment. “Oh, Christ, I’m like two inches off the road surface, aren’t I?”

“Something like that,” Jeremy said. The car purred to life.

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## ◆ Thirty

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"I had no idea this place was even here," Simon said, turning halfway around in his chair to look out over the low hedges at the narrow road. Truth be told, he didn't precisely know where he was; he'd gone into a light trance of expensive-car appreciation and not snapped out of it until Jeremy was easing said car into a parking spot. They were definitely still somewhere in DC, he knew that much, but nowhere he was familiar with. The houses surrounding this little outdoor café were just small and narrow and old enough to be extremely expensive, and Simon didn't get out to the ritzy parts of town much. Everything was red brick and greenery. Senators probably lived around here. Lobbyists. Cabinet members. Simon thought he could probably see the slime trails if he squinted.

"I only found it a few days ago myself," said Jeremy. He was still wearing his sunglasses; out here on the patio they didn't even seem all that out of place. Simon was vaguely grateful for them. "I'm afraid there's no horse on the menu, but it *is* on our way—"

Simon rolled his eyes. "Christ, can we drop the horse thing? It was a figure of speech, and it was a lame one, and it was like an hour ago anyway."

Jeremy smiled, slightly. "One might say I was beating a dead horse, then?"

Simon bit the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning. "Don't think I'm not considering throwing a fork at you," he said. "Only thing that's stopping me is not knowing which of these forks is for throwing."

"When in doubt, start at the outside of the silverware arrangement and work your way in," Jeremy started to say, but just about then their waitress appeared pretty much out of nowhere, bearing two glasses of water and a relentlessly awed expression. Jeremy retreated into a small superior smile.

"I'm sorry for your wait, sir!" the waitress told Jeremy, putting the water glasses down and whipping her order pad out of her apron. As an afterthought, she beamed half her leftover smile at Simon. "Can I get you two something to drink while you take a look at the menu?"

Simon considered having a beer, remembered the car, and changed his mind. "Water's fine," he said.

"I'll have a club soda, please," Jeremy said, settling back in his chair and giving the waitress the benefit of his smile. She almost craned towards him, hanging onto every word like there were fifty-dollar bills tied to each one. Which, given that it was Jeremy, was more likely to be true than not. "With lime, if you'd be so kind."

"Yes, sir!" their waitress said, and darted off, dodging between the small round tables at a rapid trot.

Simon watched her rapid retreat sourly. "You've been here before. I can just tell."

"Didn't I say so?" Jeremy said vaguely, engrossed in his menu.

Simon sighed and slumped down in his seat, folding one arm across his stomach. "Definitely better," he said.

"Very much so," Jeremy said. "I'll just call for the bill, shall I?" He raised a hand and wagged his fingers. Sure enough, the waitress materialized at their table, bearing both the check and a poorly-concealed hopeful expression.

Simon stifled a belch behind his fist and turned to watch the road, not paying much attention to anything. Expensive cars cruised by on occasion but the sidewalks were nearly deserted, and Simon spent a moment theorizing as to why before remembering that it was early Thursday afternoon and almost everyone had somewhere else to be. "Feels weird not being at work," he said, watching a late-model SUV lumber by. "I keep thinking it's Saturday or something."

"I take it you don't vacation often," Jeremy said, pushing back his chair with a slight screech and standing up.

"Not really," Simon said, glancing at the leather check folder just out of habit. However much money Jeremy had tucked in there, it was all neatly hidden away from Simon's eyes. Simon shrugged a little and stood up himself, staggering a bit from sheer fullness. "Not like I have anywhere I really want to go."

Jeremy made a little noise of assent and headed for the exit. Simon watched his retreating back for a moment and then flicked open the check folder. A little pile of crisp twenties, at least six of them, sat on top of a bill for close to sixty dollars; Simon snorted, closed the folder, and jogged after Jeremy. "Hey," he called after Jeremy as they hit the street. "Wait up."

"Mm?" Jeremy said, glancing over his shoulder.

Simon jogged around Jeremy and got in his way, reaching out to thump Jeremy's chest with his knuckles. "Gimme," he said, holding out his hand.

Jeremy stopped—it was that or run face-first into the Great Wall of Simon—and looked up at him, just barely smiling. "Did you want something?"

"Gimme," Simon repeated, wiggling his fingers.

"Give you . . . what?"

"Quit being a dick and give me the keys," Simon said patiently.

“You could say ‘please’,” Jeremy suggested. He was already fishing around in his pocket.

Simon shrugged. “I could also say ‘or else’,” he pointed out.

“That’s true,” Jeremy said, dropping the car keys into Simon’s waiting hand.

Simon closed his fingers around them before Jeremy could change his mind.

“Great,” he said, turning around. “Uh, where’d you park?”

“Around the corner,” Jeremy said. “You do remember which one is mine, don’t you?”

“Little silver one,” Simon said, heading for the corner. He had a bad moment when there proved to be two little silver convertibles parked in the parallel spaces along the road, but then he spotted the Porsche logo on the back of the nearer one and was able to rule it out. Besides, it was the other one that chirped when he pushed the ‘Unlock’ button on the electronic key.

Without a word Jeremy slid into the passenger seat and settled in, waiting patiently; Simon wedged himself into the driver’s seat and spent a few uncomfortable moments with his knees jammed up against his chest before his groping fingers hit the little lever under the seat cushion. Once the seat had been adjusted to his liking Simon wriggled his shoulders, settling back into the curved leather seat with a sigh. “So,” he said, craning his neck to figure out where the key went, “which way is 95 from here?”

Jeremy touched two fingers to his sunglasses, pushing them back up. “Behind us,” he said, still smiling a bit. “It’s probably easiest just to make a U-turn and then hang a right when this street ends.”

“Gotcha,” Simon said. After a bit more fumbling the engine roared to life, and he twitched his foot off the gas pedal before it could do any more of that.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t damage the car,” Jeremy said, right on cue. “Also, please do try not to get pulled over. The car and I are only technically legal, you understand.”

Simon paused, hand on the gearshift. “Is it stolen?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Jeremy said. “It’s just that when I say that I’ve ‘rented’ it, I mean that I’ve actually borrowed it under the table from someone who owes me quite a favor for, ah, services rendered once upon a time. And also the name on the insurance and all that isn’t quite real, although I should hope it would stand up to most scrutiny.”

“Fair enough,” Simon said, fidgeting the car into reverse and gingerly nudging the accelerator. “It’s okay, though. I’m not going to get pulled over.”

“I hope not,” Jeremy said.

“No, seriously, I’m not going to get pulled over,” Simon said. The car responded eagerly to the slightest suggestion and he found himself having a hell of a time not launching the little missile into parked cars as he fought his way through a six- or seven-point turn. Finally the car was pointed in the right direction and moving smartly towards the stop sign, and Simon was able to add,



“I know pretty much every spot on 95 where the highway patrol lays up. We’ll be fine.”

“If you say so, Simon,” said Jeremy, nestling down into the cradle of the passenger seat. No attempt to put his hand on Simon’s leg seemed to be forthcoming; given how hard to manage the car was proving to be, Simon decided he was grateful for that.

Five minutes later they were on 95 and Simon had gotten the hang of the little car. The trick was remembering that despite its cool, sleek, expensive exterior it was as excitable and eager to please as a puppy: it would put on speed if Simon thought the word ‘fast’ too loudly. “This is a great car,” he said, speaking loudly to be heard over the low roar of the wind, cocking one arm out the rolled-down window and letting the steering wheel slide through his fingers.

“I’m fond of it myself,” Jeremy said. Simon risked a glance over at him. Jeremy was still wearing his sunglasses but Simon could see Jeremy’s swollen eye past the earpiece, now a vivid dark red; Simon winced and looked away, only to discover that he was doing close to eighty again.

“How does it do that?” Simon asked, easing off on the accelerator and not really expecting an answer.

“Do what?”

“Never mind.” Simon paused and hunched his shoulders a little. “D’you want to pull over somewhere and get some more ice to put on your eye?”

Jeremy thought about it. “Actually, as long as you’re going to be doing the driving, that’s not a bad idea.”

“I’ll find a convenience store or something,” Simon promised, letting the little car slither over into the right lane. “Get myself some coffee, too.”

“Ah, your real motivation surfaces,” said Jeremy. Simon, already negotiating the exit and trying not to overshoot the turn, just snorted at him and didn’t deny it.

After a few minutes of fruitless searching (and privately muttering to himself that the gas station wasn’t *that* big so where could the little bastard have gone anyway) Simon finally thought to actually go outside and check the empty car in person, rather than just glancing irritably at it out through the big plate-glass windows. Four feet away from the car it became obvious that the passenger side seat was missing; two feet away and Simon could see where it had gone. Simon leaned over the side of the car, coffee in hand. “*There* you are,” he said in exasperation. “I couldn’t figure out where the hell you’d gotten to.”

Jeremy blinked up at him (or winked, at least; his left eye was hidden under yet another bag of ice). “Ah, of course,” he said after a moment. “With the seat fully reclined I’m invisible, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” Simon said, crossing his arms on top of the passenger side door. His styrofoam coffee cup dangled from his fingers, less than six inches from Jeremy’s hip. “You look comfortable.”

“Actually, I *am* rather comfortable,” Jeremy said, closing his visible eye and sighing deeply. “Laying back seemed like the easiest way to keep the ice on my eye.”

“I guess so,” said Simon, studying the tableau beneath him with some vague interest. Without really meaning to, he reached down and splayed his free hand out on Jeremy’s stomach.

There was a pause, and then Jeremy opened his visible eye about halfway and smiled slightly. Simon huffed a little and pulled his hand back, then went around to the other side of the car and got in without another word.

They were back on 95 in what seemed like a matter of seconds, the little convertible nearly leaping up the onramp despite Simon’s attempts to keep it under some kind of control. The rush of the wind discouraged conversation; within five minutes Jeremy appeared to be falling asleep in the reclined passenger seat, and Simon’s attention was fully claimed by the car’s enthusiasm anyway. “It’s doing it again,” Simon said, after fifteen minutes or so.

“Doing what?” drifted up from Jeremy’s reclined seat.

Simon gestured at the dash. “I *blink* and suddenly I’m going ninety-five again.”

“... you sound terribly happy about that,” Jeremy said sleepily.

“Oh yeah,” Simon said with an outrush of breath. “I totally am.”

Simon hunched his shoulders and restarted the car. “... don’t even start,” he said.

“In my defense, Simon, I haven’t said a word,” Jeremy said, upright again and making a few minute adjustments to his seat.

“It’s *not a ticket*,” Simon insisted. “He let me off with just a warning, okay? That’s not a ticket.”

Jeremy said nothing, just tilted his head down and hid his smile behind his hand. “Shut up,” Simon said anyway.

Jeremy snorted out a laugh before he could catch himself.

“I said shut up!” Simon said, shooting a highly put-upon glare in Jeremy’s direction and goosing the accelerator. Gravel crunched under the tires as Simon got the little car back up to speed, the state trooper’s car dwindling in the rearview mirrors.

The next few hours passed uneventfully. A few miles away from the Holland Tunnel Simon found a convenient gas station and pulled over, figuring that even if he *was* insane enough to drive a fantastically expensive convertible into

Manhattan, he certainly wasn't insane enough to do it when he didn't know where he was going. "Your turn," he said, undoing his seatbelt.

Jeremy stretched luxuriously. "Fair enough," he said when he was done. "How are we on petrol?"

"Probably ought to fill up while we're still in New Jersey and can make someone else do it," Simon said. "Lemme guess. Premium?"

"Premium," Jeremy confirmed.

Simon cocked his arm over the door and waited until the somewhat harassed-looking attendant came scrambling over. "Fill it premium," he told the guy, and then hopped out of the car. "And you," he said, pointing at Jeremy, "pay the man."

"Yes *sir*," Jeremy said, and managed to squeeze in a thoroughly ironic salute before Simon turned his back.

Simon headed for the station proper, scuffing a hand through his windblown hair. When he was almost but not quite out of earshot, he heard Jeremy laugh and tell the attendant, "He rather likes to give orders." Simon ducked his head and kept going.

Even with Jeremy at the wheel, they still made it out of New Jersey in a matter of minutes. After an interlude in the Holland Tunnel loud enough to make Simon's ears ring, they got into the city proper and promptly got mired in traffic. "Christ, every time I come here I'm reminded of why I don't come here more often," Simon muttered, slumping down in the passenger seat and staring straight ahead.

"What, don't you like New York?" Jeremy asked, stepping smartly on the brakes to avoid a right-drifting taxicab. Simon's seatbelt promptly clamped down across his chest, so he only lurched forward slightly.

"New York's like someone tied a whole bunch of *normal* cities together and started trying to beat you to death with them," Simon said, settling back again. "It's great, but it's . . . too noisy, I guess."

"Mm," said Jeremy, coming to a neat halt at a red light. The car was promptly engulfed in hustling pedestrians, none of whom deigned to so much as glance in their direction. "If I were to say something along the lines of 'well, then, don't ever go to Tokyo', you'd probably accuse me of being a snob, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely, but mostly because I hate you and also you are one," Simon said. "Although, you know, I'm aware that there are bigger cities out there than New York. I know I'm not half the world traveler that you are—"

"—only you could make that sound like an insult—"

"—but I'm not *stupid*, either," Simon said. "I know what's out there even if I haven't seen as much of it as you have, thanks."

“I wasn’t accusing you of being stupid, Simon,” Jeremy said, most of his attention consumed by turning left without hitting anyone or anything. “Just in case you were wondering.”

“Yeah,” Simon said after a minute, subsiding. “I know.”

Jeremy glanced at him, then nodded and went back to sparring with cabs.

Simon, who’d been watching the city go by, didn’t even see it coming; one moment Jeremy flicked on the turn signal and the next everything went dark, the car dropping out from underneath him. Simon blinked rapidly, the concrete walls of the underground parking garage evolving out of the darkness as his eyes adjusted. “So I’m guessing we’re here,” he said.

“We’re here,” Jeremy confirmed. The parking garage was mostly full, but there was an empty space right by the bank of elevators and Jeremy slid the little convertible into it, parking under the discreet little sign that said RESERVED. Simon considered the sign, considered Jeremy, and didn’t mention it.

“We’ll need to stop off in the lobby for a moment,” Jeremy said, touching something on the dash. Behind them something whined mechanically and the car’s soft top unfolded, closing them off from the dim yellow light of the parking garage; Jeremy touched something else and the trunk opened with a muted chunking sound.

“Good boy,” Simon said, patting the car’s dashboard.

The elevator doors opened onto a lobby that looked like something out of a James Bond movie. All the furniture looked like it had been imported from Europe at great expense during the 1850s and had not been moved since. It was all darkened wood and dulled brass and faded brocade, shabby and antique and completely real, like something out of a glossy travel magazine. Simon immediately felt underdressed. “My proletariat ass is going to get thrown out of here for not being the right sort, isn’t it,” he muttered, putting a protective hand over his battered old duffel bag.

Jeremy laughed softly. “Somehow I doubt that,” he said, heading for the long low counter that ran along one whole side of the lobby. “Although I suppose you could stick close, if you’re so worried.”

“Stick close,” Simon repeated, falling in step behind Jeremy. “Gotcha.”

The ancient brass bell on the counter barely deigned to clatter asthmatically when Jeremy tapped it, but all the same it drew someone’s attention; the man who appeared soundlessly from behind the row of wooden letter cubbyholes managed to look dignified and aloof for about two seconds until he saw who had rung the bell. Carefully cultivated New York *sangfroid* warred with naked greed on his face, and his exclamation of “Mr. Harbottle!” was probably a lot warmer than he’d meant it to be.

“Harbottle?” Simon muttered.

Jeremy ignored him. “Hallo!” he said cheerfully. Simon could have sworn that Jeremy’s accent was thicker. “Any messages for 1200, then?”

“I believe so,” the desk clerk said carefully, twisting around to check the wooden cubbies and fetching out a long cream-colored envelope marked *J. Harbottle*. “Ah, yes, sir! From the concierge.”

“Ah! Wonderful,” Jeremy said, taking the envelope and not bothering to open it. “And I’ll just need a second key for the suite, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Immediately!” the desk clerk said, vanishing back to wherever he’d come from just as silently as he’d appeared. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder at Simon; the corner of his mouth twitched upwards in a mocking little smile. It warmed Simon’s heart. He stopped fidgeting.

“Key for you, sir,” said the clerk, reappearing and dropping not a plastic ID card but an actual brass key into Jeremy’s hands. The clerk’s eyes flicked to Simon and narrowed. “Will . . . sir be staying with us?”

“Oh, yes, for a few days,” Jeremy said, straightening up and tucking the envelope into the inside of his jacket. His hand slid back out with the inevitable folded bill caught between his first two fingers, and suddenly all of the clerk’s visible distaste for Simon vanished, along with the money.

“If I could just get sir’s name?” said the clerk.

Jeremy waved a hand dismissively, already turning to leave. “I’m certain that won’t be necessary.”

“Of course, sir,” the clerk said with only the barest of pauses. “Have a good day, sir.”

“I intend to!” Jeremy said, and flicking a casual wave over his shoulder he headed for the elevators. Simon edged away a step or two, then spun around and followed, managing not to stumble over his own feet despite all the lurking ambiance waiting to trip him up.

“What was *that* about?” he muttered under his breath, just as soon as he’d caught up with Jeremy at the elevators.

Jeremy bypassed the bank of normal elevators and stopped in front of one that stood alone to one side. Instead of the usual ‘up’ and ‘down’ buttons this elevator had only a small brass plaque with a keyhole in it; Jeremy slid the room key in his hand into the keyhole and the elevator doors immediately creaked open. “I’m reasonably certain he believes I went cruising for—oh, what’s the word—rough trade,” Jeremy said cheerfully.

Taken completely by surprise, Simon had a coughing fit. “What?” he wheezed, when he could.

Jeremy put a hand over the elevator door sensor and jerked his head back. “Come on,” he said, still with that irritating good cheer.

Simon shot him a look but joined him in the elevator, making sure not to stand too close. “Am I supposed to be insulted or something?” he asked. “Because, you know, I feel kind of insulted.”

“Oh, don’t be,” Jeremy said, leaning against the wall as the elevator made its ponderous way upwards. “What do you care what he thinks?”

“Let me see if I can put this in a way that you’ll understand,” Simon said. “I care because, let’s see, I’m *not a hustler*?”

“So if I know that, and you know that, what else matters?” Jeremy asked. “The man has a comb-over. I suppose he has to get his sleazy little thrills where he can.”

Simon subsided, grumpily. “Not a hustler,” he muttered again.

“How nice for you,” Jeremy said, still smiling.

“Uh,” said Simon. “No offense.”

“None taken,” said Jeremy.

The elevator doors creaked open again, revealing a short and ominously fancy hallway that ended in two doors. The carpet was thick enough that Simon couldn’t hear his own footsteps as he followed Jeremy down the hall. Jeremy unlocked the door marked ‘1200’ and then held out the key. “There you are,” he said.

Simon took it, stared at it for a moment, and then stuffed it into his jeans pocket. “I didn’t think hotels still used real keys,” he said.

“Some do,” Jeremy said, pushing the door open and going in. Simon followed him into the suite.

After a long, sick minute, Simon said, “I’m not impressed.”

“Of course not,” Jeremy said.

“No, seriously, not impressed,” Simon said, looking around. “Especially not by the view. Nope. Not impressive at all.”

“The view does get better at night,” Jeremy said. “For what that’s worth.”

“Christ, this one room is bigger than my entire apartment,” Simon said, dropping the pretense.

“Many things are,” Jeremy said with a quick twist of smile. “At any rate. There are two bedroom suites—” Jeremy held both hands out, gesturing at the doors on opposite walls; Simon thought he looked a little like one of those vapid women who point to prizes on game shows “—and you may sleep in whichever room you like.”

Simon eyed him suspiciously. “Which room are you sleeping in?”

“That one,” Jeremy said innocently, flickering the fingers on his left hand.

“Gotcha,” said Simon, and headed for the other one.

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## ◆ Thirty-One

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Unpacking took Simon all of about a minute, and by the time he had finished, found a place to kick off his sneakers, and explored the rest of ‘his’ suite (the bathroom was large enough that his half-disgusted exclamation of “Jesus!” echoed hollowly off the tiled walls) he no longer felt like he was trespassing. He wandered back out into the main room and found himself alone in it, the door to the other bedroom suite closed, so he indulged his curiosity and spent a good five minutes staring out the massive bay window at the city stretched out below and around him. Off to one side he could just barely see a splash of green, which he took to be Central Park mostly because he didn’t know of any other large parks in Manhattan.

Once he’d come to terms with the view he padded around the rest of the living room, opening drawers and cabinets, turning up the television, a rather disturbingly complete wet bar, what appeared to be a small library of books and DVDs, and some sort of laptop docking station that had been discreetly hidden in an antique rolltop desk. There was still no sign of Jeremy, and so finally Simon made his way over to the other door and knocked lightly.

“Come,” Jeremy called, his voice made faint by the closed door.

Simon twisted the doorknob and pushed the door halfway open, lurking uncertainly in the doorway. “So, uh, what now?”

Jeremy, seated crosslegged on the bed, waved a piece of cream-colored paper in Simon’s general direction. The matching *J. Harbottle* envelope, neatly slit open, lay on the bed beside him. “We have reservations for dinner,” Jeremy said, “but they’re not until eight, so we needn’t leave for another hour.”

“You got the concierge to make dinner reservations,” Simon said, watching the piece of paper flap stiffly in Jeremy’s hand rather than look at the dark red beacon of his left eye. “You were that sure I was going to come back with you, huh.”

“Yes, well, reservations can always be cancelled,” Jeremy said. “Better safe than sorry, I thought.”

“Judging from the way the day has gone so far, your definitions of ‘safe’ are as fucked up as everything else about you,” Simon told him. “So what’s the ‘J’ stand for?”

“Mm?” Jeremy asked, refolding the paper and tucking it back into the envelope.

Simon gestured at it. “The ‘J’. ‘J. Harbottle’. What’s it stand for?”

Jeremy’s smile flashed on and off again. “Jeremiah,” he said.

“Ah,” Simon said, going very still.

“Ironically, ‘Jeremiah Harbottle’ is one of my best-kept secrets and least-connected alter egos,” Jeremy said, fiddling absently with the envelope. “Plus he has the advantage of being completely legal and thoroughly documentable. I’ve always made certain to keep him alive, just in case.”

“Just in case,” Simon repeated.

Jeremy dropped the envelope to the bed and folded his hands in his lap. “As I was saying, we’ve an hour or so before we ought to leave, so if you’d like to lay down for a while or what have you, feel free. Personally I’m for a shower and a bit of a liedown myself.” His smile flickered again. “It’s been quite a day.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, shaking his head a little. “I’ll, uh, leave you to it.” And he retreated, pulling the door shut before going back over to poke through the room’s little library.

His poking turned up a book that looked at least mildly entertaining and Simon leafed through it without much interest for half an hour or so. The shower in the left-hand suite went on at one point and off again a while later; Simon noted both things but didn’t pay them much real attention.

Finally he admitted to himself that he wanted another shower, so he dropped the book on the coffee table and went into his own suite to have one. A look in the mirror convinced him that he was doing the right thing; five hours in an open convertible, partly in Manhattan, had left his hair a tangled mess and his face windburned and grimy. It took him a few minutes of negotiating with the ridiculous tub, but eventually he managed to produce hot water.

Clean and dressed again, Simon went back out into the main room. Jeremy, in his inevitable black-and-shades, was sitting on the couch idly leafing through the book that Simon had left there. “Well! There you are,” he said, putting the book back down. “Shall we go?”

“This isn’t a place that’s going to make me wear a jacket or anything, is it?” Simon asked. “Because Christ, I don’t think I even own a tie.”

“Neither do I,” Jeremy said, not precisely answering the question. “Loathsome things. Might as well be wearing a dog collar with a sign attached that says ‘hello, I’m a very small cog in a very large machine’.”

Simon eyed him askance. “Whatever,” he eventually said. “So I’m okay?”



"You're fine," Jeremy assured him. "I harbor a deep distrust of restaurants that require one to dress up anyway. It says to me that they care more for ambiance than food, which misses the point."

"Okay," Simon said warily. "So . . . let's go."

"Right!" Jeremy said, hopping to his feet. "It's only a few blocks away, so I thought we'd walk, if that's all right with you."

"Sure," Simon said. "Actually, sounds really good. I haven't . . . I could stand to stretch my legs some."

"Oh dear," said Jeremy, already halfway to the door. "If you're going to stretch those long legs of yours, I suspect I'll find myself trotting to keep up with you."

"Not that you wouldn't be up to it," Simon said, following him. "Christ, you're damned near bouncing off the walls. Are you *on* something?"

"I am, as they say, high on life," Jeremy said cheerfully. He pulled the door open and burst out into the hallway without waiting for Simon.

"No one actually *says* that!" Simon yelled after him.

Dinner proved to be Italian, so damned good that Simon promptly forgave New York City for everything, and afterwards by mutual unspoken agreement they wound up wandering around looking in windows instead of just going back to the hotel. Wherever they were, it appeared to be about sixty percent snotty little upscale art galleries, and Simon learned more than he'd ever wanted to know about Jeremy's opinions on the contemporary art scene. ('Viciously unimpressed' seemed to sum it up pretty well. As did 'catty'.)

Eventually they got coffee in the world's narrowest coffee shop and started heading back in the general direction of the hotel. Whatever was fueling Jeremy's weird energy hadn't run out yet, and Simon found himself having to make a point of keeping up. And it was all okay; surprisingly okay. Simon felt so normal that he felt guilty about it, when he remembered to. He could go for long stretches of time without thinking about anything but what was right in front of him.

By the time they got back to the hotel it was well after eleven, and the snotty clerk with the comb-over had been replaced by an older guy with a jowly basset-hound face who watched Simon and Jeremy go by with a sleepy unblinking stare. No sooner had they gotten into the suite than Jeremy flicked the chain across the door and announced that he was going to bed; Simon agreed and headed off into his own room before Jeremy could suggest anything else, closing and locking the door behind himself.

He was okay while he changed into his sweatpants, and he was okay while he brushed his teeth and washed his face, and he was okay when he was looking askance at the fancy little box of chocolates that had appeared on his pillow while they were gone. He was okay climbing into bed and he was okay turning out the

light, and then he lay back in the darkness and pulled up the covers and realized that he was not okay at all.

He lay there for a while, wide awake and staring at the ceiling. His chest hurt and his mind thrashed around. For the longest time he refused to look over at the clock, certain that he'd be asleep at any minute, certain that it had only been ten minutes and the rest was just his mind talking crazy talk, certain that it had already been hours and the sun would come up at any moment. Finally, after a particularly loud horn blast from outside had disrupted his horrified half-trance, Simon looked over at the clock, saw that it was getting on towards one, and gave up.

He didn't bother with the light, just swung his legs out of bed and stood back up. The room was almost completely dark, the heavy curtains pulled over the window, but he'd been lying there in the darkness for so long that he could see perfectly well; he made his way to the door without running into anything, the rug dampening his footsteps almost to nothing, the click of the door's latch amazingly loud in comparison.

The main room, in contrast, was almost bright. The drapes were still wide open, letting the city in through the massive bay window. Simon stood in front of it, looking left and right, and conceded that Jeremy had had a point. The view *did* get better at night.

He lowered himself gingerly onto the window seat and leaned his forehead against the glass, staring out. The city glittered all the way out to the horizon, and below him he could still see cars and taxis flowing by in an endless stream. Down on the street it was almost bright as day. Up here, it was night, if only barely.

As long as he was upright the turmoil in his mind receded, leaving him mostly alone. Sooner or later he'd fall asleep, if only when he fell over, but right now . . . it wasn't happening. Simon huffed out a breath, fogging up the window in a little circle, and considered turning on the lights, maybe giving that book another try or flipping through the channels.

The little click of the other bedroom door opening didn't really surprise him at all. "Can't sleep?" Jeremy said softly.

Simon shut his eyes wearily and waited for Jeremy to go away, even though he knew, deep down, that it was probably futile. Jeremy had never been the kind of problem that just went away. For a long moment the silence held, the back of Simon's neck prickling under Jeremy's steady gaze, and then Simon roused himself enough to say, "Go back to sleep, Archer." His voice sounded rough from disuse, but steady enough.

"Mm," Jeremy said. "No, I don't think I will."

Simon snorted. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Perhaps you're psychic," Jeremy said. His footsteps, already muffled by the thick rug, were entirely lost under the constant traffic noise from outside, but

Simon knew he was coming. He knew it by how the phantom itch on the back of his neck spread down his spine and across his shoulders. That was Jeremy. Always irritating.

Jeremy slid around him and sat opposite him on the window seat, drawing one leg up so that he could hug his knee. He reached out and touched the window with one hand. "It's a beautiful view, isn't it."

Simon muttered some sort of agreement. Jeremy fell still, smiling out at the city, like he'd built it there himself. Eventually Simon acknowledged that Jeremy wasn't going to go away until he was placated, so he raised his head and looked at him. "I suppose it wouldn't do me any good to tell you that I'd rather be alone," Simon said.

Jeremy tilted his head to the side. The weird ambient glow of the city outside dyed his skin in patches of amber and blue, except for the whorl of bruise around his left eye, which in the semidarkness was a deep and unrelenting black. "Well, I'd have to give you points for honesty," Jeremy said quietly, his smile catching the city lights for a second, "but then I'd have to tell you that no matter what you prefer, you probably shouldn't be alone in any case."

"Jesus, who died and made you my case officer?" Simon said, nettled. "I don't need your help."

"Tch, and here I'd given you points for honesty," Jeremy said. "You don't *want* my help, is what you mean."

"Same difference," Simon said.

"Not really," Jeremy said, "but I suppose it isn't really important."

"No, it's not." Simon rubbed a hand down his face, scrubbing his palm over the faint stubble on his cheeks. "Leave me alone, okay? Shit, I'll even say 'please' if it'll make you go away."

"It probably wouldn't," Jeremy admitted.

"So . . . what, then? I don't want to 'talk about it' or anything," said Simon, turning to look out the window again. He could see Jeremy's faint reflection in the glass, glowing and half-dressed, the ghosts of his bare toes resting not six inches away from the ghost of Simon's knee. Simon tried to ignore it and found that he couldn't. "And I don't want company," he added. "I'll just sit out here until I get tired enough to sleep and then I'll go back to bed."

"Well, yes, you could do that," Jeremy said. Like Simon he turned to look out the window, and suddenly it was only his reflection that had a black eye; the right side of his face, turned towards Simon, was normal and unmarred. Jeremy and his reflection smiled a little. "But then you'd miss breakfast."

"I don't eat breakfast," Simon said. "Well, most of the time I don't."

Jeremy waved a dismissive hand. "Then you'd miss sitting around and watching me eat breakfast. And I feel that I should add that the hotel makes excellent coffee, for what that's worth."

Simon snorted. "That was pretty lame, Archer," he said.

"I suppose it was," Jeremy said.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Simon said. "Even if I did try and go back to bed now I'd just lie awake."

"Mm," Jeremy said again, and he stood up, extending his hand towards Simon. "Come on."

Simon eyed the extended hand and didn't take it. "What?"

Jeremy wiggled his fingers. "Come on," he said again, in the soft cajoling tones of someone trying to coax a nervous puppy out of his doghouse. Simon scowled and refused to rise to the bait. Undeterred, Jeremy leaned forward and plucked one of Simon's hands out of his lap. "Come on, get up," he said, tugging at Simon's hand.

Simon resisted for a few seconds, although he didn't bother pulling his hand free of Jeremy's grip. "Why?" he said peevishly.

"Bed," Jeremy said. "Come sleep. It'll be easier that way."

"What? In there? With you?"

"Yes," Jeremy said patiently. "It does help, you know."

"Maybe I don't want your help," Simon said, tugging half-heartedly against Jeremy's grip on his hand.

Jeremy's fingers tightened, just enough to keep him from escaping. "Too bad," he said. "I'm afraid you're going to accept my help whether you want it or not. Unless you care so strongly about it that you'd prefer to black my other eye, in which case I suppose I would probably leave you up to your own devices."

"Okay, now that, that is *really* low," Simon said, stung. "Jesus. I only *hit* you because—"

"—because I deserved it?" Jeremy finished for him, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes!" Simon said, then immediately corrected himself. "No! ... fuck. I don't know. Can't you just go away?"

"I'm afraid not," said Jeremy. He'd stopped tugging on Simon's hand a while ago; now his thumb traced a light arc across Simon's knuckles. "Just accept my help, Simon. I promise I won't tell anyone."

"Christ," Simon muttered, giving up and heaving himself to his feet. "Obnoxious little faggot."

Jeremy just laughed, leading Simon towards the door to his suite. "Charming as ever, Mr. Drake," he said.

"Yeah, well, I try," Simon said, lagging behind, forcing Jeremy to half-drag him onwards.

Jeremy's bedroom was as dark as Simon's had been, the curtains drawn tightly shut over the window. After staring into the expanse of the city Simon was blind again, and only Jeremy's guiding hand kept him from running into anything; then his hip bumped against the high shelf of the bed and Jeremy let go of his hand. "This side?" Simon asked.

“That’s fine,” said Jeremy, his voice moving around the foot of the bed. “Go on, get in.”

Simon sighed and groped across the top of the bed until he found the edge of the covers, crawling under them with something like relief. Christ, he was tired—the other side of the bed depressed under Jeremy’s weight and the covers pulled tight across Simon’s chest for a moment. Jeremy settled lightly against Simon’s side and put his arm across Simon’s waist. “Good night, Simon,” he said, absolutely radiating smug contentment.

“Yeah, this is cozy,” Simon muttered, wedging his arm under Jeremy’s head before Jeremy could trap it against his side. There was a pause, and then Jeremy put his head on Simon’s shoulder. Simon rolled his eyes at the ceiling. “Christ, you camel, shove over a little, will you?”

“Am I hearing things, or did you just call me a camel?” Jeremy asked.

“Yeah. Uh. Story my mom used to tell me when I was a kid,” Simon said.

Jeremy made a little curious sound. “I don’t believe I know the story. What’s it about?”

“Basically there’s this guy and his camel in the desert and they stop at an oasis for the night and the guy sets up his tent and why am I telling you this story?”

“Because I asked?”

“Jesus, you’re demanding,” Simon said. “So anyway the guy’s all nice and warm inside his little tent and it’s cold outside and so the camel sticks his head into the tent and says he’s cold, so could he just put one foot inside the warm tent, and the guy says—”

“So this camel talks.”

“Yeah, the camel talks. What do you want from me? I’m not the fucking Discovery Channel. Anyway, the guy says sure, it’s a small tent but there’s probably room for one of your feet, that’s fine. So the camel sticks his foot in. And a few minutes later he says that he’s so cold, can’t he put in another foot? And the guy says okay, I guess, there’s probably room for two feet. So the camel sticks in another foot.”

“You know,” Jeremy said, “I believe I can see where this is going.”

“So yeah, to make a long story short, the camel keeps wedging parts of himself into the tent until he’s all the way inside and the guy’s been shoved out into the cold, and my point is, scoot the hell over or you’re going to knock me off onto the floor.”

“Well, if you insist,” Jeremy said, shuffling back and tugging lightly at Simon’s hip. Simon scooted away from the edge of the bed but, somehow, did not manage to escape from Jeremy’s loose grip. “There we are,” Jeremy said. “And I had a bedtime story and everything. My goodness, we should do this more often.”

“No, we shouldn’t,” Simon said. “I’m just doing this because I’m too tired to argue with you.”

“Well,” Jeremy said, settling down and tugging the covers up. “Whatever works, I suppose.”

“Yeah, I guess it *works*, I just don’t *like* it,” Simon said. “G’night.”

“Good night, Simon,” Jeremy said, and then he fell silent.

Simon stared up at the ceiling and listened to Jeremy breathe and decided that as soon as Jeremy was asleep, he was leaving, even if it meant peeling Jeremy off like a leech. Jeremy shifted against his side and sighed softly and sent Simon’s thoughts scurrying away, and Simon curled his arm around Jeremy’s shoulders without really thinking about it, and somewhere in the middle of it all, to his surprise, Simon fell asleep.

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## ◆ Thirty-Two

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When Simon finally swam back to consciousness he was alone in the bed, and he wasn't really surprised by that at all.

Narrow bars of sunlight shone in under the closed drapes and the door to the main room, but the bedroom itself was still murky. The sounds of traffic had only gotten worse, and on the street below people were yelling and playing music too loudly, but for the moment it was just dull background noise. Simon looked around the room blearily, licking his lips, and then put his head back down onto a pillow that still smelled slightly of whatever Jeremy used on his hair and went back to sleep.

Some time later he woke again, still alone in the bed. The bars of sunshine had moved across the floor, but not too far, and there was a low and indistinct buzzing of voices from the living room. One of them was Jeremy's (Simon would recognize that ironic tenor tone anywhere) but he didn't recognize the other one.

Simon sat up and scuffed both hands through his hair, listening incuriously to the muted voices. He couldn't make out much, not with the door closed. Still, it didn't sound like an argument or anything, so after a moment or two Simon dismissed it and trudged into the bathroom.

It took his sleepy brain almost a minute to connect 'unknown voice' and 'possible Karpol thug' to each other, and it gave him a nasty shock just when he needed it the least; he only narrowly managed to avoid peeing on the toilet seat. Just as quickly as the connection had come to him, he dismissed it. Even assuming Karpol's people *had* managed to find Jeremy under this alias and get past the desk brigade and the keyed elevator, they didn't seem the type to sit around and make urbane conversation with their intended victims; if it *had* been one of Karpol's thugs, he'd probably have been awakened one hell of a lot less pleasantly, and someone would be dead by now. Paradoxically, this was something of a calming thought.

Still, the momentary shock did leave him wide awake, and after splashing some water on his face Simon went back out to see what was what. He opened

the bathroom door at pretty much the exact moment that Jeremy opened the other door. “Ah,” Jeremy said, blinking at him. “I thought I heard you moving about.”

“Yeah, I’m—” Simon cleared the frog from his throat “—I’m up. Who was that?”

“Room service,” Jeremy said. “I was just coming to tell you that breakfast was here.”

“Should have guessed,” Simon said. “Is there coffee?”

“No, of course not, it didn’t seem important—of course there’s coffee, Simon.”

“Too early in the morning for sarcasm,” Simon informed him. “Uh. What time is it?”

“A little after ten,” Jeremy said.

Simon could smell the coffee now, mingled with other, less interesting smells. “Bit late for breakfast,” he said.

Jeremy shrugged. “I suppose. But unless you have some pressing plans that you neglected to inform me of, there’s absolutely nothing preventing us from also having a late lunch.”

“True,” Simon said, drawn irresistibly in the direction of the coffee. Jeremy slid to one side, still blocking half the doorway, forcing Simon to edge past him to get out. It was such a Jeremy thing to do that Simon reached down and grabbed Jeremy’s hip before he really thought about it; then he *did* think about it, and he dropped his handful of Jeremy like it had burned him.

“You didn’t have to stop,” Jeremy said.

“Uh,” said Simon, and he finished squeezing past Jeremy. “Coffee,” he said in explanation.

“Ah, yes. It’s clear where I fall on your to-do list,” Jeremy said, following him.

There was coffee, an entire silver pot of the stuff. Once Simon had had half a cup he felt up to the challenge of poking around in the serving dishes; uncovering the neat little rounds of sausage made his stomach growl. He was startled to discover that he was ravenous, and he fell to with a will.

Jeremy sat cross-legged on the couch opposite him, a china teacup in both hands. His left eye was afloat in a mottled swirl of purplish-black, although the skin around his eye was significantly less puffy this morning. Simon concentrated on his eggs and tried not to look at it.

Eventually, once the initial growl of his stomach had been muted, Simon noticed that he was doing all the eating. Jeremy hadn’t touched anything besides his tea. “What, are you not eating?” he asked, spearing another bit of sausage. “Trying to fatten me up or something?”

“I’m fine,” Jeremy said, cradling his cup in both hands. “Although if you could pass the bread . . .” He gestured at a linen-draped basket with his elbow.



Simon picked it up and flicked off the napkin, curiously. “Hey, someone poked a bunch of holes in your English muffins. Think that makes them Swiss muffins?”

“They’re crumpets, actually, although I suppose they *are* fairly politically neutral.” Jeremy plucked a puffy triangular thing out of the basket and held it up. “And before you ask, this is a scone.”

“I know what scones are,” Simon said, nettled. “They sell ’em at Starbucks.” Jeremy shuddered.

The rest of the morning passed slowly but not unpleasantly. Once Simon finished ravaging the breakfast plates he went back to his own suite and took a shower and got dressed, then ate one of the two chocolates in the little box, working on the theory that you shouldn’t waste food. Then he ate the other one, working on the theory that the first one had been really good.

Jeremy was gone when Simon finally strolled back out. Simon poked his head into Jeremy’s suite—empty—then poked his head out into the hall—also empty—then finally found the note on the coffee table, beside the covered breakfast debris. *Gone down to check messages, back in a flash - J.* Simon crumpled it up and tossed it into the trash can, then settled down on one of the couches with yesterday’s mildly interesting book.

By the time Jeremy got back the book had become more than just mildly interesting, and Simon waved without looking up. Jeremy was obligingly silent, standing by the desk and sorting through a smallish stack of envelopes, slitting them open one after the other with a deft flick of his wrist. Finally Simon got to the end of a chapter and put the book down on his thigh, folded open to his place. “So what’s up?”

“We have dinner reservations at eight,” Jeremy said, waving one envelope, “and a few recommendations for good places to have a late lunch, and also the concierge wanted to know if we had any interest in seeing any shows. I told him that I doubted it, but I thought I’d check with you, just in case.”

“Yeah, I’m not—” Simon broke off there, considering.

“Mm?” Jeremy looked up from his messages.

“I had a thought,” Simon said, drumming his fingers against his upraised knee. “I’m no Broadway fag buuuut . . .”

Jeremy’s lips twitched up into a faint smile. “But?” he prompted.

“*Spamalot*,” Simon said.

Jeremy gave Simon a blank look. “Spam—”

“*Spamalot*,” Simon said again, patiently. “Because it is just *not right* that you’ve never seen any Python, and also it’ll make half my team d—go green with envy if I get to see it. Besides, not like our social calendar is full right now.”

“I’ve not heard of it,” Jeremy said.

“*That* is not surprising,” Simon said. “Scares me sometimes how out of touch with pop culture you are. Look, just tell the concierge. He’ll know.”

Jeremy pursed his lips, considering, then nodded. “Fair enough. I’ll see if he can’t finagle tickets.”

“Sweet,” Simon said, picking up his book again. “Hell, I’m almost not sorry I came with you now.”

Jeremy smiled, already heading for his suite. “Please, spare me your effusive gratitude, Simon. It’s so *embarrassing* to be fawned over like that.”

Simon, already deep into the next chapter, just grunted.

By the time Simon finished his book and put it back in its place on the shelves, it was close to two. Despite his having eaten breakfast not four hours ago he was already hungry again, and so accordingly he went and pounded on Jeremy’s door. “Hey!” he called. “Rich guy! Feed me!”

“Just a moment, Simon,” Jeremy said, his voice muffled by the closed door. Simon rolled his eyes and went to put on his sneakers and grab his jacket. Jeremy *still* wasn’t out by the time Simon was done with that, so he pounded on the door again. There was a pause, which in retrospect should have been Simon’s first warning, and then Jeremy said, “Well, come in, then.”

“About time,” Simon said, throwing the door open and almost immediately jerking it shut again. He leaned against the closed door and rubbed a hand down his face. “You could have told me you weren’t dressed,” he said.

“But you seemed so *impatient*,” Jeremy called back.

The lunch place that the concierge had recommended was a good fifteen blocks away, deep in the heart of midtown. After his lazy morning Simon was good and ready to get out and *do* something, and apparently, so was Jeremy; Simon found himself having trouble keeping up with him once again, particularly when the sidewalks were too crowded to let him work up a good stride. Pedestrians parted like water for Jeremy, who darted through tiny openings in the crowd without seeming to think twice.

“Am I going to have to put you on a leash?” Simon asked, catching up with Jeremy at a red light. Jeremy gave him a long and thoughtful look; Simon was immediately sorry he’d asked.

“I apologize,” Jeremy said, eventually, his smile flickering on for a moment. The light turned green and they were both borne into the street by the surge of pedestrians. “I suppose I’m just . . . happy to be out and about.”

“Uh huh, sure,” Simon said. Jeremy started to pull ahead again as they neared the opposite curb and Simon grabbed a handful of the back of his jacket, reining him in. “You act like you’re on speed or something. Knock it off.”

Jeremy rolled one shoulder, twitching the leather of his jacket free of Simon’s hand, and shot him an apologetic look. After that it got easier. They fell into a

gap between one group of pedestrians and the next and managed to stay there, Jeremy visibly restraining himself.

Lunch was good—and, more importantly, there was plenty of it—and the restaurant wasn't too crowded at two-thirty in the afternoon. By the time they were done Simon was finally beginning to feel like he'd filled up that hole that he'd starved out of the center of himself. Moreover, he'd apparently caught whatever was causing Jeremy's odd energy; when Jeremy suggested cutting through the park on the way back to the hotel, Simon readily agreed, and he didn't have any trouble at all keeping up after that.

Simon spotted the first flicker of green between the buildings at close to four and instinctively angled towards it, for once leaving Jeremy in his wake. They just barely made the light and crossed 59th Street, caught in a tidal wave of people ducking out of work early to get their weekends started; as quickly as the crowd had formed it thinned again, leaving them in their own little momentary space on the sidewalk.

It was the churn of motion that first caught Simon's eye. Half a block ahead there was a disturbance in the flow of traffic, someone moving too fast, someone *running*, his head and shoulders flashing in and out of sight—and if there was one thing Simon automatically distrusted, it was someone running when he didn't need to be. Reflexively Simon stuck one hand in the pocket of his jeans and reached around behind himself with the other, coming to a momentary confused halt when his hands encountered neither his ID folder nor the butt of his gun.

Ahead of them, someone screamed. The crowd not ten feet in front of them rippled and burst open, spitting out a skinny kid with a woman's purse dangling from one hand, dashing down the sidewalk towards them, his eyes darting from side to side. Simon's hands snapped open and in the next heartbeat he would have lunged for the purse-snatcher, brought him down—but at that very moment the kid ran into a black blur of something and he went flying, turning an entire somersault in mid-air before his chest hit the pavement with a thud that drove all the air from his lungs in a shout. The stolen purse dropped to the pavement with a jangle and a clatter, spilling its contents at Simon's feet.

Jeremy slammed his foot down onto the middle of the kid's back and jerked one of his arms up behind him, and then stopped dead, looking just about as startled as Simon felt. He looked up at Simon, blinking, and then abruptly burst out laughing, even as he yanked the kid's arm up a little farther to quell the thrashing. "Oh *dear*," he said, his voice quavering with hilarity. "I seem to have accidentally upheld the law!"

Simon was saved from having to reply to that by the purse's owner fighting her way out of the crowd, still screaming in fury. She took in the scene in front of herself and skidded to a stop, the shriek tapering off. "*Thank* you!" she cried, throwing out her arms, sounding more frustrated than anything else. "Fuck, I didn't think anyone was gonna have the balls to stop him!"

“You’re quite welcome,” Jeremy said, giving the kid’s arm another warning twitch. “If you’d like to call the police—”

“Fuck that,” the woman said, and she hauled off and kicked the kid in the ribs, hard, before hunkering down and shoveling everything back into her purse. After a moment Simon dropped down and helped her gather up the last few bits of her stuff. “You guys can do whatever you want with him, I don’t care,” she said, straightening back up and clutching her purse to her side. “I’m outta here.”

“Just what I always wanted, a purse snatcher,” Jeremy said reflectively, but she was already gone, merging back into the crowd, strutting like an infuriated chicken. Simon watched her go; Jeremy kept his eyes on his prisoner. “So,” Jeremy said after a moment. “If I let you go, what do you plan to do?”

The kid made a little choking sound before he realized that Jeremy was talking to him. “Huh?” he said, his voice thick and breathless.

“Keeping in mind that my companion here is armed,” Jeremy said, sounding almost pleasant, “if I let you go, what do you plan to do?”

“I’m gonna get the fuck out of here,” the kid wheezed, recognizing and grabbing for his opportunity with both hands. “Fuck, fucking *bitch*, ow, my fucking *ribs* . . .”

Jeremy glanced at Simon. Simon shrugged and took a couple of steps back, clearing the way. “Fair enough,” Jeremy said, taking his foot off the kid’s back and dropping his wrist, shifting smoothly into a defensive stance as an extension of the same motion. He didn’t need to bother. The kid was running before he even stood up, crossing the first few feet of pavement on all fours before managing to scramble ungracefully to his feet. The crowd closed around him like water over a stone, and he was gone. Jeremy dusted off his hands and stared after him, looking thoughtful.

“You know, not to detract from your little moment of victory or anything, but I’m not actually armed at the moment,” Simon said. “Just thought I’d point that out.”

Jeremy glanced at him and shrugged. “You carry yourself like you are,” he said.

“Huh.” Simon turned to look in the direction that the kid had gone, shoving his hands in his pockets. “He’s just going to go mug someone else, you know.”

“Possibly, possibly not.” Jeremy tugged at the lapels of his jacket, settling it properly on his shoulders again. “I did stick a fifty up his sleeve while I had it so handy.”

Simon didn’t quite gape at him. Upon reflection, he wasn’t that surprised. “You did what,” he said evenly, not even bothering to turn it into a question.

Jeremy shrugged again, his features reassembling themselves into something that approximated innocence. “I do, after all, know what it’s like. Call me a sentimentalist, I suppose.”

“How about I call you an idiot?” Simon said, shaking his head a little and setting off towards the park again.

Once they were inside the park itself even Jeremy seemed content to slow down. Following the paths they headed vaguely north, not bothering to keep up even the most desultory of conversations any more; whatever Jeremy was thinking, he was keeping it to himself, and Simon was (by habit of long standing) turning over the memory of the foiled purse-snatching in his head, putting it in order as if he were going to be required to file a report on it later, pulling out and examining details that he hadn’t had time to study when it was actually happening.

*I was about to tackle him, Simon thought, glancing right as a child shouted. Then . . . Archer came around my . . . left side? Left side. And he put out his arm—he clotheslined that kid, that had to hurt—*

Jeremy slid into view, moving in front of him to let a woman and her dog jog by in the opposite direction. Simon glanced up at him, then back down, staring at the pavement in front of him. *And then . . . what? Why’d the guy go flying like that?* He was walking on autopilot now, using just barely enough brainpower to make sure he didn’t wander off the footpath. *Wait. Wait. The kid was going by us on the right. But Archer didn’t hit him with his right arm, did he?*

“Simon?”

Simon’s head jerked up. “Wha?”

Jeremy laughed a little. “Earth to Simon. Are you in there?”

“Yeah,” Simon said, shaking his head. “Just thinking.”

“Oh, thinking,” said Jeremy. “It looks difficult. I’ll just be quiet, then, shall I?”

Simon grunted, looking back down at the path they were following. *No, he didn’t. It was his left arm. So . . . Archer was twisted around, sort of. That looks right. Wait, okay, so Archer was facing the kid—Simon brought his hands up, forming a vague ‘T’ in front of himself—who was facing me. And he stuck out his left arm, and . . . and what. What. Okay, back up.*

Jeremy caught Simon’s sleeve and guided him onto a different path, one that crossed the one they’d been on. Simon’s concentration wavered for a few moments, but then Jeremy dropped his arm and he was able to settle back into visualization mode. *So the kid runs neck-first into Archer’s left arm and starts to fall backwards. Right. So . . . he should have hit the ground on his back, or just staggered back. So—wait, no, okay, you saw Archer do it to Sandy, remember, he stuck his left leg behind the kid, so the kid was moving backwards and tripped over his outstretched foot.* Unaware that he was doing it, Simon brought his hands up again, gesturing blindly in front of himself, reshaping the moment. *Right, that’s it . . . wait, his right arm blurred. What was it—where did it go?*

Five feet ahead of him, Jeremy stopped and turned around, looking back at him—Simon had drifted to a stop, staring down at his hands. *Kid trips over Archer's left leg, so his legs are coming up, right, so Archer—what? Grabbed one of his legs with his right hand and threw him the rest of the way over? . . . actually, that sounds about right.* Simon shut his eyes and replayed the memory again. *That's it. Yeah. So the kid went all the way over and Archer grabbed one of his hands out of the air—in his mind he could see it now, Jeremy snatching one flailing arm and hauling it down and back—and all he had to do once the kid hit was step on his back and finish pulling his arm up. That's it. Christ.*

“Simon?” Jeremy said.

Simon opened his eyes. “I get it,” he said.

Jeremy blinked. “You get . . . what?”

“You’re still worried about Karpol, aren’t you,” Simon said. “That’s why you’ve been so nerved up every time we step out of the hotel. No wonder you went for that kid like that. You’ve been waiting for someone to attack us all this time.”

For a long time, Jeremy was silent, his face completely blank. His eyes were unreadable behind his sunglasses. “If you like,” he finally said, and just like that the animation flooded back into his face; one eyebrow twitched, and he smiled.

“Frankly, I don’t think you’ve got that much to worry about,” Simon said. “I may be on . . . currently on suspension, but if something had happened to Langridge they’d have told me no matter what. And under *that* name, in *this* city? You’re fine. Stop worrying about it.”

And now Jeremy laughed, turning away and heading up the path. “If you say so, Simon,” he said. “I do trust your professional judgment.”

Simon snorted and jogged after him, falling into step with him once more. “Not entirely sure *why*,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “I haven’t exactly been batting a thousand lately.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said. Simon waited, but he didn’t say anything else, and after a while Simon fell back into his own thoughts while they made their way out of the park.

Another one of those inevitable cream-colored envelopes was waiting in 1200’s cubbyhole when they got back. Jeremy traded a folded bill to the desk clerk for it and carried it up with them, slitting it open once they were safely inside the room.

“So . . . what is it this time?” Simon asked, shucking off his jacket and tossing it on the arm of the couch. Wordlessly Jeremy held up a pair of yellow tickets. Simon whistled. “Oh, *sweet*,” he said. “I thought that show was sold out forever.”

“Never question the ways of the concierge,” Jeremy said, tucking the tickets inside his jacket. “At any rate! It sounds as if we have plans for tomorrow night.”

"The guys are going to be *so* jealous," Simon proclaimed, throwing himself onto the couch and toeing off his sneakers. "Mike is just going to shit himself. It'll be great."

Jeremy tossed the empty envelope into the trash. "And of course that's just the sort of reaction I live for."

Simon let his head drop back onto the couch's cushions and stared up at the ceiling. "Rich wouldn't have liked it, though," he said carefully, waiting to see if it was going to hurt. And it did—he had to reach up and rub away the sharp twinge in his chest—but it didn't hurt as badly as he'd been afraid it was going to. So he shut his eyes and went on. "Rich never liked it when things got adapted. Like movies made from books. Or, you know, Broadway musicals made from movies."

Jeremy was silent for a while. "Ah," he finally said.

"Yeah," Simon said, and laughed a little. "He could be really vicious about it. You should have heard him when the Lord of the Rings movies were coming out." Jeremy didn't say anything. After a moment, Simon added, "They made movies out of this series of books called Lord of the Rings, in case you didn't hear."

"No, no, I heard about them," Jeremy said. "I was, erm, *engaged* in the States when the second film was about to come out, and you couldn't miss the fuss."

"But you never saw them," Simon said.

"No, I never saw them," Jeremy agreed. "I don't know why this surprises you."

Simon lifted his head and opened his eyes a crack. "It doesn't *surprise* me," he said patiently. "I'm not *surprised*. I'm *making fun of you*. You ought to be able to tell the difference."

"Ahh," Jeremy said, a little smile curling on his face. "At any rate, we'll need to leave for dinner in . . . two and a half hours, more or less."

"Works for me," Simon said, lunging forward to pull open the cabinet door that hid the little library. He was scanning the titles on the books' spines when he heard the door to Jeremy's room open and close again, leaving him alone, which suited him fine.

"—not as bad as, say, your current shirt," Jeremy was saying as the door to the suite swung open.

"What the hell is wrong with my shirt?" Simon asked irritably, following him in. He was beginning to feel a bit like a pincushion—Jeremy had started needling him halfway through dinner and hadn't let up yet. If this was his punishment for copping to Jeremy's Karpol paranoia, then, well, he still didn't like it any. "I like this shirt!"

"Of course you do," Jeremy said, flicking a finger against the topmost button of Simon's shirt. "That would explain why you wear it despite . . . everything."

“Oh, this from the guy who dresses like a Miami mortician,” Simon said. “Are you allergic to color or what?”

“I’m allergic to *those* colors,” Jeremy said, gesturing grandly at Simon’s shirt and shuddering theatrically. “Light gray and light blue. Ugh. Either one alone would be terrible on you, and together—actually, light gray is terrible on most everyone.”

“Well, that’s just fascinating, except for the part where I don’t give a shit,” Simon told him.

Jeremy’s thin smile curled in on itself. “Now the *jeans*, the jeans I approve of,” he said, nearly purring it. He paced around Simon in a circle, looking him up and down; Simon found himself faced with the choice of letting Jeremy go where he pleased or revolving in place like an idiot. Not particularly wanting to look like an idiot, he crossed his arms over his chest, determined to wait it out. “Oh, yes,” Jeremy said from behind him. Simon tried not to twitch. “Very nice.”

“I’m so glad you approve of my pants, Archer,” Simon said heavily. “Really. Can we drop this now? This is stupid.”

“Actually, I wasn’t talking about your pants, precisely,” Jeremy said, tugging lightly at one of the beltloops. “I was *referring* to the view.”

Simon gritted his teeth. “Okay, fine,” he said. “Would you just let up already? Are you *trying* to be this irritating?”

“Yes,” Jeremy said, appearing around Simon’s other side. “Is it working?”

“Ye—” Belatedly, Simon got it, and he snapped his jaw shut with a little click of teeth.

Jeremy made a pleased little sound in the sudden silence, reaching out to put his hand on Simon’s chest. “I miss waking up with rug burn,” he said, softly.

“Yeah, I—” Simon started to say, his voice thick. That was as far as he got before his throat swelled shut and he had to stop and swallow. “Jesus, Archer.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, walking his fingers down along Simon’s chest, ticking the buttons one after another. When he reached Simon’s crossed arms he reached out and tugged at one of Simon’s wrists. Simon grudgingly let his arms drop. Jeremy reached back up, flicking the topmost button open with a deft little snap of his fingers. “It seems to me that we’re going to have to start all over,” he said, undoing the second one.

“Hey,” Simon said, grabbing Jeremy’s wrist and hauling it away from his shirt. Despite everything it was getting harder and harder to think straight. “You’re not going to quit it, are you?”

“Mm, no, I don’t think so,” said Jeremy, making a grab for the third button with his other hand. Reflexively, Simon caught it. Jeremy glanced at the hand around his right wrist, glanced at the hand around his left wrist, and then turned that cool smile on Simon. “Well,” he said. “Here we are, then.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, and swallowed again. “Shame there aren’t any large air-conditioning ducts around for us to get stuck in. It worked so well before.”



There was a brief pause and then Jeremy laughed, swaying forward. Simon automatically tightened his grip on Jeremy's wrists, but it turned out not to matter; Jeremy pressed up against him anyway, cocking his hip, rubbing it up against the sudden bulge in the front of Simon's pants. "We'll make do," he said, his voice rough.

"Christ, I guess we will," Simon said faintly, and he used his grip on Jeremy's wrists to sling him to the floor. They fell down in the doorway between the main room and Jeremy's suite with a thud that not even the thick carpet could muffle; Simon had just enough time to pity whoever had the suite below theirs before he forgot to care at all.

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## ◆ Thirty-Three

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On Monday morning Simon woke up with the slight but definite feeling that something was missing. Jeremy wasn't there, of course, but that wasn't it; somehow he almost always managed to be up and gone before Simon woke up, and Simon couldn't say that he minded missing out on the morning-after experience at all. No, it was something else that was absent.

Simon blinked up at the ceiling, then scrubbed his eyes with his hands. He felt . . . fine. The suite was quiet but the street outside was as noisy as ever, and Simon let his hands fall to his chest and listened to the far-off commotion for a few minutes.

Eventually he got tired of chasing his hunch around and got up, poking his head out into the main room. Empty, of course. Simon grunted and headed over into the other bedroom suite to have a shower.

By the time he emerged, showered and dressed, both Jeremy and their breakfast were waiting for him in the main room. Breakfast was sitting on the coffee table under its fancy silver lids; Jeremy was standing by the desk, flicking through yet another pile of messages from the concierge, a steaming teacup forgotten beside him.

"Morning," Simon said, dropping onto the couch and grabbing for the coffee. "So what time's checkout in this joint, anyway?"

"Mm?" Jeremy asked, looking up at him and blinking. His shiner was rapidly fading, mostly browns and yellows now. It barely bothered Simon at all. "Oh. I hadn't actually been planning to check out, Simon. I'll take you home this afternoon and then come back."

"Oh," Simon said, first a bit taken aback and then grumpy with himself for giving a shit. "Uh, okay. Guess that saves us having to be out by noon, anyway."

Jeremy turned his attention back to the pile of messages, slitting the next envelope open. One of these days, Simon vowed, he was going to figure out where Jeremy *kept* that little blade. "Did you *want* me to come back to DC?" Jeremy asked, his voice absent.

“Oh, hell no,” Simon said, poking around in the serving trays. “I’ve got things to *do*, Archer. As, uh, interesting as this has been, I’ve got to get back. Hell, my poor truck’s been sitting there for a week with a busted tire, I’ve got to take care of *that*, at least, and there’s a little matter of a hole in my wall, and everything.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, his attention wholly absorbed by the inevitable sheet of cream-colored paper in his hand. Simon waited a moment, then shrugged and dished himself up some breakfast.

Eventually Jeremy dropped the last empty envelope in the trash and picked up his teacup, joining Simon. Simon passed him the bread basket without being asked. “Plus it’s probably safer for you to stay out of DC for a while,” Simon said, picking up the conversation where he’d left it. “I mean, I sincerely doubt Karpol’s guys are looking for you too hard, but if they are, they’re more likely to be looking for you there than here.”

“That’s true,” Jeremy said, filching a scone and putting the basket back down where Simon could reach it. “Ah, well. Will you miss me terribly?”

Simon pretended to consider this. “Nah,” he finally said. “I’m pretty fucking sick of you by now.”

“You always were such a sweet-talker, Simon,” Jeremy murmured into his tea.

“Who’s sweet-talking? I’m just telling the truth.” Simon popped the last bite of his toast into his mouth and poured himself another cup of coffee. “You know. The truth. It’s the kind of thing us normal law-abiding citizens put a lot of store in. Maybe you’ve heard of it.”

“It does sound *vaguely* familiar,” Jeremy said. “Ah, well. I suppose I’ll just have to attempt to carry on without you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure you’ll get all emo and start emailing me godawful poetry,” Simon said. “After all, I’m a hell of a guy.”

Jeremy was smiling now. “Would you like me to send you a severed ear?” he asked.

“Okay, now, that? That’s unsanitary.” Simon chugged off half his coffee and flopped back against the couch cushions. “Plus that’s for artists, not for art *thieves*. You were any kind of real art thief, you’d go steal van Gogh’s severed ear and send *that* to me.”

After a moment Jeremy laughed and abandoned his half-eaten scone on one of the empty plates. “Well! You certainly seem to be feeling better.”

Simon hesitated. That feeling that something was missing came back to him, more strongly than ever. “Yeah,” he finally said. “I guess I am.” As soon as he admitted it everything fell into place; he’d woken up this morning without that nearly subliminal sense of dread that had been dogging him all week. Whatever happened now might be awful—was undoubtedly going to be awful, in some cases—but for the first time in a week he felt confident that he could handle it.

“Nothing’s ever going to be the same,” he added, “but . . . well, light at the end of the tunnel and all that.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jeremy said. His tone was casual, almost dismissive. If he’d picked up on the churn of Simon’s thoughts, he didn’t let on. “At any rate. Theoretically we can leave for DC at any time, but if you wouldn’t mind, there’s somewhere I’d like to go before we leave.”

“Uh?” Simon said, blinking to clear his mind and bring himself back to the conversation at hand. “Where?”

“It’s a museum, actually,” Jeremy said. “There’s something I’d like to show you while I have you here in New York—”

“Oh no. No way,” Simon said immediately, holding up a hand and cutting him off. “There is no *way* I am going into a museum with you, Archer. I’ve got zero interest in being your accessory before the fact.”

Jeremy actually looked taken aback for a moment before he burst out laughing again, tenting a hand over his eyes. “Oh, dear. No, Simon. I promise you that I have absolutely no professional interest in the artworks on display.”

“So then . . . what?” Simon asked, suspicious.

“As I said, there’s something I’d like to show you,” Jeremy said. “It shouldn’t take long.”

Simon waited a beat. “You’re up to something again, aren’t you,” he said, when nothing else was forthcoming.

Jeremy’s little smile was thin and teasing. “Oh, be fair, Simon, you always think that.”

“I’m usually right!” Simon said.

“So where’s this museum?” Simon said, turning in a slow circle on the sidewalk to look up and down the street. A guy in a sharp suit and a cellphone earpiece scowled and dodged around him, nearly whacking Simon in the hip with his trendy slim briefcase before stalking on up the street, muttering; “Yo! Sorry!” Simon bellowed after him, mostly just to be an ass about it.

“It’s just up here,” Jeremy said, waving his hand negligently in the other direction. “Another block or so. No more than that, I shouldn’t think.”

“Hokay,” Simon said, falling into step with Jeremy again. “What’d you say this place was called again?”

Jeremy smiled and flicked up his sunglasses, despite the tall buildings all around them that completely blocked the sun from view. “I didn’t,” he said, “but since you asked so nicely, it’s the Oly Tamson Museum Of Architecture.”

“The what?” Simon said. “Never heard of it.”

Jeremy nodded. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Hey,” Simon said warningly.

Jeremy quickly held up a hand. “No, no, I didn’t mean it in that sense, Simon. I simply meant that’s not one of the more famous museums. And there are so

many museums in New York in *any* case . . . no one could fault you for not having heard of them all.”

Simon eyed him for a moment longer, then nodded, mollified. “Okay. So what’s there? What are we going to go see?”

“It’s a surprise,” Jeremy said cheerily, stopping at the corner and waiting for the lights to turn.

Simon heaved out an exasperated sigh. “You are such an *infuriating* little bastard,” he said.

The lights changed. The WALK signal came on. Jeremy glanced left and right and stepped out onto the crosswalk. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Simon,” he said over his shoulder, flashing Simon a small and private smile.

They walked along in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, dodging other pedestrians and the occasional bit of scudding garbage. The sidewalk was littered with people trying to sell stuff of all kinds, from knockoffs of designer watches and handbags to things that ‘fell off trucks’ to just plain cheap and kitschy crap; they called out to everyone that passed by except Simon, and by extension, Jeremy. Simon couldn’t help but grin a little. You probably didn’t work the streets like this without developing a sixth sense for badges. “There it is,” Jeremy said, interrupting Simon’s train of thought to point at a building about halfway along the block.

Simon came to a halt in front of a hot dog vendor’s cart and eyed the building askance for a long, long moment. “So, let me see if I’ve got this straight,” he finally said. “That building there is a museum of architecture.”

“Mm-hmm,” Jeremy said, smiling slightly.

“A museum that’s intended to celebrate—oh, let’s see—*architecture*. Fancy buildings and, and, uh, columns and arches and all that crap.”

“Mm-hmm,” Jeremy said again, the smile growing wider.

“And they chose to house this celebration of the glories of architecture . . . in that,” Simon said, waving a hand at the dull black windowless slab of a building.

“One *could* argue that the contrast only heightens one’s appreciation for the wonders inside,” Jeremy said, but he was nearly laughing now.

“One could also be talking out of one’s impossibly pretentious asshole,” Simon said, grinning right back.

“Hey, you guys gonna buy something or just stand there all day and practice your vaudeville act?” the vendor asked, annoyed. Jeremy glanced at him, startled, then looked back at Simon and promptly burst out laughing. Simon rolled his eyes—biting the inside of his cheek to avoid laughing too—and caught Jeremy’s shoulder, pushing him away from the cart. The vendor watched them go, glaring wearily after them before turning to watch for more customers.

“Oh dear,” Jeremy said as soon as they were out of earshot, his eyes gleaming with good humor. “I’m afraid I’ve inconvenienced that poor fellow.”

"Nah, he's a New Yorker, that pretty much counts as flirting with you," Simon said.

"*Really*," Jeremy said, pausing and giving the cart a long, considering look. The vendor glanced over, caught him doing it, and promptly threw Jeremy a huge and dramatic shrug: *what?!* Simon snorted and pushed at Jeremy's shoulder again. "Ah, well," Jeremy said, dismissing the cart and vendor with a weary wave of his hand and heading on towards the museum. "He wasn't my type in any case."

"Yeah?" Simon said. "Do I even want to ask what your type is?"

"Do you have to?" Jeremy said, glancing back at him and smiling. Simon coughed and promptly got very interested in the black slab they were heading towards, which was kind of a stretch, because it still didn't look all that interesting. Now that they were closer he could see the museum's name picked out in discreet brass letters across the black, but it wasn't until they were almost there that he saw the recessed doors.

"Whoa," Simon said, stopping. In direct contrast to the grim dull black slab of the museum's front, the doors were a gothic extravaganza of arched stonework, curlicued and frescoed all to hell, with attenuated bleeding saints rolling their eyes to heaven on either side and a massive gargoyle curling down from above. Set deep into the blank exterior, the doors were a startling contrast. "Okay," Simon said, blowing out a breath and gesturing at one of the gray saints, "*that's* cool."

"I rather like the contrast, myself," Jeremy said, studying the doors.

Simon glanced at him, struck by a sudden hunch. "Have you not been here before?"

"Actually, no," Jeremy said, glancing over at him for a second before looking back at the doors.

"But there's something here you want me to see . . ." Simon said, letting the sentence trail off in an attempt to make Jeremy finish it, or at least explain.

"Oh, yes," Jeremy said. His smile flashed on for a moment. "Something the museum just acquired recently."

"Fine, be that way," Simon said, and looked back at the doors. Man, those granite saints looked like they were really hurting. It was kind of creepy. He wouldn't want to come here at night. "Something you originally saw somewhere else, then."

"Mm-hmm," Jeremy said, tugging off his sunglasses and making them vanish inside his jacket. He reached out and put a hand on one of the massive wrought-iron doorhandles. "Shall we?"

"Yeah, let's," Simon said. Jeremy pulled the door open; for all its vast size it swung open almost too easily, ponderous but completely silent on modern hinges. A breath of cooler air curled out and touched Simon's cheek before dissipating.

He shivered and stuck his hands deep into his jacket pockets, following Jeremy in.

The grim and massive doors opened up onto a much more conventional museum lobby, enormous and echoing and nearly deserted. A pair of pale and intense-looking college kids were hovering around a glass case at one end, and there was a volunteer manning the window at the other, and that was it. Jeremy looked around, rolled one shoulder aimlessly, and headed towards the window. He glanced back at Simon, as if to make sure that he was following; Simon was struck by how *alert* Jeremy suddenly looked. A suspicious itch crawled up between Simon's shoulderblades. Maybe now would be a good time to pay attention.

Halfway to the window where the docent was waiting, Jeremy's stride altered. It was subtle, but Simon was watching for it, and thus he saw it as clear as day: Jeremy slowed and pulled his shoulders back, shifting his center of gravity. The walk that resulted couldn't quite be called a swagger, but there was something self-satisfied about it anyway. "Hallo!" Jeremy cried as he reached the window, sliding his hand into his jacket and producing his ID. "I'm Jeremiah Harbottle, Mr. West's representative? I do hope you were expecting me!" His accent was *definitely* thicker than usual. The incident at the hotel hadn't just been Simon's imagination after all. Simon ticked his tongue against his teeth and settled in to watch the show.

"Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Harbottle," the lady behind the window said, looking a bit flustered. Simon felt a momentary stab of pity for her; she looked like a nice older lady, with her reading glasses on a little chain around her neck like a librarian's. She didn't deserve someone like Jeremy. Then again, Simon was privately convinced that no one did. "Mr. Tamson told us to expect you! Just give me a moment and I'll find your all-access ID badge..." She trailed off, rummaging around in her drawer while Jeremy cocked an arm on the counter and beamed at her. Simon started to feel *really* sorry for her.

Finally she came up with a discreet-looking brass tag, which Jeremy accepted with an overly ceremonious little half-a-bow before clipping it onto his lapel. The volunteer's eyes skipped to Simon for half a second before returning to Jeremy. "I'll just call for Mr. Denton, he's our head docent, he's so eager to show you around—"

"No, no," Jeremy said, lazily waving a hand. "That's quite all right. I much, *much* prefer to walk around on my own and form my own opinions. My companion and I will show ourselves around."

"Oh, but... are you sure?" the volunteer asked. Her eyes flicked to Simon again and she frowned in confusion. "I'd hate for Mr. Denton to think I sent you out on your own..."

"I'm absolutely positive," Jeremy said. "In fact, I must insist. I *do* hate to seem so standoffish but I find that I serve Mr. West's interests better when I'm

undisturbed. If I have a question, I'll certainly find someone and ask." He paused, and then laughed a little, splaying a hand out on his chest. "Oh, goodness, I sound like such a prima donna, I'm terribly sorry."

"Yeah, well, that's because you are one," Simon muttered under his breath. Jeremy glanced at him for just a second, his smile never faltering.

The poor flustered volunteer gave no sign that she'd heard him at all. "If you're certain," she said doubtfully, picking up a walkie-talkie and hugging it to her chest. "I'll just let Mr. Denton know that you don't wish to be disturbed."

"Bless you, madam," Jeremy said with sudden and immense gravity, giving her another one of those half-bows. "Is there anything else you need from me before we go?"

"Your companion," she said. "We weren't expecting . . ." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

Jeremy dismissed that with a wave of his hand, already turning to go. "He'll stay with me, I'm sure."

Simon couldn't resist rolling his eyes. He was almost immediately sorry he'd done so, because the volunteer lady caught him at it and blinked in confusion. Simon gave her a quick apologetic smile and headed after Jeremy, biting his tongue until they were safely inside the first room and out of earshot. The moment they passed through the doorway Simon caught Jeremy's shoulder and pulled him off behind a display case. "Okay," he said. The room caught the first word and boomed it back to him. Simon winced and lowered his voice. "What the hell was that?"

"What was what?" Jeremy said, suddenly all innocence again.

"That!" Simon said, waving a hand in the general direction of the lobby. "That whole cock-and-bull story! What in the hell?"

Jeremy didn't immediately answer. Instead he reached up and brushed Simon's hand off his shoulder, twitching his jacket back into place. "Actually, Simon, it was the truth," he said. "As I would have explained if you had given me a moment, I *am* here as Mr. West's representative. It's simply not the *only* reason I'm here."

"Fine," Simon said, folding his arms. "Explain."

Jeremy sighed and reached into his jacket, coming out with a slim black pen. "Shall I explain as we go? It's a bit of a story, but fortunately, it's also a bit of a walk."

Simon jutted out his jaw and studied Jeremy for a moment, then threw up his hands in exasperation. "Fine. But I'm getting tired of this mysterious act of yours. And I don't like surprises."

"What a pity," Jeremy said, slithering past him and pausing in front of one of the lit display cases. Simon followed him, barely glancing at the tiny wooden building inside the display case before looking expectantly back at Jeremy. "Mr.



West is a . . . business acquaintance of long standing,” Jeremy said, in a voice so low that it barely carried to Simon.

“Okay . . .” Simon said.

“A few years back he made an enormous donation to this very museum,” Jeremy went on, abruptly stepping away and heading to the next display case. Simon ground his teeth and followed. “So enormous, in fact, that they’re just now finishing the installation. The exhibit is supposed to open in the summer.”

“And so you called in a favor and got him to lean on the museum for you, huh,” Simon finished for him. “Maybe he wanted somebody to come by and make sure they’re not screwing things up anyway. Little *quid pro quo*.”

Jeremy smiled. “Exactly,” he said. “That’s what I like about you, Simon, you’re so *very* clever . . .”

“Can it,” Simon told him. “Okay, fine. So what was up with the so-veddy-British act in the lobby?”

“Ah, you caught that,” Jeremy said, his smile curling in on itself. “You *are* clever.”

“Or maybe you’re just transparent.”

“Possibly.” Jeremy moved away from the second display case, heading for the far wall and the series of photographs there. He brought up the black pen and pressed down on its clip, and a brilliant red dot popped into existence on the leftmost photo. “Isn’t that interesting,” he murmured, tracing the laser pointer up and down along one of the walls in the photograph. “Look, it tilts inward . . .”

“You are changing the subject,” Simon said impatiently.

“So I am,” said Jeremy, the dot hopping to the next photograph. “But I see you currently have no interest in forced perspective, so let me see, how best to put this.”

“How about ‘immediately’?” Simon suggested.

“Tch,” Jeremy said. “Well. I have a number of identities, correct?”

“Yeah?”

“So I tend to give each one a distinct personality and set of mannerisms,” Jeremy said, shrugging. “It helps me keep their stories straight.”

Simon looked at him for a moment longer, then snorted out a laugh and looked away. “Christ. *Normal* frustrated actors wait tables, you know.”

“I suppose I just had to be different,” Jeremy said. The laser pointer dot hopped to the third photograph, traced along a roofline, and vanished.

“Sure you don’t mean ‘difficult’?” Simon asked—had to ask.

Jeremy smiled. “Also that.”

Ten minutes and three rooms later, Simon was bored out of his mind. While he was sure that all these massive slabs of marble and weatherbeaten statues were *important*, that didn’t make them *interesting*, and the museum’s tendency to err on the side of two or three dramatically-lit pieces in a huge echoing space

was getting on his nerves. Maybe it was stylish, or maybe they just didn't have enough pieces to fill their rooms yet.

What was worse, Jeremy seemed perfectly content to amble along, occasionally tracing things with the dot of his laser pointer or pausing to read one of the little brass plaques. Simon was beginning to seriously consider grabbing Jeremy by his belt and collar and frogmarching him through the museum at double-time when he noticed the figure lurking by the doorway they'd just come through. "Hey, we've got a stalker," he said.

"I know," Jeremy said, not looking away from the weird flat-headed marble woman that he was currently studying. "He's been following us for about five minutes now."

"You know, for someone who flattened a kid on Friday out of sheer paranoia, you're sure taking this calmly," Simon said, glancing back at their stalker again. "Also, that woman you're staring at? Her head's flat on top."

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Jeremy abandoned the flat lady and moved on to a group of three worn-down stone women standing nearby, none of whom had particularly flat heads or, in one case, any head at all. Simon followed him, glancing back at their stalker again; the guy seemed content to lurk in the doorway. "I suspect it's the mysterious Mr. Denton, trying to stay handy in case I suddenly develop a question without actually disturbing my concentration by coming too close," Jeremy said. "Isn't it wonderful how you donate a few million pounds' worth of stonework to a museum and suddenly they're just terrified of offending your representatives?"

"A few million..." Simon trailed off there and looked at Jeremy askance. "What the hell did he give them, a whole church?"

"Something like that," Jeremy said. "You'll see."

"... I was kidding," Simon said.

"I wasn't."

Eventually they came into a large and echoing room with no exhibits in it at all, which seemed to Simon like carrying the museum's predilection for empty spaces just a little too far. Instead there were a few uncomfortable-looking wooden benches, a couple of fake plants, and at the far end a massive roped-off stairway, leading down. More of those discreet brass letters informed Simon that the stairway led to THE ETHAN WEST CATHEDRAL HALL; a little sign on the velvet rope added 'opening August'.

Simon wandered over and peered down the stairs. His idle curiosity was foiled by the massive wooden double doors at the bottom of the staircase, currently closed, with a loop of jarringly modern titanium chain wound through their iron handles and fastened with a serious-looking padlock. "This it?" he asked Jeremy, gesturing down the stairs.

“What was your first clue, Simon?” Jeremy asked, unhooking the velvet rope from one of the two poles and gesturing him in.

Simon hesitated, his sense of order vaguely offended by the casual removal of the rope. “You know, that rope’s there for a reason,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” Jeremy said. “To keep out the people who aren’t the two of us. Mr. Denton?” he asked, raising his voice slightly.

Immediately their mysterious stalker detached himself from one of the doorways and hurried towards them, a squawking walkie-talkie in one hand. Once he got close enough he turned out to be a small and pudgy man in his forties, with thick glasses and thin hair. “Mr. Harbottle,” he said, his eyes wet and nervous behind his glasses, putting out a hand as soon as he got close enough. “I’m Stephen Denton, the head docent here at the Tamson, it’s a pleasure to meet you—”

“A pleasure,” Jeremy said, gravely taking the limply proffered hand. “And might I just add that it’s truly wonderful to work with a man such as yourself? You would not believe the number of museums I’ve dealt with where the employees would simply *not* leave me alone to do my work.”

By biting the inside of his cheek Simon managed not to start laughing. “Well, *that’s* sure as hell true,” he said instead.

“Ah. Yes. Well.” Stephen Denton wiped his hand on his pants leg and held it out to Simon. “Stephen Denton. I don’t believe we’ve been introduced . . . ?”

“You know what, I think you’re right,” Simon said, automatically shaking his hand. It was a little like squeezing a piece of raw fish. “Nice to meet you.”

Denton stared at him wetly for a moment longer, then gingerly reclaimed his hand and started patting down his pockets. “I have the keys here somewhere,” he said with a nervous little laugh. “Will you be wanting to go in alone?”

“Oh yes,” Jeremy said firmly, doubling up the velvet rope to get it out of the way. “As I explained to the lovely lady working the window, I simply *must* have peace and quiet in which to work. I’ll call you if I should need anything.”

“Whatever you like, Mr. Harbottle!” Denton said eagerly. Finally he came out with a large ring of keys and started picking his way down the staircase toward the door. Jeremy followed him. Simon trailed along behind them.

After a few moments of fuss the docent managed to undo the padlock and slide the chain free, but Jeremy laid a hand across the doorhandles before Denton could pull the doors open. “The first look is always the most important,” he said, sounding almost apologetic. “You’re *so* kind to cater to my little peccadilloes.”

“Ah, ah,” Denton said, fiddling with the length of chain in his hands. “Of, of course, Mr. Harbottle. I’ll just . . . be in the West lobby upstairs. Just give a shout if you need me!”

“Believe me,” Jeremy said warmly, “I will.” And he gave Stephen Denton such a luminous smile that the poor guy turned bright pink and scuttled back up the stairs, chain clanking in his hands as if he were a particularly cheaply-

equipped ghost. Jeremy watched him go, then turned that crazy-bright smile on Simon, curling his fingers around both doorhandles. “Well,” he said softly. “Shall we?”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “After all this buildup I’m just curious as hell. Hit me.”

“Mm,” said Jeremy, and he pulled on both handles, gliding back a step in order to fling the massive doors open wide. Like the front door, they opened much too quietly.

At first Simon couldn’t see much; the room beyond was all gray and shadowed, with rows of columns marching off towards some sort of squarish altar in the distance. The doors caught and stayed open with a soft pneumatic hiss. Jeremy smiled and bowed to Simon, gesturing him in. “After you,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Simon said, and went in, and stopped dead as the room—the cathedral—resolved around him. The sheer unrelenting scale of the place threatened to buffet Simon to his knees. He’d never felt so small. Weatherbeaten angels and saints, ranked row upon row in the distance like soldiers, stared forlornly at him from the walls to either side; shadows massed in the soaring arched vaults of the ceiling above, making the room dissolve upwards into darkness. The columns to either side were as large around as tree trunks, and the stone underfoot was pitted and uneven but carefully laid. His breath echoed. *Everything* echoed. And somehow this massive space had been shoehorned into just another museum in Manhattan. Simon’s mind made a completely unwanted association with opening the refrigerator and finding the Temple of Zuul.

Behind him the doors chuffed shut again. “Would it ruin your enjoyment of the experience if I told you that it was the result of a massively complicated money-laundering scheme?” Jeremy said, the purr of amusement plain in his voice. “Actually, the plan itself was utter brilliance, and I don’t think anyone failed to benefit from it, but make no mistake: the remains of the cathedral are here because they washed clean loads of stolen money.”

“Shut up,” Simon said, still staring up into the dark recesses of the ceiling. His voice echoed back to him, and despite himself, he winced. “I’m having a rapture or something.”

“Yes, it’s like that, isn’t it,” Jeremy agreed. Simon didn’t answer him, just continued to stare. Behind him Jeremy fell mercifully silent, tugging the doors the rest of the way shut and then fiddling with his laser pointer.

“Huh,” Simon finally said, shaking his head and moving into the cathedral proper. His sneakers were quiet on the uneven stone floor but the massive space still caught those slight echoes and tossed them around.

Jeremy trotted a few steps and fell in beside him, his own footsteps annoyingly silent (or, at least, lost under the sound of Simon’s). They passed between the first pair of massive columns and into the nave, worn statues watching them go by. Now that they were (slightly) closer, Simon could see that large chunks of the walls were missing, and what was left was carefully bolted to the walls in an

approximation of where they'd once stood. "Amusingly, those are the exterior walls," Jeremy said, waving a hand at the stone angels. "It's as if the cathedral was partially turned inside out, but of course the stained glass was long gone after the Second World War."

Simon grunted, not really listening. The altar on its dais at the far end was slowly drawing closer and it was beginning to dawn on him just how big that thing really was. The red dot of Jeremy's laser pointer skittered over the far wall for half a second and vanished; Jeremy didn't say anything else.

When they were halfway through the colonnade, in the center of the massive space, Jeremy stopped and put a hand on Simon's arm. "Uh?" Simon said, looking over at him, but Jeremy was already turning around, looking back the way they came.

"All right," Jeremy called, his voice pitched to echo. "You can come out now."

"He didn't follow us in—" Simon started to say in exasperation, but a second voice cried from the heavens like an avenging angel's and cut him off: "*Oh, you Christing bastard, you said you'd come alone!*"

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## ◆ Thirty-Four

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Before Simon could do more than blink, Jeremy ducked smoothly and drove his shoulder into Simon's side. Caught off-balance Simon reeled sideways, overbalanced, and fell, choking on a yelp when his hip hit the cold hard stone of the floor; there was a popping sound and a bullet whined off the stone where they'd been standing, raising a puff of dust and leaving behind a bright new pit in the floor. Simon scrabbled backwards on all fours, heading instinctively for the closest column and cover. Halfway there Jeremy slammed into him again and they rolled the rest of the way in a graceless but fast-moving tangle of limbs, coming to rest in the safety of the column's shadow with Simon's head reeling and Jeremy half on top of him.

Simon scrambled up onto his elbows but Jeremy put a hand on his chest. "Stay," he said urgently, and flattening himself against the column's marble flank he flicked out the laser pointer in his hand like he was wielding a lightsaber. It wasn't a little red dot that appeared on the column opposite them, but a long red line, about six feet tall; just as quickly as it had flashed into existence it flashed away, Jeremy blindly waving it across the back half of the cathedral like some kind of futuristic handheld scanner. Half a second later someone screamed, and an enormous metal *something* boomed onto the stone floor just a heartbeat behind the scream, deafening them all with the echoes of its fall.

Jeremy sucked in a shaking breath and shut his eyes. The hand on Simon's chest pressed down, but Simon growled and batted it away, scrambling to sit upright and put his back to the column. Automatically he grabbed for the holster in the small of his back, hissing in dismay when it wasn't there. "Who the fuck—" he started to ask, and then his brain kicked in. "Oh, you *son* of a *bitch*," Simon growled under his breath. "Couldn't even fucking well *warn* me—"

"Later," Jeremy breathed, and then raised his voice. "Ah, yes, that's a little flaw we discovered in the low-light lenses about three years ago," he called, sounding so calm and confident and completely on top of things that Simon had to fight down the urge to hit him again. "Unfortunately we didn't know how to get in touch with you to tell you about it—"

“Jesus!” the other man screamed, his voice high and thin with panic. Only it wasn’t *Jesus*!, it was closer to *Jaysis*! Simon definitely recognized that voice now. “You’ve blinded me, you bastard!”

“Yes, well, you *did* just try to shoot me,” Jeremy called back. “Under the circumstances I really don’t feel all that bad.” The other man howled in wordless anger, making the massive space ring around them. Simon resisted the urge to clap his hands over his ears. “Now, then,” Jeremy said, still calm as anything, once the howling echoes had died away. “Would you like to scream some more, or shall we get on with this?”

The howl tapered off into ragged and infuriated breathing. Now that it was mostly quiet, they could hear the doors at the far end rattling frantically, and a faint voice crying something. “Damn,” Jeremy breathed. “Mr. Denton has heard us. I’d hoped that the doors would be thick enough to cover the racket.”

“You blocked the doors,” Simon said, not really surprised.

“Oh, yes,” Jeremy said. “Put a crowbar through the handles. It’ll take them a few minutes to get in.”

“So we’re trapped in here with the crazy guy who wants to kill you.” Simon let his head fall back against the column with a dull and painful thump. “Great. Maybe if I knock you out and hand you over I can cut a deal.”

“All right, you fuck,” their assailant cried, his accent turning it into something that sounded like *awright, yeh fahk*. “What d’you want?”

“Throw down your other gun,” Jeremy called, patting Simon’s shoulder.

“Like *fuck* I will!”

Jeremy’s hand fell still on Simon’s shoulder and his own shoulders began to quiver. Simon, still nerved up on adrenaline, couldn’t believe what he was seeing; Jeremy started laughing out loud a moment later, confirming it. “Oh, dear,” Jeremy said, his voice still trembling with laughter. “You’ve treed yourself fifty feet up a bloody column *and* managed to drop your rifle—which, I might point out, gives me an excellent idea of which column you’ve shinned up—you can’t see, your targets have nearly perfect cover, and either you stay treed up there until the authorities arrive or try to climb down and give us ample opportunity to pick you off, and you still think you can dictate *terms*?”

After five seconds of fuming silence something smaller boomed off the stone and skittered away. Jeremy dropped his head to Simon’s shoulder and choked back laughter. “Oh, God,” Jeremy whispered, his voice wobbly with crazed hilarity.

“Christ,” Simon muttered back, and suddenly *he* was having trouble not laughing, even though his heart was still racing in his chest. “Maybe he ought to go shoot whoever told him he was a *competent sniper* . . .”

Jeremy made a choking *snrk*! sound and slapped Simon’s chest, lightly. Simon, unable to resist, ruffled Jeremy’s hair. “All right,” Jeremy cried, his voice

still wavering a bit. “You might as well come on down. I’m getting quite tired of yelling.”

“I *can’t* come down, y’idiot! I’ve been *blinded*! D’you want me to fall to my death?”

Jeremy heaved out a deep breath and pushed a hand through his mussed hair, putting it back in order. “You’re not blind!” he said patiently. “You’re just a bit dazzled. Wait a few minutes. You’ll be fine.” Edging forward he stuck his head out and jerked it back almost in the same motion. “All right,” he said softly. “He’s gotten himself stuck up top of the second column from the door in the opposite row from this one.”

Simon nodded, once again reaching around behind himself and once again coming up empty. “Can he get to the guns?”

“If he dives for them,” Jeremy said. “Stay here. I’ll go fix that.”

Simon grabbed Jeremy’s arm before Jeremy could stand up. “Don’t touch them,” he said. “Just kick them away. If that’s the gun I think it is, *I want it*, and I don’t want it smeared with your fingerprints.”

Jeremy nodded, shaking his arm free. “That *would* complicate things, wouldn’t it,” he said. “Don’t worry.” And he slid around the far side of the column and vanished into the gloom.

Simon braced his back against the column and slowly slid upright, flexing his fingers. For the moment, all was quiet; he couldn’t hear Jeremy, their mysterious assailant was presumably sulking, and Denton had left off rattling the doors, probably to go call security. They didn’t have long—something heavy clattered across the stones behind him and Simon’s heart leaped into his throat for a moment. From far up above him the other man yelped inarticulately, nearly covering over the second long clattering sound. “There,” Jeremy said cheerily from somewhere behind him. “That ought to take care of that. How are your eyes? Can you see yet?”

“No, I fucking well can’t!”

“Liar,” Simon muttered under his breath.

“Liar,” Jeremy said at almost the same moment, seconding Simon’s hunch. “I’m sure you can see well enough to climb down. Best get started, hm? I’m sure you’d rather like to finish this before the police arrive . . .”

“*Fine!*” the other guy yelled, completely and thoroughly frustrated. Simon could empathize. Actually, it was kind of nice to know that Jeremy infuriated someone else almost as much as he infuriated Simon. “I’ll come the fuck down, then—” *down* was almost *dahn* “—and it’ll be on your bloody head if I bust my head open!”

“Yes, yes,” Jeremy said impatiently. His voice had shifted; he was moving away from Simon again. “And I shouldn’t get any bright ideas, if I were you.”

“Fuck you *right* up the ass,” his opponent promptly replied, and Simon bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing again. Jeremy didn’t respond, and



after a moment Simon could hear a soft slapping sound that he couldn't quite identify.

Time to move, Simon thought, and he sidled around the far side of the column and dashed for the next one, bringing himself closer to the column that Jeremy had pointed out. He risked a glance to the side as he went—he couldn't see the sniper himself but there was a band of something slung around the column in question, and even as he watched it loosened, flipped down a foot or so with a leathery slap, and then went taut again. A linesman's belt. Then Simon was behind the next column, his footsteps still hanging in the air. "Th' fuck was that?" the guy up the column cried.

"I expect it was my friend, moving," Jeremy said. He was somewhere else again, somewhere far from Simon. "I wouldn't worry about him, if I were you; unlike you, he's not the sort to shoot anyone in the back."

"Oh, ouch," Simon called, figuring that it was about time he got in on this little conversation. He edged to the other side of the column and glanced out, checking the sniper's downward progress. A third of the way down, if that. Satisfied, Simon pulled back. For the next minute or so, the only sound in the cathedral was the rhythmic sound of the linesman's belt inching down the column. Simon thought about saying something else, but as little as he liked this guy, he liked the idea of being responsible for his falling to his death on the flagstones even less. Let him concentrate.

The slap of leather gave way to the rattle of chain behind him, and then something hit the stone with a thud. "That's quite far enough," Jeremy said at almost the exact same moment, his voice crisp. "Simon? Would you care to join us?"

Simon rolled his eyes at one of the saints on the far wall and took a deep breath, then slid around the side of the column and into the nave proper.

The discarded linesman's belt lay loose around the base of the column. Both of them stood by it, ten feet apart, but only Jeremy spared Simon a glance. At some point Jeremy had discarded his jacket, revealing the harnesses strapped to his bare forearms; his left arm was extended, his left hand cocked back, his right hand curled loosely around his left wrist. Simon could see the glint of metal against the heel of Jeremy's hand: the prongs of his taser.

Their mysterious assailant had his hands up, and that was about all Simon could tell about him. He was wearing one of those catsuits like Jeremy's and the face mask that he'd been wearing at Annadale; his eyes were still hidden behind a familiar rectangle of smoked glass. "Nice," Simon said, studying this apparition. "The ninja look is very in right now. Very trendy."

The rectangle of black glass twitched towards him for half a second before jerking back to Jeremy. Jeremy smiled. "My associate does raise a good point," he said. "Take off the goggles and the mask, please."

"Go an' fuck yourself," the black figure replied.

“Mm, no, it’s ever so much nicer when someone else does it,” said Jeremy. “Take them off.”

The other man twitched like he’d been hit, but didn’t reach for his goggles. Jeremy’s little smile vanished and he thrust his hands out slightly. “I’ll do it,” he said softly, flexing the fingers of his right hand around his left wrist. “Believe me when I say that.”

The tableau held for three more breathless seconds before the other man snarled out a wordless sound and ripped his goggles down to dangle about his neck. “Oh, sure, an’ you’ll taser me like a damned dog,” he spat, grabbing a handful of his hood and yanking it off with a crackle of static.

Simon, finally able to put a face to the voice, found himself less than impressed. The man was pale and fine-boned, his pale eyes sunken in between sharp cheekbones and a high forehead, his dirty-blond hair cropped close to his skull. Taller than Jeremy but not as tall as Simon, just as Jeremy had said, and on the thin side, but not extremely so. In fact, he’d be wholly unremarkable if it wasn’t for the anger that twisted his features into a sneer.

Jeremy let out a long and shaky sigh and then, despite everything, smiled. His smile was a small and uncertain thing. “Hallo, Irish,” Jeremy said softly. “It’s good to see you again.” The other man’s sneer deepened until it bared his teeth, but he refused to say anything else. Simon glanced at Jeremy, waiting to see what he’d do next.

Jeremy, catching the glance, let the smile deepen into something broader and much less sincere. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, pitching his voice to carry. “Where *are* my manners? Simon, I’d like you to meet Bran Lindsey—that’s B-R-A-N L-I-N-D-S-E-Y, in case you were wondering—my foster brother . . . Bran, this is Simon.” Jeremy paused for a heartbeat’s worth of time, letting the echoes die away a little before he spoke again. “I believe you’ve met. Simon’s with the FBI.”

The shock of it wiped Bran’s face clean, leaving him slack-jawed for just a moment before his face contorted with rage. “*You son of a bitch!*” he screamed, hurling himself at Jeremy with his empty hands clawed; Jeremy fell back a couple of rapid steps instead of firing the taser, hesitation written clearly on his face. Simon lunged forward and caught Bran by the arm, jerking him back. Bran snarled and fought against Simon’s grip without ever taking his maddened eyes off Jeremy. “*You gave him my name, you Christing fuck!*”

“Yes, I did,” Jeremy said, calm as ever, recovering and nodding absently at Simon. “And, I point out yet again, you just tried to shoot me. In the back. With a sniper rifle. What *were* you thinking?”

“*You,*” Bran breathed, his eyes narrowed to slits. The sheer malice choking his voice transformed the word into something like *hyuuuuu*. “You Christless, nutless, gutless *bastard*—you fucking *snitch*—you Sodomite—you fucking arsebandit *Brit*—” Once the dam had broken Bran showed no signs of being able to stop.

Little dots of foamy spit formed at the corners of his mouth as he heaped ten years' worth of bile and pure unadulterated crazy on Jeremy's head. Simon couldn't help but be impressed at the sheer length, breadth, and depth of the cursing out that Jeremy was receiving (at one point Bran called Jeremy a 'motherfucking cuckoo's egg', which Simon thought was impressively scholarly, particularly in the mouth of a crazy fucker like this one) but he also couldn't help but wish that Bran wouldn't scream so loudly. With the echoes in here, it was really starting to hurt his ears.

Jeremy waited patiently through the torrent of abuse, his little smile fading to nothing. Bran might not have run out of words yet but eventually he ran out of breath, and paused for a heartbeat to gasp. "Ethan still sets a place for you at the high table every Christmas," Jeremy said, in a quiet voice that cut across Bran's bluster like a knife.

Whatever it meant, it shut Bran up like Jeremy had slapped him. He fell still, breathing hard. Jeremy waited a moment, then looked over at Simon and flicked his fingers twice: *let him go*.

Simon widened his eyes and raised his eyebrows. *Are you crazy?*

Jeremy repeated the gesture. *Let him go*.

Simon waited a beat, then shrugged—*Fine*.—and let Bran go, stepping back. Without taking his eyes off Jeremy Bran reached up and rubbed his arm, fingers working in absent circles over the slick material. He didn't say anything.

"He misses you," Jeremy said, still so quiet. "You're welcome to hate me all you like, Bran, but for God's sake stop taking it out on Ethan. He's your father and he *loves* you."

Bran was still silent. After a moment, Jeremy tried to smile again. "And if you'd just come to Christmas it'd save me having to carry on answering the door all by myself—"

"Shut up," Bran hissed. Sweat was beading on his forehead.

"Go back to England," Jeremy said, maintaining the smile, although it wobbled. "Stop playing the bloody prodigal. Whatever mess you're in with this Russian, he can *handle* it, you know he can, he'll *fix* it—"

"SHUT UP!" Bran screamed, so loud that Simon jerked away from him and grabbed for a gun that still wasn't there. "I don't need him and I *don't need you!* I *never* needed you! Not once!"

Jeremy was silent, no longer smiling. The echoes died down to nothing. "God," Jeremy finally said, looking away. "I wish you had."

"Shut up," Bran said, nearly panting now, his breath hissing in and out between clenched teeth.

"I needed *you*."

"Shut up!"

“I—” *Loved you*, Jeremy said—Simon read it on his lips as clear as day, like a punch to the gut—but the actual words were lost under Bran’s rising inarticulate scream as he charged.

“Shit!” Simon hissed, grabbing for him again. Bran twisted and Simon’s hand slapped against the frictionless material, slipping off. Simon dashed after him, one hand outstretched, reaching for the band of the goggles still around Bran’s neck . . .

Jeremy flowed back a step, his face suddenly and completely empty of anything resembling an emotion. His hands rose, not in a firing pattern but in a defensive stance; he twisted to the side and whipped his right foot up and out in the same motion, kicking Bran square in the chest with an audible thud.

Bran’s eyes popped and he made a tiny startled *hk!* sound, sent flying backwards into Simon, who caught him by pure reflex. It was like trying to hold on to a live wire. Gasping too hard even to scream Bran threw himself forward again and again, trying to break free of Simon’s hold and get at Jeremy.

What finally quelled him was the babble of raised voices from the double doors behind them. Something hit the doors with a boom and they creaked, but held. Bran fell still, taut as a wire and trembling, and glanced over his shoulder; his wide eyes were rolling in his head like a spooked horse’s.

“Oh dear,” Jeremy said. “We seem to have company.”

Bran made a high-pitched panicky sound and threw himself forward again, so hard that Simon stumbled forward half a step just trying to hold on to him. “One last chance,” Jeremy said. Whatever Bran heard in Jeremy’s voice, it was enough to make him stop struggling, although he was still panting. “Because you’re my brother and I cared about you once—” Bran shuddered once, a full-body shudder that came closer to freeing him than all his thrashing had “—I’ll give you a chance.”

“And what chance is that?” Bran said, trying to sneer the words and failing in his panic.

“Yeah, Archer,” Simon said. “What chance is that?”

“There’s an emergency fire exit behind the altar,” Jeremy said, gazing at Bran and ignoring Simon. Bran jerked and fell completely still, barely even breathing.

“Excuse me,” Simon said.

“It can’t be opened from outside,” Jeremy went on, still ignoring Simon. “For security purposes. So they can’t come in that way.”

“Excuse me,” Simon said again.

“They may or may not have thought to post a guard out there, but it’s certainly a better chance than you’d have if you went the other way,” Jeremy said.

“Excuse me!” Simon said, now completely exasperated. “This is all very nice and brotherly and all, but there’s this little problem of me wanting to *arrest* this crazy fucker—”

“Simon, *please!*” Jeremy said, ripping his gaze away from Bran to stare at Simon. The plea in his eyes was so damned plain that it made Simon wince. “Bear with me,” Jeremy said, forcibly reining in the emotion in his voice.

Simon ground his teeth and tightened his arms around Bran’s shoulders. “Fine.”

Jeremy hesitated, then nodded, and then looked back at Bran. “Well?”

“What’s th’ catch?” Bran asked.

“Yeah, Archer,” Simon said. “What’s the catch?” The look of pure exasperation that Jeremy shot him went a long way towards restoring Simon’s good humor.

Jeremy didn’t answer right away. The banging on the double doors was very loud now, but right here in the center of the room everyone was silent; then Jeremy sighed and spread his arms wide. “All you have to do is get by me,” he said. And he smiled. It was a small, thin, tight little smile, devoid of anything like happiness. Simon had never seen him look so goddamned crazy.

“That’s not fucking fair,” Bran immediately said, jabbing a finger at Jeremy’s arm. “You’ve still got your effin’ weapons about—”

“Oh, and *now* you care about what’s ‘fair’ and what isn’t,” Jeremy said, never once losing that godawful rictus of a smile. “You know what, *fuck* ‘fair’, Bran. You’ve not been fair to me a day in your life and I’m bloody sick of making excuses for your nasty disposition.”

The banging on the door suddenly acquired a heavy stroking rhythm, the doors shuddering and creaking with every blow. All three of them glanced in that direction, startled; before Simon could recover Bran stamped down on his foot with all his strength. Simon bellowed and reflexively tightened his grip but Bran still broke away, eeling free of his grip with an eerie and boneless speed that was only improved by the slick surface of his suit. Jeremy barely had time to say “Oh, now that was uncalled for—” before Bran was on him, jabbing his stiffened fingers at Jeremy’s windpipe.

Jeremy swayed to one side and grabbed Bran’s wrist as it shot past his ear, then let go to block the punch to his stomach that followed, his hand flicking around in a circle to strike at Bran’s eyes half a heartbeat later. The resulting scuffle was almost too fast for Simon to follow, the two of them striking at and blocking each other at nearly preternatural speeds, flowing across the floor like a single creature that had turned on itself; it ended as quickly as it had begun when Jeremy slammed the heel of one hand into Bran’s face.

They broke apart, Bran reeling backwards. He caught himself and scrubbed a hand across his face, smearing his upper lip with blood. “That’s none o’ Ethan’s,” he panted.

“No,” Jeremy said. In contrast he was barely out of breath, although he was mussed and gleaming with sweat. “It’s only mine.”

“Thought you were the one going t’ carry on Ethan’s *legacy*,” Bran said, thin and jeering. “T’isn’t fitting o’ you t’ go against his teachings like that—”

“That’s a right load of crap,” Jeremy said. Behind him, the doors boomed.

“I hate to break into this touching moment,” Simon said, “but you *are* aware that he’s mocking you to buy enough time to catch his breath, right?”

“Yes, Simon, thank you for your input,” Jeremy said patiently. “Let him catch his breath. It isn’t as if he’s going to be able to beat me anyway.”

Bran hissed in his breath through his teeth and struck like a snake, his clawed hand lashing out at Jeremy’s cheek. Jeremy slid backwards half a step and Bran’s clawed fingers whipped past not an inch from his nose, their momentum jerking Bran halfway around; almost casually Jeremy stepped behind Bran and booted him in the ass. Bran stumbled forward two huge looping out-of-control steps and smacked face-first into one of the columns, grabbing the column to keep from falling like a drunk man might hug a lamppost. Simon choked on a snort of laughter.

“He’s never been as good as I am,” Jeremy said, his voice still even. “Not at this. Not at anything. And he’s too bloody thick to realize that there’s plenty to go around. There never was some mythical single spot that we both had to fight for.”

Simon turned his head, taking in the cathedral around him, and just couldn’t resist the crazy impulse that came bubbling up in him, clamoring to be voiced. “There can be only one!” he cried, letting it boom off the walls and echo back to him.

“That’s not—”

“Here we are—born to be kings, we’re the princes of the universe,” Simon half-sang under his breath.

Jeremy’s head jerked back, slightly. “My God,” he said, blinking. “Do you know, I actually *saw* that movie?”

Bran lurched away from the column, leaving a smear of blood on the stone at nose height, and dropped into a crouch. “Bastard,” he snarled, his voice thick and bubbly from his nosebleed. “You stole what was rightfully mine—”

“Not to belabor the obvious,” Jeremy said, sliding his feet apart and raising both hands to hover in front of his stomach, “but I *am* a thief. In fact, I’m the best thief in the world. And you’re not.”

Bran snarled and struck out at Jeremy, once, testing his guard. Jeremy slapped Bran’s hand aside. Outside the heavy thing struck the doors again, and this time there was a loud splintering of wood; Bran’s shoulders jerked into a straight line and he threw himself at Jeremy, baying in desperation.

Jeremy brought his knee up sharply into Bran’s stomach, driving him back a step. Even though it left Bran sobbing and gulping air he struck at Jeremy again, stabbing his thumbs at Jeremy’s eyes. Jeremy swayed backwards and kept

falling backwards, his hands hitting the stone floor. His leg pistoned up, his foot thudding into the underside of Bran's jaw with a crunch.

Bran reeled backwards towards Simon, who took an instinctive step back. Jeremy flipped back to his feet, a good fifteen feet away. "Kill you," Bran gurgled, and gathering himself in a crouch he launched himself towards Jeremy—

"I'm sorry, Irish," Jeremy said, and his left hand whipped out, two thin wires singing across the gap between them. There was a loud snap like a squirrel stepping on a transformer and then Bran fell to the ground in a twitching and graceless heap, his heels drumming on the stone, the faint smell of smoke and burnt meat hanging about him.

It took everything that Simon had in him not to yell "*Pull!*", but somehow, he managed.

Expressionless, Jeremy drew his hand back. The tail end of the wires fell free of his wrist pouch and dropped to the floor with tiny musical sounds that Simon could somehow hear despite the splintering and booming and shouting from behind. Picking up the inert wires Jeremy wound them about his wrist, crossing to where Bran lay; for a moment he studied the semiconscious man at his feet with that same unnerving lack of expression, then wordlessly cocked his right hand and shot a stream of whitish gas into Bran's face. Bran jerked, wheezed out a thick sound, and passed out.

Simon discovered that he hadn't been breathing and whooped in air. "That was exciting," he said, still a bit breathless.

"Mm," Jeremy said. "I think we'd best go."

"Wait, go?" Simon said, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Like hell. I want this guy. And that gun. We paid you to help catch him—"

"—and he's caught," Jeremy said, flicking a hand at the slowly collapsing doors. "The gas will hold him until they manage to get past the doors. Do you really want to be on the record as being here? While you're on suspension? In the company of a known criminal? Under false pretenses?"

"Fuck," Simon said. "Uh. Where are the guns?"

"Back that way," Jeremy said. "By the first column on the left."

"Right," said Simon, fired with inspiration. "Have you got a pen?"

To his credit, Jeremy didn't ask, just dug a pen out of one of his wrist harnesses. He threw it to Simon, who caught it one-handed, rooting around in his pocket for his wallet.

The guns were right where Jeremy said they would be, in a ferocious little pile. Simon dug a receipt out of his wallet, checked to make sure that it didn't implicate anyone but Jeremy, and scribbled I'M DIRTY—RUN ME THROUGH THE *NIBIN* on the back, using the column as a makeshift desk. When he was done he stuck the pen in his teeth and caught the receipt in a fold of his shirt, scrubbing his palms vigorously together to remove his fingerprints from the paper as best he could. Satisfied, he let the smeared note flutter to the ground and

nudged the smaller gun on top of it with the toe of his sneaker. "There," he muttered, and he loped back to where Jeremy was standing. "Okay, let's go," he said.

"Yes, let's," Jeremy said, and he took off at a run for the altar, bending down to scoop up his abandoned jacket in mid-flight. Simon yelled and pelted after him, conscious of the splintering wood behind them, and the yells that he could both hear and understand now . . .

Jeremy hit the bar of the emergency door with his shoulder and they both tumbled out of the gloom into a bright sunlit day, nearly blinding themselves. The Tamson Museum's fire alarms all went off in a shrieking chorus and Simon cringed and stumbled away, clapping his hands over his ears and frantically blinking to clear his sun-dazzled eyes. They were alone in the alley; there was no guard in sight. It didn't precisely inspire Simon to respect the NYPD. But, then, he was FBI; nothing much could.

"Come on," Jeremy said, plucking at his shoulder. "And *walk*. Nothing looks more suspicious—"

"—than someone running away from an alarm, Christ, don't you think I know that?" Simon said irritably, jerking his shoulder free. Knowing it and doing it were two different things, though, and he fisted his hands and dug his fingernails into his palms to keep himself from bolting. Beside him Jeremy shrugged back into his jacket and ran both hands through his hair, putting it back in order.

The muscles in Simon's back were taut with tension. Any second now that fire exit was going to burst open and spill policemen into the alley, and even assuming they didn't get shot right away there'd be a hellacious amount of explaining to do—somewhere in the middle of Simon's grim reverie they reached the end of the alley and slipped out onto the street, immediately lost in the throngs of Manhattanites on their lunch hour. Simon heaved a deep breath and tried to relax, but his nerves were still jumping. He turned on the only target he had left. "Don't you ever fucking well do that to me again," he said under his breath. "If I'm walking into a goddamned firefight I want to *know*, do you hear me?"

Jeremy was silent for a moment. Simon was about to repeat himself when Jeremy abruptly barked out a laugh. "I must admit I wasn't expecting the *sniper rifle*," he said, his voice nearly shaking.

"Still," Simon said. "Never again. Jesus Christ. I'm not saying I don't get why you did it, but Christ, don't ever do it to me again."

Jeremy took a deep breath and held it for a moment, then let it out. "I sincerely hope it will never again be required," he said, sounding almost calm again. He looked calm; he looked a thousand miles away.

"Yeah, you better," Simon said. Then he snorted. "Fucking drama queen."

Jeremy smiled a little despite everything, digging around in his jacket and producing his sunglasses. "I suppose you were right about me all along," he said, putting on his shades like a shield against the world.



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## ◆ Epilogue

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*They came for him at eight o'clock on Sunday morning, last night's rain still wet on the streets and steaming in the sun.*

*It had been a long, hard week of work, out in Cincinnati, and Nate still hadn't quite recovered from Thursday's disastrous all-nighter. The older he got, the longer it took to fix his sleep schedule; kvetching about that sounded so stupid, because here he was, not even thirty and already saying I'm getting too old for this—but it was true, just the same.*

*So he was still deeply asleep when they came for him, tangled up in his blankets and snoring. He didn't hear the doorbell ring, and his mother had to knock on his open bedroom door twice before Nate woke with a snort and a yelp. He sat bolt upright in bed, clutching the blankets to his chest with both hands like a movie starlet (although most movie starlets didn't do it to hide the scars) and blinked at the fuzzy mother-shaped blob standing in the doorway.*

*"Some men are here to see you," she announced, matronly disapproval very clear in her voice. "From your work. They wouldn't say what they wanted."*

*Nate let go of the blankets with one hand and groped around on the bedside table for his glasses, fumbling them on. "Who is it?" he asked groggily, his voice thick with sleep. "Simon?"*

*"I'm sure I don't know," his mother sniffed, already retreating. She didn't approve of her son wasting the day away in bed, she'd made that very clear, and she certainly didn't approve of his job or his friends, but most of all she didn't approve of coming into her son's room when he was in there. When she'd moved in with him following his father's death she'd come pre-equipped with all sorts of internalized and unspoken rules for how she would and would not deal with her youngest son, with his house, and with the world, and it had taken him several months to figure them all out. Entering his room was fine when he wasn't in it, she'd decided, because how else would she change the sheets or put away his laundry or snoop through his bedtime reading material or check under his mattress for who knows what, but she'd also decided that a man's home was his castle and it certainly wasn't her place to distract him while he was enjoying*

*it. If Nate tried to come into his bedroom while she was in there, she'd nearly knock him down trying to unobtrusively get out of his way. "They're waiting downstairs," she added, already clumping away.*

*Nate took his glasses back off and knuckled the sleep out of his eyes, letting his blankets fall to puddle around his waist again. Then he combed his hair with his fingers and put on yesterday's jeans and t-shirt (and slippers, because his mother also didn't approve of walking around the house barefoot) and went downstairs to see who it was.*

*A pair of field agents that he didn't know were sitting on the edge of the couch, their backs ramrod straight and their hands loose in their laps. They both wore white shirts and ties and identical Young-Republican haircuts (Mike, in his finite wisdom, had nicknamed this look the 'Mormonator') and they both nodded at Nate when he came in, but didn't smile.*

*Nate hesitated in the doorway, then crossed to the big chair and sat down. "What can I do for you?" he asked, knotting his fingers together into a little bunch in his lap.*

*And then, of course, they told him.*

*They put him in their car and drove him to headquarters, which was good, because he was a bad driver at the best of times and nearly catatonic now. He sat in the back of the car and stared unseeingly out at the roads, completely and utterly in shock.*

*It took Nate an unconscionably long time to figure out that Internal Affairs was seriously investigating the possibility that he'd been helping Rich do this terrible, terrible thing. When it finally dawned on him it took away his ability to breathe for a few seconds, but by that point they'd already pretty much dismissed the idea, so Nate didn't manage to sabotage his own defense by panicking and protesting too much.*

*He was asked—or, at least, politely told—not to attempt to get in touch with any of his teammates until the investigation was complete. "What about Rich's funeral?" he'd managed to ask, fidgeting with his coffee mug.*

*"I'm sorry," the agent said, with a little apologetic smile. "Mr. Story's remains will be transported back to Seattle for burial, and I'm afraid I'll have to ask you not to leave the city just now."*

*Nate had nodded, not knowing what else to do.*

*Eventually they'd wrung him dry and let him go, on paid suspension until further notice, with yet another warning about not contacting any of his teammates. A different pair of field agents drove him home. Nate sat in the back seat staring out the window and tried to come to grips with what he'd been told, about Rich, and about Simon.*

*He didn't know how he felt about it. Instinctively, deep down, he knew that Rich was capable of having done just what they said he'd done, and so he believed in the story, as crazy as it sounded. Rich had been his closest friend but Simon was Simon and so, just as instinctively, he believed that Simon had done the best he could. In the days to come Nate would question a great many things but he never questioned Simon's version of events. Nate understood having faith in someone. Nate understood it very well.*

*His mother met him at the door, her face slack and lined with worry. "What is it?" she cried, wringing her hands. "What's happened?"*

*Nate knew that he'd get no peace until he explained, just as he knew that explaining wouldn't buy him much peace either. So: "Rich is dead," he said dully, stepping past his mother in order to shut the door. "He was shot. There's an investigation going on."*

*"Shot," she whispered, both hands flying to her mouth. "Oh, Nathan."*

*"I know, Mom," Nate said. Sooner or later she was going to give him one of her Well-I'm-Certain-I-Don't-Know-I'm-Just-Your-Mother-But speeches about how his job was horrible and dangerous and he really ought to think about finding a less risky line of work, but Nate didn't think he could deal with it right now, so he took the quickest and cheapest out he could. "I need to go change," he said, and made a beeline for the peace and quiet of his bedroom. She didn't follow him in.*

*Time slowed to a crawl after that.*

*Without his job to anchor it Nate's schedule slowly and gently started rotating around the clock, reverting to the night-owl tendencies that he'd always fallen afoul of in college. (Back then he'd called it 'getting unstuck in time' and thought he was very clever.) He stayed up later and later, waiting until he was completely exhausted to go to bed, and then slept in later and later each successive day to make up for it. He didn't mind. He liked staying up late and having the illusion of having the house to himself.*

*His mother certainly disapproved but for the time being she seemed willing to hold her peace. It was a small favor, but Nate was still grateful for it.*

*It wasn't until a week later that the email showed up.*

*It was just after midnight, and the house was dark and silent. He was messing around on his computer, enjoying the peace and quiet of his computer room, the one room of the house that his mother absolutely refused to set foot in, whether he was in it or not (she was terrified of computers, absolutely certain that they gave people cancer and ruined their eyesight, just you wait, Nathan, doctors will discover that some day). The taskbar had flashed, indicating that he had new mail, and Nate had tabbed over to his email program, expecting nothing but*

*something from one of his mailing lists, or maybe a new and enterprising bit of spam that he hadn't managed to block with his filters yet.*

*Instead he got an email titled, cryptically, Goodbye Nate, with the sender listed simply as Rich Story.*

*A wave of numbness swept through him. Automatically he clicked on the message and brought it up in the main window, but he managed to read no further than Nate: If you're reading this, then I'm long gone before he stumbled up out of his computer chair on legs that felt like they bent the wrong way and fumbled his way out of the room and down the stairs, to the dark and deserted kitchen.*

*Without bothering with the lights Nate wobbled over to the fridge on rubbery legs and fetched out a can of Coke, wincing at the brief flash of refrigerator light. He popped it open and drank it standing above the sink, no matter what his mother might think about people who ate over the kitchen sink, or drank right out of cans, or drank soda at all (rots your teeth, Nathan).*

*By the time he was done he'd managed to come to terms with what was waiting for him upstairs, so he rinsed out the can and left it on the sideboard to dry (his mother would cluck and shepherd it into the recycling bin tomorrow) and went back upstairs, sliding back into his chair to read the email from a dead man.*

**Nate: If you're reading this, then I'm long gone. By the time this email pops up in your inbox I'll be in another country, one without an extradition treaty with the US, and if you're reading this then you know why.**

**All the data on my computers has been erased and overwritten by now. I made sure that would happen. So you can tell them not to bother looking, because they won't find anything. My tracks are covered pretty damn thoroughly.**

**If they think you were involved, or anyone else was involved but me, tell them they're full of shit. I did it all myself. Got away with it forever, too. I cc'ed a copy of this email to Upstairs so that he'll know that. Guess it's the least I can do.**

**I didn't do it to hurt any of you. I made damned sure not to give away anything that would hurt the team. You don't have to believe that, but it's true.**

**You won't hear from me again. I'm not going to be one of those idiots who gets caught because he got homesick or started missing his old friends or any of that shit. But I wanted to at least say goodbye. Since I probably won't get a chance to do it in person, I did it this way. I guess it's more like me anyway.**

**You're a good guy, even if you don't know what the fuck you're talking about half the time. Hell, you're smarter than anyone I know, at**

**least personally. Hope you'll still call me your friend after all this shit.**

**Rich**

*For a good minute or so after he finished reading the email Nate stared at the screen, his lips trembling. "Oh, you egotistical little—" he finally whispered, unable even now to finish that sentence. "How could—you're not even sorry, are you? You're not sorry for any of it! You're proud of yourself! You... you asshole!" Nate's cheeks flared pink, and then went red when he abruptly stabbed his upraised middle finger at his computer monitor. His eyes were watering and his throat was thick and closed, but he didn't quite cry.*

*Then he grabbed his phone and called headquarters, dialing the number with trembling fingers.*

*Things moved very quickly after that.*

*Barely four days later he was back at work, picking idly at his own computer and trying not to look at the three hooded computers in the corner, all turned off and silent. IT had dumped the contents of all three computers onto virtual disks—despite the precautions that Rich had been so proud of, none of the three computers were, in fact, totally wiped, and knowing this gave Nate a mean little burn of pleasure deep inside—and then left them there. "Upstairs says for you to poke at them when you've got a moment," the IT guy said. "You knew him better than anybody, so maybe you'll be able to break his encryption shit where we won't. Who knows? Good luck."*

*Nate planned to try. He knew he wasn't half the software engineer that Rich had been but he wanted to at least give it a shot, see how well he measured up. But right now he was just poking at his own computer because he was scared to turn around and talk to the other members of the team.*

*Apparently they all felt more or less the same way. It was quiet in the saferoom. Even Mike had given up on trying to lighten the tension and was now fiddling with his pen, poking it into his cast to scratch the phantom itch on his palm that he'd been complaining about earlier.*

*They were all there, except Simon. They were all waiting on Simon. And Nate was terrified. He wasn't sure they were going to be able to go on after this, after Rich's betrayal and subsequent death at Simon's hands. He wasn't sure he was ever going to be able to look at Simon and not think of Rich. Maybe the team was dead. Maybe Rich had killed it. Maybe Simon had.*

*The door to the saferoom swung open and even the faint strained conversation in the room fell dead, all four of them turning around to stare at Simon. For a minute Simon didn't move, just stood there looking hesitant, and Nate's heart plummeted... but then Simon smiled, or tried to, and said "Hey," and came in, letting the saferoom door slam heavily shut behind him.*

Everyone in the room automatically looked towards the wall they shared with Team Hall, just waiting. Team Hall, showing an uncharacteristic amount of restraint and good taste, didn't make any of their usual protests, and a second or two later they all caught each other waiting for it and shared a laugh, although it was a small one and quickly over.

"C'mon over, Nate," Simon said, taking his usual seat at the head of the table. Nate put his computer to sleep and went over, joining the rest of the team for the first time. "So," Simon said, once Nate was at the table. "We're not going to get anywhere if we tiptoe around this subject, so I'm just going to say it and get it over with. If any of you want out—if you can't work with me any more after this—just say so, and I'll let you go. No hard feelings. Swear." And then he fell silent like he was actually expecting any of them to take him up on it.

Nate held his breath. Mike and Sandra glanced at each other. Johnny opened one eye a crack. The silence went on, strained and unpleasant, and then Johnny heaved a rattling sigh. "Nah," he said, shutting his eyes again. "I'm good."

It broke the skin of tension on the room like a rock thrown into a pond. Mike yelped out a laugh. "As if, Templar!" he said, and maybe his voice was a little nervous, but he was making an effort. "Shit, I can't leave, who the hell else would put up with my shit?"

"That's a very good question," Sandra said, "and one I don't have an answer for. I'll stay. I think we can get past this, if we try."

Nate was so overwhelmed with relief that no one else was deserting that he forgot to say anything. One by one they turned to look at him expectantly, with varying degrees of pity and worry in their eyes, and finally he noticed the lull in the conversation and the eyes on him. Nate yelped and went pink. "No!" he said. "I mean, yes, I'm staying, I'm not going anywhere—"

"You sure, Specs?" Simon asked. "I mean, you don't sound sure—"

"I'm sure!" Nate squeaked in horror, and then he caught the smile that Simon had been trying to hide, and he made a little embarrassed noise and shut up, his cheeks burning. Mike snickered. For a brief, shining moment, it was all almost normal again.

Simon bowed his head and looked down at his hands, clasped together so tightly that his knuckles were white. Then he heaved out a deep breath and unknotted his fingers and looked back up. "Well, you all had your chance," he said. "So, moving on. How are my injured?" Simon asked, knocking his knuckles on the table. "You guys surviving?"

"I'm good," Johnny said again. "Just a bruise anyway."

"Four more weeks in this cast," Mike said mournfully. "I'm gonna go crazy. I'm just gonna snap and start beating it against the table and someone's gonna have to tranq me."

"I'll do it," Sandra said immediately. "I have been waiting years for that opportunity."

*“Gonna take advantage of me while I’m unconscious?” Mike said, wagging his eyebrows. “I hope so!”*

*Sandra snorted and punched Mike in the shoulder. Mike yelped. Johnny shook his head. And Simon got up and fetched himself a cup of coffee. Nate’s chest threatened to burst with relief. For a horrifying moment he thought he might cry.*

*“So what’s up?” Mike asked as soon as Simon sat back down. “We still got a thief to catch, right?”*

*“Actually,” Simon said, and he paused to take a sip of coffee, leaving them all hanging like he liked to do. “Seems one Bran Lindsey, a fellow of Irish extraction and some unusual IRA affiliations, got himself taken in by the NYPD a couple of days ago while carrying a very interesting gun on his person.”*

*After a startled moment Mike wailed, “Whaaaaaat? He got caught by local cops? Aw, fuck, that’s lame, Templar! Why’s it got to be our ass they find the one time they can find an ass with both hands?”*

*“Tell me about it,” Simon said, shrugging. “Anyway, I let the NYPD know that I had a definite interest in Mr. Lindsey, and after lunch I think we need to call some PDs and get the ball rolling. What do you say?”*

*“Least we can do that much,” Mike muttered, subsiding. “Shit. I was hoping for some glory. Or at least bragging rights.”*

*“So he’s definitely our guy?” Sandra asked.*

*“Far as I can tell,” Simon said. “He fits the description that Archer gave us, he’s got the accent, he had the gun, and he had a few other extremely interesting tools on his person when he was arrested. If he’s not our guy, he’s doing a damned fine imitation.”*

*“Ah,” Sandra said. “And Archer?”*

*Simon shrugged. “Lindsey’s in detention and he looks good for it, so he’s caught, which is what we’d wanted Archer’s help for. I authorized Accounting to pay Archer the rest of what we owed him.”*

*“Seems fair,” Sandra said. “Did you ever hear from Archer? He called me to find out what was going on, said he couldn’t get hold of you.”*

*Simon took another, longer sip of coffee before answering. “I talked to him just long enough to confirm that he’d gotten the rest of his money and that we were square. He’s fucked off somewhere, as usual. Guess we could go pester Art Theft to find out where.”*

*“And Karpol?” Sandra asked.*

*Simon heaved a deep breath. “Not a ripple. Lindsey’s arrest didn’t generate any sort of Russian-language backlash, Langridge is fine, although she’s still laying low, and if Langridge is fine, I think Archer’s going to be okay. I don’t think Karpol is our problem any longer, and neither is Lindsey, and therefore neither is the CIA. Aren’t those just beautiful words, boys and girl?”*

*"Like a song," Mike crowed, bouncing his pen off the table and catching it again. "Man, I just love it when a case comes together."*

*"You and me both," Simon said. "The only thing I still don't know is who Edward Plunkett is."*

*"What?" said Mike. "Who? Huh?"*

*"Lord Dunsany," Nate said automatically. Everyone turned to stare at him and he turned pink.*

*"Who?" Simon asked.*

*"Um," said Nate, getting redder all the time. "Edward Plunkett, the eighteenth Lord Dunsany. He was a British nobleman and a fantasy writer from the turn of the century? One of Lovecraft's big influences?"*

*There was a pause while the others at the table digested this, and then Simon put a hand over his face and started to laugh, for some reason.*

*"Nerd," Mike said happily. "You learn that on Wikipedia?"*

*Johnny cracked open an eye. "You know what Wikipedia is? You some kind of nerd yourself?"*

*Mike blinked rapidly. "Uh, no," he said. "Never heard of it."*

*"Well, why don't you go look it up on Wikipedia, then?" Simon suggested, still laughing, and after a minute Mike started to snicker, and then they were all laughing, the pink flush fading from Nate's cheeks.*