

Fell Deeds

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Fell Deeds

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Summary

They thought the nightmare ended with the fall of Division, the defeat of Amanda/Helen and the winning of their freedom. They had succeeded in that; Nikita and her friends, her family now, complete with a new recruit and member by the name of Cara Mason, had taken apart Division and locked Amanda in a dark hole for the rest of time. That should have been all that was asked of them. They didn't plan on anything more than living out their days together in peace. But when Cara's father calls on her to help his organization - the DMS (Department of Military Sciences) working with and above board to save the world from terrorist types all over the world - with an international issue, the whole team can't help but say yes. When a doomsdayer surfaces with the notion to do the world in himself no one will survive, no one but himself and the people with whom he identifies as chosen, special, worthy, the two teams come together to save the world all over again.

Prologue: The Family Code

It couldn't be ignored. The feelings in the room were primarily positive but behind all that was tension and uncertainty. It was the elephant in the room, so to speak, and though no one was actively ignoring it no one was talking about it either. Ryan wasn't dead, that was the most positive thing, undeniably so, to have happened all year. And even that had been touch and go for a while there; everyone had a target painted on their back as long as Amanda had been out there. Everyone that meant anything to Cara was still alive, however, including herself. But even so, there was this hollow gnawing feeling in the pit of the brunette's stomach that things wouldn't stay this way for long. Sure, Amanda was gone now, completely out of the picture and unable to hurt them, any of them, ever again; but it was never that easy when considering the lifestyles they led. They'd all burned some bridges and no matter how a person tried to recompense for those times, those moments, nothing was truly forgotten – whether or not it was forgiven. Cara had proven her loyalty, her fealty, beyond a doubt in anyone's mind; this wasn't to say that her recompense wasn't due. She'd be paying on that debt for the rest of her life.

Cara's pale grey blue eyes looked up from the floor in front of where she sat in a threadbare high-back chair. Seymour Birkhoff was in the kitchen of the small house they were in – she could see him through the doorway, there – and he was talking to Sonya in hushed tones. Cara wondered what they were discussing, or rather, what he was telling her. Sonya, whose last name wasn't something Cara knew in her overall wealth of knowledge, had betrayed them all to Amanda within the first year the petite brunette had been with the team. Apparently Amanda had reactivated Sonya's kill chip and forced her to spy for her in Ops, every day when she would come into work. Granted, Cara didn't know anyone that well in the time she'd been with the 'new Division' and she knew Sonya less than the little she knew of the others, but to her the betrayal had been incredibly uncalled for. It was inexcusable. And somehow these people all found the ability within them, the fortitude of spirit, to forgive her... It took Cara longer but she did. They were family; they were all any of them had anymore. They had to stick together if nothing else. It was why she'd forgiven Sonya and why she'd been so vocal that Birkhoff and the young computer expert fix things and stay together romantically, even when things got difficult. Even to her own inevitable detriment...

"Hey you..." Nikita sat down on the arm of the high-back chair Cara currently occupied. The intrusion into the younger woman's thoughts came from left field; clearly she'd been deep in thought because she hadn't noticed her mentor's arrival in the room. Although, Nikki was known for coming in on the wind like little cat feet... Nikita looked expectant, wanting an answer; guarded, but expectant.

"Hey, Nikki." Her plump lips smiled, curving upward albeit slow and temperate. Those pale blue eyes of hers brightened infinitesimally. She didn't relish this conversation; it would only cement that icky feeling she had, unsettled, that the worst was somehow yet to come.

Cara had tried her hardest not to fall in love with Seymour Birkhoff. It wasn't necessarily because he was seeing Sonya romantically, even though it should have been the only reason. During the days of the original Division there had been no fraternizing between operatives

and/or other staff; Cara was still stuck in that mindset and she tried to keep it that way even when Ryan took over and Nikita and Michael became friends rather than enemies. She also hadn't wanted to fall for Birkhoff because of both similarities and differences between them; they both were geniuses according to the scores on the historical Stanford-Binet test, they both had amazing computer and technical skills, but unlike him Cara was a field operative and had seen combat and bloodshed the likes of which he wouldn't even be able to imagine. She'd tried her damndest not to fall in love with him...and she'd failed miserably. It didn't take long for their friendship to grow progressively closer, the bond tightening around them...and their hearts.

"What are you going to do now?" Nikita's eyes lazily traversed Cara's slight but powerful frame. She was lithe and strong and agile and yet curvy and buxom in all the right ways. If Nikita had been a man she would have found her irresistible too! "You know, I didn't trust you right away, in the beginning. You came out of nowhere and saved my ass like I was supposed to be grateful. But you were just looking out for me and you did that over and over again through this whole campaign against Amanda. And now...I'm concerned about my friend and her future. Who's going to have her back?"

Cara's plump lips parted over her perfect pearly whites, baring them in a genuine smile. "Hey, everyone should be so flattered." A light chuckle bubbled up and out as Nikita met the smile with one of her own. "Believe me, I understand the initial hesitation. I would have to if I'd been in your place more than a couple years ago, for years, alone in it. But...I'm glad we've become friends." Nikki didn't answer, still waiting for Cara to answer the question about her future, what she'd do now, where she'd go. "But to meet you halfway and give you an answer, the only answer I know for sure is...I...I really don't know."

Nikita let Cara's answer sink in for a moment, gazing into the other room where Birkhoff was still talking to Sonya. It wasn't as though either one could hear the conversation between the two women, and vice versa, of course; it looked like neither party of two seemed very happy with the path put ahead of them at the moment. "You and Nerd...?"

"Again, I...don't know."

"Did he make it clear how he feels? Did you make it clear to him how you feel?"

Her eyes were faraway and took on a stormy grey tint rather suddenly as she thought about the queries laid out for her. "He...I thought he was pretty clear about how he felt...for me..." Cara paused, trying to formulate a coherent thought out of all the noise in her head. All eyes were on her, Nikita's eyes anyway, as she tried to sort through the muck, thoughts free floating like stars in the night sky. "And I thought I made it abundantly clear how I felt about him, but then..." She shrugged.

Nikita spoke up. "Sonya was there much longer..."

"Yes..." The brunette's word was almost a whisper, unsure.

Nikita's hand took Cara's abruptly and a soft gasp left the younger woman's mouth at the action. "Don't worry about Sonya. If Nerd is smart, as smart as he likes to think he is, he'll come around to what is right, to what his heart wants, and fairly quickly. The loyalty you've shown, the unconditional friendship...that means one Hell of a lot more than you may think;

just give it a day. Something...” Of course she’d been trying to make Cara’s worries less but Nikita couldn’t get inside Birkhoff’s head; that limited the extent with which she could actually accomplish that service. “And if he doesn’t...boys are stupid. You want me to pound him a little?” She laughed softly, making hand gestures to symbolize it, fist in hand.

Meanwhile in the other room, Seymour’s and Sonya’s conversation ended. The two women didn’t notice when Sonya left the room and Michael slinked in by way of the shadows. It didn’t take much to gauge the tenor of the meeting that just broke up. It wasn’t pleasant. Birkhoff’s head was in his hands; he hadn’t noticed Michael’s arrival himself. “Birkhoff...” Michael’s eyebrows raised together as was his typical fashion when speaking, waiting, expectant. “Rough afternoon...?”

Seymour sighed. “I thought once the Dark Side was defeated all our problems would run to ground or just...go away.”

“Problems have, predominantly...” Michael put his weight on one leg, leaning a hip against the kitchen island. His tone coupled with his speech was just as cryptic as ever. “No one ever said romance is one of the quote, unquote, normal problems.”

“Yeah, well, romance sucks, Mikey. I’m thinking life was easier when I was masturbating to online porn.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...okay, too much, too much!” Michael waved his hand, waving off the very unfortunate mental image immortalizing what Birkhoff had said on Michael’s tender grey matter. While Michael regrouped, Seymour nearly blushed and smirked sheepishly. “Moving on...” His eyes found the computer tech’s and softened. “I saw you with Sonya. I think everyone did...”

“Shit...”

“Well, now, hang on.” Michael commented, holding up a hand to keep Birkhoff there with him and in check as opposed to just spewing off at the mouth again. “I say that, not because Cara saw you both and got jealous or something. I don’t know how she felt or feels currently, to be honest. I say that because I know about the both of you, the love affair – as much as the two of you tried to hide it, and believe me it wasn’t that hard to see, so – and I’m just wondering here, what’s going to happen now? How does this end? I care about everyone here, Birkhoff. I care about you and Sonya and Cara, equally and without preference. You’re all friends of mine. We’re all family.”

Birkhoff ran a hand through his longish dirty blond hair and sighed once again. “Thanks, Mikey; but the truth is, I don’t know where I’m going from here. I can barely think about my future right now, let alone dragging some beautiful woman along with me into Pandora. Jesus, even the two Na’Vi hotties I’m in love with don’t deserve to be riding my coattails! They deserve better.”

Michael rolled his eyes without Birkhoff noticing. All of his film, TV and media references got a little annoying at times. “Okay, so, you don’t even have an idea...?”

“I didn’t say that. I have an idea. I just don’t know how right it is, whether that’s right for me or right for them.”

“How right it is?”

“Mikey, no matter what I do one of those gorgeous ladies is going to get their heart carved up like a Christmas goose.”

✂

“Alex has Owen now and you have Michael and Ryan has new accomplishments awaiting him in the private sector of the government under a new name. I’m not trying to whine and moan and cry but when you don’t even have a lover or job to keep you busy, something to look forward to...” Cara blinked, shaking her head. “It kind of takes all the fun out of being dead, you know?”

Cara’s arms were crossed over her chest as she stood beside Nikita. Everyone was finishing packing their SUVs and assorted other vehicles, trying to get started leaving before the rains came. The forecast promised one doozy of a storm rolling in... Her perfect and pert B/C cup breasts stood atop the bridge of her arms and kept drawing Birkhoff’s eyes from across the gravel drive without Cara’s express notice. Nikki huffed after shoving in the last bag and shutting the tail gate on her vehicle. “You’re not whining, Cara. Your heart was just broken and you’re not crying or down on the ground, kicking and screaming. You didn’t even kick Nerd in the baby-maker so...” She smirked and winked before embracing Cara in a lingering hug. “I’d say you’re doing pretty good, Amazon.”

Amazon was the nickname Nikita had given her during one of their missions together and it just seemed to stick. No one other than Nikki ever called her by it but that was alright; it just mean that she was loved. Cara didn’t look it but she was stronger than most others her age and size. Division made sure of that and so had her father. Growing up without a mother and with a father in his own head, more interested in government and saving the world at large than he was concerned with his own daughter would make a girl a woman exactly in Cara Mason’s image and likeness.

The hug lasted about five minutes and the feeling of friendship, of sisterhood and caring that permeated there was strong. Cara had never had that before. “Thanks, Nikki. Coming from you, that means a lot to me.”

Goodbyes were hard in any case, at any time, but saying them to the only people who loved you and knew you were alive was much heavier. Michael and Nikita left first; they were well on their way to happiness but the goings on of the last couple years were still weighing on them. They had a road to go but it was known they would get there eventually. The two of them belonged together. Alex and Owen left pretty soon thereafter and then it was just Birkhoff, Sonya, and Cara.

The most awkward love triangle in history...

“So...” Cara noticed Sonya was hanging back, staying as far away from the petite operative as she could manage. “You think the computer geek with the muscles of steel and deadly

tendencies is going to hurt your little sweetie?”

Seymour chuckled, smiling because as much as he knew Cara was joking he knew there was nothing more true about her. She was lethal. “No, but now that you mention it that’s probably what’s running through her mind right now.” He walked up close to her, smelling the patchouli and sandalwood all around him now. It smelled phony on anyone else but with Cara it was natural. She was a real life woman of the earth; whatever she was, she was. There was never any pretense with her. She was centered, for all of her faults and history; Cara was as conscious as anyone in their business came. Perhaps that was why she was so haunted by her past, what she’d done. “But...are we okay?”

Her eyebrows turned down and her nose crinkled. “Are we okay?”

“That’s what I asked, yeah... I mean, by that, like...”

“I know what you mean, Nerd.”

“You know, there was a time I was so mad when anyone but Nikki called me that.” Birkhoff commented, smirking now. “But I like how it sounds coming from you; you say it and it just sounds...nice. Cara, I don’t want to lose you in my life because I chose Sonya as my...you know.”

And there it was, the real reason Seymour Birkhoff was freaking out; he didn’t want to lose her.

He didn’t want to lose her!

Cara blinked, the shock inwardly playing out but never registering on that porcelain creamy pale face of hers. “I told you a long time ago when we first became friends, the trust you placed in me to keep Nikki safe, Alex, Michael, Owen...and even Sonya; I told you that it would take a lot more than some bad guys to make me go away. And this silly emotional heartbreak thing... That’s still not enough. I stand by my word.”

He almost snorted. Seymour was in more shock outwardly than Cara had probably ever been in her entire life. Her words replayed in his head like a record on repeat, broken. This silly emotional heartbreak thing? This. Silly. Emotional. Heartbreak thing. Really? Did she just...? “Right, well, you know what? I’m glad you feel that way. I really am, Cara.” He would have said more if the petite brunette hadn’t launched herself at him, engulfing him in one of the strongest visceral hugs he’d ever experienced. He could practically feel her heart beating so hard in her chest and his matched hers but for a completely different reason; her breasts, the same ones he’d been ogling earlier, were so soft and they were pressed against him so tightly. If he had a regret in him it was that he’d hurt her. He’d hurt her and it would never show because she was centered. That’s what he loved about her, right? She was too great a woman to show it. Cara was a fucking Lady!

“Take care of yourself, Nerd.” Cara whispered beside his ear so only he would hear. “Take care of her too, yeah?”

And when she released him, Cara did it quickly and turned away. She didn't turn back. She didn't even heard him whisper his wish that she take care of herself. She just didn't want him to see her cry.

Chapter 1: Welcome to the Warehouse

“Scrambled or lookin’ at ya?” The waiter asked.

“I’m sorry...” Cara clued back in at the end of the query. All she heard was a voice; she hadn’t been good at paying attention to the here and now as of late. “Must have been beamed up for a minute there...” Just as the waiter was about to regale her with the choices a quaint jingle-jangle cut the silence and Cara smiled apologetically, her sexy plump berry stained lips doing the talking for her. The waiter smiled back and backed away slowly. She swiped her forefinger across the screen to answer the call – an ID that read Restricted – and kept it cheery but blunt. “It’s your nickel.”

“Eggs?” That was all the voice on the other end inquired.

The person on the other end of the call didn’t have to say more or even introduce themselves. The vocal tone and quality was unique among the former Division operative’s contacts and the question in itself was telling. “What are you, now? Watching me...?” She negated to answer the question directly. Instead she answered as though he was asking about her menu selection.

“No, you spoiled brat and even if I was is this call private?” A pause, though brief, as if trying to decide whether or not to say whatever came next. “Your Daddy asked me to make this call.”

“Is he afraid his precious daughter is going to do something crazy, something rash? He wants the glorified baby sitter to follow up? Or maybe he just thinks I won’t answer his calls...”

“Is this call all mixed up or what?”

“What do you think, BPD? I didn’t just fall off the turnip truck, you know! Plus, Division had toys that make yours and Dad’s look like they came second hand from Bosnia.”

“Ouch! That hurts!” The male voice was smiling somewhere on his end of the line. She could tell. “Well Daddy might be tapping this call so, be careful there, darling daughter...”

His attempt at taming her venom didn’t succeed. “Yeah? Good! It’s about time the eldest child got some of Daddy’s attention!” The ex-operative took a sip off of her coffee and swallowed slow, savoring the sugary sickly sweet caffeine shot. The coffee had a thin film of grease on the top and the saucer it sat on was chipped. To say that Cara was meticulous and sharp was an understatement; she noticed everything, always on alert, ever vigilant. “What does it have to do with me this time, Joe? That’s all I want to know. In case you haven’t already heard, I’m out of the super secret government issued spy business. I’m in retirement.” And it wasn’t like she hadn’t done enough for them, for her father, already...

“That right!? Percy and Amanda leave you your 401K?”

“Mommy Murder and Daddy Darkside spent it, but uh, I got creative.” She said simply, nonchalant.

“Proud of you, Babe.” He sounded it from the inflection before he continued. “I need to see you to give you details. First rate gossip; I can’t chance it even on a secure line.” Joe Ledger sounded more tired than usual. It showed now in his tone, at the end there, when he started talking about work.

“Where?” She didn’t fight him in this. It must have been something major to get Captain Joe Ledger and the rest of the DMS out there looking for her, to bring her in for consult.

“Pier 19, where you died; meet me at 9pm.”

“Shit... Okay, I’ll be there.”

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She hadn’t come here since Cara Mason had died and Division gave her a new life. Of course she hadn’t really died but then, that was Division’s way; make sure the world knows a body is dead and no one will think twice when an operative shows up in Chechnya that looks like said corpse and takes down a shadow operation and ruins a coup... Cara had been waiting at that pier for twenty minutes. It was unusually cold and wet for an Austin, Texas evening. Her brunette locks, almost black in the dim faded light, smelled like the salty brine of the sea. And her good demeanor was wearing, whittling to bare bones the more she stood in this abnormal night air; but she waited, nonetheless. Joe was late.

“Were you followed?”

The petite body whirled around fast, but she wasn’t startled, instead stomping forward on angry dancer’s legs. “What’s the idea, Joe? Huh? Making me stand around in the dark like some fucking derelict!?” Her pale blue grey orbs were like ice as they practically glared holes in him. She was smaller than him, a mere 5’7 to his bulkier 5’11 to 6’ frame; but to think for one moment that she couldn’t take him would be negligent.

“Calm yourself, sweet cheeks...” There’d been more to it going in but Joe Ledger never got it out. A stiff right hook caught him behind the left jaw in a pressure point. His knees buckled though he never fell; though he recovered fairly quickly he still suffered the little starbursts behind the eyes. “Fuck! Now that’s why I love you! Why does your Daddy hate me, so? We could be together! We’d be magic. We’d be wild!”

Cara snorted, derisive. “My Daddy doesn’t hate you. He trusts you with my life which is a Hell of a lot of trust for any father to put in a man where their daughter is concerned. Besides, the reasons we can’t be together is firstly, Grace Courtland and second, I’d fucking kill you on the first date.”

He laughed, short but genuinely amused. “Yeah, you would.” He smirked, tasting blood. She brought out the worst of him at the same time as the best. Cara might have drawn first blood from him but he cared for her deeply and he knew she cared for him too. “But I’d still like it... I’m a glutton for your punishment, Baby.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled, more genuine now than before. “Cut to the chase, here, BPD.”

Joe sobered and hunched over so his shoulders protected his neck from the chilled sea breeze. It was odd; he swore that Austin this time of year was hotter than Satan’s ass crack on earth. “Got some evidence together; this is the first legitimate case we’ve taken on since Division shut down and we had to rebuild MindReader. All the patterns on this make sense. We need your help, Cari.”

The nickname momentarily set her back ten years or more to when she was a young girl and not yet a woman, not yet a killer. She hadn’t heard that in about so long. And she’d thought that part of her life over... Still, she didn’t let it betray her outwardly; the assassin remained stalwart and unchanged. “Okay, yeah. I remember getting Dad’s call around that time. When Shadow Net went down, when Birkhoff had no choice but to shut it down he had to rebuild it from the ground up. Somehow it shut down MindReader in the process. So...?”

“So, we rebuilt and what we have now is an influx of new cases, new patterns and new evil to hunt down. We have one picked out, the most obvious of the bunch, and we need someone with your skill set to help out.” Joe’s eyes cut into her, even through the dark.

“My skill set? You mean a trained assassin the world at large thinks is dead? Or...was that someone you were planning on recruiting after you get me on board?” Her sarcasm was biting.

Joe scoffed. “There’s no one like you, so no. That’s not all there is to you, Cari. You know that, as well as I do, although...” He thought on it for a moment before continuing. “Let’s recap: you’re a trained operative, deadly assassin, excellent Cleaner if we ever need one of those, overall best in any field of knowledge you possess or skill you’ve acquired and that includes computers and other assorted tech. That’s a skill set I sure as Hell don’t have! And you’re considered a genius, Cara! I mean, shit! So don’t tell me that we only want you because you can kill really well for a dead chick.”

“Call me chick again and you’ll find out.”

Joe smiled wide. “See? Cheeky... There’s my girl!”

Cara couldn’t help but to smile at that. Joe’s easy nature, albeit a smartass one most often, was contagious. “Alright, alright; so, details on this case and then I’ll decide if you can pull me off retirement.”

“Trust me, darling, once you hear this you’ll be begging me to take you on!”

“Joseph...” The brunette warned; her eyes turned icy.

“Well damn! Using my given name like that? Really?” He grinned a little bit but shifted his shoulders. “That gave me goose bumps, Babe. But yeah, to the point; I always loved that about you. Firecracker, you know that TV show on cable? Well, I don’t honestly know if it airs anymore but it was the Doomsday Preppers or something like that? We got ourselves a radical version; he’s taking the world out himself.”

“H-how is that possible?” Cara stuttered. It wasn’t like her at all. But then, it wasn’t every day that someone told you the world was in danger...by someone who was supposed to prepare for the apocalypse and protect them and theirs against it. She thought, for a fleeting little while, that she’d been all through with this saving the world nonsense. Joe shrugged his shoulders. “We’re just mobilizing right now. We’re doing everything we can to get in front of this thing.”

“And you guys want me?”

“That’s the general consensus, yeah. Remember that anarchist coup in Jordan last year?”

“Yeah, vaguely; we attributed that to the Shop.”

“Wasn’t them.” Joe shook his head. “It was our guy.”

“You’re shitting me right now.”

“I wish.”

Cara took a moment. She didn’t say anything as she mulled over everything he’d told her. Joe fell silent as he waited, knowing her mind was in some upheaval. “Yeah, Hell yeah, count me in on this. If this wasn’t the Shop and it’s just some twisted schnook that’s been told his dick is too small a couple times too many in some nuclear bunker somewhere, then this shit’s worse than we ever thought. It’s probably worse than you think, too. We’ve got to shut them down.”

“My thoughts exactly, Firecracker; come with me, then. You may as well just fly in with me tonight.” Joe took a hand from his coat pocket and ushered her forward.

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Somewhere in Monaco a phone rang. The building that stood resembled more of a high-end hotel for one than a home. It had been four months since he’d moved in and almost a year since he’d said goodbye to his friends, his family, for the last time. He didn’t know who would possibly be calling him. It wasn’t as though he’d never see them again but they all agreed to meet under better circumstances, only after everyone had settled into their new lives and were truly happy. No one was looking for Shadow Walker anymore; the presidential pardons given them had included a by-line in his for all of Shadow Walker’s illegal activities of the past. And Sonya sure as Hell wasn’t looking for him. Not after the better part of the year fighting with one another about how things turned out. He couldn’t trust her and she didn’t accept that; she also couldn’t accept that he’d fallen in love with someone else. He didn’t blame her in the slightest; the dissent in their relationship had started when he’d met Cara Mason, it had started with him, and his actions were what predominantly led them here. And the fact he’d disagreed to share Shadow Net with everyone like they’d originally planned, of course... Birkhoff answered but said nothing. He figured if a person made the effort to call him then they should get right to it.

“Okay, Nerd, I can hear you breathing so I’m going to presume you’re watching porn and I’ve caught you at a really inopportune time.”

Nikita... “Who, me? I’ve never watched porn...” He scoffed a laugh but even to his ears it wasn’t convincing.

“Nerd, don’t lie.”

“Shit, fine, but I’m not for your information.” He paused and almost sighed but caught himself. “What’s up, Nikki?”

“How’s life?”

“I’m surprised Sonya didn’t call you immediately and fill you in...”

“No she didn’t. But I can tell there’s a story there...” Nikita paused to swallow, pursing her lips a bit. “What’s going on over there, Nerd?”

“I ended things a few months ago. I just...couldn’t get past her betrayal, I guess. It’s been gnawing at me for the better part of two years and I just didn’t notice because of everything that was going on. It was all too much all at once.” Birkhoff sounded tired. His voice was faraway and ashamed.

“So, translation: you’ve realized now that falling in love with Cara was no accident, that you still love Cara, that you love how she makes you feel and how you’ve made her feel and that you miss her terribly and can’t keep up a relationship with Sonya anymore because she’s not Cara.” Nikita switched weight from one leg to the other. Her tone was no bullshit, matter of fact. Nikita knew the truth no matter what anyone said. He loved Cara as much as she loved Michael; it was evident and it was a talking point she could prove on a first hand personal level.

Seymour was speechless. The more he reflected on it he knew it was true. Cara had never lied to him, never betrayed him or any of their friends, and Hell, she nearly died on one of their last missions against Amanda. She was all tough exterior, a hardcore operative with the kind of skills that could only be matched by Nikita, Michael, Owen or Alex; but inside she was all soft heart, big dreams, kittens and unicorns. Secretly, Cara was a huge dork and computer nerd like himself. He remembered his first meet with her had been her asking him to run a diagnostic on the security system and backdoor the backdoor hack so that she could access the intruder’s computer with a Trojan Horse virus in the guise of an email about getting a degree at a local trade school. It was a fairly genius way to get them; as soon as they opened the email it would redirect and the idiot wouldn’t even know they’d been hacked. It wasn’t something he’d have thought of and that burned his proverbial balls while also securing her position on the team with her usefulness and her place in his life, period. Eventually their friendship grew, merging into something else, something more. Just when he thought he was dead, that no one, not even Nikki would believe him and his story, Cara had stood by him and even stepped between him and Ryan Fletcher with a gun in the plane – and to be fair, he had been about to take Ryan’s gun away from him – when she was only armed with herself and no gun. It was during that time they both realized there was more there, more to their relationship, than platonic friendship and there had been for a long while already. There was no turning back once they both admitted that aloud. Unfortunately, the presence of Sonya in his life cooled things off on every odd occasion; neither one wanted to hurt her but there was

a definite pull there between them that couldn't be locked away. Sonya be damned... He felt bad about it but, there it was.

"You love her." Nikki repeated.

Seymour sighed. "Yes I do. But I hurt her when I chose to try and salvage what I had with Sonya, Nikki. I hurt her and she was too mature, too adult, too much a Lady to show it but I know it's true. I fucked up any chance I ever had to be with her."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's been almost a year. Cara doesn't want to hear from me. She's probably on a beach somewhere right now, getting oiled up by a Puerto Rican sex god forgetting about the Nerd just about the time he takes her to his sheets for a little horizontal mambo."

"I...don't think that's possible. And I'm not even in love with you, Nerd. In my defense I have had a few Puerto Rican sex gods in my time, though."

That threw him for a moment. It wasn't the comment that Cara couldn't forget about him and it wasn't the fact that Nikita didn't love him romantically; somewhere inside Birkhoff knew the former to be true and the latter had always been true. She loved Michael; she had for a long time. But, what was that pause about? Nikita had wavered for a moment. "Why am I getting a bad feeling about the tenor this call just took and where it's going?"

"I don't know what you mean, Nerd."

"My Spidey sense is tingling. There's something more here than a bossy call to a friend about the state of his love life."

Nikita rolled her eyes on her end of the call. Birkhoff was such a drama queen! "Have you heard from Amazon lately?" She commented, questioning, even though she was pretty sure what the answer would be.

"I feel like I just answered that question." Birkhoff remarked, snarky.

There was a soft snort in reply to him. Nikita remained silent for a moment; she didn't know whether or not to continue along this line of thought knowing what kind of emotional state Nerd was already in. "You need to check that attitude, first of all. I just asked a question. It set up where this is going." She paused to swallow and collect herself but she jumped right in. "Michael and I made Cara promise to stay in touch with us. For a while there was no problem and we had a few nice talks, Michael said hey, you know. I tried calling her number a few times this past week and each time she wouldn't pick up. Then yesterday I called her and her service was shut off. My call could not be completed as dialed. She didn't change her number, not without letting us know about it. But there's just...nothing..." Nikita hadn't shown it yet but inside of her she was concerned and worried.

At the onset of her explanation Seymour thought there had to be a reasonable excuse for the phone. People in their former business profession changed their phones all the time; it was commonplace. People could also disappear if they wanted to and maybe, right now, Cara

didn't want to be found. He knew her better than almost anyone, even within their circle of friends and family, and the fiery brunette had the potential – he knew – to want her own time, her own space, to do with exactly as she determined. By the time Nikita finished, however, he was a bit north of worried, too. If Cara told them she wouldn't change her number without notifying them then she wouldn't have. It was as simple as that. Cara may have disappeared on him and out of his life but not on them, not on anyone else. She had no reason to and anyway, she'd given her word.

Something was wrong.

Cara would never break her word.

Because she never had...

"What should we do here, Nerd? I've asked Michael and his first inclination was to call you."

He took a beat before answering. His head was swimming with so many scenarios, playing them out in dark twisted bloody meter and verse and it was all too much for him to stop. Birkhoff was running down uncharted roads with no compass to even tell him where true north was. "I have a few ideas. Give me a second and I'll fire up Shadow Net, see what I can find."

"We should meet. We should be doing this together."

"You got it. Your place or mine, Mr. Miyagi?"

Nikita smirked. "Michael's and mine; it's only fitting that we somehow moved into another HQ worthy place...Grasshopper."

"Ooooooh, okay mama; you got me. Buy me a ticket, send me a link and I'm there. Anything for Cara." He said the words but there was no telling how much he actually meant it, and he did. He had long ago made the silent oath to lay his life down for Cara is he was asked; literally anything was on the table this time.

"Anything for Cara." Nikita reiterated before both of them hung up.

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The Learjet touched down to tarmac on a private airfield less than three hours from their take-off. It was a lucky thing that Cara hadn't bothered to get out of the States after her friends and she all parted ways. Yeah, she did the good-bye thing; the only people she'd kept in semi-regular contact with had been Michael and Nikita and now even that had to cease. It was okay, in fact, it was better that way. None of them, not even Birkhoff, should be involved in the things she'd just signed on for. Still being in the States afforded her the added luxury of disappearing; none of her friends were still in the States, and that meant they couldn't possibly know she was. It also meant the trip back to Daddy's little base of operations in Baltimore, Maryland was decent and not driving her any closer to crazy than Joe possibly could, on top of everything else she already knew was on her mind. She didn't want to go home. It wasn't that this was home, because it wasn't. What her father

had here was a base of operations and living quarters for all of his little toy soldiers, his proverbial chess pieces. Home was a far forgotten memory for her. Cara hadn't had a proper home since her mother was alive, and she died when Cara was very little. Mr. Church, who'd gone by a different name all those years ago, had been for her the only home she knew. He had been everything to her, her entire world, for her whole life. Perhaps that was also her reasoning for being so upset at being summoned back to him like some loyal subject; she was his daughter, in Christ's name, not someone he should have been commanding! He had been the one to put her in Division's crosshairs, knowing what would happen after they took notice of her clandestine and illegal behaviors. Of course she had known what risk they were both taking. It wasn't as though she was clueless. Cara had never once been clueless, not about anything. She also knew it wasn't her father that put her in such a position; it was the duty in him that had and they were two completely different animals. It was a complicated issue and had been from the start. So why stop now, right?

"You ready, babe?"

"I feel like I'm going to throw up if I'm being completely honest." Cara's pale eyes held Joe's gaze as he gave her a short but reassuring smile. She didn't return it.

"Swell." He held up a small wastepaper basket from the little white hangar where they'd disembarked the plane and currently stood waiting for their baggage to be off-loaded. "Well, in any case...the prodigal returns, right?"

At that, Cara did crack a smirk. "Thanks, Joe."

"You bet, babe. Any time."

The trek down to the mobile unit her father sent to receive them was shorter than expected, though the size of the armed twelve man team was something she was even prepared to consider expecting. She looked back at Joe who was standing behind her. Cara pulled a face that conveyed confusion and disbelief all at once. "This business must really be serious, after all. Usually Dad sends you to my door and that's enough...almost."

"You remember the first time we met?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, I kicked your ass around and handed it back to you."

"As I recall I asked your name and in addition to your reply, which was 'who wants to know' you swore and threw a punch at me because 'you looked like one of those military Neanderthals my Dad employs'." Joe's eyes narrowed. "Which hurts my soul to this day; nothing escapes you but that just serves to make you one irritating little shit."

Cara smiled wide, her white teeth reflecting a lot of sun. It was a winning smile. "You love it. Don't lie."

Joe snickered. "I do. Hey, let me introduce you to my guys. I don't think you've met them before." Since meeting Cara himself when the DMS first recruited him, he couldn't remember a time when they'd all gotten together after hours and had drinks or traded war stories. Cara had always been on one side of the war, with Division or her other family she'd

found in her time there and Joe on the other side with Grace and Cara's father with the DMS. Their two lives hadn't merged together since her cover with Division had begun. "This is First Sergeant Bradley Sims; we just call him Top."

Top stepped up to Cara and looked down on her. She had to crane her neck up to make eye contact with him. He extended his hand and took hers, shaking it, very gentle for a man of his size and strength. "It's a pleasure to meet ya, Ma'am."

"Please, call me Cara." She smiled at him as the shake ended.

"Miss Cara, it's a pleasure. Any friend of Cap'n is a friend of mine." And she could tell he meant it rather than simply saying what was expected, something polite.

"Then the pleasure is all mine, Top."

Joe gestured and the next big man stepped up to Cara to introduce himself. He was slighter and less bulky than Top but only just. Both were just as intimidating and a lesser woman might have been affected.

"Pleasure and an honor, Cara; the name's Sergeant Harvey Rabbit, but people all call me Bunny."

Cara smiled and tried to keep the smile off her face and the laughter at bay. "I can see why... rather unfortunate given name, honey."

He grinned wide at her little address of 'honey'. "Yes ma'am, but being called Bunny is good. Makes people think I'm a pushover..."

Cara beamed. "I'm sure that's true. Good for you, soldier." As she turned a bit to her side she caught the third man coming to her, one that she hadn't noticed before. "And you might be?"

"Big Bob Faraday, Miss Cara." He wasn't a man of many words, more to the point, but Cara could appreciate that.

"Nice to meet you Big Bob. I'm going to call you Bobby just because I like it and I've always wanted a friend named Bobby. Don't be offended, okay?"

"Not at all, Miss Cara. You're the boss."

At that Joe's eyes widened and his mouth opened as if to comment but no sound came out. Cara's mouth was creased in a wide grin and she punched Echo Team's leader in the arm playfully. "Hey now, this guy knows what's up! Happy woman, right? You know what they say..."

The Baltimore Regional Office of the DMS was housed in the same building as and was actually synonymous with the tactical office which everyone called the Warehouse for short. It wasn't quite a nickname of affection but born instead of resemblance. For all intents and purposes it was a huge abandoned warehouse that had accumulated – as warehouses always do – all of the tools, weapons, vehicles and personnel the DMS needed in the region. There were no signs and no directions to the compound. This wasn't exactly the kind of thing

anyone, at least within the DMS, wanted a blaring neon sign pointing to. No matter what public opinion the Department of Military Sciences served the government and the citizens of this great country whole-heartedly with no questions asked and they did it all above board, following all the laws that existed, both on paper and morally. The DMS was a goddamned public service, period. The Warehouse was off the harbor so it was a bit of a drive on site; Cara made it a point to meet all the other men before they took off from the hangar, before they got under way. They might not work exclusively under Joe Ledger, whom she trusted with her life, but they were all good men. Of that, she was certain. Her father was a Patriot and a good man, for all his faults, and he would have handpicked these recruits himself. After all the introductions were done the convoy took off and the people in every vehicle fell silent for a time.

Joe was driving the SUV that had Cara and his men on board. Every so many beats she caught him looking at her in the rearview mirror. Eventually, after the fifteenth time of his gazing, Cara pushed herself forward and hung between the driver's and passenger's seats. "Alright, if you want to look at me then look at me. Do you have something to say? I mean, Jesus, take a picture!"

Joe chuckled. Top and Bunny, who had been with Joe since the beginning, looked at each other and then back again. Whether it was the way Cara spoke to Joe that shocked them or the way he reacted to it instead, couldn't be assessed for sure. "Just worried about you, kid... You've been too quiet for too long back there."

"Call me 'kid' again and then see how quiet I am. Matter of fact, see if you can remember anything after that..." Her tone was cold and as serious as they came. Joe laughed a great barking laugh that was contagious. Top and Bunny exchanged glances again, this time grinning wide and dopey.

They were thinking maybe this wouldn't be so bad. At least they had someone around who could make Joe even funnier than he was all on his own; and least she was capable. Everything they'd heard about her – and they had read her entire file – was of a woman who was trained and experienced in the very thing they were trained and experienced in but she was better. Cara was trained by Division. Division was everything the government would never publicly condone but everything they wanted to put into their soldiers.

But even Cara wasn't enough to stay the hand of whatever storm was coming...

The motorcade, as the brunette operative thought of it, pulled up to the main gate in front of the Warehouse. The gate was manned by two two-man teams of men – and in some cases women – behind two electrified chain link fences with some barbed wire atop them. It was, indeed, a compound. Joe flashed a smile instead of a badge and the two men in the shack returned a couple goofy grins and waved before they motored the gates open. Cara snickered in the back. She didn't say it but it was just like Joe that everyone would know him or at the very least, of him. And anyway, the legend that was Captain Joe Ledger was a well-told widely-known tale.

Once inside and beyond the threshold the gates closed and latched. Cara stepped out of the vehicle before Joe even parked the thing. She was sure he'd been protesting but she didn't stick around long enough to hear. He always treated her like the little girl her father believed

her to still be. It wasn't Joe's fault; it wasn't even her father's fault. She'd devoted a majority of her young life to being dead, a Division agent, and away from the watchful eyes of people who cared for her. Seeing them every now and again wasn't really enough. 'Just checking in' was all they had between them.

Major Grace Courtland met her at the bay door into the loading dock of the Warehouse. "If I'm not absolutely gobsmacked!" The British woman exclaimed upon seeing Cara. "I'm about to lose the plot! Not a one told me you were coming, mate!" Right away the Brit enveloped the petite American in a sincere embrace. "How have you been? It's good to see you, mate. This dodgy bloke didn't run you off did he?" She jerked her thumb at Joe and in response he pulled a face. Cara and Grace chuckled together lightly. "You here to stay, then? Don't go skiving off, now."

"Oh no, I'm here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. A little while...anyway. I don't have a real job anymore, so..."

"Yeah, Church told me. Your life's been bollucks for a while now. It's brilliant to have you back!"

"Thanks Grace; I'm glad to be back."

The reunion of the two females was a pleasurable one. Cara genuinely liked and cared for Grace and likewise the other way around. That was really and truly the only reason Cara refused Joe's almost constant advances; women should really stick together more as far as Cara was concerned. And anyway...there were her feelings for Birkhoff to consider, even if he didn't feel the same and had shown her as much when he chose to be with Sonya.

They all moved inside as the band of men dispersed to their backs. Cara was looking around; it had been a few years since she'd last set foot inside the compound, the place her father now devoted every part of himself and his life. He was selfless when it came to this so how could she not be when being asked of the same? All the same...she still had Daddy issues. They passed a bank of elevators similar to the setup Division used to have and it was then that she thought of her old team, her friends, and she missed them. The elevator let off a Bing! sound before the doors opened to them; the sound shook her out of her reverie.

"All aboard the Mad Scientist Express!" Joe called, doing his best impression of a conductor on the engine of a stage coach.

The mad scientist express...? Cara's eyes flitted between the people in the metal cubicle with her. Everyone was in varying degrees of fits of laughter, except for Cara; apparently it was an inside joke and she hadn't been inside for a very long time. She smiled at that like she knew what that had meant, just to fit in somehow. Of course this was her family but she'd made more family in her years away, at Division, and for the second time in so short a span she missed them. No smartass comment Birkhoff would make would have left her in such a state of loneliness.

She missed him more. Terribly...

Why didn't she get away from the States when she'd had the chance? Going anywhere else...?

She wouldn't feel the outsider or the lonesome right now if she was alone. Being alone never equated to lonesome for her...

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"Who would have thought Grenada at this time of year was so beautiful? Damn!" Birkhoff asked the first part before taking off his sunglasses in their new foyer and exclaimed the latter upon taking them off. It was like one of those movies. Staring at Nikita hadn't hurt either... "Guess Mikey's doing his job, shit! Congratulations on your face, and...everything else." It was no secret he found Nikita wildly attractive but things were different now, for him as well as for her. He made at least veiled attempts at hitting on her now.

"Be serious, Nerd." Nikki straightened, letting her hair cascade down her shoulder from where she'd been keeping it aloft on the back of the couch she was relaxing against. "This isn't about us right now. This is about Cara. I shouldn't have to tell you that..." She trailed off, meeting his eyes and he gave her a look that said she didn't. "I don't have to. Anyway, when you were wheels-up did you learn anything?"

It was a pretty standard question but it was anything but a mundane response. "I got Shadow Net poking around in all things Division, covert ops, Cara Mason, local and federal authorities and their databases. Nothing. I tried pinging her phone off some cell towers; the only thing I got there was a time stamp on a last known. Which, we all know could have changed since it was last noted... She was close to the docks, Pier 19. Location it states is Austin, Texas. But that can't be right, can it? Cara doesn't really strike as an urban cowboy type."

Nikita shrugged as Birkhoff plopped himself down and immediately set up his laptop. "No, but if I was a betting sort I'd wager she found a way to set up some sort of thing you've done. You know, hiding your true location by feeding your signal to a lot of other channels, satellites, that sort of thing."

"Why would she do that?"

"I don't know. She is truly free from every obligation and every enemy, friend or family besides the six, seven of us." She corrected herself, forgetting about Sonya now that she wasn't forefront in Nerd's life any longer. "We're the only ones that know Cara Mason still exists. Everyone else thinks she's dead or just doesn't care one way or the other. So who, or what, is she running from?"

"Maybe she's not running. She might be leaving breadcrumbs, for the people who know how to find them, to pick up on."

"Why?" The question was simple but the answers were a loss as far as both of them were concerned. It baffled them both for quite a while. They remained there in their silence, Seymour seated and Nikita now standing by him, a hand on his shoulder and her lip between her teeth, worrying it. Fifteen minutes went by.

“Well if no one else has any ideas...” Michael, who’d been standing in the foyer for a while, broke the silence with that while tossing a huge bag of Chinese food onto the table. “How about, she’s in trouble; she’s been forcibly removed from wherever she settled, made to go quiet and underground. I think she pinged that tower for a reason.”

“What is there in Texas except horses, steers, cowboys, dust and blood? It’s the quintessential Redneck state.” This was Birkhoff being open-minded.

“No stone unturned, Birkhoff. If we want to find her then we run down all the leads, no matter how insignificant. Right...? From bucking broncos to sweet bleeding Jesus and all the many lifestyles in between; we don’t know which one of those leads will pan out.” Michael turned to see Nikki and she was already nodding.

“Alex and Owen are coming in on a flight in six hours. Until then let’s run this lead and come up with a plan.” Nikita said. No nonsense.

“Just like old times, huh?”

“You got it, Nerd.” She winked and gave him a smile.

By the time Alex and Owen arrived Seymour was doing mental gymnastics. He couldn’t find anything about Cara, at any point in her life on record, that would lead her to Austin, Texas. Six hours searching back channels and old files from before Division even heard the name of Cara Mason. Everything said she was an at-risk youth who got into drugs and prostitution and then miraculously, one day, shot her John and stabbed a security guard at the front desk of the hotel she’d been meeting her paying customers at. She got on Division’s radar and was processed through her death sentence by none other than Roan. Who... “Holy shitballs, Batman!” Seymour exclaimed. “I don’t know how I missed this before!”

Alex came running over, fresh off the tarmac, followed closely by Nikita and Owen. During Cara’s stint as a Cleaner with Division she and Owen had met; he liked her and considered her a friend all this time, even before she’d been anyone else’s friend here. “What did you find?” The team’s overgrown puppy was concerned, his eyes wide with the worry, the possibility. Birkhoff hadn’t expected him to say the first words of the past few hours.

“What did you miss before?” That was Alex’ question; she was always more practical and compartmentalized the emotional turmoil better than the others.

“Cara! Her cell phone pinged a tower in Austin, Texas but the location I picked up was altered! When someone looks at a map of Texas, Austin is nowhere near the water! When I pulled records from the tower it says Pier 19 at the docks. So she somehow altered her location, the one I could see, while maintaining the location and time stamp of her actual location. She was trying to tell us something...right?” He started grinning. He was practically dancing with his excitement. “Sassy devil temptress, Daddy’s going to spank you when I find you...” He said it aloud but was addressing feelings he had for Cara’s hack skills.

“B!” Alex cringed, her upper lip curling back.

“Nerd, eww! Come on!” Nikki pulled a face. This while the other two men in the room had nothing to add; maybe it was a gender thing?

“Sorry, sorry... So then, since we’re moving on...” Seymour flipped to another screen with a couple clicks of his keys. “I found her intake file on the Black Box. Percy kept a file on her just like he did everyone; big surprise, I know but it actually helped me out this time. Her intake file says Roan, impersonating a cop, shot and killed Cara Mason on Pier 19 where she fell into the waters, never to be seen again until...” He did a fancy little drum roll on the desktop in front of him.

“Until she was weaned off the drugs and was trained, becoming our asset, a Division asset...” Michael finished the thought for them.

“Exactement, compadre.”

“Nerd...two different languages?” Nikki shook her head.

“I know. So...?” Birkhoff waved his hands around. “Hello? Isn’t anyone going to ask me where Pier 19 actually is, where her staged death actually took place?”

“Where, Nerd?”

“Baltimore, Maryland.” He stated flatly. “So, what’s the plan here?”

Alex was quicker than anyone else to answer. “If she altered something in the records then she may not want to be found. I mean...are we sure we want to be following this up. You know how Cara was about her privacy, secrets that needed to stay buried and all that...”

“Or...” Birkhoff countered. “She does want to be found and maybe someone else tried to throw us off? She left the only clues she could given the circumstances? All I know for sure is, something feels off about this. She’d check it out all the way if it was any one of us. She’d go to Hell and back. I’m going through this the whole way. I’m running this down.”

Nikita’s eyes focused on Alex from their initial place somewhere off in another space and time. “He’s right. I’m in this, too.”

Alex and Owen looked to each other before he spoke, more to Alex first and then generalizing the statement. “I’m in too. I know Cara. She’d do this and more for me; she has in the past. We’ve been friends longer than anyone else here. No way I’m leaving her to some unknown Hell.” He looked back at Alex again. “We’re in, aren’t we?” He wanted to know she was there for him in this, that they’d run this down together just like they’d done everything else thus far. Together; Alex nodded once. She needn’t say anything more. He’d said all that was needed in that moment. Cara was family.

It went without saying that Michael was in. Anywhere Nikita went, no matter how dangerous, Michael was sure to follow. “So, then, it’s settled. We’re flying to Texas?” He paused at the looks he got at that. It was confusing them. If she was killed by Roan in Baltimore why would they go to Texas to look for clues? “I know she’s probably in Baltimore but we don’t know that for sure. The safest thing to do is follow every lead,

remember? Texas first; if we don't find anything we'll move on to her electronic breadcrumb and fly to Baltimore."

"That's the first stop, sure. I just know there's more to this, though." Nikita commented. Her hand moved on Seymour's shoulder to pat it gently. She looked to Alex and smiled; Alex might be taking a more logical cynical side to things here but that was good. They needed a checks and balances just in case any one of them made the wrong kind of decisions. "Okay, Nerd, you work on anything else we could use and Alex, you and I will secure the transportation to Austin, Texas and what we'll use when we get there. We want to keep a low profile so no criminal covert behavior. Everything's above board right now. Got it?"

It took the better part of each person to make it through a commercial flight from Grenada to the states, straight to the heart of Austin, Texas. Birkhoff and Owen were on their last nerve, collectively and between the two, and the only one who wasn't remotely cranky was Michael who had slept almost the whole way with his neck in a supportive comfortable pillow. It was a good thing they were all allowed to disembark when they were or security might have had to pick up the pieces of Birkhoff left strewn in the aisle ways and cuffed Owen's still bloodied hands behind his back. Hell, they might even have had to detain the whole lot of them!

All five of them spent seventy-two business hours on the search for Cara. They hit the streets, beat the bushes and dug up ghosts and long-buried bones. At long last on the eve of the final day Birkhoff, the last of them to stop looking, retired into hopelessness once more. "It's been more than a business week, guys. I just don't know what to do anymore. All the footage from the security feeds that night, anywhere I checked, was either clean of Cara sightings to begin with, was scrubbed or altered or looped. Plus, there are blind spots everywhere and it's pitch darker than a black hole on a number of the video logs I checked! I cleaned it up and lightened the shadows and still!"

"So we try something else." Alex commented. It seemed that somewhere along the line, between Grenada and the states she had a change of heart.

"Like what?" Owen asked, dejected. "We have no other leads except a vague mention or allusion to Baltimore, Maryland. Alex, short of turning on her old tracker and going after her Division style, which 1) she probably had removed and 2) would be us turning on the old Percy and Amanda switch, there's nothing..."

Birkhoff sat up rigid in his seat. He hadn't thought of that. How could it be that the Division muscle could think of that before his genius could? It should have been criminal! He hadn't even considered it until now! At the prompting of someone else! "Actually...that could work. She came in under the late Percy and Amanda tag-team regime. Cara had a tracker/comboination/kill chip implanted in her brain. There would be no getting that out easily. There would be hours of prep and a trained surgeon. You could do it easily using forceps and a tilt-table but you'd still need the former before somebody could even consider it. I should be able to reactivate it without the risk of killing her since she'd already died once, clinically, to disengage the kill chip portion before." He remembered when Cara started working with them, when she was still undercover inside Division and she'd been forced to resort to drastic measures to make sure Amanda couldn't kill her or use the chip against her

for working with Nikita and their little group of rebellious misfits. He did some super fast tapping of keys, typing commands, clicking through some programs; a couple windows popping up, and soon was inside Cara's file. He accessed the tracker/kill chip portion of her file, which was almost three dimensional within the confines of his computer. All this happened before even a full minute passed. "Like flicking on a switch...kind of..." He watched his monitor for a bit and Owen came up behind him to look as well. "She's alive. I don't know how well she is. Seems ok..." He paused. "Her vitals aren't really elevated or anything right now. And Cara is in Baltimore..." Seymour paused again and his eyes settled on Owen over his shoulder. A small smile was on his lips.

"Good call, man."

"Thanks." Owen Elliot only sounded halfway convinced that Birkhoff actually meant what he said.

"No, man, I mean it. You really came through. If she's okay and if we can save her before something happens..." Seymour smiled a bit wider, worried but more relieved now than he had been since learning of this whole sordid thing from Nikki. "I owe you, man. Huge!"

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It wasn't long before Cara felt more at home than she had in a long time. She'd been there about a week already, laying low and waiting until her father saw fit to grace her with his presence. She'd seen everyone else and met the new recruits since she'd last been within the compound. She was currently in an elevator bound for the lowest levels of the facility, a sublevel that wasn't originally part of the building and wasn't even noted directly as an option of visit on the elevator keypad. "I don't remember this being around the last time I was here. Looks...dungeon-esqe..."

"It wasn't. And it kind of is... Do you remember that zombie virus scare way back? It was the rededication of the Liberty Bell and it was the same case I'd been recruited for..." "I do. As I recall Division agents were there as well before Amanda shut us down. We had bad intel and yet you guys were on top of it. It was good work. Dad was always good at finding the best; you're the best, Joe."

"Well, thanks! I wish I could say I was your guy but the work that was pivotal to us getting there on time and containing the whole thing, knowing how to stop it, was all due to the mad scientist down here."

"Well that's surprising; it wasn't Joe Ledger's shining hour?"

"No, and it bugs me to have to give this asshole his due because he'd got a huge head/ego without any help from me." As they waited for the elevator to stop Joe kept talking. "So this place is the result of that, basically. We always had the labs and the interrogation rooms underground but this is deeper down than even before. You father wanted everything as top secret and cloak and dagger as possible."

The elevator doors opened with a lot of creaking and much ado. A whitewash room with fluorescent lights all over the place came into view. The entire level was almost blinding! There wasn't a shadow in that room or in the near vicinity. The elevator party filed out across

a white tile floor and it was then that Cara got the best view of the scientific level of the Baltimore DMS. It was immaculate and it was also bustling with a great many people, a good majority of them being lab techs and doctors of varying specialties. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen before; even Division had nothing on this place. "Holy shit..."

"It's actually just shit, not a whole lot 'holy' about it." A doctor that appeared to be of Asian descent or heritage, in a lab coat, came around a corner and smiled at them all. He stopped short in front of them, almost clicking his heels together. "Dr. Hu, at your service Miss. It's a pleasure to meet Mr. Church's daughter finally."

"Dr. Hu?" Cara smirked.

"I told you she'd react like that." Joe whispered to Grace.

"Doesn't mean I owe you a bloody red cent, mate."

"The Hell it doesn't! We had a wager and you bet wrong. You swore on it! Pay up, babe."

"That's Major Babe, to you, you wanker..." She chuckled lightly and grinned devilishly.

"You've got to be shitting me. Dr. Hu? Where's your Tardis!?" She chuckled as Joe held out his hand to Grace, not willing to back down, and she placed a fifty dollar bill rather roughly into his palm.

Dr. William Hu snorted, not impressed, and gestured over to Joe. "That's nice. What did you, tell her what to say? Or did you just rub off on her?"

Joe scoffed a laugh and shook his head. "First, I didn't rub anything on her; that wouldn't be kosher." He gave shifty eyes for a moment between Hu and Church. "Second, does it look like she'd let me tell her what to say?" At that, Cara narrowed her eyes at Hu, and then arched a single well-manicured eyebrow. "See? See that!? That shit's frightening!"

Cara rolled her eyes, exasperated, and waved. "Hello? Hi. My name is Cara and I'm here to help you guys. And by the looks of things you guys need a lot so...might we get started?"

Dr. Hu looked like that was the best idea anyone had all day. "Right! We should be moving on from this nonsense. Follow me, Miss..." He was searching for a last name, a preference between names, anything he could call her; and he was unsure if the surname she held was the same as her father – Church – or something else altogether.

"Oh, right... My last name is actually Deacon. A surname my dad had before; but my chosen last name is Mason. It was dual purpose; to protect me from people wanting to hurt him through hurting me and also as a believable alias when I went undercover with Division."

"Miss Mason it is, then."

"Yes, Miss Mason..." An authoritative yet softer raspy old man's voice chimed in from behind her and the others. "I was wondering when I would see you again. You need to be debriefed. It's been a long time coming, in fact."

Cara wheeled around abruptly. The sudden appearance of the man and his voice startled her in a deep and penetrating way. She hadn't seen or reported in to her father for the better part of three years. After Division fell into Ryan Fletcher's hands it was no longer a potential threat to DMS or the world at large, thus leaving Cara free to operate within her own discretion, no overlord needed. "Mr. Church...it's been a long time indeed." She didn't address him as a daughter would a father; they hadn't been that, hadn't had that kind of relationship, in a long time. "I'm not ready to be debriefed, by the way. I don't have much to say to you."

Everyone in the vicinity remained silent, knowing the only words needed in this were between father and child, mentor and protégé. That didn't stop some of them from making faces and acting awkward. The whole thing definitely raised a few eyebrows. "I didn't ask what you felt ready for, Cara."

"Frankly, sir...I don't give a flying fucking shit."

"Agent, you do not use that tone with me." Mr. Church ordered, his tone calm but firm. "I am your ranking official here, so whether or not you respect me as your father, you will respect me as your boss. Now..." His hands were clasped behind his back, hand clasped around the opposite's wrist. He strode forward toward her. "You will come with me and we are going to have a conversation. It's your decision whether you come peaceably or I have three or four men carry you away." He paused for a moment. "First line of business: has your tracker been disabled?"

"We all shorted them out before we left Division behind."

"You won't mind if I check to be sure? We wouldn't want any old enemies coming after you and least of all here."

"Enemies...? I'd be more worried about my old friends, but yeah, sure, give it a good college try."

It was ironic and a little awkward how small a change existed between the man she'd left behind and the man she found today. They were much the same men as the other; the man was grey haired, variable clean-shaved or scruffy – which was dependent upon the level of stress he'd accumulated over a given period of time – and eyes as vibrant and alive as they'd ever been. There was never much that could slow him down and apparently even the absence and possible demise of his daughter wasn't the thing to do it. She followed him down a long narrow hall in the lowest level of the facility away from the team that she promised to work with, promising to help. He led her back to a set of rooms off one central hallway, a closet sized room, 5x11, with a single table and two chairs only. It was an interrogation room. "Really!? I thought this was a debriefing..."

The father held a hand out, his palm outward, gesturing that she should take a seat. "This is; there will be no mind games, no good cop bad cop, and no wartime posturing. I won't even raise the temperature to sweat you out. And I certainly won't bring any cookies in here..." At that his daughter, correction, the agent, made a sour face and rolled her eyes; a small played at the corners of her mouth. "All I require are honest answers to the questions I'm going to ask you."

“I can’t say I will because that depends on what you ask me.”

“Nothing for right now; I have Bug coming down from the technical department and we’ll see about your tracker. If it’s off we may be able to remove it permanently and all-together.”

“I had a combination tracker/kill chip implanted in my head close to my brain stem. If that thing gets messed with, turned on by accident by someone not equipped to deal with it, not trained in its finite intricacies...I’m dead. As long as it remains off, I’m good with a little metal explosive in my brain, thanks. Least I’m alive...”

“Quite frankly, I am not.”

“That’s not your decision to make. You’re the one who put me in these peoples’ path! You knew full well what they would do to me! You knew they’d put this micro-explosive in my head! What do you care so much for now? After all is said and done...?”

“Yes, you’re right. I did all of those things. I am responsible for what’s happened to you. I knew that Amanda was rather...crafty, when it came to ensuring loyalty. Yes, I knew and as an agent of this government I put you in a terrible position that was, for a solid majority, a necessary evil, a necessary risk. As a matter of fact, why don’t I just claim responsibility for every bad thing that happens in the world on a daily, almost constant basis...? Hmm?” He looked expectant but didn’t wait for her to reply before continuing. “But I am also your father! I have never stopped loving you, caring for you... If I could have taken your place, spared you, I would have. If there had been any other way available to me at the time...”

The slight brunette balked at that. She hadn’t heard anything remotely close to an ‘I love you’ in a longer time than she cared to remember. “You love me?” Cara asked, incredulous. “The last time I heard that from you I was six years old and you left me with some Marine Corps family because mom died when I was three and you had no one else to dump me with. You’d called in all the favors you could possibly think of in the private sector. I was raised by nannies, tutors and military families who owed you these favors.

And at that last particular time, by the way, I didn’t see you again after that for six years! You left me! I may not have been alone but I sure as Hell felt like it! I was six fucking years old and I’d lost my mother when I was too young to even fully realize what was wrong! I couldn’t even mourn, Dad!” Cara’s eyes filled with tears and the emotional turmoil remembered tossed those grey blues like a stormy sea. “All I wanted was you! I needed you!” She couldn’t keep it in anymore. “Why did you leave me, Daddy?” Her desperation showed her truth.

“I was scared. I couldn’t let anyone hurt you. The potential loss I faced in you was far greater than losing your mother. And you had already lost so much...” He paused. He’d never willingly admitted to being afraid before and likely never would again. “I was trying to protect you.”

It was as she’d feared all along. He’d wanted to protect her by pushing her away, emotionally, physically, in every way feasible; he’d served to push her toward the very work that made him the hunted man he was, unable to be the father she so desperately needed and wanted. It should have been different than it was but the choices were made and it led them all here, now. “But you protected me so well from the bad things that I grew up lost and alone enough

that I followed you blindly right into the proverbial ring with those bad things. I battled them before they could take me by surprise and take my life like they took my mother's. Hurt others before they could hurt me..." She paused, looking across the room at him. She hadn't taken the seat yet but her father had, looking up into her eyes as Cara looked back at him. "I was chasing the danger because I had nothing to fear; by protecting me you really hurt me. You know that? It only damaged me further."

"I realize my thought process was...fallible. I hadn't thought things through to the long term. I was concerned with more...immediate results."

"It took me a long time to open up to anyone after that."

"But you did...eventually. What was the name of the young man? Ah, yes, Seymour Birkhoff, given name Lionel Peller...isn't that right?"

"I never mentioned him in my reports except in passing. As a colleague..."

"Which is why; I took a distinctive interest in him and your involvement with him."

"You spied on me."

"Don't be so melodramatic, Cara. I wasn't looking for anything more than your involvement with him and how closely you and he worked together. That's all; I didn't ask MindReader to tell me whether or not you two enjoyed sleeping together and if he slept naked or not."

Cara pulled a face. She was all about disgust. "So bring on the tracker sweep and let's talk about Nerd...Birkhoff, some more; I'd love to color in the lines you've already drawn." She commented, tone clipped. Her tone was acid and sarcasm dripped from her teeth. She'd also automatically corrected her name for him to the last name he went by; suddenly aware Church wouldn't necessarily know who she spoke of otherwise, by nickname alone.

Bug appeared within twenty minutes of her last words on the matter. Nothing was spoken about their business at hand, nor the actual debrief; her father wouldn't chance it while her tracker, and the potential damage it could incur, was up in the air. Bug was their IT expert on site in the Warehouse. His given name was Jeremy Taylor but everyone who knew him called him Bug. It was a rather ironic name considering he could crank out a computer virus of his own and decimate others fairly quickly... His chosen career path made him a walking billboard following him around his whole life. Cara giggled when he arrived and gave her one of his usual goofy grins. "Hey, Cara!"

"Hey, Bug! Been a long time; how you been?"

"Oh geez! Busy like a bee..." He chuckled. It was a joke. Bug, bee, insert the crashing cymbals here.

Cara laughed. "You and me both, it looks like. Are you here to scan me?"

"That's what they tell me. And uh, before we begin, continue... Is it true you know Shadow Walker? Like, in the flesh?"

The hesitation to talk about Seymour Birkhoff was just as evident now as it was when her own father was asking about him. It wasn't because of Seymour's past or what they both did while inside Division, before they became good guys; everyone here could simply use MindReader and get all the information about them they wanted during those periods of time without ever even needing to ask. Rather, her hesitation came from having had intimate knowledge of the man before she didn't anymore. It was because they'd parted ways and she wanted to keep him out of this, to keep him safe. He deserved to be free. "Yes, I knew him." That was all she would say on the matter.

Bug's eyes went round and wide. "That's...that's really great! He's a legend!" As he responded to her acknowledgement he was setting up a hand held scanner tool with built-in on-board computer for reading the results of the scan, which, in essence was as simple as pressing a button and waving the thing slowly over the area. "I'd love to meet him someday. I mean, I know we've had occasion to duel on the interweb but..."

"And how often, exactly, did you pull one over on him?"

"A few times. I shut him out when Division was still under Percy."

Cara smirked. "That's my boy!" She ruffled Bug's hair. "Did he ever figure it out?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Bug was beaming.

Once the technical stuff was all set up he came over to her and smiled. "Alright, Cara, I'm going to need you to lean over the table and rest your head on it sideways, so..." He paused as she did so. "Yeah, just like that. Press your cheek on the metal. Perfect!" His smooth hands with their long nimble fingers moved her hair to the side so he could better access her neck at the base of her skull with the scanner. It worked a great deal similar to an ultrasound machine. He used an ultrasonic gel to help bounce back the image feeds from inside, where they were scanning. An image of the inside of her neck, at the base of her brainstem came upon the computer and showed the tracker there where Amanda put it. It wasn't a combination kill chip anymore but every time she saw it, Cara shivered, nervous. "Uh, Cara...? Problem..."

"What!? What problem?"

Bug pressed another button on the scanner and a window opened on the laptop set up on the table to her right. An image of the inside of her head came up in the window and a little red diode started blinking on the laptop's screen and another pop-up window blinked up over the scanned image. She couldn't read it from where she was. Bug wiped the gunk off her and she sat up to face him. "Your tracker is on. The kill chip part is still off, so not to worry there, but...someone knows you're here with us. Which is a problem...? I'm pretty sure."

"How...h-how long ago? Can you tell...?"

"No I can't tell you that but I do know..." He looked past Cara as the door to the room opened and her father entered after having taken his leave. Church's eyebrows raised; by the time Cara's gaze made it from her father back to Bug, he was all meager frown and furrowed brow. "Yeah, we need to remove it."

“Remove, quarantine, and smash with extreme prejudice.”

It was final. Those words coming from the head of the DMS made it final. Cara, nor anyone else, had any say in the matter. The more she thought about it, however, the more she realized the likely culprits were Birkhoff and Nikita. Cara had gone off the grid, leaving no forwarding number to be reached with either Nikita or Michael. They would have been concerned. And they would have called Nerd... “Wait, just...wait!” Cara got up out of her chair where she’d sat to allow Bug to scan her just as two more DMS operatives walked in. This wasn’t looking good for her or the tracker in her brain. “It’s just my family, my friends, from Division. They must be concerned because I went off the grid for a while here. They called Nerd, ‘er, Birkhoff. He must have remotely activated my tracker to make sure I was alright. They’re of no threat.”

“Whether or not they’re a threat is of no bearing on this decision, Cara; we can’t have anyone outside of the need to know having our location. It’s coming out tonight. Bug, have Dr. Hu prep a neurological surgical team.”

Cara was a little more than upset now. “Excuse me, sir, for being insubordinate; but, what then?” Her tone was angered and icy all at once, sarcastic. “They likely already know I’m alive and where I am. Birkhoff is the best at what he does and he knows those trackers better than anyone else. They know I’m alive and I go offline all of a sudden...? They’ll come looking for me.”

“We will discuss what happens if they find us later on.”

“You should know before ‘later on’ gets here, that if they come looking for me, they’re coming with weapons, full tactical field operations, in force. Nikita, Michael, Alex, Owen, Birkhoff, and Hell, maybe even Ryan Fletcher too! They’re going to be looking for blood, expecting a fight. They don’t know that no one is holding me here against my will.” Church sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “Then I’ll have Joe and Grace posted at the gates with a team or two.”

“You can stop any violence and death from occurring and just let me keep the stupid chip in my head. Or let me talk to them...something...”

“No can do, Cara. I’m sorry.”

✕

“I swear to God, if you don’t shut up and stop quoting Back to the Future...”

Birkhoff sped up and redirected where he was walking, getting in front of and then slowing down to beside Nikita, on the other side of her from Owen. Apparently he was still working on Owen’s last nerve.

“You both need to cut it out, quite frankly.” Alex rolled her eyes. “B’s references are mega annoying and your outbursts get old fast, so...”

“Hey!” Owen’s eyes went puppy wide and innocent. No one would have been surprised to see a lower lip wobble in the coming attractions.

They were all in the same vehicle now, an SUV that Alex had procured for them. Without even a clue as to how she’d done it... Birkhoff guessed that she didn’t rent it from Enterprise like a normal person. “Is anyone going to be looking for this anytime soon?” Seymour practically whimpered the question. He wasn’t excited about confrontations with people much bigger and meaner than him.

Alex turned to him from the passenger front seat and glared, eyes slightly narrowed. “If you mean the drug dealer I stole it from, no. He won’t be reporting the theft.”

“May I hazard a guess as to why he wouldn’t do any reporting...?”

“I took it while there was a delivery in progress. Five kilos of heroin never made it out of the back.”

Birkhoff’s eyes bugged out of their sockets. “And we’re just...riding around with it!?” He sounded incredulous.

“No, you ninny! I stashed it in the harbor. Dumped it all... He doesn’t know that.” Alex grinned, winking at him.

“Thank God...”

By three in the evening they were settled into a hotel room in the heart of Baltimore. Birkhoff set up his control room of sorts, a semi-circle of computers he’d ordered special and had been hand-delivered to his door upon their arrival. Four monitors blinked on and a fifth was in the other room with Nikki and Michael for their own use. No one used the Nerd’s station. At least, no one that wanted to live when they were done. Using Shadow Net he once more accessed Cara Mason’s vitals and statistics under the location and monitoring tab of her file. It had been fairly simple for him to turn the tracker back on but now he was wondering... Depending on who took her, if someone did take her, and for what reason they took her; would they be looking for a tracker like the one she had in her brain? And if they were, how long before her signal went dead? How long did she have? He shook his head and his light brownish dirty blond mane ruffled around his shoulders. Trying to dispel those negative thoughts once he entertained them was harder than even thinking them. Without another delay, Birkhoff finished setting up the bank of computers at his disposal and settled into looking at Cara’s vitals and her location. She hadn’t moved from the very same spot in some time which led him to believe she was being held captive or being detained in some other capacity, perhaps being interrogated? The problem with this was that Birkhoff couldn’t currently narrow down Cara’s location any more than that she was in a singular place and wasn’t moving. Someone was blocking him from getting any further information right now. Seymour reached over and grabbed a can to him, popping the top on it and drinking of the Taurine fueled beverage as though it were a Big Gulp from the 7-11. He sighed when he surfaced for air and cracked a few knuckles before leaning back in his seat in the middle of the room; Owen was keeping his distance on the other side of the hotel – in theory – but Michael walked over to him with his own cup of steaming fuel and waited for the almighty computer expert to address him.

“What?”

Michael took a sip off his coffee, blinked, and lowered the cup as he swallowed. “What? I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re looking at me like I’m going to break, Mikey. I’m anxious, that’s all. I’m just...”

Michael nodded. “I get it, I do. Have you any idea where she is? Location down to the centimeter, I mean?”

“The tracker is bouncing around a little bit, the signal I mean. I’ve got a trace going in the background here; it’s like wherever she is they’re making strides to jam the tracker or mask the signal but they’re doing a piss poor job of it. A novice could do better work, really.”

“Well, Nerd, you better get cracking on her location because it’s been a week, possibly longer. Depending on who we’re dealing with, what they want with her...she’s running out of time. There’s only so long she could keep them talking, keep them irritated with just enough, without telling them anything.” Nikita said what they had all been thinking but were too afraid to vocalize aloud. She looked around at everyone staring right back at her. She wasn’t thrilled about it either, but there it was. She shrugged, eyes shifting. “Potentially...” She amended.

Birkhoff’s wide eyes blinked a couple of times as he tried to keep the images of torture out of his mind. Nikki wasn’t being nice to him. Although true friends never told a person what they wanted to hear; they always told the truth, no matter how seemingly harsh and indelicate.

“I’m working on it. I just deployed the backdoor for finding an agent that we used before to find the agent with Percy back in the day. That should return something fairly...” He didn’t get a chance to finish before the signal he was currently tracking on her started to move.

“She’s on the move!” Seymour switched screens, calling up the satellite feeds of the area and trying to triangulate based on her movements. “Alright, she’s in an industrial complex. It looks like a warehouse layout. She’s...underground, I think. It’s why the signal is so wonky.”

“And she’s moving?” Alex and Nikita both leaned in and crowded Birkhoff. “Can you get me an address, at all? If they’re moving her we need a location, B.”

“Yeah, I got it.” He paused for a second. “But it’s like the system is fighting me... It’s slow and when it does respond it’s not giving me specifics. What the Hell!?”

“What do you mean, the system is fighting you?”

“I’ve never had this happen before! I’m accustomed to other systems, databases, booting me out or there’s another hacker giving me problems but this is Shadow Net. This is my system. No one is inside but me!”

“Unless...” Nikita trailed off.

“Unless what? You know, I shouldn’t even dignify that question in your tone with a response. That’s just fucking rude!”

“It’s happened to you before, B.” Alex challenged.

“You two don’t count. Percy and Amanda always stifled my game.” Seymour sat in silence watching Cara’s little red blinking dot moving over the faint warehouse outline. He kept typing commands, ordering the interface to give up the address of the warehouse building, but Shadow Net still denied him. “I don’t understand this! Fucking bullshit, man!” His fist came down hard on the table, rattling the monitors atop it.

Owen slinked closer. He was hesitant to say anything about it, his thoughts on the matter, because he and Birkhoff both were temperamental creatures at best. They got along sometimes, sure...but only just. “Not to put too fine a point on things but if the hacker here can’t perform miracles here, like usual, then we can’t locate Cara. We can’t save her.”

Birkhoff glared at him. “Don’t you think I know that? I know, alright!? I know better than anyone! I’m in love with her for fuck’s sake!”

“Yeah, well, losing her ain’t an option for me.” Owen challenged.

“Me neither, bone head!”

“Guys! Holy shit! Shut up!” Alex ordered, standing up straight and walking over to Owen, placing her hands on his chest. “We’re all in this for the right reasons. We all love and care for Cara. None of us want her to die or be tortured. Let’s just calm down and think things through, alright?”

Seymour sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. Alex was right; they needed to stop pestering one another and focus on the reason they were all on the edge.

“I have a thought.” Owen commented abruptly.

“That must be a new feeling for you...ow!” Birkhoff rubbed his arm where Nikki hit him. “Sorry, continue...”

The blond operative and ex-Cleaner continued as if nothing had phased him. “What if we go mobile, you know? We should take a lot of weapons and hop in the SUV and track her on the road. We could use our proximity to her signal as a judge of how close we are. Like a game of cold, warm, hot... Can we do that?”

Seymour looked surprised. He literally couldn’t keep the look off of his face. This was the third time in so many days where he’d made Birkhoff look foolish. Maybe it was true, what people said about other people in love; there’s nothing rational about it and a person’s brain takes second fiddle to their heart. His lower mandible snapped up closed and he swallowed. Sometimes he was jealous of Cara’s and Owen’s bond with one another. As Cleaners they were expertly skilled, even more than an average operative, and they were forced – no matter what their original position, which may or may not have been the same – to be ruthless and were given jobs that no other operative or agent would be able to perform. Both of them met at that time and although neither one had ever said, Birkhoff was sure they’d been romantically or at the very least physically engaged. He couldn’t prove their involvement of

course, but there it was. The Nerd smiled ruefully, nodding. "I think we could make that work. That would save some time." He paused, rifling through a couple bags and coming up with his tablet. "Let me upload a few things from here and I'm ready to go."

Michael was driving. Nikita couldn't be trusted to drive if they were in a rush because she drove like a maniac under normal circumstances; at least with Michael driving they would still be speeding, but they'd all get there alive. He was the safer choice. Birkhoff was in the passenger seat next to Michael with his tablet monitoring Cara's tracker as she moved within the confines of the building she was in, below ground. Michael's eyes flicked over the younger man next to him and then to everyone else in the vehicle, using the rearview mirror for the task; it was like they were loading up, preparing for World War III or something, loading guns, shotguns and side arms, and dressing in protective gear. "How long do you think we have to reach her?" Michael was talking in hushed tones so that he wouldn't draw anyone else's unwanted two cents. He was concerned about Birkhoff's mental status. "You know..." He didn't wait for Seymour to answer before continuing. "She's not helpless, at least not entirely. Cara's a highly trained operative/agent and she was even more skilled at taking care of herself before we got to her." He paused again, allowing that to sink into the hacker's thick skull. "Cara's going to come out of this fine, Birkhoff. She adapts. That girl...I haven't seen another survivor like Nikita in all my time at Division, not until she and Alex showed up. And Alex, she was trained by Nikita; Cara was gifted with the survival gene all on her own. Cara is a survivor, man. Just...keep thinking that."

Seymour side-eyed his friend and former Division recruit trainer. In theory, what Michael said made a great deal of sense. Cara was a fighter, a survivor, and she had been for a great deal of her life before Division. She was stronger than Alex, though no one here would ever say it outright. She never once had a relapse with drugs or alcohol addiction despite her very similar background to Alex in those matters. Not with alcohol, but Cara had been hooked on drugs and sold into sexual slavery for many years. Alex had relapsed a few times over the years. "I hear what you're saying." Birkhoff fell silent for a moment. He was thinking that despite all of those truths about her none of them meant a goddamned thing under the present conditions. They didn't know who had her and for what purpose. None of her training mattered if they just wanted to hurt her for sport. Even if they were pumping her for information via torture, she wouldn't last forever. "I'm just worried they're going to hurt her bad and we're going to be too late. We're almost been too late before, Mikey."

Michael had a grim set to his mouth. Because Birkhoff was right too...

It wasn't but five more minutes when Cara's tracker stopped moving. She was stationary somewhere inside the facility. "She's stopped. I think she's back in her cell, or whatever." Seymour didn't say anything more but he was fit to be tied. They should have found that building already!

"Almost there, another ten minutes we'll be right on top of her." Michael alerted them all. Birkhoff had wired his tablet into the vehicle's GPS unit so Michael could track their process as well.

Seymour's heart jumped as the tracker's signal went offline. It suddenly vanished as though it had never existed. "What!? No, this can't be right!" He used all the commands he knew, all

the hacks he'd ever been remotely made aware of, but nothing brought the tracker back online. He even tried rewriting the algorithm to turn it on. Nothing worked. "This is bullshit! Someone's got to be jamming her signal from us!"

"What do we do now?" Owen asked.

"We're almost where her last known signal came from. It's an industrial complex close to the water. In a couple minutes we will literally be right on top of it." Michael reiterated. "We stay on point and we storm the place if we have to."

Birkhoff was beside himself. Everything he knew wasn't good enough. Even the backdoor channel to trace Cara had been closed on him. Someone either got smart awfully fast or had been playing with him this entire time. He didn't like that. His ego wouldn't allow it. And no one taunted him with Cara's life or well-being! "I say we kill them all." His voice was monotone and low, calculated. He was calm and he was serious.

No one was expecting they wouldn't get the chance.

No one in that SUV expected three vehicles, military grade, to surround them, pinning them in and forcing them to stop.

Nikita had her automatic submachine gun up, ready to fire, when the sliding doors on either side were pulled open. She never got a round off. Simultaneously, Michael and Birkhoff were pulled from their seats, everyone being treated the same. All of them were lined up on the street on their knees, both hands zip-tied behind their backs at waist level. Some sexy brunette/sandy haired bitch was barking at them. She was British and she was mad; similar to Sonya, only not. Seymour struggled to keep up...

"Well, aren't you just a bunch of inbetweeners!? A few of ya look a right bit dodgy but... guess we'll see. Well fellas..." She turned to look at her men and jerked her chin at the lot of them on their knees. "Would ya get 'em up for me, then? And make bloody sure ya belt 'em up and bodge it, boys..." She thought some more and amended. "This bunch has me brassed off; blindfold 'em too 'til we know what the Boss wants done with 'em and Bob's your uncle, right?"

Birkhoff guessed the men had worked with the Brit for a while now or none of them would know what she meant. They – Birkhoff and his lot sure didn't – and that was saying something since they'd all been around Sonya for years. Nikita, Alex, Owen, Michael and Seymour were all sacked at the same time; black cloth sacks were snapped over their heads fast and then they were up, being moved to the army vehicles the teams had come in. Where were they being taken? Was it the same place as Cara? Were these the same people? There were more questions now than there were answers and it probably wasn't only Birkhoff feeling this way. Whatever their thoughts before, not a single person here had been expecting a group as well organized as this broad and her friends happened to be. They were good, almost better than Nikita and the rest of Division. That explained how they'd taken Cara...

It took less than ten minutes or so for the vehicles to make a sharp turn off and the blindfolded party could feel and hear the gravel grinding and crunching under tires. Birkhoff thought they must have driven around a bit to confuse them, throw them off from how close

they'd actually been. Almost instantly after the turn the forward motion stopped but inertia rocked the Division forces against their seatbelts. They all hung there with baited breath, without saying a word to one another, for what seemed like a long time. In reality, no one really knew how long they remained in the SUV before massive bodies hauled them out of their seats and practically abused and bullied them in the compound. It was a lift or elevator down for a long time before they were off-loaded into a predominantly open floor plan. Their hands were all still bound behind them by the zip ties but their hoods were all yanked off at the same time.

An open floor plan had been an accurate guess. Seymour blinked and looked over the space before noticing his fellow compatriots. They were all standing in a level of a parking garage, or so it appeared, and all five of them – despite being manhandled – were unharmed. “What do you want with us?” Came Nikki’s voice, brazen and bold as ever.

No answer came from any of the men there, not even from the Brit who was very clearly in charge, at least of the men who were present. The men didn’t look like they were big on conversation anyway; perhaps they were better at knocking heads. Soon, however, the men parted around a figure coming through. He was an old man, somewhere between his sixties and seventies, and he was the one in charge of the whole show. The way he commanded the room without so much as a word; that was what made Birkhoff sure. This is the one they should be talking to if they wanted real answers. Once the leader stopped in front of them all, he smiled. It was disconcerting. “Sorry about all this; I had to be sure you weren’t a threat to us, to me and my friends here, people who have become my family.”

“Yeah? Well we’re here for our family.” Alex retorted.

“Ah, yes, Cara said we could be expecting you. That’s why we were ready, so no blood had to be spilt over misunderstandings.”

“Misunderstandings? You’re holding her against her will!” Birkhoff raised his voice. He was almost incredulous at the audacity of this old bastard. “I wouldn’t call that something I’m confused over!”

The old man smiled again. “And you must be Mr. Birkhoff...?” He chuckled. “We’re holding her, yes. But you’re not the only family she has left and despite what you think, or maybe because of it, there have already been misunderstandings. However, I’m willing to overlook such things, for all our sakes, and I’ll let you know right now that Cara is alright.”

“I won’t believe shit until I see her with my own eyes!” Seymour spat back. Not only was he angry that this yahoo thought he could placate him and his friends with a promise of seeing her again, that she was alright; he was upset that someone had outsmarted him on the computer too.

“Well, that’s up to you, Mr. Birkhoff. You’ll get the chance in a few hours. Oh, and where are my manners?” The man tapped his forehead to symbolize his remembering. “I am Mr. Church and welcome to the Warehouse.”

Chapter 2: Legends and Legacy

“It’s been forty-five minutes. Are they just going to leave us here on our knees or what?”

They’d been left on their knees with their hands bound behind their backs like criminals posing imminent threat. All of the pomp and circumstance they had arrived to had disbanded, only five guards posted in the room to keep them in their place in that open room. It had been Owen that spoke first, though no one present even acknowledged the words. Everyone was deep in their thoughts or zoning out or simply focused on the job at hand; which, currently, was not upsetting the applecart too terribly as to result in something neither one of them could control or predict. Or fix... The men who watched them didn’t even blink at the outrage in the tone. Seymour Birkhoff heard what Owen said but his head was elsewhere. What had that guy named Church meant when he said they’d been expecting them? Cara wouldn’t have said anything about them unless she was under duress. They had probably tortured her. Was that why they couldn’t produce her for them? Was that why no one could see her for a few hours? Probably because they had to clean her up and make her presentable, present her to them as untouched as possible or they knew they’d catch Nikita’s and Birkhoff’s wrath! At the very least!

Seymour maneuvered so that he was sitting on the flooring on his ass. All of this waiting on his knees was making him cranky and more so, his feet were falling asleep. Another hour came and went and still no one came to them with any claims, any stories or excuses, and there was certainly no Cara in that time either. The silent sentries remained as stony as ever. To break the monotony Nikita was doing isometrics while her ass fell asleep on her heels. She didn’t seem bothered by it. Unlike Birkhoff, she’d been in numerous interrogation situations and knew how to keep a steely eyed poker face. The next time the group saw anyone that weren’t their guards or one another, it had been three hours from the very moment they’d arrived on scene; the man in charge of it all, the one who called himself Mr. Church, came in from the service entrance of the far side of the floor and stopped in front of them.

“It’s time to bring you all upstairs. We’ll be questioning each one of you, debriefing you before I can decide whether or not you’re all truly no threat to our operations here. I’m sure you all understand.” It wasn’t a question or a point that required address. He wasn’t about to let them go, whether or not they understood. Things just didn’t work like that in this business...

“I have this feeling that we don’t get a choice.” Michael said derisively.

“It goes without saying, Mr. Bishop.” Church surprised him by addressing him by name as well. “We here are the only ones with choice at this time. Once we have spoken with you, each one, then you may have one choice or another.”

Three men came behind and began to take them away, one at a time. It was unnerving. First they took Nikita; there, upon their leaving, was silence and no one appeared again for a half an hour. Michael was next, then Alex, then Owen, seemingly leaving Birkhoff last for one

reason or another. Neither reason he knew or even wondered about. Perhaps they had tortured Cara so thoroughly that she gave something of his importance to her away; perhaps they'd gotten something out of her after all, period...

Two hours elapsed and Seymour was the last and only person remaining in the big room. He didn't know whether he should feel worry, fear, or something else entirely. No one, to his knowledge, had seen Cara yet and who knows what they'd done to her; perhaps their idea of a debrief was a little torture by way of their creepy old men in charge and their grammar usage and emphatic need for annunciation. When the men returned for him he smiled, goofy, too cocky for his own good. That attitude always did get him into trouble... "And here I was thinking you'd started the party without me; where we going fellas?" He was hoisted up by his armpits off the floor. At no time did Birkhoff attempt to stand or even kneel again. He'd be damned if these animals would get any help from him! He was walked over to the elevators, put inside, albeit rather roughly, and accompanied upward three levels. That was his approximation; he couldn't be sure because all the elevator buttons and the digital readouts were all codes instead of actual numbers. "What, no clues...?"

The men remained stoic and without even a hint of a reaction. It was a short ride upward in the metal box and soon Birkhoff was slammed down in a metal chair across from the old man called Mr. Church. A younger man stood behind him; he was approximately Cara's age, maybe a bit older, and he wore a stance that was all soldier. He was much stronger, built better than Seymour. Shit... There was absolutely no getting out of this. "Mr. Birkhoff, please have a cookie. Relax; we won't be here long."

Seymour's eyes glanced down to the table for the first time, having been too preoccupied by the younger man in the room before to notice, and sure enough, there was a tray of cookies there at the center of the table. There were Oreos, vanilla wafers, and some macaroons. "What the Hell...?" He mumbled under his breath as he took it in, Church grabbing a vanilla wafer and chewing it thoughtfully. "Really!?" That was a bit louder.

The young soldier crossed his arms behind Church and shook his head, rolling his eyes once. "You know that's so disconcerting. Don't you? Who trusts a man that chooses a wafer over an Oreo?" Let alone somebody who serves cookies to people he's interrogating...

"I know, right?" Seymour spoke up. "Who even does that? That's not normal. That's sacrilege."

"Okay dweeb, shut up!" The soldier type commented, half stern with the slightly older computers expert.

Birkhoff's jaw dropped, in awe that anyone would tell him what to do. No one ever said shit to him about his quirks...

"Captain, that'll be enough." Church countered while the Captain just smiled. "Seymour Birkhoff, formerly Lionel Peller, age thirty-five, the youngest and also the only on-record-dead child in the Peller family..." Church began reading off statistics verbatim as if he were reading them off a list but he possessed no paperwork before him. It was all from memory. Another genius...ulk! "On the dark web, you retained the name Shadow Walker and amassed illegal funds in bank accounts all over the world. Illegal funds that very currently have been

lining your pockets and keeping you from living rent free, courtesy of the international federal government.”

He wasn't done but Birkhoff stopped him. “Is this a debrief, I'm sorry, interrogation, or a bedtime story?” Seymour noticed the Captain pacing around the table but lost sight of him for a moment. A solid slap to the back of his head made Birkhoff's teeth clack together. “Ow!”

“Joe...” Church warned, though it wasn't exclaimed. It was more a low threatening growl. With that, the Captain, Joe, whatever, retreated. “This is, in essence, a show of hands, Mr. Birkhoff. I know very well who you are – you and your friends and what you've been doing with your whole lives since your mothers dropped you out like little bird eggs – and I'm making that fact quite evidentiary. Now, what do you know of us and our operations?”

The computers and technology expert looked at the old man, then the Captain and back again, like they were figments of a highly irregular acid trip. “This is going to sound really infantile, but, whatever you two are smoking...I think you should stop. Or, you might consider cutting down on the breakfast drugs...” He didn't leave room for a reply before continuing. “I don't know shit about you guys or your ‘operations’ or whatever. All I know is you people have Cara, probably against her will, and I...we, we want her back! I don't even give a shit about who you are. I don't even give a shit about what happens to me. Let her go, and we'll go, too.”

Church and the Captain exchanged a look that bordered on disbelieving. “No can do.” The big man responded.

“Well, that's too bad; because now, when we get free, we're going to kill as many of you assholes as we have to. We're getting her and then we're leaving.”

There was moment where silence pervaded and the nerdy guy thought for sure they'd kill him on the spot for such talk but nothing happened immediately. The one Church had called Joe looked over at Church, thoughtful mixed with amusement. Hell, he liked the geek's spirit if nothing else, and his drive to find a friend and save her. “Hey.” He nudged Church with his knuckles. “Maybe we best rethink this...” It wasn't a question. It was a quick assessment. Maybe everyone else reacted in this same way?

Mr. Church looked cool, calm, and collected but underneath that well-maintained façade he was perturbed. Anyone who had known Amanda in their time would know the look. There was a slow burning rage on an oil slick of emotion beneath that skin of his. Still waters running deep...or something like that... “Perhaps you're right, Joe.” The old man paused and sat back in his chair before standing. “Tell Grace I want Cara up here. If she's able...”

“If she's able!? What the fuck did you do to her!? I swear to God! I swear to God if you hurt her...” It was a lightly veiled threat. Birkhoff was half out of his chair with his irrational anger.

Joe pointed his finger and used the tone one would admonish a puppy that shit on the carpet with. “Shut up, dweeb or I'm coming over there!”

“Do it! Fucking do me! It’s one more nail in your coffin!”

“Joe!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Both of the men left abruptly then, both clearly worried about what would happen in they stayed any longer. Birkhoff was alone again. It took him two minutes to start yelling. “Where are all of you pussies? Picking on a girl? Let me loose and I’ll fuck you up!” All manner of things came out of his mouth until the door opened again and... “Cara! Holy shit! We were so sure...”

She cut him off. “What did you do!? Why is he all trussed up? I told you they weren’t a threat! I mean...fuck!”

The words washed over Birkhoff but he didn’t absorb or process them yet, not as they came and not as they meant in the way she’d put them. His immediate worry was over Cara’s health and welfare but...she appeared fine. Feisty as ever!

Cara’s brunette midnight shade hair was pulled back revealing a newly laser-closed incision at the base of her skull just below the line of her hair. That was the only mark on her. She closed the distance between them as Church and Joe came slinking back into the room; her knife came out of its sheath and she cut loose his hands from their bindings. “You okay, Nerd? They hurt you?”

Her scent washed over him now, making him stupid. He’d forgotten his own name if she hadn’t said it to him. Birkhoff was her Nerd. Seymour barely managed a reply. It was more grunt than word or phrase and it took him a space of time to even find his voice. “Mmmm... fine.” He couldn’t think with her that close! How could it be the better part of a year goes by and any part of her, even just her presence, could make him stupid like that? But her smell! And her warmth! If he thought about anything else it would have been to question, why wasn’t she hurt? Why is she talking shit at those assholes and they’re not doing damage on her? “M’okay...” He murmured a second time.

“Good.” She said it with such finality. “Now, where are the others?” Cara looked to Joe as she stood. “I said NOW!” The yelling wasn’t like her and everyone else flinched at the demand.

“In the conference room...” Joe said quietly.

“And if you even think about restraining him again I’ll have your back molars one by one with pliers...”

Birkhoff leapt up just as Cara stalked out of the room. He was just as eager to find the rest of their friends as she was. Two corridors left and three doors down on the right and they were there. Cara stormed in without further ado, every familiar face at the table looking up at the entrance. They were somewhat startled by the crashing door but otherwise they appeared fine. Just like Cara... At least they weren’t cuffed or shackled anymore. Alex jumped up and

ran to Cara, hugging her tightly. Michael and Owen stood from their seats in a show of respect for a lady who had just entered the room. Nikki remained seated.

“Oof! Hello to you, too!” Cara exclaimed, holding onto Alex as tightly as she was holding her.

“Cara! It’s good to see you; you’re okay.” Owen smiled.

“Yeah, yeah...about that...” Once Alex let go of her she smiled nervously. “Why did you... how did you all...were you looking for me?”

“Hell yeah, we were looking for you!” Owen said emphatically.

“You went off the grid.” Nikita stated.

“We thought something bad happened to you.” Alex commented. “After everything, you know?”

Seymour had been silent up to then. “You’re family, Cara.”

“But you didn’t have to come...”

“The Hell we didn’t!” Birkhoff shook his head. “You would have come for any one of us.” He wanted to say more, but he didn’t. His wits were slowly but surely returning to him and he wanted to know more. He wanted to get it out of her. Why wasn’t she hurt damnit!? There was so much to be said, so much to know. So much he’d missed...

“I owe you all an explanation, though, at the very least. You really...you really shouldn’t have come...”

“Later.” Nikita stood and gestured for the others to follow her lead. “For now, we know what we know, and that’s enough. You and Nerd need to catch up. Come on, let’s give them the room.”

“Wait, where do we stand?” Seymour asked, looking back at the old man and the soldier. He was now quite sure that Nikki and the rest of them were privy to information that he didn’t have and were comfortable here in their surroundings with these people. It unnerved him as much as not knowing a thing about Cara and why she was here, healthy, not tortured bruised and bloody was bothering him.

Church adjusted his tie and nodded once in a show of respect. “Miss Mason vouches for you all. We have accommodations at the ready for everyone. Follow Miss Courtland, please.” He waved a hand toward the hall and the woman who’d gone full Brit on them earlier was there.

“Miss Courtland, shite, you can call me Grace. Being you’re friends of Cara’s and all...”

Birkhoff got the sense, once again, that the others knew more than he did and once again it was unnerving to him. All of his friends were willing to go with their hosts, following the Brit down the hall. It was the promise that he would soon know what was going on for

himself that kept him calm. Once everyone had dispersed Seymour scratched his eyebrow, furrowed it, and then spoke. "I'm confused. I don't know where to begin..."

"Should I, then?"

"No, I mean... I have questions, I just..." He stammered. "You're not hurt." It was an observation.

"No, I'm not."

"How...? Why? Why not...?" Birkhoff was trying to understand.

"I wasn't taken. I wasn't brought here against my will, Nerd." She paused for a moment, phrasing it all in her head.

"You came here..." He reflected on that for a second. "That crazy old man with the cookies, he said we weren't your only family..."

"You're the family I've chosen. Just because you're not my blood; that doesn't mean I don't love you as much." Seymour's eyes softened and she smiled at him. "But he was right, too; one of my blood relatives...he still exists."

"Who...? How...? I thought we had everything about you documented...?"

"Life can't be a series of hit and runs on a page, Nerd. There's...always more to it..."

"Then explain it to me. I want to know you again. Everything... I guess...more than before..." He was beginning to hurt inside. He thought he'd known her; he thought he'd learned everything about her important enough to know. Now he was finding he didn't. Suddenly nothing was making as much sense as it did.

"It's a long story, Nerd and I'm not sure you're going to like everything I share..." Cara liked to think she knew what Birkhoff was feeling. She knew there was betrayal there. She'd feel it too, if it had been Seymour keeping secrets from her, if it had been Seymour she suddenly didn't know.

"I don't care. I'm here, now, and I'm asking you to tell me." He paused for a moment, thinking. It was his first time having to deal with this. He'd never had to get to know someone all over again, for a second time. "I came here looking for you because I cared about you. If there's more to you than you've shared in the past then...that's fine but how I feel about you hasn't changed and it won't."

"I don't know about that..." Cara sounded incredulous. There was no way...

"Please, Cara...?" His tone was earnest and softer than it had usually been with anyone else in their circle of friends.

"Alright, fine; I guess I should start with the simplest part of this. Mason isn't my given last name. I was born Cara Deacon."

“Okay...?”

“Well, now, if you’re going to interrupt...”

“No, no, I’m good. Please...continue.”

“When I was little my daddy used to say I’d always be in danger. Because of what he did for a living, the work he chose to do, I would always have a little red sight on my back just behind my heart. To prevent that, I always had a different last name than him. I took Mason to further the distance between us. I’m not...I’m not the young woman on file with Division. At least, I’m not exactly the young woman they had on file.”

“So...who are you then?” It took everything in him to remain calm, resolute to hear her out without jumping to conclusions. She had to have a good reason to lie to him, right? Because that wasn’t her; it never had been.

“My life was very different from what’s in those pages, that file; I grew up different. I’m far from perfect, still...I’m not the complete fuck-up that Division thought I was, am.” She met his eyes before continuing. It looked like he was struggling to stay calm, to believe what she told him. Or maybe it was that he was fighting hard to retain the reality he knew based on the image he had of her once, before this moment. “I was groomed for this part of my life over my whole childhood, trained, everything. I was a plant inside Division.” Birkhoff’s whole demeanor changed in an instant; he stiffened and his eyes hardened. He was slipping away from her... She was losing him. “I was supposed to ensure Nikita won, at any cost, and when she took over with Ryan and Michael, I convinced my handlers that it was in everyone’s best interest to stay on. I knew we were doing real good there, together.”

“So, then, what...? Was everything a lie?” His tone was bitter, lost, and still just as confused as before.

“No! God, no! Nerd...” Cara closed the distance between them for the first time since before they’d left each other, since he’d chosen Sonya instead. She put her hands on his chest, placating, reassuring. It was likely he’d recoil, take her hands away or step back from her but she had to take that chance. “Nothing that happened between us was a lie. None of that was faked. All of that was me; I’m still me. I was always me with you. And, in a way, the woman I became at Division, with Nikita and with you; I’m more me now than I was before I started.”

His eyes softened infinitesimally. He knew she had her reasons. She was always true, even when she wasn’t. It was just like her. A complexity that no one really knew, she was a walking contradiction; well, for a complicated girl she wasn’t that hard to figure out. “That’s good, because I was more me when I was with you, too.”

It was Cara’s turn to be confused. This had started out about her, the things she had kept from him, the person she was and the parts of herself she hadn’t been able to share with him. How had this become about them, Cara and Birkhoff, Birkhoff and Cara? How was this about the unhealthy, sick little love triangle between them and Sonya? “So, then, why...? Why choose her and not me?”

He scrubbed both hands over his face like this was the most uncomfortable he'd ever been. It was likely true; Seymour Birkhoff didn't do emotions well. He didn't emote well. Granted, it had been better since he'd started working with Nikki and Cara, fighting the good fight, but it still didn't equate to 'well.' "Shit... I chose Sonya because it was safe. She was the safe choice because I wasn't completely out of my gourd every time she was outside the facility, because she wasn't an operative like you. The she made a choice, a choice that nearly killed you and Nikki both, and...I thought I could get past it; I thought you scared me. What you and I had, scared me. I thought the safe thing was to choose the sure thing. And you...you were a wild card. But I came to realize that there was no choice to make. No matter what I chose...you were going to be it for me. You were the one."

"It scared me, too. I haven't felt that way ever, for anyone else and I..." His final words on the matter shocked her into silence once she'd processed them through. There was never a choice. The choice had been made a long time ago, probably when they first began their relationship, their friendship, even. She was the choice. She was the only one for him. She was the one... "You...wait..."

"You remember what you said to me the first time we kissed?"

Cara's pale grey-blue hues widened by a fraction; of course she remembered. It had been a moment she'd never forget. Oh, sure, she'd had plenty of sex before but she'd never felt the way she did for Seymour Birkhoff. "I remember. Entropy..."

And he kissed her abruptly, passionate. It muffled the word he'd wanted to hear again. It was also an asshole move; he'd broken her heart, he'd given her love and then he'd snatched it all away and now... He didn't know what now. He didn't even really know her, as it turns out. Was this what he wanted? Was this what she needed? He just wanted her to be okay, in the end.

It was entropy, though, wasn't it? Either way.

Entropy.

It was the reason the toothpaste couldn't be put back inside the tube.

The way things were changed, and became how things are now. Once something happened things couldn't be put back the way they were before.

Forever changed.

Forever altered.

When the kiss broke the brunette was breathless and so too, was he. Birkhoff snickered, a scoffing laugh of a sound. "Entropy, yeah... Still true...?"

Cara opened her eyes and nodded. "Yeah, that's about right." She smirked, a slow rise at the corners of her lips. "But Sonya..." Thus, the slow rise...

"She's not with me anymore. She hasn't been for months." It was that simple to him. Sonya was gone. And he was here, with Cara; that was all that mattered. That's what he told

himself, what he knew.

“Oh.” Her eyes shifted to the side and down.

“It was her choice. I’d be lying if I said my love for you didn’t actually affect her choice, because it did. I came here for you. Yeah, it started because Nikki asked me to get involved but if I’d known about this whole thing before, I’d have been here knocking down doors a lot sooner. So, you tell me...can we fix us? I know we don’t really know each other anymore. I know you and I have a lot of sharing to do and a lot of work to do, too. But I want to fix us... Tell me I didn’t lose you forever like a dumbass.”

Cara balked. In a million years she hadn’t expected this. She imagined upon their parting of the ways that she would be alone for the better part of her days. The duty bound loyal operative in her wanted to work, needed the work DMS promised in order to keep her out of her own head for too long. She needed the distraction from the things in her life that made her weak. And love was something that could do that... She had been trained, trained to believe emotions must be governed; sadness, remorse, love, these feelings made you weak, but anger, loyalty, pride, these feelings made you powerful. The daughter in her needed to please her father; to be his pride for once. And the woman in her, while not able to forget and could use the distraction of other things, only wanted Seymour Birkhoff to call her his again. Things were complicated now, more complicated now than when they’d left each other about a year ago. She couldn’t allow him to call her his anymore, not now that she’d gotten involved in this. “I wish...” Cara looked so torn about it. He’d been hopeful a second ago but now Seymour’s face began to fall as she spoke. “I wish...that I could, Nerd.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Well, for one thing – which is really first and foremost on this list of reasons – that crazy old man with his cookies...?”

Birkhoff looked up at her face, attentive now, his right brow arching. “Yeah?”

“That’s my dad.”

Seymour snorted and coughed, half laugh, half choke. “You’re shitting me! That’s your old man!?”

Cara barked a laugh at his reaction. It was classic Nerd. “Yeah, that’s my old man. Surprising?”

“A bit.” He paused, bringing his body closer to hers again and laying hands on her; both of his palms lay on her upper arms, fingers wrapped around them. An amused expression took his mouth. “Well, you should consider yourself lucky...” He commented, his smile widening. “Comparatively, you turned out normal.” His following laugh was contagious.

Cara couldn’t help but laugh too. “But that’s only one reason...”

“That’s not much of a reason, though. I could live with that. It’s not like I have to be in love with your dad, too. It would just be us...”

“I’m involved in something here, Birkhoff. That’s the main reason we can’t...”

“So what...? I mean, what is ‘this’ that you’re involved with here? Why should that stop us being together? I don’t understand. Help me understand, Cee.”

“You’re free! You’re free now, Nerd, and I’m...I’m not anymore. I promised my dad... Joe...”

“You promised that ass-hat something!?” It was Birkhoff’s jealousy talking. Although it didn’t show outwardly as jealousy, it was definitely that to him and he knew it. Half the battle was admitting truth to oneself, wasn’t it?

“You don’t know what they do here, Nerd. They do what we used to do; they save the world, innocent people. They take potential international incidents, horrible people doing horrible things to innocent people, and they turn it around. They endeavor to make it better.” Cara tried to explain without getting into the details of their operations here. She didn’t think she could handle all of that on top of the current romantic emotional quagmire they were dealing with.

“Okay, so explain it to me. Sit me down and tell me why you think this, whatever this is, means we can’t be together.”

“Jesus Christ, Birkhoff! This isn’t just about me or my dad or what I’m involved in here. This is so much more complicated! There are emotions here, feelings, and I can’t just up and get past the fact that you chose someone else over me! Sure, she was your girlfriend before I even came into the picture but you’re right, what we had was scary and real and the kind of thing a person could search forever to find and most never do! I mean, fuck! I was scared too! What the Hell did you expect me to do about it? Sleep with Owen? Tell you I was moving on? Maybe I should have hurt you before you hurt me, hmm?”

“No...no, that’s not what I wanted. I love you, Cee. I’m so sorry.”

She thought about his apology, how he loved her and how it had shown, every minute, every second, that they’d been together. Cara sat down at the table in the conference room as he’d suggested they do; the table was so large and she wished he would sit apart from her, if only for the sake of her sanity and her heart, but he wouldn’t. She knew him. He sat right beside her, wheeled her chair around and brought their knees together, ducking his head to try and lock eyes with her again. She’d been silent after her little rant, his apology and proclamation weighing heavy on her. Cara wanted so badly to let go, to fall into his arms and let him hold her, but she couldn’t. That training and that cold distant resolve was still too strong to ignore. “There’s something going on right now, a case. My dad sent Joe to find me and bring me here because he knows I can help, that I would want to. I was briefed on the matter and I agreed. So, you see the problem here, now? I’m not free. I have obligations here. You are; eventually one of us would be upset with the other for their status and we’d only end up further in, more to lose, and hurting each other worse.” Her eyes remained firmly averted. She couldn’t even look at him. Even the thought of his eyes, his face, was weakening her resolve to remain apart. “It’s...better we just don’t go there...”

His hand reached out and he turned her face to look at him. It took her a moment but when their eyes finally met Cara regretted it. She'd hardened herself enough to make that statement but Birkhoff; he looked devastated but somehow defiant, in denial. "I'm not free. Something beyond my control is keeping me from being with the woman I love. I'm not free if I can't have you."

"Please...Nerd...don't..."

"No! Listen to me, goddamnit!" He grabbed her hands and squeezed just enough to maintain all of her attention. "If you're here, I'm here. I chose someone else before and...I chose wrong! And you'll never hear me say this again, but once is enough; I regret the days we spent apart. I hate myself because I broke your heart. And now that we're here, I'm not leaving you."

"I don't want to get you involved in this world again. You're out, you got out. It's dangerous and..."

"All the more reason to stay; I'm not going to let you do this all by yourself. You and I...we were a team before anyone else. We were the best tech experts at Division and I was in your ear every step of the way when you were in the field. I've always had your back. I'd like to have it again; I will." Their eyes locked again and he smiled in such a way that she hadn't seen on him in a long time. "Now say you love me too and you're sorry for trying to push me away."

The petite brunette scoffed a laugh despite the tears blossoming in her eyes. "You're an asshole, Nerd." But she said it with a smile: "With love and in the nicest most polite way possible..."

"That's why you love me, Kitten." He grinned and gave a wink.

"Yeah..." Cara leaned in and kissed his lips, moaning softly when she tasted him, their tongues touching briefly. "I do love you. And...we can fix us. If you want..."

He nods. "I want." He smiles as he claims her mouth again.

✂

The conference room was once again filled with Cara's family, only now both sides were present. Joe and Grace claimed a corner of the room, standing behind Church who was beside Cara on one side of the table. Birkhoff was seated across the table from Cara, in front of her. Nikita and the rest of their group were seated together along the same side of the table as Birkhoff, to either side of him. This was their first official meeting.

"Should we begin with introductions...?" Joe grinned, cocky.

"Joe..." Church and Cara admonished in unison, warning. "We all know each other well enough to get by, for right now." Cara continued.

“Right, so stop being an asshole, Captain.” Grace said in her thick accent, punching Joe’s arm. “Bloody Hell...”

Cara rolled her eyes, smiled and continued. “Nikita, Michael, Alex, Owen, you all know I was a plant within Division by now, that I’m Mr. Church’s daughter and that this is a super secure division of the government known as the DMS, the Department of Military Sciences.” It was obviously the first time Birkhoff would be hearing the latter, but he was a bright little Nerd. He’d catch up quick, on the fly; it was how they’d lived for many years. “During my time at Division I reported back here for briefs on occasion, while this place was getting on its legs, recruiting and taking on new cases, new missions. Now, unlike Division, this is an organization that operates above the board and officially, with permission from and in cooperation with the rest of the government – so you know. The first of their cases was the incident at the rededication of the Liberty Bell.” At that Birkhoff’s eyes bugged out of his head and Michael’s eyebrows met his hairline.

“Wait a minute... We were there, Division...” Michael managed through his shock.

“Yeah, we were; things went from shit to avalanche of shit really damn fast.” Seymour commented.

Cara help up a hand and they all fell silent so she could finish explaining. “The official story was a terrorist cell subbed the new replica of the old Liberty Bell with another replica that they had made themselves. It was bomb scare, in essence. It was all very plain and ho-hum in the media. Unofficially...” She paused, formulating, watching as every one of her friends sat forward, putting their arms up on the table. “It was a terrorist cell funded by an American pharmaceuticals and welfare manufacturer. They hired the cell and its extremist scientists who, in turn, curated a virus that piggybacked off of a prion – a prion is something akin to a host cell which allows something to live off of it but keep its own genetic markers, virtually a parasitic virus – the virus affected the central nervous system, keeping the body up and mobilized while it was, in reality, dead.” Alex covered her mouth and Birkhoff drew in a sharp breath. “The only drive of the remaining brain cells was to spread the virus, to kill and to spread.”

“A zombie virus!” Seymour exclaimed. “I could have told you it was coming! Someone, someday, with their sick twisted little mind was going to go all Resident Evil on the world. But no, no one ever listens to me...”

The brunette smiled. “Yes, well, Joe and company here stopped them and happened to be the only combat ready presence at the time who knew the truth, who had the means and the knowledge to stop them.” She looked pointedly at Birkhoff and arched a brow. “Even with Shadow Net, we at Division didn’t have a whole lot to go off of.”

“Didn’t I tell you guys?” Seymour pointed at Nikita and Michael, earnestly gesturing. “Amanda and Percy were always snubbing me, stunting my game!”

“It helped we had Mind Reader.” Church said. “Thank heavens for that, at least.”

“What’s Mind Reader?” The question was posed.

“A program like Shadow Net...only much more inclusive...” Birkhoff snorted and she shook her head. “I’ll show you later since you don’t believe me. It isn’t just a back door into everything government or spy software. It’s a form of information control, redirect, and gathering that is currently unparalleled! It’s electronic God on the information Valhalla.” He looked like he’d believe it when he saw it but Alex, Nikita and Owen all looked amused. Michael wasn’t quite sure what opinion to have. “Anyway, once the bad guys realized we had something like that they sent people after it.”

“The NSA, believe it or not. Crazy mother cluckers over there...” Joe commented. “Somebody bought somebody.”

“The NSA was after you guys?” Michael was almost appalled. “After you all saved the President’s wife and the rest of the free world?” He hated the thought that his government that he believed so much in could be so corrupt. This wasn’t Division they were talking about!

“Like I said, somebody bought somebody.” Joe replied. “We’re not out of the woods, either; things have calmed down quite a bit but we’re still being monitored in ways that, for now, we can live with.” He didn’t have to sound happy about it, though.

Nikita picked up the torch and spoke up next. “And so, whatever is going on now; you need Cara’s help. Right...?” All of the DMS agents, including Cara, nodded and Church smiled softly. “Tell us what’s going on.”

“Nikita.” Michael said her name plainly as Alex looked at her abruptly.

“I’m not saying anything the rest of us haven’t already entertained. Nerd is staying here with Cara, with them; I know that because I know him. I don’t have to ask. When we were all debriefed we were asked how far we’d go, weren’t we? Well, my answer was that family never gets left behind. I’d do anything; I’d do it all.” She looked at them all, one after the other. “Anyone here feel differently?”

“Not after all this time, we don’t.” Owen grinned.

“I’m in.” Alex nodded, smiling. “Without question.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Retirement doesn’t really suit us anyway.” Michael sat back in his chair but grabbed for Nikki’s hand, holding onto it.

Birkhoff was playing with his manly chunky gold bracelet before he looked up. “We’re all in; we’re all staying. Brief us on what’s going on.”

“Very well, Mr. Birkhoff; I will take the opportunity since I will be, for all intents and purposes, your new boss.”

He looked to Cara for a moment before Cara shook her head once. Seymour looked almost worried, a deer in the headlights. “Don’t worry, he lets Joe and Grace fool around.”

Birkhoff swallowed awkwardly. Mr. Church smiled slow, eerily, quiet and calm. “Grace isn’t my little girl.” His eyes bored into Seymour’s and the master hacker swallowed again, audibly this time.

“Right.” Was all Birkhoff could manage...

Cara pursed her lips, knowing it would be different. She was Church’s daughter, whether she’d felt like a daughter all her life or not; and now she was front and center in her father’s life, and she’d brought her boyfriend, unknowingly, right into the mix. “Should we move on, now, or...?”

“Let’s...” Alex chimed in. “So, we were going to find out what exactly has been going on...”

“Correct. Thank you, Miss Udinov.” Church folded his hands before him on the table and looked to each new team member individually. “First of all, ordinarily I would personally vet, recruit, and audition each one of you to verify your skills, strengths, and thought process in a combat situation...but your former professions within Division and Cara’s knowledge qualifies you without the usual performance and review.” He reached into his suit jacket pocket, pulling out a little clicker device. “Grace, could you flip that switch for me please? And Joe, hit the lights, would you please?” A monitor fired up and a series of numbers ran across the whitewash wall as it set up. As soon as the soft whirring sound slowed and stabilized, Church hit the button on the remote he held and a face came up on the screen. “Up until an hour ago, we didn’t even have a name for this unfortunate filth, or a face to even begin with. Now, post tracking online activity and some field reconnaissance, cross-referencing both with satellite images, we have both. This sack of rubbish was given the name Matthew Dominick Sorise-St. John. He’s the eldest son of a six sibling home, all male offspring. The typical stereotype exists and fits well within this case; the family was rich, parents always off to the next social function, never having time for the children. The man began killing animals at the tender age of six and has graduated over time to killing an unknown number – but fair number by assessment – of our human brethren. According to the information we’ve gleaned he’s focused his kills only on the weak and under privileged, considering them less equal and perhaps less likely to be noticed once they’ve gone missing. He’s most recently graduated to apocalypse threats and doomsday prophesying. He’s not religious in the slightest so I haven’t the foggiest as to why he’s doing this, yet; perhaps it was a slow Tuesday...”

At that, Birkhoff and Owen both laughed like amused little boys. They liked that. They thought that was clever.

“At any rate, Mr. Sorise-St. John has been taking public credit for a number of bombings and terrorist threats across the Canada’s and Great Britain using an online alias known as ‘Osiris Risen.’ Recently, a string of fires have been perpetrated in the U.S. Big conglomerations and corporations going up in spectacular flame in the middle of the night; the online alias he uses has also claimed credit for those. And he promises more, worse, until there is no one left but what he refers to as the Amenti or Duat, in other articles. Both terms are Egyptian, ancient in origin, and means – loosely – the Realm of the Dead and also refers to the night sky as being the home for the deceased, who have become stars.”

“And this is where I come in...” Cara spoke up then, sitting forward so that everyone could see her from their seats. “Before becoming a plant within Division I was a constant student of many things. My major, for which I received a master’s degree, was in Egyptology at Brown University. To risk sounding the part of a Mummy cast member, I can read, write, and decipher ancient Egyptian, both hieroglyphics and hieratic. I, in my genius, know all there is to know about ancient Egypt to date. Due to Sorise-St. John’s penchant for such terms and his alias...sort of makes me the lead on this case. At the very least, the foremost authority...”

Birkhoff was the only person that didn’t look surprised of their Division set of friends and family. He was, in a way, but he also knew the extent of Cara’s love for Egypt; he’d seen the tattoo of the jeweled ankh, the eye of Horus at the base of the cross piece, on her side just beneath where the line of her bra would have been. It was a large enough tattoo to take up some space; there was no way he wouldn’t have noticed it. She’d told him the ankh was the symbol of enduring life to the ancient Egyptians and had oft been worn as an amulet by them to ward off death and to promote long life and immortality in their pharaohs. She’d told him the eye of Horus was a symbol of protection, royal power and good health. Coupled with the ankh it was her personal amulet, one she could never go without for it was on her at all times. It protected her and it gave her the will to go on when nothing else could. She’d told him as they lay naked together in bed, his fingers caressing the very tattoo they spoke of, tracing it, mesmerizing it as he had every other part of her. “That sounds like a plan to me. I mean, that’s the start of a plan I can get behind.” He smiled softly and winked at her. “You know I’d follow you anywhere...”

She returned the smile but didn’t comment back on that. Instead, she continued: “It’s my job to try and see his ‘bigger picture,’ his endgame. If he wants the end of the world then fine, how, why, what’s the point, and so on. I’ll be operating both inside the Warehouse and out in the field. Nikita and I will be running point in the field, Birkhoff and I will cover the majority of the technical and computer stuff when I’m inside. When I’m gone, I’m going to have Nerd work with a tech guy that DMS recruited; I trust the kid with my life and he’s a friend so it’ll be fine. Alex, I’m putting you on reconnaissance and intelligence; you’ll be working closely with the DMS’ tech expert I mentioned and Birkhoff. Owen and Michael, you’ll be heading up tactical support and quick response. I trust you both with my life, too, so I want you guys heading our back-up teams.”

“Wait a second, what back-up teams? I’m the Captain of Echo Team and Grace is the head of Alpha Team; are we missing something here?”

Joe’s question made Cara roll her eyes. “I’m not replacing the two of you, if that’s what you’re worrying your pretty-boy head over. I’m expanding. We’re going to rebuild Charlie Team; Michael, you’ll have them and Owen you’ll head up Delta Team. None of the men or women here will be at your beck and call to use. Dad...Mr. Church has left it in my hands to do this, at my discretion, and so I am. The both of you will band together, recruit your own soldiers, fighters, and the like, and you’ll be training them as well, together.”

“You want us to recruit? Together?” Owen looked incredulous at her audacious request.

“Anything you want.” Michael spoke up, looking to Owen even as the surprised man looked over to him. “We can do this, man. We have all the skills, all the knowledge; plus, Cara

expects we work together. You wouldn't want to cross her, would you?" He smirked afterward, like the answer was already staring him in the face.

"Shut up; you're a loser!" Owen picked up his pen, which actually belonged to Alex who had been taking notes, and chucked it at Michael across Alex and Nikita's seats.

"Hey! Cut it out!" Alex scolded Owen.

Not a second passed and the pen was fired back at Owen. It hit him square in the forehead with a little dull 'plink' sound. Nikki grabbed the edge of the table in her hands and glared at Michael. He shrugged once and his eyes widened a bit. "What!?"

"Your adult is needed. Leave the man-child somewhere else, Mikey." Seymour completed, taking the heat off of the females on that side of the table. "It's not a good look on you. It suits Owen, though..." He smirked at Owen smartly. "Sorry, not sorry."

Owen's smile was crooked. It was his dark Cleaner's humor. "We'll see if your brain still fits in your skull when I'm done being a man-child..."

Church and Joe were exchanging looks before long, both of them glancing to Cara after that. "I know what you're thinking. Every group has its quirks. They only want to kill each other sometimes. We're good. One works better in the field and one works better inside because he's pasty and breakable. Keeping them apart means they work well on the same team." They'd been giving her the kind of skeptic expression one might reserve for psychics and voodoo magic. "I swear, we've been all each of us has had for a long time, now. Family always fights but they never stop loving. Trust me, we got this."

"We do." Nikki jumped in to defend them all as well. "We've done really truly good things together. You can count on us. We won't let you down." It was weird, hearing her talk that way; Nikita hadn't been a company woman in all the time Cara or any of these guys had known her, not even when she was a company woman.

The meeting was over shortly thereafter. There was a lot to do but only so much they had to talk about ahead of time. As they all milled about, Nikita grabbed Cara's arm and walked her off to the side, away from everyone else. They hadn't spoken for a while, certainly not since she'd been debriefed by Cara's father and everything had blown up into a major case that they were all needed on. Nikki was the first to speak. "So, seems like we got off on a bit of a wrong foot, huh?" She referenced how they'd first met and how, even after saving Nikita in the field, the older female hadn't much cared for or trusted her right off. "Seems like you've been in my corner all along, even when you weren't supposed to be..." Nikki gave Cara a smile.

"Yeah, about that... I told Nerd this same thing; you still know me, you know? I was still me even when I was playing a part."

"I know." The answer was simple.

"I'm sorry."

“Oh, please, Amazon; don’t be sorry. You were still you; I know that. That’s what they tell us when we’re building a legend right? Keep the details as close to the truth of your real life as you possibly can because it makes it all the more real to you. I get it.” She closed the distance between them and hugged Cara tightly.

“Thank you.”

“For what? For being your sister? Always.”

There was a smile from the both of them, though they couldn’t see one another by their positions. The moment was soft and Cara could see now that somewhere inside, in her time away, she’d missed that. When the embrace broke and Nikita found Michael, Cara found Alex and Owen. The exchange with each was quick but not at all what she’d been expecting. Not a single person was angry with her, although she’d yet to speak with Michael. Perhaps he was steering clear of her to save the conflict... Owen was her favorite interaction by far because of his grin and response.

“You didn’t lie to me. Shit, you never lied to me. Even when we were both Cleaners together and I was going through stuff you always set me straight. Don’t think I’m going to let some undercover double agent shit ruin our friendship, babe; ain’t happening.”

It wasn’t until everyone left the hall that she found Birkhoff again. “Hey.” She said quietly, walking up beside him and leaning her back into the wall behind them.

“Hey.” He smiled back. “You were busy there for a while.” It was an observation he’d made but the statement held more than the words. He’d meant that he hadn’t wanted to add to her problems, to her worries and her explanations and they he was here now...for whatever she needed.

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I thought it would be different somehow, that when the truth came out everyone would be angry. I haven’t talked to Michael yet but everyone else defied expectations.” She nudged him playfully with her elbow. “Even you.”

“Hey, don’t sell us short.” He chuckled. “And Mikey’s cool with it too; he wouldn’t be here or on board still if he wasn’t.”

“I just hate the fact I wouldn’t be in your lives if I hadn’t done what was asked of me. At the same time, I wouldn’t have theoretically lied by omission to everyone if I hadn’t, either. It’s quite the dichotomy...”

“No, none of that...” His arm snaked around behind her back along the wall, at the small of her back, and his hand gripped her side opposite him. He rolled her off the wall and into him. When she was against him her breasts were pressed against his chest through their clothing. He really had missed her warmth, her softness, her curves fitting against him, completing him. He’d missed all of her, even the hardest coldest parts of her; because they were all parts of her and she was beautiful. “You did what you had to do and you’re in our lives now. We wouldn’t have it any other way. We all love you, Cara.” Birkhoff pulled a face as she looked up at him, wide eyes, trying to fathom this truth. “It’s a good thing Owen is with Alex now or I might have to kill him.”

She giggled. “You wouldn’t.”

“It was pretty obvious for a while that he was crushing on you. The overgrown puppy dog had it bad. He wanted in those hot panties I know you wear. Are you telling me you never noticed?”

Cara was still smiling. “No, I mean...I did know he had feelings. After Emily died...he was a mess.”

“I got it. But hey, let’s change the topic because I’m about to projectile vomit... Did you want to talk about us, the job, or both?”

“I don’t know. What would you like to talk about?”

“We have to talk?” He smirked sheepishly, shifty eyed.

“You’re bad, Nerd...” She grinned. “So bad...” Cara practically purred, pulling him closer still, her hands fisting in his shirt at his mid-back.

“That’s because I’m a dorky geek Nerd pervert; I don’t get laid an awful lot. But more than that, I’ve missed you, Cee.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Nerd.” She reaches up, threading her fingers through his longish hair before trailing down to his face, caressing his cheeks between her soft fingertips. “Want to see my room?” She smiles again, a bit darker this time.

“You mean our room?” He grins.

“Over Daddy’s dead body, babe...” She said it; it was the common joke to be referred to at a time like this. She chuckled lightly but felt like punching him in the chest when he started grinning at her again.

He chuckled and stroked her cheek, down her neck and back up, his thumb moving over her lower lip. “I could take him...”

“I’m sure you could.” She laughed some more. “We can talk about that some more later; after all, what Daddy doesn’t know...and there’s nothing saying we can’t have sleepovers...”

“Sleepovers where we don’t sleep...?”

“I see you’ve read between my lines of intricately written code...”

“Shit, I just love it when you talk dirty to me; and you know I’m good for it.” As he responded they began walking together, Cara leading their way.

“We’ve been apart for too long... Think you remember just how well I stroke that QWERTY keyboard?”

A shiver ran down his spine and his cock twitched in his pants. She was merciless! “Jesus! Do me a favor: stop talking until we get to the room? I’m very sensitive about these

things...” The way he was forced to start walking was proof enough.

Cara smirked. “Sensitive is just how I like you...” She was purring the words again, knowing that tone she used just drove him nuts.

It didn’t take them long to get to Cara’s room. It was off the beaten path but a wing that was still off the main hub of the Warehouse. This would be where her loved ones lived as well, Nikita and Birkhoff and the whole gang; her father trusted her judgment but didn’t trust them. As a concession he housed them all together in the same wing, away from others to prevent any unforeseen fallout. Hell, maybe they could share a room anyway. Daddy Church did sort of force her hand with temptation by putting them all together in this wing...alone...

The door to her room opened with a five digit pass code and digital thumb scanner. They all took security and privacy very seriously around here; that was partially why Cara felt so at home here. The best parts of Division were present while the worst parts were lost forever. With the door open, Cara gestured for Birkhoff to go in ahead of her. Just as he’d deduced it would, the whole room smelled like her, sandalwood and patchouli, a Hippie girl’s paradise. And it wasn’t a great room, not by any stretch of the imagination; the only metric Seymour had to go off of was an army barracks or the cookie-cutter cots and rooms they used for recruits in Division. The only step-up was that the beds didn’t appear to be cots and there were small amenities included; a bedside clock was on an ornately carved bedside table, a small sitting area with two overstuffed chairs sat beyond the bed’s footboard and beyond that was a seventy or so inch flat screen television mounted to the wall, a gaming console below that on a small black modular stand. Her laptop was on the bedside table beneath her clock as though she hadn’t yet decided where to store it for long term habitation. “Wow, it’s pretty nice in here.”

“Yeah, no thanks to the DMS, really...” Cara sighed. “They spared some expense.”

“So all the extras are your doing?” He chuckled like an amused little boy, his face just lit up. “I knew the PS 4 and the obscenely large television was you! That’s my girl!”

She chuckled heartily. “Yes, sir!” She came inside and sat down on the edge of her bed. She looked at him, caught his gaze and directed him to look over at the top of the gaming system setup. “Did you see that?”

He turned away from her, walked over and bent slightly, taking a better look at the black stand with its cabinet design in the front. The system was atop it. Once he noticed what she wanted him to he gave a little hearty chuckle. “All this time, a broken heart, and you saved that?” It was a picture of Cara and himself, both wearing goofy grins and looking silly, jovial, happy. Birkhoff’s eyes were bugged out slightly and Cara’s head was over Seymour’s shoulder, chin resting on it. They’d been outside in the blistering heat, he in a t-shirt and board shorts and Cara in a tank top and short cotton shorts that barely met the top of her thigh. It was post mission completion and both of them had the day off. Contrary to what he should have been doing, which was being with Sonya, he’d shown up at Cara’s apartment with a steaming gooey double cheese double pepperoni and Italian sausage pizza and a six pack of beer looking for company and needing hers. He didn’t know how or when he’d first fallen in love with her. It all happened so fast and so organically; he didn’t even think Cara had been aware of it happening until they were already so deep in it. They’d eaten, drank,

talked, and eventually went for a walk in the park where he'd selfied the both of them. It wasn't until they'd gone back to her place that they fell into bed together. It was the second time; the first time had been rushed and sloppy, half-naked in his lair in the bowels of Division. This time it was slow and meaningful and they both were completely wasted after; they still spoke, held one another, and he'd learned all about her obsession with Egypt that day. It was the same day she found out he used to be some loser named Lionel Peller that faked his own death to get away from his life. It was before he'd told anyone else about it, before Amanda/Helen and her doubles made him tell Nikki. Something had told him she never shared her passions or her loves with just anyone; it meant he couldn't and wouldn't hold back the truth of his past from her. After all, they were still secrets because not a one of them would tell anyone else.

She nodded once, smiled. "Of course! You could say I lived in an illusion for a long time. I wasn't myself and I didn't want to be. When I came here I was more myself, healed, and missing you."

"I'm here, now." He eyed her, bright blue orbs boring into her pale slate blue ones. Inside he hurt because she'd been wounded for a time and he was the reason. He'd give anything if he could just take that pain away from her.

"I know."

He took long strides for the length of his legs and paired the distance to nothing between them, sitting beside her on the bed. She appeared so fragile there, eyes wide, searching, needing. His palms cupped her face between them, cradling, turning to her and kissing her without another word. The action was love and lust and protective and caring all at once. His fingers dug into the layered lines her hair made in that pony tail, making absolutely sure she couldn't pull away from him. He wanted this and they both needed it; he was sure. Cara's petal pink tongue touched his and it electrified him. He lost all control and he pushed her down on the bed, getting over her, pressing his semi-erect raging cock against her needful hungry quim from behind both their clothing. "Too many clothes..." He murmured between kisses.

Cara was on fire and yet...as wet as a spring deluge. The moment her tongue found his and vice versa she wet herself as though he'd commanded it. Her clitoris raged between her labia, blood forcing the thundering inside the little bundle of nerves to ache, to want, to need her Nerd's touch. Only he could slake this fire burning hot and wet, like a forge, out of control between her legs. She moaned and sighed into his mouth and the moment he laid her down and climbed atop her, forcing her legs open, grinding his erection into her... "Fuck!" She breathed the exclamation, her wet core soaking her panties and threatening to bleed through to her pants. "Mmmm...yeah." Her delicate feminine hands went right to the hem of Birkhoff's shirt at his behest. "I want to see you." It was a breathless confession.

Seymour didn't need any more prompt than that. He leaned back and to the side only briefly to help Cara accomplish pulling his shirt off. He wasn't as built or ripped as Owen or that Joe character but it didn't seem to matter to Cara. She wanted him; as soon as she saw his hair chest and the hairy trail past his navel she purred and managed a low growl, knocking her hips up against his and writhing against him. "Patience, Kitten..."

“Mmmmm... No.”

They both laughed at that as Birkhoff went for her shirt, riding it up her toned pale belly and up over the swell of her breasts under the material of her lacy bra. “Fuck...you do this on purpose?” She grinned and shook her head before he buried his face between those swells, inhaling her deep warm scent, kissing, licking, and biting the creamy flesh cresting over that lace covering. “Damnit...” His cock was straining so hard against the confines of his pants. The inside of his zipper was threatening to emasculate him.

As if reading his mind, Cara slipped her hands between them without pushing him back from her and grabbed the waistband of his pants. One hand popped the top button loose while the other held the material steady; soon enough the zipper was torn down haphazardly and she was earnestly peeling the pants down his hips, thighs, finally helping him kick them off his ankles where they hit the floor with a denim weighted thud. “Shit! Oh my God...” Her palm cupped the bulging material and the cock and balls underneath the boxers that covered them. “Mmmm...show me...” She begged.

Left to her own devices, Seymour was sure she’d have pulled his length out of the strategic hole in his boxers and had at him already. Her restraint, he was also sure, was due to them having to find their sexual rhythm once more. Instead of finishing Cara’s disrobing, he did as she bid him and hooked his thumbs into his boxers, shucking them down his legs. She had a good view of him from down there on her back and the grin she gave him was telling in itself. He was beside himself when a petite hand with long delicate fingers wrapped around his length and perfect girth and stroked him once fully, from base to flared head and back again. “Shit. Fuck, shit...fuck...” He managed, but only just. “Missed you doing that, too... Nobody does it like you.” He realized a little too late how that probably sounded to her but he hoped for the best. Cara should know him better than that by now.

“Yeah...?” She purred, taking that the way it was intended. “Tell me about it, Nerd...”

She kept stroking him and it made him forget how much he’d wanted to get her naked, finally, and touch her naked breasts and get his face between her legs. He’d never liked eating pussy before but Cara tasted like heaven, and she smelled so sweet and that pleasant musk lingered in his nostrils even after he drank her dry. It was all about her. He just wanted to please her. “Can’t...speak...too good... Fuck!” If she kept stroking him like that he was going to come off in her hand, all over her nearly nude form. To keep his hands busy, one tried but failed to get her pants’ fly undone and the other successfully pulled both bra cups down, beneath her breasts, keeping them perky and facing him as she worked his cock with her hands. Both hands now were on her perfect tits, squeezing the tender globes, manipulating and tweaking and flicking her nipples, which stood to attention like little soldiers. And he was sure they were throbbing and pulsing with need just like his cock, his balls contracting, spasming every so often. “Gonna, gonna cum...Cee...” He warned. The computers expert was trying so hard to hold out, but he was losing that fight a little more every second.

Her hands, her fingers, her brain and those pale eyes remembered everything about Seymour Birkhoff. And the longer this pattern held out...so much more than that. She’d memorized every inch of him in the time they’d spent like this in the past. “Don’t care...” Cara breathed

in response to him. “Do what you have to. Cum. Want it on me...” Her fingernails were painted a glossy blood red and alone, she kind of hated her hands, her fingers; but whilst wrapped around his cock, jerking and stroking and bringing him pleasure beyond measure... the petite brunette rather liked the way her hands and fingers perfectly fit him this way. “Maybe on my body...maybe in my mouth...” Her core was so wet now that the juices she gave had blossomed wet stains on the crotch of her pants. “Fuck, baby...love how hard for me you are...”

It was right then, he decided he wouldn't. The tables turned on Cara just as quickly as both of them thought he was finished; his hands took her wrists and pinned her arms over her head, his legs between hers to keep her from flipping them back over. She always tried and rarely failed. He wanted her in the palm of his hand tonight, under his control. He would tell her when to cum, when to be a good Kitten and just fall apart for him... His hands switched positions, one to secure her wrists and the other went to her pants, undoing the fly and manhandling the material until it was down her perfect dancer's legs and hanging on by a thread, or an ankle, as it were. “You like it when I'm in charge? Yeah, yeah you love it. You just want to cum for me, don't you Kitten?”

And this...this wasn't quite a side to Birkhoff she'd seen before. He could be a little kinky at times, a little forward and blunt in his advances but... He did have her in the palm of his hand, quite literally. She was used to the play, the back and forth, but he'd never taken control like this before. “Nerd...oh my...” He moved her panties down her hips and took his free hand to her forge, her wet soaking his palm, his digits. “Oh God...Nerd...” Her hips bucked up instinctively, rolling them into his hand; her back arched up into him and her head pressed back into the bed. Her mouth opened, forming that perfect o-shape. Birkhoff's index and middle fingers parted her folds enough to rub tight concise circles into her clitoris. Within minutes those same fingers were deep inside her silken channel, pumping and thrusting in and out of her, his thumb taking over on her clit.

“Mmmm...nnnnnggg...unh unh oh... Yeah, that's so...mmmmnnnnnggg...” Her eyes fluttered open and locked with his for just a moment. “Like this side of you...” A little grin took her mouth before she was hit with another wave of pleasure, her head tipping back. “Nerd, oh God...Seymour...”

“That's good, Kitten; say my name.” Birkhoff had never tried this control thing before. He kind of liked it. At least he liked the idea of making Cara quiver and come undone for him. “I need you to cum for me, Cara. Can you do that? Can you cum for your Nerd, Cee?”

“Unh! Yeah...uh! Aahh!” A couple more seconds and she did exactly that, came hard over her Nerd's fingers. She writhed and bucked and moaned and mewled for almost three straight minutes as her orgasm continued to crash down around her and literally shake her to her very core. Every fiber of her being was as high as a kite at his ministrations.

He hadn't been expecting it, but the moment he felt her walls spasming maniacally around his two digits, his thumb still furiously rubbing her clit, and she finally came like a seizure was ripping her apart, Seymour came as well; he shot a hot load all over his Cara's taut belly. “Ah, oh, uh, uh, unh...Jesus...” He looked down at himself, his still engorged length, taking in Cara and her sticky middle. “Didn't expect that...”

Cara was in stitches. She was giggling heartily instantly at his reaction to what he'd done. "That's what you get for taking control! As much as I loved it..." When he pulled back a bit to look down at her she bucked her hips up hard and unseated his leverage over her, rolling them onto their sides, then his back, before climbing atop him and straddling his waist. There was no need to hold his arms at bay; it was her turn now, and he knew it. Reaching down, Cara fingered the mess on her belly, collecting some on her fingertips and bringing them to her mouth. "Mmmm...you taste good. I knew I should have let you put it in my mouth..." She swallowed, licking her lips clean before leaning down to him and kissing him hard on the lips, bruising them, together. Over him the way she was, her hips rocked and rolled, her labia parting over his member as it slid lengthwise between her folds, her juices wetting him. He began to groan low, guttural. "I know, baby; I know. It's alright. I'm here... And it's all your turn to cum for me, now..."

Time elapsed. The next time Cara looked up at the clock beside her bed it told her they'd been there being intimate for nearly three hours. Her gaze fell on her lover's body as he lay there naked beside her beneath her bed sheet, their bed sheet. What happened between them was a long time coming. It was a reunion of everything they have already been and a promise to be more going forward. Her pale eyes traversed his body, memorizing him all over again. No, Birkhoff hadn't changed at all since they'd been apart but that didn't mean she felt she could slack about being his girl. He was hers too, after all. Nothing about them had to change for them to continue to be good to each other, to be on top of the love they shared and never let it die.

"Stop thinking so loud; I'm trying to sleep here." Seymour commented, monotone, smirking while his eyes remained closed, his body still completely relaxed.

"And here I was under the impression there would be no sleep for us..." She chuckled low and got close to him, breathing in his scent as she waited to hear an answer from him, to hear the continuity of his breathing stagger and become uneven.

It did. "Did I say that out loud? Oh...yeah. I remember now. It seems to me that I was just reading some underscored subtext intricately written in code by my genius girlfriend... No?" He grinned slyly, looking up at her through one squinted eye.

She grinned, chuckling low, leaning in and pressing a chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Are you blaming me or...?"

"Hell no! Nothing to blame you for; I love the fact you don't want to sleep with me, that we're going to be too busy with the sex." Birkhoff smirked sheepishly. He always referred to their coupling as 'the sex.' Apparently their sex was the only sex that existed to him, the only sex that mattered. "Plus, you talk dirty to me one more time and I won't be sleeping so... minor disagreement averted." He gave her a winning smile with both eyes staring up at her now. "So what's it going to be...Silhouette Wayfarer?"

"What?" She laughed softly. "What is that?"

"Your new handle...if you dare to accept it."

“My new handle is a thesaurus’ version of Shadow Walker.” It wasn’t a question and it wasn’t requiring of a response. It was an observation, nothing more.

“Well, yeah...” He blinked and grinned. “But it’s much more feminine and I was thinking you’d need something shadowy and mysterious while conveying power and authority. Shadow Walker approved!” He gave her a quirky expression with thumbs up. “Doesn’t get more authorized than that on the dark web...”

“While I appreciate the generosity of Shadow Walker, a large measure of assistance and all that, I think this requires something more than Shadow Walker and his female counterpart can give. Something...daring and...god-like.”

“Not offended; no problem.” Birkhoff propped himself up so that he could see her better. His prone form on its back wasn’t doing much where his sightlines were concerned. “We could always keep that between us...”

Cara laughed and smacked him playfully on the chest. “Yeah sure, so I can stroke your ego some more than it even needs! I don’t know...” She pulled a face, teasing him.

“Hey! Not fair, my dear...my Kitten...” He shook a finger at her back, in jest. “But all my egotistical bullshit aside, you’re the expert; what do you think your handle should be?”

“Something Egyptian related, ancient, well-phrased...” Her head was propped up on her palm which lay against the curve of her cheek and jawline. Cara’s pale eyes were attentive, all about him and their conversation. Despite the fact both of them were completely nude under their covers... “Brainstorm with me?”

“Sure, although that will predominantly consist of me listening and nodding and playing with terms already noted; again, I’m not the expert, Kitten, you are.”

Her eyes took on a mischievous light. “I’ll bet that turns you on and sends you ass over heels for me, doesn’t it?”

“You think you know...” He grins, pulling her in and kissing her lips with renewed vigor. “I’ll be taking that out on you in bed for weeks.”

She chuckled into the kiss and purrs. “Good to know...”

⌘

The night faded quickly upon the return of the sun. By the time either one of them was aware, it was sunrise. As promised, Cara and Birkhoff spent the entire night doing something that wasn’t sleep. And when it wasn’t sex it was conversation, which helped to figure out how best they were all to proceed from here, in business and in pleasure. The sun wasn’t visible in the room she shared with him but she had an internal clock and right now, the alarm was going off like a fog horn, deep and persistent, until she rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. She was a slender but curvaceous young lady but her spinal column showed through the skin of her back in spots despite her healthy weight. The brunette looked back over her shoulder at her lover briefly; Birkhoff laid there and looked back, wordless. She smiled and

when he smiled back, Cara knew they'd be okay. They'd gone through so much, both in each other's presence and apart from each other, but they would still be okay.

She snatched Seymour's shirt off the floor, an aged graphic t-shirt with the logo for Danzig on the front. She laughed lightly; it would have been a giggle if the woman had been capable of it. "I didn't know you were a Danzig fan."

"I'm all kinds of surprising, Kitten. Actually, I started listening when I left. A little piece of you I could keep with me...much like your photo."

As he spoke, Cara slipped the t-shirt over her head and stood, gathering her barely there thong panties off the floor too. They were bright blue and rather shocking compared to how tame she usually was in the clothing department. He was done by the time she pulled them up and turned around; seeing him sprawled there in her bed, knowing he was still naked, did things to her. Apparently, she was insatiable... "You're sweet, Nerd."

"Uh, I'm actually quite selfish, by nature."

"So am I."

"Well, aren't you the one..."

She chuckled as she moved around the room. "Let's both get something to eat and have a shower... Not necessarily in that order, either..."

"Together? Oooh...that could be dangerous..."

"To get clean, Nerd; not to get any dirtier..."

"I was going to say..."

"Why? Don't think you can handle me, slippery when wet?" She chuckled some more, throwing him a shirt of her own that would fit. It was maybe two times her size, something she usually used to sleep in, a big Superman emblem over the chest.

"I might have misread the directions on nerdy hot chicks in the shower, naked and wet and... I'd probably end up in traction."

At that Cara doubled over, laughter spilling out of her like water down a fall... "We wouldn't want that. It's probably best we go at the shower one at a time, then, hmm?" The look she gave him then was amused but soft and appreciative. No one had ever loved her like him.

"Suppose so...though that takes some of my fun away."

"Traction, Nerd..."

"Okay, fine! It's a deal."

An hour and two showers later they were in the mess hall with the rest of the DMS and their friends, formerly of Division. Alex and Owen were still in the line because he was adamant

the allotment of apple and banana to go in the oatmeal wasn't enough and was pleading his case to the employee behind the counter who looked angered more every moment, all while Alex yanked on his sleeve and begged him to check out. Nikita and Cara found each other across the crowded mess first, eyes locking. By the time they came together at the table, the whole group was present. Cara was pounding coffee and bacon with scrambled eggs. "Good coffee today; how did everybody sleep?"

"Well, thank you." Nikita was quiet beyond that, her eyes guarded.

"Better than the two of you, by the look of it..." Michael commented, a slight smirk taking his lips. Nikki punched him hard in the upper arm. "Jesus! I mean, you two look great! Happy...and all that..."

"Like, the two of you got lucky as fuck!" Owen grinned.

Cara would have blushed if she hadn't been used to the inappropriate commentary from them and Birkhoff alike. "Oh, no, Sir... We got lucky because we fucked!" She paused for effect before finishing. "Many times..."

"Oooooohh!" A resounding sound of triumph and support came from Michael at that, Alex and Nikita smirking like cats that at the canaries. Owen didn't quite know how to react; he was in a state of minor shock. Birkhoff had probably been right about him; if he wasn't in love with Alex and committed to her, he likely would have come after Cara. Cara had been the only other available heart that cared about him there, aside from Alex, since Nikki had always belonged to Michael.

Birkhoff was smiling wide, cocky. "Why, yes, thank you; I am not only a computer hack, expert, guru, Shadow Walker, etc. etc, but I also claim the title 'Mister Satisfaction.' Because it's guaranteed..."

Cara pulled a face, grimacing briefly. "Nerd, ewwww, you're drunk on sex. Go home."

"I can't believe we talk about sex as much as we do now." Alex shook her head, smiling nonetheless.

"Division's dead, baby." Owen smirks. "I think we all get it on now a lot more than we did. No bosses to disapprove...the gossip's good."

"Since when did you become the authority on sex conversations, Owen?" Michael asked.

"I don't think it's about that." Alex said. "I think it's because we're all friends here, family even, and we've known each other so long it's...it's familiarity. It's because we're all comfortable."

"Since I started having it... A lot of it..." Owen gave a wide grin before Alex hit him, too; a solid punch in the chest. "Oof!"

Birkhoff and Cara smiled at one another, chuckling at the goings on in their circle of friends, of family, before getting to the food on their plates and finishing up. The DMS definitely

wouldn't win any awards for their chow, but it was better than some. They served scrambled eggs, bacon, and oatmeal with all the fixings daily but in order to give the illusion of choice, the chefs made country fried steak on Thursdays and biscuits and gravy on Fridays.

"So, maybe we should discuss the mission? I think we all need to hop on this pretty fast." Michael commented. Everyone seemed to agree but no one said anything else following. It took some time before Cara finished chewing the last of her food, leaning in over the table to speak to them. She quieted her voice and softened it so only her group could hear. Granted, it was far from dead silent in the mess hall anyway, but she couldn't afford to chance it. "Birkhoff and I both came up with my online handle last night. We'll have to start making the rounds online, hacking, editing, backdoor posting; really, the goal is to make my persona believable with enough background on the web that Sorise-St. John isn't going to think twice about who he could be talking to. Plant enough seeds and eventually there's a forest..."

"Too dense to see past..." Good idea, you two." Nikita smiled, proud.

"Standard hack tool, Nikki; if you're going to infiltrate the system, populate the field with too much information to sort through. A mole in an organization counts on their ability to get lost in the crowd, blending in; that's why they're so effective, not because they were too good or too smart. That's kind of what we're going for here." Seymour replied.

"So what's your handle, Car?" Owen asked, muffled, mouth full of oatmeal and banana.

"Ammut Devours."

"Sounds scary; so, what's it mean?"

At Owen's reply, Cara smirked, chuckled a little bit and then settled in to explain. "Ammut, some say, was a goddess. Others say she was a demon; there is no actual documentation in history to verify the former claim and the latter claim is based in the mythology of the being that was documented. She's only ever referred to in hieroglyphs and texts as the 'devourer of hearts' and only appears in reference to the burial and funereal rite." Everyone gave her their full attention as she carried on. "You see, in ancient Egyptian culture, they believed when the dead first crossed into the spirit realm their final judgment would come. We all believe in a final judgment too, but it was never a matter of Heaven or Hell for them. They only had one place, the Underworld, the spirit realm. At the time of judgment, Anubis – he's the jackal headed god of embalming and conductor of souls, god of the necropolis – he stands before a large scale, the scale of Maat, one side weighted with a feather, the feather of truth, the other is where he places the heart of the deceased. If the scales balance, or if the heart happens to be lighter than the feather, the deceased's soul gets to join the rest of the spirit realm, to endure and walk in the day, coming back to its body by night to rest. If the heart weighs more than the feather, Ammut will snatch the heart from the tray, devouring it, and the deceased's soul will – in essence – cease to exist, neither here or in the spirit realm. At least, never to be at peace... The texts are a little confusing as to the actual fate of the soul this happens to, as ancient Egyptian scripts also state that no soul will cease to exist so long as a person remains in life to speak their name aloud and remember them, so..."

"Wow, that's rough..." Birkhoff squirmed.

“Well, yeah, but if the person lived a good life, a just life, when they were alive to see it then they had nothing to worry over.”

“Just for me, because I’m really getting interested in this stuff...” Alex said. “What did Ammut look like? Since you mentioned Anubis wore a jackal’s head...?”

“Well, first, I should say that the gods and goddesses in the mythology of ancient Egypt were always depicted with the heads of certain animals but it was also said in texts that they were the first pharaohs and queens of Egypt and as such, were men and woman. Once achieving their station, achieving immortality, they received the power to change form at-will to any animal or being of their choosing. So, yes and no on the heads of animals; but, Ammut’s body was part lion and part hippopotamus with the head of a Nile crocodile.”

“And they worshipped her!?” Alex asked, incredulous.

“Oh, no! She embodied all the ancients feared, threatening to bind them to eternal restlessness and never to gain the immortality they so desperately wished to attain.”

“And who was this Maat you spoke of, the one whose scale it was...?” Owen asked, getting interested, too. He loved a good story.

“She was the goddess of truth, of purity and piety. The feather was the measure of goodness and truth one would be expected to live up to.”

“Well, shit! If that’s the case this Sorise-St. John guy should be afraid of you knocking on his proverbial door.” Michael reasoned.

“He doesn’t think he’s doing anything wrong, Michael. He thinks he’s the one that’s justified. From everything we know of him, which is a considerably small amount, yes; but, everything we know says he considers himself to be on par with or the reincarnation of Osiris, the god of all gods at the time in ancient Egypt. He was the father of life and light and love and governed over all things.”

Nikita finally spoke, seeing the sleight of hand Cara was attempting. “And that everyone else is guilty, unjust; he’ll take you in because you would represent his war hammer. You would destroy for him. You plan to infiltrate his organization, don’t you? Not just online but in person, up close and personal.”

Seymour scoffed a laugh. “That’s not the plan.” His face fell when he looked at Cara. “Right!?”

She’d almost feared having this conversation with him. Cara knew he would disapprove of the plan she’d developed, a plan she’d already vetted with her father and began to plan with Joe before the rest of her old team arrived – the week before, to be precise. “I...we haven’t really gone through logistics and strategy yet, Nerd.”

“You could have mentioned that! We should have discussed this, Cee!”

“We’re discussing it now.” Owen growled. “Calm your squirrely ass down.”

“Nobody asked you, Sam!” Seymour called him by his given name, the name Amanda/Helen had erased along with the criminal element he used to be, only to give it back to him just to help decimate Nikita’s forces and potentially end their destruction of her and Division. “Shit, you worship the ground Cara walks on! She’d probably tell you to lick the floor clean and you’d do it!” Birkhoff’s frustration and anger was evident.

Cara’s eyebrows shot up onto her forehead, almost reaching her hairline. “The fuck is that supposed to mean!?”

“Nothing, Jesus...I don’t know! Okay? But you should have...”

Michael cut everyone off. “No! Goddamnit, shut up! Everyone stop!” Nikita was chastising them all at the same time, both of them chiming in at once. Michael continued alone. “Cara has whatever right she wants to tell us things or keep us in the dark. This is her show and we all pledged to help her. We’re supposed to support her and give her what she needs, not question her every call and plan or strategy. If she says we’re infiltrating then that’s what we’re doing. Again, we’re all on need-to-know, and sometimes we don’t have to. Maybe we’re better off not knowing; that’s her call. Yes, we’re all a team but there’s still hierarchy. This isn’t Division. This is a new ball game with all new players and all new rules. We adapt. Got it?”

“I mean, I haven’t even sorted through all the details yet, anyway. I asked for your help because you all wanted to give it. And not just because I need it, because they need it, but because I want it! I love every one of you guys; you’re my family. We are family. I value your input, your feelings.” Cara looked around the table at them and smiled.

None of them spoke any further on any subject until they were all done in the mess hall. The silence was pleasant and it gave all of them the chance to mentally catch up to the change their lives had taken. The new life they were all embarking upon was quite fitting; not a single person there could have fully retired and been happy doing milk and cookies in front of the tube every night. That was all fine and good for a while, to relax and decompress after a mission or something, but not for forever. They could never sit still forever. The need to help, to help raise the underdog while pushing down the oppressors; everyone there would never walk away from a fight against someone taking advantage of their power, their station over someone else.

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