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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES

CENOTAPH

In 2089, a man returns to his old team, annoying the hell out of his former partner. Time-traveling is not an easy business, especially if you cannot trust the man beside you. Now they have to work together again, awakening feelings that should have died with their separation but were just resting in a very uncomfortable coma.

The fight against temptation, missions gone wrong, faceless enemies, and irritating teammates all conspire to make their lives a perfect postcard from Hades.

With their future at stake (talk about time-traveling mayhem), they only have one option. And that option is a cenotaph.

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CENOTAPH

By Gabbo de la Parra

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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CENOTAPH

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

Anime-style drawing of two men. One, dark-haired, lies on the floor with his semiautomatic trained on the chest of the blond-haired one who looms over him. The blond has a really large sword ready to pierce his adversary's chest. The frozen image debates between black and white and sepia; it speaks not of hesitation but of controlled fury. Both their gazes scream things that cannot be spoken.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Consider this particular moment, an intense expression of love-hate, the joy of a fight, violence, and yet also something stopping us from outright killing each other; a connection, a passion, admiration, respect, love, a past, a future? How did we get to this moment? Were we friends before a betrayal? Or enemies who despite a connection were destined to fight on opposite teams? Or was it something much more complex? Is this where it ends or is it just the beginning? Things do tend to get confusing when time traveling.

Who are we, whether we live in an alternate, sci-fi, dystopian, or contemporary reality (just no fantasy, paranormal, supernatural, magic, etc.), what we look like (bonus points for at least one being an ethnic minority), and our personalities are completely up to you. At its core, our story revolves around this particular moment where we aren't sure whether we want to murder or shag each other (or both); a moment of elation and joy of fight that only comes from dark pasts, a life where there is a blurred line between passion and violence.

Graphic sex is not necessary but very welcome (no BDSM but they can fight it out to determine who gets to top). HFN is fine but not necessary (no HEA, please). Author, get in touch with your darkly violent passionate time traveling side and have fun.

Sincerely,

Alicja

Story Info

Genre: science fiction/near future

Tags: enemies to lovers, time travel, reunited, interracial, switch/versatile, spies/secret agents

Content Warnings: no HEA/HFN

Word Count: 19,129

CENOTAPH
By Gabbo de la Parra

1. NOTHING WRONG WITH PUNCHES

AURORA CITY.NOVEL CALIFORNIA.YEAR 2089

CLEPSYDRA PROJECT.BUILDING G

“I don't know why they had to bring him back.”

“Cause Singh's the best.”

“Fuck you, Jagger. I *am* the best. That idiot forfeited the title when he quitted four years ago.”

“Oh, boohoo. Spare me your whining, Fondant. I still don't understand why you hate your ex-partner so much.”

“I have my reasons.”

“Well, you gonna have to swallow your reasons 'cause the president specifically asked for him to return.”

“I'm pretty sure there was a lot of money and cocksucking involved...”

Quinn Fondant knew this to be more than BS since it was precisely due to Veer Singh's religious beliefs that their whole partnership (and whatever that partnership was becoming) had gone to the frigging toilet.

They were watching Veer talk to Ramsey, their team leader, through a two-way mirror. In any other facility this would have been a place for questioning suspects, but in Clepsydra Project it was just a way for team members to learn about their coworkers unobtrusively. Team Aegis was a six-member unit even though they were partnered in pairs. Unluckily for Quinn, his partner, Len Faludi, had died in a car accident the previous month, leaving the team incomplete.

“We all know you're a perv and resolve everything with sex, but don't put your methods on other people,” Jagger huffed, annoyed. He inserted a finger into the collar of his ill-fitting shirt and pulled as if the thing was strangling him.

Quinn's demeanor was all a facade. It was his way of keeping his team at bay regarding his private life. If they thought he was a pervert, they wouldn't try to fraternize with him and thus leave him alone to nurse his aggravated heart. Being part gypsy helped a lot since, in Aurora, many of his quote

unquote cousins had amassed great fortunes catering to the darkest pleasures of their fellow citizens. Although, he was the odd man out since his mother's people looked at his fair hair (a gift from his *Frenchy* father) askance.

"You got that one right."

"Huh?" Jagger looked at him perplexedly for a second (a half movement away from scratching his head) and hissed, "Fucking queen of non-sequitur."

For him it was a joke that every time his teammates wanted to make him feel special they used queen instead of Quinn. "At least I am not a size queen, like you, hotshot."

"There's nothing wrong with loving big boobs." Jagger was a big guy, six-foot-two and brawny; known for his lack of fashion sense, his persistence in keeping those few sparse hairs on his head, and his love of petite women with giant chi chis.

A total wiener but good at his job.

Quinn chuckled, making a gesture like squashing massive breasts. "Sure, especially when you put them together and they look like a hunk's ass."

Jagger rolled his eyes. "We need to pay attention to their conversation."

Inside the not-interrogation room, Veer laughed at something Ramsey said. Blinding white teeth and a complexion so fair (what was that they called it in India, wheatish?) that he didn't exactly look Hindu. His dark hair was still thick and frigging wonderful, although a bit shorter than the last time they had seen each other. And that little, almost pencil thin mustache paired with the hair neatly trimmed on his chin was pissing Quinn off, triggering all kinds of things he shouldn't be thinking of.

"For shits and giggles? It's not like we don't know him already," Quinn growled at Jagger. The big man had joined the team a year before Veer abandoned them.

Before Jagger could come up with a suitable response, Veer and Ramsey stood up and shook hands.

"Thank God they've finished. Five more minutes around you, and I'd have punched you in the face," Jagger murmured under his breath.

"And the crowd roars. Ahhhhh, 'cause you don't have Hollander and Russo to cower behind... ahhhhh." Quinn had his hands around his mouth, making the far away noises of an agitated mob at a baseball game.

He was the one with a punch (or three) reserved for Veer Singh.

2. THE DELICATE BALANCE

Same long, blond hair, same lean, muscular body, same mesmerizing, gypsy eyes. Quinn Fondant hadn't changed much since the last time Veer had laid eyes on him. The permanent scowl on his face was new though.

Four long years.

"Well, boys, you know Veer Singh, so introductions are unnecessary," Ramsey commented in his crisp tone. He looked at his watch. "Russo and Hollander are about to return. Let's go to the time chamber."

Veer shook Jagger's hand. The tallest of their team gave him a warm smile.

"Can I talk to you for a sec, Ramsey?" Quinn asked, giving his back to Veer as Veer moved to shake his hand.

"We're talking." Ramsey arched an eyebrow but didn't stop walking. Building C wasn't that close.

"It'd be in the best interest of Team Aegis if you partner Mr. Singh with one of the other guys."

"And why would I do that? You're the one without *your other half*."

The growl that came out of Quinn was one Veer knew well.

"Yeah, that answers my question." Ramsey didn't even look at Quinn. "I'm not going to disrupt the delicate balance of each pair just because you feel whiney today, Fondant. Besides, you were partners with Singh before. You can pick it up where you left it."

"Let's be professionals." Veer offered his hand again as they entered the elevator. This time Quinn could not avoid it without being blatantly rude.

The murderous look Quinn gave Veer as they shook hands would have made any other man shake. The only thing it did to Veer was make his resolution to go through this ordeal firmer.

I can do this. I know I can do it.

The creepy background music felt like the soundtrack of Veer's partnership with Quinn. One part *Carmina Burana*, two parts *Phantom of the Opera*, two pinches of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and a hot lot of *Gladiators Gone Wild*.

Metal doors slid open with a soft whoosh, and Quinn hurried as far as he could from Veer without separating from the group. Veer sighed inwardly. They walked through the crowded lobby, people moving fast in all directions, an organized chaos—completely different from the one inside Veer. Still in silence, they crossed the tall glass entrance into a sunny morning. It should have been a starless night full of gray storm clouds for the way they mutely moved toward the building where the most treasured jewels of the government changed the course of history.

All seven buildings (from A to G) looked like the headquarters of any corporate business, but unlike most reflective glass towers, these were not just heavily armored but could withstand an actual nuclear explosion once their doors were closed. They were in the middle of the city, and this was not a military complex, but the powerful weapons and shields protecting those jewels were so subtle; regular citizens had no clue of what was happening in it.

Fingerprints and retina scanners acknowledged their identities, and they boarded another elevator inside Building C. The three time machines were on the seventeenth floor. One minute into the four-minute ascension, Jagger asked, “So Singh, what have you been up to?”

“Worked with Mossad as a consultant for two years, then went back to Punjab to help my grandfather manage some business.”

“Your grandfather the Maharaja!?” There was a bit of fangirl tone in Jagger’s question.

“Yep,” Veer said.

Quinn snorted.

The doors opened with a ding.

“You’ll know all about Singh’s princely adventures as soon as we finish our meeting,” Ramsey offered casually as they were fingerprint and retina checked once more outside the middle time chamber, Octo. The other two, Septem and Novem had their exterior red lights on.

Quinn snorted again.

Guards in Kevlar body suits nodded at them somberly.

Enough.

“Do you have a problem, Fondant?” Veer poured all the things tormenting him into his aggressive tone.

“No. Do you?”

They were nose to nose, eyes narrowed, fists closed, and chests puffed.

“Hey, you two, stop it.” Ramsey pushed them apart. “I have no doubt that Fondant might have a boner for you, Singh, but I know your religion forbids extramarital sex. So unless you two gonna hitch it, fucking cut it out. I don't have time for BS.” He pushed a thick finger into Quinn's forehead. “Behave. The rumors that Faludi's death wasn't an accident but a suicide will not help you if Singh issues a complaint. *Capish?*”

“Yes, sir.”

The people inside the chamber, which was a vast circular space covered in computers and monitors and all kinds of giant gadgets, had been looking at them as if they were ready to place bets. As soon as Quinn and Veer separated, there was some sort of collective telepathic, “Boooh” within the chamber.

An alarm went off, and, thirty seconds later, the time capsule's titanium door slid upward, expelling hisses and fumes. Russo, naked, covered in sweat, with his reddish hair plastered to his forehead, stood up from his squatted position and staggered out; the door closed behind him with a bang. An assistant put a robe over him and gave him a bottle full of rehydrating liquid. He was somewhat thinner than how Veer remembered him but looked fine.

Two minutes later, Hollander was puking all over the entrance of the time capsule as he crawled out. Veer was surprised by the two massive red dragon tattoos covering Hollander's arms. Those were new.

“I told you not to eat that effing lamb!” Russo yelled from where he sat like a prize fighter between rounds, and the assistant massaging his shoulders reinforced that image.

“Oh, shut up.” Hollander cleaned the dribble on his mouth with the back of his hand as another assistant helped him to walk toward Russo.

Team Aegis was back together.

3. IT'S AN ORDER, CABASH

Byron24 Saint, one of Clepsydra Project's Linchpin Analysts, entered the conference room, ready to explain their mission. Ramsey had warned them the guy was new and might seem a little odd, advising them to go easy on him. Quinn was happy his parents hadn't jumped into that wagon of adding numbers to names. People were getting stupider by the minute with them. An actress had named her child Emma348756 because that was her great-grandmother's high school locker combination.

Saint wasn't the bespectacled, skinny geek Quinn expected. He only got one thing right and that was the skinny part. Black spiked boots, black ripped T-shirt advertising Catskull Band, and manliner for days, all topped with a mat of dark blue hair strategically covering one eye. He had a cute little bubble butt though; unfortunately, Quinn was too busy trying to keep his hands from Veer's neck and his mind from that frigging Punjabi, kickass form.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Saint moved the hair covering the one eye with a flick of his head. The sepia photograph of a handsome forty-something man, dressed in the manner of explorers of the nineteenth century (khaki everywhere, including his quasi-helmet hat) appeared on the half-wall screen facing their long table. "Jean-Luc Bilodeau was one of the biggest promoters of a civilized Algeria, but he was killed by a male dancer slash prostitute in an Algiers gentlemen's club in 1938." Now the image changed into a recently taken picture of the same man, wearing nice Victorian clothing, most probably taken by Russo and Hollander a few days ago. "We have determined that preventing his death would stop the taking of Algeria by the Germans and thus give us a strategic advantage during WWII to shorten it."

They were used to this seemingly random linking of events that unleashed others, but he couldn't understand why they kept changing things from WWII instead of completely avoiding it. Quinn understood the idea of saving perhaps millions of lives with the shortening of the war, but wouldn't it be better if the war hadn't happened at all?

Russo voiced Quinn's thoughts. "We go through this every time Upstairs sends us to change something to impact WWII, why not just kill fucking Hitler?"

Saint chuckled and gave Russo an angelic smile, belying his darkness-related ensemble. The kind of smile one would give a cute toddler asking a silly

question. “The key to using time travel effectively is to change something that seems random, almost unimportant. You don’t go and kill Hitler—or the Christ, you kill their grandparents. Nevertheless, every major event in history occurs for a reason. If we erase them, we might awake in a completely different world. I’m pretty sure you all have watched the *Back to the Future* trilogy since it is mandatory for all involved in Clepsydra Project.”

They all murmured in agreement.

“All right. Your mission is to save Bilodeau.” Another picture popped on the screen. The man looked a lot like Veer, but the eyes were wrong. Well, it was something Quinn would notice, he doubted the others did. “The killer,” Saint informed them.

“Wow, Singh. That could be your great-great-granddaddy!” Hollander guffawed.

“Precisely.” Ramsey rose to his feet. “Veer would take the place of the assassin. He and Quinn would be dancers at the club, it wasn’t named a club then anyway, but you get the idea.”

“Aren’t we too old and big to be dancers of that era?” Quinn was confused. Men of that time, especially these type of European business men, preferred boy-looking whores. Although, there was nothing boyish about the killer.

“This club catered to men with a taste for something a lot less delicate.” Ramsey grimaced. “Singh will fit right in because he looks like the killer. *You*, due to your long, blond hair and sexy ass. And you already speak French.”

“Well, I’m glad I have impersonated a stripper before. If not, this would be devastating. Ten years of military training for nothing,” Quinn stated, waving his head like crazy person.

All catcalled and wolf whistled, including Saint. Veer kept his mouth shut, averting his gaze from Quinn.

Good.

“Okay, now that we’ve all let our inner children breathe for a moment, let’s continue.” Ramsey did a calm-down movement with his hands.

“May I ask why this man was killed?” Jagger interjected.

“The details are sketchy. Some accounts mark it as a crime of passion. Nevertheless, we have to consider all possibilities, including business rivalry or an impatient heir. The procurers will figure that one out if needed.”

The procurers were Russo and Hollander; they scouted the terrain before every mission, securing locations and making contacts. Ramsey and Jagger were the muscle and logistic coordinators. Quinn and his partner were usually the ones in contact with the target, unless the physical needs of the mission called for something closer to the other members of Aegis, in which case they'd switch roles.

"Hollander and Russo have secured a location in the Cabash as operation base. They will contact the assassin and convince him to take his manliness somewhere else. If he doesn't cooperate, well..." Ramsey shrugged.

They tried their best to avoid killing people while in the past. As Saint had mentioned, killing grandparents might erase the life of someone important and unintentionally mess up history in immeasurable ways.

"Jagger and I," Ramsey continued. "We'll go after Singh and Fondant to be their backup at the club and assure that everything with Monsieur Bilodeau goes smoothly."

"Hold on a sec. What you mean with smoothly? We're just impersonating dancers. No assassin, no murder." Quinn didn't like where this conversation was heading to.

The answer came from Saint. He coughed first to call their attention to him. "As of yesterday, there is a new directive enforcing the minimal change in events. In this case, for example, since we know Bilodeau was killed while being intimate with the dancer, mister Singh most probably would have to at least give a *handjob*." Saint's shrug attempted to be an apology, but it felt like he didn't give a rat's ass if Veer had to let the man go all the way.

All eyes landed on Veer.

Come on say something, you can't have sex before marriage.

"If it's an order..."

"That's all you have to say, Singh?!"

All eyes landed on Quinn this time. His outburst had been accompanied by him springing to his feet and slamming the table.

"Fondant! If Singh doesn't have a problem with the new regulation, why are you screaming like a damn lunatic?" Ramsey shouted at him.

Quinn had locked eyes with Veer, but now his gaze moved around the room. The others were staring at him agape. He growled, "I don't know." He

really didn't know and didn't want to analyze the reasons for his sudden explosion.

“Then sit down and shut the fuck up!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now.” Ramsey closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers. “We have a week to learn everything we need to know about time and place. We have trackers following our players' movements to learn their routines.” He sighed, clearly exasperated. “Since this day appears to be heading the wrong way, go home and rest. Come back tomorrow acting like adults and ready to work like mules.”

All arched eyebrows were aimed at Quinn, except one. Veer's face was effectively blank.

Shit.

4. NOT A DAY FOR THAT

After that disastrous first meeting with his old team, Veer had been trying to hail a cab unsuccessfully for the past fifteen minutes. Cyprus West was always busy. It was the divider between the ten blocks that formed the business district of Aurora, five 24/7 money-making blocks on each side of it; the Clepsydra Project Complex was located between 9th and 10th South, right in the middle of it. Perhaps if he walked to Circular Park Four (only two blocks north) getting a cab would be easier.

Veer would arrange for a driver with the concierge of his hotel. He wasn't against walking; he walked almost everywhere while he was back in *Ambarsar*, but it was better when you knew the vehicle was there waiting for you in case you needed it.

As Veer waited for the light to change to cross Cyprus West and get to the park, the soft purr of a bike settled beside him. He turned to look at it. He would recognize that bike anywhere in the world.

Quinn.

Taking the helmet off and shaking his glorious, blond hair, Quinn simply said without smiling, almost scowling, "Hop on."

His first instinct was to move toward the bike. Veer knew Quinn had an extra helmet in the box, but a different kind of caution stopped him. "Planning on murdering me?"

"Not today." Quinn opened the box and offered the helmet to Veer. "You have been flailing your arms like an idiot long enough. I'm just being a decent partner."

"Are you stalking me, Fondant?"

"Hell no."

Veer still resisted. "These are not riding pants." He pointed downward with both hands.

Arching an eyebrow, Quinn zeroed in on Veer's crotch.

Damn it.

"What is that, leather and silk blend?" Quinn's eyes were still caressing Veer's package. It was distracting the way his head was tilted a little sideways, like a puppy deciding whether to pounce to get the toy or not.

“Er...”

Quinn rolled his eyes and shoved the helmet against Veer's chest. “Just put this shit on and get moving.”

Veer adjusted the helmet and straddled the bike. “Do you already know in what hotel I'm staying?”

With a snort for an answer, the bike roared to life, and they zigzagged through traffic.

The voice of his mentor, Sutlej Singh, emerged from the turmoil in Veer's head. *The only way to conquer temptation is to face it until it doesn't entice you anymore.* And that was why Veer had accepted the reinstatement when it was offered. Unfortunately, his guru hadn't told him what to do with temptation when one was holding his waist, swaying amid fast-moving cars. For some unethical design of Fate they hadn't hit a single red light, therefore Veer was never able to take his hands off Quinn's body. Petrified, he resisted the urge to lean onto that wide back, covered in a royal blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves.

All expectations of surviving the day died when Quinn turned onto Capitol West en route to one of the bridges over the San Joaquin River connecting the west and east sides of the city. His hotel was in Spain West, very far from where they were heading to—because Veer knew where they were going, straight to the one place that was worse than a mine field. Quinn's apartment. In Tarot Towers.

Instead of turning left to go to Tower Eight (where Quinn lived), they turned right, rounding Circular Park Three. Soon the Pegasus Fountain was visible. The five circular parks of Aurora were designed to look like the Yin and Yang symbol in bird's eye view with the fountains located where the contrasting color dots would fall. They entered a multi-level parking space facing the park. On the uppermost level, Quinn thumbed a scanner, and an enclosed parking spot opened; they entered it and the engine went silent.

“So this is where you leave my body to rot.” Veer didn't know what made him say something like that. He knew how quickly Quinn's temper could flare.

Quinn was quiet as he put both helmets in the box. Once they had moved out of the secured space and closed it, Quinn turned to Veer. “If you want me to kill you, just say it with all its letters.”

“Not today.”

“Good.”

“May I ask why do you leave *Morena* here?” Veer asked, confused, because one knew a man loved his bike when he gave her a pet name meaning “dark-skinned” for the black chrome surrounding her.

“You Sikhs are not superstitious and don’t believe in rites and stuff, but there are things out there, man, and when you live in a place like Tarot Towers you have got to be alert. Six months ago, I found some white powder over *Morena* and didn’t think much about it, but then all kinds of crazy things started happening with her.” Unabashed, Quinn started walking with his head high. “I called one of my aunts to do a cleansing and decided to keep *Morena* away from the building and those fuckers.”

Okay, they worked time-traveling; of course there were things out there that logic alone couldn’t define. What men considered science now was supernatural only a couple of hundred years before. Veer would have worked a different solution though. “Why don’t you move if you don’t feel safe?”

“That was my mother’s apartment. I wouldn’t leave it for all the money in the world.”

“I forgot about that, sorry.”

They crossed Circular Park Three in silence. It was high noon, but it wasn’t hot, and a soft balmy breeze followed them. A beautiful spring day that should have assuaged the shadows and murky thoughts roaming furtively inside Veer. Quinn flipped a coin into the Pegasus Fountain as they passed it.

The real name of Tarot Towers was Fanning Complex. The ten towers had been built resembling the curve of a fan. They were infamous throughout the city (and even the country) because ninety percent of all the spiritual workers of Aurora lived in them. Veer had only been here once, a little before he resigned from Clepsydra Project when he’d helped Quinn move after his mother’s death. His partner hadn’t been especially close to the gypsy lady, but her demise had snapped something inside him, and Quinn was seriously devastated.

They had almost trespassed then, stepping into a forbidden threshold.

Veer shuddered.

And it didn’t have anything to do with how cold it was inside Tower Eight. They did a one-eighty inside the elevator to face the door, and, before it could close, a little old lady (the kind you’d see down the streets of Barcelona or

Istanbul or Sicily) emerged out of nowhere and entered. She stared at Veer all the way up to the twentieth floor. Quinn and he exited the elevator, and he couldn't resist turning back to look at her. She gave him a rather creepy "good-bye" wave and mouthed something Veer seriously hoped was "Cute."

They stopped in front of Quinn's clover-green door. "Spooked enough?" Quinn asked as he thumbed the lock's recognition pad.

"Asshole."

Quinn wagged his eyebrows. "Not today."

5. BLOOD AND STRIPPERS' WARDROBE

"Welcome, Veeru," the house computer said.

Veer staggered. "Why did she call me that?"

"The last time you were here, we were friends. I hoped more than friends, but you quitted on me." Without thinking, Quinn smashed Veer against the wall closest to the door, sending a portrait to the floor with a loud crash, both hands pressing on Veer's hard chest. "I would've never abandoned you."

A roar emerged from Veer, and he pushed Quinn. They struggled, hands around throats, knees threatening soft parts. Quinn swept his foot under both of Veer's, and they landed together, rolling on the carpet, knocking aside chairs and knickknacks, destroying the living room in their fury, growls and curses the soundtrack of their battle.

"Should I call 9-1-1, Quinn?"

"Don't you dare, I'll handle this," Quinn yelled to his house computer.

That momentary distraction gave Veer the opening he needed, and a solid punch in the jaw made Quinn's brain rattle in his head. "Fucker!" He grunted, and Veer's eyes went wide like someone discovering something really gross and alive in his salad.

Veer sprang backward and scuttled away from Quinn in a perfect imitation of a startled crab, his face distorted in a wild mask of horror. A leather couch curtailed his escape, and he hissed, "Why did you bring me here?"

"I want answers."

"We were partners for three years. You knew me better than some members of my own family. You knew all the answers before you even had the questions."

True. They had been partnered as soon as they entered Clepsydra Project at twenty-one, after four years with the Marines. Quinn, the child of two colliding words: superstition against science, and Veer, raised to be a saint-soldier but wanting to be so much more. They had become fast friends easily.

"You didn't say good-bye."

Using the arm of the couch to pull himself up, Veer didn't say a word until he was at the door. He opened it and, with a foot outside the apartment, murmured, almost in a whisper, "And I'm not going to say it now."

The door closed with a sad click. Quinn stared at it for an entire hour. His mind not blank but so jumbled with confusing and contradicting thoughts, it was impossible to find a single thread of coherence to use as a lifeline.

As Quinn resurfaced from his catatonic state, he noticed a large blood stain over his shirt. Had Veer stabbed him? Impossible, neither of them had drawn any weapons. Quinn touched the side of his jaw and his fingers came up smeared with dried blood. Then he remembered Veer was wearing the square, bloodstone ring Quinn had given him for his twenty-fourth birthday, a couple of months before their inconclusive separation.

Quinn had thought for a second the ring was a signal, a silent message when he saw Veer wearing it, sitting with Ramsey. Yet his enragement had incinerated that silly idea the minute Veer stepped out of that room acting like he had just gone on vacation for a few months and was ready to pick up right where he'd left off as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

He didn't know how, but Quinn found himself in front of his bathroom mirror. The amorphous blood stain created by the long, dripping cut was right over his heart. *How fitting*. Any normal cut would have trickled along his neck, but no, the mark of the fucking lion had to mess with his wardrobe and his brain.

Quinn chuckled against his better judgment. Singh meant Lion, and for some absurd reason or because of the plain stupidity of his mind, four years ago, Quinn had thought Veer Singh could be *his* lion. They were both lions even if for different reasons, if he believed that his birthdate made him a Leo.

What a fucked up Monday.

April 11th. Shit, Veer's birthday was next Friday. Quinn ran a hand over his face, and the blood from his reopened wound left him looking like a barbarian after an epic battle. He rolled his eyes. "Computer?"

"Yes, Quinn?"

"Contact the store and request two cases of Moongoddess beer to be delivered this afternoon."

"At once, Quinn."

His hangover wasn't as bad as it could have been the next morning.

"Geez, Fondant, didn't know you'd changed to the *ladies*." Russo made a rude gesture with hand and forearm and then pointed at Quinn's jaw. "That's gonna leave a pretty nasty scar, hope it was a nasty battle too."

"I don't see ladies involved. Maybe he adopted a big pussy!" Hollander followed without missing a beat.

"Or he was trying to do us a favor and kill himself, but he was too drunk to aim at his jugular correctly," Jagger counterpointed, guffawing.

Quinn noticed how Veer flinched at the words kill and drunk. He locked eyes with his partner, refusing to be the first to look away.

They would never know who would have won because Ramsey yelled, "Enough." And they both moved their eyes together to look at the team leader. "You two—" Ramsey pointed at them "—three hours of dance lessons."

"Oh, Fondant is not gonna have trouble with that," Hollander commented. "Don't you remember how he *flamenco'ed* the fuck out of that mission we had in Madrid during Franco's dictatorship?"

"Yeah," Jagger joined. "I'm not into dudes, and I was all hot and bothered when he was strutting over that table in that seedy joint. The crowd went wild."

Russo elbowed Veer. "You missed a hell of a show. You could have learned a thing or two."

"He *can* dance," Quinn blurted before his brain could censor his mouth or stop the blood rushing to his face.

All eyes landed on Quinn.

Before he was forced to offer an explanation for his comment, Ramsey rescued him. "We'll do the *fangirling* later. This is a different kind of dancing. Singh and Fondant need to try on outfits and everything else, so move along. Conference Room Alaska, fifteenth floor." Before they could move toward the exit, Ramsey added, "And Fondant?"

"Huh?"

"You can't take your sword on this mission. We can't let you run around Algiers with that thing. This is not *Kill Bill*."

"You only need one kind of sword for this mission!" Russo yelled.

Veer and Quinn left Team Aegis headquarters amid catcalling and wolf whistling. Their destination was within Building D, five floors above their offices. They hadn't even said good morning to each other, and, in silence, they entered and exited the elevator and found the conference room. A man and a woman awaited them. The man was their dance instructor. The woman was in

charge of their costumes? Uniforms? Quinn didn't know what to call the gauzy, translucent genie pants, thong, slippers, and jewels he donned.

Quinn got out of the cubicle where he'd gotten dressed for the lady to check him and do alterations if needed. He wasn't happy about the string teasing his asshole. The clothing was all shades of red and purple, and it went well with his fair complexion. He was fussing with his satin slippers when he looked up and saw Veer.

His partner was a vision in gold and green.

Fuck me.

6. A TIMELESS BIRTHDAY TRIP

Today was his birthday, and, after he divested himself of the fluffy maroon robe, Veer was as naked as when he came into the world. With an ominous hiss, the titanium door slid upward, inviting him to the gullet of a dragon, its spasmodic lights dissimulating their true purpose softly. He wasn't afraid; he had prepared for this. What he hadn't prepared for was the torment of five days around Quinn, exchanging only the bare minimum of words necessary to do their job. They were not acting like partners, and they were about to embark on a mission that seemed easy enough but with many unknown variables. Their lack of true communication made the situation all the more straining.

Veer was mentally prepared to touch and let Bilodeau touch him inappropriately, but the idea of Quinn seeing these acts suffocated him. It was his job, but it would be like spitting on Quinn's face. The only way to avoid that affront was to entice their target to a private area of the club, away from Quinn.

"Are you ready?" The assistant's voice was comforting, similar to a loving father asking if you had your hot milk before bed.

Lost in his own machinations, Veer hadn't noticed he was stalling in front of the door. "Yes. I am." He looked back slightly, and an also-robed Ramsey gave him a thumbs-up. Veer smiled and, with a nod, entered the time capsule.

The bang of the closing door didn't startle him as he crouched, the metal floor feeling warm against his fingers and feet. Veer understood the concept of crouching to start the process; this position mitigated the sensation of being pleated into a million folds as if the machine was preparing you to be stuffed into a match box. But this time the action had a sexual connotation that Veer couldn't shake. He didn't think it had anything to do with the fact that both Quinn and he had been utterly waxed, something that wasn't part of time travel procedure, but a requisite of this particular mission. He tried not to look between his legs at his flaccid cock and hairless balls, but he did, and temptation seized its opportunity, sending a mental image of Quinn's strong fingers caressing his shaft, cupping his sac, teasing his hole.

His traitorous body liked the idea and shivered and hardened in response.

The alarm signaling the beginning of the countdown went off, swallowing his moan. Veer closed his eyes, but that was worse because Quinn's laughing

face jumped at him. An image Veer loved and couldn't seem to be able to provoke since his return. No, Quinn hadn't laughed with him or at him, he had been nothing but cold and distant when they were alone and his usual grumpy but passable self when around the team.

"Two, one."

Veer was reduced to nothing for an infinite second. Lightning zapped him, folding and compressing him. All of a sudden, he was pushed out of the womb of the time-space continuum onto a cold mosaic floor. They were allowed just one second of disorientation, since what or who awaited them on the other side was never an absolute given. Veer tensed, opening his eyes.

"It's all right, buddy. It's all right," Russo and Hollander intoned together. They stood, one on each side of Veer, neither of them touching him.

But Veer's eyes went straight to Quinn, who was seated in a high-backed wooden chair, splayed like a king and wrapped in a black silk *robe-de-chambre*, disheveled and glorious, drinking from a metal goblet.

A growl escaped Veer.

"I think he's in shock." Hollander shifted uncomfortably, stopping his attempt to reach Veer.

"But he did fine in the trial capsule," Russo whispered.

Hollander arched an eyebrow. "You noticed his growling, right?"

"I'm okay," Veer growled again.

"Then stop making those sounds, man," Russo chuckled, pushing a silk robe in front of Veer.

Veer pulled himself up on his own, without his head spinning or his balance being lost. He donned the soft garment and tied it.

"Here, drink." Hollander offered him a goblet. "Happy birthday! We have a surprise for you!"

"We got an Indian cook!" Russo clapped like an excited child. "She's not from Punjab, but she knew what not to cook, and we have a feast for you!"

A table was laden with bowls and trays of dishes, and it smelled delicious. Well, in this moment any food would smell wonderful after twelve hours without any solids. Here is where Veer realized Russo and Hollander were dressed like proper Victorian gentlemen, even their ascots folded to perfection.

He didn't know whether to laugh or commend them. "Thank you, guys, this looks magnificent."

"Don't thank us. Fondant told us where to find her." Hollander pointed with his thumb toward Quinn, who hadn't moved a muscle since Veer arrived. Now, he made a toasting gesture with his goblet toward Veer.

How?

Neither Quinn nor Veer had been to this time before. Was this a truce offering? Veer tipped his goblet. "Thank you."

Hollander drew out a pocket watch and, in a perfect imitation of a train conductor, said, "All right, Ramsey will be here in three, two, one."

With a crackle, Ramsey emerged as if inflated out of thin air. Whooping, he stretched up. "I love it." Of the six of them, Ramsey was the only one who ever came out of the time-travel process like a rollercoaster enthusiast.

The group chuckled, and Russo offered him a robe. "Well, boss, we were waiting for you to start eating."

"Let's dig in then." Ramsey grabbed a plate and started shoveling food onto it. "I haven't eaten Indian in ages."

"Me neither," Quinn grumbled, without moving from his king's chair.

"Then come and get some, you idiot," grumbled Jagger, who had just entered from a different room, still shaking rain (that Veer hadn't heard until now) off himself.

"We weren't expecting you so fast." Hollander handed Jagger a plate.

"And miss my friend Singh's party? Never!"

Four men laughed.

Two only stared at each other.

7. SAVING MISTER PERV

The quote unquote club was a series of large tents along the beach. The dancers of the Saeel tent were congregated in a smaller tent from where they would enter at the appropriate moment to show their assets and entertain and possibly accompany their wealthy clients for more intimate endeavors later. Twenty men in different stages of undress prepared for the night, helping each other to accommodate jeweled armbands, ankle and wrist bangles, studded leather vambraces, cocks in pouches, precious metals chains around their necks, and other myriad things to enhance their muscular bodies.

Strangely, they didn't oil themselves because they were supposed to only smell of manly sweat, which was fine with Quinn; he wasn't a big fan of being slippery unnecessarily. He did notice some of the guys applying some oil in their holes, perhaps to ease the customers' trial of the goodies. If Veer hadn't appeared back in his life, Quinn wouldn't have had any problem trying some of the goods himself. This was a fine lot of prime meat.

The dancers were programmed to enter the tent first one, then two, and then one again until the last two groups were a pair each. As agreed with the club owner, Veer and Quinn would be the sixth set. Ramsey, Jagger, Russo, and Hollander should be in place by the time they came out of the thick velvet curtain separating both tents.

A tall, brawny, tanned man (Quinn had nicknamed Ringmaster) entered their tent and clapped his hands, calling for attention. "Ten minutes to go." He spoke to the group in heavily accented French, then focused on the first dancer. "Akham, you ready? No hashish, right? Good boy." He walked around the tent, checking that the guys were ready and asking questions to some of them. He gave Veer a particularly nasty leer and straightened some of the chains falling over his chest. "Nice, very nice."

It took every ounce of control Quinn had not to pounce and pummel the son of a bitch. Fists clenching, he reminded himself worse things would probably happen once they were outside amongst the men who had come to see the dancers of the Saeel, "the strong" tent.

Music started outside. Applause followed immediately. Ahkam positioned himself by the curtain opening, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck; he jumped a little in place. From Quinn's time perspective one would think

Ahkam was about to perform some Olympic gymnastics routine, not play stripper for a bunch of lusty men. On cue, the handsome man opened the curtain and was swallowed behind it amid roars, cheers, and whistles.

Quinn wanted to peek through the curtain to see if his teammates were there already. The dancers did fifteen minute sets with brief intervals, so Veer and Quinn would have to wait a bit more than an hour and a half for their turn. The men who left the tent didn't return because they were encouraged to mingle with the customers, and before the smell of the ocean and the roasting meats outside their tent could do a number on Quinn's stomach, the minutes flew by, and they were standing by the velvet curtain.

"You good?" Veer asked Quinn as they both did their own shoulder-rolling beside the curtain.

"I'm pumped."

"So am I."

"We got this," Quinn said, his uneasiness lifting a little. The original assassin had been sent with his family out of Algeria, his teammates were surely outside, and, even if he hated Veer's guts, Quinn knew they could depend on each other.

Their music started, and they pulled the curtain aside. With grinding pelvic movements, they advanced toward the low, circular stage amid fifty or so gentlemen reclined on fluffy, ornate cushions. Quinn gyrated toward the right side, Veer in the opposite direction. The hubbub of the tent quieted as they embraced their routine, soon it was only the music, sensual and tormenting, and the many eyes trained on them, as if they were otherworldly visions. Moreover, the seven previous dancers (now seated on men's laps or reclined along them) stared in a mixture of envy and awe. Undulating, gyrating, twisting, Quinn let the enticing voices of *mizmar*, *tabla*, *riqq* and other instruments guide his body, while his mind remained alert, assessing his surroundings.

Veer danced in front of Jean-Luc Bilodeau, and the man was frankly on the verge of drooling. A stab of jealousy almost doubled Quinn, but a hand pinching his ass startled him.

"*Zut Alors*, that's hard," said the man, and Quinn rounded, ready to punch him, only to discover it was fucking Jagger.

Two can play that game, asshole.

Instead of moving away from Jagger, Quinn (armed with a sensual smile) backed and squatted until he was on Jagger's lap, moving as if Jagger was fucking him, which brought cheers and applause from the men around them. He even brushed his lips over his teammate's before returning to the circular stage, leaving Jagger with ninety hues of red on his face and a possible erection.

Their set was nearing its ending, but their target was already hooked. Bilodeau stood by the edge of the stage (which was truly only a round wooden platform rising five inches from the floor), clapping with the stupidest, most loving grin a man could muster up. The music ended with a bang, and cheers exploded from the crowd. Veer and Quinn bowed in the center of the stage. They had a five minute interlude before the next set, so they could approach customers and stay with them.

Bilodeau jumped to the platform and held Veer's hand. That prompted whistling and catcalling from the chatting men. He whispered something into Veer's ear, and Veer's laughter came out deep and teasing like syrup dripping over pancakes.

"Mark," Veer called Quinn. They weren't using their real names. Quinn was Mark, and Veer used the assassin's name, Aarzam.

Quinn moved toward the two men with his most becoming smile. Veer put his hand on Quinn's shoulder and stroked it. Thank goodness for his training because he was a frigging puddle of need. "Monsieur Jean-Luc wants us to go home with him." Veer purred in Arabic-accented French, one hand trailing Quinn's arm, the other doing who-knew-what behind Bilodeau.

"Is he sure he can handle the both of us?" Quinn traced one finger along Bilodeau's chiseled jaw. He had to admit the man was handsome. That helped because it was hard not to look down to try to figure out what Bilodeau's hand was doing *behind* Veer.

"I'm extremely capable, handsome." Bilodeau gave Quinn a disarming wink.

"Then let's have some fun," Quinn exclaimed merrily.

The three of them laughed, descending from the platform, catcalling and cheers from the men in the tent followed them.

Quinn wondered if he'd get fired by blowing the mission and killing Bilodeau himself.

8. THE BLESSING OF CAUTERIZATION

“That was a fucking mess.” Jagger slammed the table back in their rented house in the Cabash.

“Son of a bitch.” Russo threw himself onto a purple sofa.

“That’s why the motherfucker got killed before.” Quinn kicked a weaved basket, scattering figs all over the mosaic floor. “He’s so lucky I didn’t have my sword with me.”

Hollander drew out his pocket watch. “Guys, we have eight hours before transportation starts. If any of you want to get some shut-eye, this is the moment for it.”

Five pairs of eyes landed on Veer.

“Are you all right, buddy?” Ramsey asked.

Veer scrubbed his face with one hand and nodded, closing his eyes. He had known the night would be a disaster the minute Bilodeau asked him if he and Quinn would mind going with him to his apartment. In theory, it should have been better if they stuck together, but something in his gut told him it would be the opposite of good.

The idea of having Quinn near if he had to do things to their target was unnerving enough; still he’d caught something else altogether in Bilodeau’s eyes the moment he suggested the threesome. It had stopped raining at some point while they were in the “strong” tent, and the cloudless sky with one of the biggest full moons Veer had ever seen seemed an ominous sign of the things to come as they wound along the deserted streets from the beach to a group of white, five-to-six-story-high buildings. This was the area where most of the privileged French bachelors lived. Bilodeau was married, but his wife was more interested in the latest fashion of Paris than in her husband’s endeavors on this side of the planet.

The first alarm inside Veer went off the moment the two bodyguards who accompanied them through the city (broad-chested men with thick handlebar mustaches and broken noses) stayed inside the room where Quinn, Veer, and Bilodeau retired to get acquainted. Another duo of bodyguards had greeted them upon arriving to the apartment, but those ended up outside the entertainment room.

Bilodeau offered drinks to Quinn and Veer, and they both pretended to drink them. Both had taken powerful pills to counteract the effects of alcohol and most mind-altering drugs, but as a rule they avoided drinking or eating anything that came from a target if they could get away with it, just in case. Some records of music very similar to the one they had been dancing to were quickly summoned, and, in no time, Bilodeau was undressing as Quinn and Veer danced.

Sitting on a high-backed chair (uncannily similar to the one Quinn had been sitting on when Veer arrived at the Cabash forty-eight hours earlier), Bilodeau ordered them to get closer and take each other's clothes off while kissing. They had donned coats to walk to the apartment, but they were still only in their translucent genie pants and jewelry and nothing else. As long as they were covered on their way back to their base, they shouldn't run into trouble, and their teammates were to be located strategically close by.

Quinn brushed his lips over Veer's and murmured in French. "It's all right. I'm here for you."

Not exactly the thing one'd say to a partner when they were about to start undressing each other for a mission. Veer kept telling himself this was for the greater good, that saving Bilodeau's life tonight would save thousands of lives during the war. Nevertheless, Temptation whispered sibilantly, dripping arousing venom with each word, "*Ah, deep inside you hoped for something like this to happen. You want his hands on you. You've dreamed of his hands on you, his lips, his body pressing against yours...*" Veer shuddered, and Quinn took it for a signal of nerves. "Shhh, let me take care of you."

"How magnificent his devotion," Bilodeau uttered throatily, palming his engorged cock through his short drawers.

Quinn's hands roamed over Veer's torso, but his mouth never touched Veer's again. Quinn's lips followed his hands as he carefully took each piece of jewelry with ceremonial patience, his body moving sinuously around Veer.

Paralyzed, overwhelmed, on fire, Veer was only able to close his eyes and let his body respond to Quinn's attentions. Yes, Bilodeau had told them to undress each other, and, yet, he didn't seem bothered by Veer's stillness. Soon (too soon), Quinn was unlacing Veer's pants, his lips on the small of Veer's back. He covered each revealed inch of skin with a soft kiss that was a feather and a knife, contradicting and embracing—sin and redemption.

Hard and jutting in Bilodeau's direction, Veer's cock was proof of how little control he had. Quinn helped him to step out of the pooling pants, and quickly stood up, shielding Veer from Bilodeau's predatory eyes.

"Beautifully done, Mark. Come and sit on my lap. Let's see what Aarzam can do with that wonderful cock of his." Bilodeau patted his leg and offered a hand to Quinn.

Quinn hesitated only a second and then moved toward their target. He sat sideways, resting the back of his knees over the chair's arm but taking care to purposely grind on Bilodeau's crotch. The man hissed, his eyes rolling backward.

"Go on, handsome. Show us how you milk that nice piece," Bilodeau said once he had recuperated from Quinn's move.

Taking his cock in hand, Veer peeled the foreskin. The head glistened, and a drop of precum emerged from the slit. As his eyes moved toward the two men in front of him, a moan slithered around him. It hadn't come from Bilodeau but from Quinn.

Temptation hissed inside Veer, "*Hiiis haaands...*"

Veer stroked his cock slowly and intently, back and forth, back and forth. His free hand found his neck, and he caressed his collar bone, wishing his hand were Quinn's; his eyes only on his partner, this sinful effort only for him.

Infinite seconds, perhaps minutes later, Bilodeau snapped his fingers. Before Veer could completely shake the sexual haze around him, Bilodeau's bodyguards were bodily lifting and positioning him on a large sofa, his ass in the air and exposed to their host. "Boys," Bilodeau said, and the one word came out hungry and menacing. The other two bodyguards entered. Veer saw over his shoulder as one went straight for Quinn and held him in place over Bilodeau's lap, the other moved behind Veer, unbuckling his pants. "Now we watch." The same hungrily disgusting tone wafted around the room. Veer bucked and struggled, but the two men holding him wouldn't budge. He and Quinn were spitting out curses in several languages, their voices rising with each crude epithet.

A bang like a nuclear explosion sounded outside the room; they all stood petrified for a second that was eternal and suffocating. Veer used that moment to elbow one of his attackers on the nose. The man howled, snapping all the others out of their daze. Ramsey, Russo, Hollander, and Jagger barreled into the room, huge guns drawn, yelling for all to freeze.

Bilodeau and his goons stopped the fight, raising their hands in surrender. Quinn, who had been literally trying to strangle the bodyguard restraining him, kned the man. Doubled, the man fell to the floor. Like lightning, Quinn swiveled and clocked Bilodeau square on the face. "You motherfucker," he yelled in French.

"Stop," Ramsey ordered. "Calm down."

"They were about to rape him." Quinn flailed his arms.

Ramsey just nodded. He walked toward Bilodeau. Veer knew the expression on their team leader's face. If they weren't supposed to keep this man alive, this would have been his last night on Earth. Ramsey stood in front of Bilodeau and slapped him. "You listen and listen well. You'll stay in Algeria and conduct business as usual. You're gonna be a good boy and behave. If you leave the country or try to pull another one of these numbers, I'll come back to take care of you, 'cause shit like this don't happen on my watch. Agreed?"

Veer had heard that tone before and still goose bumps were erupting all over him.

"Jagger," Ramsey called over his shoulder. "Toe."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm gonna leave you something to remember me by. Well, actually I'm gonna take something off, so you can remember this night every day for the rest of your fucking life." Ramsey growled. Perhaps if the exchange were in English instead of French the situation would be a lot less truculent.

Russo, Hollander, and Quinn, who had gotten a weapon from one of their teammates, cocked their guns as Bilodeau's men tried to react to the threat.

"I'll be good. I'll be good," Bilodeau sniveled.

"Of course you will," Jagger chuckled, lifting Bilodeau's ankle. With two skillful moves and a bloodcurdling scream, Bilodeau was divested of his left little toe and the wound cauterized.

"Hey, partner, this'd help." Quinn shook Veer and offered him a goblet, bringing Veer back from the denouement of the previous hour to the safety of their base in the Cabash

"Would you hold me?" Veer's voice sounded small and fragile, but he didn't care what anyone else thought. He just needed Quinn's arms around him.

Quinn didn't say a word. He sat and pulled Veer toward his chest, quietly stroking his hair.

The other four men in the room politely looked the other way.

9. NEW MISSION FROM MONTREAL

“You’ll stay with me until you get your own place. End of discussion,” Quinn said.

Veer opened his mouth, probably to come out with some lame excuse.

“If you argue, you’re gonna get punched.” Quinn closed his fist and showed it to Veer.

“Just stay with him for a bit, Singh. You shouldn’t be alone for a couple of days.” Russo patted Veer’s back.

A rush of jealousy ran through Quinn. Holy fuck, his obsession with Veer was becoming stronger every day.

They were getting dressed after returning from 1938. Hollander pulled down a neon orange long-sleeved Henley. “Yeah, buddy. Fondant has the most decent place, but if you want to stay with anyone else, we will accommodate you.”

Quinn didn’t have time to scowl because his eyes were watering thanks to Hollander’s blinding top. He wanted to growl, though. Veer wasn’t going anywhere but to frigging Tarot Towers.

Veer nodded, finally accepting defeat. “I’ll stay with Fondant.”

“Good boy.” Jagger ruffled Veer’s hair.

Where is my sword, where?

His teammates shouldn’t be touching Veer. That drove Quinn alarmingly nuts. What was Veer saying?

“...so I’m gonna go get my stuff at the hotel and meet you at your place later.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be there waiting for you.”

“Thank you, guys,” Veer said in the general direction of the other men and left the locker room.

“Have you noticed Fondant hasn’t wielded his stupid non-sequiturs since Singh arrived?” Jagger said, donning his canvas jacket.

“You’re right!” Hollander punched Quinn in the shoulder. “Afraid Singh is gonna smack you?”

“Leave the man alone, perhaps he found the light, and he’s just rectifying his annoying ways.” Russo pulled the other two by their collars away from Quinn.

“Assholes,” Quinn hissed between gritted teeth.

“Wishful thinking, babe. It’s never gonna happen.” Jagger blew a kiss as Russo tossed him out of the locker room along with Hollander, all three of them laughing like high school kids.

His wristwatch beeped. The screen read: INT CALL. Quinn tapped it. Iven Fondant, his grandfather, appeared. “Hi, Grandpa. What’s up?” Quinn asked happily; he hadn’t spoken with his father’s father in ages. The old man was eighty-three but looked like he was sixty and in top physical condition. After a life of *kenjutsu* and frugality, it was expected.

Iven arched an eyebrow on the tiny screen.

Oh shit.

“What’s going on, sensei?” Quinn was not going to say he was sorry for calling Iven *grandpa*. His mentor needed to accept that he was *ancient*.

“We need to talk. I need you here ASAP.”

“What? You know I can’t just take a hovercraft and go to Montreal.”

“This is very important. You need to figure it out. Forty-eight hours, no more.” Iven scowled really hard at Quinn and ended the call.

Quinn stared at the 11:07 on his wristwatch. It wasn’t even noon, and it was already another Hades Monday. Ramsey chose that moment to enter the locker room. Good. That way Quinn could ask for a LOA right away.

“The mission was a success. Bilodeau died in his eighties, killed by his third wife after she found him with a lover.”

“Well, we knew it was really improbable that man dying of just old age.”

“True.” Ramsey grimaced. “We saved a lot of lives.”

“That makes me feel real nice inside, boss. By the way, I need a couple of days off.”

“Shaken by what happened to you guys in Algiers?” Ramsey looked at him quizzically.

Something in the back of his mind told Quinn not to tell Ramsey the true reason for requesting LOA. “No.” Quinn rolled his eyes. “One of my aunts just called and asked me to help her with some gang stuff.”

“Isn't it for these things that Police Departments exist?”

“Hey, we are Romani. We deal with this kind of shit ourselves.”

“As long as you don't do anything illegal, and I have to haul your ass out of jail...”

“I can promise no murder, but I'm not gonna hold on the blood.”

“Fine. Just be sure to be back by Friday.” Ramsey took off the robe he had been wearing since they arrived from 1938 and started to pick things out of his locker to change.

“Thanks. You're the best.” Quinn turned around and exited the locker room. “House.” His wristwatch dialed his house.

“Hello, Quinn,” the house computer answered.

“You still have Veer's fingerprints in your database, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Perfect. Give him access to everything. He's staying for a while.”

“Complete access granted, Quinn.”

“All right. I'll be in touch.”

“Good-bye, Quinn.”

“Veer Singh,” Quinn said and the connection was made thirty seconds later.

Veer appeared on the screen. “I haven't reached the hotel yet.”

Is he annoyed?

“Uh, I'm just calling to let you know you have access to the apartment. I'm going out of town for a few days to deal with a family situation.”

“Oh. Okay. See you when you get back.”

Quinn opened his mouth to say good-bye when Veer spoke again. “Be careful.”

“I will. You too.”

Veer nodded. His image dissolved.

Seven hours later, Quinn was entering 1250 René-Lévesque in old downtown Montreal, the part of the city where buildings look short compared to the ones built after the 2035's height limit of three hundred and fifty meters.

He took the elevator to the thirty-fifth floor. It was 21:15 hours, but that was nothing when an office ran 24/7.

Hiromi, his grandfather's personal assistant, showed Quinn to the ample Asian-inspired office. He was glad the assistant didn't have a *kinagashi* ready for him. His old man was known to be a little excessive in his love for everything Japanese. Well, Quinn was not going to grumble about that because all those swordsmanship teachings had saved him from more than one tight spot. *Swords to grandpa. Fire arms to the Marines.* His street smarts were honed before his parents' divorce, prior to everything going to Hades and him getting carted off to live with Iven Fondant.

His grandfather stood, looking at the recently darkened sky over Montreal, those old hands clasped behind his back. He wore a navy blue kimono, his sword hanging from his waist as if just waiting for a signal to draw blood. His short blond-and-white hair shone with reluctant intensity thanks to the city lights outside the floor-to-ceiling window.

"Hello, sensei," Quinn said, striding toward his silver fox grandfather. He really hoped he looked as hot when he was that age.

Iven turned to face him, his brow furrowed. "Your next mission will be to kill a man. Be sure only one man gets killed."

10. FIFTY-FOUR WAYS TO SCREW IT

“Good morning, gentlemen.” Byron24 Saint, their Linchpin Analyst, said in a cheerful tone that didn't have anything to do with his gothic clothes. “Your next assignment is this man.” A burly fifty-something, balding man appeared on the screen in front of the table where Team Aegis sat at, sipping coffees and relaxing. “His name is Dacian Marmion. He is, I mean *was*, a Canadian arms dealer and responsible for supplying the National Liberation Front of Chad. This time we are authorized to eliminate him, but we need to do it on a very specific date to take advantage of a situation.” Byron24 paused, expecting questions, perhaps.

It was a Thursday, and Quinn had come in late the previous night. He and Veer had only chatted a little before climbing onto *Morena* to come to work. Veer looked around, but his teammates didn't seem concerned by the fact that they were assigned to do something they usually didn't do: terminate a target.

“When and where is this specific situation?” Quinn asked, looking absolutely bored.

Byron24 grimaced. “July 30th, 1978, in the back alley of Studio 54.”

Quinn's flinch was almost imperceptible, but Veer was expecting it; they were going to kill a man on Quinn's birthday even if this was eighty-some years before his birth.

“Oh, fuck. I hate the Disco Years.” Hollander flailed his arms, “The clothes are stupid, the music is ridiculous, and those mustaches, gosh.” He looked at Veer. “No offense, man.”

Veer chuckled. “None taken.” Hollander hadn't been around some of Veer's more orthodox relatives; *those* were scary mustaches.

“The only good thing about that era is its porn. Man, hairy pussies, you don't see those anymore.” Jagger had a silly, faraway look on his rugged face.

“Ladies, enough about body hair.” Ramsey said. He made a “continue” gesture at Byron24.

“During that night, Marmion got stabbed in a back alley scuffle. He went to the hospital, but he didn't die. We need to make sure this fight brings his death.” The picture on the screen changed to Marmion and two younger men, one blond and the other red-headed. “These are Marmion's bodyguards. The

redhead is Adair Wilson and the blond is Marcus Townsend. Townsend stabbed Marmion. Apparently, he wasn't happy the boss was fucking his girlfriend, a waitress at Studio 54."

"Go figure." Russo rolled his eyes.

"All right," Ramsey said. "Fondant and Singh will be inside the club to shadow Marmion. The rest will be doing outside surveillance and make sure Townsend finishes him."

"More detailed information is in your stations. Thank you." Byron24 turned off the wall screen.

"You know you're doing inside duty 'cause you're the pretty ones on the team." Jagger sneered at Quinn and Veer.

"Hey, I'm nice looking too," Russo whined.

"He said pretty, but he really meant H-O-T." Quinn grimaced.

Russo blew a raspberry.

"Um, Singh. The president wants a word with you before you go to your station," Ramsey said, looking everywhere but at Veer.

Everyone wolf whistled, and someone singsonged, "There goes an Indian in trouble." Veer didn't know who said it because he was already at the door.

The office of the President of Clepsydra Project was located in building A, an inner sanctum most members of the project only saw once, as President Holden Alicja made it his business to personally welcome each employee when they became part of the system. Veer had seen him twice because he received a commendation six months before he resigned. He had received a phone call from the secretary of the president the previous month, telling him a position had opened in his old team, and that Alicja wanted him to come back if it was possible. Now the man was requesting his presence.

Veer wasn't nervous, but he didn't know what to think.

He identified himself and was ushered into the president's office.

"Ah, welcome, Veer, welcome!" President Alicja stood up and rounded his desk, shaking Veer's hand as he reached him. "Can I offer you anything: tea, soda, coffee?"

"Thank you, sir. Water would be just fine."

“A bottle of water for Mister Singh, Meredith, please.” The president gestured toward a round chair. “Make yourself comfortable, Veer.” He took the opposite chair, a square empty coffee table between them. “How do you feel? I heard about the incident in Algiers.”

“I’m all right, sir. I’ve faced gunshots, stabbings, and many other things. I just see that snafu under the light of my duty.”

“Very well then. I have an assignment for you.”

“Sir?”

President Alicja punched a button on his side of the coffee table and its surface turned into a screen. The picture of a blond man appeared on it. “Do you recognize this man?”

“I do, sir. This is Adair Wilson, one of the bodyguards of our current target.”

“Excellent.” The president was a tall, lanky man in his early fifties, the image of the consummate politician. He smiled in the way a proud parent would smile. “Your mission is to make sure this man dies along with his boss. It must look like an accident, and none of your teammates should know of this side-assignment.”

“Sir? Two deaths? Wouldn’t that change the timeline too much?”

The smile turned beatific. “We’re doing this for the greater good, like everything Clepsydra Project does. You don’t need to worry about the timeline. We’re saving lives.”

Veer nodded. He had been raised to not question his superiors. He had to have faith that what he was doing was for the greater good, for the benefit of mankind. “Yes, sir. That man shall not survive the night.”

The thought of finding out who Adair Wilson was and what would be his future evaporated as duty emerged and filled Veer’s entire being.

11. DANCING WITH SPICES

“Is that what I think it is?” Quinn asked as a delicious aroma welcomed him upon entering the apartment.

“If you’re thinking Butter Chicken, yes it is, according to my sensors,” the house computer informed almost cheerfully.

“I just thought to regale you with your favorite dish before you went out, since it’s Saturday night and all that.” Veer came to the living room, drying his hands with a kitchen towel and wearing a lemon green and fuchsia apron over a brilliant yellow shirt. At least his jeans were dark.

“You look like Bollywood exploded all over you.”

And so frigging adorable, I don’t know if I want to smack you or push you against a wall and kiss you until you can’t breathe.

“Really?” Veer said, but he was smiling.

Quinn nodded, a grin blooming. He moved closer to Veer. “What’s this?” He swept the brownish powder with his forefinger from Veer’s right cheek. “Mmm, garam masala.”

Veer rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t know why that always ends up everywhere.”

“Is the stove off?”

“Yes. Why?”

“So I can do this without messing our dinner.” And Quinn pushed Veer into the navy couch; they bounced together. “You really thought you were gonna be under my roof without some harassment?”

Instead of growling or pushing Quinn away, Veer laughed. The laugh was a throaty thing, a hundred times hotter than that syrupy noise Veer had made in Algiers. It made Quinn’s cock grow hard in a flash. It also came accompanied with the aroma of his favorite beer, Moongoddess Dark. “You were drinking!?” Quinn inspected Veer at arm’s length.

Veer didn’t drink; he wasn’t allowed to drink. He made a V sign, still chuckling. “Just two. They were sitting in the fridge looking sad and abandoned. I felt pity for them and ended their misery.”

“You frigging lightweight. Now how am I supposed to know if you’re doing this because you want to or thanks to beer-induced disinhibition?”

His partner shrugged. “Maybe I needed the dark goddess to give me courage.” His eyes were half-lidded and zeroed in on Quinn’s lips. They screamed *I want it*.

“What goddess? You don’t believe in goddesses.”

With a huff, Veer rolled his eyes again. “Talking about the beer, you moron.” He pulled a strand of Quinn’s hair and said in a voice that was sultry and dreamy. “Do you know how many times I sat on the opposite shore of *Harmandir Sahib* at night, and the lights illuminating the golden temple reminded me of your hair, of how it sparkled in the sun when you laugh. I haven’t seen you really laugh since I came back. Why?”

This is what Quinn had been wishing for so long; to feel Veer’s body beneath him, that thick, square hand resting on his lower back; those dark eyes on him, drowning in desire, in acceptance. “I don’t know how to do it anymore. You took that knowledge when you ran.”

You left me broken.

Veer pushed his face upward, brushing his lips over Quinn’s, and murmured, “I’m sorry.” He released the hair he was pulling and grabbed the back of Quinn’s head, smashing their mouths together, making the kiss hungry, desperate, violent.

But the contest wasn’t just in their upper bodies where hands had joined the battle and clothing had started to fly in all directions, their covered crotches rubbed, pressed, wiggled, vying for domination. They rolled from the couch with Veer landing on Quinn; laughter erupted again, only interrupted (no—muffled) by Veer’s nibbling at neck and shoulders, his hands roaming frantically over Quinn’s torso.

They had seen each other naked many times—at work. This was different, they could touch, they could taste. They made quick work of their pants and socks and shoes to end up only in unnecessary underwear. Veer was straddling Quinn, doing his best to keep him pinned to the floor and rocking over his strained cock. “I don’t care where my soul will go tomorrow, but tonight I want you to fuck me. To let me finally feel all the things that have been consuming me since that night you kissed me, so many fucking centuries ago.”

“No.”

What sprouted in Veer's face was not shock but pure terror. "Why not?"

"Cause if any cock is going places, it's yours inside me," Quinn growled, grabbing Veer's narrow hips. He was almost sure that the minute Veer climaxed, this magic bubble would explode, making him run again, so Quinn was going to at least get well-fucked before that happened. "Computer, lube." A door opened and closed with a click, and a wheeled tray zigzagged toward them, a bottle of lubricant on top of it. Quinn tapped a solid lower cheek. "Get rid of those briefs and sit your ass on the couch."

Veer sprang to action, and in less than four heartbeats he was on the couch, legs spread and towering cock dripping fluently. He was a freaking vision, all spicy butterscotch skin and square, honed muscles. Scars (that made him more beautiful) were scattered about his body telling the stories of their travels through History. Confusion was gone, and anticipation radiated from every pore of his amazing form.

In a kneeling position, pushing Veer's legs apart, Quinn leaned forward. He nuzzled the sweet pole, inhaling, drowning in the piquant, manly aroma of Veer's desire. Tentatively, his tongue traced the exposed frenulum after Quinn pulled the foreskin down. Veer hissed and trembled, and the sound was like the slash of a sword through the air, frightening and magnificent, hardening everything that wasn't already hard in Quinn's body. He took his first taste of Veer's cock and knew that he was not just broken but irreparably lost. With each inch he devoured, every cell of his body hummed and thrummed, primed for the final surrender.

A hand touched his cheek, and Quinn looked upward. He found Veer's eyes. They shone bright and watery, and their silent prayer was, *never stop; never let me go*. Eye contact remained unbroken as Quinn found the bottle of lubricant and readied his hole with one hand, while the other helped his mouth to prepare his destination.

Quinn surged upward, his hands memorizing every surface in case this was a onetime occurrence, a blind man reading a tale in each scar and branding it into his soul. Yes, he'd still have the recording the house computer would save, but it wasn't the same; his tactile memory would certainly enhance the recollections later. But now, he was about to impale himself on this wide, uncut phallus he'd dreamt of more than a thousand nights.

And as the first ring was breached, Quinn trembled, and Veer moaned. All restraint shattered, and Quinn's growl emerged, encompassed by the stretching of his most personal space. "Fuuuck yeeeesss."

“Quinn...” Veer groaned. “I never knew... this could be so...”

There was no day nor night, not before nor after, just one blinding moment of unadulterated bliss, setting all of Quinn on fire, turning each molecule upside-down. And hands. Veer's hands traveled down, settled on Quinn's hips and encouraged him to move. And eyes. Infinite eyes shouting a million truths that were forbidden to sound.

Impaled and happy, Quinn rocked and squeezed until he didn't know what hands were his, what mouth was Veer's, what chest was whose because they were entwined harder than wild ivies; grunts, moans, and groans their soundtrack. Climax came and conquered them, leaving them drenched and panting, sated and smiling.

Quinn rested his forehead over Veer's and murmured, “If you're here the next time I wake up, you'll know more.”

12. FACING TEMPTATION AND KISSING IT

Veer didn't run. Running wasn't an option anymore.

True, he'd been a coward and used alcohol to give himself a boost. Nevertheless, as the influence of the beer evaporated, all the things that his heart (and let's not forget his body) underwent with each kiss, with every caress, eroded the fortress where he had locked the temptation to surrender to the passion Quinn offered.

Veer hadn't run, and it was Thursday night; Quinn was inside him once again, stretching, destroying, commanding. All the mayhem that Quinn's body wrapped around Veer's unleashed within his moral consciousness was nothing compared to the euphoric freedom he experienced when, sated and exhausted, they slept in each other's arms.

"I don't know how I lived every day without you." Quinn grasped Veer's face with both hands, never altering the tempo of his piston, of his conquering. "*Shukriya*," he whispered, touching noses with Veer.

Quinn had said *thanks* in Hindi, and that made Veer's heart dissolve into something he was afraid to call Love. "It's me who should be saying that. You never yielded, and that's why I'm here."

These words wrenched a groan and a hard stab from Quinn. On his back, Veer almost hit his head against the headboard, but Quinn was quicker and used his hand to protect him. Those little, inconsequential things were the ones that made Veer almost fall the first time, and now, were taking him irrevocably to a land from where he didn't want to ever come back.

"Oh Veeru, my Veeru." Quinn's rhythm faltered, and he came with a howl.

Veer thrashed as Quinn, still inside him, took him in hand and pumped his ready-to-burst cock. Just a few strokes, and Veer erupted in spunk, joy, and stars.

Slowly, with the utmost care, Quinn left his body, and Veer hated his absence immediately. He fell on his back, pulling Veer on top of him. "Tomorrow we go to the 1970's."

"Even the 2070's were horrid, and we lived those." Veer chuckled.

"You're gonna look striking in those wide lapels and bell-bottoms."

“Shut up and kiss me.”

The kiss lasted until they fell asleep.

Friday, 0915 hours...

“See you on the other side, guys.” Hollander disrobed and waved, the stupidest grin all over his face. He entered the time capsule and crouched.

“I seriously don’t understand why he’s so cheerful every time he enters that thing,” Jagger murmured, pulling his robe around him as if he were very uncomfortable.

“Aww, you’re just scared because when you emerge behind him he always has a raging hard-on.” Quinn guffawed and punched Jagger in the shoulder.

“And what’s making *you* so happy lately?” Jagger arched an eyebrow. “You’re acting almost like a normal person, not your usual giant-hemorrhoids-ass self.”

“Maybe that ass is getting some dicking...” Russo elbowed Quinn with a chortle.

If they hadn’t been men trained to disguise their emotions and reactions, Veer was sure he’d have been blushing like a recently-betrothed maiden.

“What I put in my ass is none of your business.” Quinn laughed and jolted Russo.

“I like assplay as much as the next man, but enough of this ass-talking.” Ramsey pushed Jagger toward the capsule. “Your turn, big man.”

Veer had been so preoccupied following Quinn’s reactions to the taunting he hadn’t paid attention to the alarms coming and going signaling the readiness of the capsule for the next traveler.

“I can’t wait for my first look at 54,” Russo said, moving his shoulders and hips in some kind of dance move. “We’re going tonight, right?” His bedroom eyes expectantly settled on Ramsey.

Ramsey looked upward, perhaps asking for divine intervention, and hissed, “Yes. You and I will go tonight so you can get your groove on.”

The thing with time traveling (and of course the scientists were never going to give them the whole story) was that they needed to do it on the same weekday of the date they would travel to. In this case, the event was on Sunday, July 30th, 1978, so they were traveling to Friday, the 28th.

They usually went a couple of days before to acclimate to the time and the area where they would be operating. Veer still remembered a story of a failed mission where a lone operative had been sent to Italy on Friday, October 5th, 1582, a logical mistake if you saw that the day before was Thursday, October 4th. But that was the day when the Gregorian Calendar (the common time-frame the machine used) was implemented, jumping from October 4th to the 15th. That woman was never found. Because of this, Clepsydra Project decided to forbid any mission to dates before the 1800's, which might seem a little extreme, but would essentially secure a more unified time-frame around the world since the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar had been gradual.

In all honesty, Veer mentally shambled through this trifling knowledge not just to avoid externalizing his romantic situation with Quinn but his growing apprehension regarding his side-mission. Something kept nagging him in the back of his mind, pushing him to tell Quinn about it.

“Hey, are you all right?” Quinn touched Veer's arm.

The alarm went off again. Only Quinn and Veer were left of Team Aegis.

“Yes, I'm good to go.” Veer smiled. It was hard not to grab Quinn and press him against his body.

“Okay, see you in New York.” Quinn nodded and moved toward the capsule. He gave his robe to the assistant.

A rush of desire enveloped Veer as Quinn crouched and winked at him. The image of Quinn straddling him, moaning and panting, almost toppled Veer.

Poor Jagger, he's about to see another unwelcome stiffy.

13. THE TRUTH ABOUT LIARS

They were gonna get caught. Quinn sighed as he buttoned his shirt up. Veer was in a different room of their base in the Upper East Side getting presentable too. They had come up with the most absurd excuses since their arrival on Friday to stay behind in the apartment while their team members moved around New York. It was so freaking difficult to keep his hands (or his mouth or his cock) off Veer, it was verging on an addiction. So many quickies in the last forty hours, they were worse than newlyweds.

Focused on getting in Veer's pants, Quinn had not come with a plan of action to keep Adair Wilson alive. He couldn't include his lover. One of the first things his grandfather had told him as he explained the disturbing reasons for this side mission was to avoid involving any of his teammates at all cost because Quinn would need to stop one of them from killing Wilson.

More than one life was in his hands, and Quinn wasn't acting like a soldier but as a pimple-faced teenager enjoying his first piece of tail. Only, Veer wasn't just a piece of tail, he was bigger than mere release, and that made matters far worse and extremely complicated.

Quinn heard the door of the apartment open, followed by laughter. Ramsey, Jagger, Russo, and Hollander had gone to eat and retrieve one of the special boxes with stuff for them sent from the future.

"Care to share the joke?" Quinn smiled as he entered the living slash dining area where the others were gathered around the dinner table.

"You know how we're not supposed to have sex with people when we're working?" Hollander said, using his hands to make his point, as usual.

Quinn flinched inwardly. They were not to have intercourse with people of the time-frame where they worked to avoid impregnating somebody and changing the lineage of any offspring. Just on principle they didn't fuck guys, either.

"Well, this lady practically put her pussy on Jagger's lap as if saying 'are you gonna do it or what?' We had to wrestle the big guy to keep him at our table and... You missed a good show. We almost got thrown out of the restaurant." Hollander snorted, and all three jostled Jagger, calling him perv names.

The toilet flushed in the half-bathroom; Veer came out of it a moment later with a wicked grin that made Quinn's knees tremble. "You were dreaming about it, Jagger, and Fate brought it to you. You wanted a hairy one, and you got it!"

"Damn right you are." Jagger had a silly grimace that made him look more like a person and not a boulder of muscles. He had finally decided to shave those stupid four or five hairs on his head so he seemed more in tune with the times; the 2080's times, anyway.

"Okay, I have gifts for you, kids." Ramsey said, opening the box on the table. He drew Quinn's sword and tossed it to him.

Catching it, Quinn flicked it like a switch knife, and the folded blade extended to its full length. He kissed the shiny blade. "I missed you, baby."

"Get a room!" Russo laughed. "You're not using that hilt for other things, are you?"

"All right! They sent us a new device for individual transportation back to our time." Ramsey pulled a little black box the size of two fingers. "There's one for each. At the end of the mission we come back here, take our clothes off and use it."

"Never heard of this before," Jagger commented, inspecting the one Ramsey had just put on his hand.

"It's been tested and approved. That's all we need to know." Ramsey pitched four boxes.

It was really light; it seemed a toy more than a time-traveling device. It was almost a joke. Seven digits were etched on one side and a barely visible button on what Quinn assumed was the top. "What are these numbers for?"

"Those are identification numbers. They were specifically assigned to each of us."

"I didn't see you look at any list." Russo frowned.

Ramsey tapped his temple with his index finger. "Do you really think I need to look at a list to remember six combinations of numbers linked to our names?"

Russo just put his hands up with a semi-shrug and a grimace.

"Now, the instructions are simple. Keep the device with you at all times, so if you need to escape back to our time you can do it quickly."

“You mean if somebody is chasing me I have to start stripping to jump in time?” Quinn asked, chuckling.

“Exactly.”

Well, that didn't make any sense. Why now, without even informing them beforehand about this device? There was something dodgy about this assignment from the get-go, but they were already here, no turning back now.

Quinn looked at Veer and noted the same uncomfortable apprehension; the same expression was on Hollander's face. Russo's features were inscrutable, and Jagger was looking at anything but them. Knowing what he knew, Quinn wanted to punch himself for not paying more attention to what was happening around him since they arrived at the Big Apple.

Loud claps broke the awkward silence. “Let's get dressed, Team Aegis.” Ramsey put his little black box in his pocket and walked toward the bedroom he shared with Jagger and Russo. Hollander led the way to the other room, the one he shared with Veer and Quinn. Veer opened his mouth to say something, but Quinn shook his head. This wasn't the moment to air their doubts.

Four hours later...

“You, the one with the turban!” the bouncer yelled over the crowd assembled in front of Studio 54's entrance.

“Told you,” Veer said under his breath as he pointed to himself as if surprised.

“Yes, you, and bring the blond with you.”

The blond was Quinn, and he laughed as Veer towed him, pushing the writhing mass clamoring for a chance to enter the infamous nightclub. They were dressed similarly. Veer wore a royal blue turban that matched perfectly his Nehru-style, sleeveless jacket with silver appliquéés on the neck and along the front line. Quinn wore the same style of jacket, but his was hunter green with golden details. He'd have looked ridiculous in a turban, so his hair was in a sleek ponytail. Of all the outlandish outfits they brought, Veer had been sure these would do the deed to get them in.

Quinn had seen an old movie about the club, documentaries, and Clepsydra Project's own research about the place, but none of it prepared him for the circus that was Studio 54. Every crazy thing one could imagine was happening at once, and bizarre costumes and hairdos abounded; people with gold, silver

and glittery body paint, psychedelic masks, or wearing nothing but G-strings. It was awesome. The smoke and the wavy lights gave the scene a surreal feeling. But the best thing of all was Veer holding his hand as he broke through the masses of dancing bodies like an icebreaker in the middle of Antarctica.

The music faded, and a hyperactive MC jumped to the main stage. "You know his brothers, and you know him. Please put your hands together for Mister Randy Glibb and his smashing number one hit 'Dancing Shadows'!"

Gosh.

14. THE OPPOSITE OF MENDACITY

Quinn and Veer were pushed by the people drawn to the stage. Three huge screens descended behind the handsome, lanky blond man all dressed in white in the center. A contagious melody started, and spotlights brought to life the silhouettes of dancers kept out of sight by the screens.

*You have me starin' in
those windows to paradise
your direction is what I chase
no lies I'd ever tell
all I can do is lovin' you
If you say yes, baby, I'd lose my mind*

The voice was somewhat whiny and close to high-pitched, but there was something about it that was catchy and provocative. The energy of the people around them had Veer moving his hips in tandem with the enticing music. He sensed Quinn's solid body materialize behind him and wrap itself around Veer like desperate vines.

"Mmm, you're so right in my arms," Quinn whispered in Veer's ear, nibbling his earlobe.

Yes, this felt absolutely right and was ominously wrong, but Veer was not going to think about his beliefs now. They would figure out what to do with this growing happiness later, when they were back in their own time. He put his hands on top of Quinn's, where they rested over his stomach, and they both swung their hips, following the song's upbeat rhythm.

*Dancing shadows we are
all through the night
come on, baby, move me right*

Veer turned his neck a little to look at Quinn and nodded with a wink. He had so many things he wanted to say but neither the position nor the noise around them would let them come out the way they should.

Quinn grabbed him by the hips and made him do a complete one-eighty without releasing him. He kissed Veer softly on the lips and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "I love you."

Stunned, Veer swallowed hard, but the answer bubbled out before he could squash or overthink it. "I love you too." He took Quinn's face in his hands and kissed him for all he was worth.

"It's really nice to see that you two are having so much fun." Ramsey was looking at them with an arched eyebrow, his mouth twisted, and his arms crossed over his chest. He was in frustrated parent mode.

Quinn and Veer separated as if they had been zapped by a zillion volts. Not an easy feat when you had a crowd closing in and thus giving you minimal space to maneuver.

Ramsey sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He shook his head and rummaged for something in one of his pockets. "You forgot this. Keep it with you." He thrust the new transporting device into Veer's hand.

Veer didn't know whether to be embarrassed or annoyed. "Ramsey..."

Quinn tried to say something too, but Ramsey put his hand up, silencing both. "I don't wanna know. I didn't see anything."

The song ended and the crowd exploded in applause and cheers.

Beyond Ramsey's left shoulder, Veer saw their target. "Marmion!"

"Where?" Quinn and Ramsey followed his gaze.

"Okay, do your thing. I'll be outside." Ramsey zigzagged through the crowd and disappeared.

Marmion was gesticulating furiously at Townsend. Wilson tried to put himself between them, but they both pushed him aside and went for each other's throats.

"C'mon, they're gonna be thrown out any second!" Quinn grabbed Veer's hand and started to push people out of their way. They were too far away and by the time they reached their destination, the three men were nowhere to be seen. "Shit, let's go." Quinn kept towing Veer. They saw an exit door close and two security-looking guys dusting their hands off. "This way!"

They pushed the doors open and found Marmion and Townsend already rolling on the floor; Marmion with a gun and Townsend with a knife. Wilson had a gun trained on them, yelling at Townsend to leave their boss alone. Veer yanked his hand from Quinn's grasp. He needed to find a way to involve

Wilson in the fracas to kill him; the man was too far from the others to make it look like an accident. The ideal resolution would be to use either Townsend's knife or Marmion's weapon to finish Wilson, thus avoiding loose ends.

"Where are the others?" Quinn hissed, irritated.

The five of them were alone in that back alley. Wilson circled around the other two; both punched and snarled and kicked. Wilson's circling put him right in front of Veer, and he had an idea. It was risky, but it could do the deed. He drew his semiautomatic and launched himself at Wilson, the momentum making them both land on Marmion and Townsend.

"VEER, NO," Quinn cried, and amid the curses around him, Veer heard the unmistakable ring of metal sliding on metal as Quinn's sword unfolded.

An elbow hit Veer, and he grabbed someone's head. It was Townsend's, and he smashed it against Wilson's face. Veer only had seconds before Quinn entered the row and separated them. He pushed Townsend's hand, stabbing Marmion in the heart, and then with a better grip aimed it at Wilson's throat. He would have to kill Townsend too, there was no other option.

Before the blade could claim its prize, Veer was yanked, flying backward away from the group. The impact knocked the air out of him. He heard two shots fired, and by the time he was able to breathe again and open his eyes, Quinn loomed over him, the tip of his sword piercing Veer's chest.

Instinct and training surged blindly. The arm attached to the hand glued to the semiautomatic sprang to life in exact opposition to the long sword over him, and he felt wetness growing around the burning sensation on his chest. Veer almost squeezed the trigger, but the anger mixed with confusion on Quinn's face stopped him. Shit, he almost shot the man he loved.

"What the fuck, Veer?"

"I have orders," Veer growled, hoping those three words explained everything. He added three more. "Wilson must die." Veer didn't lower his hand.

"If you kill him, you kill me."

15. SELF-PRESERVATION TRUMPS LOVE

“What?”

“Are you gonna lower that gun?”

“Are you going to take the tip of your sword off my chest? I’m bleeding.”

Fuck. This is a fucking mess.

Quinn wasn’t happy knowing that one of his teammates had been ordered to kill Wilson, but he never expected it to be Veer. Quinn sighed and moved his sword away, its tip red. He arched an eyebrow, and Veer lowered the gun.

“Would you care to explain yourself? What is Wilson to you?” Veer lay flat on the pavement and asked the question with his eyes closed. The memory of them in bed, in almost the same position, was painful to Quinn.

“Wilson is the father of my grandfather’s mother.”

Saint’s words came out of Veer’s lips in a groan, but it felt like a slap on the face. “You don’t go and kill Hitler or the Christ, you kill their grandparents...” Veer put his semiautomatic on the ground and proffered his hand with the most haunted face Quinn had ever seen.

The sword clattered, and Quinn pulled Veer up. They embraced, two children awaking from a horrible nightmare, looking for comfort in each other’s arms. But the real nightmare had just begun.

“Why would Clepsydra want to kill you, Quinn?”

“Not me, baby. Iven is the one to be erased. He was an assassin on the French Government’s payroll, and apparently he still does side jobs.” Quinn had just learned this truth the previous week. Growing up, he always thought his grandfather was just a busy traveling businessman obsessed with Japanese culture.

“A white ninja...”

“Never say that in his presence. My sword is like a butter knife beside his,” Quinn said, chuckling.

“What are we going to do?”

“Let’s hope none of the others was part of the plot and wasn’t ordered to finish the job if you didn’t. I don’t know where they are. I’m not even sure if their absence is a lucky break or another piece of the puzzle.”

“Who shot?”

“I did it, to get Marmion and Townsend out of the way. Both dead.” Quinn looked sideways. “I smacked Wilson with the hilt of the sword, so he’s still unconscious. We need to get the fuck out of here before the police arrive. We can’t be pinned as witnesses.”

They were in the middle of the alley. They picked up their weapons and ran to their left, away from Studio 54’s main entrance. As they reached the street, Russo and Hollander came running toward them, panting and with their clothes in disarray.

“What happened?” Veer asked, his hands on his knees, heaving.

“We were mugged. Can you believe it? Ramsey came to tell us you have seen Marmion and when we were about to split a fucking gang descended on us. Like fifteen against four!” Hollander was more pissed off than rattled.

“They hurt Ramsey real bad. Jagger went nuts. I think we killed like five people on this mission.” Russo shook his head; what was done was done. “What happened with you two, is Marmion dead?”

“Yeah,” Veer said. “He and Townsend killed each other.”

“Wait a minute, where are Ramsey and Jagger?” Quinn looked around for the other two.

“He needed medical attention, so Jagger helped him to get back to our time and left behind him.”

Good, Quinn didn’t have to worry about them then. Only Russo and Hollander to figure out. Sirens were wailing, getting closer to them. “We need to go.” He pushed the other three men away from the vicinity of the alley.

“And the other bodyguard?” Hollander asked.

Shit, not Hollander.

“He’s unconscious back in the alley. We knocked him out,” Veer replied.

“Good,” Hollander said.

“Yeah. We had more dead people than we needed already to add another one.” Russo almost cheered.

Phew.

It would have been really hard to have to kill one of these two. Hard, not impossible.

“Do we even need to go back to the apartment?” Veer asked as they crossed the street to hail a cab. None of them wanted to walk the two miles to 69th street.

“What do you suggest?” Russo looked at Veer expectantly.

“We just find a secluded place, shed the clothes and go back to our time like Ramsey and Jagger did. The cleaning crew can pick up what we’ve left in the apartment.”

“Excellent, I saw a restaurant a bit farther down the street. Let’s go there. Hollander and Russo, you two jump first.” With the happy pair back in 2089, Quinn would have time to plan something with Veer before they returned to the Clepsydra Project Complex.

Hollander grabbed Russo by the scruff of his neck. “C’mon, Booboo. Let’s jump the fuck out of 1978.”

They found the restaurant easily, and Hollander and Russo disappeared into the restroom. Five minutes later, Veer went to check, came out with their teammates’ clothes, walked straight to the entrance of the restaurant and gave them to a homeless guy.

“You lost your turban,” Quinn commented casually as Veer sat, facing him.

“That’s the least of our concerns right now.” Veer had a really sad face. “We are over, aren’t we?”

Quinn nodded. “I’m sorry, baby. If I can walk out of Building C tonight or whatever the time is in our time, I’ll go into hiding. Iven is determined to destroy Clepsydra Project now that he knows they are after him. It’s not an option. If I survive it will just be a bonus for him.” He patted Veer’s hand. “You should probably do the same.”

“Separated, we have a better chance to survive. Run today, fight tomorrow.” Veer drew out of his pocket the little black box. “I’ll go first. That way if they try to do something I can back you up.” He didn’t look at Quinn but stared at his box, his brow knitted. “These are not my numbers.”

“What?”

“Ramsey gave me his.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, the sequence is all wrong. He must’ve had both in the same pocket and gave me his by mistake.”

“Do you think it matters?”

“Only one way to find out. Let's go to the restroom together. I want at least a good-bye kiss.”

“Maybe we can steal a quickie.”

“Even better.”

And they would have it because Quinn knew he was forever broken and incapable of reaction to any other man ever again.

16. ENDINGS, BURIALS, AND WHAT THE FUCKS

They survived.

Ramsey didn't. He never came back from 1978.

Quinn went AWOL the afternoon they returned from their New York mission.

They didn't make plans to meet again. It was over.

Veer resigned two weeks later, after President Alicja personally assured him that everything was all right, that there was nothing to worry about. He had the nagging suspicion that if Ramsey hadn't confused the devices, he'd be the one lost forever.

Nevertheless, Veer was indeed lost. Nothing was right without Quinn beside him. He had fought his feelings for so long, only to lose the love of his life in an epic rush. He had even been preparing himself to face his family and his community, holding to the technicality that yes, he was supposed to get married and have descendants, but he could do all that with a man. Their beliefs were based on tolerance of all humans regardless of race, religion or sexuality. There was nothing specifically written against a same-sex match as long as he fulfilled his duty to have a family and not live like a hermit. But now that promise of a tomorrow with Quinn had vanished like morning mist.

Going back to Punjab would be a futile exercise. The sight of the *Harmandir Sahib* in his home city would make him crumble. Every Butter Chicken would drive him sad with longing. The smell of garam masala would be like a sword in his heart. He should find a place where the Hindu presence wasn't that big.

He chose a place where there weren't that many people anyway. Antarctica.

On December 1st, 2089, Veer finished his volunteer time with Better Earth in Climate Control Station Theta and started the long journey back to Aurora because he couldn't think of any other place to go.

Five days later, Veer rented a hotel room under an alias in a busy area of Nippon East. Wearing the bushy beard he had grown while he was surrounded by snow, a gray knitted hat, loose clothes, fingerless gloves, and insect-like sunglasses, he walked the several blocks to Circular Park Three every day and stared at the Pegasus Fountain, facing Tarot Towers, for hours.

Two weeks into this routine, a boy of ten or twelve sat beside him on his usual bench. He had a sunny complexion, a thousand freckles, and wore a terribly annoying yellow beret, tilted toward his left eye. "Are you a bum, sir?"

Veer chuckled. "I'm not."

"I needed to ask." The boy took out a folded piece of paper from one of the many pockets of his pants. "Are you Veer then?"

Taking off the sunglasses, Veer asked disgruntledly, "Who told you my name?"

"I guess you *are* Veer. This is for you." He gave Veer the folded paper.

"What's your name, kid?"

"JayeThreeFive." The little imp had a spark of defiance to his demeanor that Veer found mildly interesting.

"Why not thirty-five?"

"Cause I'm not like everybody else," he jumped off the bench and waved. "See ya!"

"Of course you are not." And that reminded Veer of things he shouldn't be remembering.

For a long time, Veer stared at the paper with the same intensity he usually reserved for staring at the singing fountain, his mind back to absolute blank. He finally opened it. In blocky handwriting were the following words: *My Veeru, stop being ridiculous and get on with your life.*

He laughed like a mad man, like he hadn't laughed in months. He rose to his feet and walked back to his hotel. For a moment, naked in front of the mirror, he stared at the asterisk-like scar over his heart, reminder of his last night around Quinn. He shaved his beard after taking a shower and went out again to buy new clothes.

The next morning, Veer walked to a flower shop, bought a wreath of white flowers and took a cab to West Cemetery. It was on a hill, and the Pacific Ocean was visible from there in all its glorious majesty. Not ancient (because nothing was truly old in Aurora), the cemetery still possessed that desolation associated with the forgotten departed. Perhaps this eerie sensation had created the myth of the Elephants' graveyards around the world. Places where things instinctively went to lie silently, disremembered.

The spot he was searching for was located in the highest part of the hill; from there one could see the expanse of the city, alive and moving rapidly on the left, and the glittery waving of the sea on the right. Veer stood in front of The Travelers Obelisk (a monument erected in honor of those who died during time-traveling) for a moment and deposited the wreath on its base, close to a plaque with the coat of arms of the city: a rising sun over dark land with the words POST TENEBRAS LUX written in a semicircle on the dark area.

Light after darkness...

A sound Veer thought he would never hear again, grew closer. Slowly, he turned around, and Quinn, riding *Morena*, stopped beside him.

Quinn took his helmet off. His hair was fashionably short, and he wore a Vandyke beard. He didn't look exactly older, he looked... wiser.

"And you told *me* to shave my beard."

"I don't recall writing the word beard anywhere on that note."

"I know the *ridiculous* was for the beard."

"Not just the beard, baby. The whole concept of hobo-chic is a delusion. Didn't work before and never will."

Ah, that voice. It stirred so many things in Veer. Things that could never be. "How is the destruction of Clepsydra Project coming along?"

"It's coming. I'm pretty sure it will happen before the end of this century. A lot sooner than that." Quinn winked without humor.

"There's no hope for us as long as it exists, no matter what we feel."

Quinn cracked his neck and shook his head. "We have a better option of survival away from each other."

Surviving wasn't living, but Veer was not going to beg. He would find a way to go on. Wasn't the saying *better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?*

What a sorry excuse to keep threading through life.

Veer drowned in those gypsy eyes, drank that form that he would never hold again. He was ready to say good-bye when Quinn groaned, breaking eye contact.

"This is what we need to do," Quinn said quietly, his hand open toward the marble obelisk.

“Bury them?” Veer sighed.

“Yes. These feelings will lie in our hearts to never awake. And we leave the memories here, in this fucking cenotaph.”

The End

Glossary

Ambarsar – It's the colloquial name of the Indian city of Amritsar. It is home to the *Harmandir Sahib* (referred to as the “Golden Temple” in the western media), the spiritual and cultural center for the Sikh religion.

Kenjutsu – Is the umbrella term for all (koryū) schools of Japanese swordsmanship, in particular those that predate the Meiji Restoration. The modern styles of kendo and iaido that were established in the twentieth century included modern form of kenjutsu in their curriculum too. Kenjutsu, which originated with the samurai class of feudal Japan, means “the method, or technique, of the sword.” This is opposed to kendo, which means “the way of the sword”.

Kinagashi – It is type of Kimono clothing that can be used in everyday life, to relax or go out. Informal.

Mizmar – Arabic flute.

Tabla – Arabic drums similar to bongos.

Riqq – Arabic tambourine.

Zut Alors – The French equivalent of Damn!, Dang! or Darn!

POST TENEBRAS LUX – The motto of Aurora. Latin for Light After Darkness.

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) will come to your e-reading devices in Summer 2014 and The Pompeiian Horse in Autumn 2014.

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