



The Team

Author: *N.R. Walker*

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Description: Rhett Ouston loves his job as the captain of the Milvus team. He was born for the world of covert ops, secret missions, and tactical training.

And the best part? He gets to do it all with the love of his life by his side—Milvus team medic Jay Lin.

But then two new men are added to his team, along with doubts and secrets, and everything goes sideways.

Thrown into the deep end in a country they shouldn't be in, with no help from HQ, Rhett doesn't know who to trust. And when the mission they're on to stop a global terrorism deal goes to hell, tensions and trust within his team implode.

"Trust your instincts," Jay tells him. "They've never failed you yet."

So Rhett digs in, determined to do the one thing he knows how. He's going to make this team work even if it kills him.

And it very well might.

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ONE

SHANGHAI

Jun-mei peered up, her doe eyes and plump, full lips enough to make his knees weak.

“I will miss you so much,” she said softly.

He pressed his lips to hers, trying to capture this moment for as long as he could. “I love you.” He traced his thumb along her eyebrow, down to her pale cheek. “I will text you when I can. You have the burner phone?”

She nodded. “Of course.” She smiled. “Do you have yours?”

“Of course. Keep yours here in a drawer. Keep it charged. Keep it on silent. Don’t take it out of the house. And keep your go-bag packed and ready. And remember the code word. Any instruction I give to you will have our code word first. If it does not, ignore it. Do not reply.”

Her smile faded. “Okay.”

“What’s our code word?”

“Húdié,” she said. “Butterfly.”

He kissed her forehead. “My butterfly.”

She beamed up at him.

He couldn't keep delaying the inevitable. "Keep your head down," he said seriously. "And be safe."

She nodded solemnly. "I know."

"Don't answer the door to anyone. Go to work, come home. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but I can't protect you when I'm not here."

Her beautiful eyes became glassy, but she nodded again.

"If you think someone is watching you or following you?—"

"I know, I know," she murmured.

"It won't always be this way," he reassured her. "I will find a way, I promise. It's why I'm doing this."

"I know. As much as I wish it otherwise."

"We will have forever after this," he promised her again. "Freedom, and no more hiding."

She tried to smile, teary-eyed. "I love you."

He took a deep breath in, absorbing her words, absorbing this moment, and he kissed her again. When he broke the kiss, he pressed his forehead to hers, his strong arms holding her close.

"You be safe," she said. "And come back to me."

He studied her eyes, wishing he could have this moment forever. “Wo de xin.”

He left her then, heartsore and scared, wondering if this would be the last time he set foot on his home soil. He threw his bag onto the backseat of the waiting military vehicle, climbed in, and didn't look back.

TWO

LONDON

Rhett Ouston didn't drink alcohol often, but he still enjoyed a night out. Being surrounded by happy people, who were oblivious to the horrors of the world, was good for the soul.

To be in a club filled with people, merry and dancing, laughing, making out, with the music thumping, made Rhett feel normal. Even if just for a few hours.

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Where there wasn't evil lurking in the shadows or death and destruction around every corner.

Where he wasn't on high alert, on a secret mission, undercover.

Where he could be himself. Be nothing but a regular twenty-six-year-old man in a club in Soho, watching the love of his life dance without a care in the world.

Jay Lin had been a beacon of light in his life for eight years. A sassy, sarcastic, smart-mouthed ray of fucking sunshine.

His ray of sunshine.

Jay needed to let loose tonight. They'd been in go-mode for months, and while Rhett could forge on, Jay had needed a break. Just for a few hours.

Of course, Rhett would never deny him.

He'd do anything for him.

Jay had only had two beers—barely enough to take the edge off—but he liked to dance. Where he could close his eyes and lose himself to the music, to the thump and sway of dancing bodies.

And Rhett could lose himself watching Jay.

Jay was shorter than most men. All of five foot four inches and barely sixty kilos, and

holy hell, he was pretty. His Chinese/Malaysian heritage was a striking mix, and with his bright eyes and blinding smile, men were usually drawn to him.

He never showed a hint of interest in them though. His eyes were on Rhett the whole time, and most men took one look at Rhett's six-foot-two, military-fit frame and his death glare and usually got the message. Or Rhett would slide his hand down to Jay's ass and give the guy a lethal and possessive glare and that was the end of that.

Not that he had to mark his territory often, but he'd have no hesitation. Not in any country in the world, and certainly not in a bar in Soho.

So when he noticed a man at the back of the club watching the dance floor, watching Jay, Rhett kept an eye on him.

Five ten, Chinese, fit, serious, and wearing all black. His short hair looked military, and the way he scanned the room while appearing not to was a tell.

Fuck.

Rhett put his water down, watching. Waiting.

A second man appeared, trying to come off as smiling as he spoke to the first guy. Taller, bigger, also Chinese, definitely military.

And definitely watching Jay.

Rhett was on the move.

He weaved his way through the crowd toward the dance floor. Jay was watching him, saw the seriousness, so he knew... but he kept up the charade and never stopped dancing. Rhett didn't collect him, didn't take his hand and lead him outside. He put

his hands on his hips and began to sway with him so he could whisper in his ear.

“Two men, corner, at your three o’clock.”

Jay put his arms around Rhett’s neck, swaying and smiling. Then he leaned up on his toes and pulled Rhett down a little so he could talk in Rhett’s ear. “Are they swingers?”

Rhett growled. “Not funny.”

Jay threw his head back and laughed, then whispered again, his lips at Rhett’s ear. “They’re definitely watching. Should we give them a show?”

Rhett didn’t like the way these men had singled them out. Their night of anonymity was over. “We should leave.”

Still playing his part and not to cause a scene, Jay laughed again, took Rhett’s arm, and led him toward the exit. As soon as they were outside, they were nothing but shadows in an already dark night, disappearing in plain sight.

Round the corner, down the alley, through a gate, and gone.

“Who were they?” Jay asked, serious now as they clung to the shadows, heading for the crowds on Rupert Street.

“Don’t know. But they weren’t just watching you. They were scoping. We got made.”

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“Who knows we’re here?”

That was the million-dollar question.

As they made it to the crossroad, Rhett scanned the street. Saturday night crowds were milling about on the sidewalks. A few drunk and loud folks but nothing unusual, and there was a taxi bay across the street and down past the pub.

They headed towards it, just as a crowd of people poured out of the pub. Loud laughing men and women, crowing about a football match.

Rhett navigated through them, Jay beside him, but one drunk older guy had more liquid courage than brain cells and decided that pushing Rhett was a good idea.

“Watch where yer goin’,” he said, staggering and sizing up Rhett. “Big guy like you don’t scare me. Beat plenty’a’ guys bigger than you.”

The dumbass looked like his nose had seen a few fists back in his day, and perhaps if he had been thirty years younger and thirty kilos lighter, it might have been a fun fight.

But not tonight.

Rhett put his hands up. “Sorry, pops. I don’t dance.”

Jay laughed, and the older guy clearly thought Jay was an easier target. He turned to him, red in the face, about to spout off some bullshit, but Rhett stepped in close. His

voice was low, menacing. "Look at him if you wanna fuckin' die today. I dare you."

Pops took a step back, and through all the crowdsurrounding them, the pub security watching, waiting, Rhett noticed something move out of the corner of his eye.

Two shadows in the dark past the pub.

"On our six," Rhett said, the old guy forgotten.

Jay turned. "Shit."

They took off, pushing through the crowd,towardthe threat this time. People yelled after them, the old guy hollered for the cowards to come back like some hero, and someone laughed.

Rhett didn't care. They rounded the corner onto Shaftesbury Street, his heart thumping.

And saw nothing.

There was no one. Nothing but a streetlight some twenty metres up the road and an otherwise empty street. Quiet and dark buildings and a one-a.m. silence.

So Rhett looked upward, scanning the brick walls, looking for anyone, anything. Those walls were three stories high. Not scalable, not in the seconds it had taken them to get there.

"What the fuck?" Jay mumbled. "Where'd they go?"

Rhett had no answer. "I don't like this," he whispered. "Let's go."

He turned, ready to head back past the pub, ready to see if old pops really did want to dance, when a figure emerged from the shadows and lunged for him. Rhett reacted on instinct, deflecting and slamming into the body mass.

He could see him now.

Wearing all black, the first guy from the club. Rhett had his arms around him and drove him onto the street. A passing car honked its horn, but Rhett was focused on his target. Before he could find his centre of gravity, Rhett swung at him.

His target was fast on his feet—too fast—countering Rhett's punches, anticipating his moves. They traded a few blows, Rhett copping a sharp jab to the eye before landing a solid punch to the guy's chin.

It rattled him for a split second, and Rhett risked a glance back at Jay.

Jay could hold his own, Rhett knew that. But he'd always worry. The need to protect him was ingrained.

Rhett circled around so he could see both Jay and his target, who flew at him with a sidekick.

Rhett blocked and parried, trading jab for jab, blow for blow.

And his target laughed.

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He fucking laughed.

“You know Sanda,” he said. His split lip bled more when he smiled and he wiped it with the back of his hand. “I’m impressed.”

Rhett sneered at him. “Who the fuck are you?”

But then there were sirens incoming and cops on foot surrounding them.

Fucking hell.

The street fight was over, though honestly, Rhett and Jay could take down all these cops on their own if they had to. They weren’t even armed. But this was already bad enough.

“Put your hands in the air,” one cop yelled at them.

“Like you just don’t care,” Jay sang along, wiggling with his hands in the air.

Rhett shot him a look, seeing his eyebrow was cut, but he was still smiling.

Always smiling.

The big guy behind Jay chuckled, despite his bleeding mouth and scuffed cheekbone.

What the fuck was going on?

Rhett looked at the man beside him. He wasn't smiling now. His jaw was set, eyes hard. Assessing, calculating.

"We could make a run for it," he said, like it was a challenge. Like this was all some kind of joke.

Rhett sneered at him. "You go first."

More cops arrived then, sirens, lights, crowd gathering, recording it all on their phones. Hell, it was probably being live-streamed to TikTok. This was a nightmare.

"Get on your knees," one cop ordered the four of them.

Jay opened his mouth and Rhett snapped at him, "Do not say it."

Jay snorted but he complied, going to his knees. So did the big guy beside Jay. Rhett and his new friend needed to be told twice, apparently.

They lowered themselves down like it was some contest between them to see who'd concede first.

It was a tie.

Then Rhett allowed himself to be handcuffed and manhandled down to the local police station, where, after being processed, he and Jay were thrown in an interview room.

Across the hall, he could see his two new best friends sitting in their interview room. The first guy was sitting stock-still and stoic, and Rhett was pleased to see he'd given him a shiner and a split lip. The second guy was banged up but mumbling something and smirking, laughing.

“Who do you reckon they are?” Jay asked. “Five bucks says they’re spies for the PLA.”

“That’s a safe bet,” Rhett mumbled. “My question would be what the fuck do they want with us? And how the hell do they know who we are? They targeted us. It wasn’t random.”

Just then, a uniformed Met officer escorted an older man, Chinese, wearing a long blue trench coat and a steely scowl, into the room with the two waiting men. Smiley straightened up instantly, but Stoic’s eyes met Rhett’s through the glass window. And as their visitor seethed quietly at them, Stoic simply stared at Rhett.

Jay nudged him. “I think he likes you.”

Rhett couldn’t help it. He laughed.

Stoic’s expression never changed.

Jay nudged Rhett again, leaning in close. “I think he’s in love.”

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Rhett nudged him back. “Fucking stop it,” he said, just as their door opened.

A Met officer stood there with none other than Ericson King.

Rhett had expected some brass to come collect them, give them an earful, maybe even an official reprimand. But he hadn’t expected it to be the Director of Foreign Intel.

Ericson King was sixty, at a guess. He reminded Rhett of Don Cheadle... if he were English and with less of a tendency to smile. Did his time in the ranks of MI6 and was apparently the best, until a bullet ended his field career and gave him a permanent limp and a cane.

And he didnotlook happy now.

Jesus.

Rhett and Jay both stood immediately, and the director seethed into the room, the door closing behind him. “Ask me how happy I am to be called in here at two a.m. on a Sunday morning,” he said, voice like razor wire.

“How happy are you—” Jay began, until King glared at him so hard, even Rhett winced.

“I don’t have a sense of humour, Agent Lin,” Director King said to Jay. “Not on a good day. And I sure as fuck don’t have one at two a.m.”

Rhett figured he'd start the explanation. He fell into the at-ease position, feet apart, hands behind his back, gaze straight ahead. "We believed our cover was compromised, sir. Two assailants made us. We left the vicinity and were followed. We returned chase, and an altercation broke out?—"

"An altercation broke out," King repeated. Rhett had to wonder if steam would actually come out of his ears. "It's on every social media platform and YouTube, for fuck's sake. Your faces! Do you think your cover was compromised? Do you fucking think?"

Rhett remained silent and still.

Director King scrubbed a hand over his face, inhaled deeply, and sighed. "I don't even know what to do with you," he said. "I don't have to remind you how stupid you are and how we have expectations of zero fuckups. Not even gonna start on international incidents and diplomacy. I had to come down here and identify myself to save your asses. What I should do is separate you two until you prove you can behave."

Rhett's gaze shot to King's, his blood running both hot and cold. "Sir."

Jay made a soft noise, his breath hitched, and he gave a small shake of his head.

"That's what I fucking thought," King said. Then he growled, frustrated and pissed off, and he was about to say something when there was a quiet knock on the door. "Enter."

The door opened, and the older man in the blue trench coat stood there, perfect posture, neutral expression. Stoic and Smiley stood behind him, eyes straight ahead. "Director King," he said as he stepped inside. His two men followed him in, stopped, and stood at attention.

And not for the first time tonight, Rhett asked himself what the fuck?

“Commander Zihao,” King said.

They knew each other?

King stared at Rhett first, then Jay, then back to Rhett before nodding in their direction. “And this is Captain Rhett Ouston, and medic Jay Lin. I believe you’ve already met.”

What Rhett wanted to ask was what the fucking fuck, but he settled for, “Sir?”

King gestured to the two men who’d attacked them. “Meet Yin Tao and Chen Hanyu, agents with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. The two newest members of the Milvus Division, Alpha.”

Alpha? That was Rhett’s team.

“Sir, I already have a squad of eight.”

“Correct. And when Kowalski and Myles get back from assignment, you’ll have ten.”

Rhett kept his gaze straight, his jaw set. “Director, I thought you said you didn’t have a sense of humour at two a.m.”

Director King stared at him, nostrils flared. He took a step closer to Rhett, his knuckles white on his cane. “What I have is zero patience for your Australian bullshit. I don’t care if you’re the best, Ouston. One more remark, one more mistake, and your demoted arse will be on the first flight back to Canberra. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Rhett could have sworn he saw Yin Tao smirk.

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Director King stepped back to join Commander Zihao. Zihao was neat as a pin, and Rhett recognised no-nonsense when he saw it. “I apologise for the actions and behaviour of agents Yin and Chen,” Zihao said. “Rest assured, such insubordination will not happen again.”

Rhett looked over at Yin and Chen, taking in their exemplary posture and banged-up faces. At the two men who were now on his team that he now outranked. He owned their asses. Then he turned back to Commander Zihao. “I can assure you it won’t.”

Zihao nodded before the three of them turned and walked out. The remaining silence in the room was deafening.

Director King moved to stand in front of Rhett. “Report for duty at zero six hundred, where you will be debriefed in full. This is an exercise in diplomacy and international relations in an official exchange of intel and goodwill. It’s a goddamn olive branch, and so help me god, you will play nice. Do you hear me?”

“Understood, sir.”

“It better be. Now get out of my face,” King said. “Before I change my mind and fire you both.”

Rhett and Jay got to the door.

“Captain,” the director said, stopping them.

Rhett turned. “Sir.”

He pointed his cane at him. “Play. Nice.”

Rhett couldn’t help it. He almost smiled. “Yes, sir.”

THREE

Rhett and Jay were at the London HQ well before the required 0600. They’d fucked up last night and Rhett wasn’t giving them one more opportunity to punish him.

Director King had threatened to separate them last night, and that had been enough to knock some sense into him.

The truth was, they’d become complacent. Arrogant in thinking they were untouchable.

Had they been on separate missions before?

Sure.

Had they spent a week or two apart in the last eight years?

Of course.

But separated? And sent to opposite ends of the planet for fuck knows how long?

Never.

Rhett couldn’t even stand the idea of it.

Jay was his entire world.

It had been a massive issue in the beginning. When they'd been selected for Milvus, the powers that be considered culling Jay from their list of ideal candidates.

Rhett had said he'd decline. They were a package deal or no deal at all.

The thing was, Jay was exceptional at his job. He was brilliant at this life. Covert ops, forever on the move, sleepless nights, relentless fatigue and strain on their bodies and minds.

Jay made it look easy.

He was an outstanding field medic. He was the best. And Rhett was the best leader, the best soldier, their best recruit.

And Rhett had sworn, promised and vowed that their relationship, their bond, would not compromise their work.

It would make their team better, Rhett had said. Their dedication to Milvus was unwavering, resolute, and true. But it was a two-for-one deal.

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They'd warned Rhett. They'd told him, in no uncertain circumstances, that any conflict of interest or misstep because of their relationship, and it was all over.

For two years, they'd been a formidable team.

Their results were impressive and undeniable. Keeping them on the same team had been the right decision.

Until last night.

It was stupid, stupid, stupid.

And perhaps the blunt reminder that Rhett needed. On the ground, he was in charge of his team, yes. But he was not in charge of the Milvus Division. He did not make decisions.

He took orders.

The arrogance and complacency were gone.

The debriefing on the two new members of his team went about as well as expected. He was a team leader, a squad leader, with his tail between his legs.

Agent Yin looked more reserved too. Giving polite nods and subservient replies. Chen wasn't smiling so much now, but the spark of humour in his eyes was still there.

Maybe the ass-ripping they got last night had reminded them of their place too.

Director King was there, of course, standing at the back, unimpressed. Commander Zihao was there, poised and polite. Director Depraz led the debriefing. She was French, astute, and to the point.

Agents Yin and Chen were introduced as members of the Jiaolong Commandos. The name translated to Sea Dragon, part of the People's Liberation Army Marine Corps.

SEALS.

They were the equivalent of Navy SEALs.

Yin had been a captain, same rank as Rhett. Rhett wasn't surprised by this. He held himself like a leader. Fought like one too.

Chen had been a first lieutenant; Yin's right-hand man. He was a big guy, and Rhett assumed he was the brawn of the duo. Yin was the brains.

They were highly decorated, highly respected, and hand-picked as ambassadors for this mission.

King had said it was an exercise in diplomacy and international relations, an exchange of intel, but Rhett had to wonder if the Milvus council simply wanted a base on Chinese soil. A foothold in China, conveniently within striking distance of Russia, perhaps?

Rhett knew one thing for certain: nothing ever happened without subterfuge, ulterior motives. Personal gain.

And that went both ways, Rhett had no doubt.

What the Chinese were getting out of this deal, Rhett could only guess.

There was no word on duration. Were they here for a week or a year, or a permanent inclusion? Rhett couldn't even guess. He could only assume, given he had not been told, that he didn't need to know.

At the end of the day, it didn't matter. They would adapt to their inclusion as well as adapt to their departure.

Every member of Rhett's team listened as he knew they would. None would argue. They were soldiers, all of them. They each knew decisions were made over their heads and they would obey without question. Personal beliefs and prejudices were not a factor.

Not according to the hierarchy anyway.

How the team adapted and the cohesion, or lack thereof, that followed was Rhett's problem.

Bringing two new members into an established team was never easy. But Rhett knew, as always, that any failure was a failure of his leadership skills.

And Rhett didn't fail at anything.

Director Depraz looked directly at Rhett. "Agent Ouston, anything you'd like to add?"

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In other words, reinforce everything she'd just said.

"Thank you, Director," Rhett said. He faced his team. "My expectations remain unchanged. I expect no issues because there will be no issues."

Every member of his team gave a nod. Even Jay.

And Rhett knew Jay's opinions on this. He wasn't thrilled, but Rhett knew Jay would just roll with it, adapt, and push on.

"Right, then," Director King said, walking forward, using his cane a little heavier than normal. His lack of sleep from having to extract Rhett and Jay from the Met at two o'clock in the morning, no doubt.

It reminded Rhett to tread carefully around King today, and probably for the foreseeable future.

"You've got thirty minutes to get acquainted," King said, "before I want to see Ouston and Lin, and Yin and Chen in my office."

Another ass-kicking, no doubt.

"Understood," Rhett said with a nod.

The directors filed out, leaving Yin and Chen still standing at attention at the front of the room.

“So,” Azrael said, smiling. Then she gestured to her face, then to Rhett and Jay, then to Yin and Chen and their busted-up faces. “You boys all get your make-up done at the same place?”

The others laughed, but all looked at Rhett to answer. “We may have had a misunderstanding,” he said.

“We saw,” Coyote said, pulling out his phone. He held up the YouTube video. “The view count is crazy. Tech’s gonna have a lot of fun trying to scrub this video.”

Rhett sighed.

“You got your ass kicked,” Sid said with a laugh.

Chen’s big smile broke out at that, and even Yin’s lips twitched.

“Hey,” Jay said defensively, both hands up. “I was well out of my weight division. We can all see that, right?”

“You fight well,” Chen said, still smiling. “For a little man.”

Yin’s gaze went to Rhett’s, stoic as ever. He wasn’t waiting for a comment on the fighting. He was waiting for Rhett to take charge of this meeting.

Rhett hated that he was right.

“Introductions,” Rhett said. He was sure Yin and Chen had full intel, but he was doing this anyway. “Name’s Ouston, call sign is Captain. Australian, SAS.”

“You’ve met Agent Lin,” Rhett said, gesturing to Jay. “Call sign Medic. Australian, SAS.”

“Agent John Ritchie,” Rhett said, and Sid gave a wave. “Call sign Sid. English, MI6. He’s our ops and intel officer.”

“Agent Sahni,” Rhett said, and Tarak gave a nod. “Call sign Echo. He’s our comms sergeant. India’s 1B.”

“Agent Cantrell,” Rhett said, gesturing to Damian. He gave a nod. “Call sign Coyote. He’s our weapons and demolitions sergeant. American Navy SEAL.”

Coyote thumped his chest. “Hooyah!”

Chen smiled. Yin did not.

“Agent Masson,” Rhett said, gesturing to Anna, the only woman on their team. “Call sign Azrael. French BFST.”

Yin’s gaze went to Rhett’s. “Azrael?”

Rhett gave a nod. “Angel of death.”

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Sid waved his hands like a magic spell. “The beautiful enigma that carries souls to meet their maker.”

Azrael shot Sid a glare. “The day I get to send you to meet yours gets closer every day,” she said.

Rhett ignored their bickering. They always bickered.

“She’s our sniper,” Rhett explained.

Yin looked at her, and only then did he smile.

Figures.

She was beautiful and talented, true. Many men admired her. She never looked twice at any of them.

Sid noticed Yin’s smile too, and Sid rolled his eyes.

Rhett wasn’t in the mood for that bullshit today. “We have two members on assignment. Kowalski. Engineer sergeant, Polish GROM. And Myles, weapons, Canadian JTF2.”

Yin gave a nod but said nothing.

Rhett was pretty sure he was waiting for permission to speak, so he gave it. “Your turn.”

“Yin Tao,” he said. “Or as you would say it, Tao Yin. As explained before, I was a captain in the Jiaolong Commandos.”

“The Sea Dragons,” Coyote said, nodding his approval. “Nice.”

Yin gave a small nod of respect. “For ten years.”

Ten years as an elite tactical officer. That was pretty hardcore, Rhett had to admit.

Then Chen gave an awkward wave. “First name Hanyu, last name Chen. I am...” He looked at Yin. “In English?”

“Breachman,” Yin supplied.

Chen grinned. “Breachman. My English is just okay, but I learn.”

Breachman? From the size of him, Rhett was not surprised.

Then Jay said something in Chinese that Rhett couldn’t follow, but Chen grinned, and even Yin gave a small, surprised smile.

Rhett knew enough Mandarin to sayhelloandthank youbut very little else, and he knew the rest of the team had no hope. He looked at Jay for translation.

“I just told him I was happy to help with translations,” Jay said. “For a small man.”

Rhett smirked.

“You guys got a call sign or something?” Sid asked. “What do we call you?”

Chen grinned as he gestured to Yin. “His name is Fù-shé,” he said.

“For sure?” Rhett asked, wishing he hadn’t the second it was out of his mouth.

“Fù-shé. Is snake.” Chen motioned his hand like a snake striking.

“Pit viper,” Jay said. “Fù-shé is Chinese for pit viper.”

Pit viper, Rhett thought. He could see that, and it was a pretty cool name, though he still preferred Stoic.

Then Chen put his hand on his chest and proudly said, “Totoro.”

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Oh my god.

Fucking Totoro.

Jay burst out laughing, and Azrael smiled. Sid, Echo, and Coyote all had no clue.

They looked to Jay for an explanation. “That’s perfect, I love it,” Jay said.

“I’ll show you guys later,” Azrael said to the others.

Rhett checked his watch. “We have a meeting with Director King.”

Jay stood up, his chair scraping the floor, and he clapped his hands. “Come on, Totoro. Let’s go get our asses kicked again.”

Chen smiled at Jay like he was his new favourite toy.

Rhett resisted smiling as he held the door.

“How’s your lip?” Jay asked, pointing to the big guy’s cut as they walked out.

“Is fine, no trouble,” he said. “You fight good.”

“For a small guy,” Jay added, and Chen laughed.

Yin gave Rhett a nod as he followed them out. Rhett looked back at his team, did his best not to sigh or roll his eyes, and quickly fell into step beside Yin.

An exercise of diplomacy, indeed.

FOUR

Rhett expected an ass chewing and he wasn't disappointed. King was pissed, and rightfully so.

He did have to clean up Rhett's mess, after all.

And Rhett didn't like mess.

Punishment was gruelling. A solid eight hours of fitness. Not just for him and Jay and Chen and Yin. But for his whole squad.

And oh boy, did they love him for that.

They bitched the four of them out, cussed at them, and Rhett was pretty sure Echo even cussed his mother. Rhett's Urdu wasn't great, but he understood that much.

Still, he deserved it.

Now, they ran fitness on the regular. Sometimes for hours. Sometimes for days on end. Pushing their bodies and minds to the limits was expected as part of the job. But this punishment felt like a burden.

He'd burdened his team with this. They were going through this punishment because of his actions. But the scathing glares he got as they did drills soon turned to the occasional smile as the hours wore on.

They loved being pushed. They urged each other on, they pushed each other, and would always, always strive for excellence.

The challenge always spurred them on.

And Chen and Yin held their own.

Rhett had expected the big fella to struggle, but the man was a freaking warhorse. He was red in the face, sweating, but once he got past the pain threshold, he was in the zone. Crazy sonofabitch even laughed a few times.

Yin, on the other hand, took the punishment seriously and without so much as a murmur. He ran, he climbed, he swam, he pushed, pushed, pushed with laser focus and determination. He worked as part of the team seamlessly. He kept an even pace, sensible and practised, and Rhett had to wonder just how long he could keep it up.

Until he dropped dead, probably.

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Rhett didn't particularly like the guy, but he had to respect that.

And he had to best him, of course.

When the drill sergeant blew his whistle and called it all over, everyone dropped to the ground, panting, laughing, cursing.

But Yin barely rested his hands on his knees, so of course, Rhett had to stand tall. He allowed himself to put his hands on his hips to catch his breath.

What he wanted to do was collapse to the ground and groan. But he couldn't let Yin win.

So he pretended he was fine and stood there, measured breathing, even smiling.

His team had done well.

"Beers are on me tonight," he said.

Sid hauled himself up and gave Rhett a shove as he walked toward the showers. "And so they freaking should be."

Echo followed Sid but gave Rhett a pained huff. "And pizza."

Rhett gave a nod. "Deal."

Azrael groaned as she got to her feet. "I hate you all," she said, still puffing as she

followed the others.

Rhett laughed and lifted his shirt to wipe his face. When he looked over at Jay, Jay put his hand up. “Need help to get up.”

Rhett laughed and, taking Jay’s hand, pulled him up to his feet. “Shower, food, bed,” Jay said. “In that order.”

Rhett had to agree.

Jay looked over at Chen. “Totoro, get up. You like pizza?”

Chen groaned as he slowly got to his feet. “Pizza, yes. Like very much. Punishment, no like very much.”

“Same, big guy,” Jay said. “Same.”

Without a word, Yin headed toward the showers and Chen followed him. Jay turned to Rhett and gave him a smile. “You know how I said I think he likes you?”

Rhett grumbled. “Hm.”

“Well, I take that back,” Jay said. “I don’t think the pit viper likes anyone.”

Rhett almost smiled at that.

Jay began walking to the showers, not looking to see if Rhett followed. “I wasn’t kidding about the shower, food, and bed thing. And next time we get followed at one o’clock in the morning and decide to have a fight in the street, can we ask them first if they’re Chinese special ops? Because I don’t want a repeat of today. Ever, if possible. Could have saved us all this trouble if we’d just asked them to dance.”

Rhett smiled as he followed him. “Dare you to ask Yin if he wants to dance. Idareyou.”

Jay laughed, but it sounded pained. “No thanks.”

The showers were open, like most military showers were. Rhett was very used to seeing all the guys naked and rarely even looked at any of them. They were all fit and jacked, nothing new to be seen. It’d been that way since his cadet days back in the beginning—well, except with Jay. After all, the showers were how he and Jay had first ever hooked up. But modesty was not something the military afforded.

Chen didn’t seem to care either, but Yin showered in the far corner. Fast and efficient, as he was in most things, Rhett assumed.

But as he walked out, with his towel wrapped around his waist, Rhett saw Yin’s back. Almost every inch was covered in scars and shrapnel wounds.

Well, shit.

The others noticed too.

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It was kinda freaking hard to miss when the guy looked like a build-a-body crash-test dummy.

Yin definitely had a story to tell.

And it fucking irked Rhett that he disliked the guy a little less, and maybe respected him a little more.

He remembered seeing Harry Harrigan when he was shirtless in a hospital bed. That man had more scars than a battering ram—a lifetime of war and battles.

Rhett had to wonder about Yin. About the battles he'd fought, won, and lost. What wars and the horrors he'd seen.

The truth was, with all the intel they had on the Chinese military, so much was unknown. Maybe this exercise in diplomacy wasn't so much Yin learning what he could about their operations, but more about Milvus learning about theirs.

Either way, Yin and Chen were now a part of his squad, and he had a duty to include them, to bridge the gap in trust, and make his team as strong as possible.

That was Rhett's job.

Being a leader and, differences aside, that's what he was determined to do.

Today's punishment had taught Rhett a few basics on both Yin and Chen. They weren't quitters. That looks can be deceiving, because as big and oafish as Chen was,

he was as fit as any of them. And they could and did work as a team.

He'd seen Yin offer a hand to Echo to help pull him up on the rope obstacles. He'd seen Chen offer a foothold to Sid to get him over a wall.

So maybe today hadn't been such a waste.

When they were all dressed and much more presentable, they headed to the pub. The Cat and Fiddle was a typical English pub and one they'd frequented a few times as a group, whenever they were in London, anyway. The first time, the barman asked what the occasion was to bring the group in, and Rhett said they were all colleagues from the telco offices around the corner. The barman never batted an eyelid, never questioned them again, and so they joined some tables together and ordered some pizzas to share.

There were dartboards, a pool table, a jukebox, and locals who didn't bother them.

As they took their seats, Yin and Chen sat together at one end, mostly observing the group in action. Gauging dynamics, Rhett assumed. Learning personalities and senses of humour, which was a good thing.

Jay, of course, had the loudest laugh. And the best smile, Rhett thought as he took a swig of his beer.

Coyote and Azrael played pool, Sid and Echo played darts, and when Jay hauled Chen out of his seat and made him team up to beat Coyote and Azrael at pool, it left Yin and Rhett at the table alone.

Rhett took his beer and pulled up the seat next to Yin. He tapped his beer bottle to Yin's. "How was your first day?"

Yin smiled. He actually smiled. “Had worse.”

Rhett chuckled, because hadn’t they all. “So, there’s something I gotta know.”

Yin’s eyes hardened, no doubt expecting something personal.

“Did we pass?”

He turned his head slowly to face him. “Pass what?”

“The test last night,” Rhett replied. “I mean, that’s what it was, right? Follow us, draw us out. See how we handled ourselves, how we reacted.”

Yin smirked as he sipped his beer. “It was just for fun.”

Fun?

Not the word Rhett would use to describe it. Not the fight, and not the punishment that followed.

Just when Rhett wasn’t sure what to say next, Jay mis-hit the white ball and swore, and Chen roared with laughter. It made Rhett smile, and he decided to take the focus off themselves. “Big guy’s funny.”

Yin’s face did something... his eyebrow flickered and his lips twitched before he frowned. “A better man you won’t find.”

Rhett nodded slowly as he watched the worst game of pool ever played unfold. Then he figured he’d try to squeeze out some info. “First time in England?”

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Yin looked at him as if it were the stupidest question he'd ever heard. "No. You?"

Rhett smiled. "No. First time in England with the English government knowing?"

Yin snorted and sipped his beer, but he didn't answer. Instead, keeping his eyes on the guys playing pool, he said, "He speaks Mandarin."

Rhett tried not to let that bother him. He wanted to say he has a name, but he couldn't show any bias.

"He does. And Malaysian and Indonesian."

Yin's lips twitched as if he found this tug of war for details funny. "You and he were together last night."

Rhett sipped his beer, contemplating how best to answer, and if Yin noticed how hard Rhett was holding the damn bottle, he never let on.

"We are every night," Rhett said, tone as neutral as he could manage. "Have been for eight years."

Yin's gaze cut to his—a reaction unschooled—before he looked back at the pool game. Instead of speaking, he sipped his beer.

"Your intel not divulge that?" Rhett asked. He'd be a fool to think the Chinese military didn't have the full brief on this team before they sent two of their men to join it. "Thought you woulda had the rundown on everyone before you got here. I

mean, you knew where we were last night.”

Yin looked at him again, the corner of his lips curling up. “Intel, yes. Two Australians, not... not that you were...”

“Together?” Rhett shrugged. “Gay?”

Yin was suddenly back to being stoic, impassive. “No.”

Rhett put his bottle on the table. He had zero time for bigots, and there wasn’t any way he was putting up with it in his team. “Look,” Rhett said, voice low. “I don’t give a fuck what you think about it personally. If it offends you or is looked down upon in your world, not one single fuck. But here, in this world—in this team—it won’t fly. Go have yourself removed from my team. No skin off my nose.”

Yin’s gaze remained on the pool game, though his jaw ticked. “I don’t have a problem with it. I didn’t expect to see you dance.”

Rhett snatched up his beer. “Okay, first of all, I don’t dance. Jay dances. And second, we saw you watching us, and Jay was going to ask you to join us on the dance floor.”

Yin turned his head so fast, Rhett wondered if it hurt his neck. He stared at him, mad and shocked, and it pleased Rhett greatly to elicit such a reaction out of Mr Stoic.

Rhett laughed. “Just kidding.”

Yin seethed, his lips a pressed line, eyes narrowed at where Chen and Jay were now attempting to play darts. Rhett couldn’t help it. He liked Chen, and he got the feeling everyone did.

“So,” Rhett hedged. “Totoro.”

Yin looked at him again, not quite schooling the disdain from his eyes. “What about him?”

“He’s funny.”

Yin’s temper, or perhaps his defensiveness, deflated. “He is.”

“He’s like Jay. Hard not to like the guy.”

Yin gave a nod and nothing more.

“Known him long?”

“Six years.”

“Were you in the same squad back home?”

Yin’s face went back to stoic, and for a long beat, Rhett thought Yin wasn’t going to answer. But then he gave a slight nod. “Yes.”

Rhett was just trying to make amends, make conversation while getting to know his team members better, but this guy was a steel trap. It was like trying to get blood from a stone.

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“Was it your idea to join Milvus?” Rhett asked. “Did you put your hand up for it, or are you on orders?”

Yin cut him a side-eye.

Rhett shrugged. “Don’t bother me either way, just so you know. I expect the same dedication regardless.” He took a swig of his beer. “I kinda get the feeling you’d give a hundred percent either way, so whatever. I’m just trying to get to know you better so I can run this team.”

Yin was silent for a few moments before he sighed. “I volunteered. I requested consideration.”

“And Totoro?”

“He goes where I go.”

“Ah, like me and Jay.”

He shot Rhett an acidic glare. “Not like you and Jay.”

Rhett laughed. “No, not like us.” He knew Sid and Echo were keeping an eye on Rhett and Yin’s conversation, probably waiting to see if another fight broke out, but Rhett hoped they were past that now. “So, you leave anyone behind back home?”

It was a long drop into personal territory, but fuck it. He wanted to know.

Yin's eyes flinched despite his attempt at stoicism. "No. You?"

Rhett shook his head. "Nope. No one. Jay's got enough family for both of us."

Yin kept his gaze on Jay and Chen and he damn near smiled, Rhett was sure of it, but then he schooled that away. "His accent surprised me. He looks Asian, sounds like the crocodile man."

Hm. He was attempting a conversation?

Pleased with this, Rhett snorted. "No one expects it." Most people did a double-take when Jay opened his mouth and Steve Irwin came out.

"Even speaking Mandarin, he does not lose that accent."

"I bet he doesn't." Rhett smiled as he took another sip of his beer. "About that. How many languages do you speak?"

Yin exhaled as he considered. "Six, fluent. Mandarin, of course. Also Cantonese, Korean, Japanese, Russian, and English. I know enough of a few others to get by. Farsi, French, some German."

Wow.

Rhett was impressed. "Good to know."

"What about you?" Yin asked. "What's your hidden talent?"

Rhett grinned at him. "I get the feeling you already know. You got the full scope on us before you got here. Well, apart from the gay thing. So you tell me, and I'll see how good your intel really is."

Yin's lips twitched. "You were born in Sydney, Australia. Put into foster homes. Went through the cadet program for troubled boys. General enlistment at eighteen. Moved up through the ranks quickly. Exceptional combat skills, born leader. No family made you a prime candidate for your SAS. And then you excelled at that too. Eight overseas ops in two years, hundred percent success rate. Hand-picked for this Milvus Division."

Rhett stared at him, because holy shit. The Chinese government knew that much about him, and he was a redacted agent. But he still couldn't let Yin win.

"You didn't know I'm trained in Sanda," he said, not caring if it sounded childish, but Sanda was a specialised Chinese combat martial art. Yin should have known that. "Or that me and Jay are together."

Yin chewed on the inside of his lip. "True."

"And it wasn't a troubled boys' program. It was a last-ditch effort to stay out of juvie."

He narrowed his eyes. "Juvie? What is that?"

"Juvenile detention. Prison for kids, basically." Rhett shrugged. "I was in and out of foster homes; hated that, hated school, hated the world." Hated that he liked boys instead of girls. Hated that he had no one in his life who cared. Not that he'd tell Yin any of that right now. "Went into the cadet program and found somewhere to belong. Three meals a day, clean clothes, and a bed every night was a helluva incentive." He sighed, remembering... "But I found more than that. A place to belong, something I was good at, where I wasn't looked down on or told I was worthless. They saw something in me." He smiled at Yin. "And here I am."

"No regrets."

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“Fuck no. Not one.” He could only hope that now he’d shown this part of himself, as a human, that maybe Yin would offer the same. “What about you?”

Yin inhaled deeply and gave a half-smile. “My parents had strict expectations. Very strict, and they demanded things of me. Military service is not compulsory for us, but I volunteered. And for two years I was free.”

Free? In the military? That was the one thing they were not, but Rhett didn’t say that.

“I exchanged my parents’ orders for the orders of my superiors,” Yin said quietly. “But it was my choice.”

“The one thing you could control,” Rhett offered.

Yin gave a nod. “My parents permitted a two-year service, thinking I’d have my fun, then return to the life they wanted for me. But I stayed, and they were not happy.”

“No?”

Something like regret flashed across his face. “No. No promotion or medal would be good enough.”

“It matters to us,” Rhett said. “To those who know what it takes, what it means. We know the honour, the sacrifice.”

Yin stared at him, eyes searching his.

Rhett shrugged off the scrutiny. “It’s true. Only other servicemen will understand. Civilians have no clue.”

Yin blinked a few times, Rhett’s words clearly hitting home, then went back to watching Chen and Jay. “I was the youngest member of the Jialong Commandos in the Yemen incident,” he said quietly before he stopped, as if he was embarrassed and not sure why he’d divulged that about himself. “If you know what that is...”

Of course Rhett knew what the Yemen incident was.

Just the evacuation of almost 600 Chinese citizens and over 200 other foreign nationals from Yemen after a Saudi-led coalition began airstrikes against the Houthi rebel group.

It was a massive joint operation involving many countries.

“Hell yes, I know what that is,” Rhett said. “You were there? The youngest?”

Damn, if Yin didn’t look embarrassed, proud even. Well, as proud as his Chinese modesty would allow.

Rhett was about to ask if the scars all over his body were a result of that time but decided not to push his luck. He’d gotten more out of Yin than he ever thought he would.

“Hey, boss,” Jay said, sliding his empty beer bottle on the table in front of Rhett. “Everyone’s bugging out.”

He looked over, and sure enough, Echo was putting on his coat, Chen was making Coyote laugh, aaaaand Sid and Azrael were bickering again, this time about football by the sounds of it.

Yep, time to go.

“Good idea,” Rhett said, standing up. He turned to Yin. “You guys good to get home?”

Yin rolled his eyes.

Jay laughed, and Rhett couldn't even be mad. He felt good about how this night had played out. He'd broken ground with his newest team members. Well, with Yin. Chen already seemed to be friendly with everyone. Rhett needed to meet Yin head-on, and it seemed they'd done that tonight.

Rhett slung his arm over Jay's shoulder. “Let's go home.”

Well, home in London.

It was a barely equipped one-bedroom safe house. Nothing like the fancy places they used for special ops in movies. This was nice enough—small, basic, but inconspicuous, and with three ways to leave the building undetected.

Plus, they were never there long enough to feel cramped. It was small, yes, but it was more than enough. And they got to stay together.

And it was the only personal time he and Jay ever got. During the day, during meetings, during fitness, during any mission, they kept their relationship professional and kept their hands to themselves.

But they were allowed to share a flat in their downtime. And as soon as that door was shut behind them, professional was out and personal was in. They didn't give a fuck if the place was bugged, or if their handlers or superiors were listening. Rhett hoped they enjoyed the audio porn they provided most nights.

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When Rhett closed the door behind them, he almost sighed with relief. Where nothing and no one else existed. Just Jay and him.

Jay slid his phone onto the table and spun to face him. "So, you and Mr Pit Viper seemed to be getting along. Like, he spoke actual words to you."

Rhett smiled at that. "Yeah. I feel like I got somewhere with him. He's a hard one to read, that's for sure. But he's been through some shit, I know that much."

Jay studied him for a second, his smile widening. "Oh my god."

"Oh my god, what?"

Jay was grinning now. "You... you respect him." He put his hands to his face. "That's worse than liking him, I hope you know. You respect him." Then he peeled off his shirt and proceeded to do some lame strip dance with it. "R-e-s-p-e-c-t," he began to sing.

Rhett grabbed Jay's stupid shirt and threw it toward the couch, then pushed him against the table, smiling down at him, capturing his mouth in a deep kiss, invading Jay's mouth with his tongue. When he pulled back, Jay chased the kiss, desperate for more. Rhett put his thumb to Jay's lips, making him whine.

"Do you need me to shut you up?"

Jay laughed and began to undo Rhett's jeans. "Fuck yes."

Rhett shoved Jay toward the couch and none too gently forced him onto it, the way Jay loved. He loved being manhandled. He loved rough hands and a firm hold. He loved it when Rhett took charge and showed Jay exactly how much he needed him.

Jay fell onto the couch, his head resting on a cushion where the back met the armrest. His smile was sinful as he licked his lips, and his eyes drew down to the bulge in Rhett's jeans. "Give it to me," he murmured. "Fucking need it, Rhett."

Rhett chuckled, his body thrumming with need and anticipation. He pulled his cock out, pushed his jeans down a little, then put one knee on the sofa beside Jay's hip.

With one hand on the back of the couch, the other on the armrest, Rhett aimed his erection at Jay's mouth. Jay wound his hands around Rhett's ass and, bringing him up and closer, he took him straight into his warm, wet mouth.

Jay hummed and sucked harder, swirling his tongue around the head, and Rhett looked down, not wanting to miss a second. He watched as Jay worked him over, taking him deep, sucking hard, his perfect lips gliding up and down.

"Fuck yes," Rhett hissed, thrusting in and out. The pleasure was too much, too soon, hurtling Rhett toward the precipice of ecstasy. He wanted it so bad. He needed it. "You feel too good. Gonna come too fast."

Jay looked up at him with those dangerous brown eyes, took him deep, sucked him hard, and squeezed his ass cheeks. Rhett couldn't hold it back any longer.

He arched his back, trying not to ram in too far, as he unloaded in Jay's throat, spilling his seed in hot, thick spurts.

Jay drank it down, moaning and humming, squeezing and sucking, and Rhett's head spun. His world blacked out.

He barely registered Jay pulling him down on the couch with him, holding him, rubbing his back, kissing his neck.

“Fuck,” Rhett breathed, panting. “What day is it?”

Jay laughed underneath him. “It’s dick-sucking day.”

“Oh, goodie,” Rhett said, mind swirling into sleep. “My favourite.”

Jay chuckled. “Good. Because you’re up next.”

Rhett should have known... good things didn’t last; moments of happiness were fleeting at best. Any step forward was met with two steps backward in their world of secrets and lies, of tricks and treason.

His ringing phone after too few hours of sleep was a blunt reminder.

Rhett never expected an easy life or extended periods of peace. But Jesus Christ.

One fucking day would be nice.

FIVE

Awoken just after 0400 to a phone call, Rhett jolted up, snatched his phone, and was greeted with Director King’s curt tone.

“Briefing room. Fifteen minutes.”

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Fuck.

“It’s go-time,” Rhett said, and was up and out of bed, Jay stumbling to follow.

Without a word, they dressed, pulled their boots on, and Rhett walked into the briefing room with one minute to spare.

The wall of screens showed twenty different things. A person was at every desk, tapping away, speaking into their earpieces. Frankston and Malla, their team’s handlers, worked frantically. Directors King and Depraz were watching it all, faces sullen.

Rhett knew it wasn’t good.

“Lin with you?” King asked.

“Of course. He’s gone to confab one. He’ll get the team ready. What do we know?”

He had no clue what he was even here for.

A terrorist attack? A personal detail? Recon and extraction? Transport?

Depraz spared him a hard glance, full eye contact, all business. “We lost contact with Kowalski and Myles.”

What?

Hell fucking no.

Rhett's stomach dropped. His adrenaline spiked, his blood pounded in his ears.

“When? Last known location?”

King gave him a look that told Rhett he was not going to like the answer. “Baku.”

The fuck?

“Azerbaijan?” Rhett couldn't believe it. “They were never?—”

“Objectives change. You know that,” Depraz said.

King's expression was grim. “They last checked in at eighteen hundred and were supposed to make contact after crossing into Georgia. They did not. Rendezvous point in Tbilisi was not made.”

Fuck.

Rhett looked directly at him. “When do we leave?”

“You'll fly into Baku, and there will be vehicles waiting for you south of Sangachal. Van detail in thirty.”

Rhett turned and headed for the door. “Debrief me enroute.”

He headed straight for confab one, the room where his team would convene. He knew Jay would have rounded everyone up and be waiting, like he knew they'd be ready.

He opened the door, and seven heads turned to face him. “We're up,” he said. He checked his watch. “Gone by zero five thirty.”

Echo, Coyote, Sid, Azrael, and Jay all stood up, and Yin and Chen half a second after them. They weren't familiar with how the team operated, but they were about to learn. It'd be a case of sink or swim for the two newest members, but Rhett wasn't too concerned.

He was confident they'd be assets to his team in no time. And if they couldn't adjust and keep up, if they weren't as good as he thought they could be, they were finished.

If not dead.

Rhett led the way to the bunker. Every home base had one just like it—dark, windowless, reinforced, undetectable by radar. Lockers with their gear, black combat fatigues, weapons. Personal belongings got left behind, no identification, no nametags. Once they put their combat gear on and went on a mission, they were on their own. They belonged to no country; they were a team of kites. Independent of government and allegiance.

Such was the Milvus Division.

Operations were get in, get out. The least amount of time on the ground as possible. That was how they operated.

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This one was different though.

These were two of his team that were missing.

Rhett checked his watch again. It was 0515. Kowalski and Myles had been no-contact for almost twelve hours.

And that was really fucking bad.

Everyone dressed in silence. Everyone checked their weapons without a word.

Rhett avoided looking at the two unopened lockers. Kowalski and Myles.

It wasn't unusual for the team to break off into smaller factions for a short op. Kowalski and Myles were more than capable and had done ops together before. They all had.

Theirs was supposed to be a simple three-day op. Covert deploy into Armenia, acquire footage and intel of a target, and get out.

They could do this shit with their eyes closed.

Which meant something had gone very wrong.

And their last known location was Baku, Azerbaijan?

Yeah. Something wasn't adding up.

Rhett rechecked his Glock 17, slid it back into his thigh holster, and turned around.

His team was watching him, waiting.

He had to treat this like any other mission, as if it weren't two of their own they were extracting.

Slipping into that go-mode mentality helped him compartmentalise. Detaching any and all emotions was the only way to go. "Kowalski and Myles failed to make rendezvous; they were supposed to make contact twelve hours ago and failed to do so. We'll be making a covert drop into Azerbaijan, southeast of Baku."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Sid mumbled.

"Twelve hours?" Echo whispered.

Rhett gave a nod. "We'll know more enroute."

Then the door opened, and Director King walked in. He had with him Frankston and Malla, who were, as always, glued to their iPads.

They were tech nerds who watched everything, knew everything, collected intel and data for every move their team made. Tactical intel from iPads and satellites was how wars were won these days. They got to sit in the comfort of HQ playing real-life chess games, moving their pieces—Rhett and his team—around the chessboard with no more than an earpiece and a live satellite feed.

King looked around the bunker and paused for a millisecond when he saw Yin and Chen. He turned to Rhett, and he knew what King was about to say.

They were untested, too new to be thrown into a mission so soon. It had been barely

twenty-four hours, after all, and the lives of two of their own were on the line.

“I was expecting to send six,” King said.

Rhett stepped forward, deliberately putting himself in front of Yin and Chen. “I’m taking my team. My team of eight, remember? You make whatever signal adjustments you need to, but all of us are getting on that plane. Do we have a problem?”

Director King stared at him.

Was this a test of Rhett’s team alliance? Did King want to know if Rhett already included Yin and Chen as part of his own? Rhett didn’t think for one minute that King thought Yin and Chen weren’t capable. So this was a trust issue.

Rhett stared right back. Unblinking, unmoving. If this was a test to see who had bigger balls, Rhett would win every fucking time.

King’s nostrils flared before he turned to Frankston and Malla and gave a nod.

“Full authorisation, full comms,” Rhett added, looking at the two techs. “And just out of interest, who was working on the Kowalski and Myles job?”

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Malla gawped a little at Rhett's scrutiny and turned to Frankston, throwing him right under the bus. Malla was a tall Spanish guy, neat as a pin. Frankston was the complete opposite. He reminded Rhett of an English version of Jack Black. Shorter, pudgy, and unkempt in a way that was made more obvious working with military folks. But he was proficient with all things tech, and he'd got their asses out of a few sticky situations on assignments before.

"Yeah," he said with an awkward wave of his hand. "I relayed transport details to get them into Georgia, but there was no response."

Rhett gave him a nod, then he gave King a look that said fuck you in no uncertain terms before turning to his team. "Let's go."

The team climbed into the back of the black van, four a side, facing each other. Rhett knew that Yin was looking at him, but he was still too pissed off to face him. Fucking bureaucracy made him so mad. If they had any doubts about including Yin and Chen, they shouldn't have been brought into Milvus at all. And if they were doubting Rhett's ability to run his team, well, they could all go get fucked.

"Thank you," Yin said, breaking the silence.

Rhett looked at him then. "Still trying to figure out if they doubt you or if they doubt my leadership. Fucking assholes."

Director King's voice broke through their earpieces, a warning of its own. "Full comms, Captain Ouston."

Rhett smirked. “Good. Saves me repeating myself in my report.” Then he thought better about being too disrespectful, so he tacked on a curt, “Sir.”

Yin’s eyes widened, Chen grimaced, but Jay laughed, and the rest of the team smiled.

Rhett was defensive of his team, and the fact that his team now included Yin and Chen was Director King’s doing. And quite frankly, King should have known better than to question that in front of his team.

The residual anger helped keep the pre-mission anxiety from setting in, and Rhett felt better once they were in the air. They’d be refuelling in Croatia, so he told his team to rest, and he spent his time squeezing King for all the intel they had.

The base in Croatia hadn’t changed much since the last time Jay was there, over a year ago now. When they’d extracted Asher Garin and Oh Yunho from the underground bunker with the help of his favourite cranky tank, Harry Harrigan.

They were there to refuel and, of course, Rhett was off with Director King, going through the latest intel.

The base had since been relieved from the multinational crime ring fronted by Istomin in a trade-off with the Croatian government and was now a detail base and refuelling station for the Milvus Division whenever needed.

Jay didn’t care much for the political bullshit that went on. He knew it was necessary. He knew it was all a game of bargaining and give and take. Just like he was aware those rules were murky as fuck, lies were a given, and nothing was ever black and white.

Grey was a whole fucking colour.

Jay couldn't let himself get consumed by that side of it. He knew Rhett straddled the sidelines every day—his role as team leader had him with a foot on either side of the military and political line—but Jay wasn't built for that.

As much as it drove Rhett crazy sometimes, or just downright pissed him off, Jay was glad it was Rhett and no one else.

Not just because he knew Rhett was capable, but also that his loyalty would always be for his team. He put them first, always. And he would stand up to the likes of Director King to defend his team when maybe others wouldn't have the balls to dare.

Rhett had always been that way. From the first day Jay had met him, he'd stood for what was right, what was rule and regimented.

It also helped that he had the skills to back himself.

Jay remembered seeing Rhett that first time. They were barely eighteen, and Rhett was much scrawnier than he was now. Their sergeant had ordered team obstacle course runs through mud and sleet, and Rhett had taken charge, taken the lead, and got his team through it. They might not have come first, but every member crossed the finish line, and that was a win according to Rhett.

The other team had failed because they'd not worked as a team, and their leader did nothing but yell at the weakest links, two not finishing the course and one ending up in the infirmary.

The drill sergeant had yelled at Rhett about efficiency, and Rhett stood toe to toe with him, never backing down, yelling that he'd stand with his team, win or lose, because that's what a leader does. All of eighteen years old and already a better leader than most.

Jay had only had eyes for Rhett after that day.

And he'd worked harder to never be one of those weakest links again.

He'd trained, he'd practised, he'd studied, just to make Rhett proud. To maybe make him notice...

And take notice, Rhett had.

Eyes that lingered a beat too long, a smile for no one else but Jay. Until Jay got caught looking and Rhett noticed. Now, to Jay's defence, Rhett was hot as fuck, ripped physique, but the confidence...

The sexiest fucking thing a man can have.

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And that first time in the barracks showers, when Rhett came out with nothing more than a towel around his waist and Jay couldn't make himself look away...

Rhett noticed. Because, of course he did. They stared at each other in the silent, knowing way that closeted men might. But they were interrupted and Jay got himself busy and gone, heart hammering.

Such a dangerous game.

The very next day, Rhett wasn't in the showers, and Jay had wondered if he was avoiding him. Disappointed but not surprised, he'd stripped off and hit the showers. With his hair full of soap and eyes closed, he hadn't noticed anyone using the shower next to his.

"Pass me the soap," a deep, quiet voice had said.

Jay's eyes had shot open to find Rhett next to him, naked under the steaming jet of water, semi-hard. His eyes dark, his hand out.

Jay handed him the soap, fingers brushing, electric and exhilarating, and for one second, forgetting where he was.

"You're in late today," Jay said, no clue why.

Rhett had smiled as he scrubbed himself. "Wanted to get you alone."

Jay stared at him, his heart skidding to a stop. He glanced around the open showers.

“They’re all gone,” Rhett said casually. “I made sure of it.”

Nerves flooded Jay’s belly. He was about to get jumped or railed. “Look, I…”

“You what?” Rhett smirked. “You keep looking at me like you want something.”

Jay’s breath hitched.

Fuck.

“Do you want something, Petty Officer Lin?”

Jay’s eyes met his—those cool grey-blue eyes were storming. He knew that look. He felt it down his spine, to his core, his blood was scorching hot. He could barely get his breath out to form words. “Not sure what you mean.”

Rhett slammed the water off, grabbed Jay’s hand, and dragged him to a toilet stall. He pushed Jay against the cold concrete wall and crushed his mouth down on his, forcing his tongue inside.

Jay grunted and took it, head spinning, heart screaming. But then Rhett took Jay’s cock in his hand, and he swallowed Jay’s muffled cry.

Once his brain had kicked in that this was actually happening, Jay wrapped his hand around Rhett’s rock-hard cock, and they devoured each other’s mouths while jerking each other off.

Jay came first, bucking into Rhett’s fist, and Rhett followed a moment later. His mouth on Jay’s, breathing hard, eyes closed as he spilled all over Jay’s hand.

When he opened his eyes, Jay saw the grey storm clearing, revealing sated blue skies.

And then Rhett was gone.

He heard the shower start, and Jay took a second to catch his breath. He wiped the sweat off his belly, then went back out to the showers.

Rhett was gone.

Confused, satiated, but still wanting more, Jay rinsed off and got dressed. He was last and late for dinner. He found the mess hall mostly empty but grabbed a tray and a seat at a table by himself, trying not to think about what had just happened when a tray slid next to his at the table and a familiar body fell into the seat beside him. “Seat taken, Petty Officer Lin?”

Jay looked over at Rhett, trying not to smile, pretending he didn’t blush. “It is now.”

And it was taken almost every day after that. They were mess hall buddies, every chance they got. They were in the same squad, same team, same bunkhouse. Same bathroom cubicle every chance they got as well.

Same weekends’ leave too. Same hotel bed. Then, as the months and years rolled on, Rhett would join Jay when on leave, visiting his family. Rhett had no family, and Jay’s mum made quick work of rectifying that. She included him in her entire clutch of kids; when you already had five kids plus their partners, what was one more? And if that wasn’t overwhelming enough, the first time Rhett had met the extended Lins—a dozen aunts and uncles, twenty-something first cousins—had been funny as hell.

Sid’s boot tapped Jay’s. “Stop it. Scares me when you smile like that.”

Jay laughed. “Just remembering back to the only time I ever saw Captain Ouston scared.”

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Their whole team looked over to where Rhett stood in full black fatigues, jabbing a map with his finger and telling Director King exactly what he thought about something.

Totoro blinked in shock. “Captain? Scared? No...” He shook his head, disbelieving.

Jay snorted and nodded. “He met my whole family. All of us, at my niece’s naming ceremony.”

Yin quirked an eyebrow. “You have that in your family?”

Jay smiled at him. “Sure. Half Chinese, remember? But also half Malay and mostly Australian so it was just an excuse for a BBQ and a piss up.”

Yin stared at him, alarmed. “A what?”

“An excuse to get on the piss.”

“To drink alcohol,” Echo offered, and both Yin and Totoro nodded appreciatively.

Jay shrugged because, of course, that’s what he meant. “Anyway, you think he’s tough and takes no shit, but my Po Po tells him to jump, he fucking jumps.”

Everyone chuckled, and Rhett stormed over holding the map. “For the record,” he said flatly, “it’s called respect, and your grandmother is savage. Plus you have fifty cousins, and in I walk, the only tall white guy. They still make unseasoned-chicken jokes to my face. It’s been five years.”

Everyone laughed at that. Everyone. Even Yin. Though he schooled it when Rhett shot him a pointed glare.

Then Rhett shook off the moment of levity and was back in Captain mode. “We leave in five,” he said, voice firm. Everyone stood taller, instant game-on faces as they listened. He laid the map out on the table, pointing to one spot in particular. “We land here at twenty-two hundred. There will be two vehicles waiting for us. We then drive to here—” He dragged his finger along the map. “—to this location, where we await instruction. I will tell you what we know on the way.”

The familiar sound of a Blackhawk starting drew their attention. “Okay,” Rhett yelled over the noise. He gave the signal. “Let’s go.”

Jay’s adrenaline spiked, his heart pounding at the thrill of it. He fucking loved this job. But then his training kicked in, he put his head down, and ran for the chopper.

Rhett had never been to Baku before, and he was surprised by its beauty. Even at night, perhaps especially at night, the city was a blend of medieval and modern. From where he stood, looking out the window, surveilling the street below, the yellow streetlights lit the old stone walls, highlighting the carved stonework and the cobblestone streets.

He was waiting for an update while his team slept. Well, except Jay, who came over and handed Rhett a bottle of water.

It had been a long day, and the six sleeping bodies on the floor made Rhett feel... something. These weren’t his original six. There were two new additions, while two of his originals were... out there, somewhere.

They’d had confirmation, footage of when Kowalski and Myles were taken; CCTV footage of them being hustled into a green BMW van on the very street Rhett was

now overlooking. They'd been lethargic, drugged most likely, unsteady on their feet, with respiratory masks, and helped into the van. What looked like medical equipment was loaded with them: cylinders, black boxes. The men escorting them wore hospital garb, complete with gloves and masks.

An outsider might think they looked like patients, but Rhett knew differently. It was definitely Kowalski and Myles being shoved into that van, and something was fucking wrong.

That was almost twenty-four hours ago, and Rhett had been instructed to sit tight and wait for intel.

HQ had satellites and CCTV access, and they even had a name, but there'd been a hiccup, and they needed to be one hundred percent sure.

There was no room for mistakes.

"Wanna talk about it?" Jay whispered.

Rhett's eyes met his in the dark, and he almost smiled. Of course Jay would pick up on his mood.

"Worried?" Jay prompted.

Rhett nodded. "Yeah. That footage of Kowalski and Myles. I can't stop thinking about it. Seeing them like that. It's been over twenty-four hours."

Jay stepped in closer and spoke, barely a whisper. "And?" He shot a pointed glance at the corner where Yin and Chen slept.

Yeah. Jay knew him too well.

“Dunno,” Rhett murmured. “I’m not familiar with his demeanour in the field, but he seems distracted.” Rhett shrugged. “I dunno. Am I misreading him?”

He didn’t need to even explain which of the two he was talking about.

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“Hard to tell,” Jay whispered. Then he put his hand on Rhett’s stomach. “Trust your gut. It’s never been wrong.”

Rhett smiled and wished he could pull Jay against him, kiss him softly for being exactly what Rhett needed. But they weren’t like that on the job. Work was work, personal lives were separate, and they never showed PDAs when in uniform.

They just didn’t.

Even with everyone else asleep, even in the dark, Rhett wouldn’t allow himself the smallest luxury of comfort.

The best he could do was a gentle look and a soft voice. “You should sleep.”

Jay’s bright eyes shone in the moonlight, the soft glow touching only half his face, highlighting his smile. “Yes, Captain.”

It made Rhett smile, even briefly.

And he went back to scoping out the street below. The building half a block up and adjacent was his target. It was all dark and quiet now and had been since they’d arrived.

Intel had told him no one had entered or left the building since Kowalski or Myles were escorted out. They’d been ushered into the waiting green van by two men, presumably armed, a black van following them.

Rhett had wanted to take a look in the building for himself but had been told to sit tight.

Rhett didn't like sitting tight. And what for? If the place was empty, then what the hell were they waiting for?

He didn't like it when his instructions went against his training, against his instinct.

They were supposed to be kites, free agents hired for their tactical experience. But they were very much still tethered to their agency.

He recalled what Harry Harrigan had told him once.

I can tell you right now that kind of power is not good. No good will ever come of it.

Rhett liked to believe that the Milvus Division was on the side of good. He had to believe that. Since the Clive Parrish scandal—when the Australian military leaders and politicians were exposed as traitors, when Harry and Asher had brought the whole operation to its knees—the Milvus Division had been established to counter such threats.

The special counsel, with Directors King and Depraz and their ilk, had powers that exceeded international borders.

That kind of power is not good . . .

Rhett didn't like questioning their motives. Sure, the tech was state of the art; the weapons, the transport, the secrecy were all the best there was.

Having world-class hackers like Yunho and Yixing also helped.

But Rhett had to wonder... who were they really working for?

He and Jay were still tethered to the Australian government. Each member of the Milvus Division was employed, as such, by their own country.

And those governments each had a say, a stake in the game. Rhett and Jay were two pieces on the chessboard. He knew that. He was fine with that.

But it begged the question—the damn question he couldn't get out of his mind, thanks to Harry—what stake did the Chinese government have by putting Yin and Chen into the game?

What did they want?

Did it have something to do with Yixing? The genius kid absorbed into the Milvus agency for his hacking skills?

Was it simply an exercise in diplomacy, as King had said?

Did they want to be included with the international good guys?

Was the Milvus Division the good guys?

Rhett groaned, mad at himself for being too much in his head, and he straightened up, wishing he could do something constructive instead of sitting around waiting for the puppeteers to pull his strings.

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But then Yin sighed, more than likely to alert Rhett of his being awake. He stood up, coming over to the window to stand beside him. “Anything?”

Rhett shook his head. “This is bullshit,” he hissed. “Sitting up here like this when every second counts.”

“You want to go and look,” Yin said.

“Minimum. The very least.”

“Then let’s go.”

Rhett’s gaze cut to Yin’s. “Now?”

Yin gave a hard nod. “Why not?”

“Never pegged you as a rule breaker.”

“And I never thought you’d be one to sit here and do nothing.” Then he smirked.

“And technically, I wouldn’t be disobeying orders. You would be. You’re the boss.”

Rhett stared at him—the audacity of being called out like that—and eventually, he smiled. “Then let’s go.”

Rhett and Yin took one pistol each—concealed, of course—and put on their gloves and coats. Rhett went to Sid and gently shook him. “Sid, you’re up.”

Sid shot up, blinking, taking half a second to focus. “Where are we going?”

“You’re not. We’re going across the street, and you’re on watch. I’ll have my earpiece.”

Sid stood up and went to the window, scrubbing his face. “What do we know?”

“Nothing. That’s why we’re going.”

Sid only then seemed to notice Yin standing, ready. He looked back at Rhett and gave a nod. “Okay.” He fitted his earpiece and checked his watch. “If I lose comms with you, I’m sending Azrael over.”

Rhett was sure that was purely for Yin’s benefit. A warning, of sorts, that Rhett was protected and Yin wasn’t exactly trusted yet.

Either way, Rhett didn’t mind.

Because Sid wasn’t wrong.

Rhett gave Yin a clap on the arm. “Let’s go.”

They left the quiet of their loft, made their way down the hall, the stairs, and out onto the street. Rhett was surprised by how quiet Yin was on his feet—stealth, indeed—and tried to make his own footfalls quieter.

And failed, but his competitive streak and his ingrained need to be the best made him try at least.

They went around the back of the block to the alleyway. The walls were stone blocks, three stories up, cobblestones under their feet. There were utility pipes, drains, and

trash cans, darkened windows, and no sign of life. It was three in the morning, after all.

A cat scampered from a doorway and Rhett startled, his heart rate kicked up a notch. Yin chuckled quietly.

Rhett shot him a glare. “This way,” he said, entering the doorway the cat had come from. It was an entryway for the apartments in this building. Rhett wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but something had to be better than nothing.

They’d been sent an old blueprint of the floor plan, so they knew the general layout but didn’t know which level. Rhett stopped at the letterboxes in the entryway. There were six apartments in this complex, two on each floor. Each mailbox had a metal number tag, each looked perfectly normal, emptied and used, except one. Flyers and catalogues stuck out from the mail slot.

Rhett pointed at the number. 1B.

Yin gave a nod and they headed down the hall to the end apartment door.

The old brass 1B on the door was crooked and it smelled as if that cat in the alley had pissed in the hall. Rhett put his hand on the door handle. Yin went to point position. He turned the handle, expecting it to be locked, but it turned.

His gaze went to Yin. Yin took out his pistol, gave a hard nod, and Rhett pushed the door open. Yin went in first, quiet as the wind, and Rhett followed.

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The room was dark, and Yin went through an archway, weapon raised and ready. Rhett took the hall, checking the two bedrooms and a small, dirty bathroom.

The place was empty, save for an old sofa in the first room and two dining chairs, one of which was knocked over.

“Clear,” Yin said.

Rhett gave a nod. “All clear.” He relaxed a little, but looking around the empty space, he wasn’t happy. “Nothing.”

Yin took out his scanner; a small black device, and switched it on. He held it up to the air vents, the light fittings. “No surveillance, no bugs.”

Rhett went around the corner into the kitchen. Yin had said it was clear, and he didn’t doubt that, but he hoped to find something.

There was no fridge, the oven door was crooked and ajar, the cooktop broken. He checked the cupboards and found nothing, then the drawers. Empty.

There was no sign of a struggle, no sign of life. No sign that anyone had been there for fuck knows how long.

“Could be another apartment,” Yin said quietly.

That was true. It could be. But Rhett didn’t think so. Either way, there was nothing to do but go back to base.

“Let’s go,” Rhett said. As he walked back into the first room, he noticed something under the sofa. The corner of a piece of paper. He went to it and carefully slid it out with his gloved finger.

A local pizzeria flyer.

Something was written in Turkish across the top. There were greasy fingerprints on the flyer, and although Rhett couldn’t be certain, it looked somewhat fresh.

Rhett tucked it inside his coat pocket and gave Yin a nod for them to leave. Except Rhett didn’t run back down the alleyway. He went to the nearest trash cans and lifted the lids, just as his earpiece crackled to life.

It was Sid. “Ah, Captain?”

Rhett froze, making eye contact with Yin. He pressed his earpiece in tighter. “Go ahead.”

“Eagle Eyes has you and suggested you get your asses back to base.”

Frustration and something close to resentment burned in his gut. Rhett sneered. “Suggestion is noted. Over.”

Sid chuckled. “Roger that. Over.”

“Fuckers,” Rhett grumbled.

“What is it?” Yin asked.

“HQ’s got eyes on us,” Rhett said. He looked down the alleyway, wondering which CCTV camera they had access to. Probably all of them. He looked up, smiled, and

waved, then went back to the trash can.

Nothing but garbage, funnily enough. Kid's cereal box, milk containers, pasta boxes, scraps.

He tried the next one. Same as the first. General household shit.

"What are you looking for?" Yin asked, plucking a lid off the next can.

"That," Rhett said, lifting a pizza box out of the trash can. Same logo as the flyer in the apartment. There were some half-eaten crusts and scrunched-up napkins and a receipt.

Bingo.

"Let's go."

Rhett took the box, and they ran back down the alley.

"Vehicle incoming at your nine," Sid said in his ear.

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Rhett held up his hand, signalling for Yin to stop. He did, pressing himself against the wall, cloaked in shadow. The car drove down the street, noise fading.

“All clear,” Sid said.

Rhett gave a nod and he and Yin crossed the street, took the stairs two at a time, and slipped into their loft.

Everyone was still asleep. Rhett instinctively looked for Jay, sighing at his sleeping form on the floor.

Sid kept his eyes on the street below. “Hope you got pepperoni.”

Rhett smiled and slid the pizza box onto the small table by Sid.

“HQ’s gonna wanna little chat,” Sid said quietly, giving the iPad to Rhett.

Rhett ignored it for now. He opened the pizza box, took photos of everything—the flyer, the Turkish writing, the receipt, even the half-eaten crusts—and he sent that to Frankston.

That was his response to whatever bullshit they had to say about him going across the street.

Evidence.

Well, he hoped it would be.

At least it was something. Fucking anything was better than the nothing they expected him to accept.

Sid took out his binoculars and settled in. “Grab some shuteye. I got this.”

Rhett gave a nod for Yin to rest as well, and Rhett went over to where Jay was asleep. He took a spot next to him, not touching, of course, but close.

Always close. And always between Jay and the door.

Always protective.

The floor was hard and unforgiving, but at least this place had a bathroom and a flushing toilet. Rhett had slept in worse. They all had.

Not that he could speak for Yin and Chen, but given they were ex-Sea Dragons, Jiaolong Commandos, Rhett assumed they were no strangers to discomfort.

He didn't want to say he'd been impressed with Yin when they went out, because he certainly expected nothing less, but he hadn't been disappointed.

He was quick, quiet, efficient.

He understood the universal hand signals, he stayed close, did everything Rhett would have expected any of his team to do. As a very small first test, he'd passed.

Well, more specifically, he hadn't failed.

Rhett put that out of his mind, knowing he needed what little sleep he could afford. He studied Jay's sleeping profile. The curve of his ear, the line of his eyebrow, the hint of a smile at his lips.

He loved watching Jay sleep.

My god, he loved this man.

His rock, his one true thing. His entire world.

So, knowing everyone was asleep and no one could see, he reached his hand out and slid it over Jay's arm.

Just to touch him. To ground himself. To feel connected, just for a moment.

Rhett closed his eyes and slept.

He woke up to Sid's voice. "Yes, sir," he said.

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Rhett cracked an eyelid to see Sid getting up from his chair at the window, comms phone to his ear. He looked over at Rhett and grimaced as he held out the phone. “Director King.”

Rhett’s neck protested as he moved, sitting up. He took the phone Sid offered him and put it to his ear. He could guess from the pale blue light outside that it was maybe six a.m. “Ouston,” he said, voice cracking.

“You disobeyed a direct order,” King said, tone sharp.

“I used field judgement,” Rhett replied. “Remember what that is?”

King growled down the phone, and Rhett liked to imagine the director’s face steaming red. “You will be reprimanded when you get back,” King said. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t pull your arses outta there now, I swear to god, Ouston.”

Rhett got to his feet and made his way to the bathroom so he wouldn’t wake the others. “Because we have two of my team missing, that’s why. And if what I did last night helps in any way to find out any-fucking-thing about the location of my two men, then you can reprimand me all you like.”

Rhett kicked up the toilet seat and, while still on the phone to King, decided to take a piss. He wasn’t in the mood for this bullshit.

“I’m done wasting time,” Rhett said, not giving one fuck that King could hear him pissing. “We’re now at day two, and every minute wasted means less chance of

survival. So you either give me some fucking leads, or we'll go looking for them."

King's voice was quiet, his anger reaching its limit before he snapped for real. "I don't like your attitude, Ouston."

"And I don't like being sidelined when two of my men have been fucking taken! I've seen what happens to tortured men, Director, and I swear to fucking god, if I find Kowalski and Myles like I found Harrigan and Edwards, I will have the council's heads on plaques on my living room fucking wall."

King was quiet.

Sure, Rhett had overstepped, but he wasn't sorry. He meant it. He could be reprimanded. Hell, they could fire him and threaten him with a dishonourable discharge, but if it got his two men back, then Rhett didn't care.

"Do you think for one minute we're incompetent, Captain Ouston?" King said.

"I'm starting to wonder?—"

"There's a good fucking reason why we had you wait and why you were instructed to not enter that building. Never mind a court martial, I should have you all quarantined," King gritted out.

Wait.

Quarantined?

King had Rhett's attention now.

"And I would do exactly that if I thought for one minute you'd listen," King said.

“And if there wasn’t more at stake. But this is bigger than your two men. This is bigger than the Milvus Division. Now, I’m going to tell you exactly what you’re going to do, and so help me fucking god, Ouston, you’re going to listen.”

SIX

Rhett left the bathroom, a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. He walked out to the room where his team had been asleep. They were all now sitting up, waiting for him.

“You’ll have the council’s heads on plaques on your living room wall, huh?” Coyote asked with a grin. “Bet King loved that.”

Then Coyote noticed Rhett’s expression.

“What’s wrong?” Jay asked, standing up. “Did they find Kowalski and Myles? Jesus, Rhett, what is it?”

Rhett shook his head. “Not yet. The pizza box,” he said, nodding to where it still sat on the small table by the window. “No one touch it. Has anyone else touched it? Yin? Sid?”

They both shook their heads.

“Okay, Captain, you’re scaring the kids,” Sid said. “What the fuck’s going on?”

“Possible pathogen contamination,” Rhett said. “There’ll be a specialist crew turning up any minute to take the box and to test me and Yin. We went into the apartment and could’ve been exposed to something.”

“You what?” Azrael looked at Rhett, then to Yin. “You went over there?”

Rhett nodded. “At zero two hundred. I made the call to go.”

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Jay shook his head, his face pale. “Rhett,” he whispered. “What pathogen? What exposure risk? Airborne? Contact?”

“I don’t know. Contact, I think,” Rhett answered. “I could have exposed you all. Yin and Sid, I’m sorry.”

Oh god. He’d touched Jay’s arm . . .

“Jay,” Rhett whispered, his breath short.

“Okay, we got incoming,” Sid said, looking out the window. “White van.”

Jay rushed to the window.

“They’re wearing full PPA,” Sid said. “Jesus Christ.”

“Okay, everyone over to the far wall,” Rhett said. “Except for Sid and Yin. And Jay. Come over here.”

They stood by the window, the table, the pizza box.

Rhett hated himself for this. For putting his team at risk. If there was even the slightest chance he’d put Jay at risk... Ruining this operation was secondary.

And it shouldn’t have been.

He went to the door and opened it as two men in full protective gear came down the

hall. One carried a toolbox, the other one carried a handheld reader of some kind. “Captain Ouston,” the first guy said with a nod as he walked in.

Rhett didn’t recognise him.

The first guy slid the pizza box and contents into a clear plastic bag with yellow tape and sealed it shut while guy number two pulled out some vials and swab sticks.

Christ.

“Who handled the contents?” he asked, looking at Rhett.

“I did,” he replied. “No one else touched the box or the flyer, or the contents. I wore gloves. Time, approximately four hours ago.”

The guy took a mouth swab from Rhett’s mouth and nose and then shoved it directly into a vial of blue solution and shook it. The second guy swabbed Rhett’s vest, his sleeve, his gloves.

“Blue is good, purple is bad,” the guy said.

Guy number two began packing up his kit.

What the hell?

“Agent Yin was with me in the apartment,” Rhett said. “Agent Ritchie sat next to the box for the four-hour duration. The longest out of all of us. And I touched Medic Lin’s arm, without my glove. I slept on the floor beside him for three hours. If this pathogen is airborne, then you should test them too.”

Guy number one, still holding the vial, looked Rhett dead in the eye. “If it was

airborne, you'd all be contaminated, and this would be an exercise in futility."

Rhett seethed with anger. "Agent Yin was with me. Direct contact. In the apartment. I demand he be tested?—"

"We don't take our orders from you," he said.

Rhett took a breath in and exhaled slowly, trying to calm down. "I respectfully request you monitor the health and safety of my men."

The man looked at Rhett as if he were speaking to a child. "That won't be necessary, Agent Ouston," he said, shaking the vial like a prize. "Blue is good. You're all clear."

Then, like Rhett wasn't even there, guy number one spoke into a radio. "We are all clear. Negative swab on Ouston."

And that pissed Rhett the fuck off. "I was not the only one who came into contact with?—"

The guy cut off the radio comms, and it took every ounce of self-control for Rhett to not grab that fucker and squeeze his windpipe like Harrigan did to that piece of shit back in the bunker.

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Jay grabbing the back of Rhett's shirt was the only thing that stopped him.

"What can you tell us?" Jay asked as they got to the door. "About the pathogen."

"Nothing," guy number one said as he opened the door.

"Director King will be in touch directly," guy number two said before walking out, the door latching closed behind them.

Rhett's hands were fists. "Motherfuckers," he seethed at the door, still too mad to say much else. "They treated me like I'm the only one of us who fucking matters and that just fucks me off so bad."

"No," Jay said. "You're the only one who touched the articles, and that tells us something about what they're dealing with. It's direct contact only; skin contact only, maybe ingested. Not airborne. They know that much already. Because, like he said, if it were airborne, we'd all be dead."

Rhett turned to look at him and his anger flared again, though not at Jay, but inward. At himself.

"I shouldn't have gone," he said quietly. "I put us all at risk."

"You disobeyed a direct order," Echo added. Then he cracked a smile. "You'll be off King's Christmas card list now, for sure."

"No," Azrael said with the hint of a smile. "He'll be off his favourite list because of

the ‘fucking heads on plaques on his living room wall’ comment.”

“You all heard that?” Rhett asked.

“Pretty hard not to,” Coyote said with a shrug. “And look, Captain, I’ll tell ya something straight. Is disobeying a direct order ever a good idea? Probably not. But I’d done the same thing. We’ve got two members of this team missing, abducted, kidnapped, held hostage, we don’t fuckin’ know. Because they ain’t telling us shit. If they hadda kept you in the know, you wouldn’ta had to break protocol. So fuck ’em. I’m standing with you. Because I’m telling ya, if I ever get abducted or go missing and they withhold information, you bet your ass I’d want you to break every rule to find me.”

“Same,” Azrael said. “Till the end, right?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Sid added.

“Right,” Echo agreed with a nod.

Chen looked somewhat confused, but he shrugged. “I not know what we agree to.” He looked to Yin for some kind of clarification.

Jay said something in Mandarin, and that made Yin smile. “Rule-breaking is team-building, huh?”

“Something like that,” Jay said.

“Never broke a rule back home?” Coyote asked Yin.

Yin snorted as if that was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. “Absolutely not. If I told my superior officer that I’d put his head on my living room wall, death would

be a mercy.”

“Well,” Sid said, going back to the window. “There’s a bakery two blocks up, and I volunteer Captain Rule Breaker and his not-contaminated wallet to go get us breakfast.”

“That’s fair,” Rhett said.

Then, of course, his phone buzzed. He knew it was Director King without even looking.

Fuuuuuck.

He answered the call and put it on speaker. “You’re on speaker,” Rhett said. “There’s no privacy in this room, and it’s best if they hear the science-speak for themselves.”

Director King made an unhappy sound. “Ouston, when you get back, I think you and I are going to have a little chat.”

“When I get back, I will have Kowalski and Myles with me, and you can rip me a new asshole all you like.”

Sid grinned, Jay sighed quietly, and Yin shook his head in disbelief.

“With a bit of luck,” Rhett added, “I will have slept and eaten something by then, unlike the last twenty-four hours, so I’ll probably be more amicable. Now, tell us about the contamination, the pathogen, or whatever it is. And tell us what the hell my two team members have to do with it.”

King sighed. “Agents Kowalski and Myles were in Armenia scoping intel on a man named Aram Gordian. It was supposed to be a simple op, as you know. But then

Gordian met with a man by the name of Sadiq Askerov. Askerov is a biochem engineer with BioMed Laboratory in Baku that has, up until now, specialised in fungal toxins. Now, as you know, Gordian has been on our watchlist for some time. A person of interest, someone who appeared on our radar a year ago after the whole Istomin case got blown open. We'd never heard of him before that, and he went underground when the ZBK faction was ended last year."

Jesus Christ.

King continued as if this was not the first time he had relayed the entire case. “Kowalski and Myles were sent to Albania after information for possible evidence, and nothing else. But then Askarov turns up, we start digging into what they could possibly be discussing. Kowalski and Myles get close, we get direct audio of a confirmed clinical trial and a deal brokered, and our focus shifted to BioMed, and that’s where shit went sideways. Because a week ago, two hundred kilograms of methylphosphonyl dichloride went missing in Iran.”

“Fuck,” Jay whispered, eyes wide.

Before Rhett could ask, King continued. “Kowalski and Myles were to rendezvous in Baku. Contact was not made, as you know. They were seen being escorted into vehicles near your current location with canisters we first assumed were oxygen. What you don’t know is that we believe the canisters may contain a new bioweapon.”

Rhett felt the colour drain from his face. “What the... a bioweapon?”

“We’ve been trying to join the dots, involving experts and scientists who know a lot more about any of this than me,” King went on. “These are technically a type of trichothecene mycotoxin?—”

Rhett shook his head. “Dumb it down for me, Director. Like really fucking dumb.”

King sighed. “It’s bad. It’s like they put every bioweapon known to man into a petri dish and let it spawn. It’s a mycotoxin on super steroids, similar to anthrax, which

reacts like sarin, presents like Ebola. Think of the worst death imaginable and multiply it by ten.”

The air left Rhett’s lungs in a rush. “So it’s really fucking bad.” Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. “And Kowalski and Myles have been subjected to it?”

King answered quietly. “We cannot say with certainty because we do not know.”

“But it’s not airborne,” Jay said, clearly confused. “When you swabbed Rhett, you were looking for contact, not ingestion?”

King was quiet for a second. “Correct. That doesn’t mean our two men were contaminated with this particular agent. They could be trialling something else entirely. We have every available person on this. Our Alpha Two has been reeled in and will be available in approximately two hours.”

What?

The other Milvus team? Weren’t they in South America?

“What for?” Rhett snapped. “If you’d give us something to do, we could get it done. We wouldn’t need the second team.”

“This is bigger than you,” King said. “This is... bigger than all of us.”

Fuck.

Rhett looked up then, at the faces of his team. They watched him, faces serious and silent.

“What’s the deal, Director King?” Rhett asked. “And spare me the bullshit. What is

BioMed doing? This pathogen—bio fucking chemical warfare agent, whatever—they're making, who the hell is buying it? Is it Gordian? Or is he a middleman for a bigger player?"

Director King was quiet for a moment. "We believe he's a middleman."

"And who hired him?"

"We're looking into that."

That was bullshit, and Rhett knew it. King knew. The powers that be fucking knew but weren't ready to say.

Fine.

Rhett had more pressing concerns. "Kowalski and Myles," he asked flatly, "where are they?"

"We believe they were taken into Iran. There's a laboratory compound outside Tehran."

Rhett held his breath, eyes darting to Jay. Sid scrubbed a hand over his face, Coyote sighed, and Azrael clenched her jaw. Chen looked at Yin, and Yin's eyes never left Rhett's.

Rhett remained outwardly calm, focused now, and serious. "When do we leave?"

"Two hours. Get cleaned up and fed, ready to roll out. Just so you know, we're working with the Iranian government on this and will have the full cooperation of their police and military. You will be escorted over the border by their Armed Forces, and you will be briefed when you arrive at the base in Tehran. I will meet you there."

Rhett couldn't believe what he was hearing, and he knew... he knew then, this was bad.

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“Director,” he said, quieter this time, more subservient. “What’s the objective? What are we trying to stop? You’re talking biological warfare terrorism, right?”

A long beat of silence.

“Designed for mass carnage,” King replied.

Rhett shook his head.

Fucking hell.

“It can be detected early, like the swab tests done on you, Captain Ouston. Something to do with an elevated protein, but by then it’s already too late. One hundred percent fatality rate.”

“We believe the attack will be airborne, not contact or ingestion,” he said, his voice low and tired.

“Airborne?” Rhett said, confused. “You said it wasn’t?”

“We believe that’s what they’re working on. Mass civilian casualties.”

Jesus Christ. Rhett’s head was spinning. “The target? Do you know that yet?”

King sounded more defeated now. “We believe the intended target is Dubai airport. A highly infectious, contagious, unstoppable virus through that airport is 260,000 infected passengers going to 250 destinations in a hundred countries in one day. It

would spread around the world in twenty-four hours. Indiscriminate, unstoppable, incurable, no known antigen. It will be many millions dead in a matter of days. Health systems decimated, economies and governments ruined. The world will be on its knees.”

Rhett’s blood went cold, his humanity and training warring in his head. Eventually, his training won. “Tell me what you need me to do.”

SEVEN

Jay didn’t like this. Not one bit. They’d dealt with the worst of the world many times over, but this was... this was bad.

And by the solemn faces of the team around him, he wasn’t alone in thinking this.

Rhett’s brow was lined with worry, focused and serious. Jay hated to see him bear the weight of it all, but he knew he was capable.

There wasn’t anyone more capable than Rhett.

And that wasn’t Jay’s biased opinion. It was fact. Rhett would lead this team and the Alpha Two if he had to. Hell, he’d help lead the Iranian troops too, if it came down to that.

Rhett had unknowingly risked exposure, and Jay wasn’t even mad. Rhett had broken orders and gone over to the apartment across the street because he was concerned about Kowalski and Myles.

And rightfully so.

HQ had given them nothing, expecting Rhett to sit and twiddle his thumbs while the

minutes and hours ticked by.

The fact that he had broken orders was testament to how cornered Rhett was feeling. And if King wanted to punish Rhett for that, Jay would tell King his poor communication and lack of trust were to blame.

Besides, if Rhett was gonna be in trouble, Jay would always be right there with him.

Right now, Rhett needed some time to think, time to plan, and some time for a private conversation with King.

“Hey, Totoro,” Jay said, looking up at the big guy. “You’re on a coffee-and-food run with me. We need food and coffee.”

“I’ll come too,” Azrael said, grabbing her coat. “I need fresh air.”

“Yay,” Jay said, overly cheerful. “Did you hear that?” he asked Totoro as he walked to the door. “Az said she’s paying.”

Azrael shoved Jay so hard, he hit the door frame. “Shut it.”

Totoro laughed, and the three of them made their way down the stairs to the street.

The morning was cold but refreshing after the confines of the room they’d been bunking in. The fresh air was good for clearing out Jay’s mind, and he wondered absently if maybe Rhett should have joined them.

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“It is quite the development, yes?” Azrael said. “King was not mincing his words.”

Totoro nodded. “It is a... what do you call it in English? When you born into fire?”

“A baptism of fire,” Jay guessed.

“Yes. Our first assignment. It’s been three days. Old job not like this.”

Jay laughed. “No job is like this one. But we’ll kick butt and next week it will be something different.”

Azrael’s mouth pulled down into a grimace. “I don’t know. I think this one’s different. I mean, who the hell would want to cause so much devastation? Isn’t a terrorist attack a statement of sorts? To harm or disrupt lives on political or religious grounds, to spread awareness. No matter how fucked up. But what purpose does this one serve?”

Jay knew exactly what she was saying, what point she was making, but he had no answer.

He kept thinking about Kowalski and Myles. Two good men. Two of their team.

“Someone with the fix,” Totoro said. “Ask who benefits? The one with the... answer. The fix. Remedy.” He made a frustrated sound. “Jie yào.”

“The antidote,” Jay translated.

“Yes. I try to use only English,” Totoro said. “Antidote. One who gets paid to fix.”

“Hm.” Azrael scowled into the sunrise. “I think you might be right. It’s the only logical answer.”

Jay had to agree. He didn’t like it, but it made sense.

They passed a grocer who was just opening their store, pulling a cart of fruit onto the sidewalk.

“Should we get some fruit and water?” Azrael asked.

“On the way back,” Jay said. They were close enough to the bakery—he could smell pastries and caffeine—and his stomach growled loud enough for them all to hear. “My stomach has spoken.”

Totoro laughed. “Me too, little man. Me too.”

After everyone had demolished their coffees and bags of pastries and packed away the fruit and bottled water for later, they’d showered, freshened up, ready for whatever the day would bring.

They were ready.

Rhett was ready. He was in go-mode and focused.

Jay wanted to take Rhett aside, into the bathroom, even, and just hold him. He took so much strength from Jay’s embrace, Rhett had sworn once that it gave him a full recharge.

But he couldn’t. Not here, not now.

This was the hardest part sometimes.

Being with Rhett every step of the way but not being able to be with him. Not being able to offer any more than a quiet word of comfort when everyone else slept, or a knowing glance.

He knew Rhett could read his eyes.

All the things they couldn't say out loud.

Would the others care if Jay gave him gentle words of encouragement in front of them?

Probably not.

But there wasn't any room for that. Especially on a job. If they were off the clock, sure. But not getting ready for transport, not preparing to avert a possible worldwide terrorism catastrophe, and not when they were aligning with the Iranian military.

A country where being gay was punishable by death.

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A fact that stuck in the back of Jay's mind like a thorn.

Did it apply to them? Did their alliance with the MilvusDivision and whatever bonds Directors King and Depraz had made put them above scrutiny?

Not that they wore their sexuality on their sleeves, and not that they had any intention of being in Iran for long, and they certainly wouldn't be caught in any compromising positions... but still.

Jay knew Rhett had more to focus on than that, but he didn't doubt Rhett wasn't fully aware.

And the fact that Milvus was now aligning with Iran, and China now as well. It was a different world, Jay knew that. He didn't care to know the political intricacies, which made or broke alliances. He just did what he was told.

He would heed whatever order Rhett gave. He would follow him, right or wrong. Jay could afford to be blinkered. That was his privilege, he knew that.

He also knew that Harry Harrigan had done the same—followed orders blindly—believing he was doing what his country needed him to do.

What his country had ordered him to do.

Except he'd been lied to, used as a pawn for personal gain by the very people he'd entrusted his life to.

Jay had to believe it was different now.

The purpose of the Milvus Division was to ensure it was different. Moving forward, they were the right hand of a global counsel who could be moved at the instruction of a democratic panel, ordered to strike with the best interest of the world at its core.

Jay had to believe that.

And if that meant working with the Iranian government or the Chinese, then so be it.

Jay felt secure in the fact that it was Rhett leading his team. Rhett would make sure they completed their mission. He would make sure they did everything humanly possible to stop whatever biowarfare atrocities Gordian and Askarov had in mind.

And he'd do everything possible to bring Kowalski and Myles home.

Jay believed that too.

He hated that Rhett bore the weight of such responsibilities on his shoulders, but there was no one else Jay would trust to make it right.

And Jay knew, better than anyone else in their team, that while Rhett appeared to take it all in stride, appeared to roll with it, all without hesitation, and how he made it all look so damn easy, he did, in fact, have moments of self-doubt.

He worried about the team's safety, and he worried about failing, letting the team down. Not being enough.

So when they got the word transport was arriving, Jay did what he usually did.

He called the team to gather, and held out his fist. "Alpha One," he said. "Let's get

this done the only way we know how.”

Everyone added their fist to the centre and gave a nod. “Hell fucking yes,” Sid said.

“Hooyah,” Coyote crowed.

“Let’s take these fuckers down,” Azrael said.

“And bring the team home,” Echo added.

Jay held Rhett’s gaze. “We can do this,” Jay said, aiming it solely at Rhett.

You can do this.

You can lead us.

I’ll follow you anywhere.

I fucking love you.

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Rhett gave a nod like he understood every word Jay didn't say out loud.

Jay hoped it would be enough.

Then Rhett held his finger to his earpiece and gave a nod. "Okay, let's roll out." They collected their gear, and as everyone filed out, Rhett grabbed Jay's arm. "Thank you," he whispered.

Jay smiled at him. "When this assignment is over, you're gonna rail me so hard."

Rhett smirked, fixed the strap on Jay's gear, then shoved him toward the door. "Fall out, soldier."

With that, they left the apartment as they found it—empty—and went downstairs to the waiting van.

The ride out of Baku was quieter. Jay guessed everyone was clearing their minds, focusing, and preparing mentally for what they were about to do.

Eventually, the quiet got the better of Jay.

Totoro was sitting across from him, and when Jay's eyes met his, the big guy smiled.

Jay liked him. He wasn't entirely sure what to make of Yin. He was serious, quiet, and he reminded Jay a lot of Rhett. They were so alike.

And Chen was more like Jay.

“Ever been to Tehran before?” Jay asked him.

Totoro shook his head. “No.”

“It’s a beautiful city,” Jay added.

“Not Iran, but did training with Saudi National Guard two years ago,” Totoro said, and everyone turned to watch him. Except Yin. He kept his gaze straight ahead.

They’d done training with the Saudis?

That was . . . unexpected.

“Oh?” Jay asked. “And how was that?”

“Hot,” Chen replied. “We Sea Dragons like water. Desert no good.”

Jay chuckled. “I get that.”

“Where else have you done training?” Rhett asked. He was still looking at Yin, so everyone waited for Yin to answer.

Yin stared back at him for a long few beats before his lips twitched in what might have been a smirk. “Officially or unofficially?”

Rhett laughed. “Does it make any difference?”

Yin shrugged. “Not at all. My answer is the same.”

“It’s classified,” Sid said with a wry smile.

“Every job we’ve ever done has been classified,” Coyote added.

“I’ve never set foot outside of France,” Azrael said, her grin wide.

Jay laughed and raised his hand. “Never left Australia.”

“Me either,” Rhett said.

Yin smiled. He actually smiled.

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“Okay, favourite place and least favourite you’ve never been?” Jay asked. “I gotta say, favourite is Brazil. Didn’t love Greenland. Pretty, yes, but I’m not built for snow like that. Gimme tropical climes, man.”

“Because you like looking at half-naked people on the beach,” Echo said.

“Correct,” Jay said without shame. “Tropical climes and half-naked people on the beach. That is one hundred percent accurate.”

“Favourite place I’ve never been,” Sid offered. “Maldives. Worst place...” He grinned at Azrael. “Stade de France.”

Azrael snarled at him. “Good, because that’s exactly where I’m going to bury you.”

Jay chuckled, Echo and Coyote rolled their eyes, and Yin and Chen didn’t know where to look.

Azrael sniffed. “My favourite place is every stadium France has beat England in, and my least favourite is England.”

Sid glowered back at her, but before he could say anything, Echo chimed in with his answer. “My least favourite place is anywhere these two are bickering,” he said, gesturing between Azrael and Sid. “And my most favourite place is sitting at my mother’s kitchen table.”

That made Jay smile.

Hell, it made everyone smile.

“For me?” Coyote said. “There’s a bar in Tijuana where the margaritas are sweet and the girls even sweeter.” He shook his head, smile wide. Then his smile died. “And my least favourite was that place in Paraguay.”

Sid, Echo, and Azrael laughed. Rhett snorted. “We told you not to eat that,” Rhett said.

“Damn near left my innards in that motel,” Coyote added grimly.

Totoro didn’t seem to follow, so Jay explained, crudely, in Mandarin. Totoro laughed then. “Favourite place for me,” Totoro said. “Las Vegas. Crazy place.”

“You been to Vegas?” Coyote asked. “No shit.”

“Much shit,” Totoro said. “I lost money at casino.”

Everyone chuckled.

Rhett sighed. “My favourite is, without doubt, Acheron Island.”

Jay grinned and nudged Rhett’s shoulder, and Sid groaned. “We don’t wanna know what the fuck happened there.”

Jay laughed. “Want me to tell you?”

“No thanks,” Coyote said.

“Least favourite place,” Rhett said. “Belarus.”

Everyone winced. “What happened in Belarus?” Yin asked quietly.

“We had a close call,” Rhett answered.

And it had been.

“Shit went sideways,” Sid answered. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Certainly not yours.”

Rhett gave a shrug and a tight smile.

Another weight that Rhett bore on his shoulders. It hadn’t been his fault. The weather was utter shit, a truck rolled, slamming into their convoy and they’d been lucky to not have been seriously injured. It had been a freaking scramble. They were lucky to have survived at all.

“What about you?” Jay asked, giving Yin’s boot a tap with his own. “Favourite place?”

He seemed to think for a second, perhaps to consider how best not to answer. But then his eyes flashed with a glimpse of warmth and honesty. “Favourite place. Home.”

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“And least favourite?”

“South Sudan,” he replied quietly, flatly. The answer came easy and fast, and everyone stared at him.

No one asked for clarification.

No one dared.

“Home, huh?” Coyote murmured. “Christ, I haven’t been home in...” He sighed. “Far too long.”

It had been months for all of them. Six months since they’d been back in Australia long enough to attend Harry and Asher’s wedding, barely long enough to catch up with Jay’s family.

Though as much as he treasured seeing his family, Jay didn’t notice the time too much. He checked in with his mum every couple of weeks, of course. But it was hard to miss home exactly when his home was sitting right beside him.

Jay knew the others in his team didn’t have that luxury. They weren’t afforded that comfort.

Then, shifting the conversation and mood in the van, Rhett put his hand to his earpiece. “Roger that.” Then he looked at his team. “ETA five minutes.”

After meeting the Iranian squad leader, Rhett split his team into two, and they

transferred to the Iranian military's trucks. Two black vehicles, similar to the Rheinmetall's the Australian Army used.

He'd motioned for Sid, with no more than a hand signal, to take Azrael, Echo, and Coyote in the second truck. It wasn't that they wouldn't have all fit in one truck, but should one vehicle come under fire or be hit with an EID, at least their entire team wouldn't be decimated.

The other half could still carry out the mission.

Sid had always been his second lieutenant. More than capable, and Rhett knew Sid would do him proud. Despite Sid's tendency to run his mouth, he knew when to put his head down and get shit done.

And if, god forbid, something should happen to Rhett, he knew Sid would step up and get the team home.

The ride in the truck over the Iranian border was a quiet one.

The Iranian squad leader spoke little English and said nothing the entire ride. He and two of his men sat in the back with them, and Rhett didn't care much for the way they kept looking at Yin and Chen, and even Jay.

Rhett didn't care for that much at all.

Rhett didn't doubt Jay was aware, but it was hard to tell if Chen knew he was under scrutiny. He seemed to be fighting a smile at Jay most of the way. Hell, maybe it was the reason he smiled. But there was no doubt Yin sure noticed.

He kept alert but calm, but in the end, instead of ignoring them, Yin returned their keen observations. He just stared right back at them until their leader told his men to

stop.

It made Rhett smile.

And Yin. Well, as much as Rhett thought it was possible for Yin to actually smile.

The military base they were taken to was surrounded by desert mountains, and it looked small. A row of demountable buildings on one side, most likely admin, and barracks on the far side. There were two hangars, a mess hall, and an infirmary. Small, maybe, though Rhett knew, like most military bases around the world, especially those in the deserts and mountains, were mostly underground.

Bunkers and tunnels, garrisoned, fully armed, and ready for action in a moment's notice.

The soldiers stationed there all stopped and watched as they disembarked from their trucks. Rhett was led into the first of three large demountable buildings, while the rest of his team was shown to the hangar across from him.

There, Rhett was met by Director King. A friendlier face than the uniforms around him, though Rhett had to wonder if the smile was for show. King might have wanted to wring Rhett's neck a few hours ago but they'd be nothing short of a practised united front to the Iranian military. King also looked as if he hadn't slept in a week.

"Director King," Rhett said, sharp and professional.

"Captain. This way," King said, directing him to follow. The intel room looked like any other he'd been in, and it was air-conditioned, at least, with computers, screens, radars, and uniformed staff with headphones and headsets.

There were also other officials, and one or two national heads of state, if Rhett were

to guess. Overseeing this international operation and keeping tabs on Milvus, no doubt.

Rhett was definitely in with the big dogs now.

But reputations and status aside, Rhett was more interested in the faces on the screens at the end of the room.

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“Gordian,” King said, pointing to the first screen, then to the second screen. “And Askarov.”

“Gordian. Albanian national, thirty-four years old, no known family. Parents died in the First Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Never married. Came to our attention during the Istomin bust in Bosnia, and he’s been a person of interest since. He went off-radar for a while but came out of his hole to meet with Askarov in Baku.”

“Doctor Sadiq Askarov,” King continued. “Forty-two. Born in Grozny, Chechnya, Russia. Eight-year-old sister was killed during the battle of Grozny in 1994.

“His father, a renowned doctor in the field of neural science, Doctor Ahmed Askarov, moved himself and his son to Baku, Azerbaijan. Was the department head of Baku City Hospital, awarded the Federation of Neurology medal for his research, and for outstanding contributions to the international neurology community. Died in a car accident when Sadiq was nineteen.”

Jesus.

“Sadiq studied biochemistry and molecular modelling, completed his master’s in bioengineering at Baku State University. Genius IQ. Known gambler, banned from casinos in Europe.”

“His mother?” Rhett was almost afraid to ask.

“Missing,” King said, “from what we can ascertain. She hasn’t been home in four months, and we suspect Gordian may be behind this, to ensure Askarov does as he’s

told. No confirmation to date.”

Then King brought up another screen. This image was a satellite view of a residential address in Tehran, one building in particular marked with a red dot. He looked directly at Rhett. “We believe this is where agents Kowalski and Myles were held.”

Rhett’s adrenaline burst through him, but then King’s word choice hit home. “Were held?”

King made a face that was hard to read. “Taken to, yes. We cannot confirm nor deny they are still there. We lost signal, heat signatures show nothing.”

“So they’re underground,” Rhett deduced. “A basement or cellar.”

“Most likely.”

“When do we leave?”

“You’re not,” King said. “Not for them, anyway.”

“Sir, those are my men?—”

“And we will extract them,” King said firmly. “But your mission and our main priority remains unchanged.” He pointed to the faces of Gordian and Askarov. “Teams Alpha One and Two will be tasked with bringing in these two individuals, by whatever means necessary. Understood?”

This is the part where human-Rhett warred with soldier-Rhett. The human side of him wanted to rescue his teammates, his friends. The soldier in him would do what he was told, what he was ordered to do.

“Yes, sir.”

Rhett was given the latest intel on his two targets. Last known locations, and more importantly, where they were expected to be two hours from now.

They had a plan in place, not without its risks, of course, but Rhett was confident. Then King dismissed him, with a promise to speak to him and his team when Alpha Two arrived, and Rhett went in search of his team.

He walked into what was essentially an empty mess hall of sorts, and he walked into a tense standoff. His team, and a few faces Rhett recognised from the Iranian transport team from their truck escort earlier, were all glaring at each other. The air was static, charged, and Rhett had no clue what had transpired, but given Coyote was standing on the offensive, Rhett assumed he was in the thick of it.

The bigger of the Iranian men sneered and murmured something and Coyote burred up, ready to throw hands. Before Rhett could say anything, Yin was between them. He stared up at the Iranian, who was easily a head taller and maybe twenty kilos heavier, with a calm expression.

Yin murmured something, and the Iranian stared bitterly, nostrils flared, jaw clenched.

Yin took a small step closer, staring, unblinking, cool as fucking ice. And he stared until the Iranian took a step back.

“My money’s on Yin,” Jay said, putting his hand up with a five-pound note. “Any takers?”

Jesus Christ.

Rhett sighed. “Enough,” he barked, walking in to give the tall Iranian soldier a glare of his own. “We got a problem here?”

The soldier grumbled and sneered again, but he turned and walked away, his men following.

Rhett turned to Yin, who was still staring at the door the Iranian soldiers had disappeared through with a quiet, seething glare. Then he noticed Coyote; he had one hand on the EF88 strapped at his chest, the other on the hunting knife in his thigh holster.

Fuck's sake.

“What was that about?”

Yin met his gaze then and conceded a nod. “Seems our friends here take issue with other nationalities. Mostly Americans,” Yin said.

Coyote gave Rhett a resigned but still-pissed sigh, then clapped Yin on the arm. “Thanks for having my back, man.”

“No problem,” Yin replied.

“What did you say to him?” Sid asked Yin. “He backed up pretty fucking quick.”

Yin smirked. “I asked him nicely to be friends.”

Coyote snorted. “Yeah, right. Now, I don't speak Farsi, but I know you damn well didn't ask him nothin' nicely.”

Yin shrugged. “It was more of a suggestion.” He then went back to his seat next to Chen and the big guy gave him a nudge with a laugh. Then Yin knocked Jay with the back of his hand. “Five pounds? Is that all you'd bet on me?”

Jay laughed. “No takers, either.”

“I offered ten,” Azrael said. Then she pointed her chin at Sid, Echo, and Chen. “And I noticed none of you guys stood up.”

“Yin had it covered,” Sid said defensively. “He could fuck those guys up in a blink. We saw the footage of him kicking Captain’s ass.”

Rhett sighed, frustrated and annoyed. “He didn’t kick my ass. I was holding back so as to not draw attention to myself. Christ.”

Echo laughed. “Whatever you say, Captain.”

“You could have a rematch,” Azrael said, grin wide. “I got ten on Yin.”

Rhett stared at her. What the fuck?

“What about you?” Chen asked, nudging Jay’s knee with his own. “Who you put money on?”

Jay stared at him, wide-eyed, like what the fuck. Then he looked up at Rhett and cringed. “I mean, Rhett for sure.”

Everyone laughed, and while Rhett actually loved that his team had bonded to the point where they could mock each other, he also couldn’t believe it.

What the actual hell, Jay?

Rhett ran his hand over his face. “I’m not mad,” he said, acting aloof.

“Just disappointed,” Azrael, Sid, Echo, and Coyote all echoed.

Rhett couldn’t help but smile a little, but when Jay looked up at him, Rhett pointed a quick finger at Yin and mouthed, “Him? Over me?”

Jay shrugged, and when Chen laughed, Jay shoved the big guy. “You threw me under

the bus.”

Chen’s smile died. “Bus? What bus?”

Laughter and chatter erupted around the team, and Rhett couldn’t even bring himself to be mad.

This was what he wanted for his team. To have each other’s backs, then to sit around and laugh about it when all was said and done.

Except two of his team were still missing.

“Any word on Kowalski and Myles?” Sid asked, and a quiet fell over their group.

Rhett gave a nod. “They have a location where they believe they might be.”

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Coyote stood up. “Then let’s go. What the fuck are we still doing here?”

“Because we’re not on extraction,” Rhett said. He was met with narrowed eyes and confused faces. “We’re on priority one.” He put his hands up before they could argue. “I didn’t give the order. We’re waiting on Alpha Two to arrive, then we roll out. We have a time and location to take down our two targets. Alive, if possible.”

Or not.

Rhett didn’t exactly have a lot of faith in the judicial and legal systems. Too many instances of money and power overruling right and wrong. Evidence rarely meant jack shit when money and power were at play.

But that was not his decision, not his problem. Not his mission.

Echo cocked his head for a second, then pointed his finger upward. “Blackhawk incoming.”

Sure enough, a few seconds later, Rhett could hear the familiar sound, and he gave a nod. “I’ll join the welcome committee. Stay here and try not to beat the shit out of any soldiers.”

He turned to leave and heard Chen ask, “How you hear before?”

“He can hear shit none of us can,” Sid replied. “Tell ’em about that time we were in Portugal?—”

Rhett smiled to himself as he went outside. Despite the stifling heat, the parched dry air, and brighter-than-hell sun, and despite the tasks at hand and the reason for being there, Rhett was pleased with his team.

He met with Director King and a few Iranian brass who were his new entourage. The chopper cut the rotors, the doors opened, and Alpha Team Two filed out and headed directly for them, Captain Mateo Giardello at the front. He'd been in the Italian COFS, and from what Rhett knew, he was very good at his job.

Rhett was better, but still.

Rhett had done some training with him when Milvus was first formed, and he had liked the guy. He ran a tight team of eight soldiers, like Rhett's Alpha One team, from every corner of the globe.

They'd rarely been in the same hemisphere since then, let alone the same room.

"Director King," Giardello said, shaking his hand. Then Rhett's. "Captain."

"Captain," Rhett replied. "Good to see you."

"Sorry to hear about your men," he replied as they walked back to the admin buildings. "We'll get them back."

Well, that was the plan.

Part of it, anyway.

"Thank you for coming," Rhett offered. "Pulling your team out of South America can't have been easy. I do appreciate it."

Once they were in the office, Giardello pulled his helmet off. His hair was a little shaggy, in need of a cut, but his blue eyes were laser sharp as always.

Director King gave him a quick rundown of events, everything the same as he'd told Rhett.

"And the extraction?" Giardello asked. "Who's getting our two agents?"

Rhett liked the way Giardello included his men as his own.

"Iranian military," Director King replied. "They're preparing the go-team right now."

"I'd like two of my team to accompany them," Rhett said.

King cut him an annoyed look. "That won't be?—"

"Those are my men," Rhett hissed, trying to keep his temper in check. "My team. My responsibility. Those Iranian soldiers out there have already shown exactly what they think of us, and I won't have Kowalski and Myles jeopardised because of those asshole's prejudices. Two men," Rhett repeated, holding up two fingers. "Someone on our side needs to be there."

"Take one of mine," Giardello said with a nod. When King shot him a look, Giardello shrugged. "If they were my team in there, I'd want someone on our side too."

King let out a displeased, slow breath. "The Iranian military are on our side," he whispered.

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“Tell that to the three men who wanted a piece of Coyote twenty minutes ago,” Rhett said.

King’s gaze narrowed. “What?”

Rhett shrugged it off. “It’s fine. Yin de-escalated it.”

“Jesus Christ,” King murmured. “Did he kill any of them?”

Rhett snorted. “No.”

Rhett held his gaze until King released a sigh and conceded defeat. “Fine. Two of ours on their go-team.”

“Ritchie will go,” Rhett said. Sid wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

“I’ll tell Diaz,” Giardello said with a nod.

“Right,” King said, disgruntled. “I’ll go make arrangements. Team briefing in five minutes.”

Rhett didn’t wait to be dismissed. He turned and walked out, Giardello quick to fall into step beside him.

“Shit’s about to get real, huh?” he said.

“As real as it gets.” Rhett checked his watch. He opened the door into the hall his

team was in to find Alpha Two in the mix. Jay was with Chen and Bisgaard, a big guy from the Jaeger Corps in Denmark.

He was a nice enough guy, from what Rhett knew of him. Kicked ass in the field and was Giardello's right-hand man. Jay was making him laugh, which wasn't surprising. Jay could make anyone laugh...

"Sid," Rhett called out. He was standing with Azrael, who was talking to Audinet, a French parachute commando. Rhett thought Audinet was a bit of a wildcard but reasoned most of the parachute commandos probably were a little crazy.

Giardello called Diaz over, and Sid came straight up, serious. "Wassup?"

Rhett clapped his shoulder. "You two are in the go-team for the extraction of Kowalski and Myles. Director King will brief you."

Sid gave a serious nod. "Understood."

"Bring them home."

"Yes, sir." His gaze met Rhett's. "Thank you, Captain."

Sid and Diaz ran out of the room, and Rhett knew all eyes were on him and Giardello.

Rhett clapped his hands together. "Okay, team, this is how it's gonna go."

EIGHT

Jay was no fool. He was a trained field medic. He had medical knowledge, experience. He knew anatomy, biology. He believed in science.

And what they were told of the bioweapon being engineered in the laboratory they were about to breach scared the shit out of him.

He couldn't even begin to understand the complexity of it. But he knew enough.

This was an engineered form of trichothecene mycotoxin. Essentially, a diverse group of over forty compounds produced by fungi. Jay knew the standard variation could make people sick enough, but this was the Godzilla variation. It would inhibit protein synthesis, impair DNA synthesis, alter cell membrane structure, eventually ceasing cellular function.

Any person or animal exposed to this toxin would eventually become a leaking bag of bones and soup.

A fucking brutal way to die.

Jay didn't even try to understand why someone would want to engineer such a weapon, let alone use it.

And at the end of the day, the whys didn't matter.

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Not to Jay anyway.

Thinking about why people did evil shit led to trying to understand the psychological reasons, and that was a short path to sympathy.

There was no room for sympathy in this game.

Not for the bad guys, anyway.

The laboratory itself was located in the northeast pocket of Tehran and looked more like an office building Jay expected to see in Silicon Valley.

It was a massive white building and grounds, with a lot of office workers, admin staff.

Innocent civilians.

Something else Jay tried not to think about.

The laboratory was, according to intel, located in the second-level basement. It was secure personnel only and basically cut off from the rest of the facility.

The only people who should have been there were the scientists with top clearance. So, while teams Alpha One and Two locked down the lab, the Iranian military was tasked with escorting civilians out of the building and establishing a perimeter in conjunction with the local police.

They'd be arriving in the same armoured trucks they had before, marked Iranian military, but in full black tactical gear. The second basement was so secluded, anyone inside wouldn't even know the building was being evacuated until they breached the floor.

No one in, no one out.

Ideally, no casualties, but Jay knew that wasn't likely.

Given Gordian and Askarov more than likely wouldn't go down quietly, or not without attempting to take as many of the Alpha teams down with them, Jay wasn't expecting them to be taken out in handcuffs.

Rhett had said the order was alive, if possible, but the possible part of that equation was subjective as fuck.

It'd be body bags or nothing.

Jay was never part of the breach team. He was never one of the first ones through any door. He was the medic. It was his job to stay back until given the all-clear. And take down any threat that was late to the party, of course.

Same with Echo. His specialty was tech-ops. He could access computers, satellites, and whatever; he could listen to footage and isolate sounds in his head like a freaking computer. He could also use his weapons like the best of them, and his knife. He'd been part of India's 1B, and Jay had seen him in action plenty of times to know he'd more than earned his spot on the team.

Jay didn't mind holding position on the team's six. He'd much rather the likes of Coyote and Chen be the breach with Rhett, Yin and Giardello coming in second. The rest of the teams filed through while Jay, Echo, and Wilkins, the Alpha Two's medic,

stayed in the corridor.

When the Iranian military pulled up, civilians were understandably scared. There were the typical cries of shock and fear, voices yelling as the teams entered the building, and people running with their hands on their heads, ushered along by the military calling for quiet and calm.

Seeing a team of special ops in full gear, weapons drawn, running into the building had to be frightening.

They filed down the stairs and Jay knew the second they were through that door, Frankston or Malla would have access to the security cameras and be giving Rhett real-time intel.

Three of Alpha Two team were entering on the first basement level and two others continuing down to the third basement. Basement one was a restricted admin floor for classified information. They would be secured, cleared, and escorted out. Basement three was, as intel had divulged, an archive basement. Unmanned, only accessed by mid-level staff as required.

Frankston, Malla, or even Yixing, would open all the security doors. And, failing that, Coyote could blow a vaulted door in under fifteen seconds.

But there was no need.

“Need a key on the door,” Rhett said to HQ over their comms.

There was silence for a second. Then the access panel beeped to green as soon as they got there, and Jay heard Rhett tell Coyote and Chen to “Go, go, go.”

And they were in.

There was yelling and a few shrieks and bangs, but no weapon fire and Jay was always thankful for that.

“Where’s Gordian?” Jay heard Rhett yell.

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Just then, Morley from Alpha Two spoke into Jay's earpiece on the team's open comm. "Basement three is all clear."

When Jay got into the lab, he saw it was sectioned off into large white rooms with glass partitions. Lab gear filled almost every workspace; safety signs hung on walls. It was temperature-controlled and very high-tech.

Jay could see Coyote and Chen, and Yin and Azrael through the glass partitions, searching. "All clear," they called in turn.

Rhett had three people, two men and one woman, on their knees, hands on their heads. He held his EF88, his finger on the trigger guard. "I will ask you again. Where is Askarov?"

The woman was crying, the younger man looked pale, but the older man shook his head. "He's not here," he said, accent thick. "He did not come today. Called sick. We are scientists. Research only. I don't know what you're looking for."

"There's a vault," Yin called out. "Thumbprint access only."

"Only Doctor Askarov can open it," the scientist said quickly, as if Rhett was about to start cutting off thumbs. "We do not have access."

Rhett looked at Echo. "Take care of that vault, but don't open the door."

Echo raced toward Yin and Rhett turned his attention back to the scientists. "What's in the vault?"

“I don’t know,” the man said, shaking his head, panicking. “Samples. Tests. Doctor Askarov is the only one who knows.”

“What do you know about mycotoxin-based bioweapons?”

The older man looked up at Rhett then, brow furrowed, confused, horrified, until he seemed to realise... He paled and swallowed hard. “Nothing specific, I... I... we don’t... we can’t make that here. Is that what you think? Why you’re here?” He grew paler still, his mouth a thin line. “We’re not terrorists. We’re scientists. Doctors. Research.”

“Research on what?” Rhett asked.

“Cancer,” he said. “Specifically, how mitochondrial respiration malfunctions and increased glycolysis are observed in cancer cells and... oh.”

Then the man seemed to realise something. His mouth worked but he said nothing else, shrinking back a little.

That had Rhett’s attention. He stepped forward. “And? What else?”

“And the effect certain secondary metabolites have on biochemical and molecular mechanisms of tumour cells. It has been considered defective in mitochondrial respiration due to their dominant glycolytic metabolism, but we?—”

“What does that mean?” Rhett yelled, out of patience.

“Mycotoxins,” Jay said.

Rhett spun around. “Echo, do not open that door.” Then he spoke into his radio. “Lab is secure. Confirmed to have some kind of fungal toxins. Gonna need a hazmat team

down here?—”

The older scientist shook his head. “It is safe here. There is no risk of exposure or contamination. We wear no masks. We can’t do what you want here. You need specialist equipment. We don’t have that here.”

“We don’t want it,” Rhett said. “We want to stop it. Do you understand?”

The man nodded, aghast. And for what it was worth, Jay believed him.

“Wheredoes have the equipment to make it?” Rhett asked him. “Where could Askarov have access to that?”

Just then, the men from Alpha Two ran in. “Basements one and two are clear. Building has been cleared of all civilians.”

“Vault is unlocked but not open,” Echo called out.

“It is safe,” the older man murmured. “We would never...”

Then the woman looked up. Her face was tear-streaked, her chin wobbled. “Askarov. I hear him speak on phone,” she said, her English broken. “I not mean to hear. He not see me. He talk to I don’t know. He say Rotech.”

“What is that?” Rhett asked. “A person? A place?”

Then Yin was there. He holstered his EF88 and knelt down in front of her. He took her hand and spoke to her gently in Farsi. Jay was no expert, but he guessed Yin’s Farsi was as broken as her English, but then he looked up at Rhett.

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“She says Askarov spoke of a meeting at Rotech at two?”

“Today?”

Yin spoke to the woman again, and she replied. She held up two fingers but shook her head, but Yin shook his head in return, not following. “Two...?”

The older scientist translated. “She says he said two subjects. Two test subjects. Rotech is a laboratory. Private sector laboratory that specialises in aerosol production.”

Jay’s stomach dropped, and he watched Rhett recoil as he understood as well. Yin stood up and took a step back. His eyes met Jay’s, and yeah, he understood who the two test subjects were as well.

Rhett held his finger to his ear, a telltale sign he was getting intel. Everyone watched, waiting. “Roger that,” he replied. He looked right at Jay. “Extraction zero. Kowalski and Myles were already moved to a different location.”

Fuck.

Rhett went back to the eldest scientist. “The vault. You said it was safe, then prove it.” He looked around at his team. “Everyone out. Clear the room. Escort these two up to ground level, but don’t let them out of your sight.” The two other scientists were helped to their feet, and almost everyone followed Rhett’s order.

Except Jay.

“Agent Lin,” Rhett tried, using his captain voice.

“I ain’t leaving you.”

“Jay—”

“My grandmother will kick my ass if I let anything happen to you, and I’m more afraid of her than I am of you, so I’m staying.”

Jay heard a quiet snort and turned to find Yin standing at the door. “I’ll stand watch. If our friend here tries something,” he nodded to the scientist. “I’ll drop him. If he releases a toxin, I’ll seal the room.”

Rhett gave a nod. “Okay.”

Jay grinned at Yin. “I like you, Fù-shé.”

Rhett rolled his eyes and sighed. “Jay. Then at least stand back,” he tried. “Please.”

“Is that an order, Captain?” Jay asked.

“Does it need to be, Medic?”

Jay levelled a glare at him and Yin snorted again. So then Jay shot Yin a similar glare. “I’m liking you less.”

But Jay did as Rhett asked, though he kept the scientist in his line of sight the whole time, his weapon aimed directly at his head.

Did Jay trust him?

Possibly.

Did Jay trust anyone when it came to Rhett's immediate safety?

Not a fucking chance.

They got to the vault and Rhett nudged the man forward. "Open it."

"It's safe, I assure you," he said, pulling the handle. "We are not permitted to hold any toxin above a category two here. We don't have the facilities. See this." He pointed to a small LED screen. "Readings are normal. No contamination."

He swung the door open, and from what Jay could tell, it looked like a refrigerated storage unit. There were rows of vials and test tubes, like he'd seen in most labs he'd ever been in.

"See?" The man said. "Is fine."

"Why is Askarov the only one with access?" Rhett asked.

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“Because this is years of our work; research results are...” His words trailed off, and he turned to Rhett, pale and scared. “Those,” he whispered, pointing to one section where there was a glass box. Three small silver cannisters sat at the back, each not much bigger than a test tube. “I don’t know what those are. I’ve not seen them before.”

“Are they dangerous?” Rhett asked.

“I don’t know,” the older man said, beginning to panic. “Please step back.”

But then he reached his hand out, much the same way a father would do to protect a child. But Yin was suddenly beside Jay, weapon raised and aimed at the scientist. “Back away,” Yin barked. “Do not touch him.”

The man damned near shat himself, shaking, teary, and pale. “No, no. I do not mean?—”

“Stand down,” Jay said. “He didn’t mean it.”

Jay gave a nod to Yin and he lowered his gun. The older man sagged with relief, though Jay reckoned it took a few years off whatever time he had left.

Rhett spoke into his comms. “We have unidentified canisters in the vault. I repeat. Three unidentified small canisters... negative... Roger that.”

Then he looked at them each, his eyes going back to Jay. “A team’s on its way down now. We need to stay until we’re cleared.”

Fucking fuckity fuck.

“You shouldn’t have stayed,” Rhett hissed at Jay, angry.

“Well, I did,” Jay replied. “And I would do it all over again. You know that.” Jay wasn’t having this discussion with him right now, and not in front of others. Instead, he looked at the older man. “I can’t keep referring to you in my head as the scientist. What’s your name?”

Still with hands shaking, he turned his ID badge over. “Doctor Azad Heydari.”

Jay smiled at him. “Nice to meet you, Azad. I’m Medic. This is Fù-shé,” he gestured to Yin. “And Captain.” He ignored Rhett’s glare and gave Azad a shrug. “Helluva day, huh?”

By the time they were done with swab tests and given the all-clear, the rest of the team was already back at the base, and Rhett was pissed.

Today had been a failure on all counts.

He got out of the truck before it came to a full stop, stalking into the first admin building, and made a beeline for King.

“What the fuck kinda intel was that?” he demanded.

King glared at him, then looked at the others. “Give us the room.”

Rhett didn’t give a fuck who heard what he had to say.

“This was a waste of our fucking time,” Rhett added. “Kowalski and Myles are still missing, and we find out that Askarov has a meeting with Gordian, time and location,

from a scientist because she overheard a fucking phone call. Intel you should have known!" He pointed his finger at him. "How did you not have this information? We're supposed to have the best of fucking everything; the best intel, satellites, phone calls, CCTV access across the fucking planet, and you send us on a wild fucking goose chase."

King glared at him with as much distaste as Rhett had ever seen. "You'll do well to remember who you're talking to?—"

"And so the fuck will you!" Rhett pointed his finger again because gripping King by the throat wasn't a good idea. "We now have a location, and I swear to fucking Christ, if we're too late for my two men, I will hold you personally fucking responsible."

"You're not going?—"

Rhett took a step closer, his voice real low and lethal. "Just try and fucking stop me." He turned for the door.

"I could ground your whole team?—"

Rhett spun around on him then, and King took a small step back. "And I will go over your head. You cannot run Milvus without me, but we can sure as fuck run it without you. So just fucking try me, I dare you."

Rhett was so fucking mad. So fucking livid, he could barely see straight. He wanted to punch the ever-lovingfuck out of King, but instead, he turned back for the door and decided that kicking a chair into the wall was better for everyone.

He almost took the door off its hinges and stormed out, stalking past his entire team, which now stood by the entrance, watching the whole thing.

He headed for the mess hall where they'd set up their bullshit camp. He wanted to kick the shit out of the chairs and tables but decided against that too. Instead, he put his fingers through his hair, keeping his hands on his head to try and get as much air into his lungs as possible and a rein on his temper.

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He heard the door open, the quiet shuffle of boots on the floorboards. He knew his team was behind him, and Giardello's team too.

"So that was fucking hot," Jay said.

Rhett knew Jay would always aim for humour. It's what he did. But this wasn't the time or place for that. He turned around to find the two Alpha teams all standing there, with some variation of smiles across the board.

Coyote laughed, Azrael grinned, and even Echo gave him a smirk. "Probably not how I would have phrased it," Echo said. Then he stopped. "I meant what you said to King. Not what Jay said." He raised both hands. "No offence."

"Well fucking said," one of Giardello's guys said. "Waste of fucking time."

Yin walked over to his seat, and with a small nod to Rhett, he began to clean his gun.

The rest of the team filtered their way to a chair and began doing the same. Giardello came over and gave Rhett's shoulder a bump with his fist. "Well said," he murmured.

But Jay walked up, leaned his ass against the closest table, and looked at Rhett. "So what do we do now?"

"We have the location and the time," Rhett said, checking his watch. "We have three hours."

"No," Jay said. "What do we do now?"

Rhett met his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“The intel here is shit,” he said quietly. “Either King is being held off, or he is compromised, or he’s lying to us. So what do we do? You said yourself that you’d go over his head.”

Rhett stared at him, realising what he meant, and then he smiled. “Echo?” he called out.

Echo stopped cleaning his weapon. “Captain?”

“I need to make a call. Off the record, untraceable. Can you do that?”

Echo smiled, reassembled his gun in about two seconds, and stood up. “Can I do that, he asks,” Echo said with a laugh. “Of course I can.”

Two minutes later, Rhett was in the latrine for privacy, a satellite phone to his ear. It rang three times before a gruff voice answered.

“Whassup?”

Rhett was immediately relieved. “Hey, big guy. Sorry for calling in the middle of the night, but shit’s going down and I need you to do something for me.”

NINE

The set-up for this mission was simple.

Well, as simple as stopping two crazed bioterrorists, plus two extractions, and shooting to kill anyone else who tried to stop them. If Askarov and Gordian skulls weren’t intact by the end of the day was not Rhett’s problem.

He was told whatever means necessary, and apparently, necessary meant calling in some outside help.

Did Rhett trust King?

Normally, he'd say yes.

Whether he liked the man was a different question.

But was something off about this? Was information being withheld from them? Were they sent on a time-wasting mission, risking the lives of civilians, wasting money and the time of the Iranian military?

Yes.

Something wasn't right.

Something was being withheld, and Rhett was left with no other choice, by any means necessary, to seek outside help.

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Someone who could not be compromised or bought. Someone who would find out the truth, someone who would do everything within his power to help. No questions asked.

Harry Harrigan wasn't happy about being woken up at too-early o'clock, but within seconds, he was up, alert, and more helpful in two minutes than Director King had been in a fucking week.

"Is King compromised?" he'd asked.

"Unsure," Rhett had replied.

"But enough for you to be asking me," Harrigan deduced.

"Affirmative."

"You want Yunho?"

He freaking knew what Rhett wanted without having to ask. "Affirmative."

"What happened to the kid?"

He'd meant Yixing, the young Chinese kid who was supposed to be some genius hacker who had helped Istomin. He'd been given the option of helping the European Milvus Division headquarters or spend his life in prison. But was he helping? Or hindering?

Rhett had run a hand over his face. “I don’t know. I don’t know how deep or far this runs. Is the kid not doing his job, or is his information being intercepted?”

“Fuck.”

“Something’s not right. This mission is big. Makes Istomin look like a petty fucking thief. And it’s related.”

“Related? To Istomin?”

“His name was on that list, yes. Yunho will know more. Well, I hope he fucking does. I feel like I’m flying blind. Look, if I told you who’d been added to my team just days before deploying and in which country I’m calling you from, you’d...” Rhett shook his head. “Well, you’d understand my concern. There’s too much red fucking tape. Milvus was supposed to be above all that bullshit, and this is about to go sideways and they’re not telling me shit.”

Rhett heard Asher say something in the background, then Harry said, “Okay. The line’s open.”

The next voice Rhett had heard was Yunho’s. “Captain,” he said smoothly. “I trust you are safe to talk?”

“Yes.”

“Then please, darling, care to explain what the hell you’re doing in Iran?”

“Jesus Christ,” Harry had mumbled.

“Kinda hoping you could tell me,” Rhett had replied. “And I’m hoping like all fuck you can tell me what’s really going on with this whole case. Because I’ve got two

missing men, two new teammates who may or may not be planted, and I don't know who the fuck I'm working for."

Rhett could hear the clicking of fingers on a keyboard. "Oh dear," he said. "It is quite the mess, isn't it?"

But then Rhett heard soldiers outside. "I have to go."

"I'll be in touch."

"We're wheels up within the hour," he'd said, and ended the call just as the soldiers came in.

They stopped talking, stopped smiling, and stared. Rhett gave them a nod, washed his hands, and walked out. He went back into the mess hall, where everyone was seated around, cleaning weapons and repacking kits.

"Okay, team," Rhett said, calling for everyone's attention. "Just gonna tell you like it is. As of this very minute, I'm not entirely sure who the fuck is in charge so I'm gonna take strategic lead. Something's wrong at HQ. If anyone has a problem with that, you can side with the director. No hard feelings. I get it, I understand, I will not take it personally."

The Alpha Two team looked amongst themselves, looked to Giardello, searching for some guidance. Rhett's team, on the other hand, all smiled. Sid clapped. "Hell fucking yes I'm in."

Jay gave him a proud smile, and it burned warm behind Rhett's ribs, giving him the reassurance he needed.

Rhett turned to Giardello. "I get it if you don't want in on this, no hard feelings. But

they're withholding information, and I cannot sit by and do nothing while two of my team are being used as petri dishes by terrorists."

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Giardello held his gaze for a long moment. “Let us hear what you got first.”

Rhett gave him a nod. That was fair enough. Rhett would want to know what he was signing his team up for before as well. And, if Giardello ran this back to King, then at least Rhett would know who the traitors were.

He turned back to his team. “I’ve got some intel incoming from an outside source, which will be a damn sight better than what we’ve been fed. It’s our asses on the line here, so we’re gonna be calling the shots. We have two objectives,” Rhett said, holding up two fingers. “One, take down these fucking terrorists, and two, bring my two men home.”

Coyote clapped this time. “Hoo-fucking-yah.”

Sid gave a hard nod. “Let’s do this. Whatever the fuck it takes.”

“I’m down,” Azrael added.

“You know I am,” Echo said.

Jay didn’t need to say anything. He just smiled at Rhett like he hadn’t seen him in weeks.

Yin sighed. “I have broken three rules in my life, and all three of those times have been since I joined this team.” He shrugged. “What’s one more?”

Chen grinned and pointed his thumb at Yin. “I go where he goes.”

Giardello looked at his team, at their expressions, and then he sighed. “I guess we’re in.”

“Awesome,” Rhett said, finally feeling positive about this whole mess. “Let’s make ourselves a ready room.”

Minutes later, Yunho had set up a secure portal, sent through an access code, and Rhett had everything on the screen in front of his entire team.

Real-time satellite footage of the private research lab and of where Kowalski and Myles were being held. They had photos of Askarov and Gordian and their location down to the second, and what security they’d be up against. They also had proof of purchases of some kind of spectrometer and nuclei counters; equipment required for specific aerosol production. And financial transactions, actual fucking proof — and who Gordian had ties to. Those assholes now had taps on their phones and digital signatures. If they send it, speak it, even fucking think it, Milvus will know.

Yunho had given him the Taj Mahal of information in a matter of minutes.

This was what they should have been working with.

This was what headquarters should have given Rhett from the start.

He added a third thing to his strategy plan.

One, take the terrorists out and secure the lab. Two, get Kowalski and Myles back. And now three, find out whoever railroaded their mission and gut them like a fucking fish.

Within twenty minutes, they had a solid strategy and a contingency plan. They had routes, transport, weapons, and targets.

Everyone suited up. Full combat gear, vests, weapons, masks and helmets. Rhett was securing his thigh pistol when the door opened with a clang and the familiar tap of Director King's cane on the wooden floorboards. Rhett offered no more than a perfunctory glance before turning to Sid. "Locked and loaded," he said. "Wheels up in five."

Sid gave a nod and, ignoring King, he and Echo picked up their gear.

"What do you think you're doing?" King asked. "Did I just see Agents Masson and Velasco leave the compound? Who authorised that?"

Sid and Echo didn't even pause, like Rhett knew they wouldn't.

"I did," Rhett replied. "And what am I doing? My job."

It was only then King seemed to notice what was on the screens. His expression grew wild. "What is this? What the fuck is this? Where did you get this?"

Rhett would have probably liked to have enjoyed the moment of watching King flounder, but Rhett was in go-mode. Shit was about to get really fucking real and he was zoned in.

Getting nothing from Rhett, King turned to Giardello. "Who authorised this?"

Giardello said nothing, but his eyes went to Rhett before he turned to his team. "Let's get the birds loaded."

King's face went red, his eyes bulging, nostrils flared. "Agent Ouston, you will stand down immediately!"

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“You’re not in charge here,” Rhett said calmly. “You wanna court martial me, you can fucking do it when I get back. But we are gone in four minutes, and you’ll need to shoot me to stop me.”

The room went silent, and figuring King was done—or maybe he was actually considering shooting Rhett—Rhett turned to Yin and Chen, who were standing very much on Rhett’s side. “Let’s get this done.”

“Who authorised you?” King screamed.

Rhett spun around and yelled right back at him. “I did! I was authorised when my orders werewhatever means necessary. And this”—he pointed to the screens of satellite images and data—“is me getting my own fucking intel, by any means goddamned necessary.”

“You went over my head?—”

“You’re damn right I fucking did. Your head, and whatever bullshit headquarters is feeding you, King. We were set up to fail. And if you’re not in it, then you were set up too. Within twenty minutes, I have every piece of information we should have had from the beginning. Twenty minutes, one phone call. So if you wanna help, find out who the fuck tried to sabotage us and who the fuck we’re actually working for.”

Rhett could see King process this, the possibilities, the conversations he must have had, and Rhett could see the pieces clicking into place. He wanted to believe King was innocent in this, but he couldn’t be sure.

Jay came up to Rhett's side with his phone to his ear. "Captain, the White House is now involved, and Russia just went airborne. We need to leave. Now."

Holy fuck.

Then Jay held the phone out to King. "Asher Garin would like a word."

King, now an unhealthy mix of red and grey, stared at the phone before he took it. Rhett turned for the door, kinda wishing he could listen to that conversation, but they were out of time.

They ran for the chopper.

"Director Ericson King," Asher said, his voice eerily sweet. "So nice to finally speak to you. We have a situation on our hands, and you are either one of two things. You are either complicit, or you are being misled like the Milvus team."

King stammered for a second. "I don't know what the hell is going on. I haven't been told jack fucking shit. Everything I've been told, I've relayed directly to Ouston."

"I'm very glad to hear that," Asher replied. "Because Captain Ouston and his little Medic Lin are good friends of ours; I'm rather fond of them. Should anything happen to them because you knowingly put their lives in danger..." Asher sighed as if he had all the time in the world. "Well, that won't end well for you if we have to come over there."

King let out a short breath, then another, his mind reeling. Did he just get threatened by Asher Garin?

"I don't know what's going on," King said again. "But I am not complicit in any of this. I don't even know what I'm doing here. I'm in the fucking dark."

“You don’t normally attend the team on location?”

“No. I just assumed because of the scale of this, they wanted me on the ground.”

Asher was quiet then, and the next voice he heard was deep, gruff, and Australian. “Director King,” he said. It had to be Harrigan. “Do you believe in coincidences?”

King wasn’t expecting that. “What?”

“You got Yixing, the Chinese wonder-kid as your intel hub, and then you have Commander Zihao walk in, drop two fucking Sea Dragons into your goddamned Milvus team, and suddenly your intel goes to shit. In my line of work, we don’t call that a coincidence. We call that evidence.”

Fuck.

What could King say? That it wasn’t his fault? It wasn’t his doing? He too was just following orders? Did it look suspect? Yes.

Did he trust his office to do full background check on Zihao, Yin, and Chen? Of course.

Well . . .

He hoped they had.

Did that information go through Yixing? Fuck.

But at the end of the day, it didn’t matter.

Because Ouston was right. Rhett Ouston was a good agent, and King trusted him.

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“Milvus is compromised,” Harrigan said. “Someone in your council wanted you in Iran to get you out of their way, and now the United States and the fucking Kremlin are inbound. And believe me when I tell you, they’re not coming to help. The bidding war for the bioweapon has begun.”

King felt the blood drain from his face, his heart sank, and his stomach roiled. “What do you want me to do?”

“I’m going to put you back through to the man with the answers. And while you’re talking to him, you’re gonna go find the Iranian commanding officer and evacuate that military base.”

“Evacuate . . . ?”

“An Iranian military base being bombed won’t even make the six o’clock news, but it’s a sure good way to get rid of witnesses,” Harrigan said. “Along with two teams of kite operatives and one director of an organisation, none of which officially exist. You need to get everyone out.”

King swallowed loudly. “Jesus Christ.”

“Well, he does have a bit of a god complex,” Harrigan said. “But you can call him Yunho. And if you want to live, you’ll do everything he says.”

TEN

The laboratory was fifteen kilometres into the mountains northwest of Tehran. One

road in, one road out. A stark white compound glinting in the afternoon sun, surrounded by nothing but rocky outcrops and electrified razor wire, the chopper covering easy miles.

Azrael's cool, calm, and collected voice sounded in Rhett's earpiece. "In position and eyes on target."

"Roger that," Rhett replied. "What do you see?"

"Three vans parked to the east; two green, one black. Three guards on foot at the south entrance: one at the gate, two at the main door. MPT9 submachine guns, door looks solid steel."

Green BMW vans...

"Roger that." Rhett looked at Sid, and Sid gave a nod.

Rhett could see on his screen what they were walking into. Exactly what Yunho told him. This was the type of intel he was used to. This level of real-time information.

"Reinforced concrete buildings, minimal windows," Yunho explained through the speaker. "Surveillance cameras and motion sensors cover every inch of the perimeter. You can see on the blueprints, the basement level has a second security system, airlocks, decontamination chambers with a negative pressure system, and a biometric access point control entry. This is the high-contamination risk zone. Heat signatures show three people on the ground level. Basement has six people: three upright and moving, and a quarantined room with two men, both supine. I would bet those are your two missing agents."

Rhett had seen the satellite images of his men being dragged into this compound, so he knew they were in there. And he agreed with Yunho. "Affirmative," Rhett replied.

“Okay, rooftop insertion in twenty seconds,” Yunho said. “They are about to lose power in three, two, one... They will have backup secondary power, and when that kicks in, we will have eyes inside the building.” Yunho paused. “Aaaand we’re in.”

Just like that.

Rhett kept his eyes on the satellite images. Everything flickered for a second and then he could see the CCTV footage of inside the laboratory. Rhett could see the three people on the ground level, all looking concerned about the loss of lights and power. He could see the elevator, the halls, inside the secure rooms downstairs.

He could see Gordian in a lab coat, Askarov in full PPE, and two other men, one in a lab coat, one in overalls, and they were checking monitors, looking up at the lights. But Rhett wasn’t concerned with them. Because in an isolation room, on two gurneys, were Kowalski and Myles. Hooked up to machines and god only knows what.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” Rhett asked.

“I am,” Yunho replied. “Do not breach that quarantine room until I can confirm the readings. Do you hear me?”

Rhett grunted a response that was somewhat affirmative. And as the chopper approached the roof, Rhett put his hand to his earpiece. “Azrael, you’re up.”

The three armed guards at the front ran out into the open, looking up and confused by the Iranian military helicopter but yelling into their mics.

Tink,tink,tink.

All three guards fell to the ground, their brain matter now swirls of mist and sand in the downwash.

The chopper's skids touched down, and Rhett signalled for his teams to go. Giardello's team would take the back, Rhett's team the front. They took the service stairs, Rhett shooting the padlock and kicking the wire gate open at the ground level.

"I cannot open the main door for you," Yunho said.

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“Roger that,” Rhett replied. “Sid, you’re up.”

Within thirty seconds, Sid had a charge laid. “Set. Ready when you say, Captain.”

When everyone was braced against the wall away from the door, Rhett gave the order. “Blow it.”

The boom was loud, dust billowed, and someone inside screamed. Chen and Coyote were first in, then Rhett and Yin. Inside was a flurry of papers and smoke, and Chen and Coyote soon had the three admin staff cornered on the floor with their hands on their heads.

Rhett led the way to the stairs and kicked the lock hard enough the door swung inwards.

“You’re all clear,” Yunho said in his ear.

He made short work of the stairwell, knowing Yin, Echo, and Jay were one step behind him. He came out to an empty hallway and a locked set of doors.

“Secondary security system is down,” Yunho said.

Rhett could see the access panel was green. He opened the door, as easy as pushing the handle. “Where have you been all my life?” he murmured.

“Hey, I heard that,” Jay replied.

“You have some activity on the other side of the next door,” Yunho said.

Rhett raised his weapon and kicked the door in. The lab was exactly as he’d seen on the CCTV, but the two other lab techs were running. One frantically tapping at a keyboard, the other ran over to a wall panel, aiming for a red alarm button.

Rhett shot him in the head, and Yin took care of the guy at the keyboard. Gordian had his hands up, looking around wildly, panicked. Askarov came out of a containment, holding a small silver canister. “Don’t shoot,” he said. “My finger comes off this trigger and you all die.”

Yin moved to Rhett’s flank, Echo came up on his other side, both with their weapons aimed at Gordian and Askarov.

“Put the canister down,” Rhett ordered.

He shook his head, frantic. “You don’t understand.”

“He took your mother,” Rhett said flatly. He nodded to Gordian. “This piece of shit. He’s making you do this.”

Askarov was sweating and panicking, and he let out a manic bark of laughter. “You know nothing,” he spat. “My mother is dead. She did not understand our vision, the importance of our work. Albania and Azerbaijan must never secede to the west.”

Rhett realised then that Gordian wasn’t the mastermind. It was Askarov. And of course it was all for some political ideology.

It always fucking was.

Rhett looked at Gordian. “You’re just the buyer? Who do you work for? Who are you

selling to?”

Gordian was an odd puce colour. He shook his head. “They’ll kill me.”

“I’ll fucking kill you first,” Rhett replied. Then he spoke into his comms. “Yunho, do you need any fingerprint or retina access for any of their files?”

Askarov’s eyes went wide. “You cannot stop us!”

“No. I have them all,” Yunho said. “Accessing everything right now. We don’t need them.”

Askarov waved the canister in front of him. “You do need us!”

“We don’t need you for shit,” Rhett said, then put a bullet through Askarov’s mask, right between his eyes. He fell backward, the silver canister rolling a few inches away.

“Jesus, Captain,” Echo hissed, grabbing Rhett to haul him away from the threat.

“He was bluffing,” he said. “Those cannisters are the same as the ones in the other lab. They don’t have a trigger.”

Yin sidled over and nudged the silver canister with his foot. “He’s right. No trigger.” Then Yin looked inside the room containment vault Askarov had come out of and, using his boot, pushed the door further open so Rhett could see inside. It looked like a huge walk-in refrigerator to Rhett. “There’s a lot more of those in here. Bigger ones. Test tubes, vials.”

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“Don’t touch anything,” Rhett ordered.

Gordian stumbled backwards, blood spray across his face, and Yin quickly stood over him, his rifle trained on him. “Do not move.”

“I don’t know who the buyer is,” he cried, shaking. “Everything came through encrypted servers. Not traceable.”

“Yunho, you hear that?” Rhett asked.

“Everything is traceable,” Yunho said. “We have the files and the networks they used. It won’t take us long to access. You can leave him for the Iranian government to deal with.”

Gordian made a strange, pitiful sound. “No, no,” he wailed, fumbling hands reaching for his inside coat pocket. He produced a black handheld trigger and scrambled for the silver canister on the floor.

Yin and Echo both fired at the same time, and Gordian’s lifeless body slumped to the floor, blood and brain matter pooling from where the top of his head used to be.

“Captain?” Jay called out. He was at the back of the lab, through another door near the quarantine station. It was essentially a glass room inside the lab. “Kowalski and Myles are here.”

“Don’t go in there,” Rhett yelled back. “Yunho, I need clearance for that quarantine room.”

Rhett could hear Yunho tapping away at a keyboard. “There is an advanced filtration system and it’s not showing any airborne pathogens. The air is clean, but your two men aren’t moving, and I cannot guarantee the safety of anyone who goes in there.”

Giardello and two of his men came in, with Chen on his heels. “Perimeter is secure,” Giardello said. He then noticed the very dead men on the floor. “Guess they won’t be selling any bio-shit today?”

“Not unless it’s in the afterlife,” Rhett said. And it was then, he noticed Jay pulling on a hazmat suit. Jesus Christ. “Medic, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“My job,” Jay replied, still pulling the suit on. “Someone’s going in there and it may as well be me.”

Rhett headed toward him. “I don’t think so.”

Jay smiled at him as he zipped up the helmet. “Is that an order, Captain?”

“Does it fucking need to be?” Rhett snapped back at him.

Jay sighed and fixed the filter on his gas mask. “It’s completely sealed and has a self-contained breathing apparatus,” he said. “See? I’ll be fine.”

Rhett growled, and as much as he hated it, he knew someone did have to go in there. And as the team medic, it should be Jay. Didn’t mean he had to like it, though.

“First compartment is a negative pressure airlock,” Yunho said. “Ouston, move everyone else out.”

Rhett hesitated for just one split second. Could he leave Jay? Could he let Jay go in there alone?

“Now,” Yunho snapped.

Echo took Rhett’s arm. “He’ll be fine,” he murmured, leading him out. They closed the door, and Rhett could do nothing but watch.

Watch as Jay opened the door to the airlock. Watch as some kind of ultraviolet light scanned him up and down, and watch as the door to the inside opened.

Jay ran into the first bed. “It’s Myles,” Jay said. “Jesus fucking Christ.” Jay looked up at where Rhett was watching. “He’s alive... He has blisters, skin lesions. Myles, can you hear me? It’s Medic. We’re here to get you out.”

Rhett couldn’t be sure, but it looked like Myles spoke. Or tried to.

Jay turned to the second bed. “Kowalski... Fucking hell. Kowalski’s in worse shape. We’re gonna need a full medevac.”

“A team is already on their way,” Yunho said.

“Who?” Rhett asked. “Who’s coming?”

“Director King called in MI6 for containment,” Yunho said. “And a specialist medical team from Tehran.”

MI6? And Tehran?

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That meant King had bypassed the Milvus council. He'd gone over their heads, outside his jurisdiction, evaded the leak.

"That whole compound is about to be a little busy," Yunho said. "Your team needs to leave."

"Roger that," Rhett replied. "Medic, you need to get out of there."

"I need to—" Jay tried.

"Agent Lin, fall back now," Rhett barked.

And Jay knew Rhett meant business.

He gave a nod, said a quick goodbye to Myles and Kowalski, told them help was coming, and he re-entered the airlock. The light scanned him again, the air flushed out, and after the longest two seconds of Rhett's life, of locking eyes with Jay and waiting, the light turned green and the door opened.

"Breathe," Yin mumbled, nudging Rhett in the side.

Rhett shot him a look, which he only seemed to find amusing, then he watched Jay strip out of the suit in the decontamination chamber and stand there, arms out, with the goddamn audacity to smile at Rhett through the glass.

"Okay, Captain Ouston," Yunho said. "Your team needs to leave now. Medical team is on its way for your two men. ETA ten minutes. You cannot take them with you."

Rhett knew that. But fuck, he didn't like leaving them...

Goddammit.

Jay put his vest back on, then his helmet, and came to the door.

"How are they?" Sid asked.

Jay's eyes flinched and he shook his head. "Not good. I've never seen anything like it."

"Azrael's at the rendezvous point," Yunho said, and it was the push Rhett needed.

"Everyone back to the chopper," he said.

The team all filed through the doors, up the stairs to the admin level. "What about these three?" Giardello asked, pausing where the three admin staff now sat against the wall, their hands zip-tied.

"Leave them," Rhett ordered. "Not our concern. Keep moving."

Rhett was the last one up the stairs to the roof, the last one to get into the chopper. As soon as he was in, the door shut and the skids lifted off the roof.

Jay sat beside Rhett, as he always did, and gave him an inconspicuous nudge with his knee. Rhett growled at him. "What you did in there? Yeah. We're gonna talk about that when we get back."

Jay laughed, his grin wide. "Can't wait."

Sid groaned out a sigh. "We've all got audio, you know."

Jay laughed, and Chen did too. Even Yin smiled. Rhett resisted sighing and even considered telling everyone to shut the fuck up, just as Yunho said, “You’re being diverted to Tehran where you will rendezvous with Azrael, Velasco, and Director King. From there you will fly back to London.”

“Roger that,” Rhett said, relieved.

ELEVEN

TEHRAN MEHRABAD AIR BASE

Rhett led the team into the hangar that was now their rendezvous point, and Jay was only too happy to follow. He’d also had a quiet fiver with Sid and Echo in favour of Rhett walking up to King and punching him in the face.

Much to Jay’s disappointment, Rhett didn’t.

King was on the phone, and although it seemed an intense conversation, he was clearly relieved to see the Milvus teams. Azrael was already there, along with Velasco. She sat on one chair, her feet on another, crossed at the ankles, and she smirked as she chewed on a toothpick.

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Seeing King was busy on the phone, Rhett went up to her and they bumped fists. “Nice work back there.”

“Thanks,” she said. Others might have thought she was smug, but she wasn’t really. She was just damn good at her job.

“Any word on Kowalski and Myles?” Jay asked.

Her eyes tightened. “Not good, apparently. I think that’s what he’s finding out.” Then she nodded to King. “He’s on the phone to your friends; has been for a long time.”

Jay deduced it was Yunho. At least he hoped it was.

He wasn’t sure what the fuck had happened at HQ or what the hell was going on behind the red tape, but something wasn’t right.

King came over and held out the phone to Rhett. “For you.”

Rhett gave a nod and took the phone, walking over to the far end of the hangar.

“Is it Yunho?” Jay asked.

“It was,” King said. “Mr Garin wanted a word with Ouston.”

Jay couldn’t help but smile a little. Having Asher Garin and Jay’s favourite cranky tank in their corner was so much fun. It was almost like having two guardian angels, even if they were on the other side of the world. No one would dare fuck with Rhett

or Jay knowing they were friends with them.

And having Yunho as their own private intel was an ace up their sleeve.

It had saved their lives, Jay was sure of it.

“Any word on Kowalski and Myles?” Jay asked King.

King’s expression mirrored Azrael’s. “It’s not good. No one has the treatment, and Ouston shot Askarov, so finding one isn’t likely.”

Jay put his hand up. “Captain Ouston was justified in his actions. Askarov was a threat to all of us and to the mission. I saw Kowalski and Myles firsthand, and I can tell you now, their likelihood of survival is minimal, at best. What Askarov did to them was barbaric, and if they survive—and that’s a really big fucking if—they won’t ever be the same.”

King put his hands up. “I’m not saying Ouston wasn’t justified. I’ve seen the medical reports... I know what you saw.”

He knew what I saw?

The truth was, Jay was surprised to hear Kowalski and Myles were still alive. The skin blisters, the swelling, the short raspy breaths—and that was what he could see. They looked as if they’d been thrown into a vat of hot oil, but Jay had no doubt the internal injuries to lungs, oesophagus, mouth and sinuses, and brain were far worse than the exterior.

Kowalski was the worst of the two, and Jay had to wonder if any attempts to keep him alive were even humane at this point.

Jay sneered at King. “You don’t know what I saw. You saw pictures, probably. What I saw was two of our teammates, two of our brothers, being eaten alive by some fucking chemical cocktail. Myles tried to speak to me, but he wasn’t capable. I think he was asking me to kill him, and I’m telling you it’d have been fucking merciful. What that fucker did to them was worse than death, and you know what? He’s lucky Rhett shot him in the fucking head because I’d have made him suffer. I’d have done to him exactly what he did to them and cheered as he screamed when his skin melted off his body. You wanna talk about medical reports and what I saw, put that in your fucking report?—”

Rhett was there then, kinda pulling Jay back a bit but putting himself between Jay and King. He handed him back his phone. “Tell us what you know,” Rhett said to him. “All of it.”

King gave Jay a pointed look, let out a sigh and conceded a nod. He then looked at the two Milvus teams who were watching him, waiting, and seemed to steel himself.

“I am hesitant to admit this, and as much as I wish it were otherwise, I believe what Captain Ouston here said earlier is true. Milvus is compromised. Someone on the council, someone in head office, I don’t know who, wanted us to fail. And not just fail,” he said, nostrils flared. “They wanted us dead. The Iranian base we were at was targeted by Russian drone attacks and long-range missiles. We had evacuated all personnel only because Ouston’s informant had forewarned us, so there was no loss of personnel or property. It is believed the attack was to take out both Milvus teams,” he paused, looking at the faces in front of him. “And myself. That’s why they put me on the ground with you. To get rid of us all in one fell swoop.”

Murmurs broke out between the teams.

Jay had trusted Rhett when he’d said Milvus was compromised before they’d taken out Askarov and Gordian, but it made him feel ill to hear it confirmed.

After all, the intel had come from Yunho, and Garin and Harrigan, and Jay trusted them with his life. Hell, he trusted them with Rhett's life, and that was all he needed to know. If they said it was true, then it was fucking gospel.

“What do we do now?” Giardello asked. “Where do we go?”

King's brow narrowed. “We go back to London.”

“What?” Giardello asked. “When you say they wanted us dead and now we're expected to just go back into the lion's den?—”

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King put his hand up. “They don’t know we know. To them, on paper, the mission was a success. Askarov and Gordian were removed, our agents extracted, and the threat of biowarfare was neutralised.”

“But they know they didn’t give us the information,” Sid countered.

“Let them admit that,” Rhett said, now joining the conversation. Jay could tell by the set of Rhett’s jaw, the thunderous storm in his grey eyes that he was beyond pissed. “I want them to say that shit to my face.”

King almost winced, raising his hand for calm. “We need to be smart about this. We need evidence. Hard evidence. Undeniable proof before we say or do anything.”

Rhett’s nostrils flared.

King relented. “And then we rain down an unholy shitstorm.”

Rhett seemed somewhat mollified by that.

King took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “For full transparency, the cannisters of the bioagent were secured by MI6.” He put his hand to his chest. “I called them. I have many trusted contacts within MI6, and I made that judgement call. I will take full responsibility for that when the council wants to know why.”

The truth was, he’d made the right call. Jay knew that. Hell, everyone here knew that. With the Russians and Americans in a race to get to it first, and with someone on the Milvus council desperate for it, there was no other choice.

Unless they'd prefer it handed directly over to the Iranian government...

They were, after all, still in Tehran.

"When do we leave?" Jay asked.

King checked his watch. "Fourteen hundred." That meant they had about thirty minutes. "Pack it all up, and let's get out of here."

Rhett stepped closer to Jay. He still had an edge of anger to him—steely eyes and a hard set of his jaw that Jay would normally find a huge turn on, but not right now.

Something was wrong.

"What did Asher say?" Jay whispered when no one was paying any attention.

Rhett's gaze went to his. "He thinks we have a mole on the team," he murmured so only Jay could hear.

Jay couldn't believe it. "This team?"

"Ouston," King barked. "Giardello. With me."

Fuck.

Rhett growled and stalked off after King, Giardello falling in quickly behind him as they walked out, while Jay stared at the door they'd passed through.

Everyone was busy with their gear, with the instruction to be ready to bug out.

But Jay couldn't move. He was stunned.

A mole.

The threat wasn't just inside Milvus. It was inside the Milvus team.

No way.

No fucking way.

Jay looked around at his team. His family. Not his blood family, but his sworn family. Azrael confidently repacking her artillery, her long blonde ponytail swinging with every movement. Echo closing up his laptop hardcases, flicking latches. Sid shoving surveillance gear into cases, and Yin...

Yin checking his phone.

What the fuck?

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No one was supposed to have a phone.

He quickly slid the phone into his pocket and Chen stepped in to block Jay's view. He was packing gear and Yin hurried to catch up.

But Jay had seen what he'd seen.

We have a mole . . .

Jay heard the door and Rhett's familiar footfalls on the wooden floor, and he turned as Rhett came to stand beside him, picking up Jay's bag. "Thought you'd be done by now," Rhett said, his mood no better than it was before. Obviously, whatever King had told him hadn't been good.

And Jay was about to add to it.

"We need to talk," Jay whispered. He looked around again, seeing no one paying them any attention. "Yin's got a mobile phone on him. I saw him check it."

Rhett's nostrils flared, his gaze flicking across to the two newest members of his team, and Jay could see that this news didn't come as a surprise.

"What did King say?"

"Same thing Asher said," he murmured. Then his eyes darted to Giardello who was also now watching Yin and Chen. "He's looking into them. And Zihao."

Them being Yin and Chen, and Zihao, their Chinese military handler.

Fuck.

Jay turned his back to the room to shield his voice and moved closer to Rhett. “I saw what I saw. Phone, vest pocket, right side.”

Rhett turned around to face the same way as Jay. He leaned in, his voice barely a murmur. “Asher said Yunho did some digging. Can’t find shit on Yixing or if there’s a connection. He can’t access the Chinese satellites. But he found the Milvus official report.” Rhett’s eyes cut to Jay’s. “Yin requested the Milvus assignment.”

What?

Rhett swallowed hard and his face did something that Jay didn’t like. It took a second for Jay to pinpoint it. Uncertainty. “I told Asher I trusted him,” Rhett whispered.

Fucking fuck.

Rhett didn’t trust lightly, and to have that thrown back in his face...

To be fair, Jay trusted Yin and Chen too. But Rhett was different. He didn’t trust many people, he didn’t trust easily. It wasn’t a luxury his life had afforded him. But he trusted his team, and he trusted the Milvus Division.

Well, he had.

And now it was all coming unstuck around him. Every institution he’d put his trust in. The state foster system, the army, and now Milvus, had let him down. Not to mention that Rhett had shot a man in the head earlier. That man was a fucking dick hell bent on killing millions and he totally deserved it, but still...

Taking a life wasn't easy.

"King said we need proof," Rhett added. "And to wait."

"Do you trust King?"

His eyes flashed, the grey storm brewing within. "I want to."

"We'll be okay," Jay murmured. "Just tell me what you need me to do."

"You two gonna help us sometime today?" Sid called out.

Jay turned then to see both teams carrying all the bags and crates. They were moving out.

"Shit," Rhett mumbled, picking up Jay's med kit with one hand and one of the gear crates in his other.

Jay took a second to appreciate how Rhett's shirt couldn't hide the way his shoulders, traps, and biceps moved and bulged. Yeah, even in times like this, with everything hanging over them, he could still take a moment to appreciate his man.

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Azrael laughed behind Jay, giving him a quick shove. “You got time to ogle, you got time to work.”

Jay smirked at her. “Fair.” Then he hauled the crate up and followed them out to the plane. Following Rhett meant he could ogle his ass the whole way out.

Rhett felt strung too tight, pulled in too many directions at all the wrong angles.

As if he were thrown into a war with no clue who was the enemy or who was an ally. He didn’t know who to trust, who to turn to, who to believe.

He did trust Yunho, Asher, and Harry. And Jay, undoubtedly. He trusted Sid, Echo, and Azrael. With his life. And he thought he could trust Yin and Chen.

He believed he could.

He wanted to... part of him couldn’t believe Yin wasn’t trustworthy. The man was a Sea Dragon, for fuck’s sake. The Chinese equivalent of a Navy SEAL. They were forged out of integrity.

But whose government did his allegiance fall to now?

The core foundation of Milvus was not to be bound by one country’s legal constraints.

Or their oaths to the UN or NATO.

But like any soldier, Yin would follow orders.

Whose orders he was following was the question Rhett needed answered.

So when Chen abandoned his seat next to Yin in exchange for the lavatory, Rhett was quick to take his place. He fell into the seat next to him, and Yin gave him a nod. “Captain.”

Rhett kept his voice down. “The phone in your right vest pocket.” He held his hand out. “Give it to me.”

Yin’s eyes met his, flashing with... fear? “It’s not what you think,” he whispered. “Please.”

Rhett kept his hand out. “Now.”

Yin’s eyes flinched, and for the briefest second, a mask of distress crossed his face. But then he reached into his vest pocket and produced a small thin phone, and reluctantly, regretfully, he slid it onto Rhett’s palm.

“It’s not what you think,” he said again.

“And what do I think?”

Yin winced again, his mouth pulled down, and he looked Rhett dead in the eye. The genuine sorrow in his eyes struck Rhett as odd, but he was now holding the phone.

Rhett switched it on and, of course, it was all in Chinese. He couldn’t get past the homepage. But he didn’t need to. If Jay couldn’t read it, Yunho could make short work of it.

“It’s a personal phone,” Yin whispered. “I shouldn’t have had it. I know that. I’m sorry. It’s not traceable. It’s not detectable, it’s...”

Yin finished with a sigh.

“It’s now mine.” Rhett inhaled deeply. “I’ll tell you what’s gonna happen. We’re gonna refuel in Bosnia. And you and Chen?—”

“He’s not involved in this.”

Rhett glared at him. “And you and Chen are gonna sit down and shut up. Pretend to be asleep or something, I don’t give a fuck. Not a word, not a fucking peep. Don’t speak to anyone. Don’t do anything. Not one fucking thing. Because right now, I’d be well within my rights to shoot you in your fucking seat and toss your corpse out of this fucking plane, and I swear to fucking Christ, not one person on this plane will try and stop me.”

Yin swallowed hard and let out a short, helpless breath. “It’s not what you think. I’m not... Ouston, I can explain?—”

“Oh, believe me, you’re going to. But not to me. Save it for the Hague because you’re gonna fucking need it.”

“Captain,” he tried, but Rhett had heard enough.

He’d seen enough.

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Yin had a fucking phone on his person, and even if he wasn't the mole, even if he wasn't sending information back to Zihao or back to China, he had put the entire operation—Rhett's entire goddamn team—in jeopardy.

Rhett stood up just as Chen returned, and he slipped past him without so much as a smile and went back to his seat.

“What did he say?” Jay asked quietly.

Rhett turned his palm over, showing him the phone, and Jay's eyes went wide. “He didn't deny it?”

Rhett shook his head. “Nope. Said it's a personal phone.”

“What the fuck?”

“Exactly.” He turned it on, bringing up the home screen. “Can you read this?”

Jay took it. “Speak Mandarin, yes. Read it, not so much.” He pressed something. “Need a password or a fingerprint.”

Rhett smirked, took the phone back, and stood up.

“Without blood, preferably,” Jay added. “It smudges.”

Rhett smirked as he went back to Yin. No words, no explanation, he snatched up Yin's hand and forced his finger onto the fingerprint button.

Yin didn't fight it. He didn't react at all.

Just sadness.

Rhett had expected more of a fight out of him and was kinda disappointed he didn't get a reaction.

Chen, on the other hand, couldn't hide his alarm, his reaction. He was about to protest, about to stand up, until Yin put his free hand on Chen's arm to stop him.

Rhett aimed a fiery glare at Chen for good measure. He actually liked the big guy. Everyone liked him. His call sign of Totoro was perfect. But he was protective of Yin, his bodyguard of sorts. Rhett almost wished he knew more of their story but now it didn't matter.

Rhett knew Sid had clocked this interaction. If he'd seen the phone, Rhett couldn't be sure, but Sid didn't miss much.

Putting Yin on Sid's radar wasn't a bad thing.

Another pair of eyes on him, without knowing why, would work in Rhett's favour. If Yin so much as breathed wrong, Sid would be on him.

Rhett also noticed Azrael. He thought she'd been asleep, but no, she was watching. And Rhett didn't have to wonder about Echo or Coyote. If Sid and Azrael were watching, then they were too.

His team always had his back.

But he noticed Giardello watching too.

Giardello, who was with Rhett when King had voiced his and Harrigan's concern about the infiltration of the two newest members. Yunho was looking into it and hoped to know more by the time they landed in Bosnia to refuel.

Rhett hoped to god he did.

Whether Yin and Chen were alive or dead for the next leg of the flight back to London would hinge entirely on what they found on this phone or what Yunho found out.

When the home screen unlocked, Rhett let go of Yin's hand and returned back to his seat. He handed the phone to Jay. "Can you read any of this?"

Jay frowned at it. "Looks like a burner," he said quietly. "There are no apps. Just factory settings. No emails, no calls, incoming or outgoing. No contacts." He clicked on one button and brought up what looked like unanswered text messages. Jay thumbed up into the history. "Texts with one number..."

Rhett could see there had been some back and forth a few days ago, but all of Yin's texts in the last two days were unanswered.

"He said he arrived and all was well," Jay said. "Whoever replied said work was fine. To be careful, and that they love him. He said it back, and see this character here," Jay murmured, pointing to one word in Mandarin. "I can't be sure, because I'm rusty with this, but I think it's a woman."

A woman? "He said he has no one back home," Rhett whispered.

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Jay raised one eyebrow, which was silent Jay-speak for and you fucking believed him?

Jay went back to the phone. "Then nothing. Three days ago he sent a message. Said he was okay. No reply. Then all these, asking her to please reply."

Rhett could see all the undelivered texts.

"This last one," Jay whispered. "Please," Jay winced. "Butterfly? I don't know. Rhett, I'm not sure."

"Butterfly? What the hell?"

Jay shook his head. "Term of endearment?" He winced. "I'm not sure. Could be a pet name? Could be a code word."

What the fuck?

Jay closed that app and tried opening other pages. He checked the history, he checked the cache, the memory. He hadn't used it for anything other than to text this one person.

He also hadn't wiped anything, deleted any messages, hidden anything.

It didn't make much sense to Rhett.

If Yin really were trying to hide something, he'd have at least deleted something.

“There’s nothing else,” Jay said, handing the phone back to him. “Nothing.”

“Not that we can see, anyway,” Rhett said, sliding the phone into his pocket. He needed someone with better know-how to look at it. “I’ll be back. Try and get some sleep,” Rhett said. He gave Jay’s thigh a gentle squeeze before standing up.

He made his way to the back of the plane, not making eye contact with anyone. Sid watched him. Echo too. Azrael had her eyes closed, but Rhett doubted she was asleep.

Chen was hissing something angrily to Yin. His eyes narrowed, his finger pointed... until he saw Rhett. Then he stopped. But he never faked a smile or even tried to pretend he wasn’t mad.

Rhett had only ever seen the big guy smile, so seeing him pissed off was new.

Yin, on the other hand, was stoic. His face gave nothing away except sadness.

It was all so fucking weird.

Rhett would get to the bottom of it though. One way or another.

He found Director King sitting at the back in the only seat with a large fold-down tray that served as a desk. He had his laptop out. “Ouston,” he said. “Shouldn’t you be trying to sleep?”

Rhett almost laughed. “I could say the same for you.” He looked at King’s laptop. “Any news on Kowalski and Myles?”

“Not yet. I’ll expect an update when we land in Bosnia.”

“I need to make contact with Yunho,” Rhett said. “Before we land. Off the record. Bypass HQ. I know all comms on these planes are registered and recorded, and this needs to be on the DL.”

King paused, his eyes intent, serious, but finally he nodded, understanding what Rhett was saying.

He didn’t trust anyone at HQ.

Not their handlers, not the council.

No one.

“Okay. Do you know something?”

“I might.”

“But you’re not prepared to say.”

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“Not until I have proof.”

King scrutinised him for a tense moment, also understanding Rhett’s lack of trust extended to him. “And you want my phone?”

“It’s secure, is it not? And encrypted.”

“Yes.”

“And your laptop,” Rhett added. “You have more clearance than me.”

“They could technically trace it,” King said. “Hell, from what I know, they probably already are.”

Rhett assumed that much, but he trusted Yunho to be able to work his tech-magic. Rhett just needed a connection.

Rhett shrugged. “And for plausible deniability, I’m going to need you to go take a piss and stretch your legs for two minutes.”

King almost smirked. “Plausible deniability?”

“You went to take a piss, and when you came back, you found me sitting suspiciously at your desk but could not determine if your computer had been accessed.”

King’s lips twitched, and he gave a small nod before he took his cane and let out a groan. “Yeah,” he said, wincing as he stood. “Damn leg. Shoulda had them cut the

damn thing off.” He shuffled out from his seat, bearing his weight unevenly until he could get proper support from his cane, and it was clear that he was in pain. “Might just stretch it a bit. Uh, remind me when I get back to clear the call history in my phone. I forgot to do it after I spoke to your friend.” He put his phone on the desk, unlocked.

Rhett gave a nod. “Sure thing.”

He watched him leave before turning the laptop around and taking King’s phone. He found his call log, seeing no other number but Yunho’s. He pressed Call.

Yunho answered on the second ring. His voice smooth and unsurprised. “Director King.”

“Captain Ouston,” Rhett corrected him.

“Oh,” Yunho said. Now he was surprised, and it amused Rhett a little that he could one-up him. “Is everything okay? You are an hour outside of Bosnia. Why are you calling from King’s number?” Then he answered his own question. “Because you don’t want certain people to know.”

“Affirmative. I have a phone and I need you to access it,” Rhett said quietly. “It’s in Chinese. Jay said he couldn’t see much on it. There are a few texts to a woman, maybe? I’m not sure if there’s something else. There are no call logs, no anything, but maybe he wiped it. Maybe it’s a code, I don’t know.”

Yunho’s tapping at a keyboard paused. “Yin or Chen?”

“Yin.”

“I want you to know, I’ve found nothing else on him. His military record is

exemplary. You said you trusted him, and I can see why.”

Rhett scrubbed a hand over his face. “He had a phone on him,” Rhett whispered. “Trust or not, that’s a huge fucking breach. But...”

“But what?”

“His reaction,” Rhett murmured. “Something’s not right. I don’t know what it is.”

“You have the phone?”

“And King’s laptop. And not much time.”

“Plug the phone in for me,” Yunho said.

Rhett did that and he heard Yunho’s tapping at his keyboard. After a moment, he hummed. “Hmm. There isn’t anything... texts to a... a Jun-mei...”

More tapping.

“I’ll need some time to find out more on her, but the phone is a burner. Otherwise empty. It also has an anti-interception function, a scrambling shield common to the Chinese military. It might mean little to you, Captain, because no, he shouldn’t have had it on him. But that phone is neither a beacon nor a weapon; it gives no signature at all. He used it only to contact this one person who...”

He paused. More tapping.

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“Who what?”

“Who has not answered or received his texts for over two days. His requests for contact with her seem... desperate.”

Fuck.

“I’ll know more by the time you land to refuel,” Yunho said. “And I’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you.”

Rhett unplugged Yin’s phone, pocketed it, and turned the laptop around just as King walked back in.

“How’s the leg?” Rhett asked him.

King groaned as a response as he lowered himself into his chair. Rhett caught a glimpse of King’s leg when his trouser leg rose up. Mottled skin, disfigured, and reduced muscle mass, and he felt bad for making King suffer more than was necessary.

“I better get back to my seat,” Rhett said. He stood up and made his leave but stopped before he got too far. “Oh,” he said, nodding to King’s phone. “Don’t forget to wipe your call log.”

King smiled as Rhett turned and went back out to the seats, and amongst the silence were stoic faces and enough tension in the air to catch fire.

It was not good.

Rhett took his seat next to Jay. “What the hell happened in here?” he whispered.

“Words,” Jay replied, equally quiet. “Bisgaard had something to say to Yin. Giardello told him to shut it.”

Fuck.

Which means Giardello told Bisgaard what King had said. That Yunho was looking into Yin and Chen’s involvement. And Zihao. And how the hell they came to be in Milvus.

The last thing any of them needed was the two teams turning on each other.

Rhett could feel Sid watching him, waiting for shit to go south, waiting for Rhett to stand up, and Sid would be by his side in half a second.

Rhett heard Giardello hiss something, presumably at Bisgaard, and the tension amped up another notch. It was damn near combustible.

Jay spread his feet, as if ready to leap. His hands were fists on his thighs, his face downcast, but his eyes were on Rhett.

Ready. Waiting.

But then the intercom burst the bubble; the cockpit announced their descent, and the tension simmered a little.

When the plane landed, Rhett was first on his feet. “Alpha One with me,” he said.

Giardello seemed to agree because when they deplaned, he took his team to the other side of the bunker.

A bit of space would do them good.

But the rift in Rhett's team was evident. Yin and Chen stood to one side, arms crossed, faces sullen, and the others... well, Echo was watching everything, Azrael was glowering in Bisgaard's direction, and Sid was pacing.

"What the fuck's going on?" Coyote asked, none too quietly.

"We don't know," Rhett answered. "I'm waiting on more information."

"From HQ?" Sid asked. "I thought they?—"

"Not HQ."

"Bisgaard said Yin had a phone," Echo said, voice detached.

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Fuck.

“I saw it,” Bisgaard said, breaking away from his team and stalking over. He aimed directly for Yin. “I fucking saw it.”

Rhett intercepted him and shoved Bisgaard away. “Back the fuck off,” Rhett snarled at him.

But then Jay was there, Sid and Coyote, and Azrael and Echo. Facing off against Bisgaard and all of Alpha Two.

“The fuck are you protecting him for?” Bisgaard snapped at Rhett. He was angry, livid, pointing his finger in Rhett’s face. “He’s a fucking traitor for all we know.”

Before Rhett could take his head off, Jay was between them. A foot shorter than Bisgaard, Jay was in his face. “You watch your fucking tone when you speak to him,” Jay sneered at him.

Bisgaard snarled at Jay then, and in a split second, Rhett took the big ex-Jaeger by the neck of his shirt and drove him backward.

King tapped his cane on the concrete floor. “Enough!”

Rhett stopped but didn’t let go.

“I said that’s enough,” King repeated.

Rhett let go of Bisgaard with a shove, and Giardello was quick to pull him back.

“I am no traitor,” Yin said quietly.

Before anyone could say anything—and a few were about to begin—King put his hand up. “No one said you were. We have bigger problems than whatever this bullshit is.” He gave Bisgaard a filthy look and Giardello one that wasn’t much better. “Take your team to the other end of the bunker. Jesus Christ.” Then he held out his phone to Rhett. “Ouston,” he said. “Phone call.”

Rhett took the phone and walked a few metres away. “Hello.”

Yunho’s voice was as smooth as ever. “How is our favourite captain?”

“Been better,” he replied. “What do we know?”

“Yin’s phone yielded nothing. A search on the woman he was texting yielded nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I found nothing. Zero. Not one hit.”

“How is that possible?”

“Access to China is somewhat limited,” Yunho said. “But I can tell you it appears Tao lives with a woman, Yin Jun-mei.”

Yin?

Rhett was careful not to say anything too loud. “Wife or sister? Mother?”

“There’s no record.”

“Of what?”

“Of her. By all accounts, she doesn’t exist.”

What the fuck?

“Has she replied at all?”

“No. All still unread.”

“Is she covert? Or better yet, is he? Is Yin?”

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Yunho sighed. “I cannot yet confirm anything on her. And, from what I found on Yin, your instincts seem correct. He’s clean. Clean record, clean physical, clean psych. He was awarded medals, Captain. In a word, he is an exemplary soldier.”

Of course he was.

“Chen is much the same. Exemplary records.”

“Hm,” Rhett hummed. He never suspected Chen . . .

“Zihao, on the other hand,” Yunho added, “has a reputation as a hard ass, even by PLA standards. But...” Yunho sighed. “His record is...”

“Let me guess,” Rhett deadpanned. “Exemplary.”

“They sent their best, and it was all legit. They sent expressions of interest through the proper channels. Everything appears to be above board.”

“Who approved their application to join?” Rhett asked.

“It went to a vote. Director Depraz gave the deciding yes.”

“And that Chinese kid? Yixing?”

“I cannot find a connection.”

“Fuck.”

“I know what Harry said,” Yunho added. “I know he doesn’t think it’s a coincidence, but I cannot find any link between the two.”

“But Yin did request this post, right?”

“Yes. His reasons for that, you’d need to ask him.”

Rhett sighed.

“You still trust him.”

It wasn’t a question. “I do. I dunno why.” Then Rhett thought back to the moment when Gordian had threatened him with one of those canisters, and Yin was quick to protect Rhett. And the time in Baku when they’d snuck over to the abandoned apartment, it was Yin who stopped Rhett from being discovered. “He’s proved himself,” he offered weakly. “He’s covered in scars. Big ones. Like he almost got ripped apart. For him to survive that and still want to do this job... He reminds me of Harrigan in that regard.”

“Ah,” Yunho said fondly. “That would be from his time in South Sudan. Medical records say it was an explosion.”

“He mentioned South Sudan,” Rhett murmured.

Yunho hummed. “Yin saved his entire squad, but it was Chen who saved him. Carried him for over a mile.”

Jesus Christ.

Knowing that just confused Rhett even more.

“For what it’s worth, Rhett,” Yunho said, “I don’t believe the mole is in your team.”

“Someone on the council.”

“Or HQ. I’m looking, believe me. But they’re all digitally locked down pretty tight. We are running tracers and cameras on everything. If it’s there, I will find it. I’m hoping to have answers for you by the time you land in London.”

“Into the lion’s den,” Rhett murmured, repeating what Giardello had said before. He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Any word on Kowalski and Myles?”

Yunho’s voice was quiet, sorry. “Yes. You should know Kowalski’s prognosis isn’t good. Myles has fared better but is still critical.”

Rhett closed his eyes and hung his head. “Thank you.”

“I will be in touch. The minute you touch down.”

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“Thank you,” he said again. The truth was, if it wasn’t for Yunho, and for Asher and Harry, it was likely Rhett’s entire team would be dead by now. “Next time we’re home, we’ll come say hi.”

“Please do,” Yunho said. “Lucas said to say hello.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s well. Says he’ll keep one eye on you.”

Rhett chuckled at that, now that Lucas only had one eye. “I’m grateful.”

“And send our regards to that darling little medic of yours.”

That made Rhett automatically turn and search for Jay. He smiled when he saw him. “I will.”

“Be careful, darling,” Yunho said.

“Always am.”

The call disconnected, and Rhett felt both better and worse after that conversation.

He wasn’t sure what to make of anything, and he hated the feeling of uncertainty.

He found King talking to Giardello and his team, and they all stopped when Rhett approached.

“I was just relaying the news about Kowalski and Myles,” King said. “I assume you were told?”

Rhett gave a nod and handed King back his phone. “And that the mole isn’t on my team,” Rhett said, making sure to stare at Bisgaard while he said it. “But I already knew that.”

King looked unimpressed, in a don’t-start-fighting-again kind of way. But Rhett wasn’t even one bit sorry because, honestly, fuck them.

Rhett was sick of the bullshit.

He just wanted to get his team home safe. He wanted to find out who betrayed them, and he wanted to make them pay.

And he wanted just ten minutes alone with Jay.

Just to fucking hold him, to be held by him. That familiar feeling of home, of love, of being connected and tethered and not floating adrift.

“We’ll be on the plane,” Rhett said before taking his leave. He went back to his team, Jay’s eyes searching his, and he tried to smile for him.

My god, he needed him.

But he needed to set the record straight first. “You should know the prognosis for Kowalski doesn’t look good. Myles is still critical but stable.” He paused for a moment to let them absorb that. “And regarding who betrayed us, our intel has not changed. The threat to this team comes from somewhere within HQ. Not one of us. Are we clear?”

He looked at Az, Echo, Coyote, and lastly at Sid. They all nodded.

But then he met Yin's sad eyes. "We all good?"

Yin held his gaze and gave a grateful nod, which Rhett realised may have actually been a bow. Did he just fucking bow to him?

"All good," Chen said, smiling again.

"Excellent," Rhett said. "Let's get back on the plane and get the fuck out of here."

They filed aboard, King following, limping slowly with his cane. Rhett couldn't have cared less if Alpha Two stayed behind, but they eventually boarded and took their seats.

Rhett liked Giardello. Had a lot of respect for him as a soldier, a leader, and as a man.

But Bisgaard was now on his shit list. Rhett only had to remember the way he'd snarled at Jay, and Rhett wanted to crush his windpipe...

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Rhett had often wondered what could possess Harry to do that to another person. But that guy had beaten and tortured Asher.

Bisgaard had only snarled at Jay, and Rhett wanted to squeeze his neck.

He tried to imagine someone actually hurting Jay, and yeah... Rhett didn't have to wonder anymore. If Bisgaard, or anyone for that matter—on Alpha Two, someone from HQ, or a total stranger—hurt Jay, Rhett crushing their windpipe would be the least of their worries.

“You okay?” Jay asked quietly beside him when they were in the air.

Rhett turned his head so he could stare at Jay for a long moment and sigh. “Yeah. Can't wait to get home. I need you so fucking much.”

Jay smiled at him, eyes soft. “Oh, believe me, you're gonna have me.” Then he made a point of looking toward the bathrooms. “I mean, we could join the mile-high club.”

“I heard that,” Echo grumbled from his seat.

Jay laughed. “Wanna hear us actually?—”

“Absolutely not,” Echo replied.

Az chuckled, her eyes closed. “Me either. For the love of all that is holy.”

Jay sighed happily, and Rhett couldn't help but smile. But he was so freaking tired.

He wanted a proper feed, a hot shower, and Jay in their bed for two full days of nothing but sleep and sex.

“Get some sleep,” Jay whispered, giving Rhett’s hand a quick squeeze. The warmth was heavenly and far too brief. “I’ll keep an eye on things.”

Rhett slid his hand into Jay’s—something he didn’t do when they were on the job—and threaded their fingers. He was all out of fucks for rules. He would dare anyone say a fucking word to him about it.

Knowing they had a bigger battle to fight all too soon, he closed his eyes and slept.

TWELVE

LONDON

Director King walked up and handed his phone to Rhett the moment they cleared London airspace. Jay could only hear the murmur of Yunho’s voice and see the serious set of Rhett’s steely gaze before he closed his eyes and let out a low breath.

And Jay knew.

He knew it was bad news.

Yunho spoke for a solid two minutes, Rhett saying nothing, until he murmured his thanks and disconnected the call.

“King’s about to debrief us,” he whispered. “Kowalski didn’t make it,” he said, loud enough for his team to hear.

Jay’s heart sank, and Az, Coyote, Sid, and Echo’s faces all fell. “Fuck,” Sid

whispered.

But Jay wasn't surprised. He'd seen Kowalski and Myles on those tables in that laboratory. He was surprised Kowalski even made it to the hospital.

The way Myles had tried to speak, his laboured breathing, it sounded as if their respiratory systems were as shredded as their skin.

And Kowalski wasn't even capable of speaking . . .

Fuck.

"And they're gonna quarantine the plane and test us before they let us off," Rhett murmured.

Jay sank back in his seat with a sigh.

He understood the reasoning. It was to contain any possible contagions from the greater population of London, and it was a fair call. It just sucked ass.

As soon as the wheels were down, King walked front and centre. "Stay in your seats. They want to rapid test us all. It'll only take a few minutes." Then he let out a sigh. "And I'm sorry to have to tell you that Lieutenant Piotr Kowalski succumbed to his injuries. He died an hour ago. Myles is still listed as critical."

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Silence fell over all of them.

King continued. “Before the medical team gets here, I want to tell you that the person, or persons, behind the intel fuck-up of your mission still has not been made known to us. So, that being said, you’ve all got forty-eight-hours rec leave, and I strongly urge dispersal until you hear from your captain or myself. You know the drill.”

Dispersal.

To spread out, to not congregate together, to minimise the impact of enemy fire.

Meaning they couldn’t take them all down if we each went our own separate ways.

Jesus fucking Christ.

The medic team boarded the plane in full PPE.

“I’ve seen this movie,” Sid said, then raised his finger and did his best ET impersonation. Which was terrible. “Home.”

But they were all instructed to stay in their seats, where they were swabbed, exactly like Rhett and Yin had been back in Baku.

“Remember boys and girls, blue is good, purple is bad,” Rhett said.

The tech didn’t even smile.

But one by one, they all returned a negative swab and were cleared for deplaning. They dropped their gear off and changed into their civvies, the mood in the change room was quiet, tense, and uncomfortable.

Being told to disperse was not good.

“Lie low for two days,” Rhett told the team. “Get some sleep. If you think you’re being watched or followed, see anything or anyone suspicious, call me ASAP. If I hear anything on Myles, I’ll be in touch. And if shit gets real with whoever screwed us over,” Rhett said with a shrug. “Well, we’ll need to reconvene to sort that out.”

Sid gave a nod. “Understood.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Jay said as he made a face. “And have a shower,” he sniffed, “because you all stink.”

Azrael shoved him hard into Rhett. Echo laughed as he slung his backpack over his shoulder. “I need two things,” he said, holding up two fingers. “I need food. And to not see any of you for two days.”

He walked off, holding up his two fingers as a salute goodbye.

Jay snorted. “You know you’ll miss us.”

Echo laughed as he walked out. Azrael sized up Sid. “I’m gonna hit the gym. You up for it?”

“Absolutely not,” he replied, and they bickered as they walked out.

Coyote stood there with his bag, brows furrowed. “We’ll have a drink for Kowalski soon, yeah?”

“Absolutely,” Rhett answered. “We’ll find who did this.”

Coyote gave a hard nod and tried to smile. “Two days,” he mumbled as he picked up his bag and walked out.

And that left Yin and Chen.

“Does Echo not want our faces for two days?” Chen asked. “Does he not like us?”

“Don’t take it personally,” Jay said to him. “He means it as a term of affection because he loves us. He just has a different way of showing it.”

“Needs work,” Chen said with a serious nod.

Jay couldn’t help but smile.

Yin, on the other hand, was standing there with his head down, but he eventually looked up at Rhett, waiting for whatever it was he knew Rhett had to say.

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Rhett sighed. “My guy gave you the all-clear.” He took Yin’s phone out of his pocket and turned it over in his hand. “And this.”

“I shouldn’t have had it on me,” he murmured, eyeing the phone.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Rhett replied. “You could have jeopardised the mission or us.”

“It’s not detectable,” he said. “It emits no?—”

“It emits no signal, I know,” Rhett said. He scrutinised the black screen for another moment before handing it over to Yin. “If you bring it on assignment again, I’ll...”

“Shoot me in my seat and throw my body out of the plane,” Yin said with a wry smile.

Rhett straightened up, dead serious. “Yes.”

Jay sighed and looked up at Totoro. “You have somewhere to stay in London, right?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Awesome.” Jay clapped his hands, then took Rhett’s arm. “Okay, it’s been great and I’m glad we’re all good, but we have somewhere else to be.”

Like face down on my bed getting fucked for hours...

Rhett snorted but went willingly, and as they made their way into the hall, Zihao was on his way in.

He was a quiet, unassuming man. He was on the shorter side, about Jay's height, but Jay knew that didn't mean shit. Jay had no doubt Zihao could kick ass. He had serious eyes like a hawk and a tight smile. He stopped and bowed his head slightly.

"Yin and Chen are still inside," Rhett volunteered without slowing down.

"Yes, thank you," he replied quietly.

They walked to their car in silence, and when they got inside, Rhett put his finger to his lips.

Which meant don't speak.

Which meant Rhett assumed the car was bugged. Was their apartment too?

Probably.

Well, Jay conceded, they were about to get a few hours of hot sex audio.

"We should swing past the supermarket on the way home," Rhett said as he started the car.

"Good idea," Jay replied.

Then he made small talk about takeout, and for the entire time, he didn't mention Yin, or Yunho, or Kowalski, anything they'd done or seen in the last week.

He wasn't joking about the supermarket. Rhett pulled into a spot and they got out,

Rhett scanning the parking lot, the people. As they walked into the supermarket, Jay murmured, “We got a tail?”

“I think we should assume so.”

Fuck.

“Well, just so you know, I’ve already made the decision that they can listen to you rail me for hours. I have no problem with that. In fact, I might even ask them for a copy.”

Rhett snatched up a basket, giving him an uncertain look. “Not entirely convinced that’s funny.”

Jay shrugged. “Honestly, I’d be more surprised if they don’t have ears and eyes on us and have done for years. Think of all the hot sex audio of ours they have on file. I should get the compiled list. Hours and hours of easy listening.” They headed straight for the produce section and Jay picked up a punnet of strawberries. “The price of these is ridiculous.”

Rhett added some more fruit and greens, not saying anything, but Jay collected some apples. “You like apples? How ’bout them apples,” he said, mimicking the famous line from a movie.

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Rhett rolled his eyes. “That was terrible.”

Jay laughed, then picked up a rather large eggplant. “Oh, this reminds me, we need more lube.”

Rhett sighed. “True.”

They collected some bread, milk, eggs. Enough food for them not to leave the house for two days, all while Jay talked about the sex audio tapes and the possibility of even making a soundtrack. Rhett threw in a notebook and a pack of pens in the stationery aisle, and he paused to leaf through a trashy magazine.

“Company,” Rhett murmured. “Blue coat, three o’clock.”

Great.

They were being tailed in the supermarket. Rhett was right.

“Oh, I forgot the lube,” Jay declared loudly. “Be right back.”

He went to the opposite end of the aisle and doubled back. This guy was a fucking amateur at best. Luckily for Jay, the aisle he went down was the personal hygiene aisle, and he plucked a familiar bottle off the shelf and rounded the corner. Blue coat was still standing there, pretending to look at birthday candles. Jay had seen him before, maybe around HQ at some point. Passed him in a corridor or somewhere.

Jay, ever so casually, leaned against the shelf next to him and held up the lube. “Hey,

quick question. Do you prefer silicone-based or water-based? Personally, I much prefer silicone. You can use it in the shower too, which is super handy.”

The man baulked and blinked. “Uh...” He turned away just as Rhett boxed him in. He stumbled back and Jay pushed him forward.

“This your first day on the job?” Rhett asked. “Because you’re either incredibly stupid or a decoy. Which is it?”

“N-n-neither, I just?—”

“You were just leaving,” Rhett said, his voice low. “People are starting to take notice, and causing a scene would be in the top five of basic shit not to do in this game.”

“Top three,” Jay added helpfully. “At least. Literally learned-that-on-day-one kind of shit.”

“Who sent you?” Rhett asked, stepping in closer. “Who gave the order?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “Someone above me. Everyone’s above me. I don’t know names?—”

Christ. This guy was worse than an amateur.

“Now, I’ll tell you what’s gonna happen,” Rhett said, staring at him with that steely stare Jay just loved. “You’re gonna leave. And if I see your face again, I’ll give you a free swimming lesson in the Thames. Are we clear?”

He nodded, his hands trembling. He put the birthday candles back and bolted.

Rhett growled, then met Jay’s gaze. “Still think it’s funny?”

“Well, it would be funny if it wasn’t so bad. That guy had no clue. He was about to piss himself.”

“Decoy.”

Jay nodded. “Yep.” He tossed the lube up into a spin and caught it. “We are gonna need more of this because, my god, I love it when you get all badass. So fucking hot.”

Rhett snatched the lube from him. “I’ll be at the checkout.”

Jay went back for more lube and met Rhett in the self-checkout. He threw in a few bars of chocolates for good measure. Rhett fed cash into the machine, they left the car where it was, and disappeared into the crowded subway and on the Tube.

They checked into a hotel suite, and a few moments later, before they’d even put their groceries on the counter, Yunho called Rhett.

“Not going home was smart,” Yunho said.

“You’re on speaker,” Rhett said, sliding the phone onto the counter. “Jay’s with me.”

“Hello, my darling medic, how are you?” Yunho asked.

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Jay grinned at the phone. "I'm about to be a whole lot better in about half an hour, if you know what I mean. It's been a long week, and we've had zero privacy."

Yunho laughed. "Oh, you are so delightful."

"Who ordered the amateur-hour comedian?" Rhett asked.

"Well, you're not going to like this," Yunho said. "It appears your handler, James Frankston, has been a very busy boy."

Rhett's eyes met Jay's. "Frankston."

Frankston, the man with one eye in the sky and one hand on his iPad. The same guy who had stepped Rhett and Milvus through all kinds of mission intel in real time. Given them directions, exits, names, numbers, descriptions.

Jay inhaled sharply. "That motherfucker."

"Yes, indeed," Yunho said. "He was half-clever but not clever enough. We're onto him now, stripping his data."

"Are we assigned?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know if your services are required." Yunho paused. "He should be taken in alive, all evidence secured so he can face trial. If he's eliminated, it runs the risk of Milvus imploding completely and exposing you all. For cases such as these, there must be due process. From your side, anyhow." Then he sighed. "If it

comes down to you being compromised, we'll do what we must."

Which meant kill him. "Of course."

"Director King has been notified."

Rhett nodded. "What do we do now?"

"Sit tight. Get some sleep. You just bought two bottles of lube, did you not?"

Jay cocked his head. "You were watching?"

"And listening."

"Listening?" Jay snorted. "Do me a favour. We're gonna be busy for a few hours. Record it for me."

Yunho laughed, but before he could agree, Rhett grumbled. "Yeah, I don't think we need to do that." Then Rhett gave Jay a playful swat. "We really appreciate your work on this for us. You saved our skins."

"It's my pleasure, darling," Yunho said. "I will be in touch with news on Frankston. If we give him enough rope, he'll hang himself soon enough, and we'll be ready." He sighed. "And for your own peace of mind, the canisters taken from Tehran have been logged by an MI6 secure facility and are being analysed as we speak. I'll have the results as soon as they enter them."

"Thanks. That's good to know."

But then Yunho paused.

“Anything else?” Rhett asked.

Another pause before Yunho sighed. “Something developing. We’re not sure what to make of it. It could be nothing, and you both need some rest. I’ll let you know if it becomes relevant.”

Rhett shrugged, clearly exhausted. “Roger that.”

“Talk soon.”

The call ended and Rhett let his head fall back with a groan. He was more than exhausted, physically and mentally. He had dark circles under his eyes, three-day growth, his short hair a mess from his helmet and from running his hand through it a hundred times in the last few days. “Fucking Frankston. Never liked that fucking weasel.”

Jay agreed wholeheartedly, but there was nothing they could do this minute. They needed proper rest and food, and Yunho would let them know if and when they had to move.

Jay sighed and stood in front of him. He took his hand. “You look tired, baby.”

“Is that your way of telling me I look like shit?”

Jay smirked and pressed his hips against Rhett’s and ran his hand down Rhett’s chest. “You’ve never been sexier to me,” Jay said. He cupped Rhett’s jaw and thumbed his cheek. “You need a hot shower, some food, and a mind-blowing orgasm. Then,” he added, “I’ll allow some napping, if you’re lucky, before more of those delicious orgasms and maybe some more food at some point.”

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Rhett's smile was lazy and the sexiest fucking thing Jay had ever seen, and he slow-blinked. "Mind-blowing and delicious, huh?"

Jay slid his hand around Rhett's neck and pulled him down for a kiss. He sucked his bottom lip in between his, then slid his tongue into Rhett's mouth, giving him a taste of what he had in mind.

As much as Jay had anticipated a hard-and-fast fucking, the way they usually fucked, he soon understood that was going to be different. Rhett needed comfort; he needed something slow and deep to feel connected.

He needed to feel how much Jay loved him.

Jay led Rhett into the bathroom, took his time undressing him. He ran the water as hot as he could stand it and worked the soap into a rich lather, all over his body. He scrubbed him clean—hair, chest, back. Jay even went to his knees and scrubbed Rhett's feet, his legs.

He soaped up his balls, and washed his heavy cock, stroking it to full hardness as the hot water washed the suds away.

Rhett swayed, sleepily. Languid and wanting.

So then Jay took him to bed. He pushed him onto the mattress and crawled on top of him. "Let me take care of you," Jay murmured. "I'll make you feel so good, baby."

Rhett let his arms fall back to the bed, and he gazed up at Jay with fire in his eyes.

“Right now, you could do anything you wanted to me.”

“Anything?”

Rhett nodded.

Jay hummed, warmth blooming in his core. “I’m gonna ride you,” he whispered, kissing his neck, licking up to his ear, and sucking his earlobe between his lips. “Gonna milk that load out of you, and take it so deep. You want that, baby?”

Rhett moaned, his hands finding Jay’s hips. “Fuck yes.”

Jay found the lube, and slicking his fingers, he reached behind and lubed his hole. He never needed much preparation. In fact, he loved the reward of the burn and stretch from a hard-and-fast passionate fuck. Especially when Rhett couldn’t wait a second longer, when he needed him desperately, lube be damned.

But this was different. This was slow and careful, and they had the lube, so he ran it over his hole, slipping his fingertips in, just far enough. Rising up on his knees, fucking his fingers as Rhett watched on, enamoured. Transfixed.

Rhett took Jay’s cock in his hand, giving him a few slow strokes. “You’re so fucking hot right now.”

Jay felt those words like a caress, and it urged him on. He took more lube and slicked Rhett’s erection, giving him a hard pump, making him hiss.

Then Jay positioned him at his hole and sank down. Slow, oh so slow, and Jay gasped as the head of Rhett’s cock pushed in. He rose up a little only to sink back down, further this time, taking all of him, only remembering to breathe when he was fully seated.

Rhett looked up at him in wonder. Eyes wide, full of lust and love, pupils blown, lips parted. “Jay,” he whispered, sounding like a fucking prayer or an ode to the heavens.

It sent a jolt through Jay and he arched. Rhett’s hands stilled his hips, his cock twitching inside him.

Fuck yes.

Jay revelled in the power he held over him. The way he looked at him. Begging, pleading, without saying a word.

Jay rolled his hips slowly, moving up and down at a torturous pace, feeling every inch, every moment. Rhett took Jay’s cock, pumping him, making him feel so damn good. He was so hard, so turned on.

“Need you to come first,” Rhett said, voice tight. He pumped and squeezed, just as he knew Jay loved. “Please, Jay. Need you to come when I’m inside you.”

“Oh god, yes.” Jay took over from Rhett, sliding his slicked hand over his shaft and twisting over the head. “I’m close already. Your cock inside me is all I need.”

Then Rhett reached up, ran his hands over Jay’s chest, and tweaked his nipple at the same time he thrust up into him, and it set fireworks off behind Jay’s eyelids. He stroked his cock, shooting come onto Rhett’s chest, his head thrown back as Rhett held his hips, rocking his cock up into him deeper, making Jay cry out as he came.

He collapsed forward, his forehead on Rhett’s collarbone, trying to catch his breath.

Rhett slowly rolled his hips. “You squeeze my cock so good, baby. I need to come.”

Jay lifted his head far enough so he could kiss him and ground down hard, changing

the angle of Rhett's cock inside him, and they both groaned as their tongues met.

Rhett's hands went to Jay's face, cradling his jaw, fingers digging into his hair, desperate with need.

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Jay fucking loved that too.

He kept a slow pace, denying the need to thrust, the need to ride him like a fucking horse. Rhett's hold on him was tight, clawing, getting so fucking desperate, and Jay smiled into their kiss.

“You wanna come, baby?”

“So bad.”

“Can feel how swollen your cock is,” Jay murmured with a groan. “You fill me up so good.”

Rhett cried out, gripping Jay's hips hard and thrusting up into him, swelling impossibly before pulsing, throbbing as he came.

Jay could feel it. Every surge.

“Oh, fuck yes, give it all to me,” he cried.

And Rhett did.

They collapsed in a sweaty, sticky mess, too exhausted, too sated to care. Jay was only going to close his eyes for a second...

But he woke up to daylight cracking in through the blinds and to hunger pangs.

Oh. Food.

They'd kind of forgotten about that.

After a quick detour to the bathroom, leaving a gorgeous Rhett sound asleep, Jay decided to make a banquet for his king.

Thankful for the suite with a small kitchen, he made toast, eggs, sausages, and a metric fuckton of coffee. Jay knew the smell would rouse Rhett soon enough, and he wasn't disappointed.

A sleep-rumpled, boxer-wearing Rhett came out to the kitchen, one eye still squinting and his hand scratching his head. "Food. I smell food."

Jay laughed and held a slice of toast to Rhett's mouth. "Eat up, baby. Carbohydrates are very important for sustained energy and endurance."

Rhett chuckled as he chewed and swallowed. "Is there any such thing as death by too many orgasms? Because I'm pretty sure I know what you have planned for me today."

"I dunno," Jay replied happily, this time offering him a bite of sausage. "But you might wanna give the Guinness Book people a heads up, because we're gonna break some records today."

Rhett laughed as his phone rang, and Yunho's number came up.

Jay groaned as Rhett snatched the phone up and hit Answer. "Do you ever sleep?"

"Sometimes," Yunho replied. "Remember last night when I said something could be developing?"

Rhett stood up taller. “Yeah.”

“Well, something’s developing. Get your team together and get to Northolt Airport. I’ve arranged transport and I’ve notified Director King. He’ll be joining you.”

“Sounds big,” Rhett replied, dread pooling in his belly.

“Yixing is missing, and facial recognition just pinged Frankston entering Shanghai under a false passport.”

Holy fuck.

“And I believe there are direct ties to the disappearance of Yin’s contact. I have footage of a man seen putting a woman into an ambulance at a military hospital, who we think could be Jun-mei. And that same man just picked Frankston up from the airport.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

At a military hospital?

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“Does Yin know?”

“No. He’s still trying to reach her.”

Oh, man.

“Call your team, Captain Ouston,” Yunho said. “She was taken four days ago. The one thing she doesn’t have is time. You’re leaving for Shanghai in an hour.”

THIRTEEN

Rhett and Jay were not the first to arrive at Northolt. Which Rhett hated, but they had little other choice.

They raced over to the waiting private jet and Rhett threw their go-bag onto a seat. “Sorry,” he said. “Had to make a stop on the way.”

“Did we interrupt something more important?” Sid joked.

“The only clothes we had were the ones we’d worn for three days. Be grateful we don’t smell like shit.”

“No clothes?” Echo asked. “You didn’t go home?”

Jay shook his head. “No. We were tailed last night, so we ditched the car and stayed at a hotel.”

Sid's smile died. "What the fuck?"

Rhett nodded. "Some idiot newbie from HQ. Stuck out like a sore thumb and almost shat himself when we had a little chat."

"We think he may have been a decoy or someone to waste our time for a bit, so we opted out of going back to the flat," Jay added.

The plane's engines started just as King came onto the plane, limping heavily on his cane, with a frown and laser-focused eyes. Yin and Chen ran on after him, bags in their hands, panting.

"Did you guys run the whole way?" Sid asked.

But then Rhett got a better look at Yin. "Christ. I thought I looked like shit. Did you sleep at all in the last twelve hours?"

Yin gave a shake of his head. "Sorry we are late."

Remembering what Yunho had said, it was very likely Yin hadn't slept a wink. Rhett clapped him on the shoulder, and Chen gave Rhett an apologetic grimace that was maybe supposed to be a smile.

"Well, I don't know who organised this ride," Azrael said, looking around the very nice cabin. "But I could get used to this."

And it was nice. A private jet, with space before the cockpit for a screen and a table.

Before the door was closed, the last person to board came through the door.

Zihao.

Rhett shot King a what-the-fuck glare, and from what he could tell, Yin and Chen were surprised to see their handler.

“I’ll explain when we’re in the air,” King said pointedly to Rhett and, by association, everyone else. Then King gestured to the seat by him. “Director Zihao, please make yourself comfortable.”

The seatbelt sign came on, so they all took their seats, which were leather and more comfortable than any furniture Rhett had ever owned, and a few minutes later, they were on their way.

King eventually stood up and leaned against his table. “To answer Agent Masson’s earlier question, this plane was organised by our new intel contact, and friend to Ouston and Lin, Mr Oh Yunho.”

Azrael spun to stare at Rhett and Jay. “You’re friends with him? From when you transported him and Edwards back to Australia?”

“We stayed at his house when friends of ours got married,” Jay said.

“When Harrigan and Asher freaking Garin got married,” Sid clarified. “A renegade hitman and a ghost sniper. What kind of friends do you have?”

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“Friends that save our asses,” Rhett replied. “Now shut up and listen.”

King sighed. “We’ve had some serious developments in the last few hours. Ongoing and subject to change. Currently we are on our way to Shanghai?—”

Everyone’s head spun to face Yin and Chen, but it was very clear this was news to them as well.

“Shanghai?” Yin whispered, eyes wide with... Fear? “What for?”

“The fuck’s going on?” Sid asked. Then he levelled a glare at Yin and Chen. “Just what exactly did you get us into?”

“They didn’t get us into anything,” Rhett said, standing up and joining King at the front. He locked eyes with Sid. “So shut the fuck up and listen.”

“Our intel contact, Yixing, is missing. And so is Director Depraz.”

He had everyone’s attention now.

“They have been unaccounted for,” he checked his watch, “for going on eight hours.” King sighed. “And the leak from HQ was none other than our handler James Frankston. He was seen on security cameras entering Shanghai under a false passport just over an hour ago.”

“Frankston?” Coyote said, eyes darting to Rhett’s. “Is that why our intel was off? We got sent on a suicide mission because of Frankston?”

That's certainly what it looked like.

King nodded. "But that's not all." He turned on the screen on the wall and pressed some buttons on his laptop. On screen was footage of what was clearly an airport and a familiar face. Frankston. They watched as he left the terminal and was met by a man in a black coat. King froze the screen so they could see his face. "This man," he said, then turned to Yin and Chen. "Do you know who this is?"

Chen shook his head, frowning. Yin studied the screen, then looked up at King. "No. Am I supposed to?"

King pressed another button on his laptop and the image changed. The new photograph was what looked like a loading bay with... ambulances?

Oh shit.

Yin's face paled.

There, on the screen, was a man pushing a wheelchair. When the image zoomed in on the man's face, King froze the screen. "It's the same man."

The woman had her head down. She looked sedated, though it was hard to tell.

It wasn't until he helped her onto a gurney and her hair fell away from her face that they could see her clearly.

Yin stood up, Chen beside him. "Jun-mei," Yin whispered.

Rhett was quick to put his hands up in a calm-down fashion before there was a whole fucking incident on the small plane. "It's okay. We're on our way there right now."

Yin's face was stricken and afraid, and he watched, horrified, as the gurney was wheeled into a waiting ambulance and the doors were closed. "He took her?" he whispered.

"Yes," King said flatly. "I'm sorry, Agent Yin. We tracked the ambulance but satellite imaging in China is very restricted."

Chen put his hand on Yin's shoulder and said something in Chinese.

"Who is she?" Sid asked.

Yin didn't look capable of speaking. His face flashed with fear, horror, and realisation, then anger.

"Girlfriend," Chen replied, keeping his arm around Yin's shoulder, fisting his shirt. "Tao's partner."

"When?" Azrael asked, nodding to the screen. "When was this?"

"Over four days ago," King replied gently.

Everyone's faces changed, softened, because in all likelihood, they knew what that meant.

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Yin put the heel of his hand to his sternum, to his stomach, and he peered up at Rhett. He looked about ready to puke. "Please."

Rhett nodded. "We'll find her."

Director King made a face. "Agent Yin, I need to ask you some questions. Personal questions."

Yin's face crumpled, but Chen nodded. "He will answer."

Yin turned to Chen then, disbelieving, and mumbled something in Chinese.

"They will help," Chen said to him. Then he looked at Rhett, then to the others. "It's okay. They are different. Not like home. You must trust them, Tao. You trust the captain. Tell him."

Yin's chest was heaving but he was utterly defeated. He had tears in his eyes and was still pale and distraught.

But it was King who spoke first. "Her name is Yin Jun-mei."

Yin sagged, his head down, eyes closed, but he nodded.

"She has your surname, yet we can't find any record of marriage," King said. "We can't find any record of her at all."

Yin's face screwed up in pain and he shook his head, and he let out a shuddery

breath.

“The fuck are you lying about?” Sid said.

“I’m not lying,” he said, desperate, again looking at Rhett. Then he turned to the rest of the team, and to King and Zihao. “I’m not lying. I’m... I need to protect her.”

“To protect her,” King said. “We’ll need her real name.”

“Her real name,” Yin snapped, “is Jun-mei.”

“Tao,” Chen whispered gently, prompting him, pleading.

Yin looked at him, then sagged with a long sigh. “Her government name,” Chen said quietly, “is Shi Yufei.”

Shi Yufei . . .

Zihao cocked his head, staring at Yin as if that name meant something.

“Who’s that?” Rhett asked him. “You know who she is? You know that name?”

Zihao’s gaze eventually drew to Rhett’s. “No, I don’t. But...” He turned back to Yin. “That’s not a woman’s name.”

Yin’s gaze shot to Zihao, dark and murderous.

“What’s going on?” Coyote asked.

Yin ran his hand through his hair, looking as if he wanted to bolt. If they weren’t on a plane, Rhett was certain he would have.

“Jun-mei is,” Chen said. “How is word for . . . ?”

“Trans,” Jay offered beside Rhett.

“Yes,” Chen agreed.

Yin turned to Zihao and spoke rapid-fire Mandarin, but Chen shook his head. “No, no. Tao,” Chen said, holding Yin’s arm. Yin shook him off, and all Rhett could see was a desperate man.

“Hey,” Rhett murmured. Yin was still looking at Zihao, so Rhett stood in front of him and put his hand on Yin’s chest. “Hey,” he said, firmer this time. Yin’s eyes met his and he seemed to snap out of his tirade. “We will find her, okay? Us, all of us,” he said, gesturing to his team. “We will find her.”

Yin’s eyes became glassy, and he nodded, blinking back his tears. Chen clapped him on the back, his big hand giving him a squeeze.

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Rhett turned to King. “You have the name. Find out what you can. I need to speak to my team alone.”

King looked around the cabin. “Where do you want us to go?”

“The head, galley, cockpit,” Rhett suggested.

King eyeballed him for a long moment before grunting, snatching up his laptop and his cane and glaring at Rhett as he headed for the galley. He waited for Zihao, who stared at Yin and Chen before following King.

As soon as they were alone, Rhett turned to Yin. “Okay, tell us what we need to know, and start from the beginning.”

Yin looked perplexed, cautious, and so pale. Exhausted. He licked his lips and let out a huff of breath. “I told her to be careful. She is not safe.” He shook his head, sadness seeping into his eyes. “She’s a nurse in the military hospital. I met her when I was in recovery. I spent four months there...”

In recovery? Oh, right. “South Sudan?” Rhett deduced.

Yin’s eyes darted to his. “Yes.”

“You saved your unit and wore the full blast of an explosion to your back,” Rhett said for the sake of the others. “And someone carried you to safety,” Rhett said, smiling at Chen. “For more than a mile?”

Chen's grin was wide, and he flexed both arms. "Am strong."

Yin managed a smile, but it was weak at best. He got teary again. "She poured my tea and helped me to drink it because I couldn't," he said. "She was so kind and so pretty, and she was a light for me when everything else was dark. She would see me every day. Even on her days off..." He shook his head again, his glassy eyes meeting Rhett's. "When she told me her truth... it didn't matter to me. It was too late because I loved her already."

Rhett got it. He understood.

God, how he understood that.

"I am no traitor," he whispered, looking at each member of the team in turn. "I love my country. But Jun-mei is not safe. They do not accept her, and I..." He frowned but raised his chin. "I love her more. I choose her."

"You requested this position," Rhett prompted gently. "You asked for Milvus. Why?"

"It was my plan all along," he said as if that explained everything.

"Your plan?" Jay asked.

Yin raised his chin defiantly, proudly. "To defect." But then his chin wobbled. "If I was in Milvus, I could move more freely. Not be questioned, and I could find a place that is safe for her. I could get her out. I didn't know how. They took her passport. The police say she doesn't match their records. They make her life more difficult than it already is. She would never hurt anyone." A tear rolled down his cheek and he scrubbed it away. "I don't know why that man took her. To hurt me? To bring me back to China? I don't know."

“To bring Milvus to China,” Azrael said.

“But why?” Yin asked her. “Believe me, the last person he wants near him right now is me. If I find that man... if he’s hurt her...” He swallowed as if his throat were lined with razors, and he pulled at his hair. “It’s been four days.”

Rhett clapped Yin’s shoulder. “And we’ll help you.”

“Leverage,” Coyote said quietly. “That’s why they took her. To ensure that you do exactly what they want.”

“To manipulate Milvus,” Echo added. “To getusto do what they want.”

“So we can expect Frankston to come at us with demands,” Sid said.

“Probably, yeah,” Jay added.

“Yunho and King will handle that,” Rhett said. “What we need to do is worry about us. We’re good, yeah?” He looked at Yin. “You good?”

He kind of shrugged, kind of nodded, and got teary again. “Thank you for understanding, for not...”

Chen nudged him. “I tell you they understand, Tao.”

Yin gave Chen a smile, then looked up at Rhett. “No one knows. Only Chen. Not even Zihao.”

“Yeah, I gathered that,” Rhett said. “From the look on his face.”

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“He could have me discharged?—”

“Like fuck he can,” Jay said, not exactly quietly. Everyone turned to Jay at his outburst, but Rhett could only smile. “You’re not in the PLA anymore. You’re not a Sea Dragon. You’re Milvus. You can love whoever you damn well want.”

“Unless Zihao does know,” Azrael whispered, “and he initiated your girlfriend’s kidnapping.”

“Zihao?” Rhett asked her.

She shrugged. “It makes sense. Keeps it quiet, saves his reputation and his position in Milvus.”

Rhett could see how that might make sense, but he didn’t buy it.

Chen shook his head. “No.”

Yin looked torn. “I don’t think so. Zihao is a good man. He would expose me and ruin my career, then claim the truth is the only thing our country upholds.”

Chen nodded his agreement, and Rhett sighed. “Yunho said Zihao was clean.” Then looked at Chen and Yin, not even remotely sorry. “I had to ask.”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” Yin mumbled. He looked tired as hell but also relieved now, as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Okay, Yin, how much sleep have you had in the last four days?”

He dismissed Rhett’s question, but Chen answered for him. “He no sleep. Maybe two hours a night.”

Jesus.

Rhett shook his head. “Yin, you need to sleep before we land. I’m not asking you. I’m telling you. Because when we’re in your country, we will need you at your best, okay?”

His eyes went wide and glanced to where Zihao and King had gone. “They will find information on Jun-mei. Where she is. Captain, I need to know. I must wait to hear, to know where they took her, how she is, if she is okay.”

Rhett softened. It was difficult to be a tough leader when one of his team was clearly hurting, and the truth was, Yin wouldn’t likely be able to sleep until he heard something. “As soon as we hear something. Then you sleep.”

King came back out, slow on his cane, perhaps to give the team a moment to pause their conversation.

Zihao was behind him, and he appeared mollified. Rhett had to wonder what King had said to him.

Or what information they’d found.

King gave Yin the briefest of smiles and Rhett had to hope that it wasn’t bad news.

Yet.

“We have some information,” King said. “David Ridgeworth, the man who followed Ouston and Lin last night, has been questioned and made a statement. He was under the impression his surveillance work, if we can call it that, was on the record. He claims Frankston ordered him to follow and report back. He has had no contact with Frankston since.”

“He was a decoy,” Jay said.

“We think so,” King said. “To keep you busy while he was leaving the country? To ensure you’d ditch the car, that you wouldn’t go back to your apartment? We don’t know. But we are having your place swept for bugs as we speak.”

Jay sighed. “Fucking hell. Everyone gets to listen to us fuck, but no one has sent me the audio yet? I’m so disappointed.”

Sid, Az, and Coyote chuckled. Echo snorted, Chen was kind of horrified, but Yin half-smiled. Rhett sighed. He ignored Jay, looked at King instead. “Please continue.”

“It also appears Frankston has been sending information to some friends of his,” King said.

“Who?”

“Whoever pays the most. He sent incorrect information to us; he withheld critical information relayed by Yixing pertinent to our mission in Tehran. We believe Yixing realised and went to Depraz. As soon as Gordian and Askarov were taken out of the equation, Frankston shut everything down and prepared to flee the country.”

“That fucking traitor,” Rhett seethed.

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“What is he doing in China?” Yin asked. “Who is he meeting?”

King gave a nod and brought up an image on the screen. A still shot taken from CCTV by the looks of it. A man, possibly in his fifties, wearing a long tan coat and sunglasses, getting into the backseat of a black SUV.

It was Zihao who answered. “His name is Wong Bo-chen. A billionaire who made his money selling pharmaceutical and medical equipment. Lives in Hong Kong. Arrived in Shanghai two days ago. We believe Frankston inserted himself as the middleman when Gordian could not.”

Rhett cocked his head, joining the dots. “You think Frankston has the chemical compound recipe to sell?”

“It’s likely,” King said. “He’s selling him something.”

King looked back at the screen and pressed a button to bring up a new image. It was Wong, same coat, same sunglasses. Walking into a building alongside a now-familiar face. The same guy who had met Frankston. The same guy who had kidnapped Junmei.

Yin stood up. “That’s him.”

Zihao gave a nod. “His name is Tan Huan. He was a major in the Snow Leopard division. A mean piece of work who decided the private sector was more his style.”

“Snow Leopard?” Coyote asked.

“Police tactical unit,” King said. “China’s elite SWAT team.”

Sid sighed. “Snow Leopards, Sea Dragons. How come they get the cool names?”

Chen gave him a blinding grin and even Zihao gave a flicker of amusement, which was a first.

But Yin’s gaze never left the face on the screen. “So he’s a civilian now,” he mused.

Zihao nodded. “Yes.”

“Good,” Yin whispered.

King shook his head. “He’s amassed his own team of men. All ex-Snow Leopards.”

Yin’s eyes hardened. “Even better.”

Jesus.

The coldness in Yin’s stare and the way he seethed pure rage made Rhett glad he was on their team. Because this Yin wasn’t the stoic-but-friendly Tao Yin he’d known barely a week. This was Fù-shé, the pit viper. He’d obviously been given that name for good reason. Rhett hadn’t seen this side of him, and he was kind of looking forward to seeing him in action.

But if they were going up against a team of mercenaries, they were going to need help.

“What kind of weapons can we get?” Rhett asked.

King smiled and gestured to Zihao. “Courtesy of Director Zihao, who made some

calls, and due to the nature of this exercise, we will be landing at a military base and working with the PLA.”

Working with the People’s Liberation Army. With the Chinese military.

One for the record books, that was for sure.

It also meant they’d have transport and a whole bunch of weapons. “Excellent,” Rhett said.

“Any word on Jun-mei?” Yin asked King, purposefully not looking at Zihao.

“All we know is she was taken from her place of employment in an ambulance. We can only assume she was sedated or drugged. Yunho tracked the ambulance as far as his satellite allowed. Access is limited, but believe me, Yunho is doing everything he can. He has the names of the men on Tan’s team and he’s tracking all movements and transactions for the last week. He’s doing all that he can.” He sighed. “Perhaps when we land, given we will be working in conjunction with the Chinese military, we may be able to request access to satellites and information.” He held Yin’s gaze and nodded with intent. “We will find her.”

FOURTEEN

Jay felt sorry for Yin.

He was strung so tight, so stressed. He had dark blotches under his eyes, and what Rhett had said was right.

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They were going to need Yin at his best.

The man needed to sleep.

The relief that poured off him when he'd divulged his secrets and found nothing but acceptance was palpable.

He damn near wept.

He'd looked so small sitting there, deflated and lost. He'd had to expose his biggest fears to a team he barely knew.

But he'd found himself in the company of brothers, of family. When Rhett had put his hand on Yin's shoulder and said, we'll find her, well, Yin had just about crumpled.

Jay reckoned Yin had found the support he'd been so sorely lacking for years right then.

Of course the team would help him.

They didn't care if his girl was trans. Hell, she could be from outer fucking space and they wouldn't care. It was Yin's partner. He loved her. And she'd been kidnapped for fuck's sake. She'd been missing for four days already.

Of course they'd do everything they could to find her.

Like they would if it were the loved one of any of their team.

It's what family did for each other.

Jay fell into the seat next to Chen. "Hey, Totoro," he murmured. "Are you holding up okay?"

He looked at his own hands then at Jay, clearly confused. "Holding? I'm not holding?—"

Jay chuckled and gave him a nudge. "Sorry." Then Jay dusted off some rusty Mandarin and asked him how he was feeling.

Chen smiled at him and nodded. "Is good," he said in English.

"Is Yin okay?" Jay asked quietly.

Chen's gaze followed Jay's over to where Yin was reclined on a seat with a blanket, his overhead light turned off. "He needs to find his Jun-mei."

Jay nodded. "Understandable." Jay inhaled and let out a sigh. "You knew about her?"

Chen's smile turned rueful. "Yes. From beginning. I saw his eyes when he see her. He not lie to me."

Jay smiled. "You're a good friend to him."

"Know him for long time." Chen put his head back and had a gentle smile. "Met day one. He was smart and good soldier. Was team leader and I was just... me. We pair for team, and we be first always. How you say... brains and..."

"Brains and brawn. He's the brains, you're the muscle."

“Yes.” Chen chuckled. “Many times we win. Me and him. We not a beatable team. For many years.”

“Sounds familiar,” Jay said. “Me and Rhett. Unbeatable for eight years.”

Chen laughed. “Me and Tao not like you and Captain.”

“You never . . . you and him, ever . . .”

Chen was both amused and horrified. “No, no.” He put his hand to his chest. “I bed women.”

Jay laughed at his wording, and he put his hand to his own chest. “I bed men. Well, correction. I bed one man.”

Chen nodded sagely. “Tao bed all women. Lot of women. But now, correction, just one.”

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Jay chuckled but he had to know... “Does it bother you? That Jun-mei is trans?”

Chen shook his head. “No. I worry for him at first, but when I see him with her, it not matter to me. He never look at anyone with... soft eyes, but he look at her, and he has hearts...” He pointed to his eyes. “So it not matter who Jun-mei is, or was. He choose her, is all I need.”

Jay could have hugged him. “I like you, Totoro.”

He grinned. “You and the captain, eight years?”

Jay nodded, the memories happy ones. “Almost nine, yeah. Since the second I saw him, I knew.”

“You know love at first sight?”

More like a burning desire to get railed at first sight. Jay laughed. “Something like that.” Then they were quiet for a long moment. “I’ve never been to China,” Jay admitted quietly.

“Ah,” Chen said. He rested his head back and smiled. “Is beautiful. I show you my city. Maybe not this time, but next trip.”

“Sounds good.”

Then Chen nodded to where Rhett was talking with King and Zihao. “He not sleep?”

Jay snorted. “Sometimes, yes.” Rhett had always been able to function on far less sleep than most. “Then sometimes I have to put my foot down and make him rest. I pull my medic card and tell him it’s an order.”

Chen smiled and was quiet again for a while. “I am glad we are here,” he murmured. “Milvus. Is fun, much excitement.”

“When Yin told you he wanted to join, you were okay with that?”

“I go where he goes.” Then he looked at Jay. “I thought he be a little—” He used his index finger to draw a circle near his head, making the international hand sign for crazy. “—yes. But it make sense. I did not expect to like it this much. Good team, yes?”

Jay nodded. “Yep.”

Then he leaned in closer. “Can I tell you secret?”

“Sure.”

“Azrael,” he whispered, eyes dead serious. “She scare me a little.”

Jay burst out laughing, then tried to be quiet. “That’s okay. She scares everyone.”

He nodded, happy with this news. “Good. Not just me.” Then he made a face. “But not Sid. He tease her. Brave or stupid, I not know.”

Jay chuckled. “Don’t be fooled. She scares him the most.”

His smile petered out with a sigh. “I am sorry for your friend. The one from Polish GROM unit. Sorry I never met him.”

The truth was, although they'd never been close, Jay had liked Kowalski. He was a tough sonofabitch. A little wild and crazy. Could drink like a fish and had a wicked laugh. He was never particularly fond of the fact that Rhett and Jay were lovers, but he kept his grievances to himself. He respected Rhett's captaincy, was a dependable asset to the Milvus team, and Jay was sorry he was gone.

A terrible fucking way to die too.

Jay could still see his face . . .

"He deserved better," Jay murmured. "A more honourable death than those bastards gave him."

"Do you think it not make sense?" Chen asked quietly.

"What doesn't make sense?"

"Why they want us here. What is real reason for bringing Milvus to them?" He shrugged. "If you want to make deal or sell secrets, you make it quiet. Not bring fight to you. No sense to me."

"I don't know," Jay whispered. "But I'm sure our guys will figure it out."

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Chen nodded. “Feels”—he put his hand to his chest—“personal.”

“Personal? How so?”

“Personal for Tao. They take Jun-mei. So maybe they not want Milvus. Maybe they want Tao. Milvus is bonus.”

Jay studied Chen’s face in the darkened cabin and realised that the big guy maybe wasn’t just all brawn after all. “Hm, maybe.”

Jay looked over again at where Rhett was studying something on the laptop with King and Zihao. Their expressions were serious.

Chen checked his watch. “Ugh. Should sleep,” he mumbled, closed his eyes and then five seconds later, was snoring.

Just like sleeping next to Rhett.

Jay sighed and closed his eyes.

Rhett managed a few hours’ sleep before they’d refuelled in Astana, Kazakhstan, where it was bitterly fucking cold and no one wanted to stick around for long.

They were back on board, fed and watered, and by the time they were at altitude, King’s laptop chimed with an incoming video link.

Yunho.

When his face filled the screen, Rhett could see he looked tired but otherwise well. Behind him was a wall of screens that looked much like the intel room back at HQ, only better.

“Ah, Captain, it’s good to see you again,” he said.

“You too,” Rhett replied. He noticed the heavy set of Yunho’s eyes. “Did you manage some sleep?”

“About the same as you, I’d guess.” His smile was brief. “I have news.”

Everyone on board stood where they could, and Rhett turned the screen around better so they could see him.

“Agent Myles’ condition is stable. He’s been intubated and is in an induced coma. He’s not out of the woods yet by any stretch, but his condition hasn’t worsened. When I know more, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you,” Rhett replied.

Yunho gave a brief nod, his expression turning grim. “We have located Yixing in Paris. I believe it’s a safe house. He has a burner phone, and his only contact is Director Depraz.”

What the hell... Rhett’s eyes went to King’s, but this was clearly news to him as well.

Yunho continued, “We only have timestamps and lengths of their first phone calls, but recordings of subsequent phone calls make it clear that Depraz put him in that safe house to protect him. And,” he added, “she’s not telling anyone in HQ. In fact, several times when in discussions about Yixing’s disappearance, she’s withheld disclosure.”

“She doesn’t trust them,” King said. “She knew there was a leak, about Frankston, but not how far it went.”

Yunho gave a nod. “It would appear so. We are keeping an eye on the situation and on Yixing. He’s safe for now.”

“Do you know who informed who?” Rhett asked. “For certain, I mean. We were only assuming before. Did he tell her about Frankston, or did she tell him?”

Yunho’s lip twitched in an almost smile. “Good question, Captain. Yixing told Depraz. From their conversations, he alerted her to the fact Frankston was intercepting the intel and not relaying details to your Milvus team on mission in Tehran.”

Rhett glowered, rage brewing in his blood. “We need Frankston alive,” Rhett sneered. “So I can kill him myself.”

Someone off-camera snorted and Yunho’s eyes darted to the left, then he sighed. “Birds of a feather,” he said, then turned his laptop to show who was sitting beside him.

Harry Harrigan looked as big as Rhett remembered, but he looked... more relaxed. Happy, even. “Hey, Captain.”

Rhett grinned. “Harry. You look good.”

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

“Where’s your little pain-in-my-ass sidekick?” Harry scanned the faces behind Rhett, but Jay came over to shove his face in front of the screen.

“My favourite cranky tank.”

Harry glowered but then Asher was there, smiling. “Hello, darling,” he said cheerfully. He slid his left hand onto Harry’s shoulder, his wedding ring glinting. “You boys have been busy.”

There was a strange sound gurgling behind them and both Rhett and Jay turned. Azrael’s face was red, and Sid nudged her, concerned. But Jay laughed and grabbed Azrael’s arm. “Asher, this is Anna Masson. She’s a huge fan.”

Azrael waved like a starstruck fangirl meeting The Beatles; short, jerky hand movements, stupid smile, wide eyes, and flushed cheeks. “Bonjour Monsieur Garin. Je suis une grande fan de votre travail.”

And she spoke French?

She really was freaking out.

Asher put his hand to his chest. “Agent Masson, is it?” he asked, and she nodded eagerly. “Your work in Tehran was very good. Three shots for three kills; four hundred metres, crosswind and twenty-one-percent humidity. Nice work.”

She made that weird noise again and patted down her hair. “Je suis une énorme admiratrice.”

Jay laughed. “Look, Harry, Asher has a fan.”

Harry’s big hand slid the laptop around so his face filled the screen. “Yes, thank you. I’ll be sure to never hear the end of it.”

Jay blew him a kiss and Rhett shoved Jay out of view. “What have I told you before about pissing him off.”

Jay just laughed. Meanwhile, Director King cleared his throat, and Sid pulled Azrael back at the same time Yunho pulled the laptop back to focus on him. “The reunion and fan-club meeting can wait until your return.”

“Agreed,” Rhett mumbled.

Then Yunho scanned the people behind Rhett. “Where is Agent Yin?”

Rhett turned to Yin, seeing him pale and swallow hard, as if expecting bad news. And for all Rhett knew, that’s what he was about to get. Rhett gave Yin his chair.

Everyone went quiet.

Yin sat woodenly. “I am Yin Tao.”

“Oh Yunho,” he replied. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yes, yes. Same.” He cleared his throat, wiping his hands on his thighs. “Have you any word...?”

“She’s alive, and we have a location,” Yunho said, and Yin let out a rush of breath, hands running through his hair. Rhett didn’t realise he’d been holding his breath until then, and he could feel the relief roll through all of them.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Yin said, nodding and swallowing back his tears.

Yunho gave him a nod. “I’ll be sending through the coordinates in a moment. It’s not an easy drop and we’re going to depend on all the help the authorities can give. My access on the mainland is very limited, and while I probably could access China’s military satellites, I’d rather not start an international incident. Having Commander Zihao’s influence will hopefully pull the right strings. But,” he hedged, “if you meet resistance, please let me know and I’ll do what I must.”

Yin nodded again, eyes still teary. “Thank you. I will be forever in your debt.”

The laptop turned around to Harry’s not-smiling face. “If anything happens to Ouston or Lin, I will be the one who collects on that debt. Are we clear?”

Chen bristled at that, but before it became a different kind of international incident, Jay stuck his face in front of the screen. “I knew you loved me, Harry.”

Harry growled. “Correction. If anything happens to Ouston?—”

Jay gasped at the same time Yunho pulled the laptop around. He looked like an irritated schoolteacher. “Information incoming, Director King.”

“Thank you,” King said. “Please stay in touch.”

“Of course.”

The screen went dark, and Rhett gave Yin’s shoulder a bit of a shake before he addressed his team. “Okay, we’ll be landing in just over an hour. I think we can expect a briefing with our Chinese counterparts upon our arrival. We will be gracious and respectful. Our mission is clear: secure Yin Jun-mei, arrest Wong, and take down Frankston, preferably alive. And also the Snow Leopard guy and his entire team.”

Yin stood up. “Tan Huan,” he murmured, as if the words tasted bad. “He is mine.”

Rhett shrugged and put his hand to his chest. “I have no problem with that,” he said, glancing at King and Zihao. “Is he an extraction, elimination, or...?”

King shrugged.

Rhett clapped Yin on the shoulder. “That’s an official cannot confirm or deny request, soldier.”

Yin met his gaze, and Rhett saw fire and determination looking back at him, and he gave a nod.

“Alive is always best,” King clarified. “But, given he sold us out and kidnapped Yin’s girlfriend, should Frankston or any of that mercenary team accidentally slip and hit their heads two dozen times on a shovel, I wouldn’t be terribly sad.”

Then King’s laptop beeped with incoming intel.

“Okay, team,” King said, bringing his laptop screen up on the TV so they could all see the photos and files Yunho had sent him. “Location intel. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

FIFTEEN

The plane landed at Dachang military airbase in Shanghai. Mid-morning, sun shining, air brisk and fresh.

Rhett had never been to China before. Not for any other reason than it was just somewhere the Australian government had never sent him.

He had no idea what to expect. Now, he’d seen a lot of military bases in a lot of different countries. Some with a budget of billions, others substantially less.

China, on first impression, was at the former end of the scale.

The aircraft, the vehicles, the hangars, the buildings, all new. The grounds immaculate, and every soldier awaiting their arrival was standing at attention so perfectly they could have been statues, their faces masks of stoicism while their eyes missed nothing.

It reminded Rhett of Yin.

Rhett followed King and Zihao off the plane, alongside Yin and Chen, the rest of their team behind them. They wore their combat blacks but carried no weapons. They wanted to make it clear that this was an amicable, peaceable discussion; a plea for assistance, given the person selling biowarfare recipes was now on Chinese soil, as was the person they believed to be buying.

They needed to be transparent.

This was an international operation that could have possible global fallout if it were to go balls-up.

It was also a matter of diplomatic relations, and Rhett knew enough about Chinese hierarchy and respect that Yin and Chen needed to be seen with their captain.

They were greeted by a uniformed officer, who saluted Zihao, and escorted them into the main building, security doors held open by fully armed uniformed officers. The precision of their movements, trained discipline, and well-practised efficiency Rhett could only admire.

The walls were adorned by the Chinese flag, photos of political leaders and generals, and writing that Rhett couldn't read.

And as sterile as this military base was, Rhett could feel their presence was an event. He felt curious eyes on him, from officers to the staff who looked at them through glass partitions and doorways as they passed.

They were finally guided into a conference room, where three men rose from their seats at a large oval mahogany table. They were dressed in crisp, olive-green uniforms with red epaulets and adorned with enough stars and chevrons for Rhett to know these men were generals and commanders.

They were greeted formally, Zihao leading the exchange. The only person he introduced was Director King. He never acknowledged any of the Milvus team, though he did afford them a smile and instructed them to please sit at the table.

Which Rhett and his team did. Well, his team except for two.

Yin and Chen remained standing at ease, staring straight ahead at the side wall, not looking toward the front of the room, as if that was standard procedure, not sitting

down as instructed. Rhett had the odd urge to join them, and if it weren't for Zihao's instruction to sit, he probably would have.

Then Zihao spoke and the three senior officials listened, exchanging concerned glances, and King stood there, chin raised, obediently silent. It was moments like this that reminded Rhett that King had been a senior ranking officer himself, before battle stole the use of his leg.

Rhett risked a glance at Jay to find him watching the conversation intently. Rhett had never been gladder to have his bilingual partner alongside him. For all the times Rhett had been sworn at or cussed out in Mandarin by Jay, this made up for it.

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Would he catch every word?

Maybe not.

But Jay would know if shit was about to go south or if Zihao told them something he shouldn't have.

Not that Rhett expected him to, but it didn't hurt to know.

Zihao asked King for his laptop, which he handed over dutifully, and a few moments later, everything that Yunho had sent through to them was now on the screen at the front of the room.

Images of Frankston and photos of Wong Bo-chen, then of his home. It was an island fortress, something out of a James Bond movie. The same location where Yunho believed Jun-mei was being held.

And Rhett knew the moment Zihao mentioned her because the three senior officials all glanced at Yin. Yin stood stock still. His only tell was the slightest flare of his nostrils.

But Zihao kept the meeting on point, quickly moving on to the next set of images. One general asked some questions, while the other nodded, the third concentrated on the images.

And for twenty minutes, Yin and Chen never moved a muscle, and not once was Rhett asked for any input. Hell, King wasn't even asked.

Then Zihao turned to the team and smiled, gesturing to the officer by the door. “Officer Wei shall show you to the amenities.” And just like that, they were dismissed.

Rhett followed Officer Wei, his team behind him, to a large hall-like cafeteria where they were shown to three tables in particular, in the far corner.

But then Officer Wei stopped in front of Yin and Chen. He saluted Yin. “Fù-shé.” Yin nodded, maybe even almost smiled, and replied a greeting in a sharp friendly tone.

Then Wei looked up at Chen and broke out in a grin. He slapped Chen’s shoulder and Chen picked Wei up in a bear hug, laughing.

Christ. Yep, everyone loved him.

Yin looked on fondly but then turned to the team. “Tea, coffee, any food you would like, you can have,” he said, gesturing to the cafeteria line.

Jay and Azrael were roped into Chen’s conversation with Wei, so Rhett shook his head and smiled. “No thanks. Tell me, what was said back there?”

Yin sat down beside him. “Formalities. A brief rundown. I can tell you they won’t have liked us having satellite information on their civilians or locations, but they will appreciate our transparency. And they will appreciate our asking for assistance.” Yin’s brows pinched. “Our inclusion into the Milvus Division is good for politics.”

Rhett knew that. Milvus was a geopolitical game of chess, and anyone would be a fool to believe otherwise.

“It’s all political; everything we do,” Rhett said. “When Milvus was first formed, it

was with good intentions. I do believe that, and I continue to believe in what it should stand for. We were supposed to be above the political bullshit. Starting wars for oil and shipping ports. I mean, Jesus fucking Christ. That's what we were supposed to prevent. But there'll always be political motives. Our own governments will always try and manoeuvre us on the chess board for the best advantage points." Rhett shrugged. "Yours. Mine. Each of us. Makes no difference. We're still just pawns in the game."

Yin sighed and looked back at Chen, Jay and Azrael talking to Wei. He seemed enamoured with Azrael's beauty and Jay's accent. Another soldier had joined them now.

"Lucky Sid is not watching," Yin said with a smirk, nodding to where Sid, Echo, and Coyote were inspecting the food in the fridges. "They're not used to seeing a pretty blonde French woman in combat gear."

Rhett smiled at them, at Az playing along, and at Jay laughing. He was so damn lucky to have him here with him every day, every mission. But it reminded Rhett that Yin didn't have that.

"Zihao mentioned Jun-mei," Rhett whispered. "What did they say about that?"

Yin gave a tight shake of his head. "Zihao said the hostage was known to me, that was all. That we believe she was taken to lure us here, to set us up, but we didn't know to what end."

"Do you think they'll help us?"

Yin nodded. "Yes. But for what price, I don't know. Information on the bioweapon, maybe? A simple press release saying that it was the People's Liberation Army who helped take down a global enemy?" He shrugged. "I don't know these political

games. At the end of the day, I'm just a soldier; I follow orders. And I just want to get Jun-mei back. At first, I wanted to get her out of this country..." He shook his head, his eyes meeting Rhett's. "Now I just want her safe."

"We're gonna make sure that happens," Rhett said. "With help from your guys or not."

Yin held Rhett's gaze for a long beat, searching his eyes before looking away. He scrubbed a hand over his face and laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "I see you look at him," he whispered. "At Jay. Out in the open, in front of others. No hiding." He sucked air in and let out a shaky exhale. "That's what I want. That's all I want. To not hide as if it's shameful. I'm not ashamed of her. That's not?—"

"Hey, I get it. I understand," Rhett said. "You don't have to explain. It's not shame; it's fear for her safety."

Yin sighed and looked around the large cafeteria, at the tables at the other end where soldiers were watching them with curiosity or annoyance. Rhett found it hard to tell.

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Just then, Chen put a plate in front of Rhett and grinned. “Special order. Unseasoned chicken.”

Everyone laughed, though Jay’s laughter was the loudest. Even Yin smiled.

And Rhett didn’t even mind. If it gave his team a moment of levity before shit got real, he’d take it. “Thanks,” he said, but he certainly wasn’t about to eat it. Thankfully, another officer came in and spoke to Wei.

“If you will come, please,” Wei said, gesturing to the door they’d come through.

Rhett stood up and Yin did too, looking a little nervous. Rhett guessed they were just about to learn if the hostage extraction was part of their mission.

Or if they’d be going off-script to do it themselves.

Rhett’s team waited for him and Wei to spearhead the walk back to the conference room. When he entered the room, he was surprised to see the three senior officers still there, but maybe they intended to see the entire thing through. There were other officers in there now, and more equipment: laptops, monitors.

He knew without being told, things were a go.

But to what extent, he waited for Zihao or King to explain. It was Zihao who spoke. “The PLA has graciously agreed to supplement our mission,” he said, giving a diplomatic smile to the three brass. It felt a little too smarmy for Rhett’s liking, and he had to wonder what conditions were agreed to in this deal.

But Zihao then went to the screen on the wall, which was an aerial live-feed view of Shentou Island. It wasn't the map image Yunho had provided. It was Chinese satellite and way more detailed, showing the island fortress and a whole lot of open water.

The South China Sea was heavily guarded, and perhaps Frankston thought himself safe.

Rhett had no idea what that fucker was thinking, but one thing was certain. They couldn't do this without the PLA's help.

Zihao motioned toward the screen. "Wong Bo-chen's property has state-of-the-art security: military-grade trip lasers, motion sensors, and biometric systems such as fingerprint and retina scanners, and facial recognition. He has scanners on the water two hundred metres surrounding his island. It rivals this military base and will require a dark covert drop." Zihao pointed to a blue line on the water. "A two-man team, Ouston and Chen, will enter from here, proceed underwater, and once on land, disable the mains, which will shut down his security here—" He pointed to a specific part of the north-facing wall. "—here, and here. This has to be done by hand. Once that is offline, we can begin accessing the security system and we can move in." He pointed back to the screen. "The remaining five breach by boat. Once the property is secure, the navy can intervene with drones and a Jiaolong Commando team and take over the operation. You will retrieve the hostage and retreat," he paused for a split second. "And targets Frankston and Wong are to be taken alive. Remember Wong's personal security team is highly trained. Tan Huan will be with Wong. He is skilled and very dangerous."

There was so much in that delivery that Rhett wanted to pull apart, but one thing in particular stuck out. "Two and five makes seven. There are eight of us."

Zihao's gaze hardened at Rhett. "Agent Yin will not attend. His affiliation to the hostage and bias against Tan?—"

“No,” Rhett said flatly. “We go in as eight.”

His whole team was wide-eyed, like what the actual fuck, both confused and alarmed. Chen had his angry face on, and Yin looked about ready to puke.

“Captain Ouston,” Zihao said quietly. “I appreciate your?—”

Rhett wasn’t having it. “We are an eight-man team,” he repeated, louder this time. “We go as eight with your help, or we go in as eight without your help. Our number does not change.”

“Ouston,” King said this time. He looked torn but erring on the side of the officials for diplomacy’s sake, no doubt, and that just fucking pissed Rhett off.

“You want the best to go in, then Yin has to be on the team. He was Jiaolong Commando,” Rhett said, knowing the three brass understood that word. “A commander, and the best in his unit. We need him on that first drop. Yin and Chen.” He pointed to the line on the map where they would enter, no doubt enough distance to avoid detection, in the middle of the freaking South China Sea. “I will not send my team in there without him.”

Zihao raised his chin. “It’s not your call to make.”

What he wanted to say was bull-fucking-shit it wasn’t, but he knew that’d be a torch to already smouldering kindling. “With all due respect, it is my call,” he said calmly. “The purpose of the Milvus Division is to work outside of the rules of diplomacy other nations are bound by. It is our purpose to see that work is done that other operatives cannot do. We are entrusted to make decisions to see the success of a mission, and it is one hundred percent my call to make.” Then Rhett looked at the three brass, still sitting there, staring at Rhett intently. He had no clue if they could understand him, but something told Rhett they understood him just fine. “China

petitioned to be included in the Milvus Division to be seen as a participant in the democratic good of international relations, and you sent your best. Commander Yin Tao is the best in the water, and unless you want this mission to fail—unless you want an international incident in Chinese waters on the front page of every paper tomorrow morning—then you will send in your best.”

Rhett turned to see King’s lips twitch in an almost smile before he schooled it away, but Zihao was far from smiling.

Rhett didn’t give one single fuck.

“Yin is on the team,” Rhett said, his gaze now locked on Yin’s. “And Chen. We need them both.”

“Milvus is eight,” Sid said, surprising Rhett. Then Sid turned to King. “We’ll need all of us. Especially in the water.”

Rhett’s eyes darted to Jay to find him smiling back at him, not attempting to hide his pride and adoration.

“We can do this. Yincan do this. And I go where he goes, always,” Chen said. Then he looked right at Zihao and said something in Chinese—that Rhett didn’t understand at all—but it made Jay smile some more, so he could only assume it was good.

But Rhett was done. He was done with the bureaucracy. He was done with the diplomatic rules. In that split second, he remembered what Harry had said to him in that chopper when they’d pulled him out of the bunker. He’d said the political power of running the Milvus Division was not good and that no good would ever come of it.

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Rhett hadn't truly grasped the impact of what he'd meant back then. But he understood it all too well now.

There would always be a political grab for control. No matter how hard Rhett fought against it.

Well, Rhett was drawing a line today. Was a military base in Shanghai with head officials the best place for it?

Logic and reason would say no.

Diplomatic relations would say definitely not.

But for Rhett? There was no better place.

He met King's gaze, held it for long enough to see a glimmer of what might have been respect, before Rhett turned to the three senior brass. He drew his feet together and gave a slight bow of his head. "Thank you for your time and consideration," he said.

Then he turned to his team. "Let's go," he murmured.

Before Azrael and Echo even got to the door first, King spoke. "Captain Ouston."

They all stopped, looked at him, and waited.

"Eight works," King said. "Yin's on the team." Zihao shot him a look, but King

wasn't ruffled. "Yin and Chen will breach. If this is going to work, they'll need him. And we need this to work."

Zihao stared at him for a long beat, and whether to save face in front of the brass—Rhett couldn't be sure—Zihao gave a nod as if it were his idea all along.

"Milvus team," Zihao said without missing a beat. "Prepare for dispatch."

The late afternoon sun on the water made for a picturesque view that Jay would have otherwise appreciated, but it did little to take the chill out of the air.

Last temperature check of the water was, at surface, twenty degrees Celsius. Not frigid by any means but Yin and Chen would be well below the surface for some time. As practised Sea Dragons, they were used to this, probably worse conditions for longer periods of time. Jay trusted they knew what they were doing and they'd be fine, but as their medic, he couldn't help be concerned. Recon or extractions in the desert were so much easier...

The fishing trawler was old and, like all the other similar trawlers in this stretch of water, inconspicuous. The inside of the trawler was old too, but the gear they had was something out of the future.

The Chinese tech was far better than any the Milvus Division had.

Echo was at the sonar, headphones on, listening, concentrating. Coyote was rechecking his explosive charges. Azrael was on weapons detail. Rhett, Sid, Yin, and Chen were at the screen with real-time satellite with thermal-scan imaging. They had floor plans, electrical circuit blueprints, and all the intel a covert op needed.

The Chinese cybersecurity analysts were now on the job—confirming everything Yunho had said about Frankston and Wong conspiring to sell and purchase

information pertaining to the biochem data Frankston had stolen from Gordian.

It didn't make sense to Jay.

Not why Frankston sold out. Money was a powerful drug. But when.

When did it start?

When did Frankston start his plan to deceive them?

How far back did it go?

"Hey," Rhett said quietly. Jay hadn't heard him come up behind him.

He was sitting near the end of the cabin, looking out across the water.

"Hey," Jay replied, smiling up at him.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just checking my kit."

"You were staring off into space. I called out to you but you didn't hear."

Shit.

Jay sighed. "Sorry. Just thinking."

"About?"

"About how pretty it is here," Jay mused. "I'd like to come back one day."

Rhett snorted. "Not sure I'll be welcome."

That made Jay chuckle. "You were great back there," he murmured. "What you said to King and Zihao and those three chiefs. You ain't ever been sexier than you were right then."

Rhett snorted. "Uh, thanks. I think."

"What you said was true."

Rhett let out a sigh and sat down next to him, their thighs touching, and Jay relished the contact. "I'm not sure any of this is working," he admitted quietly.

Jay's eyes met his. "This mission?"

Rhett shook his head. "Milvus. What we were designed for. The bureaucracy and power grabs." He shrugged and his brow furrowed. "I dunno. Harrigan was right."

"Christ, don't say that. He'll get a fat head. You know he's probably listening, right?"

Somehow. I'm sure Yunho is." Jay looked around and gave a wave and a big cheesy grin.

Rhett snorted and leaned back, unbothered. "Absolutely certain we're being watched at all times."

"And yet," Jay joked, "no one has sent me the sex audio tapes. I'm very disappointed in a lot of people."

Rhett's smile slowly faded as he cast his gaze out across the water. "It is pretty here."

He was far too melancholy for Jay's liking. He nudged his knee with his. "This mission will go just fine. We have all the intel, and at the end of it all, we have the Chinese military behind us. And we have you. We can't fail."

Rhett nodded but his eyes tightened, those beautiful blue-grey eyes troubled.

"Frankston wanted us here," he said. "Feels like we're walking right into his trap."

"Okay, so this self-doubt needs to fucking stop," Jay said. "What the fuck, Rhett? Where's the guy who walked into a Chinese military base, looked three generals in the eye, and basically told them to get effed? Where's that guy? Because we need him. Yin and Chen are in there suiting up right now and they need you."

Rhett sighed, looked miffed for half a second, then rolled his eyes and nodded. "Yeah, okay. Message received and understood."

"Good," Jay added. "You're the best. This team is the best. And don't fucking forget it."

That made Rhett smile, his eyes meeting Jay's, and that stormy grey was gone, more

like steel now. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now get in there and do what you do.”

Rhett went back to where Yin and Chen were putting on wetsuits, and when Jay looked at Az, having clearly heard their conversation, she smiled at him.

“And people think he’s the boss of you,” she said with a scoff and a shake of her head.

Jay laughed. “Yeah, no. He wishes.”

Jay closed up his kit and pulled the strap before he went to where Yin and Chen were now fully suited up, doing a final check on their tanks and earpieces.

“We can track you but won’t have contact with you until you reach land,” Rhett said.

Chen chuckled. “Yes. We know. We do this many times. Hundreds or more. We train in this water.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Rhett said with a wince. “Echo’s got nothing on the sonar. You should have a clean run.” He ran through the water temperature, current, and tide specs, but it was pointless. It was the equivalent of telling Azrael how to hold a gun.

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Rhett really was nervous.

Yin clapped him on the arm. “We’ll be fine. See you on shore.”

“Okay.”

Chen put in his mouthpiece, and before Yin did, he stopped and looked at everyone. “Thank you, all of you. You defended me and stood up for me, to include me on this mission. It means a lot, and I won’t let you down.”

“You’re buying beers when this is all said and done,” Coyote said.

“And pizza,” Sid added.

Yin smiled and fitted his mouthpiece, then with a nod to signal they were good to go, he and Chen slid into the water without barely a splash.

Attention went to the sonar. Echo put his hand to the ear of his headphone. He tilted his head and listened for a long moment before he smiled. “They’re quiet. How can scuba gear be so quiet?”

“And fast,” Sid said, nodding toward the tracking screen. “Jesus H Christ. Are they part shark?”

It was long, quiet drawn-out minutes of watching. The silence and the waiting were starting to make Jay nervous.

Rhett put his hand to his earpiece and turned away from the conversation, which Jay knew meant incoming intel. “Affirmative,” he said. He looked Jay in the eye. “Roger that. Alpha One team is ready on your go.”

The rubber dinghy was ready, their gear ready. They were ready.

“Breach team eighty metres and closing,” Sid said.

“We got this,” Jay said, giving a pointed look to Rhett. “Just another day at the office.”

“We can do this shit all day,” Sid said.

“All day long,” Az agreed.

“Hooyah,” Coyote hollered.

They were psyching themselves up, getting their heads in the game, and Jay appreciated the normalcy.

Azrael double-checked her EF88 before sliding it into her chest pack. “Tell me again: how many of this so-called SWAT security team are there?”

“Five,” Rhett replied.

“How many can I have?” she asked him seriously.

“All of them.”

She grinned, and they all kept their eyes on the screens.

Rhett let out a low breath. “We wait for Yin’s signal.”

They all watched.

Waiting.

They were fast, yes. But fuck, the wait...

“Ten metres and counting,” Sid said. “We should get audio in three, two...”

They waited, and Jay held his breath.

There was a soft crackle and the next sound they heard was barely a breath. “Breach team has contact,” Yin whispered.

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“Roger that,” Rhett replied with a smile.

“He’s not even out of breath,” Echo mumbled, shaking his head.

“I’d need a nap,” Sid said.

“Because you eat shit food,” Azrael replied. “Have you considered eating a vegetable?”

Rhett put his hand to his earpiece, which was also a code for the team to shut the fuck up. “We have thermal eyes on you,” he said.

On the screen, Jay could see Yin and Chen stripping off their tanks and belts, then they began up the rocky embankment to the stone wall.

They watched as Chen gave Yin a boost up the wall, then Yin leaned down and pulled Chen up. They were fluid, fast, and efficient.

“Damn, they’re good,” Sid whispered.

Then one by one, they slid the deflector devices onto the three cameras. And just like that, King and Zihao—and presumably Shanghai’s military’s best cybersecurity team—had control of the visual while inside the building had no idea. They’d see nothing but looped footage showing nothing out of the ordinary.

“Okay, that’s our cue,” Rhett said. “Let’s load up.”

The rubber dinghy hit the water, the motor cutting through the inky surface with ease, and Jay kept his head down from the cold. Rhett held the tablet screen, watching Yin and Chen.

“The alarm’s ours. Gate’s open,” Rhett said.

Yin and Chen were so fucking good.

Coyote steered the boat toward the shore, and two black figures slinked out to greet them. Chen pulled the dinghy up onto the sand without a word.

The team jumped out, and Jay threw the gear bag at Yin’s feet.

“Alarm is disengaged,” Yin said as he pulled his wet suit off.

Jay knelt at the bag and handed up their shirts and then their pants. They hadn’t been exposed to extreme temperatures, but they’d been wet and cold long enough.

And Rhett was going to need them to move, and fast.

“We’ve got four minutes to find her,” Rhett said, reading his watch. “Then I want us gone.”

God. Just four minutes.

Chen pulled on his boots as Yin, already fully dressed, clipped in his EF88. “Then let’s go.”

SIXTEEN

The night was silent, save for the crash and hum of the ocean licking at the shore and

the pump of Rhett's pulse in his ears.

It's just another mission, he told himself. Like all the others. Simple arrest of two targets and the extraction of one hostage, and the elimination of any threat in between.

Except this hostage was one of theirs.

Not that all hostages weren't valuable or important, but this was a loved one of one of their team.

Failure wasn't an option.

Failure had never been an option for Rhett, but this... this felt different.

He tried to imagine how he'd feel, how he'd react and perform if it were Jay in there.

He remembered how Harrigan had reacted when it was Asher held hostage. Rhett could still hear the crunch of that man's windpipe being pulverised by Harry's hand.

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He couldn't risk Yin doing a repeat.

Emotions, adrenaline, combined with high-strung reactions, itchy trigger fingers were never a good combination. Though Rhett was under no illusion that Yin needed his weapon to kill anyone.

"Remember," Rhett said. "We take Frankston and Wong alive. Are we clear?"

His team nodded, except Yin, who was looking back toward the house.

"Yin?"

"Yes," he answered, distracted. But then he shook his head and focused. "Clear."

"Good. Sid, Echo, Yin, and Chen, take the bedroom wing and get Jun-mei." Rhett knew there'd be no use putting him on any other detail. "Az, Coyote, and Jay, you're with me. Entry point is the south terrace. They don't know we're here, but as soon as we get inside, it's game on. Intel has five armed guards, ex-SWAT. Expect pushback and weapon fire." He put his hand to his ear. "Have you got ears?"

They all nodded in silence.

The mansion loomed over the landscape, a modern fortress of glass and steel, its perimeter lined with infrared cameras and motion detectors. Rhett led the team up the rocks, crossing the manicured lawn toward the south terrace, crouched in the shadows, weapons at the ready as they ran.

Through Rhett's earpiece, Director King spoke clear and concise. "Security guard coming in at your three. Armed with a QBZ-191."

Azrael didn't even slow down to put a bullet in the guard before he could even raise his gun. "One out of five."

Rhett got to the glass doors of the terrace, held his breath for half a second, and with a quick prayer to the cyber gods in the Shanghai conference room that they'd disabled the alarms, he slid the door open.

Silence.

The interior was a fusion of wealth and bad taste. Expensive marble, original artworks with tacky gold frames told Rhett this guy was not born into money. Or he was colour blind.

It was, thankfully, well-lit.

"Three targets are on the second floor," King said in Rhett's ear. "Two security detail in the hall, same 191 rifle."

Rhett signalled for Sid and his team to go right to the bedroom wing, while Rhett led his team to the grand staircase, their rifles sweeping every angle as they went.

"Agent Ritchie," King said to Sid. "Armed guard in the hallway coming your way."

Rhett put his hand up for his team to stop before they hit the landing on the second floor. He needed Jun-mei safe before they detained these two dicks.

A soft pop sounded in Rhett's earpiece.

“Threat neutralised,” Sid murmured. “Two from five down.”

Rhett gave the signal for his team to move.

“Captain,” King said in his ear. “Second door on your left. Guard outside.”

“Roger that,” Rhett whispered as he gave the signal to move.

Rhett raised his rifle, finger on the trigger, and rounded the corner. The guard sputtered, and Rhett shot him before he could raise his gun or the alarm. “Three from five.”

They swarmed in low, rifles raised, and Rhett paused for a moment as they got into formation at the closed door. “On three,” he whispered. “One... two... three.” Then he kicked the door open, and everything happened so fast.

Tan, who was already on his feet, spun to face them, and Az was first in, her rifle zeroing in at his forehead. “Hands where I can see them.”

Echo rounded past Rhett and trained in on Tan as well. “Get on your knees.”

He was, in this room, the greatest threat.

Frankston leapt out of his chair, dropping his iPad. “Hands in the fucking air,” Rhett barked at him. “And get on your knees.” He spared a glance at Wong. “You too. Hands where I can see them.”

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Wong had scooted backwards on his chair behind the desk, his face pure shock and horror. He didn't move, so Jay rounded on him, rifle pointed at his head, and barked out something in Chinese.

That, he clearly understood. He rose to his feet, hands trembling, face pale.

Rhett homed in on Frankston. "You are gonna fucking hang for this."

Frankston had the audacity to sneer at him.

So Rhett cracked Frankston's nose with the butt of his rifle. "You were told to get on your fucking knees."

Blood gushing, he fell to his knees, holding his nose.

"Captain," Sid said through their comms. "She's not here. The woman here is not Jun-mei. Yin's on his way to you."

"It's not her," Rhett said, even though his team heard exactly what Sid had just said.

Then Yin ran almost past the door, but grabbed the jamb and burst into the room. He lasered in on Tan like a heat-seeking missile and grabbed him by his face—Azand Echo adjusting their stances—and with nothing short of rage and fury rolling off him, fired rapid Mandarin at him.

"Stand down," Rhett barked.

Yin, still holding Tan's face, his chest heaving and unbridled rage in his eyes, spared a glance at Rhett before letting his grip go.

Rhett shoved Frankston with his boot, sending him back onto his ass, still holding his bloodied nose. "Where is Jun-mei?"

"My nose," he wailed like the pathetic piece of shit he was.

So Rhett cracked him again. The crunch was sickening and the way Frankston wailed, clutching his broken face, was almost satisfying. Almost.

"You hit me," he cried, like a dumbass.

"It's the least of what you're about to endure," Rhett said. Then he turned his rifle on Wong. "Where is she?"

He flailed pathetically before he fell back on his ass, and Jay followed with his rifle aimed directly at his forehead. "He speaks English," Jay sneered through clenched teeth. "Yin Jun-mei. Where is she?"

Just then, Sid and the others reached the room, Chen holding the arm of a woman. She was young and petite, a purple goth streak in her long black hair, wearing black jeans, a black hoodie, and a filthy scowl as soon as she saw Wong.

She gave him a spray of Mandarin and it was Chen who translated. "She say his sister. She supposed to stay in her room."

Chen sat her down in the corner and, Rhett could assume, told her to stay put. She drew her knees up when she seemed to realise the room was full of automatic weapons.

Wong put his hands out. “Don’t hurt her. She’s not part of this.”

“She is part of this,” Yin spat. “You made her part of this. Now where is Jun-mei? She was here. Where is she?!”

He shook his head, eyes darting to Tan, and Rhett knew that’s where the answer was. He rounded on him and put the muzzle of his gun to Tan’s forehead. “It’s all over. Your government knows everything. Where is she?”

Tan had the au-fucking-dacity to smile, even with two rifles aimed point-blank at his head, so Rhett took a deep breath before he cracked him in the fucking nose too. He barely even winced, but his sneer was murderous.

Rhett hadn’t wanted this to get so violent, but that fucking smile, the daring in his eyes was cold.

Not redeemable.

But he wasn’t gonna talk. Wong was just a gutless moneybag, but Frankston... Apply some pressure and he’d fold like a fucking deck chair.

“Yin,” Rhett said, going back over to Frankston to loom over him. “Did the Chinese government say they needed Frankston alive?”

“Yeah.”

Rhett lowered his gun to where Frankston’s knees met the floor. “Did they say anything about kneecaps?”

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Yin hummed, as if thinking... “No. No mention of kneecaps.”

Frankston shook his head, eyes wide.

Rhett pointed his gun to Frankston’s crotch. “Any mention of testicles? Would a traitor need his testicles intact for whatever the Chinese government is going to do to him?”

Yin smiled at that, then took two long strides over, and with an FA Cup goal-winning kick, he swung his right boot directly into Frankston’s balls.

Rhett winced—because that had to fucking hurt—Sid groaned, Jay hissed, and Azrael laughed. Coyote mumbled, “Goddamn.”

Frankston fell heavily onto his side, clutching his crotch. The sounds he made were more animal than human. His eyes were wide, he frothed at the mouth and drooled onto the floor.

Rhett grabbed him by his hair and pulled him back up to his knees. “Now, we’re gonna ask you again. Yin Jun-mei. Where is she?”

Frankston still couldn’t speak, apparently, so Rhett pulled his head back by his hair and glowered down at him. “If you think that hurt, we haven’t even got to the part where we make you pay for Kowalski and Myles yet.”

Sid had a knife out, stomped over, and pressed it to the corner of Frankston’s eye. “He won’t need both eyes, will he?”

“When you pop it out, don’t damage the retina,” Azrael said. “We might need it to open security doors or something.”

Frankston still wasn’t motivated enough to speak, so Sid pressed the knife edge to draw a little blood. “Why did you betray us? Why did you betray Kowalski and Myles?”

“If he won’t talk,” Yin said, “spread his knees and I’ll kick him again.”

Frankston drew his knees together, shaking his head. “They weren’t supposed to be there,” he blurted out. “They found out where Gordian and Askarov were meeting. Not through me. They overheard them talking. It wasn’t my fault.”

“You sold us all out, you fucking piece of shit,” Coyote hollered at him. “You tried to have us all killed in Tehran.”

He floundered like the piece of shit he was. “I didn’t... It wasn’t supposed to... it all got out of hand?—”

Rhett put the muzzle of his gun at Frankston’s head. “You wanted us here. Why?”

“Not all of you. Just...” His eyes went to Yin.

Rhett pushed the gun harder against Frankston’s temple. “Last chance. Why him? Why Yin, and where the fuck is Jun-mei?”

“Because he’s the cure!” he cried.

Rhett stopped.

He’s the cure.

Yin stepped over, picked Frankston up by his shirt collar, and pinned him against the bookcase. “What do you mean, I’m the cure? What does that mean?”

Rhett had a horrible, sinking feeling . . .

“To the pathogen,” he said. “To the biochemical pathogen they made.”

Still holding Frankston to the bookcase, Yin glanced at Rhett, confused, then back to Frankston, and shoved him harder.

“When you were in South Sudan,” Frankston said. “You were exposed to it. They were running trials?—”

“The sickness . . .” Yin whispered.

“The reason the factory people were sick?” Chen said, voice booming.

“There was a contamination leak. Yin was exposed because he couldn’t fucking help himself. Had to help them. If you’d just minded your fucking business?—”

Yin pressed his forearm against Frankston’s neck. “You made them sick on purpose, you piece of fucking shit.”

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“They blew the compound and you were supposed?—”

“I was supposed to die in the blast,” Yin finished for him. “I was in hospital for months while they put me back together.”

“Yes. But you didn’t die. You didn’t even show symptoms. Your bloodwork showed anomalies in your BH3-only proteins that made you immune.”

Then Chen reached over Yin and grabbed Frankston from Yin, roared something in Mandarin, and threw him against the wall by the door.

Literally threw him.

He hit with a thud and crumpled to the floor, and before Rhett could register that Chen had just thrown an eighty-kilogram man two metres into a wall out of nothing but pure rage, Yin stepped over and picked him up.

Frankston was dazed and winded and scared. And Yin was fucking livid. The rage rolling off him was enough for Rhett to be on edge.

Christ.

Yin pinned him to the wall with a hand around his throat. “Who? Who was behind the tests? The explosion?”

Frankston was gasping, but the fucker still managed to smile, and Rhett knew the answer wasn’t going to be good.

“General Yuan,” he said. “Your own government.”

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ.

Rhett pushed his comms button. “King, are you getting this?”

“Already on it,” came his reply. There was background noise, as if the room King was in was just as chaotic as the room Rhett was standing in.

Yin was stunned, pale, and Tan laughed. That fucker laughed, and Yin rounded on him like a rabid dog. He grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. “Where is Jun-mei? Tell me where she is or I’ll rip out your tongue from your head.”

Tan sneered at him again, eyes wild and daring, and he mumbled something in Mandarin.

Yin took Tan, holding him to the floor and, using his boot, pried his jaw open.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

“Yin, don’t do it,” Rhett said.

Christ, he was gonna see a repeat of Harrigan...

Tan flailed and tried to kick and yell, but Yin was literally stepping on his jaw, seriously trying to pull out his tongue.

Before Rhett could tell him to back the fuck up, Chen was in the middle. At first, Rhett had thought Chen was trying to stop him... but no, he was helping.

Then Sid had his rifle pointed at Frankston. “You’re next, traitorous motherfucker.

Tell us where she is.”

Frankston made a gurgling noise around his smashed nose, still holding his balls, and Rhett was wondering how the fuck this had all gone to hell when Jay called out. “She knows! She knows.”

The room fell quiet, and everyone stopped and turned to Jay, who was crouching down near the sister. “She says she knows where Jun-mei is.”

Yin stood up, and with a final slam of his boot, he broke Tan’s jaw. The man writhed and groaned, holding his face. Until Chen booted him in the balls, and he groaned and coughed.

Azrael still had her gun aimed at his head.

Rhett and Yin went to the girl next to Jay. Yin knelt down in front of her and she recoiled—considering she’d just watched him snap a man’s jaw, that was hardly surprising—but he spoke gently in Chinese. She nodded and replied. Yin looked at Jay and then at Rhett. “She says she’s here. There’s a safe room. Not detectable on radar. And she knows the code.”

“Captain Ouston,” King said over their comms. “Situation’s changed. Military’s incoming to conclude the mission. Wong and his sister are to be left alive.”

Rhett’s gaze went to Wong and Frankston. “And the other piece of shit?”

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“No longer required. We have all we need.”

“Understood.” Rhett gave a nod to Sid. “You and Coyote take Wong downstairs. Zip-tie him. His government can have him.” Then he gave a nod to Jay. “You and Chen take the girl out of here.”

Jay nodded, seeming to understand what he meant.

Rhett looked at Yin. “Tan is no longer required.”

Yin smiled, then pulled out his EF88 and put the nozzle to Tan’s forehead, ignoring his disfigured hanging jaw. “My face will be the last thing you see,” he whispered, then pulled the trigger.

He stood up, and with a sigh of satisfaction, he gave Rhett a nod.

“Go get Jun-mei,” Rhett said, and Yin darted out the door.

Echo was at Wong’s laptop, clicking the keyboard, but he gave Rhett a shake of his head. “I can’t read any of it.”

“Leave it,” Rhett ordered. “And Frankston’s tablet. Leave it all. We don’t need it.”

Echo walked around the desk, stepped over the blood pooling from Tan, and he grimaced at the mess that Frankston was making on the floor. “What are we doing with him?”

Rhett pointed his rifle at Frankston's head, at his pitiful eyes, broken nose, at the blood and drool, and Rhett pulled the trigger. "That."

Jay followed the woman down the stairs through the hall to a study. While he wanted to believe she was innocent in her brother's business dealings, Jay kept his finger on the trigger guard and his eye on her every move.

"I saw them bring someone here," she said. "When I asked Bo-chen, he told me it was a friend of Mr Frankston and they wouldn't be staying. But I never saw her leave. And," she said as she stopped by the door. "I see guards bring food."

She went to the far corner in the study, between a bookcase and light sconce, where she pushed the edge of the wooden panelling. It clicked and popped forward, revealing a... wine cellar?

A freaking temperature-controlled cellar the size of Jay and Rhett's London apartment, stocked floor to ceiling with racks of bottles.

Jay cast her a look.

She gestured inside. "This way," she said quietly.

Jay pointed his rifle. "You first."

"Where is she?" Yin demanded.

That made her move faster. She shuffled inside to one rack in particular, pressed something, and stood back. The rack slid to one side to reveal a metal door.

No handle, no keypad. Just a small black LED screen.

“How do we open it?” Jay asked her.

She put her middle finger on the screen and the door swung inward.

Yin was first through, pushing past Jay and rushing in.

The room was small, maybe three metres by three metres. No windows, just one overhead light, and a single metal bed. On the bed was a small person with the blankets pulled up, startled, afraid. Her hair was short, jagged, spikey. As soon as she saw Yin, she burst into tears, mumbling something over and over that Jay couldn't understand.

Yin rushed to her, sat on the bed, and pulled her close, cradling her, kissing her head. “It's okay,” he whispered. “I'm here. I've got you. You're safe now, but we need to go.”

She shook her head and cried. “You can't be here, they'll hurt you. They want you. You must go.”

Yin shook his head. “I'm not leaving without you.”

Chen went to them and put his big hand on her. “Can you walk? I will carry you.”

She cried again when she saw it was Chen, her hand trembling. Then, like she remembered something, she looked at Yin and touched her chopped hair. “They cut my hair. All my hair is gone.”

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Yin looked at her hair and ran his fingers through it. “You’re still beautiful.”

That just made her cry some more.

Jay went to her. “We need to move. Can you walk? Are you injured?”

She nodded. “I can walk.” She pulled back the covers, showing she was wearing her nurse scrub pants and a T-shirt. Yin pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her, helping her stand.

Jay pressed his comms. “We have her. On our way up to you now.”

“Roger that,” Rhett replied. “Make it quick. Military incoming, and we need to be gone.”

Yin bundled Jun-mei up with the blanket and kept his arm around her. Jay led the way, escorting Wong’s sister up to the living room. She went to her brother, who was on his knees with his hands zip-tied behind his back.

Rhett paused only for a moment when he saw Yin with Jun-mei, and Jay saw the briefest flicker of Rhett as his gaze softened before Captain was back. “To the boat. Now. We’re about to have company.”

And sure enough, before they could get to the terrace doors, a team of Chinese soldiers in full tactical gear—special police force, Sea Dragons, Jay wasn’t sure. They weren’t wearing any identifiable tags.

But then again, neither was Milvus.

They swarmed into the house, focusing on Wong and his sister, like none of the Milvus team were even there.

Completely ignored.

Not important to their mission.

Or acting as if Milvus were never there.

If any of them recognised Yin or Chen, they never showed it.

Rhett led their team through the grounds, silent and without incident, down to their dinghy. They boarded, pushed off the shore, and set off into the dark night to the waiting boat.

The water was inky black, the air and sea spray mist cold and damp. Yin kept the blanket around Jun-mei, holding her tight and rubbing her arm, her back, kissing the top of her head. Jay found himself smiling at them, and when he looked at Rhett, Rhett's eyes met his, and he smiled.

SEVENTEEN

The team was quiet on the boat and even in the vans on the way back to Dachang military base, and Rhett didn't blame them.

Jay sat beside him, their sides touching from boots to shoulders, and that warmth, that presence, was exactly what he needed. He needed Jay in ways he couldn't explain.

As heartwarming as it was, Rhett found it hard to watch Yin and Jun-mei. Rhett

figured everyone felt the same. It felt as if this reunion between them should have been private. Yin was vulnerable, exposed, and emotional. It was hard to watch.

And Jun-mei. Her tear-streaked face, blotchy and puffy from crying, was mostly hidden by the blanket as she slept with her head on Yin's shoulder. He held her tight, brushing his lips to the top of her head every so often.

Those bastards had hacked her hair off.

And Yin and Chen had just found out their own government had ordered the explosion in South Sudan. They'd marked Yin as collateral, wanting him dead so the mess was easier to clean up.

Except he hadn't died. Chen had saved him, and by some stroke of luck or fate, they'd discovered he was immune to the pathogen.

And then he'd met Jun-mei.

Motherfuckers used her as bait to get Yin back.

Rhett was glad Tan and Frankston were dead. And he was glad Yin had made him suffer before Rhett ended his misery.

Because honestly, fuck them.

Fuck them all.

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And if the Chinese hadn't killed Wong yet, they'd make him wish they had.

The sister would probably be deemed an accomplice, but that guilt was on Wong's shoulders, not Rhett's.

He refused to think on it anymore. He had enough to worry about.

He let his head fall back and he closed his eyes, taking the few minutes he had to rest as the van drove them back to base.

He had no idea what to expect or what was waiting for them when they arrived. Going back onto the military base seemed foolish, but he trusted King to get them out.

When the van slowed to a stop at the checkpoint entry, Rhett's eyes met Yin's. "You coming to London? Or stopping here?"

Yin looked at him, clearly affronted by the suggestion.

"Your choice," Rhett added. "If you say yes to London, I'll make it happen no matter what any badge out there has to say."

Yin's arms tightened around Jun-mei. "London. I am Milvus, yes?"

Rhett smiled at him. "Absolutely."

"Hell yes he is," Jay said.

“Me too. I am also Milvus,” Chen said. “London for me, please. I go where he goes.”

Rhett grinned at the big guy. “Sure thing, Totoro.”

“Hell yeah,” Sid said, leaning over to fist bump Chen.

“Hooyah,” Coyote added.

“Captain Ouston,” King said over their comms. “The van will pull up on the tarmac. You will disembark the van and immediately board the plane. We are wheels up in four minutes.”

“Roger that. Yin and Chen are coming with us. No exceptions,” Rhett said flatly. “And Yin Jun-mei. She’s coming too.” He paused. “Or are we shooting our way out of here?”

Every pair of eyes in the van went to him. Azrael’s hand slid to her weapon and she smiled.

King sighed. “Christ. No one’s shooting anything. Director Zihao has cleared her for departure.”

Rhett grinned at Yin. “Good. See you in one minute.” He then looked at his team. “Van to plane, no deviations. And we’re not supposed to shoot anyone.” He looked at Az. “Sorry.”

She sighed just as the van came to a final stop. They collected their gear, and when the van doors opened, Rhett got out first, assessing their situation.

Armed soldiers lined the perimeter and blocked the entrance to any building. The team got out of the van, making a beeline for the plane. Yin carried Jun-mei,

still wrapped in the blanket. Chen followed them on, then Jay, Rhett right behind him.

As soon as Rhett was onboard, the plane doors were closed. King met him with a clap on the shoulder and a look that said let's get the fuck outta here, and Rhett couldn't have agreed more.

Zihao came back with a small blue vial, showing it off with a small shake. "Swab is negative. Jun-mei's good to travel."

Just as fucking well, Rhett thought. Because she was coming with them, right or wrong.

Rhett and Jay took their seats as the captain announced over the PA to put their seatbelts on and prepare for take-off.

Going against his rule of any public show of affection toward Jay, as the plane was taking off, Rhett slid his hand over Jay's and threaded their fingers.

Jay shot him a look, but he squeezed Rhett's hand and didn't let go until they were in the air. "You okay?" Jay asked.

Keeping his head turned toward Jay and his gaze locked on his deep, soulful brown eyes, Rhett nodded. "I am now. I'm so fucking grateful for you."

Jay's eyes softened. "I love you," he whispered, and it honestly felt as if those words wrapped around Rhett's heart.

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“I love you too,” he murmured. “I don’t think I say that enough to you.”

Jay squeezed his hand. “Baby, I know you do.”

Rhett shrugged. “Still . . .”

“I need to go check on Jun-mei,” Jay said, undoing his seatbelt. “Make sure she’s all right.”

Rhett gave a nod. “I have to see King.”

Jay took his med kit out of the overhead and went to the back of the plane, and Rhett went to the front. He slid into the seat next to King and gave him a nod. King sighed, looking more tired than Rhett could remember seeing. “Didn’t want to sleep?” King asked.

“Nope.”

King scrubbed a hand over his face. “Shit got real back there,” he murmured. “Apparently, Frankston was right. General Yuan ordered the strike in South Sudan. Unsanctioned. Turns out he was in on the bioweapon sellout. Has shares in the big pharma company. Also has ties to Istomin. And you’ll never guess who else.”

“Who?”

“Parrish.”

Rhett stared at him. “Parrish?” he hissed. “The Australian Special Ops Command director that Harrigan and Garin took down?”

The same case that exposed a lot of undercover overseas operatives and why the Milvus Division was created.

“Oh yeah. The Parrish case blew the lid on a lot of these assholes.”

Rhett joined some more dots. “Gordian had ties to Istomin. Went dormant until he found his scientist in Tehran.”

King nodded. “And Frankston hijacked their deal, took the information. He’d been watching the whole thing for months. He knew China had found someone with immunity.”

Fuck.

“Yin.”

King nodded.

“Yin didn’t know,” Rhett said. “He had no clue. He learned his government tried to have him killed at the same time we found out.”

King nodded again. “And when he put his hand up to volunteer for Milvus, General Yuan fast-tracked him.”

“So he could keep an eye on him.”

“Use him,” King said. “He had extensive bloodwork done before joining. Hell, even we did bloods in his prelims; standard procedure.”

Rhett sighed. Fucking hell. “They used his blood for what?”

“To synthesise a cure.” King’s eyes met Rhett’s. “And I’ll be honest with you, we might do the same.”

“What?”

“It could save Myles’ life.”

Rhett let his head fall back with a groan. Fuck. It was a lot to get his head around. “Yin said he volunteered for Milvus so he could get Jun-mei out of the country. Eventually. He didn’t know how, just that he’d have a better chance to get her out if he had a passport without borders.” Rhett put his hands up in a don’t-shoot-the-messenger kind of way. “And you know what? I don’t blame him. I’d do the same. If anyone went after Jay, took his ID papers, kidnapped him, I’d tear this world apart. Personally, I think we should thank Yin for not going berserk and killing anyone who stood in his way. He showed restraint.”

King stared at him. “He broke that man’s jaw by prising his mouth open with his hands and his boot.”

Rhett shrugged. “Like I said. Restraint.”

King blinked and sighed, a moment of silence falling between them. “You trust him.”

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“I do. He’s on my team. And if you ever decide to give Sid his own team, Yin’s my new number two.”

Because letting King know just how much Rhett trusted him didn’t hurt.

“And Zihao?” Rhett whispered. “What was he like when shit hit the fan back there?”

King smirked. “He was... impressive. As soon as we heard Frankston say Yuan’s name, that he ordered that strike on Yin, Zihao went off. Now that other general and commander, or whatever he was, might outrank Zihao, but he was calling the shots, and they didn’t dare argue. He might be small, but fuck,” he whispered, shaking his head. “He was frightening. Glad he’s on our side.”

Rhett snorted. He felt the same about Yin. Rhett had no misconceptions about Yin’s capabilities. Or Chen’s, for that matter.

“I don’t even speak Mandarin,” King added quietly. “But even I understood some of it.”

Rhett chuckled. “I’m glad Jay knows a bit. It helps to have inside information. Especially when they didn’t know he knew what they were saying.”

“I should learn it,” King mused, his smile tired. “How is Jun-mei, by the way? Has Lin seen to her yet?”

Rhett’s brows furrowed. “He was just going to check her over when I came up to see you. Physically? She appeared uninjured. She could walk, but she’s exhausted.

Probably hasn't slept in days."

King nodded slowly. "Yunho said he can have paperwork done. A passport." He shrugged. "I don't want to know how." Then he shook his head and whispered, "He has all the information on Frankston and Wong. And I'm pretty sure he accessed the Chinese military satellitesystem and probably their entire military network. He has it all. I don't know how. I don't want to know. But as soon as they shared satellite images, he went quiet, and when I spoke to him afterward, he said he had everything we'd need on the whole thing. Names, dates, photographs, you name it."

Rhett chuckled. "You don't want to know."

He shook his head and sighed. "I absolutely do not. Not a word. Plausible deniability. Didn't you say that before?"

Rhett smirked. "Sorry. Don't know what you're talking about."

King smiled and stretched his bad leg out, wincing as he did.

"You need to rest," Rhett said.

"So do you."

Rhett stood up. "No, what I need is two weeks off."

King smiled as he closed his eyes. "Sorry. Don't know what you're talking about."

Rhett scoffed out a laugh. "Plausible deniability, my ass."

Jay madehis way to the back of the darkened cabin, seeing Yin and Jun-mei in the last two seats. She still had the blanket around her, still clinging to Yin, still teary.

He put his med kit down in front of Yin's feet and crouched down so he didn't seem to be talking down at her, wasn't intimidating. "Hey," he whispered, giving Jun-mei his best I-mean-no-harm smile. "My name's Jay," he said in Mandarin.

Yin offered Jay a grateful smile. "She speaks English. She learned very fast."

"Oh, thank god," Jay said, aiming his high-wattage smile at Jun-mei. "Because my Mandarin is not great."

She smiled but glanced nervously at Yin before speaking. "Hello."

"We're really glad you're here," Jay said. Then he nodded toward Yin. "Especially this guy."

Jun-mei blushed and looked down at her lap. "I am, also." Then she looked up at Yin. "Especially this guy."

Jay couldn't help but smile. "I'm the medic, and I just want to check that you're okay while everyone's asleep. Is that okay with you?"

Again, she looked at Yin, clearly fucking scared. Yin gave her an encouraging nod. "It's okay. He knows. He understands."

She got teary again and nodded, her chin wobbling.

"Oh, sweetie," Jay whispered. "You're safe with me. With all of us. Okay?"

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Tears spilled down her cheeks and she scrubbed them away, then her fingers went to her hair, clearly remembered it had been cut, and she began to cry again.

Yin took her face and thumbed away her tears. “It’s okay, wo de húdié, my butterfly. You’re still beautiful to me.”

Jay could have damn near cried with her. As it was, he had to blink back tears. But then he noticed Rhett going back to his seat, so he tapped Yin’s knee. “Can you go sit with Rhett? Keep my guy company and give us a few minutes? Just a few minutes, I promise.”

He hesitated for a moment, blinked, and swallowed hard before nodding. He gave her hand a squeeze and stood up, and Jay slid into his now empty seat beside Jun-mei.

He pointed to Rhett. “See that tall sexy man up there?” he asked her, and she nodded. “That’s my man.”

She stared at Rhett, then at Jay. “Your... man.”

He nodded and smiled at her. “Liànrén. Boyfriend,” he said. “We’ve been together since we were eighteen.”

She was stunned and clearly not entirely believing. “You . . . You’re . . . ?”

Jay nodded. “I am. Very much so.”

She got teary again, though she smiled this time.

Jay had to get the hard part out of the way. “I need to ask you some questions. Is that okay? I just want to make sure you’re okay. If you need any medications, that’s all.”

She straightened up and nodded, but Jay didn’t miss the way she held the blanket tighter.

He held the thermometer gun to her forehead. “You were held captive for almost five days?”

She nodded. “I lost track of time. The room had no windows. I didn’t sleep. They gave me food and water and a toilet, but no shower. No mirror. They would turn the light on and off.” She shrugged. “I went to work on Sunday...”

Jay nodded. “Five days.” Given it was now after midnight. Her temperature was fine.

She frowned at that. “It felt so much longer.”

Jay didn’t doubt that one bit.

“The man who took you,” Jay said. “We saw a CCTV feed. That man, did he... did he hurt you in any way?”

Her chin wobbled again. “He hit me,” she said, but showed her closed fist. Then her hand went to her hair again. “And he cut my hair. He said men don’t have long hair.”

“He didn’t . . . force himself on you . . . ?”

She shook her head and scrubbed at another tear. “No. No. He was rough and he pushed me and hit me. But not that.”

Thank god, Jay thought.

He reached over and held her hand. “Lemme tell you something. That awful man is very dead. He can’t hurt you or Yin. He’s gone.”

She nodded, still crying. “They wanted him. Tao. They needed him. That’s what they said. He had golden blood. They took me so he would come.”

Jay nodded. “Of course he would come to get you. He loves you very much.”

Her smile was teary again, then she looked around the plane. “Tao said we are going to London?”

Jay nodded. “That’s right.”

“I don’t have . . . they took my passport, my papers, because I was wrong gender. How can I . . . ?”

“We know someone,” Jay said. “He’ll get you everything you need. With your real name, Yin Jun-mei. Whatever you want, we can get it.”

She sobbed and covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes asking if that was true.

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Jay nodded and smiled for her. “We’ll stop to refuel in about seven hours. You can shower there, and I’ll get you a change of clean clothes. How does that sound?”

Jun-mei gave a teary laugh. “Very good.”

“You need some food and water,” Jay added gently. “But mostly, you need to sleep.”

And right on cue, Yin came back down the cabin holding a sandwich, an apple, and some water.

Jay squeezed Jun-mei’s hand. “Oh, look at that. He read my mind.”

Jay stood up and let Yin take his seat. “Look after her,” Jay said. “If she begins to feel unwell or dizzy, come get me.”

Yin nodded and was quick to pull her into his arms so she could use him as a pillow, then he fixed her blanket and stroked her hair.

Jay took his kit back to his seat, going past all his sleeping teammates and falling in beside Rhett, leaning against him much like Jun-mei was on Yin.

“How is she?” Rhett asked quietly.

“She’s okay. Temperature’s fine. Her swab was negative. No point doing a BP right now. She’s been in a high-stress situation, she hasn’t slept, hasn’t eaten properly. Yin just got her a sandwich. I’ll take a reading after she’s slept, when we refuel.”

Rhett sighed, exhausted. “I’m glad she’s safe.”

Jay studied him for a second. “You look tired.” He remembered then, the flight into China, Rhett was too busy getting debriefed to sleep. He must be shattered. “You know what you need?”

“Two weeks off,” he mumbled, eyes closed. “I already told King.”

Jay chuckled. “Well, yeah. But I was thinking something a little closer to now.”

Rhett cracked one eye open to look at him. “Huh?”

Jay leaned in close so he could whisper. “You know you always sleep better after sex.”

Rhett opened both eyes then. “What are you?—”

“Mile-high club. We’re joining right now,” Jay said.

“Jay,” he hissed. “We can’t?—”

“We absolutely can. Everyone’s asleep,” Jay whispered. “As the team medic, I must insist. For medical reasons.”

Rhett snorted quietly. “Medical reasons.”

“Very medical. You always sleep more soundly after sex.” He took Rhett’s wrist and pulled him up out of his seat, all but dragging him, and shoved him into the lavatory and closed the door behind them. It was a tight fit and Rhett was leaning, backed over the toilet.

“Jay,” he whispered, smiling. “What the hell are you doing?”

Jay unbuttoned his pants and unzipped his fly. He leaned against the sink, offering Rhett his naked ass. “This is the best idea I’ve ever had. Hurry.”

Rhett didn’t waste much time. He rubbed his crotch against Jay’s ass, and Jay was all out of patience.

He tried reaching behind him, trying to undo Rhett’s pants, but he couldn’t turn around. “I said hurry.”

Rhett shoved Jay’s hands away, holding them down on the sink counter, pushing his still-clothed crotch against Jay’s ass. “Patience,” he murmured.

And that shit just pissed Jay off.

He tried to turn around again, but Rhett shoved him, pushing his shoulder toward the mirror. “You’ll get what you want,” Rhett hissed. Then Jay felt him fumbling with his fly and button, and after a freaking eternity, he finally felt the hot steel of Rhett’s cock in the crack of his ass.

Fuck yes.

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But then Rhett pumped the hand lotion dispenser onto his palm.

“What are you doing?” Jay hissed at him.

“Rather me use soap?” Rhett’s voice was low and tight.

Uh, no. Jay would rather he not use soap. They did that once, and holy hell, never again.

“I’d rather you just fuck me dry,” he mumbled, frustrated.

But then Rhett drove his cock up into him, pushing in hard and rough. He held one hand on Jay’s shoulder, the other going to Jay’s mouth, muffling the cry as he drove all the way in.

Jay had never been more grateful for hand lotion.

“Be quiet,” Rhett bit out, ramming his cock up into him again. “This is what you wanted. You wanted my cock in you.”

Jay moaned into Rhett’s hand, relaxing as much as he could to take the glorious assault on his ass.

This was what he wanted, and this was exactly how he wanted it.

He loved being fucked like this. He loved being owned by Rhett, letting Rhett claim him in the most primal of ways.

“Fuck yes,” Jay mumbled into Rhett’s hand.

And he let Rhett thrust hard, driving his hard cock up into him, over and over, burying himself as far as they could.

Rhett put one boot on the toilet and hammered into him, finally surging, pulsing, and spilling his come deep.

So fucking deep.

He let Jay’s face go, slumping hard, his forehead pressed to the back of Jay’s shoulder. “Fuck, baby,” he breathed. “You okay?”

“I’m so fucking okay,” Jay whispered.

Rhett pulled out slowly and Jay winced as he pulled his pants up. Rhett swayed, barely able to keep his eyes open.

Jay turned in the tight spot, leaned up, and kissed him. “Sweet dreams, Rhett.”

He chuckled. “Gonna sleep so good.”

They went back out to the cabin, and Jay was almost disappointed that it was still pitch black, that everyone was still asleep, and no one had noticed their absence.

They went to their seats, and Jay put a blanket over Rhett, about to whisper that he could sleep for hours because their work was done and they’d be home soon, but he was already asleep.

EPILOGUE

ACHERON ISLAND, QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA

TWO WEEKS LATER

Jay loved this place.

The idea that anyone could own an entire island was insanity. Well, correction... the idea that someone could have enough money to own an island was an insanity.

But holy hell, Jay loved this place.

They had tropical waters, sunshine, and swaying palms for five days. Five glorious uninterrupted days with some of his favourite people.

They carried their bags up from the dock and were greeted by Yunho. He wore long linen pants, a flowy overshirt, and a welcoming smile. He was relaxed, happy, at peace.

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“Welcome, darlings,” he said. “Please come. Take your bags upstairs; same room as last time. Freshen up, then join us by the pool. We’re lounging in this glorious sunshine.”

They did as they were bid, and Jay shook his head as he threw his duffle bag onto the bed. “Remember what you did to me last time we were here?”

Rhett snorted. “How can I forget?”

“I’ll take a repeat tonight,” Jay said.

“Is that an order?”

“Hell yes, it is. Two nights with my family was great and all, but you won’t fuck me in my mother’s house because you have standards or some such bullshit, and I have needs, Rhett.”

“I won’t fuck you in your mother’s house because you’re too loud.”

Jay grinned at him as he pulled off his shirt and tossed it at him. “Then find something to gag me with.”

Then he whipped off his shorts, stood there in all his naked glory, as he rifled through his bag. He held up a pair of tiny Speedos victoriously before squeezing into them.

“Those are obscene,” Rhett mumbled, drinking every inch of him in.

Jay turned a few angles to give him a proper view. “Well, yeah. That’s why I bought them.”

Rhett sighed and chose his much more sensible board shorts. Jay couldn’t help but ogle him, taking in his long, lean body, gorgeous muscles, his defined abs.

“God, you’re gonna fuck me so hard tonight,” Jay murmured. He pulled his sarong around his waist and tied it off. “I’d suggest we start right now and not surface for a day or two, but there’s someone I need to go see.”

Rhett chuckled. “We have five days here. I’m sure we’ll find time.” He readjusted his junk. “Sure hope the poolwater is cold. You shouldn’t talk about sex like that.” He pretended to be mad as he plucked a shirt from his bag. “Let’s go downstairs.”

Rhett could pretend not to be excited all he liked, but Jay knew he was looking forward to this.

They made their way downstairs, through the beautiful house, to the pool area. It was, like the rest of the house, impeccable. Massive tiles, landscaped gardens, sunbeds in the shade, and a pool that could be in any of those design magazines.

But the people . . .

Lucas was on a sunbed, wearing white shorts, his shirt unbuttoned, reading something on his tablet. He wore his black eyepatch, and he had a cane beside him, but he looked healthy and happy.

Yunho was at a patio table next to him, laptop open, newspaper and coffee cup by his hand. Of course, he spotted them first. “Ah, come over. Jay, darling, you look fabulous.”

Jay grinned at him. "I know," he said, but he couldn't take his eyes off Jun-mei.

She stood up from her sunbed, her hand to her mouth. She wore a one-piece bathing suit and a long see-through overshirt. Her hair was now in a pixie cut, and she looked amazing.

Jay went to her and gave her a hug. "Look at you! Your hair is fabulous. You are gorgeous."

She nodded, eyes glassy, but happy tears this time. "I am so happy," she said. "I never dreamed of this. This place." She gestured to the pool just as Yin was getting out.

Jun-mei and Jay both stared as he hoisted himself out of the water with ease, muscles bulging, water streaming down his naked torso. His black board shorts clinging to every bulge...

"And this man," Jay murmured.

Rhett gave him a shove. "I heard that."

Jay grinned without shame and Jun-mei giggled. Rhett went over to meet Yin, shaking his hand. "Looking relaxed," Rhett said.

Yin laughed.

Actually freaking laughed.

"Happiness looks good on him," Jay murmured to Jun-mei.

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She smiled and, taking Jay's hand, led him over to her sunbed. He sat with her and her grip on his hand tightened. "I have to thank you, and Captain Ouston," she said. "I can never thank you enough."

"We're just glad you're okay."

She looked over to where Yin and Rhett were talking by the pool, and she shook her head in wonder. "Yunho and Lucas have been so kind and so generous. I cannot believe this is my life. Everyone here is..."

Jay laughed. "Queer?"

She giggled again but then shook her head, her eyes meeting Jay's. "I have new papers, a new passport, as me, Jun-mei. An Australian passport. Can you believe that?"

He squeezed her hand. "You deserve it."

"I know Tao can't stay here," she whispered, face falling. "He is Milvus now and will travel. And I'm happy that he's happy. He feels he can make a difference now."

"And you?" Jay asked. "What are your plans? You have a new life now."

She smiled shyly, eyes darting to Yunho before landing back on Jay. "Yunho said I could stay here," she said. "I could be their live-in help. Help Yunho in the office, help Lucas with whatever he needs."

Jay gasped, and he gave her hand an excited squeeze. “Really? That’s great! You already know about Milvus, all the dark government ops and stuff. You speak how many languages? And you’re a nurse. It’s perfect, really.”

So freaking perfect.

Jay couldn’t be happier for her.

“And Tao knows I’m safe here,” she whispered. Then she got a little teary again. “And I can be me here.”

“And she makes the best pot of tea,” Lucas said without looking up. “Coming from an Englishman, that’s quite the compliment.”

Jun-mei smiled, radiant and shy, and Jay gave her a hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

Before she could reply, there was a loud groan from the far side of the pool. Jay turned to find Chen, wearing shorts that did his pale legs no favours, a gawdy Hawaiian print shirt, and a bucket hat. He had his arms full of firewood, which he dropped near the fire pit at the end of the patio and dusted himself off. “Ah, you are here,” he said with a grin. He went over to shake Rhett’s hand, and he gave Jay a grin before he turned to Yunho. “Yunho, why is fence down there. You expect intruders all this way?”

Yunho chuckled and closed his laptop. “No. That’s to keep the crocodiles out.”

Chen’s smile died instantly, and after he stared at Yunho for a long beat, he looked at Rhett, eyes wide. “You know, when we first come here, I ask why not all Australians live in such beautiful place. Why have this pool when beautiful ocean is right there. Because of huge crocodiles and teeny tiny jellyfish that can kill a hundredmen.” He threw his hands up. “This is why not all Australians live here. Crocodile fence. Now I

ask why does anyone live here?"

Everyone laughed.

Well, everyone except Chen. He came over and threw himself onto the sunbed next to Jay and Jun-mei.

"Love the shirt," Jay said.

And just like that, sulky Chen was gone and grinning Chen was back. "Me too."

Jay looked out then, seeing Rhett and Yin still talking by the pool. He liked that Rhett had found a friend in Yin. He didn't have many friends. Sure, he had the whole team, and Sid in particular. He had scores of men who would follow him into battle out of pure respect. He had people who admired him, looked up to him, maybe even feared him a little.

But he didn't have friends to hang out with.

He and Yin were a lot alike in a lot of ways, and to see them talking and laughing like friends... Well, it made Jay so freaking happy.

And Yin. Standing in the sunlight, shirtless, Jay could see the extent of his scars more clearly. His back was mottled where it had been shredded and was now jagged lines of healed scar tissue. Uneven, discoloured, welts. Even the back of his thigh and calf was scarred.

Jay could only imagine how much pain he'd gone through, what it took to survive that.

He had to remind himself not to stare. "Any word on Wong and his sister?" he asked.

Yunho looked at him then. “Both detained and assets seized.”

Jay was hardly surprised. That guy’s many millions of dollars was probably part of the reason why the government offered to help. A helluva payday. “And General Yuan?” Jay knew it could have gone one of two ways. He was either rotting in a jail cell or they gave him a commendation.

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“Retired quietly,” Yunho said.

So basically a commendation. Motherfuckers.

“And all of Frankston’s files? The pathogen data and his manifesto on how to be a traitor and a giant piece of shit?”

Yunho chuckled. “We have it all.”

“Dead piece of shit now,” Rhett said, walking over.

“And Yin’s magic blood?” Jay asked. He looked up at Yin. “How many vials did they take? Leave you any?”

Jay understood they’d need his blood for tests, and that was fine. He just didn’t want the guy to become a lab rat.

“None,” Yin answered.

“None?”

Yunho sighed and closed his laptop. “The Chinese had been working on synthesising a cure, based on their test results from the explosion and what they took from him during his recovery.”

“I just assumed those blood tests were procedure,” Yin said with a shrug.

“It wasn’t in any of his medical records,” Jun-mei offered.

“No, it wasn’t,” Yunho agreed. “Not in his military records, anyway. I did find something in their hidden records though. The tests they’d run, the cure they’d found. Have you heard of the Warberg effect?”

Jay and Rhett both shook their heads.

“The long version involves cellular aerobic glycolysis in fighting cancers and mycotoxins.”

“What the scientists in Tehran were working on,” Jay said. “Doctor Azad Heydari.”

“Yes,” Yunho replied with a nod. “The shorter version of a long medical analogy is that Yin’s blood has anomalies with the BCL-2 protein, more specifically the BH3-only protein, and how it fights infection.”

What the hell?

Rhett side-eyed Yin. “Are you like superhuman or something?”

Everyone chuckled, but it was Yunho who answered. “No. It’s not medically uncommon, but those without this anomaly are likely to succumb to the pathogen. Like I said, the Chinese synthesised a cure based on Yin’s bloodwork.” Then Yunho smiled and shrugged. “And I shared that data with our own medical team. And with every government affiliated with the Milvus Division. If everybody has the cure, the pathogen has no monetary value, at least.”

Jay grinned at him. Sneaky bastard.

“And Myles?” Rhett asked. “We saw him in London, in the special care ward. He

was doing better. Talking, at least.”

“Much better,” Yunho said. “He’ll never be back to what he was, and his Milvus days are over.”

Jay wasn’t surprised. He sighed. “And Yixing is back in London, back at work. HQ is working on extra security and more transparency. Which is a good thing, I guess.”

“I’ll keep an eye on them, darling,” Yunho said with a smile.

“And so will I,” Lucas declared, gesturing to his one good eye.

It made Jay chuckle. “So,” he hedged, looking around. “I was hoping Harry and Asher would be here. Where is my favourite cranky tank?”

Yunho’s eyes twinkled. “They’re in Sydney, paying someone a visit.”

That sounded fun . . . and somewhat sinister.

“Really?” Rhett asked, eyebrow raised. “And who might that be?”

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Yunho smiled. “We found a lot of information in the data we imparted from the Chinese. Information that has been and will be quite useful.”

Jay had assumed Yunho would gain access to whatever Chinese military data he could, and he wasn’t bothered. Yunho had saved their asses several times, and at his own expense. Payment in restricted data access was his reward, and in a way, Jay was glad. He was glad his team now had more information. There had been whispers of newly structured Chinese military divisions, focusing more on cybersecurity, satellite recon, and signal intelligence.

And now Yunho had all that information at his fingertips.

Yunho continued. “Information that is pertinent to the Parrish case and his involvement with a certain politician in Belarus and the Druzhba pipeline.”

Everyone stared at him.

“Are we . . . ?” Jay hedged.

“When do we leave?” Rhett said.

Yunho put his hand up and chuckled. “You have five days off, Captain Ouston. I suggest you enjoy them.”

“Great idea.” Jay laughed as he shot up off the sunbed. He took Rhett’s hand and pulled him toward the pool, undid his sarong, letting it fall to the tiles as they went into the water.

Milvus could wait.

Hell, the whole fucking world could wait.

As Rhett surfaced for air, Jay wrapped his legs around his waist and kissed him. “Five days, Ouston,” he murmured. “You better make them count.”

Fin

OUTTAKE – BONUS SCENE

Tao couldn't believe this was real.

As he lay on the sunbed in the shade with Jun-mei, him on his side, her on her back, he studied her side profile. Her cute little nose, her full lips, her lashes.

She was beautiful.

Her hair was short now, cut in a wispy fashion that was elegant and dainty.

Like her.

He knew she'd loved her long hair, but honestly, Tao liked it short. It made her look carefree, and that suited her now.

Because she was carefree.

He'd done it. He'd got her out, saved her. Not how he'd originally planned, but she was safe now.

Tao wasn't one bit sorry that Tan and Frankston were dead. He wasn't sorry for

breaking Tan's jaw. His only regret was that he hadn't made him suffer more.

He'd deserved so much more pain.

Tao was glad they were both dead. If they'd been charged with a criminal trial pending, it would have given them time to sell out, strike a deal for information, and bargain for their freedom.

But Yunho had secured all that information, totally eliminating the need for Tan and Frankston at all.

Tao wasn't even sorry that Yunho had infiltrated his government's data.

The government that ordered his death back in South Sudan.

The government responsible for his injuries, his pain.

Merciful heavens, the pain.

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But through all of that, he'd met Jun-mei.

The person who'd saved him, shown him what love was.

"You keep looking at me," she murmured, eyes still closed.

"You're so pretty," he whispered, glad the others couldn't hear him. He'd spent his whole career being cold and distant, emotionless. And if they heard him speak so softly, saying such tender things, what would that do to his reputation?

Not that Yunho or Lucas, or Rhett or Jay would care.

Hanyu certainly didn't. He'd been there when Tao had met Jun-mei. He'd joked back then that Tao's cheeks would blush and his eyes would melt every time he saw her.

Hiding anything from Hanyu was impossible.

But here, in Yunho and Lucas's house, no one had to hide anything.

Not their love, not Jun-mei's transness, and not Tao's scars.

None of it. They were as free as free could be.

Jun-mei turned to face him, her smile making his heart swell. She put her hand to his face, scanning his eyes. "I don't know how I got so lucky, what I did to deserve you."

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers in a soft kiss. "You saved me," he

whispered. “When I had nothing left to live for.”

She frowned, her pink lips pouting. “My sweet Tao.”

Someone cleared their throat, making both Tao and Jun-mei look up. It was Jay. “Uh, excuse me, you’re in my spot,” he said to Tao. He waved a bottle of nail polish. “Jun-mei and I have very important business to discuss.”

Jun-mei chuckled and Tao sighed. He would’ve told Jay to go away if it weren’t for the fact that he and Jun-mei had become good friends these last few days. He rolled off the sunbed, getting to his feet.

Jay shooed him. “Go do your underwater thing,” he said, quickly sitting on the sunbed and holding up the nail polish. “This is so pretty. Toenails or fingernails first?”

Tao turned and, finding no one else around, figured he’d go do ‘his underwater thing’ as Jay had suggested.

The sun was scorching, the temperature and humidity far too high for his liking. The pool was hardly a hardship. Rhett and Hanyu had gone on the boat to the mainland, and Yunho and Lucas were inside. Their peaceful days were coming to an end, and they’d be departing for Canberra the day after next.

He’d be leaving Jun-mei behind, so he’d not wanted to miss a minute with her. But her friendship with Jay was good for her. He was fun and a little sassy with her, they spent a lot of time whispering and giggling, and she needed friends like him.

Like how Tao could admit he liked Rhett Ouston. He could even admit to maybe being friends.

Maybe.

Not that he'd ever admit that to him.

But he respected him as a soldier, as a leader. And he respected him as someone who was open about his relationship with a man. He would dare anyone to tell him it was wrong or not good enough. Rhett was honest, and what you saw was what you got.

That was an admirable quality in Tao's eyes.

Again, not that he'd ever admit that to him.

Take a bullet for him? Sure. Admit to his face that he considered him a friend?

No.

It had been good to spend time with them though. The downtime, relaxed and casual time off, had been a godsend. Tao had needed it, and so had Hanyu. He'd been by Tao's side for the better part of a decade, every step of the way, never once questioning Tao's actions or motives.

Hanyu was the brother he'd never had. And to see him enjoy some quiet vacation time—to see him laughing with everyone, snoozing on a sunbed, cooking meals with Yunho—made Tao happy too.

But as wonderful as this time had been, Tao was itching to work again.

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He'd never sat still for so long.

Yunho's gym, while more than enough for them, wasn't really equipped to suit a special ops team. The pool was great for cooling off and for recreation but too short for laps, and the ocean was out of the question because of all the deadly animals.

But what Tao could do in the pool was static apnoea.

Or as Jay called it, his underwater thing.

Holding his breath underwater for extended periods of time.

In his time with the Jiaolong Commandos, he'd done countless breath-holding exercises. Some static, some under adverse conditions, all depending on the drill, and all at varying depths.

Sitting at the bottom of Yunho's pool was easy, by comparison. And something he could challenge himself with during his stay. He'd sit cross-legged in the deep end, close his eyes, and clear his mind.

The first time Tao had done it, the others had been quite concerned, worried he was about to drown. Until Hanyu, snoozing unconcerned on the sunbed, waved them off. "Many minutes he be fine," he'd said, apparently.

Jun-mei's worried face peering down at him the entire time had made him happy. Sometimes she sat with her legs in the water while he did it.

But this time when Tao looked up, he saw four silhouettes standing at the edge looking down at him. Rhett and Hanyu and two others he'd not seen before. One a similar size as Rhett, the other even bigger than Hanyu.

Tao checked his watch. He wasn't anywhere near being done, but not wanting to be rude, he stopped the timer and pushed off the bottom. In one fluid movement, he took a gulp of air, put his hands on the edge, and lifted himself out.

Hanyu threw him his towel and Tao turned to face the guests, dabbing his face. "Sorry, I wasn't aware we were expecting guests," he said.

The guests, as they were, were two men. The shorter one, with dark hair and dark eyes, gave him a curious smile. The big man, blondish-brown hair, hard blue eyes, gave him a nod.

Tao recognised them from the video chat they'd had on the plane.

"Asher and Harry," Rhett said, "this is Yin Tao."

"Nice to meet you in person," Tao said, giving them a bow of thanks. "We could not have saved my Jun-mei without your help. I am forever in your debt."

And he was. He knew it, and he meant it.

Because it was these two that Rhett had called first, and they'd been the ones to involve Yunho.

And Tao would never forget it.

"It was our pleasure," Asher replied. "We were just glad you got her out okay."

Harry stared at him. “You sit at the bottom of the pool often?”

Tao smiled and gave a nod. “Sometimes, yes.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Asher told Harry. “You’ve had two punctured lungs, remember?”

Two punctured lungs?

“Tao, darling,” Yunho called out. “You might want to put on some dry clothes. We’ll be eating soon.”

“Yes,” Hanyu crowed. “We buy all the food.”

“No more unseasoned-chicken jokes, for fuck’s sake,” Rhett said as he helped Hanyu carry it inside.

Jay laughed as he followed them inside, and it made Tao smile.

He gave Asher and Harry another nod before he headed back to the doors. Jun-mei joined him, her arm going around his waist, and he slung his arm over her shoulder as they went inside.

It wasn’t until they got to their room that he’d realised they would have seen his back, seen his scars. He’d been so used to not hiding anything these last two weeks, he’d forgotten...

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And maybe that was a sign of growth; maybe it was a sign of who he was now. The Tao that was in Milvus. The Tao that had nothing to hide. It was a lot to get his head around.

He changed quickly and ran a comb through his hair.

“Is this good enough?” Jun-mei asked as she looked in the mirror, flattening her hands down her dress. It was a pretty yellow thing with thin straps, and holy hell, if she didn’t look stunning.

Tao came to stand behind her, his hands on her narrow waist. He pressed a soft kiss to the top of her shoulder. “You take my breath away,” he murmured. “I cannot wait to come back to our room later.” He kissed her shoulder again, then her neck. “And I can take this dress off you.”

She giggled, her cheeks flushing the prettiest pink, and she turned around so she could swat him. “Have you not had enough of me?”

He pulled her close and kissed down her long neck to her creamy shoulder. “Never.”

She laughed and pulled away, leaning up on her toes to peck his lips. “We have guests. We mustn’t be rude in Yunho and Lucas’s house. Dinner first, and you can have as much of me as you want later.”

Tao sighed, but he knew she was right. “Okay,” he relented. “Let’s go.” He took her hand and laced their fingers as they went downstairs and made their way to the kitchen.

Yunho, Hanyu, and Asher were discussing the seafood, somewhat loudly, while Jay requested Jun-mei help him with the salads, and Rhett gave Tao a grimace. "I'm gonna leave that to them," he whispered, sneaking out the door.

Great idea.

Tao joined him at the large patio table where Harry was sitting with Lucas, facing the pastel sunset. Rhett grabbed some beers and handed them around, then fell into a chair with a sigh.

"Kinda deceiving, huh?" Rhett said. "How the world can look so beautiful and peaceful."

Tao agreed with him because it was deceiving that it could look so peaceful and serene when, in reality, darkness and turmoil lurked in every corner.

But Harry studied him for a long few seconds, his brow furrowed. "That's not good."

Rhett shot him a look. "What's not good?"

Harry took a long pull of his beer and slid his bottle onto the table. "When someone in our game starts with the introspective shit, it's bad."

Lucas sighed. "It speaks of disillusionment and cynicism of your purpose, Captain. You're questioning what you do."

Rhett scoffed. "I just thought the sunset was pretty." But then his brow furrowed, and he scratched at the label on his beer bottle.

"Out with it, Ouston," Harry said.

Rhett let out a sigh, and when he looked up, his gaze went straight to Harry's. "You were right. Not what you said just now, though maybe you're right about that too, I dunno."

Everyone waited for him to gather his thoughts.

"In the chopper the day we met," Rhett said. "When you first learned of the Milvus Division. You said that kind of power wasn't good, that no good would ever come of it."

Harry nodded. "Correct."

Rhett nodded before taking another sip of his beer. "We got sold out by one of the Milvus HQ; and a good man on my team died because of that, and another is fucked up for life. You got sold out by your government. Yin here got sold out by his in South Sudan. Someone's always gonna want their payday, be it for information, money, weapons, war. Revenge." He shook his head. "We were supposed to be above the bureaucracy, the politics. But if I'd have followed all instructions, my entire team would be dead. If I hadn't had Yunho's intel, we'd all be dead. I shouldn't have to look my director dead in the eye and tell him how shit's gonna go down. I shouldn't have to disobey orders or threaten bodily harm to do the right thing." He finished with another sigh. "I dunno. Maybe disillusioned is right."

"For what it's worth," Tao added, "I'm glad you stood up to him. I'll stand with a captain who chooses right over wrong all day long." Then he smiled at Rhett. "Truthfully, the first time you told Director King you were doing your fucking job, I thought it was over for all of us."

Rhett snorted and tapped his beer bottle to Tao's. "When he said the mission needed to be a success by any means necessary, I don't think he thought that meant disobeying his orders."

Lucas nodded thoughtfully. “So, what are you saying? You want to go lone wolf like Harry was? To shirk off the political strings, so to speak?”

Rhett baulked. “Solo? No. I couldn’t. I need my team. All of us.” That made Tao smile. “But we are supposed to be kites, right? That was our original purpose. Now it seems we have strings from every government.”

Yunho put a large tray of fresh seafood into the centre of the table. “For what it’s worth, Captain, I think there are some changes being implemented at Milvus council.”

“What kind of changes?” Rhett asked.

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Yunho smiled. “Changes that you’ll like. More checks and balances for the council, more transparency from your handlers. Basically, an overhaul of systems and procedures and,” he said with a smile, “more autonomy for the Milvus teams. You’re right about your original purpose. Milvus was supposed to be a team of kites. They lost sight of that trying to play by the rules.”

“There are no rules,” Asher said, taking his seat next to Harry.

Jun-mei sat beside Tao, her hand resting on his arm and smiling at him in a way that made his heart sing. He loved how happy she was.

And he was happy to sit here and talk about their jobs like they were. To vent frustrations and to be reassured.

What a different life this was. Tao could barely believe it. His choice back then, to volunteer for Milvus may have been selfish in the beginning, but now he knew just how right he’d been.

“You did a good thing back in Tehran,” Yunho said to Rhett. “The whole Milvus team. You stopped an act of evil that would have changed the world as we know it. There are no parades, no medals, no accolades for that. You will walk past people on the street any time from now who will have no idea that your actions saved them. Milvus has the potential to be a weapon used for the good of the world; don’t lose sight of that.”

And then Jay had to go ruin it. “You know what I think?”

“Oh god,” Harry grumbled. “Here we go.”

“I think the captain and the pit viper need to have another round of Sanda fighting. I didn’t get to watch, and it’s pretty much all but gone from the internet now.” He smiled brightly. “I wanna see who’d win.”

Rhett looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “Jay. What the...?”

“Sanda fighting, huh?” Asher said, excited. “I’m down to watch that.”

“What the hell is Sanda fighting?” Harry asked.

“A specialised form of combat fighting used by the Chinese special forces,” Jay replied.

Tao looked at Rhett. “You never did say where you learned it.”

“I learned several forms of fighting techniques,” Rhett said.

Harry nodded, smiling now. “Come on, then. Now I wanna see.”

“You’re not allowed to try it,” Asher mumbled to him. “Your shoulder won’t forgive you.”

Jay snorted. “I’ll put a fiver on Rhett.”

Rhett stared at him. “You put your money on Yin last time.”

Jay made a face, and Hanyu, who was over by the barbeque, held up a giant pair of tongs and clicked them together. “I have ten on Tao.”

Tao laughed and stood up. “Come on, Captain. No holding back.”

Rhett groaned as he got to his feet. “Jesus Christ.”

Yunho sipped his wine, bemused. “No bleeding on the tiles, please.”

Tao walked over to the open space beside the pool, rolled his shoulders, and cracked his neck.

Rhett joined him. “Jay, have you got your medic kit? I’m probably gonna need it.”

“Sure thing, babe,” he replied. “Yin, no aiming for his junk. I need that.”

Rhett turned to face him, deflated. “Thanks, babe.”

Jun-mei laughed, her hands to her mouth. “Same, please, Rhett. Be careful with his...”

“Junk?” Jay supplied.

Everyone laughed, and Tao stood there, shocked that she would say such a thing. He turned to Jay. “You’re a bad influence on her.”

Rhett burst out laughing. “You’ve got no idea.” Then he spread his feet apart, lowered his centre of gravity, and beckoned Tao with both hands. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

The end