

REMEMBERED

A REMNANTS OF ANOTHER LIFE NOVEL

DIANA LESTON

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Remembered | Book 1 | Remnants Of Another Life

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Brooke Hudson

www.acx.com/narrator?p=A3A6QG5A10R4BD

Gregory Russell

www.acx.com/narrator?p=A1UBW234PNW8OT

Dedication

Dedicated to: Mom.

You'll always be my biggest fan, as I am yours. Thank you for everything.

Author's Note

If you enjoy this story, please let me know by writing a positive review of "Remembered by Diana Leston," on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Google Books, or iBooks.

Hey! Don't you roll your eyes at me, damn it! I can see you!

Think of it this way... You're about to take a journey with me, one that I've put a lot of love and effort into. If you like the ride and find you were entertained throughout, then reward me with what would be the equivalent of a drink - review the actual book! This helps my sales and allows me to continue writing.

If you can't swing it, I'll happily settle for a blog subscription. My author page can be found at www.DianaLeston.com. Subscribe to the blog to view upcoming works for this series!

Happy Reading!

-Diana

Glossary Of Terms

Alpha: Leader of a wolf demon pack. This distinct title is earned by defeating an existing Alpha in battle, or by becoming the mate of one who already holds the title.

Anamnesis Terrene (also referred to as *The Queen's Heart*): Heart-shaped ruby with the ability to revive the dead. The jewel was affectionately named after the deceased Queen of the Dog Demons, who traded her life for its power. The Anamnesis Terrene can call a soul back from the afterlife only once. To be used, the host body must be in a survivable condition. If a soul is called back into a damaged body that cannot support life, the person will die once again. Healers are usually on hand at the time the gem is used.

Angels (also referred to as *The Pure*): Supernatural beings that serve the creators (or gods). Angels endowed select humans with their pure energy for the protection of humanity from demons that would harm them. Angels only exist in spirit form and will not directly involve themselves in Earthly matters.

Beta: Title bestowed by the Alpha. Those serving as Betas are the second in command of the pack.

Bloodlust: State brought on by extreme mental or physical anguish. Bloodlust is usually marked by a warped animalistic physical state, along with visible and suffocating aura. Demons that fall into bloodlust lose all semblances of reason and sanity and act as savage beasts, becoming a danger to all around them.

The Celestial: Demons or Holy Users with almost God-like power.

Demon (also referred to as *The Tainted*): Supernatural beings with the ability to use dark energy. Demons take on human forms, and, depending on the species, can live for thousands of years. When humanity took control of Earth, demons hid within society.

Dog Demon (also referred to as *Hellhounds* or *Cadejos* in non-Asian cultures): Demons with the true nature of a dog. The size of the dog is dependent upon the demon's bloodline and power. Can speak to and command dogs. Known for their aloof personalities, although they are rumored to have a soft spot for humans.

Fox Demon (also referred to as *Sprites* or *Fairies* in non-Asian cultures): Demons with the true nature of a fox. The size of the fox is dependent upon the demon's bloodline and power. Can speak to and command foxes. Known for their mischievous nature and shapeshifting abilities.

The Gifted (also referred to as *The Corrupted*): Evolved humans employing supernatural powers who are a direct result of centuries worth of human and demon lineage. Humanity is unaware of the role demonic blood plays in this evolutionary state.

Holy User (also referred to as *The Chosen*): Pureblooded humans with the power to use pure energy. Abilities were given by the heavens in exchange for the protection of humanity from demons that would harm them. As demons have lengthy lifespans, Holy Users are reincarnated to allow for the continuance of their divine mission. At present, due to the widespread appearance of gifted beings, Holy Users have become an endangered species.

Hybrid: Child born from a full-blooded demon and a full-blooded human. Hybrids have stronger powers than those with diluted demonic blood (e.g., *The Gifted*). Purification powers harm, but cannot kill, a Hybrid.

Marking Scent: Wolf Demon term used to describe potent pheromones that are secreted through the skin. Marking scents warn potential rivals that a partner is taken and off-limits. This scent is so powerful that it is distinguishable by humans. The distinct scent is appealing to members of the opposite sex, but dreadful to those of the same.

Mating: Wolf Demon term used to describe the instinctual claiming of a partner. Only mated pairs are able to reproduce.

Mating Ceremony: Wolf Demon ceremony that celebrates a mated pairing. A Mating Ceremony is usually reserved for higher-ranking wolf demons.

Resonance: The process by which Holy Users relive their most recent past life through vivid dreams. Each nightly session unlocks a similar point in time in their former life for the purpose of enlightenment and training.

ROOT: Secret organization founded in 1945 for the protection of world peace. Heavily employs *Humans*, *Holy Users*, *Demons*, and *The Gifted* for this purpose.

UNI-chip: Small device implanted behind the right ear that allows for fluency in all known human languages. Developed by *ROOT's* technology department in 1980, this hardware is a requirement for employment and is inserted at the time of signage. Upon retirement, defection, or death, the device is electronically rendered unusable by the organization.

Wolf Demon (also referred to as *Werewolves* or *Wolf Spirits* in non-Asian cultures): Demons with the true form of a wolf. The size of the wolf is dependent upon the demon's bloodline and power. Can speak to and command wolves. Known for their predatory and harsh natures.

Prologue

1500 A.D.

Roukan scanned the darkened temple grounds while listening to the chorus of whispered prayers that blended with the occasional stifled whimper. The Junsuina Temple's members were in full mourning tonight, its sacred burial grounds filled by the bodies of its many priests and priestesses.

A year ago, if someone told Roukan that he and his Hyakuhiro Waterfall pack would willingly stand on sacred land, surrounded by those with the power to purify them, he wouldn't have believed it. If someone further informed him that his wolf demon tribe would come to ally themselves with such beings in a battle to retrieve the Anamnesis Terrene, he would have flat out laughed.

"How long is this ceremony?" Raiju whispered at his side.

Roukan glanced at his companion. The Beta with whom he shared his rank meant no disrespect with his question, only genuine curiosity.

Shrugging his shoulders, he refocused his gaze on the many pyres in front of them. There was only one that genuinely held his full attention. Yet, he wasn't able to bring himself to look at the woman's face that laid within.

"No idea."

Finally, after what felt like the span of hours, the chanting subsided, and the night's air filled with an eerie calm.

"It is time for the final farewell," the head priest announced, prompting the gatherers to form a loose line.

Roukan and the other members of his pack respectfully fell into step with the holy users. As the attendees took turns approaching the deceased and offering heartfelt whispers for their sacrifice, he wondered what he would say to the woman who died protecting him in battle.

It was funny. He never liked humans. Up until recently, their species was nothing more than a source of food for his people. And

holy users were once their sworn enemy, existing solely to protect humanity from his kind.

But, Risa was different.

Nothing about the woman's appearance courted any notice, yet there was something magnetic about her.

And her compelling nature was not unnoticed by his leader.

Instantly becoming infatuated with the woman, Roukan's Alpha strictly removed humans from their packs' menu and dutifully pledged his services to her temple in an attempt to win her over.

Although the priestess was always warm and friendly, even going so far as to tolerate the Alpha's flirtatious words and never-ending gifts of endearment, she obviously didn't regard their handsome and powerful leader in any romantic way. She made it clear on numerous occasions that she appreciated his friendship, but her heart belonged to another.

Roukan cleared his throat and searched the crowd for that *'other.'*

Tenrai, the object of Risa's affections, was standing at the back of the line. The priest's mix-matched green and brown eyes were unfocused, and his posture was slumping. His short, brown hair was disheveled, along with his state of dress.

For all appearances, he looked like a ruined man.

Abruptly, a menacing presence that was intentionally hanging back on the ceremony's outskirts began to move. With a sudden rush, bodies forming the back of the line dispersed, a sea of bodies splitting to either side as Renji, the Hyakuhiro Waterfall pack's Alpha, pointedly marched toward his Betas.

The demon moved like a stalking predator, his gait shifting with each of his light steps, his muscles rolling and tensing beneath his smooth skin.

The young Alpha was tall, lean, and muscled. His vibrant, yellow eyes were the color of heated gold, and they almost glowed against the backdrop of his tanned skin and fierce, shadowed features. His long, onyx hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, the abundant length of it swaying in the night's warm breeze.

Renji was clothed in his pack's traditional black furs, which were fashioned expertly over his torso and lower body in many twisting and overlapping pleats. He wore knee-high fur boots as well

as a steel armor breastplate. Although he appeared human, there was a furry, black tail protruding from his tribe's dressings.

The moment Renji flanked him, Roukan cringed and focused his eyes down to his feet.

In the two days following Risa's death, Renji refused to leave his private quarters. However, Roukan knew that once his leader's grief finally turned to rage, there would be hell to pay. And the fact that Renji's beloved priestess died while saving his sorry hide would certainly not go unpunished.

As a livid, grief-stricken aura washed over Roukan, he was sure he was done for. However, whatever Renji was about to do was interrupted by a most familiar voice calling out to them.

"Renji... I need... I need your help," Tenrai croaked as if the words burned his tongue to say.

The Alpha turned and scowled in the man's direction, making a grand show of his fangs.

The priest didn't so much as flinch. Instead, he defiantly crossed his arms over his chest. "If you cared for her as much as I did, you will help me."

"My allegiance to your kind expired when she did," Renji rumbled, his voice a low and menacing growl. "I owe you and your people nothing, priest."

Tenrai quickly closed the gap between them. When he bumped the Alpha's shoulder with his own, he angrily whispered, "Death only keeps the flesh, not the soul. My people never truly die. We are reborn. Help me find her again."

Chapter 1

2018 A.D.

Feet, moving at a brisk pace, made their way through the winding corridor of *ROOT*'s South Korean base. The female agent's combat boots made no sound as they crossed the familiar, well-lit hallways by memory.

Agent Wraith was just summoned to General's Hush's office, and as she walked, an excited crackle of electricity shot down her spine.

She took a deep breath, willing her powers to calm. She was going to need her unique abilities for this retrieval mission. She worked with agent Sleeper in the past, and could effectively zero in on his spiritual essence and find him. As long as *ROOT* could get her within thirty miles of the guy, it was a sure thing.

Idly, she wondered if her secret organization was able to gather enough intelligence about Sleeper's last known location.

Knowing the way ROOT operates, there's probably a book of information already put together and a fueled plane ready to whisk me away.

She smiled. She was no stranger to the inner workings of *ROOT*. She was recruited at the ripe old age of sixteen and remained a dedicated member of the organization for the past ten years.

Wraith thought back to her life as a civilian.

When she was a child, her powers only presented themselves out of sheer instinct. Her father, a fellow holy user, was well aware of her gifts. But, her mother was always doubtful and would often seek help with her ever-growing and sometimes uncontrollable abilities.

At sixteen, Wraith suffered a 'small' nervous breakdown that was brought about by a particular dream. While her father wanted to pull her out of school to help her work through it, Wraith's mom, driven out of genuine concern for her daughter's mental health, tried to have her temporarily committed.

It was around this time that Wraith was approached by a recruiter and offered the chance to join others like her, all under the

promise of using her unique abilities to assist in maintaining world peace

It was an offer she didn't hesitate to accept. And so, she left home and went through specialized training.

The physical training was brutal, comparative to military training, and she honestly struggled. Being a clumsy sixteen-year-old, she bumbled through the first six months, desperately wanting to quit. However, her mentor refused to give up on her, and after a year, she was finally able to find her groove and quickly advance.

The instruction she underwent and her dedication to it paid off in spades. Ten years later, and she was a proud master of Krav Maga and Taekwondo and the leader of *ROOT*'s top-ranking reconnaissance specialty unit.

Approaching the General's office, Wraith was pulled from her nostalgic musings. Subconsciously clutching her mission brief under her arm, she approached the thick, redwood door.

She knocked, waiting for permission to enter.

"Come in," came the booming voice from the other side.

She took a moment to flatten the imaginary wrinkles on her tactical pants before entering the room. Walking with confidence, she quickly made her way to General Hush's desk.

The room smelled of brandy and firewood. The fluorescent lighting overhead was a harsh contrast to the warmth otherwise exuding from the General's private space.

Upon reaching Hush's large desk, she straightened and saluted.

"At ease, agent." The large man flashed her a genuine, warm smile.

Nodding, she took her seat.

"Agent Wraith, it's a pleasure to see you again. I always wish our meetings were under better circumstances." He sighed as he absently rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I trust you have thoroughly read the mission brief?"

"Yes, sir. Agent Sleeper, formerly from the Intelligence Department, has gone rogue as of 8 am yesterday. He was working on information directly related to newly discovered biowarfare tactics used in the Middle East. His present whereabouts are speculative." She cleared her throat. "My assignment is to go to his last known location and track him down. Upon finding the target, I

am to call in for backup, and at that time, I will receive new orders. I am not to engage Sleeper unless it is absolutely necessary..."

The General watched the woman as she rattled through the mission brief. Wraith was one of his top agents, and he'd thoroughly enjoyed watching her grow up within the organization.

Today she wore her black hair in a tightly wound bun, and her long bangs were left loose, framing her soft and angled face. Her unique blue eyes were partially hidden behind her thick, long lashes, and they popped against her creamy, porcelain skin. Absently, she'd worry at her short nails while she spoke, a small habit she never seemed to outgrow during her time there. She was tall and lean, with well-defined, sinewy muscles that would slightly roll under her tactical vest as she inhaled between sentences. She was a perfect balance between soft and hard, yet utterly feminine and beautiful all the while.

Wraith was the perfect enigma.

The present silence jerked him out of his private thoughts, and he realized Wraith was staring at him expectantly.

Did she ask me a question? he wondered. "I'm sorry, Wraith. What was that?"

"Do you have any updated information on Sleeper's last known location?" she repeated. "If he's been missing as of 8 am yesterday, he could be as far as Russia by now. The closer I can get to him, the better my chances are of finding him."

Paying attention this time, he quickly responded. "Yes, as of about an hour ago, we have information that someone fitting Sleeper's description was spotted in Osaka, Japan. A plane is ready to take you there. When you land, you are to proceed to the city's train station. You will be under the guise of a civilian and are to blend in and stay out of sight. Report back if, or when, you know something."

Wraith stood and saluted, to which the General reciprocated, thus concluding the briefing. As she approached the doorway, he called out to her.

"Wraith."

She stopped and looked back in his direction.

"Please be careful. Sleeper knows you. You both have worked together in the past. He probably already assumes you'll be the one to go after him." He paused and struggled with something internally before going on.

"The information he was working on could very well start a world war if it finds its way into the wrong hands. If this new bio-weapon could be used on a grand scale, there would be too many dead bodies to count. It is imperative that we get Sleeper and all his information on the bio-virus intact. We cannot afford to allow one iota of information to leak." He ran a worried hand through his hair.

Wraith studied him for a moment, seemingly processing this information before she turned to leave. When she exited the doorway, a resolute 'understood' could be heard falling from her lips.

As Hush watched her go, unease burned in his chest. He trusted Wraith, and technically, she was well qualified to handle this mission alone. But something about this particular assignment just seemed off. Sleeper's disappearance coinciding with intelligence about a new biological weapon seemed way too convenient to him. As of late, there were too many 'coincidences' to casually brush off.

The General stared off into the backdrop of his office for a moment before coming to a decision. As his expression relaxed, he picked up his phone.

He didn't get to where he was today by ignoring his instincts.

His secretary picked up on the second ring.

"Agent Demise, get a hold of agent Fang immediately and put him through to me. I have a mission for him."

"Right away, sir," retorted his secretary before she quickly hung up the line.

Golden eyes looked out over the marina, watching the sunset over the horizon. The man would have appreciated the setting more if it weren't for the familiar, angry voice barking at him from the other end of his cell phone.

Fixating on the story the General was reciting, Renji tried to etch the major details into his memory.

Simply speaking, there was a new weapon out there he was sure many world leaders would just love to get their hands on. And the agent specifically assigned to gather intelligence on this weapon fled his station and was on the run.

"Do you have any questions, Fang?" the voice on the other end of the line asked.

"Yeah, I do. This just doesn't add up. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since Sleeper took off on you, and he's already being classified as a rogue agent. Typical protocol dictates a waiting period of *seventy-two* hours before changing an agent's status to defective. Why would this case be any different?"

The General's voice dropped a few octaves in his response. "That's exactly it, Fang. The more I look at the facts here, the more I find that details such as these aren't adding up. I'm trying to find out why the Intelligence Department didn't follow protocol when they handed this case to me. I'm also afraid that there might be a deeper problem, but I have no proof. I have an agent in the field right now tracking Sleeper. She's one of my best, but in light of current internal events, I'd like you to shadow her. Step in only if absolutely necessary and make sure no one is aware of your presence. I have a feeling she's in great danger, but I can't send out a team on this without raising suspicion," he whispered. "Let no one know of your mission or your whereabouts. This is off-the-books."

Renji smirked. 'Off-the-books' work was his favorite kind of work, and this task certainly seemed much more interesting than his usual slice and dice jobs.

"Understood."

"Good. Now, get your ass over to Osaka. Agent Wraith will be arriving there shortly. She'll be checking in with her location once she settles in. I'll be in touch with details as soon as I have them." He paused, his voice now taking on a timbre of worry. "Fang, I need you to keep her safe. She's critical to our organization. This is your objective above all else. Wraith cannot—"

Renji cut him right off. "Is she hot?"

There was a deafening silence as the General digested the question, and several seconds ticked by before the man angrily exploded in response.

"Agent Fang, you are to keep your God damn dick in your pants on this mission! Is that fucking clear?"

"You hesitated way too long. If she were ugly, you'd have said so right away. She must be smokin'!"

"You, whoring shit head! If you so much as go near her..."

Rolling his eyes, Renji listened as the old man tried to threaten him within an inch of his life. He'd worked with *ROOT* for the past fifty years and with this particular General for twenty.

"You're starting to go soft, Hush. Maybe it's time you finally retired," he chided.

A choked snort came through the receiver. "You idiot, don't you dare forget who you're talking to! The last thing in the world I need right now is to listen to your condescending backtalk! Why don't you do us both a favor and tuck that prissy vagina of yours back into your big girl panties before you start telling me what you think I should do!" he spat. "Let me be clear here, agent. Your mission is to shadow Wraith and keep her safe. Do not alert her to your presence. Period!"

And with that, the line went dead.

Renji laughed so hard he needed to fight back the tears. *That old bastard is so easy to rile up.*

The worst part about being cursed with long life was how boring it could become. The last fifty years kept him busy, but the initial glamour of his work long since faded. At least he could piss the old man off every now and again as a means of entertainment.

Hush stared at his phone as he willed his anger to subside. Fang was one of his best assassins, and he had complete faith in his abilities. His skills were pristine, and he averaged a ninety-five percent success rate.

Hell. Truth be told, the man was practically a savage killing machine, and he just so happened to be located near Osaka, Japan.

However, as deadly as he was, Fang, unfortunately, wasn't widely known to many others within their secret organization for any of his skills *outside* of the bedroom.

Agent Fang was *ROOT*'s undisputed playboy, and he seemed to go through women as quickly as a baby went through diapers. This legendary reputation seemed to extend to his personal life as well. And the last thing he wanted was for Fang to get any stupid ideas of sexual conquest in his head while he was supposed to be protecting Wraith. The woman was a highly elite agent, and he was sure as hell she was in danger.

Wraith arrived at the Osaka Central Station just as the last remnants of sunlight faded from the skyline. It was tourist season in Osaka, and the warm summer weather brought many travelers with it.

It was nice to be back in Japan, albeit she wished it was under different circumstances. As she took in her surroundings, her mind quickly wandered to her family.

Maybe if everything goes smoothly, and Sleeper is captured, I'll be allowed some time off to visit Tokyo.

Dressed in casual clothes, she perfectly blended in with the mob of tourists exiting the train station. She planned on checking into one of the many hotels located within a mile of the city.

Osaka was densely populated, and Sleeper could be anywhere if he were even here at all. To add to her troubles, if he *were* here, he wouldn't be staying for too long.

It would be too dangerous to stay in any one place for too long when you're on the run from ROOT.

Biting her lower lip while deep in thought, she walked to one of the hotels she'd looked into earlier. The walk was short, and Wraith was thankful she'd chosen to travel light, a small travel bag rolling along behind her.

Chapter 2

Wraith checked into a hotel on the main avenue and entered a small room with a single bed, a bathroom, and a tiny kitchenette.

After taking a quick shower, she pulled out her laptop, established a secure connection, and checked her interoffice files. There were some messages regarding internal procedures and a few emails from her group, updating her on the statuses of their current assignments. Nothing was out of order, and no new files related to her ongoing mission were posted to her drive.

Looks like it's about time to get down to business.

Lowering onto her twin bed, she tried to relax. Focusing on the ceiling, she started her breathing exercises. With each exhale, she forced her spiritual powers to expand and reach out into the world. She let her thoughts drift to Sleeper, remembering his face, his voice, and his essence.

Once in her spiritual zone, she could feel the warmth of Sleeper's soul flooding through her body, the heat pulling against her, much like the waves of the sea.

He's here, and he's close! She closed her eyes and honed in on the unique heat signature coursing through her body, memorizing it so she could instantly call upon it again.

When she finally sat up, she was proud that she was able to lock onto Sleeper's energy so quickly. He was certainly here in Osaka, but now there was the difficult task of discreetly finding him.

She debated on whether it would be best to make a move tonight and risk being spotted, either by a civilian or, even worse, by Sleeper himself, or if she should wait until daybreak where she could move freely through the crowds of people out and about. There was also no guarantee Sleeper wouldn't make a move and leave Osaka tonight.

She sighed. She couldn't risk losing him when she was already so close.

She would have to set out tonight.

Getting off the bed, she walked back over to her laptop. She needed to update Hush on her location and confirm Sleeper's presence in the general vicinity.

Renji gazed down at his cell phone, waiting for the file on Wraith to come through. He had just hung up with Hush, who confirmed Sleeper was in Osaka within a thirty-mile radius of the city's main avenue. Agent Wraith was reportedly moving out to pinpoint the specific location, and general details on the female agent were to be passed along to him shortly.

His long, onyx hair swayed in the summer night's breeze as he impatiently waited for the file transfer. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a sharp pinging sound signaled his attention.

It's about damn time! He perched on a rooftop above the city's central train station and blended in with the darkness of the moonless night. *You'd think such a top-notch organization would be able to provide intelligence a little faster,* he internally grumbled as he opened Wraith's file.

The first item in the folder was a photo, and he quickly clicked on it.

Two big blue eyes stared at him.

Holy shit. A blast of heat scorched through his body. *She's absolutely... stunning.*

Which was saying a lot.

Agents weren't allowed to change their appearances for the required annual I.D. pictures. Which meant the use of makeup or any other forms of enhancement weren't allowed. And Wraith certainly didn't need any. To him, the woman was naturally gorgeous.

Completely enthralled, he studied her picture much longer than he probably needed to, his eyes squinting as he reviewed her features. As he stared at her, the woman's fierce, blue eyes held most of his attention. They were of a shade he never before knew existed. If he were to compare the color, they resembled... *Kyanite gems.*

Without warning, he felt a sharp pain twist into his right temple. He quickly reached up to massage the throbbing pulse he felt there.

Somehow he knew this woman.

His pulse quickened, and with the slightest tremble of his hand, he clicked on the picture again, enlarging it.

Renji stared dumbly at Wraith's photo, desperately trying to place her face. His instincts were roaring, but he couldn't, for the life of him, remember who she was or how he knew her.

All *ROOT* agents were given codenames upon entering the organization, and all records of their previous lives were erased from society at that time. The people they were ceased to exist the moment they signed their contract's small dotted line. To be an agent was to be a ghost of a person who never was, a remnant of another life. But, with the way his head was currently pounding, he swore he knew her.

Judging by her youthful appearance, she wasn't older than her mid-twenties, which meant Renji was already 'in' with *ROOT* before she was born. Therefore, he couldn't have met her before he joined the organization. And if he ran into her on an assignment, he didn't think it would be possible to so easily forget her.

The realization didn't do anything to ease him.

Minimizing the photo, he quickly read the summary included in the file, becoming desperate for any additional information about the familiar woman.

Codename: Wraith

Birthdate: August 16, 1992

Current Position: Reconnaissance Alpha Team Leader

Positive Traits: Agent is highly independent and self-motivating. Has excellent problem solving and decision-making abilities. Can work well with others and is highly intelligent.

Negative Traits: Can be overly accommodating and optimistic.

Physical Skills: Advanced abilities in hand-to-hand combat, specifically in Taekwondo and Krav Maga.

Weapons: Moderate ability with handheld firearms and advanced ability with a military-grade hunting bow.

Special Abilities: Advanced tracking skills when locating key-people of interest. Ability to fire blasts of energy through projectile weapons (e.g., arrows). Ability to protect large groups of people with self-created energy shields.

The information was sparse, and unfortunately, it wasn't ringing any bells. Looking back at the photo, he committed the woman's alluring face to memory.

She really is beautiful, despite the stoic face she's making in her picture. Confused, he opened the last file in the folder. There was nothing in the document but a string of numbers, and he knew they signified Wraith's current location and her room number.

He was under strict orders to shadow her. The only time he could give up his cover would be if she were in danger. But for reasons unknown to him, he suddenly and desperately wanted to hear her voice.

Maybe when this whole thing is over, I could find a way to speak with her.

Wraith soundlessly made her way through the streets of Osaka, letting the electric tug of her powers lead the way. The pull was moderately strong.

Sleeper can't be too far off.

She suddenly wished she could accelerate the journey by jumping across the rooftops. The silly thought caused her mind to wander to another time, to a certain priest with mix-matched eyes who would sometimes carry her on his back as they traveled together.

She stopped in her tracks at the memory.

Now surely wasn't the time, and she needed to remain focused. One misstep, and she could quickly be taken out. Pausing, she shook her head and once again concentrated on the magnetic pull. After what felt like hours of wandering through residential neighborhoods, she finally stopped in front of a rustic home on a dead-end street.

Looking around, she spotted a shed located on the far side of the property, and she snuck over to it for cover. Once confident that there was no present danger, she flattened against the shed's siding and closed her eyes. Reaching out with her senses, she felt her aura expand around her. Soon, the surge of energy condensed and formed a thick rope, once again pulling her in the direction of the dark home at the edge of the woods.

Wraith straightened. *He's in there.* There was no doubt.

The home was dark, and from where she stood at the shed, she couldn't make out any movements from within. *I really should call this in.*

However, her current location presented a problem. If she took out her cell phone, there was a chance the glowing screen would be spotted. It was too dark to make out anyone in the house. But, that didn't mean Sleeper hadn't set up a stakeout of his own in case he was being tailed.

On a whim, she looked to the woods. *If I could make my way over there, I'd be able to scope out the hidden west side of the house. I could also use the cover of the trees to send a message to Hush and request back up,* she realized.

But, she just needed to get over there.

She figured her best option was to army crawl over to the side of the home and follow its foundation to the woods. Comfortable with the plan, she closed her eyes yet again, allowing the thick, invisible rope to form once more. If Sleeper ran, the cord would change directions, and she'd instantly know about it.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she slowly slid her way down the shed's siding. She then pressed her body flat against the ground and wormed her way over to the east edge of the house. She was more than halfway across the grass when she felt a tingle shoot up her spine, and she froze.

Someone is watching me.

She dryly swallowed, trying to remain calm while she peered up at the house's east side.

It's too damn dark. She strained her eyes but wasn't able to see anything. If someone had a night vision scope on her, and she doubted that any top agent on the run would ever leave home without one, she was done for.

She had to move, and she needed to do it *now*.

Lifting, she broke into a crouched run as her mind raced in panic. *All Sleeper has to do is find me and take the shot. Once he does, I'm as good as dead.*

She had to call for backup, but before that, she had to get the fuck out of there. Fighting against her panic, she finally found herself against the darkened home's east side. However, something was very wrong.

She struggled to slow the pounding of her heart and the hysteria rushing through her body. *Okay, Wraith. Think. You don't have much time. You have to find the source!*

Not daring to close her eyes, she reached out with her powers, desperately trying to identify the intrusion that was setting her instincts into a frenzy.

Where did the presence come from? Is it someone inside the house? Does Sleeper have someone helping him? Is there another rogue agent on the streets watching his back?

It didn't take very long at all before she found the location of the presence. Upon the discovery, the former tingle became a fierce roar of electricity shooting through her nerves. There was someone positioned up high from the direction of the street she was just on, and whoever it was wasn't moving.

Could it be a sniper? Her body began sounding off alarm bells. From the angle the person was in, they'd have clearly seen her worming over the grass from the shed to the house. *Seriously, what the fuck is going on?*

She had no choice. She needed to make a break for the woods. Whoever was watching her wasn't going to waste much more time before getting a clear shot off.

Pressing up against the house, she sidestepped as quickly as she could around the home's south end. Once she rounded the corner, she broke into a full-blown run over to the cover of the woods. In her Olympic-worthy sprint across the yard, she accidentally set off a motion detector staged at the back of the house.

Lights around the home instantly sprung to life.

Fuck!

Not daring to look back, even when well into the woods, she hid behind a large tree and released her Glock 17 from its holster. Ready to use the weapon, she pointed it in the house's direction, while simultaneously snatching her cellphone from her pocket and cursing her terrible luck all the while.

There's no way in hell Sleeper wasn't spooked by the activation of those motion sensors. He's in that house, damn it! And now he's going to bolt on me and end up God knows where!

Not only was she going to lose her target, but there was someone else out there who saw her, and they were probably on their way to try and kill her at this very moment.

Renji followed Hush's coordinates and upon arriving at Wraith's hotel, expertly snuck into the room she set up in. Once inside, he glanced around. But when nothing of particular interest caught his attention, he crossed over to the room's center and closed his eyes, attempting to identify her scent.

Not much was really registering.

He hated hotel rooms. There were always too many people in and out of them, and it was hard to catch a specific scent, especially if you didn't know the scent you were trying to catch in the first place.

He sighed. He really didn't want to go through the woman's bag, but he felt as though he didn't have much choice. Remembering the agent's stoic expression from her picture, he imagined that whatever clothes she packed, and it didn't seem as though she packed very many judging by the small size of her suitcase, would most likely be freshly laundered and pressed, not leaving much in the way of personal scent.

I have to try. He opened the small bag and made a mental note of the items and their positions within. When carefully looking through the contents, his previous assumptions regarding the state of the clothes seemed to prove correct. All her clothing was laundered and folded neatly into two identical twin stacks.

Leaning in and taking a whiff, his mind worked to process the various scents. He could make out the faint odor of cleaning chemicals along with a layer of flowered perfume, which was most likely fabric softener. Dejected, he abandoned the suitcase and once again looked around the room.

She must have left something behind. He walked to the small bathroom located in the left-hand corner of the space. There, neatly folded jeans and a button-down blouse, along with some undergarments, were stacked on top of the lowered toilet covering. At some point, agent Wraith showered and changed.

Bingo!

Chapter 3

Happy for the discovery and how much easier it was going to make his mission, Renji leaned over and picked up the stack of clothing.

He devilishly thought about smelling the undergarments but quickly decided against it. He learned that particular lesson trying to be a smart ass in the past. Just because a woman was beautiful to look at, didn't necessarily mean she smelled good, and the last thing you want is to smell someone's nasty panties.

He choked at the memory.

Pulling his thoughts together and trying to focus, he selected the blouse from the pile and brought it up to his face. Inhaling deeply and closing his eyes, he tried to commit the woman's scent to memory.

Her scent was light, a cross between the ocean and flowers. It was sweet, unique... and... and...

It was like nothing he ever encountered before. The fragrance was so deliciously sexual and arousing that Renji's body instantly responded to it, providing him with an almost painful erection twitching against the confines of his pants.

What the fuck? He contemplated his newfound physical state. As if to somehow up the ante, his traitorous mind suddenly recalled Wraith's photo, and he instantly pictured the beautiful woman loudly groaning beneath him, her sparkling eyes holding his as she came. At the thought, the pain in his temple returned so intensely in ferocity that his body folded over.

His hands flew up, clutching his throbbing head while a wave of nausea flooded over him.

Who the hell is this chick, and why the fuck am I reacting this way?

His brain struggled to remember, to place the scent, but he kept coming up empty. For a moment, while willing the pain to subside, he randomly thought about the past when life was so much simpler. He barely remembered a time that was without worry about world wars and weapons of mass destruction. There was a point when, albeit it felt like a dream now, just having enough food and protecting his tribe from outside forces was all that mattered.

There was also the Anamnesis Terrene thing, his mind chided.

Renji thought back to that particular adventure. Though a horrible experience at the time, the memories brought a welcomed warmth into his heart. After blinking a few times, his headache subsided as some of the cobwebs dusting his memories finally cleared away.

Christ, that was over five hundred years ago! Suddenly he felt ancient.

Catching a quick glance at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, he stared at the image of the tall, muscled man with lightly, tanned skin and predatory, yellow eyes standing before him. He looked no older than thirty in human years.

If it took five hundred years for him to look like a thirty-year-old human, he wondered how many more years were left until he could finally surrender to the silent and welcome peace of death.

Clearing his depressing musings from his mind, and finally feeling a bit more centered, he exited the bathroom, now making his way to the room's window. With Wraith's scent fresh in his mind, he set off to track the elusive woman down.

He quickly caught up to her within the hour and silently tailed her while keeping his distance. The agent was pretty good at expertly blending into the shadows; she left no obvious tell of her presence. If not for his canine tracking abilities, combined with his superior sense of smell, he probably would have lost her.

A devilish grin crossed over his face. Yup, still got it!

He watched on as the female agent confidently made her way along as if driven by an unseen force, pausing from time-to-time as if to re-calibrate some kind of internal compass. She stopped near, what looked to be, a vacant house at the wood's edge. She took a few moments to silently study the home before moving out of sight into the accompanying darkness of the property.

He waited for several moments before moving to a rooftop across the street, trying to, once again, catch sight of her.

She's most likely calling for backup, which makes the most sense. He sniffed the air and confirmed her position on the property hadn't changed. Seeing as how he'd most likely be there until additional agents arrived, he pulled his tactical Urbana sniper rifle from the strap affixing the lightweight weapon to his back.

Might as well set up in case Sleeper becomes wise to her position.

Laying flush against the roof, he unfolded the legs of his rifle. Using the weapon's scope, he quickly scanned the home's windows and entry points. Upon seeing nothing of interest, he continued to guide the scope over the surrounding property.

It was at this point he caught a glimpse of a black blob shuffling across the grass. Removing his eye from the lens, he instead used his perfect eyesight to hone in on Wraith's movements from above.

What the fuck is she doing?

As though somehow hearing his silent question, she suddenly froze in the middle of the lawn. A minute ticked by before the woman slowly rotated her head as if examining the row of windows now facing her.

Renji lowered his eye back to the scope. *This woman is a sensory type, and something just spooked her.*

Once again studying the home's windows and seeing nothing, he quickly lifted his head and scanned the grass for Wraith with his eyes. He then watched as she suddenly jumped up into a crouched jog and threw herself against the house's side. This time, she turned her head and looked in his direction.

Impossible. Dropping his eye back to his scope, he adjusted the magnification and zoomed in on her face.

Wraith was staring directly at him, and her expression was one of horror.

Renji's instincts kicked up, and a slight nervousness rose up from his belly. *What's going on? There's no possible way she should be able to see me.* From what he remembered from her file, her abilities didn't include super-duper telescope vision, or something just as absurd.

But, her file did actually mention she was able to locate key-people of interest, he remembered. And at this very moment in time, from his present sniper position located directly across from her current exposed position against the house, he realized that he was very much so, a key-person of interest.

He inwardly groaned as he watched Wraith sashay along the side of the home before he lost sight of her completely. And he

mentally cursed when the lights surrounding the property, apparently motion-activated, came to life, drowning the house in a bath of light.

Wraith was frantically pushing the buttons on her smartphone's keypad when she was interrupted by the telltale electricity once again building within her. It took everything in her not to accidentally fire the gun poised in her right hand.

Someone is here, and it sure isn't Sleeper. This is the presence of the rooftop stalker.

Her pursuer, to their credit, was expertly silent. If not for her powers, she wouldn't have registered their existence at all. The enemy was currently looming over her from the treetops.

How in the world could they get over here so fast? That's not possible!

The person seemed to lurk above her a moment longer than they should have as if inviting her to make the next move.

Slowly, with a movement she prayed was imperceptible, Wraith pushed her phone back into her pocket. Then, calling upon her years of training, she shifted her weight and quickly turned, aiming her Glock in the intruder's direction. And she sure as hell didn't hesitate to pull the trigger and fire.

The bullet shot forward, and the initial sound of the blast was deafening. The tiny explosion momentarily lit up Wraith's field of vision, and from what she could tell, her attacker was on the move.

Expanding her energy, she took a step forward and tried to once again lock onto her target.

If she'd fired that bullet at anyone else, it would have hit, Renji condescendingly thought. Unfortunately, for her, no one beats a wolf demon in terms of speed.

He watched as the woman once again swung her gun in his direction. *Who shoots first and asks questions later?*

He tried to ignore the chain of events that led to this current predicament as he struggled to stay out of her range. By getting too

close to her, he obviously put her into a panic. For all this woman knew, he was probably trying to kill her.

Nope. Not my fault. This chick's a bonafide lunatic, he chanted while trying to glaze over his obvious responsibility in the matter.

"Step in only if absolutely necessary and make sure no one is aware of your presence." Hush's words abruptly repeated through the chatter of his self-absolving thoughts.

He could've laughed. He was pretty sure the entire neighborhood was alerted to his presence at this point, which reminded him, he needed to bring an end to this muddled dilemma immediately. The only problem was, no matter which direction he tried to disappear into, Wraith seemed to easily follow his movements with her gun, granted she was always a few seconds behind him.

There's no way a human is going to be able to keep up me, he decided. *Even if that human happens to have sensory type powers.*

He needed to end this soon. He could already hear the muffled sound of sirens from a few miles away.

In a few minutes, the police are going to be closing in on this fun little gun party in the woods.

If he could get behind Wraith, he'd have a few moments with which to subdue her. Of course, the woman thinking that he was obviously sent there to kill her, was going to put up one hell of a fight once he did.

It can't be helped. Pushing his legs hard, he added a few seconds to his lead. He then intentionally zig-zagged across the trees, hoping to throw her off.

Thankfully, it worked.

Wraith seemed to become confused, and she struggled to keep up with his plan of attack, giving him a momentary opening. And Renji sure as hell didn't waste the opportunity to pounce.

It was too late to redirect the attack when Wraith became aware of her target's presence behind her.

It was also too late to stop the man's arm from snaking around her waist and engulfing her in a tight and unwelcome embrace.

And it was way, way too late to stop his hand from sliding down her free arm and dislocating her wrist.

Her adversary wasted no time in effectively wrenching the gun out of her now broken grasp. And as he did, his hand became free to find a new home.

Roughly cupping her mouth, he silenced any scream she could've made.

Pain shot through her arm. On reflex, she forcefully swung her leg back, trying to land the mother of all kicks to the man's balls. It would have worked too if he hadn't managed to block her with his shin at that very moment.

The kick was excruciating. Biting his lip, Renji tried to refocus the sharp pain spreading through his leg elsewhere. He thanked a higher power he somehow managed to redirect the kick from its originally intended target because this woman definitely would have destroyed his manhood.

Unforgivable.

For a moment, he considered snapping the woman's neck. She was trouble, and he sure as hell wasn't as amused by this mission as he was at the start. Becoming exasperated, he settled on a gentler tactic, praying the female agent had the presence of mind to understand his words.

Leaning forward, he chanced a low, rushed whisper into her ear, keeping the message simple. "Wraith, stop. I'm on your side. I'm agent Fang, an assassin with *ROOT*. General Hush assigned me to shadow you. I'm here to protect you."

He breathed a sigh of relief when she stilled, seeming to consider his words. But, when he felt her muscles faintly twitch under her skin, he realized the bitch was going to try to make a break for it.

Now scowling, he tightened his hold of her waist and leaped up, bringing them both into the trees. As they landed on a nearby branch, Renji noticed that Wraith didn't fight against his hold, which he took to be a much-needed step in the right direction.

"Listen, Wraith. I know you don't trust me. But, if I were the enemy, I could've easily taken you out several times over already," he huffed, frustrated. "I *don't* want to hurt you. Anything you want to know, I can try to explain, but right now, we *need* to get out of here."

As if reinforcing his words, the sirens grew louder in the background. The police seemed to now be stationed in front of the lit-up house.

"First, I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth, and then, I'm going to get you out of here. Do *not* scream," Renji ordered.

Removing his hand as promised, he promptly turned her around to face his chest. Their current position on the tree branch made it nearly impossible for her to further attack without falling to the ground and breaking a few bones along the way.

Renji didn't spare her a single glance. Instead, he swiftly bent down and caught her waist with his shoulder. Once secured, he slung her over his back.

"What the hell are you doing?" she hissed.

"Getting us out of here." Springing forward, he sprinted across the trees.

Chapter 4

Wraith didn't know what to make of her situation from her place on Fang's shoulder. With every leap across the rooftops, his long hair would whip across her face. A few minutes in, and she wanted to tear it from his head.

That escape was pretty subtle, Wraith sarcastically thought. She'd been so very close, but she let Sleeper escape.

Correction! Fang allowed Sleeper to escape, completely ruining my mission.

She sighed. As much as she wanted to place the failure squarely on Fang's shoulders, she did begrudgingly have to accept her own shortcomings as well. She should've called Hush the moment she came across that damn house. There were plenty of places she could've hidden to place a phone call *before* going onto the property.

Her abilities led her to the target, but for some reason, she opted to get closer to the house.

I fucked up.

As if finally sensing her foul mood, Fang bit out a few words of comfort from over his shoulder. "Not your fault. It's mine. I got too close. I messed up."

Wraith interpreted his jumbled sentence fragments to be some sort of half-assed apology. At this moment, she decided she didn't like him very much, but she did have to admit she was starting to grow very fond of the low timbre of his voice. He spoke in a very masculine, sensual rumble. Randomly, she wondered if he'd whisper sweet nothings in the ears of his victims before killing them...

Huh? Where the hell did that come from? she wondered. *I really gotta lay off all the dark romance novels. They're starting to get to my head!*

This was hardly the appropriate time to have such immature thoughts about her colleague, especially when said colleague happened to screw up her entire mission in addition to snapping her wrist.

Oh yeah, that. The memory enraged her. "Was it really necessary to break my fucking wrist?" she spat. "I'm a righty, you know. It's going to be really hard holding a straight shot with my left

hand if I have to. And what about all my reports? Do you know what it's like trying to type with only one hand?"

Renji's eyelid started to twitch involuntarily. *This woman is a real fucking pain in the ass!*

He'd been carrying her for the past half hour, trying his best to get her back to her hotel without further incident. But, with the way she was carrying on, he was way past the point of feigned patience, and he let his temper get the best of him.

Jumping down to a dimly lit alley, he unceremoniously swung Wraith over his shoulder and onto the ground. The woman made a comical 'oof' sound as she bounced on her ass in the dirt.

"You... *asshole!*" she bit out, between clenched teeth.

Renji watched as she scrambled to get to her feet, her limbs furiously flailing about while she shouted at him in hushed and angry tones.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, *you jerk?*" she practically hissed. "I don't have to take this shit from you! I don't know why the hell Hush sent you here, but you should go straight back to wherever you came from and leave me the fuck alone!" She marched her way over to him, her beautiful features now twisted into a hateful scowl.

But right when she got within three feet of him, her face contorted, and she stupidly stared at him, her jaw falling slack.

That's it, Renji thought, the crazy lady finally went and lost the rest of her marbles.

He studied the dumbstruck female agent before him. The woman looked absolutely traumatized, and he stared at her wide-eyed expression wanting to laugh at her.

So he did.

His obnoxious laughter erupted into the quiet of the night. After several minutes went by, and he finally calmed, he realized Wraith was still staring at him while openly gaping. He secretly wondered if she was ok.

Maybe she's in shock? He didn't think she had any injuries aside from the one he gave her to stop her murderous rampage back in the woods. *Perhaps I've missed something?* He gave her the once over.

It looked as though she'd just seen a ghost.

"Have you suddenly gone dumb?" he asked her. "Not that I could blame you. I know it must be hard coming to terms with the fact that you've done nothing but insult the sexiest man you've ever laid eyes on." He flashed her his most charming, fanged smile.

Wraith blinked several times, and Renji watched as the emotion in her eyes slowly changed. They went from, wide with sudden worry, to sad and openly pleading.

What the hell is wrong with her? He frowned. "Wraith, are you alright? Are you hu—"

He didn't get the chance to finish his sentence.

Wraith suddenly rushed him, tightly wrapping her arms around his neck while staring directly into his eyes. A few seconds passed in this way before the mood suddenly shifted.

Renji suddenly became acutely aware of her body and how it was currently pressed up against him. She was so close he simply could've leaned down and kissed her, if he wanted to. Her small rapid breaths were also lightly tickling his neck.

Slowly, a deep, burning heat spread through his body. But, before he could act upon any of the physical impulses starting to make their way to his brain, one barely audible word tumbled from Wraith's pink, plump lips, ripping him back down to Earth.

"Renji."

Renji slowly closed his eyes, thoughts tumbling through his mind behind his halted lids. He knew full well he'd given up that particular identity centuries ago. But, it sure as hell felt good to be reminded of it again.

How long has it been since I've heard my own name? he absently wondered.

With his mind still processing what Wraith just said, his eyes slowly opened and heatedly bored into hers. His hand lifted as if acting on its own accord and gently swept her bangs aside before coming to rest on the small of her back. He then slightly angled his head to the side before he spoke, finally asking her the question that was burning him alive since the moment he saw her picture.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

Maybe it was their intimate embrace or the fierce heat that was currently rolling off of Renji and washing over her. Or perhaps it was just the way he was staring at her, his lips mere inches from her own. But all things aside, Wraith wasn't quite sure she understood his question.

Of course, he doesn't remember me, her mind chided. *I look nothing like I used to.*

In their intimate position and with his essence threatening to devour her, she so profoundly regretted having to break the embrace. But, their current state was too much of a distraction, and she needed to get her wits about her.

Her eyes slowly broke away from his, and her arms regretfully slid from around his neck to now rest at her sides. She then took a reluctant step back and studied him.

The tall assassin wore a black, fitted vest matching her own, only his was overlaid with lightweight Teflon armor, his thick, muscled arms menacingly protruding from each side. His tactical pants were also black and adorned at the waist with a leather utility belt. Crossing the right side of his back was a lightweight rifle held in place with a thick nylon strap.

His long, black hair was worn in a highly held ponytail, affixed with a simple black band. His skin was tanned from evident hours spent in the sun. Black slitted pupils lived within the center his heated, golden eyes. His face was angled, dangerous, and sensuously male. Tips of fanged canine teeth peeked out below the edges of his upper lip, happily accenting his impeccable predatory appearance.

Although he appeared to have only aged to be a few years her senior, there was no doubt in her mind that this man could *not* be anyone *but* Renji, the teenage leader of the Hyakuhiro Waterfall pack.

Only that teenager was a fully-fledged man now.

In her past life, this guy had the most vexing habit of popping up on every possible occasion to unabashedly flirt with her, much to the ire of her group of friends. When she first saw his face, her

powers exploded through her body as she immediately recognized him. Although she couldn't make much sense out of why he was here, his essence was a very familiar one.

This thoroughly explained why she spooked so easily when she pinpointed his spiritual pressure back at that house. At the time, her very soul was screaming at the monumental connection in remembrance. However, she misinterpreted its message.

Did he somehow manage to survive and live through to this era? she wondered. If so, that would make him... She blinked several times as she processed this. That would make him over five hundred years old! Good Lord, this man is fucking ancient!

Wraith felt her usually sharp mind starting to wander in various directions, imagining all the things he must have gone through over the past five centuries.

He practically lived through my entire high school history book. Civil wars, the atom bomb, the rise and fall of governments, free trade... he lived through it all.

She could barely grasp the concept of the number of comrades, enemies, acquaintances, friends, and lovers who must have come and gone throughout this poor man's life.

Renji watched as Wraith put some distance between them. He'd be lying if he said he didn't instantly miss her warmth against his chest. He looked on as she seemed to struggle with her thoughts, a range of emotions crossing her soft features as she intensely looked him over.

Seconds ticked by as she studied him, and he patiently waited, allowing her space. He continued to watch as her initial hesitation dissipated, giving way to a small smile.

Additional minutes passed them by before she finally turned away from him and began softly chuckling, the index finger of her good hand rising to soothe over her lip as if lost in a very, happy memory.

And time continued along on its steadfast pace.

Upon realizing he was blatantly being ignored, Renji fought to suppress his ever-growing frustration. This woman was truly an expert at working over his very last nerve.

The fleeting tender moment shared between them had since passed. Since coming in contact with her earlier this evening, his emotions repeatedly bounced from one extreme to another, leaving him entirely drained and out of patience. He seriously felt as though he were about to lose his shit at any given moment.

He growled, clearing his throat. "Who. Are. You?" he snapped.

Her eyes met his, studying him inquisitively before the ever-elusive Wraith finally spoke.

"What happened to your tail?"

"My... My, what?" He blinked rapidly as he tried to process her ridiculous question. "I wasn't tailed. There's no way someone's going to tail me without my knowing about it," he said, attempting to assure her.

When she blankly stared at him, he felt compelled to further explain.

"I have special abilities, just like you," he flatly said. "I wouldn't be much of an assassin if I wasn't able to perceive external threats. It'd be impossible for someone to follow me without my knowing."

When Wraith didn't respond, he thought for a brief moment before speaking yet again. A small tell of hesitancy was now creeping into his once confident tone.

"Why are you asking me this, Wraith? Did you sense someone following us?" His posture straightened, and he sniffed the air.

"Huh? No," she answered, apparently confused before she suddenly began to laugh. "I'm not talking about *that* kind of tail. I mean, what happened to *your* tail. You know, the big, black, poofy thing that used to hang over your butt," she explained, looking at him as if he were stupid.

Renji's head cocked to the side. "Tail?" he repeated, still not able to keep up with the ludicrous conversation.

"Yes, a tail. As in, 'the happy dog wags his tail,'" she said, happy to use the perplexing word in a sentence.

Something clicked. *How could she know...*

Renji sharply tilted his head, sizing her up while his posture fell into a predatory crouch. His fists balled up at his sides, and he was pretty sure red was slowly bleeding into the whites of his eyes.

"Are you a fucking demon?" he spat, no longer caring to keep his voice in check.

Wraith looked around. Although the alleyway was somewhat hidden, it was located off a main street. It was late in the evening, but if Renji kicked up a fuss, which he seemed pretty intent on doing right now, it was quickly going to draw someone's attention.

"Are you insane? Are you *trying* to blow our cover right now? Lower your fucking voice!"

He silently stared at her as though he were about to rip her to shreds.

Oh. Right. She recalled his recent question. "No, I'm not a demon," she calmly stated. "My real name is..." She trailed off before immediately correcting herself. "In another lifetime, my name *was* Risa of the Junsuina Temple," she offered, hoping the mention of her former name and temple would trigger some kind of reaction.

Unfortunately, her answer didn't seem to have any effect on his murderous disposition.

She tried again. "We battled against Wynter's forces to retrieve the Anamnesis Terrene jewel. I was a priestess that usually traveled in a group with Tenrai back then..." Her thoughts trailed off before she picked back up and continued. "You used to pick me flowers all the time. It was very, sweet," she finished.

"A priestess that traveled in a group with Tenrai?" he repeated.

"Yeah. You know, the one that really didn't know what she was doing."

The name *Tenrai* certainly rang a bell, and Renji instantly pictured the arrogant and angry priest from his past and remembered the idiocy of most of their youthful exchanges. Back then, the idiot found any and every excuse in the book to try and pick a fight with him. It seemed as though Tenrai was always trying to compete with him over the affections of Ri...

Risa

Renji's heart rate quickened, and he desperately studied the female agent's face. Wraith didn't look anything like Risa. However, her eyes...

There was only one person in this world who owned that unique eye color.

What are the chances there would be two?

In a rare moment, he found he was utterly speechless. *A reincarnation?*

The red that previously overtook his eyes slowly began to retreat, fading back to white. Once it did, he wasted no time in running over to the woman. He roughly lifted her into a tight and suffocating hug while taking deep and hungry draws of her scent.

"Risa!" he whispered, struggling to keep his voice low. "Is it really you?" He squeezed her tightly. "I saw you die..." he said, choking out the words.

He didn't realize just how much he'd missed her.

He was suddenly thrilled she didn't manage to shoot him back in the woods.

Chapter 5

As if finally sensing her inability to breathe, Renji released Risa from his bone-crushing hug and gently set her down. Apparently, unwilling to break the physical connection entirely, he placed his hands on her shoulders.

"I can't believe it's really you!" he joyfully said as he stared at her. "This shouldn't be possible. You died."

"Well, yes. But, I'm a holy user. We are reborn," she explained simply.

Renji seemed to contemplate this as his memories of a long-forgotten time slowly came back to him. "So, you were reborn into *this* time."

"Yes, I was reborn in 1992."

Her words were met with a deep and throaty chuckle of disbelief in response.

"I know demons can live for many years, but have you really been alive this whole time?" she stupidly asked him.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm standing here, aren't I?"

"But you'd have to be—"

"I'm five hundred and thirty-four years old," he answered for her.

Briefly pausing, she digested this new information before speaking again.

"Do you remember any of the priests and priestesses from my temple?" she desperately asked.

Renji took a deep breath. He obviously saw where this was going. "Of course I do."

"Whatever happened to Tenrai?" she demanded.

"Risa..." His hands left her shoulders and gently cupped her face. "Tenrai died fifty years after you did. He lived a decent life. After you died, he left the temple and set out looking for you. He never gave up on looking for your reincarnation."

Covering his hand with her only functioning one, she didn't miss a beat.

"But, *you* did."

"Wait. *What?*" he sputtered. "When Tenrai explained the cycle of rebirth, I thought he was bat shit crazy. I desperately wanted to believe him. I actually looked for you, too! I just didn't commit my entire existence to it for more than a few years!"

Visibly shaken, he took a moment to center himself before speaking again.

"Tenrai always hoped. It was what gave him purpose and kept him going. He searched for years, but there was never any trace of you. It didn't take me more than a few years for it to become obvious that you weren't coming back."

"I'm standing here, aren't I?" she repeated, recalling his earlier sarcastic remark.

"You most certainly are, even though it happens to be over five hundred years later. But hey, why should that little detail matter at all?"

Risa obviously knew Tenrai was dead. Still, even though she'd already mourned the loss of her friends for years now, she felt as though she'd suddenly lost them all over again.

It hurt.

"Whatever happened to the others?"

Renji smiled. "Yuri and Shinji spent many years working to help villages under demonic attack. At some point, they got married. Had a shitload of kids, too." He snickered at the memory.

"How'd they die?"

"I'm not really sure. Shinji became ill at some point and wasn't able to recover, and Yuri took excellent care of him. A few years after Shinji's death, she followed, going in her sleep," he responded. "They were old, Risa. It was their time."

"Oh, okay." However, there was one more person on her list she desperately needed to ask about.

"So, what became of you, Renji?" *At least he's alive, and I won't have to mourn his loss again, too,* she thought, feeling a small moment of relief.

"Me? Well, I'm not really sure where to even start. I've been around for a very, very long time."

"Please start somewhere," she begged. She sincerely needed to hear something positive right now.

His brows furrowed. "I did my duty, really. After I stopped scouring the country for you, I finally settled down a bit. I led my pack for several years and eventually took Emica as my mate, which united the tribes."

Emica? She remembered the exotic female wolf demon that once hated her with every fiber of her being.

She was wrong. Just because Renji survived didn't mean there was nothing left to mourn. *Is this jealousy I'm feeling?*

Renji continued speaking, not noticing the icy hue beginning to appear in her eyes.

"We tried to adapt to life alongside humans, but over time, with the advancement of human society, we started losing more and more of our resources to them," he said, sadly. "There came a point where we could no longer sustain one large united tribe. We thought if we once again divided into individual packs and spread out across the country, we'd somehow be able to conserve enough land and food to survive.

"Eventually, we found ourselves slowly becoming extinct. Our only option was to assimilate into human society and live among them. It was an incredibly hard decision to make. Our entire way of life needed to change if we were to survive. Sadly, the animal comrades we were forced to leave behind are once again finding themselves on the brink of extinction."

Renji looked absolutely devastated, and Risa silently cursed for having asked. Her heart broke for him, his people, and his wolves.

So much for hearing something positive, she sadly thought. "I'm so incredibly sorry. Is *ROOT* aware of what you really are? We might be able to get them to help somehow. After all, our entire mission is to maintain the peace in this world, and we can't really do that if we can't find a way to sustain all the life that currently lives within it. That's our whole purpose, isn't it?"

"No, *ROOT* doesn't know what I am. They think I'm gifted, just like you. That's not to say the Intelligence Department doesn't know about the existence of demons. But, they certainly don't know that I am one."

She made a mental note to investigate once she returned to her office.

Not knowing why it mattered as much as it did, she desperately felt as though she'd explode if she didn't at least try to find one final thing out. She needed to ask him one last question.

Clearing her throat, she tried to keep the venom from her voice. "So, what happened to Emica?"

"I'm not really sure. After the packs split up, we did too. I was honestly glad she was finally out of my hair."

Risa looked at him, an incredulous expression washing over her face.

"It wasn't a good match," he simply said.

"I thought wolves mated for life," she said, confused.

"*Wolves* do, with some exceptions to the rule. However, *wolf demons* mate until the relationship naturally fizzles out, pretty much as you humans do." He laughed as he checked his watch. "I hate to do this, but we have to go."

Looking at her own watch, Risa realized she hadn't called Hush to update him on what went down tonight with Sleeper. *Holy Shit! Sleeper!* she mentally shrieked. She'd completely forgotten all about him.

As if he were catching on to her present thoughts, Renji bent down and hoisted her back over his left shoulder. Crouching down, he balanced her weight, before springing them back up to the rooftops where he broke out into a full-blown run. Dawn was only a few hours away, and the night truly got away from them.

"We're going to have our asses handed to us, aren't we?"

He didn't answer.

Speaking of asses... "Hey, Renji!"

"What?"

"You really do have to fill me in on what happened to your tail," she seriously said.

She could feel him chuckle in response.

Risa didn't know how long she'd been sleeping before she was awoken by a familiar presence looming over her bed. The half-awake part of her brain was aware it was Renji, but the half-asleep part almost punched him in the nose entirely on reflex.

Seriously, this man truly has to work on his common sense! She frowned. "Is there a reason why you're hovering over me like some kind of freak in a horror movie?" she sarcastically asked him. "Did a simple knock on the door not occur to you?"

Renji's only response was to sit back on his legs and tilt his head to the side, much like a dog.

Risa wasn't a morning person, and she was on a minimal amount of sleep as it was. As far as she was concerned, waking to an intruder kneeling over her bedside wasn't the best way to start the day.

She grumpily swung her legs over the mattress. "Next time, can you please knock? Or if you feel compelled to break-in, could you at least call out to me to wake me up?" She immediately felt guilty when she noticed the elastic bandages and the ice pack he held in his hands.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just felt bad waking you, that's all," he sincerely said. "I was debating on whether I'd be able to wrap your wrist while you were sleeping."

"It probably wouldn't have worked out well." She chuckled. "I'm sorry for getting huffy. I'm seriously not a morning person, and I could've accidentally broken your nose just now."

"I honestly doubt that."

Oh, really? Would you like me to show you? she thought in annoyance. "I've come a long way from the helpless teenager you once knew. It would serve you well to remember that."

"I know. I've read a summary of your file. You've become pretty badass, Risa. But it'll take a lot more than a punch from a human to break *my* nose," he smugly retorted.

"Oh, really? How's your shin holding up?"

Renji momentarily grimaced before he relaxed his expression. "It's doing great. Why? Were you under the impression that you broke my leg last night?"

Rising from the bed, she angrily marched off to the bathroom with her small suitcase trailing behind her.

Renji chuckled at how easy it was to rile Risa up. *Serves her right for messing with me so much last night instead of just coming out and telling me who she was.*

While she busied herself in the bathroom, he went to the room's kitchenette and started a pot of coffee, helping himself to the first cup. When she stormed out of the bathroom a few minutes later, he noticed she was wearing her hair down today, and the long, thick length of it was splayed down her lower back. She was dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a simple white, fitted tank top.

The angry priestess blew right past him and made a beeline for the coffee pot. When he decided she looked a little less murderous, he slowly approached and gently lifted her right hand with his. She didn't jerk her hand away at the contact, which he was happy about. But, she did give him a sideways glance.

Renji tenderly inspected her wrist by rolling it over in his hands. The swelling wasn't too bad at all, which he was genuinely grateful for. Working quickly, he snugly wrapped the bandages he brought around her wrist and out onto the surrounding hand. Once finished, he realized she was idly staring at him, and the anger was gone from her face.

"Thank you," she softly said.

"No problem. You're going to want to keep ice on it. It's not broken, only sprained. It may help to take some Ibuprofen if you have some. It'll help with the swelling." He lifted her hand to his lips and softly kissed the backs of her fingers.

"Yes, agent Mom!" Risa randomly shouted in a commanding voice. She straightened her posture and saluted with her non-bandaged hand.

As was now a natural behavior from his time within the organization, he saluted in return. And he silently cursed for falling for her trap when she erupted into a fit of hysterical laughter at his expense. He swore he could feel the start of one of his reoccurring 'Risa' headaches coming on.

"You do realize we're on a mission right now, don't you?" he growled, trying to shift the focus of his own embarrassment over to her. "Last night, you told me you were going to try to see if you could sense Sleeper again. You're going to have to call General Hush

soon to update him on our little situation, or have you forgotten about the mission entirely?"

The words appeared to have the intended sobering effect, silencing her loud whoops of laughter. He watched as the woman scowled at him before she took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

He really is such a jerk sometimes! I never know where I stand with him. One minute he's an arrogant moron, then he's sweet and protective, then the next thing I know, I want to push him into bed and ride him for hours...

Risa opened her eyes and stared at him. She blinked twice in confusion before closing them again.

Why do I keep having these crazy sexual thoughts about him? I mean, it's Renji! He's always flirted with me before, but it never bothered me. Why do I feel so differently about him now?

She once again opened her eyes.

Renji was standing across from her with his arms folded against his chest in impatience. He was wearing civilian clothes, and from where she stood, he looked utterly edible in his fitted black T-shirt and simple blue jeans. You could see the outline of his stomach muscles tracing through his shirt.

When she realized she was blatantly staring at him, she shut her eyes and tried to will the blush from her cheeks.

I really just need to get laid. That has to be it. When was the last time I had a good roll in the sheets? That must be why this is happening to me—

"Risa? What are you... *doing*?"

The low, seductive rumble of his voice added another layer of scorching heat to her musings. "I'm trying to locate Sleeper!" she all but shouted. "I need you to be quiet!" she hissed, becoming frustrated. *You stupid, attractive, jerk...*

Now it was Risa's turn to feel embarrassed. She was acting like a silly teenager with a crush! She worked so hard to get to where she was, and here she was goofing off and wasting time. Renji was right; she wasn't acting as if she were on a mission at all.

She took a deep calming breath and intensely tried *not* to imagine how those fangs of his might feel while being slowly dragged against the soft expanse of her neck. Instead, she channeled her current 'frustration' into activating her powers.

Once she felt the invisible heat expand from her center and fill the room, she quietly focused on the memory of Sleeper's essence.

Chapter 6

Renji watched Risa go into a trance-like state, her cheeks still slightly flushed. He wondered if, when she came to, he should tell her that he was able to smell her arousal.

A few minutes ago, she was sizing him up with hooded eyes. Her sweet scent, entwined with the heavier musk of her lust, flooded the air. He wasn't misreading her signals. She wanted him, and his body instantly responded to her body's silent request, ready to satiate her growing need.

When he asked what she was doing in his most seductive voice, indirectly requesting permission to approach her, she promptly shut him down in typical Risa fashion, which frustrated the hell out of him.

He truly found it impossible to make much sense of one minute to the next when he was around her. One moment she was laughing, in another, she was yelling at him. One minute she was serious and brooding, and in another, her desire for him would overwhelm his senses.

Every time they did have an intimate moment, she managed to do something incredibly stupid, as if subconsciously trying to push him away.

His thoughts were interrupted when Risa opened her eyes and intentionally focused on his face.

"He's not here," she dejectedly said.

"Maybe we're not close enough?"

"It's possible," she hopefully said. "I'm able to pick up on someone familiar as long as I'm within a thirty-mile radius of them. There's no way Sleeper stuck around after all that chaos last night. He has to be on the move, I just don't know what direction to look in."

"We can try the house again. You said he was definitely there last night. It may be a good place to start. Plus, I want to go in there anyway and take a look around."

"That makes complete sense. Let's do it." She walked to her nightstand, picked up her smartphone, and dialed the General.

As the phone began to ring, Renji walked over to her and gently grabbed her arm, whispering into her phone free ear.

"Remember, you *can't* tell Hush about me. If he finds out about last night's commotion, he'll reassign me."

At the contact, he tried his best to ignore the scent of her rekindled desire and the resulting pulse it was calling forth from between his legs.

"Hello, sir. How are you? Yes, I'm doing well. I wanted to update you that I wasn't able to find Sleeper yesterday evening. I've since returned to my hotel room and will be setting off to try again. No, nothing interesting happened. Yes, of course, sir. Understood." She hung up and turned to face him. "We're all set. Let's go."

"I'll go grab my car. I'll meet you around front." He winked at her and exited the room.

The duo strategically parked Renji's Jeep alongside the woods near the house Sleeper was in the previous night. This location allowed them to travel to the house undetected by the rest of the neighborhood.

"Are you picking up on anything, Risa?"

"I am, but it's faint. He must be thirty miles out from our direction, headed north," she anxiously answered. "We should probably skip the house, Renji, he could be getting away."

His brows furrowed as if undecided on how to proceed. "You were certain Sleeper was in that house last night, and if he *were* there, he would've left his scent behind. It greatly increases our odds if we're both able to track him, not just you," he thoughtfully stated.

Risa nodded, agreeing with his analysis of the situation.

As they descended upon the edge of the woods, he stopped and held his arm out, halting her hurried stride.

"What's wrong?"

"We need to make sure no one else is in there before we sneak in. I'm going to go in first and look around. I'll signal you when it's safe to follow me."

Before she could protest, he took off and abandoned her at the foot of a cherry tree. Some time passed before he reappeared and motioned for her to follow him.

She looked around before she ran to meet him, and they slowly walked to the nearest basement window together. Upon inspection, she saw the small glass pane once covering the window was now gone.

"I just went in and took a quick tour. There's no one inside. I do have a scent, but it's not Sleeper's," he dejectedly said. "However, I did happen to find something very interesting," he stated, answering her unasked questions.

"How would you know if you picked up on Sleeper's scent if you've never met him before?" she curiously asked.

He crouched down and slid through the basement's window. "It belongs to a female."

Risa's eyes widened for a moment before she followed suit. *The spirit I picked up on last night was Sleeper's. There is no doubt.*

The basement smelled faintly of mold and damp earth, and the ceiling couldn't have been more than six feet from the floor. The ground was uneven in places, and Renji crouched down from time-to-time to avoid hitting his head as he walked.

He brought her to a small open space that was nothing more than a little, three-walled room. There was a wooden table in the center and a milk crate used as a chair in front of it. There were also six small computer monitors framing the table. Each screen showed a different section of the house outside, along with the entrances found on the main floor.

"Were we just recorded?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. I don't see a connection to a hard drive. But that doesn't mean there isn't one."

"It shouldn't matter anyway, it's not as though you can take any recording of us to the police. You can't identify people who technically don't exist."

"That's true." He knelt down and attempted to follow the wires the monitors were connected to. They appeared to feed into the ceiling.

Making a mental note of their location, he headed up the adjacent stairs to further investigate as Risa followed closely behind him.

The house's main level was furnished and homey. However, judging by the layer of dust, the owners hadn't lived there for months.

Risa took out her phone and pinpointed their current location on her GPS, planning to investigate the address and the owners when there was a free moment later. Meanwhile, Renji continued to walk around the main floor, looking for the source of the wires. Not finding anything, he continued up to the second floor with Risa hot on his heels.

"Too bad you can't track wires like you can people," he teased.

Rolling her eyes, she took to investigating the house's west end while he continued to search the east.

"Those wires have to lead somewhere. Should we just put a hole in the wall? It's probably the fastest way," she shouted over to him.

"Sure, go ahead. The wires in the basement fed up through the ceiling in that direction." He pointed to the master bedroom's corner that he currently occupied. "Try not to make too much noise. We don't want to spook the neighbors again."

Risa raised an eyebrow. "By 'we' I meant 'you,'" she clarified.

He flashed her a sly, fanged smile. "I thought you'd come a long way from the helpless teenager I once knew?"

There he goes, goading me as usual. God forbid we're able to be civil for longer than a few hours at a time. You want a show, baby? Oh, honey, I'll give you a God damn show.

Without warning, she charged the wall Renji identified. When within a few feet, she jumped into the air and executed a flawless 360 Taekwondo kick against its center, cracking it in half. She then landed gracefully on the floor before following the complex maneuver with a crescent kick, which effectively blew through the balance of the sheetrock.

Risa arrogantly flicked her long hair over her right shoulder as if demolishing walls with her martial arts skills was something she did every day. She didn't even spare a glance back in Renji's direction.

Instead, she walked over to the giant hole she created and peered inside.

Renji's jaw dropped as he watched Risa casually investigate the crater that she just blew into the wall. He replayed her recent moves in his head a few times until he realized he was barely hiding an erection.

Frustrated, he quickly walked to the other side of the room and pretended to inspect the homeowner's bland choice of carpeting. After a few moments went by, and he was able to nonchalantly adjust the massive arousal straining to break free from his pants, he returned to her side and secretly stared at her in awe.

Thank God she didn't punch me in the face earlier. She really would have broken my nose! Note to self; maybe I should lay off the teasing, or I'm going to end up in the hospital. He cleared his throat. "Do you see anything?"

"Yes, actually. Look!" She pointed to the bottom section of the recently opened wall. "The cables are attached to *that* power source. So that must mean there's no hard drive or recording device."

"Great, so we weren't recorded. There's no evidence we were ever here." He balanced his chin on his hand. "So someone was watching the live feed from the basement last night. I wonder if they saw you."

"Most likely."

After the finding, the team split up. Renji stayed on the second floor while Risa looked through the first. After conducting a full inspection, they switched places and tried again.

Neither was able to find anything.

"Let's make one last pass at the basement before we hightail it out of here." Risa led the way back downstairs, straining her eyes as she tried to look around.

There wasn't much in the form of lighting, with exception to four tiny windows circling the basement.

"Do you smell anything?" she asked as Renji flanked her.

"All I have is one female scent surrounding the monitor station. I don't think anyone else has been in this house in months. I also don't think anyone was physically here helping her last night."

"You get all of that from just sniffing the air?" she curiously asked.

"Yes. There's only one scent, and it's fresh. I've committed it to memory. Hopefully, it can somehow lead us to Sleeper," he stated.

"Can you smell anything else, like objects or something suspicious?"

"The non-human smells are of earth, mold, mice, and wood," he told her.

Risa activated the flashlight on her phone. Taking her time, she rolled it side-to-side throughout the open area. Nothing looked out of place.

She then repeated her search in the small room as well. When she was about to move on, she happened to notice a tiny section of dirt that looked like it was recently turned. It occupied an area smaller than her fist.

"Renji, can you dig in that area of dirt over there, or do you want me to handle that for you, too?" she sarcastically asked.

Renji huffed, but knelt down and complied, elongating his claws and getting straight to work. His efforts rewarded him with a tiny ziplock bag containing a microchip. He held up the baggie and sniffed it.

"The female that was here definitely handled this." He passed the tiny bag over before repairing the hole he'd dug into the ground.

"Why would Sleeper hide this? Was he planning on coming back here?" Risa wondered out loud. "Sleeper knows *ROOT* is after him. Assuming he did, in fact, see me last night, what would lead him to leave evidence behind?"

"I just told you Sleeper wasn't here. The scent down here belongs to a woman."

"Just trust me on this one. The scent you're picking up on is Sleeper's," Risa knowingly said.

Before he could ask how in the world that could be possible, she rudely reverted back to their previous subject of conversation.

"You ditch your organization and run away with information on a bio-weapon. You recognize your former colleague running around your hideout. You then decide to abandon evidence in someone else's basement before you bolt?" she incredulously asked. "None of this makes any sense."

"You're right, it doesn't. But, before we waste any more time on it, let's get out of here. I have a friend who specializes in technology, and he owes me a huge favor. Let's find out what the deal is with the chip first."

"Shouldn't we call this in?"

Renji frowned. "Hush assigned me to protect you because something dirty seems to be going on inside *ROOT's* chain of command. He was going to investigate some shit on his end and get back to me. This mission seemed very suspicious to him, as it does to me. Before we draw *ROOT's* attention to this chip, let's try to get some insight on what it actually is first." His eyes seemingly glowed in intensity as he spoke.

"Also, be very careful about what you say or send to Hush. You don't know who's listening or who's accessing his files. A lot of agents have gone rogue as of late. I trust Hush. But, I don't necessarily trust that he's not being bugged in some way while he's using *ROOT* resources."

Risa gulped. "Understood."

Chapter 7

The ride to visit Renji's friend took them to the city of Sanda, which was about an hour away from Osaka. The trip was a pleasant one, and Renji and Risa spent it catching up.

"How did you become a member of *ROOT*?" She curiously studied Renji's profile from the passenger seat.

"Fifty years ago, I was a part of the Japanese military. I had highly specialized skills and was mostly assigned to tracking and assassination type missions for the government. It was on one of my missions that I was approached by a scouting agent and offered a position."

"Why'd you accept?"

"After the age of eighteen, we wolf demons stop aging at the same rate that humans do. So, every fifteen to twenty years, I'd have to change my identity and move somewhere else before anyone became suspicious. I've lived all over the world. But, I always returned to Japan for a time to start over. Joining a secret agency specifically comprised of gifted individuals was the ideal position for me. *ROOT* believes that my stunted aging is one of my special abilities, one of my gifts. My employment with the organization saves me from having to start over-and-over again, and I get to stay in Japan for as long as I want," he answered in a matter of fact tone.

"Who do you assassinate?" she asked, no longer holding back in her curiosity.

"Anyone they tell me to, really. They're mostly corrupt politicians, terrorists, rogue agents, or spies. They're always people who threaten world peace," he casually said.

"How do you kill them?"

Renji pulled his eyes from the road and spared her a sideways glance. "Quickly and discreetly," he answered, knowing full well this wasn't the question she was really asking him.

"But, *how*?" she pushed.

He sighed. "It depends on the situation. Sometimes, I break into their homes and slit their throats. Sometimes I need to use distance, and I put a bullet through their brains using my rifle. There were times where I've encountered a worthy opponent and needed to beat

them to death," he lazily drawled out. "The means of execution is usually up to me as long as it's quick and done in the shadows."

The work suits him, she thought.

"What made *you* join *ROOT*?"

Risa paused. "I wanted to belong to something where I could help people on a greater scale. I always had issues with my powers when I was a teenager. I got much better at channeling them as I got older, once I actually remembered how to use them. But, after I turned sixteen and recalled the memory of my death, I kind of had a nervous breakdown," she said in a small voice. "The memory was utterly heartbreaking, and although it was a past life, I truly experienced my death all over again, along with the sudden loss of all the people I grew to care about. I felt as though I was going crazy," she said, honestly. "My dad always said that if you were lucky, you'd never get to the end of your dreams. You'd never get to remember your end. I remembered my 'end' at only sixteen years old." She darkly chuckled. "My high school friends would talk about boys and parties, and I was forever focused on memories of a life that practically never existed."

She took a moment to collect her thoughts before continuing.

"When I was approached by the scout, I was offered a chance to fight for the greater good, alongside others with special powers like me. It felt right," she finished, now satisfied with her answer.

"Tenrai always believed you would return," Renji grumbled, more to himself as he processed her explanation.

"It doesn't surprise me. He really cared about me."

Renji winced at the comment. "So did you two ever, you know, hook up?" he abruptly asked as a hint of something dark seeped into his voice.

What? "No! I mean, yes!" she shouted before she sighed in defeat. "I mean, kind of." She pointed an accusatory index finger in his direction. "But certainly not in the way you're thinking."

"What way am I thinking?" he asked, puzzled.

"We didn't have sex!" she bit out, thoroughly embarrassed.

"Christ, you're so nosey. I was only sixteen years old, damn it. Is that how you used to think of me?"

"Well, no. I thought you were a little loose when I first met you, but that was because you were always surrounded by a bunch of men—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence before she punched him in the arm.

"You really are such an ass sometimes!"

"It was five hundred years ago. Even the prostitutes had fewer suitors than—"

She punched him again, this time much harder.

"Those *men* weren't suitors, they were *priests*!"

"Look, it doesn't matter. I was just curious. I'm sorry I even asked. Let's just forget it," he said, attempting to rectify the situation.

Silence flooded over them for a few minutes as the beautiful countryside scenery passed them by.

"So, if you didn't have sex, what exactly did you do?" he quickly asked, breaking the silence.

"Why do you care so much?" Risa shrieked. "Don't tell me you still have a thing for me! Are you jealous, Renji?"

At her mocking words, his anger erupted, and his voice became bitter and absolutely loathsome. "Of course, I'm fucking jealous! You should've been with me! I loved you. I protected you. I would have done anything for you. And you, you barely even noticed I was alive! All you ever did was brush me off, constantly chasing after your precious Tenrai," he growled. "Oh, he cared about you. But the moment he was supposed to be at your side protecting you, where the fuck was he? He wasn't there! You died, and you died because of *him*! Tenrai was nothing but an arrogant, selfish, piece of shit!" he roared.

Renji's hands were subconsciously clenching the steering wheel, and his angled features were twisted into a murderous scowl as his eyes stared straight at the road ahead.

"If you met me first, everything would have been different. But there's nothing I can fucking do about any of that, can I? I was always just a big joke to you, wasn't I? Following you around like an infatuated puppy," he spat as he scowled at the road before him.

The outburst stunned them both into silence.

Risa should have felt angry, but she didn't, which surprised her. She wanted to tell him off and tell him he was wrong, but for reasons unknown to her, she held her tongue.

"I guess a, 'so, tell me how you *really* feel' joke wouldn't be appropriate right now, would it?" she asked, attempting to change the mood.

Renji didn't respond, and after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence stretched out, she blurted, "We kissed. That was it. We kissed a few times."

She didn't even know why she was bothering to revisit his earlier line of questioning.

Renji pulled up to Circuit's cabin, located in the middle of nowhere in Sanda. As he exited his Jeep, he walked around the car to open the door for Risa. When he offered his hand to help her get down, he refused to look at her.

She took his hand, suddenly desperate for the brief contact it provided. And once she was on the ground, Renji turned to the cabin, not sparing a look back in her direction. She followed him with her head lowered, keeping her distance while he went around the small home and knocked on the back door. A few minutes passed without any response before he tried again, following with, "It's Fang, open up."

At the words, the door opened, and a small, nerdy looking fellow with coke bottle lensed glasses gave him the once over. Apparently, Renji passed inspection, and the door was swung out further in an invitation for the duo to enter.

The house was small and cozy. There was a small kitchen upon entering, and a tidy living room off to the side.

When the door closed behind them, Circuit stared at Renji and patiently waited for him to speak. The man's eyes were so enlarged by the thick lenses of his glasses that he looked like a small owl.

"I need to call in a favor. Do you still have all that equipment in your basement?"

Circuit nodded.

Renji swung an expectant palm over to Risa, and she placed the small baggie with the chip inside of it.

"Agent Wraith and I..." He motioned behind him. "Found this while trailing a rogue agent. That rogue agent was working on information related to biochemical warfare," he said in a low voice. "I need you to find out what, if anything, is on this."

Circuit once again nodded.

Does this man speak? Risa wondered.

"Back up whatever you find in numerous ways in numerous places in case something unfortunate happens," Renji warned. "Do *not* contact me. I'll be back tomorrow at the same time. You can let me know then what you were able to find."

Circuit eyed the duo before raising his hand in salute, which both Renji and Risa stoically returned. This prompted the little owl to saunter back over to the door and open it, allowing the two agents to make their exit.

The ride back to the hotel was uncomfortable. Risa made a few attempts to start a conversation, but Renji completely ignored her. She was truly beginning to feel as though she were an actual wraith.

Closing her eyes, she tried to nap. However, she knew full well that she wasn't going to be able to get any sleep.

His words hurt because they are true, her mind chastised.

Unlike her, Renji never had any issues embracing his emotions. If you asked him a question, he answered it honestly. If he felt angered by someone, he'd beat that someone up. If he felt fear, he had no problem running away to live another day. He always acted instinctually. He always remained true to himself and went after what he wanted, full throttle.

She recalled how he once proclaimed his love to her in front of his entire pack, being cheered on at the time, by their hoots and hollers of celebration. She remembered how this grand gesture mortified her. But now, the memory served to make her smile.

Why do I run from him? She wasn't sure of the answer.

Renji always made her feel so many profound things on so many different levels. She couldn't even begin to understand them.

However, she used to be so obsessed with Tenrai that she barely paid attention to anything else. The priest always seemed right outside her grasp, and she stupidly dedicated most of her former existence to chasing after him, trying to somehow will them together in some ridiculous way. It wasn't until she was reborn and able to reflect upon her former self's actions that she came to the conclusion that Tenrai didn't return her feelings. The man always had pointedly kept her at arm's reach. She didn't doubt Tenrai cared about her and loved her, he just wasn't *in love* with her.

Nor was she ever truly in love with him.

Over the years, in *this* lifetime, she was in several meaningful relationships, and she learned what healthy adult relationships were through those experiences. Unfortunately, experience was something that only really came with age, and she died so early in her last life she wasn't able to obtain it.

How much can you really expect from a sixteen-year-old with no life experience? The fact that Renji once expected so much from her back when she was practically a child pissed her off.

But there seemed to be much more to it than that.

She had *always* been attracted to the arrogant wolf demon but never paid him much mind because she was too preoccupied with Tenrai. She deeply regretted the way she treated Renji back then. It was similar to the way Tenrai sometimes treated her... as if she were invisible at times.

Now in the present day, without the former distractions being in place, Risa's physical responses to Renji were, quite literally, knocking her on her ass. She never felt so nervous, giddy, frustrated, or so turned on, around anyone she'd ever encountered in her entire life. She was aroused by the man's very spiritual aura at this point.

She was trying to analyze all the different feelings she was experiencing since finding him again. But, there was way too much going on between them and this mission, and she found she was becoming overwhelmed.

You're a coward. You're running away.

Risa's metaphorical hands were thrown up in exasperation.

I'm not a fucking coward! I just don't understand how I feel! I don't want to jump into this and lose him all over again! I couldn't bear it a second time!

Oh. Something clicked into place. I don't want to explore this only for it to fail. To experience him leaving me, or even worse, if he dies on a mission, I wouldn't be strong enough to let him go. Not because I'm weak, and not because it's Renji, it's because I just found him again, and I'm trying to protect myself from having to mourn his loss, in any way, all over again.

Risa sucked her teeth in frustration. *It's easier to keep him at arm's reach.*

This didn't seem fair.

You're a coward.

As Renji pulled up to Risa's hotel to drop her off, he didn't say one word. Once he parked the car, he quickly made his way around the Jeep to offer her a hand.

Once offered, Risa hesitated. But, did eventually accept the assistance, using it to jump down from his vehicle.

As he turned to leave her, she called out to him, "How do I get in contact with you again? Should I just wait for you to pick me up tomorrow?"

"I'll be out here watching. I'll be by to pick you up at 2 pm tomorrow." He then got back into his Jeep and left her behind.

Risa sighed in defeat and turned to make her way to her room. She had a splitting headache.

Today was a very emotional day, indeed. Her sudden epiphany in the car wholly drained her, and she was also starving. She planned on placing an order for room service and doing some casework the moment she got into her room, hoping it would somehow manage to help take her mind off of everything that was Renji.

When she swiped her room's keycard, and the lock on her door buzzed, she kicked off her sneakers and entered her small space.

Chapter 8

There was no warning. Risa's powers kicked up with explosive intensity a moment before the gun went off, changing the bullet's trajectory from her heart over to her left shoulder. Her training then kicked in instantaneously. Suppressing the pain, she charged at the shooter, putting her all into a roundhouse kick to his face.

She barely registered the sickening crunch made by the force of the contact.

The attacker was sent flying into the wall, dropping to his knees and momentarily losing his weapon. His newly vulnerable position prompted her to dive for his gun. Snatching it away, she rolled over and aimed it right at the attacker's blood-soaked face. The moment she did, she didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

The enemy's body crumpled over onto the floor in a resounding thump, signaling her to sit up, crouch on the floor, and reach out again with her powers.

Channeling her energy, she tried to scan around for new threats, but she was a little too late. Something hard and heavy landed on the back of her head.

A pistol grip? Her vision momentarily faded, and she fought to maintain consciousness through the haze of her senses.

Pushing through the pain, she rolled onto her back and swept her leg out, swiftly kicking the feet out from her second attacker. As he fell to the floor, she jumped on top of him and struggled to subdue him.

However, the man, having the weight advantage, expertly managed to switch their positions and roll her underneath him. His hands instantly wrapped around her neck, strangling her.

Risa felt her world fading from her once again. *I have to do something, or I'm going to die!*

Savagely, she forced her hand down the man's pants, fisted his balls, and twisted the sack around her hand.

Twice.

The big thug of a man screeched like a bitch as he fell back onto the floor and released her. Rolling over his body, she kept her hold on his balls and wickedly smiled in his face.

She had some questions for this prick, and she planned on asking them real slow. However, she didn't get the chance.

Risa watched on stupidly as a strong, clawed hand roughly wrapped around her victim's throat and lifted him out from under her and into the air.

Following the movement, she looked up and almost screamed.

Renji's aura was visible, black, and angrily blasting off his body. His eyes were a glowing, crimson red, and his claws were fully extended. His fangs had elongated past his chin, and he was snarling.

He looked like a savage beast.

Swinging her assailant as if he were made of air, Renji threw him across the room with such force that she could hear ribs crack upon impact with the wall. He then slowly stalked his way over to his victim's body, roughly lifted him up by the neck, and made a grand show of his sharp and jagged teeth.

"Please don't kill me!" the man gurgled out, struggling to breathe as he dangled from Renji's arm. "I'll tell you anything you want to know!"

Renji didn't even blink as he thrust his clawed right hand into the man's chest, severing one of the aortas in his heart. As he withdrew, a waterfall of blood reactively poured from the hole he left behind.

"Renji!"

His head whipped around to face her, and terrifying red eyes burned into hers.

"Please, Renji. You have to stop. We need to ask him some questions," she begged, her voice slightly trembling.

He continued to stare at her with wide pupil-less eyes while the bleeding attacker limply hung from his left hand.

He's going to fucking kill him. God damn it, Renji. Don't do this! Scrambling to her feet, she summoned her courage and walked over to him, placing her bandaged hand on his free arm. "Please, Renji. Please don't do this," she said in a barely-there whisper.

He slowly began to lower her assailant to the ground in response, his eyes never once breaking contact with hers. When Renji finally dropped him, she chanced a glance over in the man's direction.

He's dying. There's no way he'll make it past two minutes with that amount of blood loss. She looked back at Renji and gently squeezed his arm.

Thankfully, the beast stepped back and granted her silent request for access.

"Who are you?" She fell to the side of the bleeding attacker on the floor. "Who sent you?"

The man's eyes were quickly losing focus, and she grabbed him, desperately trying to shake him back into consciousness.

"Who sent you?"

It was no use. The man was dead.

She looked back up at Renji and realized his eyes were back to their usual golden color. However, his teeth and claws were still extended, and he was completely covered in blood and sweat.

He was eerily staring at her, panting in a fast rhythm.

"Renji, can you understand me right now?"

He nodded.

"Can you hurry and take a picture of that assassin's face?" She pointed to the first attacker. "While I take a picture of this one?"

He stared at her for a few seconds before taking off to complete the requested task. As he did, she took the second assassin's picture and jumped up to quickly scan the room. For the first time, she noticed it had been entirely ransacked before her arrival.

Running over to her suitcase, she shoved her laptop and a few other items into it. On impulse, she quickly confiscated each of the assassin's phones and promptly removed the batteries and the SIM cards. She then placed the dissected items into her pockets as she grabbed her small luggage and ran over to Renji. She grabbed his hand, and frantically pulled him.

"We have to leave!"

They probably only had a few minutes before back up arrived to assist the two dead men.

Something seemed to click, and Renji slung her over his shoulder. He then crossed the small room and kicked out the window, before kneeling down and leaping up to the rooftop. Once there, he broke into a full-blown run.

Risa tried not to drop her suitcase despite Renji's high speed as he leaped from rooftop-to-rooftop, carrying her away. "Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to one of my places," he answered, his voice intentionally gentle as if not wanting to spook her. "I have several homes that *ROOT* doesn't know about."

"Is it far?"

"No, we'll be there soon. Just do me a favor and keep scanning around to make sure we're not being followed. I don't sense anyone, but I don't want to be wrong."

Considering what just happened back in that hotel room, Risa couldn't blame him for wanting to be overly careful.

She stilled for a moment while she reached out with her powers. "I don't sense any immediate danger, and I'm not sensing anyone I know."

Renji dropped down from the rooftops in front of a warehouse that looked abandoned.

"That looks charming," Risa huffed, from her place on his back.

"The state of the outside does not reflect the state of the inside," he informed her. "Once I get us inside, I want you to eat something. Understood?"

Risa sighed, all out of her usual sarcastic replies. "Yes," she said, happy they were at least back on speaking terms again.

Renji took a moment to try to relax his breathing and will his mind into a forced state of calm. Although he didn't look it, he was thoroughly shaken.

When he first dropped Risa off at her hotel, he had been furious. The entire ride from Circuit's house was spent reflecting on the past and his utter hatred of Tenrai.

However, as much as he wanted to blame that particular asshole for everything that happened on the night Risa died, he just couldn't.

What happened that night was no more Tenrai's fault than it was his own.

Truth be told, Renji always believed *he* should have been at Risa's side, protecting her throughout that battle. At the time, she was utterly accident-prone, and she honestly shouldn't have been involved in the fight in the first place.

If he spent his time protecting her instead of trying to show off for her benefit during that fight, she probably would have survived. At least Tenrai went after her when she first ran off to save Roukan, but he was too late.

Renji wasn't even paying attention at the time. When he first became aware of the commotion, he saw Risa crumple to the ground, and Tenrai hurriedly take her into his arms. He watched on, completely dumbfounded, as the man then went on a rampage, practically slaughtering all the fox demons on his own.

However, Renji was too stupefied to even move, becoming utterly frozen in grief and unable to act.

Nothing more than a God damn coward.

As Renji thought upon his disgusting failure that fateful night, he was barely able to set up across the street to watch Risa's hotel room when he heard the gunshot go off. He then ran at a speed that shouldn't have been possible over to her hotel room. When he got through the door, he saw brain matter blown across the wall, with the fallen victim continuing to leak various bodily fluids all over the carpeting.

At that moment, he panicked, fearing the corpse was Risa's. By the time he actually spotted her in the room's corner, covered in blood, it was already too late for him to beat his inner beast back into submission.

He'd lost all control.

He barely registered anything that happened next. His next lucid memory was of Risa's soft voice pleading with him to stop.

He wasn't able to recognize the second assassin by scent or face, and there was nothing left to distinguish from the first.

I messed up big time tonight. I killed one of our only leads in this mission, he dejectedly thought.

All the training, all the experience, all the logic... everything left him the instant he thought he lost her.

I'm the worst person to be assigned to her right now. She's going to end up dead because of me. I spooked her when she found Sleeper, letting him escape. I sprained her wrist, taking away the use of her dominant hand. I failed to monitor her room. I was unable to protect her tonight.

If something happened to her because of him, he'd never forgive himself.

Renji was wholly lost within his self-hating musings until a random thought pulled him from the ravine.

She doesn't seem to need any protection at all, does she?

He thought about this.

No, she really doesn't.

Risa spectacularly handled everything on her own since she arrived in his care. It was his assignment to the mission that was actually causing it to fail. When faced with obstacles, Risa expertly handled them all by herself.

Maybe I should just stick to assassination work. Security detail isn't really a strength of mine, anyway, he idly thought as he made his way into the warehouse.

This particular hideout of Renji's was actually a very trendy loft, and Risa seemed to be impressed as he showed her around the first floor.

The high ceilings were exposed oak, giving way to the red-bricked walls. The hardwood floors were honey-colored and brought a feeling of warmth into the space. In the living room, there was a large fireplace surrounded by black, leather couches and accented with a decorative bear rug.

The kitchen was white and modern with stainless steel appliances, and a large island that doubled as a table could be found in the center, bar stools tucked under each side. An open staircase wound its way to the second floor, and before Risa could walk over to it, Renji physically guided her to his bathroom.

"Can I use your shower?" she asked, apparently remembering the decrepit state she was in.

"Yes, but I want to check you over first. Is any of this blood yours?" Concern tightened his usual deep voice.

"I think some of it is. But don't worry! My shoulder only has a shallow bullet grazing. I just need a stitch or two, and it'll heal just fine. I'm not really sure about the back of my head, though. That asshole tried to knock me unconscious with the butt of his gun. Hey, do you have a needle and—"

Not waiting for her to finish, Renji picked Risa up bridal style and sat her down on the edge of the bathtub. He then knelt down and lifted her arm, inspecting her bullet wound.

He hated that his hands slightly trembled as he checked her.

"Wait here," he mumbled.

He left her only for a moment to raid his linen closet. Once done, he reappeared with a towel and military-issued medical kit. He placed it at her feet while throwing the towel over his shoulder and kneeling before her. As he opened the case, he rummaged through its contents in preparation to work on her shoulder. After a few seconds of shuffling, he produced a large bottle of rubbing alcohol and a medical stapler from the box.

He then took her arm and held it out over the tub before he poured the burning liquid down and over her arm. When finished, he used the dry towel to blot away at the blood and disinfect the site.

To her credit, Risa didn't even flinch.

He repeated this process two more times before picking up the staple gun and positioning it over her wound. He then looked up at her, silently requesting permission.

Risa nodded.

Pinching her wound together with his fingers, he tacked the skin into place with the stapler. He was thankful the cut was small, and he only needed to use a total of four staples.

Rising, he took a seat next to her on the tub's edge. Gently reaching over her back, he gathered her lengthy hair and pushed it over her opposite shoulder. He then, with the utmost care, ran his hand over her scalp, quickly locating the large welt on the back of her head.

Rage instantly burned in his veins at the discovery, and he fought to push it back down.

This is not the time. He already scared the hell out of her once tonight when he lost his shit, and he'd be damned if he allowed it to happen again.

Willing his voice to be soothing, he said, "I don't feel a cut back here. But, would you mind checking, too?"

Risa complied, running her fingertips through her hair. "I'm going to have one hell of a headache in the morning," she crankily grumbled. "I don't feel any cuts. But he did give me one hell of a bump, though. Shit."

"I'll be right back with some cellophane. I'm going to use it to protect the staples in your arm so you can take a shower. Once you're done, you can take it off."

She nodded, and he disappeared from the bathroom. He didn't keep her waiting very long. Within a few minutes, he was wrapping her arm as promised and had also brought her suitcase in with him as well.

"I'm gonna jump in the shower upstairs, and then I'm going to go ahead and make us something to eat. Take your time and meet me in the kitchen when you're done. I'm going to leave the bathroom door open. So, if you need anything at all, just holler out," he instructed as he hesitantly left.

Chapter 9

The minute Renji left the room, Risa made a beeline for Renji's guest shower. She didn't even wait for the water to warm before ducking into the cold spray.

She watched the blood run off of her body, circling, before emptying into the drain below. Washing her hair, she expertly worked out the tangles with her fingers before moving on to lather a creamy layer of soap over her body.

Why were those assassins after me? Who were they working for?

She wished she were able to question the last thug before Renji went beserk.

She blanched. *That was bloodlust. He went into bloodlust back there.*

That state was something she hadn't encountered in this lifetime. But in her past life, fighting demons, it was something she would see often. And it was just as terrifying now as it had been back then.

She was just grateful that she was somehow able to get through to him before he focused all that rage on her.

When a demon went into a bloodlust state, they became mindless, bloodhungry savages. And when that happened, they didn't discriminate whose hide they took all that dark fury out on – friend or foe, it was all the same.

Yet, despite all her past knowledge and experience, she hadn't felt like she was in any danger back in that hotel room. Yes, it had been scary to see him that way. But, now, much like back then, she had this odd sense that Renji would never hurt her, even if he were like that. Hell, her priestess powers hadn't kicked up once during the entire ordeal. There was no tingle of warning or reactive blue shield. No white, holy purification light. Therefore, Renji couldn't have possibly been a threat to her...

She shook her head. What the hell was she thinking?

No demon can be trusted when in that state.

She spent longer under the shower's spray than she probably should have as her thoughts replayed the scene from her hotel room.

If it weren't for her powers blowing that first bullet off course, she'd be dead.

The thought was sobering.

We have such precious little time in this world.

Renji had just finished making a quick dinner when Risa finally padded out from the bathroom. She was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt that came down to her knees, and her damp black hair fell down her back in waves with her long bangs framing her face.

She looked incredibly sad and vulnerable right now.

Something tightened in his chest as he looked at her, and he fought the urge to cross the space between them and take her in his arms. Instead, he forced himself to continue plating the food.

"You took a long time in there. I was actually gonna go in and check on you. Are you sure you're okay?" he worriedly asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just needed to feel super clean, I guess." She took a moment to sniff the air. "Hey! What did you make for dinner? It smells delicious!" she said, her voice quickly taking on a happier tone.

"Sirloin steak and sides of steamed veggies and jasmine rice."

"Wow, Renji. I never knew you could cook!" she said, thoroughly impressed.

He made a face. "Well, you can't eat raw meat forever, I guess."

She laughed and all but skipped to the table, plopping down on one of the stools as Renji took the seat across from her.

The food didn't last very long. Within fifteen minutes, the duo inhaled the meal, along with second helpings. Neither of them ate anything all day. They sat under the dim lighting in the comfortable silence for several moments, mentally looking each other over and checking for any possible unseen injuries.

"How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"Tired. I feel as though I could sleep for a week," he answered. "How about you? Are you sure you're alright? A head injury isn't something to be taken lightly."

She dismissively waved her hand. "I promise I'm okay. If I start to feel off, I'll let you know. To be honest, I'm just happy you're speaking to me again."

He lowered his eyes in shame.

"Look, Risa..." he whispered, hesitating for a moment. "The way I treated you today was unforgivable. I have no excuse for my behavior. I don't think words exist that can truly express how sorry I am."

Humbly looking up in her direction, he tried not to get lost in those big, unique eyes. "If there were some way for me to take it all back, I would."

He didn't want to rehash everything, but he felt as though he fully needed to take accountability for his earlier asshole behavior.

"I never had any claim on you. It's not like it's your fault that I'm in love with you. You never led me on back then. You were always pretty clear about your feelings for... for the priest."

Freudian slip? Risa wondered. For a second there, Renji accidentally slid into the present tense before defaulting back into past.

It was funny how something so simple could be so monumental at the same time. She found the mistake provided her with much-needed reassurance she hadn't known she was subconsciously seeking.

We have such precious little time in this world, her mind whispered, repeating her earlier thoughts in the shower.

Quickly making her mind up, and not wanting to waste another moment, she slid off the stool and slowly made her way around the table to him.

Renji looked hopelessly lost as he watched her but felt compelled to continue. "I thought I lost you today," his voice lowered, barely a whisper. "All over again."

When Risa stopped in front of his stool, his golden eyes flicked down to hers.

There's so much sadness in his eyes, she realized.

"Now that we've found each other again, I'd like nothing more than just to be a part of your life, to get to know you..." he continued.

Without a word, she reached up and cupped his face while desperately trying to burn his handsome features into her brain.

God, he is so beautiful. Even as a kid, he was always so damn beautiful.

Renji's yellow eyes were warm and sexy as hell as they popped against the tan backdrop of his skin. His features were masculine and chiseled. His broad face housed angled cheekbones, a strong jaw, and one perfectly straight nose. His tall, lean frame was built for both power and speed, and his long, ink-black hair was fixed in its usual high ponytail, the length of it falling mid-back.

Everything about him oozed sexuality, but there was a genuine feel of menace surrounding him, something dark and animalistic that always brewed beneath the surface.

It was attractive as hell, magnetic in a way that she couldn't even begin to describe.

Obviously confused, Renji's brows furrowed while she soothingly ran her thumb over his bottom lip.

"What are you..." *That scent.* That incredibly intoxicating and musky scent Renji had recently become so very familiar with suddenly slammed into his senses like a freight train and left no room for air.

"Risa? What? I don't..." An electric tingle coasted over his lip from the soft contact of her thumb.

Finding that it was impossible to formulate coherent sentences at this point, he struggled against the ripples of heat scorching through his body.

At his immediate change in demeanor, Risa smiled as if she'd come to a particular conclusion. She then gently pulled his face closer to hers, grazing her cheek against his as she slowly moved her mouth to his ear. Her breathing hitched, and her words came out in small huffs as she whispered to him.

"You can smell it," she said in a low, seductive voice. "You can smell my desire. Can't you?" she drawled.

"Huh?" he spat out, not understanding.

Slowly withdrawing her face from his ear, she traced her lips against his jawline before she leaned back and coyly looked up at him.

"I want you to kiss me, Renji," she ordered, practically purring his name while her lips opened slightly in heightened anticipation.

Before Renji's mind could process her words, his body was already on her, roughly wrapping her in his arms, pulling her to him.

Hungrily lowering his lips flush over hers, he tasted, prodded, and teased his way inside her mouth. However, he was interrupted when Risa ran her tongue over his bottom lip and sucked it into her mouth, gently nibbling on it with her teeth. As she did, her hands snaked their way up to his scalp and released his hair from its binding.

Groaning, he slowly reclaimed his lip, before demandingly nuzzling his mouth back down over hers. He growled deep in his throat as she parted for him, allowing his tongue full access to sweep in and dance alongside hers.

Their breathing quickly became rapid as the kiss built in its intensity.

How long have I wanted this? he thought as he savored her mouth. *How long have I hungered for you?*

Their heated kisses were quickly becoming frantic. Sensing Risa's need to breathe, Renji broke away, trailing his tongue down the soft expanse of her neck while frantically sucking and nibbling on her exposed flesh.

His senses hummed when she tilted her head back to allow him more access, which he greedily took. Her hands soon fisted in his hair, tugging him closer, while her hips slowly ground against him, desperate for more of him but unsure of how to get it.

In turn, his hands fanned out, sliding down her ribs and down to her ass. He kneaded the mounds of soft flesh before cupping the cheeks, effectively grinding her hips harder against him. Her mewled groans were his reward, immensely intensifying his need.

I want all of you, baby, his mind desperately demanded as his inner beast began to awaken from inside of him. *You are mine.*

Apparently lost in the rhythmic pace he was setting, Risa didn't seem to notice when he pulled her shirt over her head and lifted her up against his chest.

Wrapping her arms and legs around him, she brought her mouth down against his, while using her new height advantage to deepen and control the kiss. She ran her tongue across his teeth, tracing the sharp edges before pulling his tongue back up into her mouth and caressing it. When this no longer seemed to satisfy her, she released his mouth and instead dragged her tongue across his jawline and down his neck, only stopping from time-to-time to suck on his heated skin.

Renji was mesmerized by the way Risa was using her teeth and tongue on his body. But, as much as he loved what she was doing to him, his inability to act in this new position was driving him crazy, and he found he desperately needed to feel her hips against him again.

Stumbling back, he tried to balance her with one arm while using his other to sweep aside the plates on the kitchen's island, clearing a space in which to put her. As the plates clattered against the floor, he backed her up against the marble slab while his hands reached under her thighs. He then made quick work of unwrapping her legs from around his waist and setting her down on the counter.

Running her hands down his chest, she pulled at his shirt, while looking at him expectantly.

Getting with the program, he ripped the shirt from his body while her hands dropped to work at the button of his jeans.

Quickly popping it open, she drew down the zipper that held his erection at bay. She then pushed his pants, along with the elastic band of his boxers down, releasing his throbbing arousal from the tight confines within. Before she could reach her hand out and caress the thick length of him, he grabbed her arm.

"That's not very fair." He leaned over her until she was fully lying down on the countertop. As she momentarily submitted to him, her long legs wrapped around his newly exposed hips.

Renji tried to catch his breath as he took a forced moment to study her, allowing his eyes to slowly trail over her body. He wanted so desperately to burn the current image of her into his memory.

Her long, black hair was fanned out across the island's white marble countertop, and her sparkling, blue eyes were hooded and hungry with desire. She was running her nails down his chest, while biting down on her lower lip, drunk with need. Her breasts heaved

with each of her heavy breaths as if begging to be freed from the confines of her white, silk bra. Her stomach was smooth. However, the outline of muscles briefly formed with each involuntary pull of her hips. She was wearing white silk panties, which visibly failed to dam the abundant wetness of her overflowing desire for him.

Looking at her, he felt his heart swell, and the sensation momentarily stupefied him.

Renji wasn't a stranger to beautiful women. They practically threw themselves at him in droves, and thoroughly fucking them was as casual and as frequent as breathing was for him. But now, as he looked upon Risa's body and became lost within her electrifying and almost *burning* touch, he realized what was happening between them was so much deeper than anything he'd ever experienced before. His inner beast, his true self, was wide-awake and stalking around inside of him with hunger and possessiveness that he'd never once experienced in his very long life.

Hell, the wolf only seemed to break from its slumber when enraged. It never became active at any other time, *especially* not while he was with a woman.

As Renji tried to make sense of what was happening inside him, Risa grew demanding.

After numerous failed attempts to pull his hips closer, now infuriated, she scooted down to the table's edge and rewrapped her legs around him. With one final, forceful tug of her hips, she finally managed to drag her wet sex against his shaft, effectively shattering the last shred of his self-control into a thousand tiny pieces.

Roughly lowering on top of her, he elongated his claws. He then shifted, balancing his weight on his right forearm, while using his left hand to slice through the middle of her bra, finally freeing her breasts from the confining fabric. He hungrily ran his hand over the newly exposed flesh, watching her pink nipples tighten under his touch as Risa continued to roll her wet heat against his shaft. Lowering his head, he swirled his tongue around the tight buds before taking one into his mouth and gently suckling her.

As he purposefully tried to savor her, he became vaguely aware of her frantic thrusting beneath him. He could feel her heat and the invisible electricity of her powers engulfing him. And the new scent

that was coming off her was making him drunk with desire. She was already so close to release.

"Renji," she cried out. "Please," she begged as she pulled his face up to hers. "I need to feel you inside me. Please, Renji."

When he didn't immediately give in to her demands, she released her legs from around his hips and reached down with her hand, trying to shimmy out of her underwear while baring all of his weight above her.

"God damn it, you're too fucking slow!"

At these words, Renji lifted back into a standing position and finally helped her, dragging the irritant underwear off along with him as he rose up from her body. He then grabbed each of her legs and spread her apart.

Taking a moment to admire her most intimate place, he slowly lowered his face down to her heated core. He paused for only a brief moment before he drove his tongue inside of her slick, velvet folds.

"Fuck!" Risa groaned. "Renji, please! I want *you* right now, not—"

As she spoke, he slowly slid his tongue lower inside of her silky depths, while he nuzzled her aching bud with his nose.

My God. She tastes as sweet as she smells.

A fresh sheen of sweat bloomed from his skin, and Renji shuddered as he took her essence down his throat.

Risa's voice cracked, and she momentarily lost the ability to speak as she threw her head back and closed her eyes.

He didn't hesitate to devour her as he started up a brutal pace, forcefully ramming his tongue deep inside of her before slowly extracting it again, pausing only to kiss and suck on the center of her pleasure before starting the process all over again.

Renji could instantly feel as her body tightened around him. At some point, her hands found their way back into his hair, which she used to pull on him each time he entered her, effectively pinning him against her as she thrust her hips, forcing his tongue deeper inside of her.

Her resulting orgasm was explosive.

Risa's thighs rose up to clinch against the sides of his face, while her hands fisted tightly in his hair. Her body then violently shuttered around him as she cried out his name.

As she finally loosened her hold on him, Renji allowed himself a moment to memorize her. She was panting, and her body was still trembling from the aftershocks of her release that were washing over her.

He didn't allow her any time to recover, however.

Flipping her onto her stomach, he pulled her hips over the island's edge. Lining his hips up with hers, he positioned the head of his throbbing erection at her entrance. Once in place, he then roughly placed both hands on her hips, using them as handles as he slowly eased himself inside of her.

Renji grit his teeth as a low guttural groan escaped him.

Good Lord, she was so tight and hot, and soft, and wet, and... *perfect*. Yeah, that was the word. Risa, no matter what body she was in, was utterly *perfect*.

"I was made to be inside you." The words fell from his lips before he could stop them. "This belongs to me, baby."

Risa's hoarse moan almost brought him to the verge of coming. He fought the feeling as he filled her to the hilt. And when he did, an electrifying, invisible gust of energy began tightly wrapping around him. The essence was entirely Risa, and it was heavenly, tenderly holding him in its embrace while working itself inside his skin.

Chapter 10

As Renji carefully entered her, Risa became fully aware of an overpowering musky scent of rich earth and freshly cut wood that began aggressively washing over her, marking her skin. The fragrance was so uniquely physical and masculine, and so utterly Renji and beautiful in its essence.

She moaned loudly and desperately gasped for air, somehow trying to fill herself with his scent as her insides stretched to accommodate the massive girth that was now nested there.

"Oh, fuck... Risa..." Renji rumbled from deep within his chest, the sound vibrating against her skin.

His body tensed as he swept his hands over her back. "I don't know how long I'm going to be able to stay in control," he murmured as he slowly withdrew from her and eased back in, stretching her further.

Seemingly becoming lost, he finally allowed his head to fall back, and set a mindless pace, the room filling with the echoes of his thrusts and their shared moans of pleasure.

Risa could feel the heat building once again, low in her belly. She was on the edge, and her muscles had him in a vice. After every heavy thrust, she could feel Renji's arousal pulsing inside of her, aching for release.

When she arched, desperately trying to match the rhythm of his hips, Renji reached around her and expertly stroked the heated bud at the center of her thighs with his index and middle fingers.

She violently shuddered at the contact, and her hands uselessly reached out, trying to find something to hold onto as she came undone.

As her orgasm exploded around her, Renji happily joined her. He pumped into her furiously, before freezing and breathlessly calling out her name. Finally collapsing over her, he moved her hair out of the way to meet her lips in a tender kiss.

Time seemed to stop as they lay in this connected embrace, hands entwined, breathing rushed, only pausing from time-to-time for lazy stolen kisses. It was Renji who begrudgingly took the lead to separate from her, gently removing himself from inside of her. When

he picked her up to carry her to the bedroom, Risa snaked her arms around his neck, cuddling into him, while he absently kissed her forehead.

"That was incredible," she softly said. "Let's continue to do that often."

He darkly chuckled. "Believe me. I plan on it."

"Good," she muttered. "I think you're stuck with me now, so I expect a lot of that as often as I can get it."

He smirked. "I wouldn't want it any other way," he admitted. He laid her in his bed and pulled the covers over her before joining her.

"Risa?"

"Mmm. Yes?" she mumbled as her eyes closed.

"I never had a tail."

Her eyes slightly cracked open as she looked him over. There was a hint of a smile ghosting over his serene facial features.

"I know that's what it must have looked like back then, but it really was just a simple wrapping of fur," he said, now fully smirking.

As tired as she was, she couldn't help but giggle at the confession.

"Wolf demons don't have tails," he whispered, conspiratorially.

"I always wondered why you were the only one who did!" She erupted into a fit of laughter as she realized something. "You intentionally pretended to have a tail to try to look cool, didn't you?" she roared.

Her question was rewarded with Renji's hearty laughter.

Risa might have gotten in a good five hours of deep sleep before waking. Not wanting to wake Renji, she settled on watching the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest.

He looked so content.

Warmth spread into her chest as she looked upon him, along with a fierce possessiveness she never thought she was capable of.

He was hers, and she was his, and it felt so damn right. If she could, she would have stopped time at this moment where nothing else existed except for him. As much as they both suffered

throughout their lives, albeit in entirely different ways, all that suffering led them here, to each other, at *this* specific time.

She wondered what would become of them after this mission. From what she'd gathered from their many conversations, Renji lived here in Japan. He was sent out internationally on missions as his skills were required, but he always returned back here. This country was his home.

She, on the other hand, was stationed on the South Korean base since joining the organization. Upon entry into *ROOT*, she'd chosen to work in the Reconnaissance Department. For the last two years, she was serving as the leader of the organization's notorious Reconnaissance Alpha Team. Her elite group was a high-ranking specialty team that was mostly utilized by the organization in the most extreme of circumstances. Most recently, her team was sent into North Korea to disable nuclear warheads.

All agents that signed with *ROOT* were assigned to departments. As an agent progressed through the ranks, they were promoted to departmental teams. Each team focused on specific ongoing tasks. From time-to-time, agents would be pulled out of their day-to-day roles and placed on solo missions that required their particular skill sets, just as Risa was now and just as Sleeper was before he defected.

As unique missions presented themselves, agents from different departments could also be pulled into specialized teams, and they would stay on those teams until the task was completed, at which time, they'd revert back to their previous roles. For example, members from the Reconnaissance, Intelligence, Interrogation, Medical Research, and Technology departments could get pulled together onto one special team for a specific mission. Upon the mission's completion, those members would return to their previous roles within their home departments. The only major exception to this rule was the Assassination Department of which Renji was a part of.

ROOT assassins almost always worked independently as sleeper agents in the real world, and they reported directly to the General. Assassins were chosen based on their specific skill sets in relation to the mission's needs. If a mark were in hiding and needed to be tracked down, someone like Renji would be the best choice. If a

dirty politician were impossible to get close to because of high-security levels, an assassin who specialized in long-range attacks would be selected. In rare instances, assassins were assigned to specialized teams for missions. That being said, she knew her chances of working with him again were very slim.

But, they were just going to have to figure something out. She wasn't going to let him go. Renji was someone worth fighting for.

Many agents entered romantic relationships with each other as it was easier to have a partner who understood the job's demands along with the lack of identity. Although many romances bloomed between team members just due to the consistent proximity, many others were managing long-distance relationships with partners in separate departments on different bases.

And *ROOT* had eighty bases spread throughout the world.

We'll make this work, Risa swore as she studied her lover's naked form, taking the time to memorize his body. It didn't take long before she felt her insides begin to tense as a result.

She wanted to take him, much as he'd taken her only hours ago. However, she needed to hurry. Her desire was slowly building, and if he caught the scent of it, she knew she was done for. She wanted to please him, and she wanted his submission to her while she did.

She quietly crept downstairs.

She needed to get some work supplies from her suitcase.

Renji's eyes opened slightly, watching on as Risa suckled his manhood into an erection. His brain slowly processed the scent of her lust along with the sight of her, although his mind was still deeply clouded with sleep.

She was taking all of him into her mouth and sucking him down into her throat. Once she seemed to get his blood pumping, she began swallowing hard around him, using her throat to work him over, before slowly pulling him back across her tongue and out her soft lips.

It only took a few seconds for Renji to become rock hard.

Upon his release from her mouth, his hips slowly lifted, his erection instantly missing the heat of her mouth. Risa responded by

rolling the head of his manhood in a circular motion around her wet lips, before taking him back down her throat to repeat the move again.

His breath hitched, and he groaned as he watched her.

Sensing his body's building response to her teasing ministrations, she looked up at him and intentionally held his eyes with hers as she lowered her head back down on him, taking his full length down to the hilt. She held him in this way for a moment, before she slipped her tongue free from her mouth and massaged it over his sack.

"Fuck! You're driving me crazy!" he hoarsely choked out while gasping for air. He tried to grab her, but his arms were somehow failing.

Slowly raising her head, she slid him from her mouth. Breaking their shared eye contact, she angled her head and coasted her lips down the sides of his erection while her tongue glided over its center.

Throwing his head back, he moaned out her name while his hips began frantically thrusting, desperate to apply added pressure to the torturous things her mouth was doing.

You feel so fucking incredible, baby.

When Risa seemed to have her fill, she leaned over him and slowly slid his manhood between her breasts as he continued to pump against her. With each lift of his heavy arousal, she'd flick her tongue over its head, squeezing his shaft with her breasts.

Renji swore he was going to lose his mind.

His woman went on this way, setting this teasing pace, for what felt like an eternity before she finally began to crawl over him, the velvet skin of his member sliding from her breasts, down her stomach, until finally resting against her heated core. At the contact, Risa placed her hands on his chest and took his mouth in a mind-blowing kiss.

A kiss that quickly became frantic.

Renji was so enthralled by her that he didn't realize she had straddled him until she started to roll her slick sex over his thickened girth. The motions were working him into an absolute frenzy.

"Risa. Risa, please..." He tore his lips away from hers. "I need to feel you, baby, please."

Unperturbed, she ignored him, moving her head so she could now suck his earlobe and gently nip at it with her teeth. As she did, she began to take heavy draws of the air before burying her face in the crook of his neck. "You smell incredible."

Once again reaching for her, he attempted to grab her hips and pull them down against him, but something was wrong.

Why the hell can't I get to her? Before he could think upon this, his lover finally lowered, sitting her weight atop his erection while dragging her teeth down his neck.

His previous groaning was replaced with a low rumble vibrating from his throat. She was hot and wet and slippery. And it was only another moment before he felt his cock being positioned at her entrance.

Is this a dream? Am I still sleeping? He watched as she leaned back on her knees and made a grand show of slowly sliding down the length of him. Her internal muscles gripped him tightly, pulsing around him.

"Don't stop! *Please* don't stop. Fuck!"

Risa's beautiful eyes fluttered closed as she took him inside while she arched over him. She then ran her hands over her body while rocking over him, setting a slow and brutal pace.

She was going to be the death of him. She truly was.

Frantically, he tried to pump into her, but with each attempt, she'd raise her hips. Preventing him from interrupting her pace, she instead forced him to watch her and everything she was doing to him and to herself.

He soon found that he was going to come and he couldn't stop it.

"I can't hold it!" he bit out between clenched teeth. "God damn it, are you listening to me? Risa, please—"

Arching back, she reached behind her and gently worked his balls back down into his sack, effectively buying her some additional time.

"What the... What the fuck!"

"Mmm. Please just bear with it for a little while longer. I'm almost there." She threw her head back and pressed her fingers down over the center of her pleasure. Squeezing her eyes shut, she bit down on her bottom lip as she neared her climax.

Renji frantically pulled at his hands, finally becoming aware that something was tying them down.

When did she? Oh, you naughty girl, you.

Channeling all his current frustration into pulling at his restraints, he easily broke through each set of handcuffs that were keeping his arms at bay.

Risa opened her eyes just in time to see his torso fly up. The movement forced her hands down to his shoulders to maintain her balance, while his hands flew to her hips, anchoring them down roughly against him.

He felt a wicked smile stretch across his face.

"Oh, shit."

He hungrily took to her neck and ran his sharp canine teeth over the exposed flesh, accidentally nicking her pulse point in the process. As his mouth came down and lapped up the resulting small bead of blood, she shuddered in his arms.

The copper taste of her blood was awakening the most primal part of him, and he began to wildly thrust into her, using his hands to lift and lower her hips down against him.

As their mutual orgasms exploded around them, Renji could feel the electric heat of Risa's powers searing down his nerve endings. Becoming lost in the pleasure the sensation gave him, he soared to a height that shouldn't have existed.

A few moments later, they both collapsed against each other, trembling from the connection's intensity. All that followed was the sounds of panting as they jointly struggled to catch their breath.

Chapter 11

Renji had had terrible sex, and he'd had amazing sex. But, sex with Risa genuinely couldn't be put into words. It was mindless and raw, and tender and intimate, all at once. There was a connection between them that exceeded anything physical he ever experienced with anyone else.

Rolling her over, he laid her onto the mattress while bracing his weight onto his forearm, gently brushing her hair from her face with his free hand.

Once relaxed, she pulled his face down to hers, bringing his lips back down upon her own. She kissed him with so much tenderness he thought he'd somehow break, her mouth communicating so many unsaid words with each stroke of her tongue. She broke the kiss only to pull him back to her in a loving embrace.

Shifting down her body, he finally settled on top of her, nuzzling his head between her chin and her chest while wrapping his arms around her. She chose to stroke his long hair as he did, starting at the scalp and gently twisting her way through the length of it. Renji hummed in approval, cuddling further into her.

"Is sex with you always so incredible?" he mumbled, lost in the feel of what she was doing to his hair.

"Yup."

He snorted. "Not conceited at all, are you?"

"Nope." She briefly paused to kiss the top of his head, before continuing to play with his hair.

Raising his wrist, he inspected the broken handcuff still attached to his arm. "You really shouldn't be using work supplies for your private sexual endeavors, you know."

She giggled, and the action shook his vision.

"Are you going to tell on me?" she teased as her free hand began to smooth down the muscles in his back.

"No. But consider this a warning."

She giggled once again before her thoughts abruptly turned to their current situation.

"I wonder if Circuit was able to find anything on that SIM card," she said. "I have two more for him to look at that I took off of those assassins."

"Did you recognize either of them?"

"No, I never met any of them before. Did you?"

"No, neither of their scents was familiar," his voice deepened, lost in thought.

"Do you think they were with *ROOT*, or from somewhere else?"

"Don't know. But we'll know for sure once Circuit can take a look at those two phones you grabbed from them."

"How do you know him?"

"He used to head up the Technology Department over a decade ago. I was assigned to shadow him for a mission and saved his life. He was left pretty shaken up after, and he retired."

"Does he speak?"

Renji laughed. "Yes, he speaks. But, he's known to clam up when beautiful women are around."

"Um. Okay. Is he going to be able to speak with us later today?"

"Don't worry about it. The guy has a hard-on for tech stuff. He'll have no problems talking to us about what was on the chip. He used to head up that department. Don't forget that."

Risa quieted, obviously trying to picture the little man barking out orders, but Renji's next question interrupted her imaginings.

"How do you know Sleeper?"

"We were usually sent on information gathering missions related to terrorist groups in the Middle East."

He didn't miss the way her pulse accelerated for a moment before she answered. "Were you involved at all beyond that?"

"Does it matter?"

A cold wave of envy shot down his spine. "Yes, it *does* matter. Were you in a relationship at any point?" he demanded, his voice hardening.

"No, it wasn't like that."

Here we fucking go again.

"We had a few flings after hours, but we were strictly professional with each other when on the clock. He was a nice guy and always fully committed to his work, as was I. We just used to

blow off some steam once in a while. It was clear to both of us it would never go further than that, nor did either of us want it to."

As Renji fell silent, alarm bells began to sound off in Risa's head. Lifting her torso, she forced him to arch up and meet her eyes. "This was something in the past. I haven't crossed paths with Sleeper in over two years. This was nothing more than two people having a little bit of fun from time-to-time. Don't dwell on it. I am with *you* right now. I am *yours*."

"I'm not mad at you. It's just hard not to picture..." He wasn't able to finish his sentence, so he attempted another. "You wouldn't understand."

"No, actually. I completely understand." She willed her thoughts not to fall to Emica.

"Look, I get that this was something in the past. I'm not naïve. You're a twenty-six-year-old human, and I'm sure you've had plenty of..." he huffed. "I know you've lived your life. It just doesn't feel so great to imagine you with anyone else, which I'd like to think is a perfectly normal reaction when you..." he sputtered, having to try again. "I'm not taking anything out on you this time. There's just something about you, Risa. Ever since I first met you, you have this way of bringing out this primal need in me. I've never been possessive over anyone in my life, aside from you. This is brand new territory for me," he admitted through clenched teeth.

She really, really didn't want to bring it up, but her words began falling before she was able to stop them. "Not even with Emica?"

Renji stilled, not missing a beat. "*Especially*, not with Emica."

She released the breath she didn't realize she was holding. "But, you two were mated to one another."

"It was a political pairing. I cared about her, and I grew to love her, I just wasn't *in* love with her."

"Did you..." she stopped. She felt absolutely sick.

"Did I what?"

"Did you two ever have children?" she choked out.

How the hell to answer that? Renji's mind scrambled for a simple way to describe the instinctual requirements needed for his particular species to reproduce. He settled on a simple, "No."

"But, I'm sure you two had sex."

"Of course we did. We were just... never able to."

When Risa remained silent, he could practically hear the gears in her mind turning as she tried to decipher his answer. When a few minutes ticked by, he lifted his face to study her.

She was scowling, and for the first time, he realized that she was jealous. Over him. And for some reason, it warmed him, a much-needed stroke to his ego.

"You're jealous of *Emica*?" he incredulously asked.

She frowned, looking away, and not answering.

Renji wrapped his hand under her chin, turning her to face him. He wanted to laugh. The idea of Risa, *his Risa*, being jealous of that particular woman, was ludicrous.

"It's always been you, Risa."

The trip back up to Circuit's cabin was uneventful. Renji had a sweet little Subaru Impreza WRX hiding at his warehouse location. The car was suped-up and hugged the roads, and he pushed it hard around corners, drifting from time-to-time.

To say that the couple was tense would be an understatement. After their early morning conversation, they fell back asleep in each other's arms. Upon waking, Renji prepared breakfast, and the two tried to come up with a plan. But their next moves were entirely dependent on what Circuit was going to tell them.

It seemed like an eternity passed before they finally pulled up to the cabin. And upon exiting the car, the couple practically jogged over to Circuit's back entrance. Before Renji could knock, the door was swung open, and Circuit was already motioning for them to follow him inside. Once they crossed the threshold, he carefully locked the door behind them and led them to his basement.

The ample space's walls were lined with a massive amount of computer servers. Wires and monitors were strewn all about in a

chaotic way. The former head of the Technology Department promptly took them to the basement's corner and motioned for them to look at the three monitors to his right.

He cleared his throat before he spoke, capturing their full attention. "What you found was a SIM card. There were over three hundred pictures, two thousand emails, numerous documents, and various voice messages saved onto it. I went through as much as I could, but it's obvious that all of the data was related to the design and testing of a special virus. The person who collected this information was a spy, posing as one of the researchers. The coordinates that were noted down can be tracked to a remote desert location in the Middle East."

He paused once again to clear his throat.

"Most of the notes are coded, but they allude to the design of a biological virus that specifically targets and breaks down, human DNA. The last notes led me to believe the spy was rushing. All they said was that testing was complete, and the disease could now be spread virally. All the pictures are of various biological codes, test results, and of the lab technicians themselves. One thing I must point out is that one particular person appears in most of the photos. It was clear that this person was fundamental in the research being done there, and the spy was the most focused on him."

Circuit turned to click on the mouse behind him, springing the three dead monitors into life. "Do either of you know this person?"

Renji and Risa got closer to the screens and watched as Circuit shuffled through numerous photos. There was one man in most of the pictures, he looked to be one of the lead scientists.

That looks like... Risa's powers quivered within her. "That's the head of the Medical Research Department!" she shouted, pointing her finger at the man's image.

Risa's words hung in the air as a heavy silence settled over them, burying them in all its weight.

"That doesn't make any sense," Circuit bit out as he turned to address Renji. "Is this why you wanted me to analyze this, Fang?"

Has *ROOT's* top brass become corrupted?" The small man's voice was strict and military in quality.

When Renji didn't answer, Circuit turned his attention to Risa. "Do you realize that, based on these notes, this virus can take out half the world's population in the matter of a week?" he shouted.

Renji morbidly stared at the monitors and looked at the various photos cycling through each. Risa was right. There were no doubts. The person spearheading the bio-weapon's research and development was, in fact, Enzyme, the current head of *ROOT's* Medical Research Department. The man was a double agent.

"That's why he ran," Risa whispered offhandedly, speaking to herself more so than anyone else, yet drawing the men's attention to her. "Once the virus was developed, and the testing was finalized, Sleeper took all the information he gathered and ran like hell. He was probably hoping to expose this entire operation before the virus could be used, along with *ROOT's* connection to it."

"But why wouldn't he have contacted the General?" Circuit shouted, his patience obviously growing thin. "I don't give a damn about dirty agents. They come and go, and it's impossible to prevent them completely. All you can do is try to keep the good ones good and weed the cancerous ones out. But the General? The General is a good man. His honor can't be tainted. I trust him with my life, and I know he would have acted on this."

Renji rubbed his temples. The gravity of their current situation was sickening. "We've recently discovered that access to the General is actually a major part of the problem. He's definitely bugged, and judging by the size of this threat, I'd say the level of internal espionage is on a pretty large scale too. We have to assume that everything going to the General is being monitored, and we'd also have to assume that any information coming from him, especially mission assignments, is being manipulated as well."

"Sleeper was an excellent agent. He loved what he did, and he excelled at it. After figuring out that Enzyme was dirty, he probably assumed that anyone he turned to within the organization could also be a threat, including Hush," Risa sadly said.

"How did this Enzyme guy not figure out that Sleeper was actually a *ROOT* spy? All the information I looked at was dated. Sleeper was around him for almost a year and a half. With Enzyme's

access to *ROOT's* resources, a simple pass of his photo into the facial recognition software would have brought up his file. There's no way that this Enzyme asshole wouldn't have done every possible background check and used every resource at his disposal to investigate everyone associated with his little side business." Circuit huffed.

"He wouldn't have been able to. It's impossible to identify Sleeper using visual verification methods," Risa simply said, worrying at her hands as she spoke.

Both men turned to her, impatiently waiting for her to elaborate.

"It is impossible because he can change his identity in an instant. He can morph into anyone he sees, or he can invent his own image, whether it be male or female, it doesn't matter. That's his ability. That's his gift. He can be anyone he wants to be, and any type of facial recognition software would be completely ineffective in identifying him."

Maybe he can change his scent too? Renji recalled the female scent he'd discovered in the basement. "That's quite the ability," he said as he focused his attention on Risa. "That explains why *ROOT* went with a sensory tracker. That's why you were the one chosen to track him down, Wraith."

Chapter 12

"I was chosen to track him down..." Risa repeated, trailing off. *He can be anyone he wants to be... I was chosen to track him down...*

"Wraith?"

Hush's voice suddenly broke into her thoughts.

"Please be careful. Sleeper knows you. You both have worked together in the past. He probably already assumes you'll be the one to go after him."

"Wraith, what is it?" Renji demanded.

Jesus Christ. "He left that chip for *me*, Fang!" she all but shouted at the realization as adrenaline began pumping through her body. "He wanted me to find it. He was never running from me, he was leading me to him, leading me to this!"

"What?" both men said in unison.

Risa shook her head, willing her mind to place the puzzle pieces together. "Sleeper couldn't go to *ROOT* with information on Enzyme without the risk of being killed before all the trials were completed. Once the trials were finally finished, Sleeper had all the information needed to potentially find a cure."

The pieces were quickly fitting together, and she was struggling to voice all the connections.

"For obvious reasons, *ROOT*'s Medical Research Department, which would normally be assigned to finding a cure, wasn't an option. So his only choice was to somehow expose the virus' existence publicly," she hurriedly explained. "He made a run for it. But, he didn't change his appearance into a random civilian and disappear. He used his agency face, his *ROOT* identity, and came to Osaka, Japan."

"But, why in the hell would he do that?" Circuit bit out.

"Because he'd quickly be identified, and *ROOT* would send out the closest sensory tracker available," she said. "I'm based in South Korea and am less than two hours away by plane. With my close proximity and my unique tracking abilities, Sleeper ensured that I'd be the *only* agent selected to go after him after he appeared in Osaka."

Both men stared at her. The tension in the room became so thick that Risa almost bowed from the weight of it.

"He wanted to talk to me. Apparently, Sleeper trusted me and trusted that I would find him. He was waiting for me at his hideout. He *wanted* to speak to me."

"But that didn't exactly go down the way he thought it would." Renji's mind seemed to race as it followed along her train of thought. "He never got the chance to try and approach you. You never made it into that house. Instead, you ran into the woods, and he would have heard your gun discharge. He probably assumed dirty agents followed you and were trying to take you out."

"So he buried the chip in the basement, hoping I might survive and somehow try to make it back to investigate his last known location," she finished, her voice now trembling with worry.

"This is fucking crazy!" Renji snarled, quickly becoming overwhelmed. "What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

Risa looked down at the ground. She didn't have any answers.

"You have to find a way to speak with Hush. Not on the phone or electronically, and not in his office. You have to get him alone in a neutral place and scan him for any hidden listening devices that might be planted on his person," Circuit said with finality. "It's the only course of action we have."

"And just how the hell are we supposed to manage that?" Renji wondered out loud. "The man is never really alone, and the amount of security surrounding him is impenetrable. What are we going to say to him?" he demanded. "Excuse me, Hush. Would you like to go for a naked walk in the park later today? Oh, and can you leave your security detail behind? Great. Thanks," he spat out, not withholding the sarcasm from his voice.

"I can call Hush and tell him I'm unable to find Sleeper, and he'll return me to base. Once I'm there, I can find a way to get him alone somewhere—"

Renji's eyes flared. "Like hell, you will."

"Excuse me?"

"Have you forgotten that two assassins tried to kill you yesterday? Two men that could've been working for *ROOT*?"

"No, actually, I haven't forgotten. But what would you have me do? Lay low in one of your hideouts and wait for this to fix itself?"

she said, frustration clear in her voice. "If this virus gets released, I'm probably as good as dead anyway, along with a shitload of other people. I can't just hide and do nothing."

He shook his head, his features twisting in aggravation. "Do you honestly think there won't be another attempt on your life if you call Hush, or when you're in transit back to your base?"

"I expect one, but as I said, I can't just hide here and do nothing," she huffed.

"I'll go. It'll be easier for me to get to Hush. My mission to shadow you was off-the-books, so I have a low profile right now. No one would suspect anything from me."

"Oh, really? So, how was it you were able to see the summary of my agency file on this 'off-the-books' mission?" she sarcastically asked. "Was it transferred to you telepathically, or was it sent to your phone by Hush's secretary?"

Renji sucked his teeth and began to pace the small width of the basement. "I'm not letting you go. And that's final!"

Risa took a deep breath, losing her patience. "The clock is ticking. This really isn't the time for any of this, Fang. Why don't you come with me? We can go together. Would that make you feel better?"

"No."

"I hate to interrupt this lovely chat..." Circuit cut in. "But, can we *please* move on here?" he demanded, effectively quieting both agents. "If you were attacked yesterday, then someone must think you're getting too close to something. You're a threat," he stated as he turned to Risa.

She nodded her head in agreement. "But it just doesn't make any sense. Why try to kill me? I was sent in to find Sleeper, which is actually what a dirty agent would want me to do, and as far as I can tell, there's no reason for anyone in the organization to believe I'm doing anything outside of my mission. No one followed us these past two days, we've been sure of it. No one could know I found the SIM card or that I know anything about its contents. Why the hell would someone be trying to take me out?"

The room grew silent. No one could answer her.

"That actually reminds me." She reached in her pocket. "I was able to get the SIM cards off of my attackers' cell phones. Would

you be able to tell me if there's any evidence of who they were working for and why they were sent? I was also able to get photos of each of them. Is there any way you can identify them?" she hopefully asked.

"I'll take a look at everything right now," Circuit promised as he expectantly held his hand out.

As Risa placed the SIM cards and her phone into his waiting palm, Renji walked over and handed him his phone as well.

"You're probably not going to be able to find out anything from the picture saved on this one. There was nothing left of this guy's face after Wraith was finished with him."

Circuit visibly blanched for a moment before catching himself. "Before I get to work on these, I need to make sure you're aware that if you received files on Wraith, then there *is* an unofficial record of your mission, Fang. If someone's monitoring all incoming and outgoing communications, which you previously said was, in fact, happening, then you too, are a mark." He slipped away to investigate the items now in his possession.

"Can you please try to be reasonable about this?" Risa whispered once Circuit was out of earshot.

"I *am* being reasonable. The best way to keep you safe is for you to disappear."

"I could say the same to you, damn it! They'll go after you too. The best thing we can do is go together."

No fucking way. Renji studied her for a moment before crossing his arms over his chest and looking away. "There has to be an alternative. I just need some time to think." He wandered back to study the active monitors.

Circuit finished reviewing the data pulled from the hardware and chanced a glance at the two agents arguing in whispers from across the basement.

Those two certainly have a lot going on between them.

It was obvious to him that they were involved, but he couldn't say he was surprised. Fang was well known to have quite the appetite when it came to the ladies. And for him, there were no lines

to blur between business and pleasure. For as long as he'd known the assassin, they always seemed to be one and the same.

A part of him felt bad for Wraith. The woman was beautiful to look at, but she wasn't soft by any stretch of the imagination. Within a few seconds of speaking with her, you knew she housed a hard internal core. But, be that as it may, she was obviously another casualty in Fang's long list of conquests. In the short time she'd been here, it was apparent that she was emotionally wrapped up in her teammate. And with Fang, that kind of attachment never ended well for the females.

He cleared his throat. "I can't say I have good news for you, but it's not bad news either."

The two agents looked over to the sound of his voice, and hurriedly walked over.

"The only items on both cards are coordinates, along with your picture and a brief summary of your file, Wraith. The phones you seized were throwaways. They're not *ROOT* issued. As for the photos, I was only able to use the one on your phone. I'm running it through facial recognition software now, and it could be some time before I get a hit, if at all."

"So basically, I'm right back to where I started?"

"No, actually, you're not," Fang growled out.

"How so?"

"Those are the same exact files that were sent to me when I was assigned to protect you."

"So, someone in *ROOT* hired outside assassins to come after me?"

"That's the most reasonable explanation."

"Well, now you know," Circuit said.

She shook her head. "I just wished I knew *why*, though."

Circuit abruptly cleared his throat. "Have you two decided on how to approach the General about our *bigger* problem?"

"No, we haven't," Wraith answered.

Circuit scratched his head before speaking. "Do you want my opinion?"

"No!" they both answered in unison.

Circuit scowled. These two were starting to piss him the hell off. He began fantasizing about throwing them out before Fang interrupted his dark thoughts.

"Were you able to back up all of the intel to multiple places as I asked?"

"Of course. This isn't exactly my first rodeo," he sarcastically answered.

"Is it possible to transfer copies of this intelligence to all the world governments?" Fang asked. "Someone might be able to break everything down and find a cure before the virus is released."

"Do you really want the developmental information for this virus to fall into the wrong hands?" Circuit replied. "I see what you're trying to do, Fang. But, you might as well give corrupt leaders an instruction manual as to how to make this thing on their own. Even with a cure, it *will* kill people."

"We could actually do the opposite," Wraith absentmindedly said.

"How do you figure that?" Fang inquired.

"Are you able to hack into *ROOT*'s system?" she asked Circuit.

His mind began buzzing with excitement. "Yes, I designed the encryption. I'm sure it's been updated since then, but I can certainly break through. I'd just need some time."

Wraith didn't miss a beat. "Would you be able to send copies of those photos of Enzyme, along with some of Sleeper's general notes about him to every agent in the organization? You don't need to send the developmental data or research information out for people to get an idea of what's been going on in Enzyme's spare time."

Fang smiled. "This could be extremely interesting."

Circuit caught on fast. "Yes. Yes, I can do that!"

"If we flood *ROOT* with those photos and information, we'd instantly be able to flush Enzyme, and hopefully whoever is helping him, right out. This would be too big of a scandal not to be thoroughly investigated," Fang excitedly said.

"It would *have* to be investigated, and every department and every agent would be aware of it, including the General!" Wraith all but shouted.

"There'd be nowhere for Enzyme to hide. And we wouldn't have to worry about exposing any of this information externally, keeping the organization protected," Circuit thoughtfully said.

"And we'd keep *ourselves* safe, too," Fang said as he eyed Wraith. "How long would you need?"

"Give me twenty-four hours." Circuit wickedly smiled.

Renji and Risa left Circuit's home shortly after they ironed out the specifics related to the internal data leak. The team collectively chose the distinct data that would be exposed and where it would be placed on *ROOT*'s network.

Each agent affiliated with the organization would be alerted to the file posting, and Circuit was protecting the data in such a manner that it couldn't be quickly deleted by the Technology Department, therefore, buying enough time for the files to potentially be viewed and downloaded.

Circuit was working on hacking the system when they left. Risa had to admit, the man was indeed a genius when it came to technology.

Before they both knew it, they'd spent several hours on the project, and dusk was now approaching.

"What are you thinking about?" Renji asked, gently breaking the ride's silence.

"Nothing and everything at the same time, if that makes any sense," she idly said. "I'm just hoping this idea really works and shakes things up before the virus is released, and all hell breaks loose. I feel like this entire mission is one bad dream, and I just want to wake up."

"I know what you mean. But it hasn't all been terrible." He glanced down at their entwined hands resting on the shifter.

She smiled at him. "You're the one part I don't want to wake up from."

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "I can make us a nice dinner once we get home."

Once we get home, her mind repeated, embracing the word's intimacy. "Where is home?" she asked. "Should we even go back to your warehouse place? Is it truly safe there?"

"I have a state of the art security system if it makes you feel any better."

She shot him a sideways glance. "How long does it usually take you to break through one of those state of the art systems on your missions?" she innocently asked, although she already knew the answer.

Renji deflected the question entirely. "We could go somewhere else. I have another apartment in Tokyo. It's a bit of a drive from here, but it'll be worth it as long as you feel safe."

She thought about this for a moment. Tokyo was home, or at least it used to be.

Her heart suddenly ached for her family, a family she'd given up a decade ago, a family she needed to keep safe from all the evil she saw daily.

"I'd really like that. But, could we make a stop first?"

Chapter 13

The steps leading up to Tokyo's small Yagami Shrine loomed above them.

I shouldn't be here. If ROOT finds out about this, I'll be discharged.

She wasn't even sure why she asked Renji to bring her here, but she felt compelled to check on her family. They had no idea how much danger they were in.

Renji quietly fell in stride behind her as she made her way to the red Tori gate marking the front entrance of her family's property.

"What is this place?"

"The Yagami Shrine," she whispered. "It's a Shintō temple."

"Are you here to pray?"

"No. We're sneaking in."

"Huh? Why?" He eyed her suspiciously.

"This is my family's shrine. I grew up here."

"You're not supposed to be doing this. Are you planning on warning your family?" he said, instantly becoming frustrated.

"No. I just... wanted to see them. That's all. I just want to look at them. They won't even know I'm there."

"There's a reason why we leave our pasts behind. Do you understand what kind of shit storm you're going to create if something happens?"

"I do understand. That's why I'm going to be careful. I just need to make sure they're okay."

"I don't think you get it. Think about what you'll put them through if you're found out. And what if an enemy sees you here? You've just served them a bunch of hostages on a silver platter!" he chastised. "Look, I know you're stressed out about everything that's happening right now, and it's got to make you worry about the people you care about, but you're smarter than this, damn it."

When Risa took a step forward, Renji grabbed her arm and turned her to face him.

"Please don't do this."

"Look. I agree with you, I really do. But I have to check. I just want to look. You can wait in the car if you'd like. I'll only be a few minutes."

"Why must you be so stubborn all the time?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Renji, please. Just support me on this one. Okay?" Her eyes pleaded with his.

He shook his head, his brows furrowed. "Fine. Lead the way."

It didn't take long for them to make their way to the little house hidden behind the shrine. Risa wasn't sure what she was expecting. She felt her mom's and her brother's presence within. As she stalked over to the kitchen window, she ensured she blended in with the shadows as Renji did the same.

I'm happy we both decided to wear our tactical clothes today.

When she reached the window frame, she gathered her courage and chanced a peek inside. The kitchen was the same as always, small and homey. Warm light shone down from the lone ceiling sconce located above the kitchen table. There was a feast adorning the table, and she could hear her mother's laughter, although she wasn't able to see her.

It took her almost a full minute to recognize Ichiro. He didn't look anything at all like the little brother she left behind. A young man now sat in his place, and there was a pretty woman at his side, holding his hand.

They look so cute together.

As her mother finally crossed into her field of vision, Risa noticed that her face was still warm. However, there were slight wrinkles now tugging at her eyes and mouth. She was waving her hands, engaged in telling a story to Ichiro, and the pretty girl sitting beside him.

She wondered if they ever thought about her anymore.

Why the hell am I doing this to myself?

She wanted to run into the house and throw her arms around them, one last time. She wanted to hear the story being told at the table, and she wanted to laugh alongside them. But she couldn't. That life ended ten years ago. Her only regret was she had to give this part up to try to fix the sorry state the world always seemed to be

in. Although she fully understood why leaving them behind was necessary for their protection, right now, it just didn't seem fair.

Glancing back at Renji, she realized he was studying her. She motioned for him to take a look inside as well.

I wonder if they would have liked him?

Briefly cocking his head to the side in confusion, he sidestepped her and peeked inside the window. He lingered there for a minute or two before finally pulling away and looking at her.

Motioning with her hands, she indicated it was time to leave, and he nodded in acknowledgment.

"Do you feel better?" he asked her as they made their way to the car.

"Not really. I feel pretty sad, actually. I didn't realize how much I really miss them."

He didn't say anything, but he did take her hand as they walked down the shrine's steps.

"Although I do feel more determined than ever to do everything possible to keep them safe."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm glad."

They'd made it back to the street and almost got to the car without incident when a giant flash of brown began running toward them from the top of the steps.

Renji instinctually moved in front of Risa, trying to shield her from the attack, but she pushed him away.

He momentarily lost his bearings, and before he could understand what was happening, Risa was tackled to the ground.

Turning, he tried to get to her, but the name she shouted out stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Tenrai!"

It was the name Risa shouted that threw Renji into a state of confusion, effectively stupefying him and halting all of his actions. All five of his senses were attempting to process the scene before him as he stood frozen. While he looked on, he willed the adrenaline pumping through his veins to cease.

He scolded himself for reacting so recklessly. *You'd think I'd be used to the chaos surrounding this woman by now.*

Renji looked on in disgust as a large, brown dog pinned Risa to the ground and began slurping her face with reckless abandon. Its tail was wagging so ferociously that there were moments where the animal's feet would barely touch the ground. It deeply saddened him that once cunning apex predators were bred down to... to this.

Wolves' connections with humans were strained ones. Centuries ago, humans formed a relationship with the animals, adapting them to assist in protection and hunting. As the centuries went on, traits that *humans* considered to be undesirable were bred out of the animals, resulting in the dogs that existed today. As a result, mostly all the behaviors of their wolf ancestors were dissolved over time.

Wolves were admirable creatures that lived in sophisticated social units. The job of maintaining order and cohesion in these units fell to the alphas, which were the only two animals in the pack who were allowed to breed. The second in commands were the betas, which were followed by other mid-ranking wolves. The hierarchy ended with the omegas, the pack's lowest ranking members.

The male alpha wasn't decided by birthright, it was a position that was earned, and the rein of the alpha male ended only if he was forced out by a contenting male or if he died. Alphas mated for life with two exceptions to the rule. First, a new alpha male could replace the existing alpha female when assuming leadership. Or, if the current alpha female died or couldn't produce pups, she could be replaced.

Packs used cooperative hunting tactics and used specialized forms of communication. The many within the pack lived and moved as one. Each member of the hierarchy had special bonds with one another, and together, they worked to ensure the safety of the next generation. They interacted with each other and mourned their dead. They weren't meant to be solitary animals.

Dogs, from what Renji could tell, were the opposite. They were animals that were owned. They sometimes lived in packs, but those packs usually consisted of humans. They sometimes worked, but mostly existed for their owner's amusement. They didn't hunt or raise their offspring; puppies were passed out to new families of humans primarily for profit. Dogs didn't mate. Male dogs consorted with any

female dogs they had access to, never forming a bond and never sticking around long enough to even meet their youngsters. Depending on the breed's specialty, human owners arranged the sex between the animals themselves. Renji couldn't figure out if he was sickened more by the human's behavior in the partnership or by the animals themselves.

Risa, however, seemed to be quite fond of the disgusting beasts. She was laughing and hugging the animal on top of her while the dog continued to lick her face excitedly. Its berserk sniffing of her prompted it to clear its nose several times, spraying her with mucus as it cleared its nasal passages. It followed the cleansing action by taking deeper whiffs of her scent.

Disgusting.

Due to the incessant licking, saliva began leaking from the dog's mouth, a situation the animal quickly rectified by vigorously shaking its head side-to-side.

Renji was soon covered in thick and foamy cords of drool.

He winced, barely stifling his gag reflex. *Ugh. The smell! I'm going to be sick!*

Apparently, Risa didn't seem to mind the spit and snot shower as much. She continued to pet, hug, and coo to the animal, stimulating it further into a frenzy. The poor beast attempted to sit down several times, but couldn't position itself correctly onto the ground due to the frantic tail-wagging situation.

A few minutes passed, and she finally sat up but made no effort to stand. Instead, she took the animal's head in her hands and looked deeply into its eyes. She told him how much she'd missed him, how he was still her baby even though he was a big boy now, and how much she loved him, her precious, *Tenrai*.

Renji's eyebrow twitched when he realized that he had, in fact, heard her earlier outburst correctly. He vaguely realized he was scowling, but made no effort to smooth the expression of his face.

She named her dog...

He watched on as the big dumb dog, that he refused to assign a name to, finally abandoned its quest to sit down and improvised by flopping sideways onto Risa's lap, exposing its stomach.

Giggling, she rubbed the animal's belly, causing it to reflexively kick its leg in rhythm with her strokes. She then started to converse

with the animal. She asked if he was eating well and if he missed her. She asked if he was behaving himself. She scolded him for chasing the neighbor's cat so long ago. She even asked how he'd been sleeping lately.

The dog responded to her, whining, barking, and yipping all the while.

Renji decided to interrupt when the idiotic conversation began to delve into the frequency of the animal's bowel movements.

"Ahem!"

As if noticing him for the first time, the animal snapped to attention, rolling onto its feet. It quickly quieted as it studied him with its mix-matched brown and green eyes.

Renji finally understood why Risa named the dog as she did.

A second or two passed before the hair on the tuft of the animal's neck rose, and it began to growl, its ears flattening and posture dropping into an attack position.

Of course, you want to fight. Stupid, smelly, mutt...

Lowering his head, he began to growl in response.

He's going to fight my dog? Risa studied the two combatants. "Are you fucking serious right now?"

Neither party seemed to hear her, and the growling further escalated with both combatants now baring their teeth.

Un-fucking-believable! She got to her feet. The ridiculous scene before her oddly tugged at her memories, but that did nothing to quell the anger rising up from her chest. "Tenrai!"

The big, brown dog snapped its head over to her, meeting her eyes.

"Sit!"

The animal cringed and obediently sat down on the ground, while she stormed over to it, gently grabbing its collar and pulling its face to look at her.

"No," she sternly said. "No fighting with Renji."

The animal turned its head to the side as if what she was requesting of it was absolutely absurd.

"That's right. Listen to your master as you were bred to do, you stupid, obedient creature."

Risa instantly wheeled around on Renji, pointing her finger right to his nose and effectively wiping the condescending smirk right off of his face.

His eyes crossed as he followed the movement of her finger.

"Don't you ever, ever, *ever*, lay a hand on Tenrai. Do you hear me? I'll never forgive you!" Her shoulders heaved with the intensity of her anger.

Renji's head also tilted to the side dumbly as he blinked several times, processing her warning. "Are you serious? He just tried to attack me!" he sputtered. "Why the hell am I in trouble here?"

Ignoring him, she took Tenrai's collar and walked him over to Renji. "Let him smell your hand," she commanded.

"He can already smell me, Risa. It doesn't work like that. That's something ridiculous humans came up with, and it's a surefire way to get bit."

"Put out your hand!"

Renji shot the dog a sideways glance before crossing his arms over his chest in defiance. "No."

When the dog barked in agreement, Risa loudly huffed in exasperation.

Tenrai stood up and forced his head under her arm, attempting to soothe her. She idly began to stroke his head and smiled at him. The animal barked a few times in response.

"Do you understand what he's saying?" she curiously asked.

"What?"

"What's he saying?" She remembered the way wolf demons used to communicate with their wolves.

"What? I don't speak *dog!*" he retorted, wholly insulted.

"But you can speak to wolves. It can't be much different."

"Do you *hear* yourself right now? That's like me saying all humans should be able to understand each other because they're human. How discriminatory can you be?"

Risa looked Renji over. The man looked utterly miffed.

"Sorry. I didn't think of it that way."

"Can we please go now?" he pushed.

Looking down at her canine companion, she once again took his head in her hands and leaned down to give him a great, big kiss on his nose.

"Be a good boy, baby. I love you so much. I'll try to visit you soon. Take good care of Mom, Dad, and Ichiro."

The dog lowered its head and sadly whined, and Renji's attention instantly snapped back to the animal. He gravely studied it for a moment, his previous air of importance abruptly leaving him.

Tenrai looked over at him and yipped a few times before pressing its large head against Risa's thigh.

Renji suddenly looked ill as he began walking over to her, slowly pacing his steps as time seemed to haze over his senses.

"Risa?" he whispered, his voice becoming delicately soft as he placed an arm around her. "We have to leave. We can't stay here any longer."

"What's wrong?" She didn't know why, but she suddenly felt the urge to panic.

"We'll come back to visit one day, I promise. But for now, we have to go. Please, just come with me and let's go home."

Something's wrong.

Allowing Renji to lead her to the car, she spared Tenrai one last hug before lowering into the Impreza's passenger seat. She then watched from the window as Renji affectionately rubbed Tenrai behind the ear before making his way around to the driver's seat.

The engine then sprung to life, and Renji took off, finally whisking her away.

Chapter 14

The tears fell as if a dam broke, hot, and heavy as they streaked down her face. She struggled to catch her breath as the waves of grief crushed her, drowning her within their oppressive depths.

The ride to Renji's Tokyo apartment was mostly made in silence. He kept her hand in his as he shifted the gears during the trip, occasionally smoothing her knuckles over with his thumb. She barely remembered entering his apartment, nor did she take in many of the dwelling's details. Upon entering, she took a seat on his couch and waited.

Dropping to his knees between her legs, he took her hands in his. His eyes held hers as he told her about the passing of her father, his soft words cutting into the very center of her heart. To her credit, she didn't immediately fall into a state of hysterics. Instead, she asked him only how the man died. Renji wasn't privy to the specifics but informed her that he was sick for some time and finally lost his battle two years prior.

I never even got the chance to say goodbye.

That was the knowledge that broke her heart, shattering it into so many pieces as she openly wept. She wept for her memory of him, and she wept for his loss. She cried both for her guilt and for his suffering.

Silently supporting her, Renji tightly held her to him as the sobs wracked her body. He stayed with her in this way, gently humming and rocking her for what felt like forever. At some point, she was carried to the shower, the warm flowing water hiding her tears, while her lover tenderly washed her body and rinsed her hair, never once leaving her side.

She didn't know at what point she finally succumbed to exhaustion, falling asleep in her man's protective arms as he gently stroked her hair. But, she awoke sometime later, her head held close to his warm chest. She could hear the sound of his heartbeat, and it soothed her.

Tracing her fingers over his chiseled hip, she noted how the skin was soft and warm to the touch. She deeply breathed in his scent and

was rewarded with the smell of cut wood and fresh earth, and all things wild, musky, and male.

She wanted him.

She felt so incredibly vulnerable, raw, and empty, and she so genuinely wanted to fill the dark void with all things him.

Shifting beside her, Renji's body reacted to the scent of her arousal, even when within the hold of sleep. His hand smoothed up her back before cupping the back of her head, tilting her face to him. He studied her through cracked lids as if contemplating her emotional state and what he should do.

Slowly grinding her hips against his, she silently voiced her request. Her lips parted in anticipation as she ran her tongue across her bottom lip, inviting him to connect with her, inviting him in. Her breathing began to hitch, the increasing rapid puffs warming against his throat.

Rolling over her, Renji continued to study her face, before gently lowering his lips to hers and taking her in a slow and delicate kiss. He kissed her in this slack and prolonged way for what felt like an eternity, eventually releasing her mouth to run his tongue down her neck, breaking from time-to-time to nibble on her skin. Grinding his shaft against her core, he masterfully created a rhythm that threatened to break her.

Risa's hands slowly ran down his back, gripping at the muscled flesh with her nails with each thrust of his hips. The sound her man was making was slowly driving her into a frenzy, a low possessive grumble emanating from his chest, vibrating through her.

Sliding down Risa's body, Renji took her soft, perfect breasts into his mouth one at a time. He flicked and teased her nipples into sharp points with his tongue before gently dragging them across his bottom teeth.

The movements caused her to arch her hips against him and grind against his stomach. He continued to suck, tease, and rub her breasts until her thrusts became forceful, and her scent changed into something exotic and profound, communicating her desperate need.

"Please. I need you, Renji. Baby, please."

Her voice was husky and coated with passion. The drawl of the way she said his name sent electricity through the nerve endings in his cock, and he swore he could orgasm just from the sound of her voice.

Sitting back on his knees, he smoothed his hands down her body. He started his reverent trail at her neck and stopped only to wrap his arms around the backs of her knees, lifting her legs to rest on his shoulders. He then dipped back down in search of her mouth, which he took slowly while she nibbled on his lips, her hands wrapping around his hair.

He broke the kiss to watch her as he slowly entered her, filling her to the hilt.

Risa's head tilted back in primal ecstasy as she bit down on her lower lip. "Mmm, Renji. Shit..." she hummed, her voice slowly taking on a pleading edge.

Slowly withdrawing, he repeated the movement again, this time allowing his eyes to close as he embraced the feel of her. A few seconds passed before he began thrusting into her in a slow and torturous rhythm.

"You are mine," he possessively whispered. He dragged his teeth down her ear while he slowly pumped inside her. "All mine."

You're damn straight.

All the things Renji was doing to her were slowly driving her insane. She was so close to the edge. The previous emptiness she felt was temporarily filled; her mind no longer capable of holding onto any thoughts, just the feel and sound of him.

She was almost there.

Her body tightened around him, and she roughly clutched his hair. In her passion, she bit her lip so hard she drew blood, the scent of which didn't go undetected for more than a moment.

When Renji forcefully took her mouth, she orgasmed beneath him. Her release was almost painful as she violently shuddered, and her inner muscles cruelly tugged, milking him for his seed.

Putting his weight behind the thrust, he pulled out only to slam back inside, becoming lost to his own orgasm while groaning into

her mouth. As he collapsed on top of her, he moved his head to the side of her face, attempting to catch his breath.

She gently ghosted her nails over his back, her touch causing goosebumps to flare on his skin.

Eventually, he rolled over to his side, taking her with him. He then dropped an arm over her waist and anchored her against him.

She pressed an expressive kiss into his chest, over his rapid heartbeat. "Thank you..." she hesitated. "For everything." She slightly felt ashamed of how easily she became vulnerable in front of him.

He cracked open an eye and lifted his finger to her lips, silencing her. "Don't," he said. "Just... don't."

She nuzzled her head into his chest. "I appreciate it. That's all. Thank you."

He said nothing for a few moments as his hand drew invisible circles against her back. "Are you hungry, baby? I can make you something to eat," he groggily said.

"No, that's okay. Thank you."

Nodding, he closed his eyes, and his breathing became slow and balanced once again.

Risa awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs flooding her nose.

Her stomach groaned.

Dragging her body out of bed, she felt as though she'd just aged twenty years. She'd been through hell.

Realizing her suitcase was still in the car, she picked a random drawer in Renji's bedroom and pulled out a T-shirt. She quickly pulled the shirt over her head and tied her hair up into a haphazard ponytail. She hoped he had an extra toothbrush lying around his bathroom as she went off to investigate.

Renji just finished plating breakfast when Risa stumbled into his kitchen. Something prideful seemed to tug at his chest when he realized she was wearing one of his shirts.

"Morning, baby," he rumbled. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like death," she moodily answered. She rose to her tiptoes and placed a chaste kiss against his lips.

"I'm really sorry about your father," he said as she released him.

"Yeah, me too. I do plan on finding a way to pay my respects after this whole thing is over."

When he motioned to the table, the couple sat down and ate.

"What time is it?" she asked between bites.

Renji flicked his wrist, checking his watch. "It's 9:00 am."

"Only a few more hours to go before the alert goes out." Her thoughts fell back to Circuit. "I hope he was able to manage everything without running into any trouble."

"He'll come through. He always does. He lives for this kind of thing. Hacking into *ROOT* would allow him to die a happy man," Renji joked.

"One thing that still needs to be resolved is the location of Sleeper. I wonder where he is? I doubt he left Japan. He's probably still hoping that I try to find him."

"How long do you think he'll wait before he assumes you're dead?"

"Of that, I'm not sure." *The last time I felt his presence was back at the house in Osaka, she remembered. The connection was faint, but the pull was indicating he was still around, just out of reach, north of my location.* Risa blinked a few times as realization dawned on her. *Tokyo is northeast of Osaka.*

She pondered this bit before sitting back in her chair and closing her eyes, taking deep calming breaths to try to center herself.

"Risa?"

"I'm okay. I'm just checking on something." Her tracking powers slowly wound through the room. As they did, they snaked their way around Renji for a moment before expanding outward as she focused on Sleeper's energy.

Renji watched as Risa went into a trance. On previous occasions, he could never sense anything related to what she was doing. Today, however, he felt a slight gust of warmth ghost around him.

Risa's eyes suddenly opened, and she flew forward from her chair, grabbing onto his shirt from across the table.

"He's not far from here! He's in the south!" she excitedly exclaimed.

After Risa's declaration at the breakfast table, the duo immediately disbanded, scrambling in different directions.

Bolting outside for a moment, Risa returned with her suitcase. Once in hand, she rushed to change into her tactical clothing.

Meanwhile, Renji hurriedly dressed and armed himself from the weapon supply kept hidden inside one of his apartment's walls. He selected his lightweight Urbana rifle along with two Glocks and a large military issued combat knife, affixing each item to his person.

After dressing, Risa also armed herself. She almost jumped for joy seeing the Recurve hunting bow within Renji's stash. She selected the weapon along with a healthy reserve of arrows. Also, grabbing a Glock and two clips, she attached them to her waist.

They really should make concealable bows. She wrapped the bow around her back. *If it weren't entirely impossible to bring it along with me on all of my undercover missions, I'd never be without it.*

Once suited up and armed, the couple looked each other over for only a moment before nodding in silent agreement and making a beeline for the car.

"What's the plan?" Renji excitedly asked as his Impreza shot down the Tomei Expressway.

"Depending on Sleeper's location, you can either cover me from afar while I try to make contact with him, or you can shadow me closely."

"I'm not leaving your side. I'm not doing the shadowing bullshit," he snapped.

"You have to. Sleeper isn't aware that we know anything about the corruption within *ROOT*. I need to make contact with him first. If he sees you with me, he's going to bolt. He has no idea you're clean."

Sensing his worry, she grabbed his hand, rubbing her thumb against his fingers before bringing his palm up to her mouth and kissing it. "You can stay close, but you can't be seen. Not until I've spoken with him first. Once I've done that, I'll give you a signal."

He apparently didn't want to be too far from her, but he couldn't argue with her sound logic. "Alright. Let's see what type of location we're dealing with once you find him, and I'll back you up from the shadows," he grumbled.

Renji's frustrated musings were interrupted by the hum of his cell phone vibrating on the dashboard. He reluctantly pulled his hand free from Risa's grasp as he reached for it and took note of the caller.

"Why the hell is Circuit contacting me?" he wondered as he angrily answered the call. "I told you not to contact me by electronic means," he huffed into the receiver.

Risa wasn't able to make out the muted ramblings on the other end of the line, so she instead tried to piece the conversation together by listening to Renji's responses.

"APA?" he questioned. "Who are they?" Renji nodded his head several times, sparing small noises in acknowledgment from time-to-time. "Okay, I'll tell her. How's everything else going?" he asked as his voice dropped a few octaves. "Great." He hung up the line.

Risa looked Renji over expectantly, waiting for him to fill her in on the details of Circuit's phone call.

He cleared his throat before speaking. "The guy that tried to take you out is a member of the APA, which is officially known as the Animal Prominence Association. They're a global animal rights group, but they utilize terrorist type tactics to get their message across."

"So they're like PETA?" she asked, rolling the information over in her mind.

"No, they're much worse than PETA. I've never heard of them, but Circuit did some research. Apparently, this group's philosophy is that the human race needs to be wiped out in order to restore balance to the world. They're known to do small-time bombings from time-to-time. They were always a limited operation, so they've never garnered much attention from anyone."

She laughed. "A group of humans that want to eliminate humans?"

"Humans truly are self-destructive creatures. I'm not surprised such a thing exists."

Sadly, Risa agreed with him. It wasn't at all surprising that there'd be a terrorist group comprised of humans attempting to eradicate all of humanity.

"Sounds kind of like a cult if you ask me. After wiping out humanity, they probably have the special Kool-Aid ready for a celebratory toast," she said, expressing her thoughts out loud. "So, why would this guy be trying to kill me?"

"He had a long criminal record and was nothing more than a thug. It seems as though his services were out for hire."

"It still doesn't explain why someone's trying to have me taken out," she dejectedly said.

"No, it doesn't," he agreed.

"Anyway, how's the hack coming along?" she asked, her thoughts now traveling down a different path.

"Circuit finished early and is overly proud of himself. He's actually going to post those files within the hour. Maybe if all goes smoothly, *ROOT* will give us a nice fat bonus for our efforts," he hopefully stated.

"That would be nice." She giggled. "I'd just settle for a little bit of time with you before I'm returned to base."

Chapter 15

Renji visibly panicked for a moment before he was able to stop it. Pulling his eyes away from the road, he looked over at Risa.

"We'll figure something out," he said, not sure if he was reassuring her or himself.

For some reason, the thought of her leaving him never once crossed his mind throughout this entire mission. The idea of spending one night without her left him with an empty void in his chest.

He began imagining all the paperwork, red tape, and security clearances that would be needed to court someone stationed on one of *ROOT*'s many home bases.

First, they'd need to file a notification of the relationship with human resources. Then they would need to fill out numerous confidentiality agreements, in addition to the ones they originally signed upon their initial recruitment. They would also receive spontaneous 'visits' from agents representing the Interrogation Department from time-to-time, to ensure they weren't sharing any secret departmental or mission-specific knowledge. To see her, he'd need to put in a request weeks in advance so he'd have the necessary clearance just to get through the front door. He'd also need to pass through several additional rounds of security just to finally get to her.

We'll figure something out, he mentally repeated. He'd do anything he needed to do to keep her. He wasn't letting go.

"Of course we will," she reassuringly said, reclaiming his hand and squeezing it. "I have plenty of personal time which I can use to visit. Do you have a lot of downtime between missions?"

He contemplated this. "Sometimes, I have weeks before a new assignment comes through. I could always come to visit you in between." *If I ever wanted to surprise you with flowers, they'd be dead by the time I walk through your office door.*

"We'll do that then."

However, the plan did nothing to ease their joint sense of loss.

"We need to get off here," Risa said as she pointed at the upcoming exit.

Risa supervised the remainder of the drive, finally leading the duo to the entrance of Yoyogi Park. Upon arrival, the team scrambled to exit the car and blend in with their surroundings.

Yoyogi Park was one of Tokyo's largest parks. It was big enough to hide in, but there would be civilians scattered throughout, especially during the day. They needed to be careful.

"He's so close." She slowly followed an invisible force through the trees outlining the park.

"I know. I'm picking up on the same scent from back at that house."

The team slowly walked for ten minutes, keeping to the trees, when they came upon a small clearing with a large cherry tree in its center. There was a thick rope tightly wrapped around its base.

"The energy trail ends at the tree," Risa whispered.

"Let's circle around and see if we can catch a glimpse of the other side."

The duo silently twisted their way around the clearing's wooded edges, stopping only when finally able to fully see the main tree in question. A blonde girl, who couldn't be more than eight years old, was tied there. Duct tape was roughly affixed to her mouth, and the child was hanging from her hands. Her eyes were wide with terror.

What the fuck is this?

As if hearing his thoughts, Risa whispered, "That's him."

Sniffing the air, Renji attempted to detect the presence of potential attackers but couldn't determine anything. There were too many human and animal scents surrounding them at this point within the park, and there was no way to distinguish if any of them were a threat.

Following Renji's lead, Risa reached out with her powers. But she couldn't pick up on any imminent threats, nor could she recognize the spiritual signatures of anyone she knew. She began to walk

toward the tree, but Renji roughly grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back.

"We have to release him. We can't just leave him there," she whispered. "Cover me."

Renji didn't loosen his hold. "I'll go."

He didn't allow her much time to argue. He slipped past her and into the clearing.

You can really be such a stubborn asshole sometimes! This isn't what we talked about, damn it! She released her Glock from its holster and began to cover his movements.

The small girl instantly noticed Renji as he approached and tried to shake her head in the negative. She was grunting in a hushed manner as if desperately attempting to speak.

"Sleeper," he whispered. "I'm a friend of Wraith. She's waiting in the trees behind me. We know about Enzyme, and we know about the dirty agents. We need to talk to you. I'm here to help."

The child's eyes closed for a moment, processing the information, before flipping open again in the same urgent panic. Her grunts were becoming more violent and hysterical as Renji worked to cut down the rope binding her hands.

"You have to be quiet. You'll draw attention, and we're in a public place," he instructed.

But Sleeper wouldn't calm down.

Risa silently watched the interaction and wondered what exactly Sleeper was put through before they found him. Something about this didn't feel right at all. Sleeper was basically being served to them on a silver platter.

She took a moment to reach out with her powers and wasn't able to pick up on any threats; she was surrounded by numerous people and animals within the park, and nothing seemed to be out of place. But, the way Sleeper was acting was setting off alarm bells.

Glancing around, she caught a quick movement to her left behind the trees. She stared off in the direction for a moment before a twig snapping to her right captured her focus.

She was being surrounded.

She immediately called out with her powers. But again, there was no indication of any threat. *What the fuck is going on here?*

She ignored her current situation for just a moment to focus her attention back on Renji. Above all else, she needed to protect him.

He just finished cutting Sleeper down, but the child attempted to flee and ran to the trees. Grabbing her arm, he roughly pulled her back to him. While he struggled to restrain her against his chest, Sleeper used her free hand to frantically grab for the duct tape and try to free her mouth.

Risa ripped her eyes away from the scene to take another look at her surroundings.

Oh, my God!

Four wolves surrounded her. The animals were calmly watching the clearing as Renji struggled with the child ahead, paying her no mind.

Her mind raced as she, once again, looked back at him from over the barrel of her gun. She watched as Sleeper finally managed to rip the duct tape off and was frantically trying to pull something out of her mouth.

A bomb.

Time slowed down.

Renji and Risa both froze at the shared realization, unable to move.

A second or two passed before Renji's instincts seemed to kick in. He released Sleeper and grabbed the child's arm. He then called upon his demonic strength as he violently swung the girl around him several times before launching her skywards.

The action animated the wolves who quickly took off in his direction.

Sleeper soared up past the treetops, clearing the park by about seventy feet before Risa's powers kicked up in full force, warning her of impending danger. She clearly understood the message, and she knew there were only seconds before the bomb was going to go off.

Please make it in time! She dropped the Glock, and her left hand flew back to position her bow. Simultaneously, her right hand swept over to her arrows.

With speed she didn't think she was capable of, she positioned the arrow while her body rotated, following Sleeper's airborne movement.

Her arrow instantly burst to life, using her spiritual energy as the accelerant.

"Hit the mark!" she screamed as she released the arrow.

The projectile flew up into the air and pierced Sleeper's throat seconds before the bomb detonated, covering the sky in a blanket of protective blue light.

The spiritual shield managed to temper most of the damage, but it didn't wholly mitigate the entire force of the explosion, and the blast's heat blew down from above, bombarding everyone in the park below.

Luckily, Risa's powers instinctually engulfed her, shielding her from the heat. But they could do nothing as she was blasted aside, roughly slamming headfirst into a nearby tree.

Renji was also blown away from his position in the clearing. Flying back, he eventually managed to grab onto a tree branch and rode out the remainder of the buffered explosion from the treetops.

As he dropped back down to the ground below, he came eye-to-eye with four snarling wolves that were waiting for him. Stumbling, he tried to put some distance between them as he struggled to make sense of his current situation.

A thick confusion combined with the temporary hearing loss from the explosion and the overwhelming stench of detonated sulfur deadened most of his predatory senses. He was too slow to notice the flurry of activity springing into life around him, and for that, he paid the price.

The first bullet burned as it blew through his lightweight armor and into his shoulder, but the pain was bearable. However, the second blast that tore through his knee was excruciating, stealing his breath away as he collapsed onto the grassy floor.

When he attempted to rise, his forehead was met with the business end of a handgun, which effectively stopped his efforts.

"Time to go," the man holding the gun instructed, the words echoing through his muffled hearing. "The boss lady is waiting for you."

Desperately looking around, he searched for signs of Risa but couldn't see her. He frantically sniffed at the air, but the chemicals from the explosion entirely deadened his sense of smell.

Another man approached him from behind and roughly hit the back of his skull with the butt of his weapon, quickly knocking him unconscious.

As his world faded to black, his last thoughts were of Risa seductively smiling up at him through half hooded lids.

Risa scrambled from her crumpled position at the foot of a tree. The blast stripped her hearing, and the world's background sounds were coming through as a high pitched ringing in her ears.

She repeatedly stumbled as she tried to get back onto her feet. Her head was pounding from its earlier impact with the tree, and she struggled to stifle a wave of nausea.

Disoriented, she swung her head around in slow, broad sweeps, attempting to look for Renji. But she wasn't able to see him.

She shook her head several times, trying to clear the haze clouding her senses. However, the action caused her to violently vomit into the grass below.

A few minutes passed as she focused on her breathing, willing her powers to surround her before sending them forth to find Renji. Her breath hitched as immediate warmth flooded through her body.

He was very close to her. But, the knowledge did little to alleviate her suffocating sense of worry.

After a few forced moments, her nausea finally subsided, and she began to feel a little more centered. Hobbling eastward, her footsteps were intentional and heavy as she tried to avoid falling down again. She went on this way for what felt like an eternity while sensing that Renji was quickly moving away from her.

As she walked, her hearing slowly returned. The high pitched ringing sound in her ears now replaced with sirens, screaming, and helicopters flooding into the background. Struggling, she pulled her

phone from her pocket and didn't spare any attention for the *ROOT* file alert message currently occupying the main screen of her phone.

She quickly dialed the General, no longer giving a shit about who could be listening, while she silently prayed he could somehow help her.

"Wraith! Where the hell are you?" Hush shouted into the line. "You haven't checked in, in over—"

Risa abruptly cut him off. "You're being bugged, but I need your help!" she shouted. "Yoyogi Park. I'm in Yoyogi Park! Sleeper is dead, and a bomb has gone off. Many civilians are hurt. I'm on the ground but injured. Renji is missing! I'm trying to find him!" she screamed.

Her head was pounding as she struggled to communicate.

The line went silent for a moment.

"*Who* is missing?"

"Ren... Fang! Fang is missing! He's here, but he's getting away from me! Something's wrong! I need help."

The line went silent again.

Risa had no patience left. "You're being bugged, Hush! I can't stay on the line. Send help, damn it! Make sure any agents you send are your most trusted and aren't dirty. I need your fucking help!"

There was only a brief pause before the authoritative voice on the other end of the phone responded. "Understood."

And with that, the line went dead.

The cord of energy she was following during her call was now slightly beginning to thin. *He's getting farther and farther away. Stay still, damn it! I'm coming!*

Breaking out into a limping run, she didn't get very far before she was slightly pushed back by whips of wind coming from a low hanging police helicopter. Sweeping past her, it landed somewhere out of sight, far to the east of her location.

She continued to run alongside the cord of energy when it abruptly began to lift up into the sky. *The helicopter? Are the police taking him?*

For a moment, the thought provided some relief. At least he'd receive medical attention if needed, and she'd be able to find him. It'd be easy to get him away from the police as well.

But, why would the police be over in this remote area? There are no injured civilians here. That helicopter came to this area directly, bypassing the rest of the park.

Realization dawned on her.

"No!"

The helicopter began to fly away, leaving a screaming Risa in its wake.

Her mind scrambled, digesting the gravity of the situation. *I can't chance firing on them! I could end up killing him!*

Having no choice, she could do nothing but to watch the helicopter go.

For the first time in many years, she momentarily felt tiny and helpless as she waited for her back up to arrive. That is until the full fury of rage quickly replaced it.

I will find you, Renji. Mark my words. I'll kill anyone who lays a hand on you. I won't lose you again, she swore as burning determination filled her eyes. *Wait for me.*

Chapter 16

Risa hid in Yoyogi Park for two hours until she was found by Hush's makeshift rescue squad, which was solely comprised of two of her Alpha Team subordinates. Upon seeing the familiar faces, she collapsed into their care.

"We've got you, Rai! Don't you worry! We're taking you home!" Frisk, her second in command, shouted back to her from the rescue vehicle's driver's seat.

She'd been temporarily incapacitated and was tended to by her other subordinate, Quake, in the back of the car.

Home. The word nearly broke her. Home was never a place. *Home is wherever I am with him.*

The wild, bumpy ride felt as though it took hours before she was transported back to her home base by plane. Upon her arrival, she was immediately taken in for medical care and began treatment for a concussion.

That was two weeks ago.

It was two weeks since she'd lost him and two weeks of absolute hell without him.

The General personally visited her bedside and made daily visits with her after her release, keeping her updated on the present internal state of disarray.

Thanks to Circuit's data leak, *ROOT* was in a frantic state of audit.

Internal Affairs was out in full force, investigating all existing agents and their past movements within the organization. A small number of agents went rogue after the leak, and Internal Affairs was utilizing the Intelligence, Reconnaissance, and Assassination Departments to locate, recapture, or eliminate them. Many ongoing daily projects were put on hold as members of these departments were flooded with these new priority missions.

The Technology Department was working around the clock to pinpoint all information recently accessed by anyone within the organization. They were struggling to identify questionable data access that fell outside of each agent's daily, or mission-specific duties. Circuit was even called out of retirement to assist.

The Medical Research Department was the most impacted. Their departmental leader went missing, and they lost several scientists after the shakedown. On top of which, they were struggling to find a cure for Enzyme's bio-virus before it could be released.

The Interrogation Department had its hands full as well. All recaptured rogue agents were brought within their department's walls to be 'broken down.' The Interrogation agents employed certain gifts to forcefully gather information. All rogue agents that were delivered to them hadn't been seen again.

And the Human Resources Department was quickly trying to scout and sign new agents to try to help fill the numerous voids left within the many other departments.

Despite all this, the information that *ROOT* was able to gather in such a short amount of time, on such limited resources, was impressive. They were able to figure out that a dirty agent from the Technology Department, named Virtual, was ghosting into the General's computer for the past two years. During that time, he was reviewing and manipulating all of the data the General would access, including mission briefs. The traitor, who was now in the loving care of the Interrogation Department, would download confidential information and establish a foreign IP address to send it to Enzyme, his co-conspirator in the Middle East.

Enzyme's secret research lab was swiftly raided within hours of Circuit's data leak. But the location was left wholly abandoned before *ROOT*'s infiltration. Enzyme was days ahead of them, being tipped off by Virtual at the time Risa first received her assignment to track down Sleeper.

The APA took responsibility for the bombing in the park, and *ROOT* was scrambling to gather intelligence on them.

"It's a God damn mess!" Hush cursed as he sucked his teeth loudly in aggravation. "This entire thing is a God damn mess!"

Risa partially ignored the man's rant as she continued to type away at her computer.

"Are you listening to me, Wraith?"

Risa slammed her fist down on the desk. The sudden movement startled Hush and effectively shut him up.

"It doesn't matter!" She desperately tried to center herself by rubbing her throbbing temples. "The only thing that matters is

finding Fang, and that's the one fucking thing nobody seems to know anything about," she spat, feeling murderous.

She appreciated the General's daily informational visits, but he was starting to work at her very last nerve.

"I'd watch the backtalk if I were you," Hush warned. "You wouldn't want to be booted off this project for something as stupid as insubordination, would you?"

He huffed when the silence stretched out between them.

"I get it, Wraith. I want to find him, too. Look, I don't know what happened between the two of you — *I warned that asshole to keep his God damn dick in his fucking pants!* — but you can't lose your shit on this. You need to stay focused and keep your emotions out of this. We're going to find him. We just need a lead. We have no idea who kidnapped him or why."

He personally looked at the Tokyo police reports that the Intelligence Department stole. The reports claimed one of the police helicopters was stolen when responding to the bombing in the park, and the aircraft remained missing. Allegedly, its internal GPS location device was removed before take-off.

"I feel like the information is staring us right in the face, but we're unable to piece it together," she bit out, sagging with frustration.

The General leaned over and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"We are the best in the world. We took a hit recently, but we're stronger for it. Trust in your colleagues, and please trust in *me*. We *will* find him."

The words did little to loosen the knot Risa carried around in her stomach for the last two weeks. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd slept or ate properly. Any private moment that wasn't dedicated to investigating was spent using her powers to try to search for Renji.

She knew it would be impossible to establish a trail on him from her current location in South Korea, but she wouldn't stop trying. Although a directional cord wouldn't form due to the distance between them, she amazingly could sense his spirit, and the knowledge pushed her forward each and every day since his disappearance.

Apparently, her powers upgraded a bit.

"Thank you," she said, realizing Hush was waiting for a response from her. "Thank you for having my back."

The General released his hand from its nest on her shoulder and began to exit her office.

"Oh! General?" She cleared her throat. "Is it possible that I speak with Circuit?"

"Go right ahead. He's scrambling around the Tech Department. Feel free to go over there and talk to him if it helps you to feel any better," he called out over his shoulder as he left.

Jumping to her feet, she made her way through the maze of cubicles and over to the building's elevators.

Renji awoke in a cold, dank room. His senses were clouded, and his thoughts were jumbled. He was vaguely aware he was tied to a... *hospital bed?*

He was also somewhat aware that he was being drugged. His arms were bound within tight restraints, and he lacked the minute amount of energy needed to pull the IV from his vein.

Where am I? He slowly tried to piece together the incident that brought him there. However, he was constantly interrupted by images of Risa's face.

Please be alive. Please be ok. He struggled to look around his room. But he quickly found he wasn't able to move his head. *Was she taken, too?*

The thought that she could be in danger panicked him, but the extra adrenaline didn't provide enough energy to move more than a few fingers on his right hand.

"How are you feeling?" a female voice questioned off to his right as if noticing the movement of his fingers. "You've been healing pretty nicely."

Renji couldn't speak. His eyes slowly shifted around the room as he tried to find the voice's source.

"Of all of the people to be working for *ROOT*," the voice chided. "I never would have expected *you*."

Renji's features slightly crinkled into the ghost of a frown. *This voice is familiar*. He tried unsuccessfully to clear his drug-induced fog.

"You can imagine my surprise when one of my officers picked up on your scent on a routine robbery call," the woman sweetly said. "We all thought you died ages ago." She paused, apparently studying him.

Renji closed his eyes, focusing on the voice. His hearing was somewhat warped. It was as if the speaker was speaking slowly, and it was incredibly difficult for him to piece the sentences together.

"I had to make the trip just to confirm it for myself," the woman continued. "Who would have thought that Renji, former alpha of the United Tribe, became a befuddled criminal?" She laughed. "Of course, that wasn't really the case now, was it?"

Renji's eyes flew open in recognition.

"Perhaps you'll want to provide your *special services* to an organization with a little less corruption in the future," she went on. "If it weren't for the intel passed along to me the following day about the appearance of that little spy in Osaka, along with the file summaries and photos of the two agents who were sent in to find him, I never would have believed it."

Emica, what the fuck are you doing?

"Sucks for you, really," she continued. "You gave us all the information we needed. We investigated that house, and wouldn't you know it, the basement was drenched in your, and that child spy's, scent. It didn't take us long at all to track the little girl down after that," she conceitedly stated. "But, I guess with police resources combined with the use of wolves, you never really stood a chance."

"Emica, why are you doing this?" Renji drawled out, his speech heavily slurred.

The woman paused for several moments before speaking again.

"I haven't heard that name in so long. I never really realized how much I missed it," she sadly admitted.

"Where's Wraith?" He internally congratulated himself for managing to use Risa's code name.

The question seemed to switch Emica's gears.

"Going forward, you might want to try to keep your cock to yourself while you're working, Renji. It really helps in keeping a clear head and making logical decisions. Know what I mean? It's pretty easy to track someone you've practically fucked into next week. Your *marking* scent was all over that agent. If the bitch were here, I'd ask her how in the hell that was even possible. Hell, I'd even ask her if you two set a date for a mating ceremony yet."

"Marking... scent?" he trailed off, attempting to communicate. *That would certainly explain the possessiveness.*

"In all my life I never thought I'd ever catch a whiff of it. The smell is actually quite lovely, Renji." She giggled. "If so many years haven't passed, I might actually be jealous."

"Where is she?" he repeated, interrupting her ramblings.

"She's dead," she robotically informed him. "It would have been over quickly, but you two idiots decided to switch positions at the last moment before 'saving' Sleeper."

Dead?

"Dying slowly from injuries sustained from a bomb is a pretty shitty way to go, don't ya think? It would have been much better if she were the one to cut the little spy down from the tree. Then there wouldn't be any pain. She would have died instantly."

Risa's dead?

"She really was pretty hard to get rid of," Emica admitted. "But, I guess when you use sublevel assassins, you get sublevel work." She huffed. "I tried having her killed to lure you out of hiding, but the bitch managed to kill my hitmen before we could get to you."

Her voice took on a hateful tone as she continued. But, Renji was no longer able to hear any of her twisted ramblings. His eyes closed, and his mind filled with images of Risa covered in blood as she stared up at him with cold, lifeless eyes.

A slow-burning rage built inside him, burning his very veins with its molten intensity.

Emica was interrupted from her one-sided conversation as Renji's heart monitor began beeping at a faster tempo.

"Poor dear, you must be upset," she said in mock sympathy as she walked over to his IV. "It's excruciating to lose a mate. But, the last thing I need right now is for you to surrender to your demonic bloodlust and tear this place apart." She significantly increased the drip of the sedative.

Crossing over into Renji's slowly fading vision, Emica leaned over him so he could finally meet her cold, green eyes.

"I'm going return this world to its non-human inhabitants, something you were too much of a pussy to do back when you reined," she spat. "Be happy, Renji. I've reserved you a front-row seat."

Chapter 17

Risa finally found Circuit hiding in the dark in one of the Tech Department's conference rooms while typing on his laptop.

"Doesn't that hurt your eyes?" she asked him, upon entering the room.

The little owl looked up at her from behind his thick glasses and shook his head as she took a seat next to him.

"I need to talk to you, but I need to make sure I can trust you with what I'm about to tell you."

Circuit looked at her waiting for her to go on.

He's back to not speaking, I see. "I need you to talk, damn it. This is important."

"What do you want me to say?" he sheepishly asked.

"I need to know that what we speak about right now stays between us. No matter what," she demanded.

"I can try. It really depends on what you have to tell me. However, if the Interrogation Department gets a hold of me, all bets are off."

Good enough, I guess. She sighed. "Do you know anything about the presence of demons in our society?" she whispered.

He studied her for a moment before erupting into a hysterical fit of laughter.

"I'm being serious! Stop laughing!"

"Have you lost your mind?" He attempted to stifle his laughter.

"I'm about to," she threatened, effectively shutting the little owl up. "Look. It's a long story, but there are demons among us that assimilated into human society centuries ago. These beings have special powers, powers we'd classify as 'gifts' within this organization."

Circuit seemed to process this information.

"Fang is one of these people," she whispered. "This is why he's able to stay so young, and why he's able to track as well as he can."

Becoming still, he now gave her his full attention.

"Fang is really a wolf demon, and long ago, he used to command all the wolves and wolf demons in Japan."

Circuit began to shake his head in disbelief.

"No! Please stay with me. I need you to believe me. His life could depend on it!" She placed her hand over his.

The physical contact kept him rooted in place.

Perverved old man! "Anyway," she huffed as she tried to move the conversation along. "That day in the park, four wolves appeared before the bomb went off. My powers didn't warn that they were a threat. They just showed up, and their complete attention was focused on Fang."

Her thoughts replayed the animal's appearance to her, along with their immediate departure, after Renji flung Sleeper into the air.

"Once Fang threw Sleeper into the air as a way to protect the civilians on the ground, the wolves flipped out and took off after him."

"What the hell are you getting at?"

Risa struggled to keep from punching him. "It makes no sense that four members of an endangered species would just randomly pop up at a public park. It also makes no sense that they'd attack Fang, who is a wolf demon."

Wolves wouldn't attack a wolf demon unless they were under orders from another, higher-ranking wolf demon to do so.

"Wolves are wild animals. They don't discriminate who they attack."

"For someone so smart, you're actually pretty stupid," she angrily retorted. "Wolves aren't the crazed beasts from old stories that were used to scare misbehaving children. They're social animals that live for the shared survival of their pack. They don't attack humans unless they're threatened or starving."

Circuit began to stand, abruptly calling their little meeting off.

"Please, don't leave. I'm not finished!" she angrily said.

"I'm not here to be insulted. You've very obviously lost your mind, Miss Wraith. Maybe your concussion was a little more severe than the medical team previously led you to believe. You should probably lie down and rest; you're working yourself too hard."

"I need your help! Don't you want to find Fang? Isn't he your friend?"

"Look, it's obvious to me and everyone else on this base that you're hopelessly in love with him, Wraith. And love makes us do

stupid things sometimes. But, seriously, do you even hear the crap coming out of your mouth right now? Wolf demons? Come on!"

Obvious... that you're hopelessly in love with him...

Risa held the owl's magnified eyes with hers. "I know what it looks like. All I'm asking for is a favor. Can you please look into the APA and see if they have any ties to the purchase or protection of wolves?" she said, her voice becoming urgent and pleading. "I need your help. I'll owe you one!"

"Oh, fine. I'll give you a few hours of my time," he spat out, frustrated.

Risa walked over and took the little man in a firm hug. "Thank you," she whispered, before turning and exiting the conference room.

The moment she was out of earshot, Circuit shouted, "Damn all beautiful women straight to hell!" before he sat down and got back to work on his laptop.

Risa was aware the sun would be rising in a few hours, but the knowledge wasn't enough to motivate her to leave her office and try to get some much-needed sleep.

She sighed as she looked at her image in the building's bathroom mirror.

She'd lost a few pounds, and her cheeks were slightly hollowed. Her hair, which was always pulled back into a neatly wound bun, now sat atop her head in a messy ponytail. Her clothing was wrinkled and crumpled. She knew she was pushing herself too hard, but she couldn't stop moving. Every time she did, she was haunted by all of her fears surrounding *him*.

Was he being tortured? Was he being fed? Was he cold? Was he injured? Is he dying?

Her brain would repeat this torturous questioning over-and-over again. And then, terrifying images would flash through her mind. She'd picture him hurting, calling out for help while he reached for her. His face was always behind her lids.

Splashing cold water over her cheeks, she tried to reel her frantic thoughts back in and lock them away.

I'm losing it. She made her way back to her desk. *Renji, where the hell are you?*

She plopped down into her chair and focused her attention back on the Tokyo police reports. She was trying to review the information for what felt like the millionth time.

Bunch of idiots. How the hell do you lose a fucking helicopter? Either you're entirely full of shit, or completely incompetent.

Her fingers ghosted over her keyboard as she tried to look up the moronic rescue squad's leader. *Nepotism was most likely at work when that guy was put in charge.* She pulled up information on Haru Tanaka, the chief of the Tokyo police department.

She grabbed for her cold cup of coffee and sipped the disgusting brew as she hit the enter key on her computer, prompting the machine to do a search. When the police chief's photo popped up on her screen, Risa choked on the liquid and sputtered the rancid drink all over her desk.

The room was filled with the sounds of her choking and gasping to catch her breath.

Impossible... She stared at the photo on her monitor, and Roukan's face stared right back at her. She struggled to control her trembling hands as she read through his information.

Apparently, Roukan, one of Renji's previous betas, was running the Tokyo police department for several years. He made a name for himself with the notable work he did within the department's canine unit. He was the first to begin using rescue wolves for search and rescue missions and was held in very high regard.

Risa felt as though her heart was going to explode, but she pushed further. She quickly looked up the use of rescue wolves within the Japanese police force. Her search led her to the Osaka police department, where Chief Kaito Nakamura was adapting the work that Chief Tanaka, a.k.a. Roukan previously instituted in Tokyo.

Kaito Nakamura, she silently repeated as she typed the name into her computer.

What do ya know? Raiju, it's been a long time, hasn't it? she smugly thought to herself as the image of Renji's former second beta popped up onto her screen.

She couldn't believe this.

Now let's see who sits at the top. She ran a search for information on the current Commissioner of Police and a photo of a woman with red hair and cold, green eyes stared back at her.

Oh, my God!

Risa bolted out of her office and ran at top speed to the elevator bank down the hall.

Chapter 18

Renji lost all concept of time. He had no idea how long he was floating around within his current vegetative state. *Has it been days, months, years?*

At moments he thought he was dead, and the idea somewhat relieved him. But, each time he would attempt to further release himself inside the void, he always seemed to be pulled back out again by a gentle warmth that reminded him of her. He came to believe the constant reminder was his punishment in his own private hell.

I lost her... again.

The thought painfully vibrated through his soul. He couldn't remember another time in his life when he'd felt such deep grief and despair.

How could I have let this happen a second time? He silently cursed. *Risa is dead, and I let her die.*

He didn't even have the strength to avenge her; the drugs in his system were so concentrated he could barely blink.

As he swam in his usual clouded state of confusion, he was held hostage by his torturous memories. Memories he once forcefully buried so very long ago that now replayed continuously for him in an eternal loop.

1502 A.D.

"She's not here!" Tenrai grumbled. "There's no trace of her anywhere!"

"Are you giving up, priest?" Renji retorted. "You said it yourself! All holy users are reincarnated. We have to keep looking for her."

Shinji and Yuri eyed one another. Their little group was at it for two years and still wasn't able to find any trace of Risa's soul in any of the young children they encountered since her death. Tenrai and

Renji refused to give up, and every time the team came up short, which was often, the boys vented their frustrations out on each other.

This was going to turn into yet another fight.

"You, stupid priest. This is all your fault," Renji accused as he menacingly leaned into Tenrai's face. "You should've protected her."

"You shit wolf, how dare you pin this on me?" he shouted, before landing his fist square against Renji's jaw.

Shinji and Yuri collectively rolled their eyes and moved away from the escalating brawl to safety.

"We can't keep going on like this," Yuri said as her voice cracked. "Risa is gone."

Shinji paused as he processed her words.

They all came to accept that they'd probably never see their friend again, all except for two.

"She sacrificed herself to save another," he huffed. "That was her way. She was the most selfless person we've ever met."

At these words, Yuri began to cry. "I miss her so much," she said, between sobs. "We never even got to say goodbye to her. She died alone and scared. It's too horrible."

"She's not dead, you idiot!" Tenrai shouted over to them from the melee taking place to their left.

"He'll never accept it," Shinji whispered. "Tenrai will never accept it."

"I'm afraid that neither will Renji," Yuri sadly said. "He has his entire Hyakuhiro Waterfall pack out looking for her, and I heard Emica's Kumotori Mountain pack is assisting him as well."

"We've covered all the land several times over, and there's no trace of her. At some point, we have to give up searching," Shinji realistically said.

The couple's eyes flew back to the fighting pair.

"We have to tell them that it's time to go back home."

1503 A.D.

"I'll never give up on Risa!" Renji roared. "How dare you even suggest such a thing?"

Roukan and Raiju flinched. This wasn't going to be easy.

"But Renji, it's been years. I know how you feel about her..."

Roukan hesitated.

"We know how you feel about her. But, it's time to accept reality. Risa is never coming back, boss," Raiju finished, completing Roukan's earlier train of thought.

Renji felt murderous.

"We've all been out searching, and Emica's pack has been assisting us for years now. We can't find her because... there's nothing to find," Roukan sadly admitted.

"We don't like it either. We loved Risa, too. But Renji, we can't continue to go on this way. The tribe needs you. We need you to rule. We need our alpha," Raiju's voice was gentle and full of compassion.

Renji squeezed his eyes shut in defeat.

There's nothing to find... The tribe needs you.

1720 A.D.

The decision to disband the United Tribe was the hardest decision that Renji ever made during his long tenure as alpha. He'd desperately wanted to believe there was another way until the tribe found itself on the brink of starvation.

He always did what he thought was best for the many, putting his own personal desires to the side. There was a time of great prosperity after the unification of his and Emica's tribes, but the world around them was continually evolving, and they found themselves unable to keep up.

"Lord Alpha, we can't continue at this rate," one of the male wolf demons advised over the crackle of the fire in the main den.

An emergency meeting was gathered to discuss the tribe's future.

"We haven't enough food to last us through the winter. The east and south have become too industrialized, and there aren't many places left to hunt."

For almost two centuries, the United Tribe was dealing with the expansion of humans throughout Japan. As the human species

advanced, so did their numbers, and the United Tribe suffered greatly as a result. Hunting grounds were now limited, and they found themselves competing with humans over territory and food.

"I might be out of place to say this..." another member spoke up.

"Then don't!" Renji spat in frustration.

Emica attempted to calm him with a gentle hand to his shoulder as she nodded to the wolf demon to continue speaking.

"Forgive me, Lord Alpha, but we can no longer ignore the situation we're in. At one time, humans were a source of food for us. On your orders, we have managed to avoid them for this long, but in light of the circumstances..." he trailed off. "Are they really worth our family dying over?"

Renji sucked his teeth as he folded his arms against his chest. They managed to get to this point, but if something didn't change soon, they were going to begin dying out from starvation. In addition to the food problem, humans started hunting the wolves down, adding an accelerant to the situational fire.

He long forgot precisely why he removed humans from the menu, but he didn't believe hunting humans now would do anything more than temporarily fix the problem. He'd spent many sleepless nights thinking about a solution, but everything he came up with resulted in the disbandment of the tribe.

He'd managed to avoid it for this long.

The audience surrounding the fire expectantly stared at him, waiting for a response.

"We have two options available to us," he hesitantly said. "We can take the lead of our foreign wolf demon cousins and mix with the humans, leaving the wolves behind entirely—"

The meeting erupted with gasps of horror and heated barking.

"Let me finish!" Renji yelled, quelling the hysteria. He rubbed his temples, trying to calm before going on. "Or, we can separate back into individual tribes, each with their own alpha, which would only serve to buy us some time."

"You choose the humans over us!" a female shouted, once again sparking outrage throughout the cave.

"I'm not choosing anyone over us!" Renji snarled, his voice echoing throughout the cave. "It's impossible to survive if we refuse

to evolve. The one thing that'll always be consistent in this world is change. If we're not able to adapt, then we're all as good as dead."

"Evolve? The simple solution to the food situation would be to eat humans!"

"And then what?" he shouted. "That won't solve the problem for very long. We'll be right back here, having this same exact conversation, in another fifty years!"

"The humans destroy everything!" another wolf demon shouted. "You'd have us live among the very people who are responsible for the downfall of our tribe?"

"I am the alpha of this tribe! It is my responsibility to ensure we survive. I can't do that if we all starve to death!" he roared, bearing his fangs. "If any of you idiots have a better idea, then I'd like to hear it. We're the last demon tribe left in Japan! All other demon species in these lands have either died out or disbanded years ago!"

"Renji, what are you saying?" Emica whispered, her intense gaze meeting his.

He took her hand in his, squeezing it for a moment before letting it fall back to her side.

"We have to disband into small packs," he said, pain now lacing through his voice. "It's our best chance of survival."

The decision was a brutal one. He knew he was making the right choice, but he also knew they were only delaying the inevitable.

"What happened to your wolf demon pride?" Emica shouted at him, from across their private den.

"I'm not happy about it either. But you know this is the best choice we have right now. We can't survive like this. Do you want our people and our wolves, to starve?"

"We wouldn't starve if we were able to hunt the humans, damn it!" she spat. "You always had a disgusting affection for them. It was your law disallowing human consumption that put us in this situation in the first place!"

Renji ran his hand through his hair in frustration. He was desperately trying to keep his temper in control. This was a

recurring argument between them long before his earlier decision to split up the tribe.

"I don't have any affection for them," he calmly retorted.

"Solving this isn't as easy as eating them. Using them as a food source isn't going to sustain us for very long. Why is it so hard for you to see the bigger picture here?"

She turned away from him. Her fists were clenched at her sides. "I can't do this anymore!"

Renji rolled his eyes. She'd been threatening to leave him for so many years he'd lost count.

"I know where this is headed," he said. "You can't stand me. You're leaving me. I'm a horrible leader. I'm a terrible lover and mate. You made a mistake," he recounted as he sucked his teeth. "I've heard this so many times, I can have your side of the argument for you."

She turned back to him and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Why do we continue this?"

"That's what I'd like to know," he retorted. "All we do is fight."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Why do we continue this?" She pointed to Renji and then to herself.

"What are you talking about? We do it for the tribe. Our pairing exists to protect the tribe."

"At what cost?" she asked, casting her eyes down.

Renji didn't know what to say.

"We've been together for so long, but we've never truly mated. We're not a true pair. We can't even have children," she regretfully said as she voiced her thoughts.

"Emica, we've been through this..." he spat as frustration came through his tone.

Sex among the wolf demons was something primal. It wasn't something usually spared a second thought. If two wolf demons became attracted to each other, it would naturally lead to sex. However, if the relationship grew into something more profound and longstanding, the pair would instinctually mark each other with a unique scent that warned others that each member of the pairing was off-limits. This act was called 'mating' or 'marking' within the tribe. Only mated pairs were able to go into heat and bear children.

For higher-ranking wolf demons, there was usually a mating ceremony to celebrate the official instinctual union within the tribe.

Mated pairings could last anywhere from few decades to several centuries. Some unions even lasted a lifetime, but such a thing was extremely rare.

Although Renji and Emica had a mating ceremony to signify their union, neither were able to mark each other. It was a primal act that could not be forced, and it was something that didn't go unnoticed by the remainder of the tribe.

"Before the mating ceremony, I told you not to get your hopes up. Ours was the first political pairing in wolf demon history. You can't mess with nature, Emica. There was never any guarantee that we'd ever, in fact, become a real match."

"So, why do we continue the charade? How many years have we dedicated to this?"

"I do it because I love our tribe. This was always for the greater good of the United Tribe. We are the alpha pair, and it was because of our union that we were able to join the tribes in the first place."

She paused, considering his words as she continued to stare at the floor. "Do you love me?" she coldly asked.

"What? Of course, I do," he said, becoming exasperated.

"No, Renji. I'm asking if you are in love with me."

"You're being ridiculous," he huffed.

She crossed the den and stood before him, her eyes looking up into his. "Say it, then," she demanded.

"Emica, you are my mate. I care about you. I know you don't always feel that way sometimes—"

She abruptly cut him off. "I just want to hear those words once. I need to know the truth."

Renji looked down at her. She was beautiful, she was elite, and she was his. He brought his mouth down to hers, only to be roughly pushed away.

"If you truly were in love with me, you would not hesitate to say it."

"That goes both ways. Are you in love with me?" he asked simply as he turned the question around on her.

She looked away from him before speaking. "You're my family, Renji. You have always treated me well, and you're my closest

friend. I wanted to love you, I really did. But, I don't have mating feelings toward you, nor do you for me. I am sorry."

Renji studied her. "I'm sorry, too," he admitted. "I really wish I did."

"I'm leaving. When the new packs are decided in the morning, I'll be going along with them. After tonight, there will no longer be a United Tribe, Renji, and we are therefore released from our obligation to it. Please do find a true mate someday. I bear you no ill will."

And with that, she turned, leaving the den.

The last time Renji saw her, she was exiting the main caves with the packs traveling back to the north.

"Are you sure you're okay with this, boss?" Roukan asked.

Renji hesitated only for a moment before responding. "She needs to live her own life for a change, make her own decisions, and find her own way. It was never a good match, Roukan," he huffed. "She deserves to be happy."

Roukan studied his leader for a moment before nodding his head. "Yes, she does," he agreed. "And, for once, you do, too."

How much time did we both waste, pretending for the tribe's sake? Renji thought as he became lost within his memories.

Love wasn't something that could be forced. It was natural. It was fluid. It was earth-shattering. It was instinctual.

And for me, love has always been Risa.

Hell, he didn't even realize he marked her in the present time. From what he understood, being able to cross-species and mate with a human was impossible. But, somehow, he was able to do it with Risa, and in what, less than two days?

And now she was dead... again.

The reality truly broke his heart. He barely survived losing her once. The only way he was able to move on back then was by burying her memory into the deepest place within his heart and dedicating his life to his tribe.

He couldn't bear to go through her loss again and let her go, this time, as his mate.

Chapter 19

The General was woken up before the dawn by the incessant buzzing of his cell phone. "There better be a nuclear war about to happen," he muttered as he swung his legs over the bed.

He looked at the ID and immediately answered.

"What is it?" he drawled, trying to shake the sleep from his voice.

"Yuna Suzuki!" came over the other end of the line.

"Excuse me?"

"Police Commissioner Yuna Suzuki is behind everything!" agent Wraith shouted. "She's the one behind the virus, and she's the one secretly leading the APA!"

Hush stared at his ceiling for a moment while trying to force his brain to process her message. "The Police Commissioner?"

Well, isn't that interesting.

"Yes! She's the one behind it all. She has to have Fang. I just know it deep down in my bones! She has him! We need to move out immediately!" she said, not attempting to hold the excitement back from her voice.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the Tech Department's conference room with Circuit."

She dragged him out of bed, too, I see. I wonder how that went?

The image of her bursting into Circuit's room and dragging him away from his slumber almost made him laugh. Wraith certainly got under Circuit's skin.

"I'll meet you two there within the hour. I want a full briefing. Depending on what you've found, I'll notify the appropriate departments and put together a team." Hush hung up the line and smiled proudly.

Wraith, you truly are one of my best.

The early morning sunrise beamed through the Tech Department's conference room, drowning the briefing's three participants within its pink and cheerful glow. The bright, sparkling light stood in stark

contrast to the heavy and serious tone of the meeting being conducted there.

The General was seated in one of the conference room's uncomfortable leather chairs. The man was sipping a hot brew of coffee as he played over the new details Wraith was revealing in his head. The female agent was speaking at an intentionally slow pace, allowing him to process all the information she put together. He listened on as she wove a tightly wound tale of the story behind the current leader of Japan's police force.

"Yuna Suzuki climbed her way up the ranks of the Japanese police force starting out as a beat cop back in the early nineties. Since her start, she earned multiple promotions and quickly advanced through the hierarchy. From what I've gathered, she's very well-liked and admired by her subordinates. She's very active in animal rights and is a key speaker for the global protection of wolves, as well as a major contributor to the International Wolf Conservation Center. She was also instrumental in the introduction of rescue wolves into the police force along with her colleague, Haru Tanaka, providing animals that would have otherwise died in the wild, with a new home," Wraith advised with military efficiency, before motioning for Circuit to take the lead.

"Behind her public persona, Yuna Suzuki, the woman, is somewhat of a mystery. She's incredibly wealthy from what appears to be old family money. Yet, the woman doesn't have any family of record." Circuit sighed, rubbing his tired eyes before continuing. "The facial recognition software was able to pull her image from many animal rights rallies from the 1960s through to 1980 under the name of Hana Ito. However, she disappeared for a decade before popping up again with her current name during the start of her career in the police force."

"Like Fang, Yuna ages at a much slower pace than regular humans. She also has the same skill set and can track through the use of a heightened sense of smell. She's also able to communicate with wolves and command them, mostly to assist with tracking or information gathering," Wraith contributed.

"That's quite the ability," the General stated, pensively. "So, the person behind Fang's kidnapping has the same gifts that he does? That sounds like more than just a coincidence."

"It's not a coincidence. They are... family," Risa stated, momentarily unsure of how to finish her sentence. "Multiple others within the Japanese police force are also a part of this same family, all sharing the same abilities. The Osaka and Tokyo police chiefs are some notable ones."

"Does that mean Fang is also dirty?" Hush asked, his voice taking on a strict quality. "Is *that* why they took him?"

"He's *not* dirty. I don't believe they realized he was still alive until recently. I believe they all had some kind of falling out centuries ago. They most likely kidnapped him to recruit him. Or, they could be torturing him for additional information related to *ROOT*."

The last statement made her blanch momentarily before she was able to catch it.

"Centuries ago?"

Risa sighed. "Fang is over five hundred years old, Hush."

To his credit, the General didn't laugh. He digested this information thoughtfully. Circuit, however, was barely able to control his hysterics, and Risa frowned at him.

"That still doesn't explain why they left *you* behind," Hush said, calling her attention back over to him.

She often wondered about this.

No wolf demons were in the park that day. If there were, Renji would have recognized their scents instantly. Emica obviously used humans to set her trap and also used them to lay in wait for us... and we took the bait. Because we were in a public place, Renji didn't perceive any of the human or animal scents to be a threat, she realized. But, the wolves that were used completely ignored me. Why didn't they kill me?

A lightbulb went off.

Their orders were only to assist in the retrieval of Renji.

"I believe Yuna set the trap under the assumption that I would try to rescue Sleeper, and Fang would shadow me from afar. If she accessed our mission briefs, which I'm positive that she did, she would have known that Fang's role was solely to shadow me. She

expected we would have followed orders and proceeded in that manner."

Renji would be in my position within the trees, which is where the wolves were gathered, and I would be instantly blown up from the bomb's detonation. But, she miscalculated...

"When we switched positions, we accidentally ruined her plan. Only the wolves witnessed the switch, and by the time they were finally able to report back to her, it was too late. She knows I'm alive... now. But, she didn't at the time. She only had a group lying in wait to retrieve Fang. She didn't plan on needing any manpower to handle me. I was supposed to be dead, but I got away."

"That's quite the story," the General grumbled. "Seems like she's pretty cocky to have not prepared a plan B. What else do you have on her?"

Circuit pipped up from his place at the table. "I was able to find that the APA came into existence in 1980, directly coinciding with Hana Ito's disappearance from society. In the ten years between the disappearance of Hana Ito and her reappearance using the new identity of Yuna Suzuki, the APA established itself as a small-time terrorist group. They'd taken responsibility for numerous bombings but never became large enough to warrant much large scale attention, therefore, effectively staying below the radar."

"So, where did she go during those ten years?"

"The ticket details from her flight out of Japan show she went to the Siberian city of Chita, Russia. And can you guess which one of our scientists were recruited from Chita, Russia?" Risa asked.

Hush could not fucking believe this. "Enzyme!" he answered, without a moment of hesitation. "That bastard's been dirty since the very start! We were set up!" he growled, anger lacing his voice.

"Before Enzyme was recruited to *ROOT*, he went by the name of Avkt Ivanov. He was a gifted scientist held in very high regard for his work on animal genetics. He was also a huge animal rights activist," Wraith thoughtfully said. "I have no doubt Yuna and Avkt met through their activism in protecting animals. It's also very highly

likely that he co-founded the APA along with Yuna during the time she was in Russia."

Well, I'll be damned, Hush thought.

Circuit coughed before interjecting back into the conversation. "In looking through Yuna's financials over the past decade, there were numerous large transfers to offshore Swiss accounts that always took place months before the APA executed a bombing. There was also a significant transfer made two years ago around the time Virtual began hacking into your computer, General."

"In the time since Yuna reappeared in Japan and Enzyme was recruited by *ROOT*, the APA gathered a decent international following. We don't have an estimate on their total numbers just yet, nor do we know how they communicate right now. I'd like for you to assign that task to the Intelligence Department," Wraith stated.

"Is that it?" the General asked, feeling as though he was slightly off-center.

"No, not even close," she retorted. "Here's where things get worrisome. Enzyme fled right after Sleeper did. Once Virtual tipped him off that there was a *ROOT* spy recording all of his developmental work with his bio-virus, he destroyed the lab and disappeared. I know it's just a guess, but he most likely went to the one person he trusted the most. It didn't hurt that the one person he trusted the most also had a plethora of police resources at her disposal to help him disappear."

"That's more than just a guess, Wraith. He *must* have gone to Yuna," Hush barked out, stroking his chin in thought.

"Yuna is a public figure, and she hasn't fled Japan. So, I don't believe she knows we're on to her just yet. What we need to figure out is where she could be hiding both Fang and Enzyme. Several tracking teams were immediately sent out to find Fang after the explosion in the park, but they weren't able to come up with anything in the past two weeks. It has to be a place she can check on regularly without raising suspicion." she folded her arms against her chest in frustration.

"We have bigger problems," Circuit cut in. "Enzyme finished the virus' development before he hightailed it out of town. It's only a matter of time before he releases it. Where does the Medical

Research Department stand on a cure? If Yuna is hiding him, then Japan is sitting on a powder keg right now."

"As of yesterday, they'd begun testing. I have to follow up with them this morning," Hush responded. "The cure is the top priority of this organization at present," he swore as he pulled out his cell phone to call his secretary.

"Demise, clear 9:00 to 10:00 on my schedule. I want you to get all the current department heads on a call during this hour. It is of the utmost importance, and tell them that it is *not* optional," he commanded, before hanging up the line and turning his attention back on Wraith and Circuit. "I'm going to brief the other departmental heads in an hour on your findings."

"Understood," the pair replied in unison.

Hush took a moment to study Wraith. The woman looked like she'd gone through hell over the past two weeks, but right now, her eyes were calm and wary and as cold as steel.

Wraith looked ready to go to war.

"How's your concussion?"

"I'm all healed up, sir, and have clearance for active duty."

"Perfect, then I'm sending you back to Japan. Go find Fang, and take your team with you. You must check-in with me daily, and you must contact me if you are following a lead. That's an order, Wraith. You are not to go off on your own without my personal clearance."

"Understood."

The General considered her before speaking again.

"Wraith, I am especially proud of you. You have moved mountains for this organization on this mission. Thank you."

The woman's posture lifted with pride and determination at these words, and she saluted.

"Leave the Police Commissioner bitch and her pack of dirty cops to me," he said as he turned to exit the room.

"Hey! What about *me*?" Circuit hollered as he chased after him. "I flushed all the dirty agents out with the data leak, *and* I gathered all of the APA information! What the hell?"

How long has it been since I've seen our former leader? Roukan wondered as he quickly looked over Renji's sedated form.

The former alpha stared at him through cracked lids. His eyes were unfocused, and it appeared as though he was struggling to breathe at times.

How much sedative is that woman pumping into him? he angrily wondered before he cleared his throat. "Renji?" he hesitantly said, not really knowing what to say. "Renji, it's me. Roukan."

Renji made no indication he heard him, or that he was even aware of his former beta's presence before him.

Sighing, Roukan studied him for a moment. Renji looked the same as he always had. He aged so little since he last saw him on the day their small pack finally dissolved and assimilated into human society. But, witnessing him in this vulnerable state tugged at his heartstrings.

This was a bad idea. It wasn't supposed to go down like this.

When Yuna called the meeting with the wolf demons advising that she found Renji, many were elated, including him. He wanted nothing more than to see his old friend again and reclaim him into their new pack. They were supposed to be bringing him here to give him an option, a chance to rejoin their family.

Yuna was going to be releasing the anti-human virus soon, and the wolf demons would finally have a chance to recapture their old way of life. Accidentally finding Renji around the same time the virus was finally completed was taken, by most, to be a sign from the heavens above.

Everything seemed to be finally falling into place and coming together. But as he looked down at Renji now, his instincts were screaming that something wasn't right. From what he heard, Yuna fully lost her shit after she, and a few others raided Renji's warehouse hideout.

They'd followed his scent from the female agent's hotel room over to the isolated location after spending the entire evening cleaning up the giant, bloody mess the woman left behind in her wake. Upon entering, they were all assaulted with Renji's heavy marking scent. It completely covered the place and mixed within it was the scent of the human agent he was supposed to be shadowing.

Yuna, along with most of the pack, always believed Renji suffered from a problematic affection for humans. So much so that their tribe suffered because of it. Catching *that* specific scent that afternoon apparently brought all of those past grudges back to light. The fires only momentarily faded before the wolves they sent into the park also confirmed the presence of Renji's marking scent on the female agent, lighting them ablaze anew.

Roukan shook his head in remembrance. *She's punishing him for it because it was with a human*, he thought as he took in the current state of his friend. *Which, in and of itself, should be absolutely impossible as a human would never be able to return the act.*

Roukan felt wedged between a rock and a hard place. He didn't mind all humans. Some of them were decent and kind. But, he did feel as though, if left unchecked, they would eventually destroy the world. He'd seen so much pain and suffering in his life, all of which was created by the human's never-ending quest for power. He didn't want to wipe them *all* out, but he felt that if they didn't do something soon, all life would eventually perish as a result.

I wish there were an easier way.

One decision he could make right now was to help his friend out, even if it was just a little.

Walking to the IV bag, he made the decision to reduce the drip's speed by half. He hoped no one would come in and notice the tampering as he pulled a chair over to Renji's bed.

He desperately wanted to talk to him.

Chapter 20

Risa's trip back to Tokyo was uneventful. She spent most of the flight updating her Alpha Team subordinates with the information she shared with the General earlier that morning. Her group of elite agents would be setting up shop in an empty apartment, thirty miles from the Police Commissioner's office. Risa's presence on the field was going to be a handicap they knew they needed to prepare for as the Commissioner, along with several of her underlings, were already familiar with her scent.

Once her team arrived at the apartment, they immediately set up their equipment, and a strategy meeting was planned to follow their completion of the work. But, the first order of business upon Risa's arrival to their new makeshift base was to try to establish a bead on Renji.

"I'm going to try to connect to him," she advised her group as they were setting up equipment in the main room. "I'll be right back."

"Go for it, Rai! Good luck!" Quake began unfolding a makeshift table into place.

The balance of her team nodded to her in approval, and Risa broke away to one of the apartment's spare rooms. Quickly laying down on the floor, she tried to concentrate on her breathing as she allowed her powers to explode around her.

She focused on Renji's spiritual essence and felt the heat of his soul wash over her. The closer proximity since being back in Tokyo was obviously helping in spades. The warmth of him filled her heart with such hope as she opened her eyes and saw an invisible cord of thread appear before her.

Roukan was patiently waiting for Renji to come to for almost twenty minutes. It seemed as though the earlier decrease in sedation was helping as he began blinking at a quicker tempo. And he swore he could see some of the life coming back into the man's dead eyes.

For the briefest of moments, it almost appeared as though Renji was glowing, but the small hum of light disappeared just as quickly as it came on.

What the hell was that? He figured the lighting in the den was most likely screwing with his head. Perplexed, he watched on as Renji's head slowly rolled to the side.

"Renji? Can you hear me?" When his features ghosted into a slight frown, he tried again. "It's me... It's Roukan. Do you remember me?"

Roukan? Renji was aware that the warm and gentle reminder of Risa's memory just passed through him again, once again torturing him with the reminder of her loss. But, that one muffled word shook him from his haze.

Noticing someone was sitting beside him, he tried to focus his blurry eyesight on the speaker's face. The edges were fuzzy, but the center of his vision was clear enough to make out a man's fangs as he hugely smiled at him.

"Renji, it's me! Can you understand me? I came to visit you!" the man said, in a barely controlled whisper.

Roukan, my beta? But... "How are you here?" he drawled out, sounding completely drunk.

"It's a long story. But some of us are still alive! I'm happy to see you are one of them!"

He closed his eyes. "Is this a dream?"

Roukan huffed. This was going to be a difficult conversation, indeed. "No, it's not a dream. I'm really here. How are you feeling?" He took a moment to consider the alpha's wounds.

The bullet wound to Renji's shoulder was nothing more than a raised scar at this point. It almost healed completely. His knee, however, sported fresh bandages and was probably not usable at the moment. But that too would be as good as new with time.

"Are you dead?"

"What? No," Roukan replied, becoming horrified.

He'd cut the dose of medicine in half, but Renji was still way too out of it. Rising from his seat, he walked over to the IV again, slowing the drip even further before returning to his place at Renji's bed. *I have to remember to turn that thing back up before I leave.*

"Am I dead? Are you crossing me over?" Renji now asked as he opened his eyes and once again tried to focus on him.

"Christ. I'm not dead, and you're not dead. You're in one of the meeting den's private rooms. You're going to be okay." He shook his head in frustration. *You'll be okay once Yuna gets you off the fucking sedatives. What the hell is that woman thinking?*

Renji didn't seem to understand his response. "When I cross, will I see her again?" he drawled out slowly.

"See who?"

Maybe this attempt to visit his friend was a bad idea. He couldn't stay here forever, waiting for him to come to his senses. He needed to be at a press conference later today, which meant there were only another forty minutes at his disposal before he needed to juice Renji back up and leave. That also didn't mean that they wouldn't be disturbed by anyone before then.

"Risa." Renji tightly closed his eyes at the sound of the woman's name as if in pain.

"Who the hell is that?" Roukan asked, quickly becoming impatient.

"My mate," he growled out, behind closed lids.

"You mean the female agent you were working with?" he prodded, trying to piece together the puzzle.

Renji opened his eyes, his pupils became a bit less dilated and more focused. "Yes. Her," he replied, his voice becoming clearer.

"No, she won't be waiting for you on the other side. We kind of lost her."

"Lost... her?" he slowly repeated.

"Yeah, things didn't really go as planned, and she managed to escape. We have no idea where she is. Yuna's pretty pissed about the entire situation."

"She's alive?" Renji's voice became crisp and urgent, and he attempted to move with very little success.

"Yeah. Yuna didn't tell you?" Roukan asked. *What the hell is that woman up to? Renji was supposed to be brought here to choose to become a part of our tribe again. Has she told him anything at all yet?*

"Who the fuck is Yuna?"

Did he even meet with her yet? he thought in disbelief. "Yuna is Emica, Renji. Your former alpha female."

The spotted conversation was soon interrupted as Roukan sniffed the air.

"Someone's coming. I have to go." He abruptly stood and turned up Renji's IV. "I'm sorry to have to do this, but I need you to go back to sleep. Don't worry. I'm not going to crank it up as high as it was. Just sit tight and try to behave until I get back."

None of this seems right. I need to talk to Yuna.

Alpha Team was collectively studying a detailed road map of their current location. Three key places were circled, indicating the Commissioner's office, the Tokyo police station, and the Commissioner's home. A Venn diagram was drawn indicating the space where the three locations overlapped. This would be their starting search area.

"So, wolf demons, you say?" agent Frisk thoughtfully asked. "What the hell is a wolf demon, anyway?"

"They're creatures that use yin energy," Risa explained as she looked over her second in command.

Frisk was a tall and muscular soldier whose exposed arms were heavily covered in tattoos. His blonde hair was always styled into long, messy spikes, while the back of his head was buzzed short. He had light, blue eyes that always twinkled with secret mischief against the white skin of his face.

"And that means what, exactly?" he pushed. "When you say 'demon,' I think of evil, little imps from hell that terrorize and possess humans."

It really is a battle explaining things to those that come from a Western culture sometimes. Risa sighed. "In Eastern culture, we use the word 'demon' to describe the physical embodiment of a spirit that

uses negative based energies as a power source. Here in the east, demons are considered to be beings who often take on human forms and exist to serve specific purposes. For example, dog demons are the bridge between this world and the underworld, and they can speak to and command, dogs. Wolf demons, in my culture, are messengers for the gods, and they can talk to, and control, wolves."

Frisk scratched his head as he seemed to process this.

"Don't think of the words 'wolf demon' in relation to any of the 'angels and demons' you've heard about from a Western-based religion, Frisk. Think of..." She tried to recall terms westerners used to describe such beings. "Werewolves. They're kind of like that, but without all the rules. As they evolve, they develop incredible elemental based powers. They're also cunning hunters and fight just like the wolves that they rule over."

"They're like werewolves but without the rules?" agent Mystic questioned, dumbfounded.

"Yeah, rules. Like there needing to be a full moon to transform, or biting humans to 'turn' them. Wolf demons can take on their natural wolf forms at any time. And they don't 'turn' humans..." She paused. "They used to eat them."

"Christ! They sound terrible!" agent Trace spat.

"But, it doesn't appear as though they do now!" she rushed to explain. "Long ago, humans were once considered to be a simple source of food. We were prey. But, over time, the wolf demon packs disbanded, and now they secretly live among humanity. They apparently don't eat us at all anymore."

"So we're dealing with, what *ROOT* would consider, 'gifted beings.' They're people who can command supernatural powers, just like us," Trace responded.

"Yes, that's exactly what we're dealing with. And, this group of wolf demons are police officers that were once affiliated with agent Fang. A very long time ago, he used to be their alpha before the pack disbanded. I've gone through the majority of the photos of the existing Tokyo and Osaka officers. There were a handful of wolf demons I was able to recognize. I'm sure there are others spread out within all the police stations throughout Japan. It seems as though Fang's broken pack was slowly able to build their tribe back up through the use of the police force here," Risa answered.

"I feel bad for them," agent Terrain's voice piped up, voicing her thoughts. "From everything you've told us, it sounds like they're just trying to survive."

Risa huffed. As much as she wanted to disagree, she couldn't. The wolf demons managed to adapt and survive by hiding amongst the very humans that pushed them out in the first place. They were slowly able to re-establish some semblance of a pack within the human police forces, ironically, now 'serving' and 'protecting' the humans from one another.

"Does anyone else know about them, Rai?" Trace asked, his gunmetal, gray eyes slightly glowing against the backdrop of his smooth, black skin.

Risa thought back to her conversation with Circuit that ended in failure.

"I tried to talk to Circuit about it, but he didn't take me seriously. I haven't told anyone else."

"What's going to happen to them after we find Fang?" Quake hesitantly asked.

"I really wish I knew. I can only guess that those directly involved with the virus will have to answer for their crimes."

ROOT wasn't the type of organization that would wipe out the many to punish the few. The organization existed to keep the delicate balance of peace, not commit genocide.

Risa began to assign locations to each of her five team members that coincided with areas in the map's overlapped circled sections. Their mission was to hide amongst the civilians, and scout and memorize the terrain inside of their assigned sections. Mystic, a psychic and clairvoyant within their group, would keep them all in communication through a telepathic link. In a worst-case scenario, they'd all have their cell phones if they just so happened to lose contact through Mystic's mental bond.

As much as Risa wanted to set off with the team during the day, she knew she couldn't risk being scented. The largest concentration of police officers was out during the busy days before they cut their numbers for the quiet evenings.

Upon nightfall, the team was to reconvene at the apartment and set out as one joint unit, with Risa's tracking powers leading the way.

Any information her group gathered during the day would be put to good use during their nightly excursion.

As the team scattered from the makeshift base, Risa allowed her thoughts to once again fall to Renji. *I wonder what he's doing right now.*

She hoped he was okay. Her constant connections with him over the past few weeks somehow managed to keep her sane.

I wonder if he's with Emica. The thought brought the taste of bile to her mouth.

When she'd first seen Emica's face pop up on her computer screen, she could've sworn her heart momentarily stopped beating from the shock.

Of all people, it had to be her... Renji's former... lover. She was his mate. She was like a God damn wife to him!

Since the discovery, Emica's image would abruptly interrupt her thoughts, taunting her.

She thought back to the time she first met the female wolf demon. Renji just saved her from a fox demon that Tenrai was fighting in the woods. Emica, who was obviously stalking Renji, took advantage of all the confusion and tried to attack her. Thanks to Renji's involvement, and his protection, the woman wasn't able to lay one claw on her. The dramatic production ended when Renji threatened to kill her if she ever so much as touched one hair on her head. The woman then proceeded to flip out because he was associating with a human and told him he was a disgrace to their kind.

The woman was an absolute, hateful bitch.

But, unfortunately, she was also a gorgeous one.

Emica was rumored to be one of the most beautiful female wolf demons in all of Japan. She was a descendant of a powerful, ancient bloodline, and she had an exotic appearance. She fought like a savage beast and was the pride of the wolf demon species. Whereas Risa was very dull in her last life, and due to her clumsiness, the only danger she ever seemed to pose was directly to herself.

She always used to wonder what the hell Renji ever saw in her back then, especially when he had Emica readily throwing herself at him all the time. Back then, Emica was always everything that she wasn't.

And truth be told, she always secretly wished she were more like her. Though, she would never admit it to anyone.

Back in that alleyway when Renji told her he'd mated with Emica, the words served as a sucker punch right to her gut. Picturing him romantically involved with that woman disgusted her, and she instantly became jealous. Since she realized her true feelings for Renji and they'd become intimate, she couldn't help but picture the former couple together in similar ways, and the images truly made her sick. But, it was when she saw the bitch's face appear on her computer screen that she became murderous.

Emica kidnapped *her* Renji, and *she* was the one holding him hostage.

As much as Risa sympathized with the wolf demon tribe's suffering and somewhat understood their current desperate actions, Emica was the one wolf demon she could never forgive.

Taking a moment to channel her current energy into her hands, she watched as they began to glow within a bright white light.

It's been a very long time since I've needed to call forth my purification powers, she thought. And I don't give a shit what the General says. If I happen to cross paths with her, that bitch is going down.

Chapter 21

The press conference went down without a hitch. Roukan wrapped up his speech dedicating all his police resources into finding any, and all, culprits who assisted in the APA's recent attack. Yuna stood behind him, nodding from time-to-time and offering her presence in support of their current united stand against terrorism.

When the crowds finally began to die out, and the news cameras were being packed away, Roukan used the opportunity to sneak his way over to her. He urgently needed to speak with her.

"Commissioner Suzuki, may I have a moment?"

Yuna nodded as she motioned for him to follow her to the back of the station. Upon entering Roukan's office, she shut the door behind them, keeping them out of earshot of the officers outside.

"Have you spoken with Renji yet?" he asked, getting right to it.

"I'm afraid I can't. He's on heavy sedation for pain. Apparently, his knee isn't healing as well as we'd first hoped."

You're full of shit, Roukan mentally hissed. "I visited with him today," he whispered in a brazen tone. "He didn't seem to need all those damn drugs you're pumping into his system. His knee looks like it's healing just fine."

Yuna's face ghosted into the shell of a frown. "Avkt is personally taking care of him. I trust his medical judgment more than I do yours, Haru."

"Don't give me that shit. You're purposefully keeping him zonked out. He's supposed to be here so he can join us, not remain a prisoner."

"He isn't a damn prisoner! The virus is being released tomorrow. I plan on speaking with him after."

So that's it. You think he's going to try to stop you if you wake him up before you're able to spread the virus.

If his former leader were anything like he remembered, he wouldn't stand idly by as they tried to wipe out the human race. In light of Renji's recent mating with the human girl, he seriously doubted his affections for them changed very much over the years. He was pretty sure Yuna also came to the same conclusion.

"Why didn't you tell him the human agent escaped?"

"Why the hell would *that* matter?" she spat, not bothering to suppress a scowl.

"Did you instead tell him she died?" Roukan demanded. *What did he say her name was again? Risa?*

"It's not far from the truth. After tomorrow, Wraith's death is assured. There's no way to stop the virus. By the time the humans do manage to come up with a cure, there won't be anyone left to cure of it."

His brows furrowed. "Who the hell is Wraith?"

"Wraaaaaaith," she said, dragging out the word. "Is the code name of his little human whore. To lay with a human is completely disgraceful. I have no idea how the hell he was even able to mark her—"

"Do you have any information on her?"

Yuna quieted for a moment as she studied him. "Why?"

"I want to know who we're dealing with. She's an agent for *ROOT*. What if she comes back here?"

"If she comes back here, there's not a damn thing she'll be able to do. She has no idea about any of us. She wouldn't even know where to start."

"I know that, but it's better to be safe than sorry. I want to see her info," he demanded.

Yuna sighed. "Fine, suit yourself. Her *ROOT* file summary can be found in my folder on the shared drive. Knock yourself out."

There was a pause as the two wolf demons studied each other.

"Are we done here?" she asked him curtly, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, we're good." He reached across to open the door for her. "Thank you."

Roukan waited until the door closed behind her before jumping onto his computer and locating Yuna's personal folder. He didn't know what he was expecting when he opened the female agent's photo, but it certainly wasn't the unforgettable eyes that usually occupied his reoccurring nightmares. They were the eyes of the courageous woman who died saving his life so very long ago.

Roukan jumped back.

How the hell is this even possible? No one has eyes like that!

Several minutes passed before he was able to walk back to the screen. Upon approach, he studied the image once again. *A*

reincarnation, perhaps? He remembered that Renji referred to this woman as 'Risa.'

In seeing the picture, the name finally clicked into place.

Holy shit! If this really is Risa, then it certainly explains Renji's mating with her.

Roukan placed his hand to his head, trying to soothe away the headache he now felt coming on as he read the agent's file. He stopped reading when he got to the part about Wraith's advanced abilities with a hunting bow and her ability to fire blasts of energy through arrows.

No one else must have any idea of who this woman really is. However, amid the mess he currently found himself in, a small and prideful warmth managed to work its way into his heart.

Renji finally found her... and he somehow managed to take her as his mate.

You finally got the girl, didn't you, Renji? But, the warmth created by the recent epiphany soon faded. *What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

The former wolf demon hierarchy was disposed of ages ago, along with the use of their wolf demon names. There was no alpha governing the tribe any longer. All decisions related to the group were collectively voted upon. Roukan had no responsibility to follow Yuna's orders. But he did have a duty to the whole of the tribe who decided to dispose of the humans.

If this really is Risa, then there's no way in hell she won't come back and try to save Renji. He got up and quickly abandoned his office, praying he would somehow be able to predict her next moves.

He couldn't go against the tribe, but that didn't mean he couldn't help *her* to.

There was a full moon tonight, and the small group needed to be careful to keep to the shadows, which was increasingly difficult in the illumination it brought down upon the city. Alpha Team did very well that afternoon, with the gold star being awarded to Terrain. Terrain was a part of Risa's group for the past four years and was usually sent into the field to locate hidden, buried structures. She

was instrumental in finding underground bases and weapons. Her 'gift' was the ability to use ground-penetrating radar, which she could emit from her hands and feet.

This afternoon, it was Terrain's gift that allowed them to locate the large, questionable underground structure situated within one mile of the Tokyo police department. When the team researched it, they weren't able to find any documentation of its construction, nor could it be found on any map.

Risa immediately called the General, updating him on their findings and asking for his permission to move out, which he quickly granted. Now the heavily armed Alpha Team found themselves moving as one through the quieted streets of Tokyo, making their way to the mysterious hideout Terrain found earlier.

It's up ahead, Terrain's voice came through their thoughts, courtesy of Mystic's psychic link.

Risa studied the area. The thick cord she was following to trace Renji's spiritual energy was leading down into the ground.

Fang is down there somewhere, she advised the group.

Do you think it can be accessed from a sewer? Frisk replied.

Not sure. But, let's find out. Scatter and let me know what you find, she ordered.

The group split up in six different directions. Only a few minutes passed before Trace's voice came through.

Found one. I'm situated northeast. Come find me, he drawled.

One-by-one, the agents closed in on his location, watching as he struggled to lift the heavy sewer cap and push it discreetly to the side.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a friendly voice boomed over to them, apparently patiently waiting for them in the shadows.

The team spun around in attention, ready to attack.

The man held his hands up non-threateningly. "I'm not your enemy," he cautiously said. "I need to speak to Wraith."

All eyes shot over to Risa.

It has to be a trap, Terrain's voice said as it broke through their collective consciousness.

Risa studied the figure from the shadows before sending her powers forth to study the man's intentions. An electric shock ran

down her spine, much like the one she felt when she was first alerted to Renji's presence that night in the woods.

I know this man, she realized. My powers aren't warning me of any immediate danger, Risa thought, hesitant about how she should proceed. I want you all to hide within the shadows and cover me. Draw no attention to your presence, she commanded the group.

You can't be serious, Rai!

Trace, I need you to follow orders.

There was a pause before a stern, 'understood' sounded off in response, and she felt the team spread out and hide within the darkness. Once everyone was hidden, she slowly approached her mysterious visitor. When she got close enough to see his face, she froze for only a moment before falling into an attack position.

"Wait! I'm not here to fight. I'm here to help you!" Roukan said, his words frantically falling from his lips.

Risa didn't believe him, and she took off in a run, preparing to drop-kick his ass.

"I can take you to Renji!"

The words had the desired effect, stopping her attack moments before impact, her foot stood poised, frozen above his head.

"I can take you to Renji," he repeated, holding her eyes with his. "He needs your help."

Risa studied him for a moment before she lowered her leg. "Why should I believe *you*?" she spat. "I know all about you, Haru Tanaka, chief of the Tokyo police. You're nothing more than one of Yuna Suzuki's lapdogs. Why the fuck would you, of all people, want to help me?"

Roukan flinched at the comment. "I'm *not*, one of her... her lapdogs. I work for her only when I wear the uniform. She isn't my leader outside the force," he retorted, anger beginning to seep into his voice.

"I know what you are," she whispered.

Roukan understood her implication, and his voice dropped down to a barely audible whisper. "That's good because then you must remember who I really am, then. I owe you my life, *Risa*, and I have a ton of questions for you, but I'm afraid we don't have a lot of time," he regretfully said.

Risa looked at him in shock. *He knows who I am! This could be very bad.*

As if reading her thoughts, Roukan continued. "Don't worry, I'm the only one who knows. No one else has figured out who you really are, and I haven't said anything."

She was speechless.

"If you want to get to Renji, there's an access point below the police station that'll take you to the meeting den. He's being held in one of the private rooms off to the right of the main meeting room."

Risa scowled at him as he rushed to continue.

"He's drugged, and he's completely out of it. He's also injured, and I don't think he'll be able to easily walk. The injury combined with the sedation is going to make it very hard to get him out of there." He paused for a moment considering her situation. "I'm glad you've brought some help. You're going to need it."

He's injured? Risa mentally repeated. "What the hell did they do to him, Roukan?" she questioned, her voice became urgent as she held his gaze.

He brightened at the use of his real name. "They shot his shoulder and blew out his knee cap to prevent him from getting away when they first took him. His shoulder looks good. I think his knee is a lot better, but even for us, bone injuries take some time to heal. He doesn't seem to be permanently damaged."

As Risa visualized Renji's condition, she couldn't stop the rage that began to flow through her.

Roukan noticed the white hue illuminating her body, and he took a reflexive step back. His instincts were obviously sounding off alarm bells. But he seemed to fight against it as he urgently said, "Yuna is going to be releasing the virus tomorrow in the subway stations during the morning rush hour commute. Have your people been able to develop a cure?"

Holy shit. Risa snapped out of her murderous musings. "Tomorrow morning?" she incredulously repeated.

"Yes."

"But, that's only seven hours from now!" she shouted, in a barely controlled whisper.

"Indeed."

Did you hear that, Frisk? I need you to get Hush on the line now! Advise him of the situation. We need all hands on deck! she shouted through Mystic's connection in her mind. Also, ask him for permission to invade Yuna's secret bunker!

Understood, Frisk frantically replied as she once again focused on Roukan.

"Why would you turn against your own people? Why would you help us?"

"Not all of us want this. However, we don't make up the majority." He regretfully shook his head.

Ah, the joys of democracy, Risa mused. "How the hell do we get through the access point at your police station without being found out?"

"I can get you through the entrance and guard it for a time, but there's no guarantee someone won't pick up on your scents and come after you. In that case, you'll be trapped. If you get stuck, the only way out will be up. You'd have to blow through the ceiling to get out onto the street above."

Risa weighed the risks.

"Don't misunderstand me. I can't go against the tribe and actively help you. If you're caught, as far as I'm concerned, this conversation never happened," he warned.

"If we don't go to Renji tonight, what'll eventually happen to him?"

"After the virus was released, Yuna was going to ask him to join us. If he doesn't, he'll probably be let go," he said, slightly hesitating before going on. "However, if he decides to start trouble and tries to assist the humans in any way or if he harms any of us, the tribe will probably vote to exterminate him."

Renji not kick up a major fuss? Yeah right! Risa thought.

Roukan seemed to have the same deep understanding of her lover's fiery personality as he looked at her with wide, knowing eyes.

Looks like it's decided then, she thought privately before she telepathically addressed the group. *Alpha Team, we did remember to pack some C4, did we not?*

Of course, boss. Never leave home without it! Terrain joked.

"Roukan, take us to the entry point. We're going in."

Chapter 22

Roukan made good on his promise. Without incident, he led the way back to the Tokyo police station while Risa's Alpha Team followed behind in the shadows. Once there, he motioned for them to meet him at the back of the building, before disappearing inside.

As the group stealthily made their way to the back of the building, they noticed the electrical power within the station was turned off.

This is too easy, boss. It reeks of a trap, Mystic's voice warned within Risa's consciousness.

The remainder of the team hummed in agreement.

I trust him, and I need all of you to trust me. I'd never put any of you in danger, Risa replied.

It was only a moment before Roukan reappeared to the group through the back door.

"We have to hurry. The power loss will prevent anyone from seeing you on the security cameras, but I can't leave the power off for too long before someone tries to investigate."

He studied the group as they passed him to enter the building. Their facial expressions would change from time-to-time, and they seemed to move as if being directed. However, they didn't speak to one another, nor did he notice any visible communication equipment shared between them.

How very odd, he thought as he continued to lead them to the police station's basement. Once there, he took them to a corner marked by a large filing cabinet. Pushing the heavy cabinet out of the way, he revealed a large wooden hatch door beneath.

"You'll have to go through there." He pointed to the door. "Follow the tunnel, and you'll be brought to the main meeting den. Be warned, your rogue scientist is hiding down there, too. Try to avoid him at all costs. He *will* kick up a fuss, and if he sends a call out for help, I won't be able to intervene."

Can we kill Enzyme, Rai? Frisk angrily asked.

Yes! Can we please kill that traitorous son of a bitch? Terrain begged.

Risa thought about this. The man was valuable to the organization alive, but she considered their current situation. They were probably going to need to carry Renji out of there. If they also needed to babysit a hostile hostage, they'd be overspent. Add in the possibility that they could be discovered and attacked; they'd surely suffer losses.

She wasn't here to lose anybody else.

No, we're not to engage with or kill Enzyme if we can help it. However, if the man becomes a threat, try to disable him, not kill him, she commanded.

Roger that, the team collectively shouted.

Quake walked through the group and lifted the heavy hatch door, revealing the dark tunnel that led within.

Here we go, guys. It's time to remind the other departments why Reconnaissance Alpha Team is ROOT's most elite specialty team, Risa said, a fierceness booming through her voice.

Speech! Frisk shouted through her consciousness. *It's inspirational speech time!*

Without hesitation, Risa addressed her group. *Alpha Team, our mission today, is to recover Fang. Fang is one of our own, and we're here to bring him home, remember that. We are to move as one and continuously communicate with each other throughout this entire excursion. If we stop talking, we die - it's that simple. Watch each other's backs at all costs. We aren't here to make any sacrifices! We'll go in together, and we'll come out together. If we happen to become engaged by the enemy, throw them off by switching adversaries with your teammates often. Don't give anyone enough time to learn your attack patterns. Time to move out!*

A universal '*understood!*' rang out within the team's collective minds, along with hoots and hollers, before they quickly lowered themselves one-by-one into the hole.

Roukan stared at the space the team once occupied before closing the hatch door and covering it once again with the large filing cabinet. He then proceeded to make his way over to the department's circuit box and turned the electricity back on.

What the hell was that? he wondered, replaying the scene.

Risa's face twisted into a genuinely savage look while her team members looked upon her in awe. Roukan could feel the group become amped up before they all broke out into smiles and shot down the hole.

It gave him the creeps.

Risa led her team through the tunnel. It was wide enough to allow three people to walk side-by-side. The team made no noise as they followed her. The lighting was dim, and the walls appeared to have been dug out by hand, which was distinguished by the numerous claw marks upon the walls.

This reminds me of that shithole we all broke into back in North Korea, Frisk said. *We were in a pretty narrow tunnel back then, too.*

Risa remembered. They were assigned to disable some nuclear warheads that they managed to find several months ago. *Try to focus, Frisk,* she warned.

The team continued to follow the tunnel in silence.

So, Fang's real name is Renji? He should've kept it, Mystic mused. *It's way cooler.*

Risa sighed. *Team, after this mission, I want you to try to forget all about Fang's previous identity.*

Roger, Risa, Frisk teased.

Of course, Roukan only needed to say the name of her past incarnation once, before her group memorized it. The only drawback of a psychic connection was there was barely any privacy within it. Everything the team accidentally thought or felt and everything they heard was passed along through the link. They collectively trained very hard with Mystic to learn how to quiet their subconscious thoughts and weed out the background noise in their minds, but it wasn't an easy thing to do.

I don't think it's funny, Frisk. Try to forget that name as well. It belongs to someone long dead, she spat.

Okay. Okay. Calm down. I was only joking. Sheesh, he responded, sounding confused.

She continued to follow the thick invisible cord of energy leading to Renji. Pausing for a moment, she scanned for any immediate threats and came up empty.

Fang is very close. I don't sense any danger or anyone I know. I've never personally met Enzyme before, so he's not going to come up on my radar. Trace, are you able to pick up on anything on your end? she asked.

For the past few hours, Renji was trying to get his body to work through sheer determination alone. Thanks to Roukan's haphazard IV tampering, he was able to think somewhat clearly for the first time in what felt like years. However, his body was still not very responsive to his mind's commands, and he was very weak.

At some point, he finally managed to bend at the waist and fall forward, a movement that utterly exhausted him. He laid in that position for quite some time before he was able to gather enough energy to swing his head over to his tethered arm and chew the IV needle out with his teeth. He then watched as the vile liquid dripped onto the floor, mixing with his blood, as he waited for his energy to return to him.

He silently prayed no one would come to check on him before the drugs' effects passed. He didn't know how long he waited in this way, but he felt his strength slowly begin to come back to him.

Risa is alive. It was this knowledge that kept him focused.

Renji tested his long unused muscles and pushed his torso back down onto the mattress. He was out of breath, and his heart was pumping hard, trying to keep up with the simple movements.

How long has it been since I've eaten?

While he rested, he elongated his claws, twisting his wrists within the restraints as he slowly cut away at them. He was able to free his right hand first, before setting off to work on his left. Once his hands were free, he took a deep breath and attempted to sit up.

The movement nauseated him and resulted in a splitting headache, but he was finally vertical. The accomplishment pleased him.

There's going to be hell to pay! he vowed.

He'd have Emica's head before this was all over. But first, he needed to get out of there. Knowing Risa, she'd be looking for him. If she was still hanging around Japan, then it was only going to be a matter of time before the wolf demons found her. He needed to get to her first before she did something stupid.

He focused his attention on his knee. He rolled his limb side to side in small movements, slowly testing it. When he didn't feel any immediate pain, he shuffled his body and swung his legs over the bed. He then slowly slid onto his feet, attempting to stand while using the bed for support. He was shaky and unbalanced, but he was able to stand up.

The hard part is going to be walking.

With a quick prayer to a higher power, he took a small step forward with his injured leg and winced as dulled pain shot through him.

Once this sedative wears off, I'm going to be fucked, he thought as he tried again, this time balancing his weight on his bad leg while stepping forward with his good one.

He encountered a similar occurrence.

I don't even know where I am. How do I get out of here? He slowly hobbled to the room's doorway.

He sniffed the air, which only served to painfully intensify his headache, and he shook his head in an attempt to soothe it while reaching out with his other senses instead.

He peered outside the doorway but didn't see anyone. Closing his eyes, he tried to listen for any sounds that would indicate another presence. When he didn't immediately hear anything, he reopened his eyes and scanned the large room. There was a platform toward the back and rows of seats circling it. Around the room were doors, similar to the one in his room. He also noticed a large archway was directly facing the platform.

That's most likely the way out. He took another look around and shuffled to the perceived exit. He slowly and quietly walked alongside the main room's wall, using the structure to help support his weight.

He was feeling faint. *I really need to eat something soon.*

He was only able to make it halfway across the main room before one of the side room's many doors opened, and he accidentally came face-to-face with a man he'd only ever seen before in photos.

Enzyme? What the hell is he doing here? You've gotta be fucking kidding me!

The two men locked eyes before Enzyme's expression fell in panic. The man then turned on his heel and reentered the room from which he came, slamming the door behind him.

Renji's pulse began to quicken. *This is bad.*

He needed to take Enzyme out, and he needed to do it now before the guy managed to alert someone.

Why can't anything ever be easy?

Although he knew he'd sacrifice the healing that took place in his knee, he pushed his legs hard, running to catch up with the rogue scientist. He was going to have to take him out by hand as he had no weapons on him at this time. A part of him reveled in the thought. This man was nothing but trouble.

When Renji burst through the door, he elongated his fangs and claws and fell into a crouched position. Enzyme was tucked away in the room's corner, speaking frantically in Russian on a cell phone, and Renji did not hesitate to attack him. He rushed at Enzyme with his claws, attempting to pierce the man's chest cavity. But unfortunately, his body wasn't in its usual peak form.

Enzyme stumbled back and dropped the phone. He managed to duck below Renji's strike and roll to the side, effectively putting some distance between them. He then sprang back up and body-slammed Renji into the wall behind him.

Renji became momentarily winded. But held his stance, this time attempting to rip out Enzyme's throat with his teeth. The man, as if predicting the movement, jumped back before crouching down low and baring his own elongated fangs.

Get the hell outta here! You, too? Well, that's just great. I should've just stayed in bed, Renji thought in disbelief.

Only seconds passed before Enzyme's claws lengthened, and he went on the offensive. The man sprang at Renji again, throwing him

off balance. As he reached out to the wall to support himself, Enzyme's claws made haste for a clear shot at his exposed jugular.

Renji couldn't move in time. All he could do was wait for the impact.

A few moments went by in slow motion before Renji realized the slash to his jugular wasn't coming. He blinked several times, trying to understand the meaning of the arrow tip protruding through Enzyme's forehead as the dead man stared into his eyes.

Enzyme's body slowly slipped away from Renji's line of vision as he crumpled to the floor. The space the man once occupied was now replaced by the image of Risa. She was standing twenty feet away in front of the exit's large archway. She was wearing her tactical clothes, her black vest covered with lightweight Teflon armor. Two handgun holsters adorned her hips over her black tactical pants. Her long hair was pulled into a high ponytail that was slightly swaying in the room's gentle breeze.

She was frozen in time. Her left hand was still steadily holding her bow, her right was still held in the release position against her chest, and her eyes were ablaze with raw fury. At that moment, she was the most beautiful sight he ever saw, and it completely stole his breath away.

Risa studied him for only a second before running over to him. Roughly wrapping her arms around his neck, she took his mouth in a rough, needy kiss. A kiss, he happily returned in intensity. They carried on this way until he realized they had an audience.

Regretfully, he broke away from her to study the group occupying the background. The two female members were blushing, and all three of the male members were looking up to the ceiling.

"This is my Alpha Team. You can trust them. We're getting you out of here. Can you walk?"

He didn't realize how much he'd missed the sound of her voice. It rolled over him, instantly soothing him.

He hesitated. "I can... but not well."

Risa tilted her head to the side, which sparked the big guy on her team to approach them. The large man with brown hair and brown eyes easily could have topped out at six-feet eight-inches.

The giant quickly flanked Renji and slung his arm under his shoulder. "I'm Quake. Put your weight on me," he commanded in a deep voice.

Risa and the big guy met eyes for a moment before she nodded to him.

"He called someone!" Renji remembered, looking down in Enzyme's direction. "We're probably going to have company soon."

He noticed that the team exchanged worried glances before they collectively took off to the exit.

Chapter 23

As soon as they entered the tunnel, Risa felt her powers flare-up in warning. *Something bad is about to happen, we can't go up there*, she hollered.

The team froze.

Trace crouched down and closed his eyes while he placed his fingertips against his temples. *Holy shit, there have to be more than thirty people coming in our direction!*

Time for plan B! Risa ordered. *Terrain put the C4 onto my arrow. I'm going to fasten it to the ceiling over that platform before setting it off. I want everyone else to take cover in the tunnel's entrance. We have to do this fast before the police force floods this place.*

Terrain freed the explosives from her utility belt, working quickly to tape a small amount to Risa's arrow while Quake leaned Renji against the wall within the mouth of the tunnel. He then took a lowered position in front of him, shielding him with his body. Frisk, Mystic, and Trace also entered the opening and flattened themselves against the wall.

Renji watched as Risa and her team orderly moved around each other in complete silence. They moved with purpose, seemingly knowing exactly what each of the other members was doing without speaking. It appeared as though they were preparing to blow up the ceiling.

It was surreal.

From his place in the tunnel's entrance, he watched as Risa's arrow took off, lodging itself into the ceiling furthest away from them. He then saw her bend down to light the next arrow on fire. Before she shot the lit arrow off, a glow of blue light formed around the tunnel's mouth, creating a shield for the team. This same shield wrapped itself around Risa.

With the protection in place, she launched the second arrow, hitting the same spot as the first. The resounding explosion was

deafening, and it was only a few moments before Renji felt his body being hoisted back up onto Quake's shoulder as the team began to move out. The fallen debris served them as a makeshift stairwell, and the group made good use of it in their escape to the street above. Once outside, Risa motioned to one of her teammates who quickly took out his cell phone.

Renji only needed one guess as to who he was calling.

The team quickly made its way up onto the Tokyo street while Frisk was urgently advising the General of their current situation over the phone.

We've got incoming, Trace advised. A bunch of cops is coming our way, and they've got dogs.

Probably, wolves, Risa corrected. They won't come right at us like dogs. They'll try to sneak around and surround us as a pack. Be wary of that.

Understood, the team replied.

I don't want this to become a war. We're completely outnumbered. We need to try to put enough distance between them to give us a healthy lead, Risa shouted as a mob of police officers began to file out from the police station's front entrance and onto the street. Quake, why don't you show our new friends why you're called 'quake'?

Will do, boss, Quake responded as he passed Renji's arm over to Trace.

Renji seemed to wonder about what they were doing as he watched them.

Quake walked toward the police department as the balance of Alpha Team took off behind him. He then cracked his knuckles before making a fist and slamming it into the ground.

The earth immediately came to life, rumbling before splitting open, creating a giant chasm between the police force and the remainder of the street.

Quake waved 'goodbye' to the now stupefied police officers before turning and breaking into a heated run.

Good job, baby! Mystic shouted. That should keep them busy for a little while!

Quake blushed at her compliment.

Hey! No more romantic crap, you guys! After that shared intimate make-out session we all just had with Fang, I don't think I can stomach it. I'm beginning to question my sexuality over here! Frisk chided, his low voice becoming frantic.

Agreed, Trace's deep masculine voice cut in. I feel as though I should at least take the guy out on a nice, expensive date now.

The group broke out into an explosive roar of laughter that couldn't be contained within the limits of their psychic link. The hysterics loudly spilled out from their throats, earning a questioning look from Renji.

"Did I miss something?" he asked, studying the group before his gaze landed on Risa. "You're as red as a tomato."

Risa kept her eyes lowered as she nodded her head, refusing to answer him verbally.

Stay focused! she mentally commanded, stifling any remaining laughter from the team. *That big hole isn't going to hold them off forever. We need to make it to the cars and try to put as much distance as we can between them. Did the General mention anything about ground support?* she asked, her voice echoing through Frisk's consciousness.

Not ground, but he can do air. The boss man's got a helicopter waiting for us in a remote location to the east of the airport, Frisk instructed.

Then that's where we'll go.

We should be approaching the cars in about ten more minutes, Trace interrupted. *Hey Quake, can you switch with me?* he asked as he threw Renji up into the air.

Quake quickly filled the empty space under Renji's armpit and instantly replaced the contact.

"How are you guys doing all of this?" Renji wondered out loud.

"We're elite agents," Frisk whispered. "That's why we're on the Alpha Team," he conceitedly stated, before blowing him a kiss.

Renji scowled at him but didn't respond.

Finally, Trace muttered as the team approached the two American four-door Dodge Chargers. The cars were black and sipped up to handle both on-road and off-road terrain.

The team split up, scrambling to get into the cars. Risa, Renji, Terrain, and Trace took one, while Frisk, Quake, and Mystic piled into the other.

"God, I hate it when Wraith drives," Terrain said out loud as she watched Risa drop into the driver's seat. She made a point to make a show of putting her seat belt on as Renji and Trace followed suit.

Renji looked at Risa from the car's passenger seat as she turned the key in the ignition. The beast of a vehicle responded by roaring into life. He didn't know why, but he felt uneasy about her driving.

"Where are we going?"

"We're meeting a helicopter east of Narita airport," she answered, in a matter of fact tone.

The two cars pulled out in unison and bolted forward as the team rushed to make their way to the expressway leading to Tokyo's Narita airport.

Renji felt his stomach lurch as Risa roughly forced the car around corners, downshifting and upshifting with ease. The vehicle would growl with each change of the gears, and she commanded the massive beast as if she was doing nothing more than taking a simple drive to the grocery store.

It was at this point that Renji decided he'd had enough. *How the fuck is this the same girl that used to trip over her own two feet when just walking?* his mind screamed.

He could only stare at her, unabashedly turned on. Since he found her again, this woman managed to find a rogue agent, take out one assassin while disabling another, figure out the situation related to Sleeper and come up with a solution to flush the dirty agents out of their organization, shield multiple civilians from the explosion in Yoyogi park while surviving, and find and rescue him from his kidnappers.

As her agent summary said, she was the leader of *ROOT*'s infamous Reconnaissance Alpha Team. Seeing her in action blew all

misconceptions he had regarding her work away. Risa was seriously badass; she indeed was an elite alpha female.

Correction - she was *his* alpha female, and the thought made him growl low in his throat in approval before he could stop it.

Pulling her eyes away from the road, she spared only a moment to raise an eyebrow in question. However, the shared eye contact was interrupted by the police sirens that could be heard off in the distance.

This couldn't be possible. How in the hell is this happening right now? Emica slammed the gas pedal of her Nissan 350z police car, and the vehicle responded by lurching forward. How in the world did ROOT figure out Renji's location?

An image of Renji flashing her a fanged smirk appeared in her mind, inciting her fury.

That asshole! This is all his fault!

She received a frantic call from Avkt, advising that Renji somehow managed to escape. She was telling him to stay put when she lost contact with him, the sounds of a scuffle echoing through the line. She immediately called Roukan, demanding he send some of the available wolf demon police officers down to the meeting den while she made haste to get to the police station.

Only ten minutes passed before she received a call that there was an explosion, and Renji escaped. By the time she finally pulled up to the station, she'd only just exited her car before seeing a large man dressed in *ROOT's* tactical clothing slam his fist into the ground, creating a massive earthquake which effectively stalled any recapture efforts.

Couldn't this have happened tomorrow?

They planned on releasing the virus in only a few hours. Instead of rehearsing the logistics for that specific agenda with select officers, she was dealing with this current shit storm.

They couldn't escape on foot, and I doubt ROOT wouldn't provide them with a means of escape.

Emica raised her CB radio to her lips. "Station ninety-two, this is Commissioner Suzuki. Send the birds out *now!*" she fiercely commanded.

All she ever wanted to do was protect her people. She dedicated her long life to that very purpose. But, now, all of her life's work was slipping away from her, right before her very eyes.

Because when it comes down to it, Renji would always choose humans.

The realization pained her.

The moment she set foot into that warehouse loft two weeks ago, she knew Renji would never cooperate with them to eradicate the humans. His scent told her everything she wanted to know. The pheromones screamed of warning to her male officers, halting many of them dead in their tracks. But to the female officers, it was overwhelmingly *beautiful*. It communicated protection, devotion, strength, and... fertility. It was incredibly raw and fierce in its essence. Unfortunately, the human's rank scent was also entwined within. To lay with a human was forbidden. It was their most sacred law.

Renji, at one time, was the most powerful leader in wolf demon history. In his heyday, he had complete control over all the wolf demons and wolf packs within the entire country of Japan. None opposed him; he was a God. He was a legend that still lived on in the stories they passed down to the tribe's children. Finding Renji again gave hope to so many, including her.

He could've helped us. But he'd rather we die for the sake of the humans; humans, that if left to their own devices, would exterminate the world and all the life within it. She loudly sucked her teeth in frustration.

Renji was her family. He was her former mate. She even thought she was in love with him once. But, as much as she'd cared for him, she cared for her people more.

He needs to go, she thought. If he gets back to ROOT, all the information regarding our people is going to be leaked. We'll be split up and slaughtered.

She idly wondered if Renji previously told the organization anything about their species and inwardly cursed. Unfortunately, at

this point, she couldn't even try to make him out to be a martyr for their cause.

This is a giant mess.

Anyone who threatened the wolf demons was an enemy. He needed to be taken out... quickly.

"Those sirens are getting closer," Renji shouted.

There were so many of them, and it was becoming hard for Alpha Team to collectively think through the racket.

"We're only ten minutes away," Risa advised, hoping her words would bring some comfort.

"If they manage to get a tail on us, what are we going to do?" Terrain asked.

Risa thought about this. If the police were able to find and chase them, she didn't doubt they'd try to engage them. Her team was entirely at the mercy of their cars at the moment, and couldn't move freely. More so, if the team became separated by more than one mile, the psychic link they maintained through Mystic would be broken. If their group did happen to lead the police to the site of their rescue helicopter, the enemy would most likely try to destroy it, leaving them stranded. They were outnumbered, and most times, winning a war solely came down to a matter of numbers.

As if reading her troubled thoughts, a new sound flooded into the background.

Police helicopters. Risa inwardly groaned. Their cars weren't going to avoid being spotted for long.

Hey, Rai? Frisk's frantic voice broke through her consciousness.

I know, Frisk, she sighed. *We might need to split up.*

The team's scrambled worried thoughts came through in a rush over their connection.

As soon as those helicopters establish a visual on us, use the 'zooks to take them out. We only have two shots, one per car, so don't dare miss. If there are more than two helicopters, then we're going to be stuck dealing with the remainder. In that case, we'll need to split up. Put your radios on. But, be wary of using them, the enemy may be able to pick up on our frequency.

A joint '*understood*' was inwardly voiced by the team in shared acknowledgment of her orders.

Frisk, you're second in command, manage your team independently as best you can. I trust your judgment. Make sure you don't directly lead the enemy to our rescue site. Offset your direction so you can make the rest of the trek on foot, she instructed.

Will do.

Chapter 24

Renji noticed that in the back of the car, the male member of their group shifted onto the female member's lap. He was attempting to fold back his seat, giving him access to the trunk as Risa hit a button on the dashboard, which retracted the sunroof.

"What's going on?" He was genuinely frustrated that he never knew what was happening around him.

His question was immediately answered as a bazooka was pulled into the car's cab.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he shouted, his eyes wide in disbelief.

"Hopefully we won't need to use it," Risa harshly said as the man in the back of the car awkwardly tried to stand up with the weapon through the car's sunroof.

Renji looked in the rearview mirror. Apparently, the second car was attempting to do the same thing, he observed, as he saw Quake's head slowly rise from the sunroof of the car behind them. He was interrupted from his musings as Risa passed an earpiece over in his direction.

"Put this on," she bit out. "Only use it if absolutely necessary. We don't want anyone picking up on our frequency," she warned as he quickly got to work affixing the device to his ear.

As Alpha Team entered the expressway, the roar from the helicopters slowly became deafening.

"Cease and desist!" boomed through the air as a spotlight bathed their car in a beam of bright, yellow light.

The lit-up scene must have truly been a sight to behold by the helicopter's pilot as he could now visibly see the business ends of two bazookas aimed directly at him.

The helicopter shifted off to the left, momentarily abandoning them. Apparently, the little bird also notified its friends as the additional two helicopters located behind it also immediately dipped off to the side.

"Bazookas? Please tell me you aren't serious!" Emica barked into her radio as she pushed her car hard to catch up.

The information momentarily stupefied her.

"Fire on them!" she shouted. "Blow them, and their weapons, the fuck up!" she screamed.

She had enough of this. She didn't want to make any sacrifices, but this little rescue squad rose the stakes, and she saw no other option at this time. She couldn't risk the exposure of her people.

A few wolves may die, but at least the pack would survive.

Alpha Team watched as the helicopters swung back over them, now surrounding them in a triangular fashion.

Are they fucking nuts? Risa wondered. How far are they willing to go to prevent Renji's escape?

She really didn't want any casualties. But, based on the helicopter's formation, it was apparent they were going to fire on them, and she couldn't let that happen.

Quake, take the one at your four o'clock. Trace, you take twelve o'clock. Fire on them and scatter! she commanded.

Immediately, the two bazooka's released their missiles, hitting their marks. The heat of the two simultaneous explosions blew over them. As the wave of shrapnel began to rain down, the two shooters scrambled to reenter their respective cars.

The explosions managed to push the one remaining helicopter back from its eight o'clock position, momentarily halting it as it scrambled to fall back behind them. Once back in place, the sole helicopter didn't hesitate to retaliate. The officers within quickly fired down on them, washing the cars over in a hail storm of bullets.

The two vehicles then abruptly split up. Risa reared to the right, exiting the expressway with the helicopter following her motion, while Frisk's car sped forward following the road before him.

Radio's from now on! she mentally shouted to her team. *Frisk, get your ass to the rescue chopper. See if you can find us and pick us up while we attempt to make our way back to you!*

Roger! came Frisk's tight reply. *See you soon!*

With those words, Mystic severed the connection. The shared hum that occupied their minds instantly becoming silenced.

As Risa, sped along the residential streets, the helicopter above continued to shower her car in bullets. She cut to the left and right frequently, but it was hopeless to try to shake their airborne pursuer.

Something needed to give soon. The car's armor could only do so much. The windows were already shot out, and they were practically sitting ducks. The officers only had to land one shot, and someone on her team would be dead.

"Fang, I need you to take the wheel! Switch with me!" she shouted, breaking him out of his chaotic thoughts.

Renji released his seat belt while she did the same. With a nod, the two simultaneously attempted to shift places.

Switching her left foot to the gas pedal, she reached over with her right leg, sliding over him. Renji smoothly replaced the weight of her foot on the pedal with his own left foot.

In another moment, they completed the transfer of positions. Renji plopped down in the driver's seat, replacing the weight on the pedal with his right foot, while Risa fell into the passenger seat.

He shot her a questioning look as he replaced his seat belt.

She leaned forward, shimmying out of her bow while pulling one of her arrows from its place on her vest. Renji said nothing as her spiritual energy encased her in a protective blue glow.

Once ready, she sprung up through the car's sunroof. She then willed her arrow to come to life, pouring as much of her spiritual energy into it as she could muster. The arrowhead flared in response as she positioned it in her bow.

She prayed the above onslaught of bullets wouldn't manage to pierce her shield and hit anything vital as she released the arrow into the night, hitting the helicopter's main rotor in an explosion of bright, blue light.

The blast threw her back, arching her over the car's roof. Twisting to her stomach, she quickly forced her way back into the car with the strength of her arms. When she fell back into the space between the driver and passenger seats, her powers sprang to life in a reactive fury, encasing the vehicle's occupants in a flash of protective blue light.

She didn't understand what happened but felt a thunderous impact as the car was pummeled sideways. She was thrust against the driver's seat hard, before becoming somewhat airborne within. She felt as the car spiraled out of control before harshly stopping against something hard.

When she opened her eyes, she was in Renji's lap with his arms and body wrapped protectively around her. Time slowed down, and she blinked several times, trying to make sense out of what just happened.

"They rammed the car!" Trace screamed out. "We have to get out of here!"

"Roll call, people!" Risa yelled. "Sound off, and let me know you're okay."

"My neck is a little fucked up, but I'm okay!" Trace shouted.

"I'm fine," Renji whispered down to her, from above.

A few seconds went by without any sound off from Terrain.

"Terrain! Talk to me. Are you alright?"

"She has a pulse, but it looks like she's unconscious," Trace answered for her.

This was the worst possible scenario. They had two members who'd most likely need to be carried.

"Fuck!" she shouted. "Trace, get her out of the car! We're going to have to try to hide somewhere and try to wake her up!"

Risa felt her body being lifted as Renji removed her from the car, while Trace worked to free Terrain from her seat belt in the back. When Renji dropped her gently to her feet, she felt his body stiffen as he sniffed the air.

"We've got a major problem."

Before she could decipher his meaning, a voice Risa only before heard in her dreams called out to her from a distance.

"You're not going anywhere!"

Her head snapped in the voice's direction, quickly catching Emica's movements as she aimed her firearm directly at Renji's head.

Her features instantly twisted into a scowl. She had a score to settle with this bitch.

Before Renji could prevent the motion, she stepped in front of him and wrapped them both inside of her protective blue shield.

"Oh, I beg to differ," she hissed, her voice dripping with venom.

Frisk, Quake, and Mystic looked up at the sky from their position on the ground, taking in the dazzling explosion of blue light that quickly flashed against the sky far in the east.

She disabled the helicopter! Mystic shouted in celebration through the small group's shared connection.

Amen to that! Frisk added. *Looks like she's about fifteen miles east from us.*

They'd ditched their ride in one of the airport's gateway tunnels and set out on foot, creeping along the fielded outside perimeter of Narita airport. Based on the coordinates the General provided Frisk with earlier, there were about two miles left to go on foot until they would encounter their ride home.

She's definitely going to be late to the party. Once we get to the helicopter, we need to radio in to find her new location. I want to make sure we're ready to set off in case we need to pick her up, Frisk advised.

Mystic and Quake both nodded in agreement as they proceeded on, running through the darkness.

Frisk took a moment to rub at the knot that was finding its way into his stomach since the team separated. *Please be okay, Wraith. We can't lose you.*

The two women continued to stare at one another, quietly sizing each other up.

"Fang, I want you and Trace to take Terrain and get out of here. Leave Emica to me. I'll catch up with you," Risa whispered.

So, you do recognize her, Renji thought inwardly. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"I'm *not* asking you. This is an order from a superior. Agent Fang, you will follow orders," she demanded in a raised whisper from her position in front of him.

"That won't work on me," he said in a lowered voice, frustration making its way into his tone. "I won't leave you."

It was at this moment that Emica began to laugh. "He can't," she managed to get out. "It's instinctually impossible for him. Give all the orders you want. It's not going to work."

Risa silently cursed. *Stupid advanced wolf demon hearing... What the hell is she talking about?*

Her eyes squinted as she tried to make sense of Emica's message. However, she didn't have to wait long as the woman seemed readily willing to assist her.

"A mated male will not abandon his female. Even if he knows he will die. He won't leave even if you command it. He will fight to protect his woman, instinctually, until his very last breath." She widely smiled before continuing. "He's also a loaded gun just waiting to go off. He's very likely to do something incredibly stupid and won't hesitate to turn on your innocent friends if he happens to fly off the handle."

Risa processed this information. "Mated male?" she stupidly repeated, cautiously studying Emica. *She used to be his mate. Is she saying he'll protect her?* She frowned. "What is she talking about?" she asked, directing the question over her shoulder to Renji.

He remained silent.

"Fang, what is she talking about?" she repeated, slowly beginning to panic.

"She doesn't know?" Emica snorted, before falling into another wave of hysterical laughter. "You haven't even told her?" she spat as she held Renji's eyes.

The sound of police sirens off in the distance started to echo through the quiet night, headed in their direction. Risa chanced a quick glance at Trace. He was carrying Terrain bridal style, and his eyes were wide in panic.

We have to leave now, he mouthed to her, before she turned her full attention back to the woman standing before her.

"Fang, what the *fuck* is she talking about?" she now screamed.

Renji silently cursed. Emica was right. If something happened to Risa, he wouldn't be able to fight against the bloodlust it would awaken within. If that happened, regardless of his injured condition, her teammates would be in grave danger. They were all as good as dead.

"She's talking about you," he warned, finally managing to find his voice. "There's too much to explain," he trailed off, lost in a barrage of thoughts.

He watched as realization slowly dawned on Risa, a small smile ghosting over her face before she could help it.

Sensing the female agent's distraction, Emica hurriedly pulled the trigger of her poised handgun, launching a bullet directly at Renji's head.

She became perplexed when he didn't fall.

Did I miss? she thought as she immediately attempted again.

The handgun flashed as the bullet left the barrel, and she focused on Renji, but nothing happened. All she heard was the bullet casing clink to the floor.

That blue light is protecting them, she realized, catching on too late.

Her previous confusion delayed her reaction time as Wraith took off at full speed, and she wasn't able to redirect the flying side kick that landed squarely against her jaw.

The blow blasted right through the bone's feeble connection with her skull, and she struggled just to maintain consciousness. As she braced herself against the wave of pain rolling through her and fought against the dark clouds overtaking her vision, a roaring alarm bell began to sound off inside her mind, freezing her in place.

Its message was clear.

Death.

Scrambling, she righted herself. Instantly elongating her claws, she launched her body at Wraith. Once airborne, her body twisted in the air like a real predator as she attempted to slash the woman's face clean off with her right hand. However, she was instead met with a flash of burning energy that blasted her to the ground.

The instinctual siren that was going off was now screaming, taking over her hearing. She vaguely realized that the skin and muscle that once covered her right arm were now gone. The remaining bone was blackened as if singed by the fires of hell itself.

Stupefied, she looked up at Wraith, and if she could use her mouth, she would have screamed.

Blinding white light snaked around her, pulsing. The heat of it was fierce, and there was so much of it that it was blowing the woman's long hair skyward as it blasted up from her body. The woman had a vicious and sadistic expression on her face as she slowly walked over to her.

Purification? Her mind scrambled at the realization. *This woman is a priestess!*

Chapter 25

As Emica panicked, Risa momentarily became lost within the sheer power surrounding her.

I was never able to physically channel my purification powers in my past life, she thought. She examined her hands before her gaze fell to the woman sprawled out before her.

Emica raised her left arm in a feeble attempt to protect herself and was cowering. The evil woman tried to speak with a pleading tone, but without the use of her jaw, the words would just not form.

Risa knelt down. She wanted the bitch to see her face before she died. "Look at me."

Emica cringed before finally meeting her eyes.

"Do you remember me?" she whispered to her. "My name used to be Risa. Think back, *Emica*. I know it was over five hundred years ago, but I was pretty important to Renji back then, too."

Emica stared at her dumbly. When her stare finally fell to Risa's unique eyes and held them, something seemed to click into place in remembrance. It was at this realization that her expression fell into one of absolute shock.

"Has history taught you nothing? How many people have tried in vain to wipe out large groups of people?" Risa spat.

Emica continued to stare at her, utterly horrified.

"There's a special place in hell for people like you, you disgusting bigot. There were a million different ways you could've served your people. However, you refused to explore any other option outside of eliminating an entire race. You're no better than the humans you hate so much," she furiously growled. "Your fate was sealed when you decided to hurt Renji. That's something I could never forgive." She pushed her hands out and bathed the woman in a scorching glow of white, holy light.

Renji watched on as the cruel scene played out before him. He willed his body to move but was utterly unable to do so. The white

purification light's appearance forcefully pushed his demon blood back.

His instincts were torn, screaming at him to run away from Risa and also shouting at him to move forward to protect her. The tug of war resulted in a fixed, neutral state.

He helplessly watched as his mate made short work of Emica. The woman hadn't been able to lay a single finger on her, and she was quickly dispatched by Risa's purification powers that he long forgot about.

He watched as Risa knelt down in front of Emica, whispering to her. As he focused his hearing on trying to eavesdrop, he nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of his earpiece suddenly coming to life.

"Where are you guys?" came the male voice through the radio connection.

Renji raised his hand over his pounding heart, trying to calm the organ's pace as he looked around. "We're near Sakuranoyama Park," he said. "And from the sounds of it, every police car in Tokyo will be on us in a few minutes."

"Shit. We're coming to get you. Any birds in the sky?" the male's voice asked.

"Not one," Renji stated. "The female in our group..." He tried to remember the unconscious woman's codename. "Terrain is injured. She needs help," he reported as he studied the woman who currently resided in the man's arms to his right.

There was a pause before the man on the other end cut off the connection.

"We need to go that way!" Renji pointed to the park off in the distance. "It'll give some clearance in case our helicopter needs to get low to the ground."

"Let's go!" Risa shouted as she made her way back over to them. "Give me Terrain and go help Fang," she instructed Trace as she came up to his side.

Risa quickly rolled Terrain onto her shoulder while Trace did the same for Renji, and the group set off as quickly as they could manage to the park's location ahead.

Please make it in time! Renji's thoughts shouted. *We've come too far to lose now!*

The CB radio in Roukan's car was never so alive throughout his many years of service. A never-ending stream of voices currently tumbled over through the frequency. The Tokyo police force was presently trying to locate the 'terrorists' that set off a bomb in front of the city's police station.

Or at least, that's the story they were going with as a cover.

Unfortunately, the humans on the force couldn't be allowed to know what was really going on under the surface, which actually made things pretty damn hard in terms of available manpower.

On Yuna's orders, Roukan pulled all of his available wolf demon staff into cars and helicopters in chase of the small *ROOT* rescue team. As Renji's rescue took place at night, he was working with half the staff to start with. Taking into account the wolf demon requirement, his available numbers were minuscule.

Calls went out to the balance of the wolf demon officers who were off duty in an attempt to build their numbers up, with additional requests being made to their neighboring Osaka force.

But, bringing in more people was sure to take time.

Roukan smiled. All the odds seemed to be in Renji's favor, he just hoped they were enough to help him to escape. The only major problem he might have to deal with was the commissioner, who was in hot pursuit.

When she last radioed in, she was close to Sakuranoyama Park. That was twenty minutes ago, and he hadn't heard from her since, which caused worry. Her GPS also remained idle, signaling that her car hadn't moved in some time.

As he couldn't raise any suspicions to his involvement in this entire dilemma, he'd set off, along with several additional cars, to go check on her.

Risa's small team managed to take out all three of the station's helicopters, so airpower was no longer an option for them. Roukan always prided himself on his ability to stay calm in bad situations, but he haphazardly dropped his radio receiver when he'd heard that the rescue team was using bazookas.

These guys really don't play around.

He'd heard of *ROOT* over the years from Yuna. Her precious scientist, Avkt, was a double agent within. They were apparently a secret military group that didn't have ties to any country. Their mission statement was to protect world peace, and their bases were spread throughout the world, and sleeper agents were scattered throughout every nation.

There had to be someone financing this mammoth operation, but Avkt was never able to find out any of those particulars in all of his time there. The organization indeed was a mystery.

Protecting world peace. That's a pretty large order.

He would have thought it was impossible. But, if Risa's little team was any indication of the rest of the organization, they actually seemed to be up to the task.

At least someone is.

"Are you okay, Wraith?" Renji's deep voice asked over the siren sounds that were slowly gaining on their position.

She was on his right and carrying Terrain's dead weight on her shoulder as they tried to make their way uphill to the middle of the park.

"How do you mean? Physically or mentally?" she responded in a hushed whisper, trying to make a joke.

"That was... pretty interesting what you did back there." He turned his head to check behind them.

"Oh, *that*? Please. That Police Commissioner cunt would have to do a lot more than try to scratch me to take me out," she grumbled. "Fucking pathetic. She completely gave up the element of surprise because she just *had* to speak to us. Who the hell would do that in a war? You have the element of surprise, and instead of firing, you decide to purposefully alert them to your presence and start carrying on about — *mating* — a bunch of random stuff. How the fuck could someone so cocky become such a decorated leader in this country?" she condescendingly said. "She also seemed to be incapable of planning for worst-case scenarios as well. True narcissist if you ask me."

"Police Commissioner?" Renji repeated as he obviously struggled to decipher her statement as they walked.

Risa glanced over and studied his handsome face.

He looked so utterly lost throughout this entire mission, and she took pity on him, instantly feeling guilty. Not only was he forced to watch on as the team communicated in silence with one another, but he also didn't know anything about any of the information she dug up in the time since he was kidnapped.

Where to even start?

"Emica is..." she started, before quickly correcting herself.

"She *was* the Police Commissioner of Japan. The wolf demons were able to successfully assimilate into human society, and through time, they took up residence within the Japanese police force's ranks. They also were using a fleet of rescue wolves, replacing dogs, in their canine units. As wolf demons find lost members of their former pack, they recruit them into the force."

She chanced another glance at him before going on. "They were most likely going to ask you to join them. From what I was told, there's no longer an alpha governing the tribe. It appears they use a democratic method in making clan decisions now. Roukan is actually the police chief in Tokyo, and he secretly helped us to find you. Raiju is the chief of the Osaka branch. I went through many police photos, and there were a lot of faces I recognize, although I don't know any of their names.

"Emica and Enzyme actually met years ago and most likely established the APA together during a decade they spent together in Russia. Enzyme was passing secret *ROOT* information over to Emica for years. Also, like you, the wolf demons have changed identities often throughout the years. None of them use the names they did five hundred years ago." She hoped she was remembering everything.

Renji appeared to be overwhelmed as he processed all of this.

"According to Roukan, who, by the way, goes by Haru Tanaka now, the wolf demons were planning to release the bio-virus at the subway stations during this morning's rush hour commute," Risa said. "We've alerted the General. But before I left the base to come and find you, the Medical Research Department only just began testing potential cures. Even if they do find one, it's going to take

time to mass-produce the quantities that would be needed in the event of an outbreak. I'm not sure what can be done," she said, worry now prominent in her tone.

Risa noticed his expression had become grave.

The group moved on in silence before he finally spoke.

"How is it that you all communicate with each other?"

"The petite, silver-haired woman on our team has psychic abilities. Her name is Mystic, and we're able to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences through her using a shared mental connection. The only catch is that we all need to be within one mile of each other to use it," Trace answered.

"You were already introduced to Quake, he can create earthquakes. The other guy is named Frisk, he's able to rip into a person's memories through touch. It allows him to uncover secret information, as well as learn new things by stealing experience directly from others. He calls it his 'mental pat down,'" Risa quickly informed him. "He's also my second in command."

"That's Terrain," Trace said as he pointed to the black woman with short brown hair that was slung over Risa's shoulder. "She can use radar and is a big help in finding underground structures, like the one you were held hostage in. And my name is Trace." His cold, gray eyes looked at Renji. "I'm able to locate living enemy forces within range, providing our group with intelligence regarding the number of foes we're dealing with at any given time," he said, before pausing for a moment. "I'm pretty sure you're already very familiar with Wraith." A chuckle escaped his lips before he could stop it.

Risa shot him a dirty look.

"Can I be added to this psychic link?" Renji asked, over the sirens that were getting louder in the background.

"Not without training, you can't. It takes a long time to be able to quell your subconscious mind. If we connected with you, everything that pops in your head is going to shout loudly into ours. The noise it would create would be unbearable, and it could end up getting us all killed," Trace bit out.

A few moments passed before he spoke up again.

"Does *ROOT* know that this situation was caused by wolf demons? Do they know what I am?" His voice was heavy with sadness.

"My Alpha Team does. I tried speaking with Circuit about it, but he just thought I was crazy and brushed me off. No one else knows anything, not even the General," Risa said.

So, my people have managed to not only survive but advance. Why the fuck would they risk throwing everything away over old grudges? So many centuries have passed, and there's still no getting through to most of them. Renji felt his heart break for his people. If the rest of the world finds out about us, we could be eliminated. If word gets out we're associated with this attempt to exterminate the human race, we've gone ahead and sealed our fate. The world's wolf demons would be hunted down and slaughtered. We wouldn't even be able to hide within society anymore.

As if sensing his mood, Risa grabbed his hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "This isn't on you," she whispered. "This is a decision the majority made. It's not a reflection of the entire wolf demon species. Even if *ROOT* does figure out what they are, they'd never expose them. That's not what we're about. You do know that, don't you?"

"If the information was to leak and the world's *humans* find out, they may not feel the same way that *ROOT* does. I've lived for a very long time. I've seen what happens when the humans single out a specific group of people," he grumbled, his voice taking on a timbre of worry.

Unfortunately, before Risa could respond, the group was suddenly interrupted by a loud howling that broke through the sirens' sound.

"We've got incoming," Trace muttered from his position underneath Renji's arm as his left hand flew to his temple. "I'm counting twelve wolves, and they just split up."

Chapter 26

The police must have found Emica's car, Risa thought. There was nothing left to be found of Emica.

Trace and Risa picked up the pace. They were almost at the clearing, and they just had a few more feet to go.

Risa pushed her hand to her ear, activating the team's radio connection. "We're going to be under attack in a few minutes, Frisk. Where the hell are you?" She was out of breath from carrying Terrain's additional weight uphill.

"Almost there."

"They've surrounded us," Renji bit out as he sniffed the air.

The announcement forced the team to stop and look around, trying to place the locations of the wolves in the dark of the night.

"There are two packs of six," Renji advised, shuffling his weight off of Trace's shoulder. "I'll handle this."

Trace sent a questioning look to Risa.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Fang? You're injured, and these wolves are under orders, if something—"

Renji shot her a warning look, effectively quieting her, before proceeding ahead. She said nothing as she watched him limp over to them. He raised his head, smelling the air, before he turned sharply to the right, apparently singling one of the wolves out.

A black wolf with cold, blue eyes and a police vest came forward from the park's edges, slowly approaching him with his head lowered and teeth bared. Renji lowered his head in response, staring the creature down and growling in return. As he did, the tips of his fangs began to stretch down from his upper lip before finally coming to rest at his chin.

Man and beast began ferociously snarling at each other.

Renji let loose a low pitched guttural growl, never losing eye contact with the black wolf standing several feet ahead. In return, the black animal began barking and snarling loudly, throwing its head back in a display of its sharp teeth.

Renji continued to growl as he slowly began to approach the animal, never dropping his gaze away from the animal's blue eyes.

As he got closer, the wolf frantically started snapping at him while it backed up slowly, its head dropped from time-to-time before it would throw it back up again in defiance.

Once Renji stood two feet from the wolf, he lowered his posture and snarled loudly at it. He then made a great show of his fangs before snapping his teeth at him while purposefully intensifying his angry growls.

The black wolf responded by lowering its head to the floor and breaking eye contact. It continued to bark, but a whine began to seep into its vocalizations.

It submitted to him, Risa thought. In front of its pack.

Renji sharply turned his head to the left, picking another wolf out of the shadows. A brown wolf came forward, and the same scenario repeated itself, leading to a similar outcome.

Those two wolves must be the alphas, she realized.

Renji continued to growl at the two wolves that now, began barking as if in response.

Are they talking? she wondered as she watched ten additional wolves come forward to join their alphas, in what seemed to be, a very heated discussion.

"That's pretty fucking cool," Trace whispered.

After a few moments, Renji turned to address Trace and Risa as the wolves took back off into the night.

"They won't bother us," he casually said. "Let's keep going."

"Nothing to see here, folks. Just a wolf demon talkin' to some wolves. Completely normal. Move right along," Trace muttered under his breath as they continued to make their way forward.

Finally, the sound of a helicopter cut through the noise of the sirens. But before the team could celebrate, the sounds of mixed shouting and running feet came into earshot.

"Freeze!" screamed one of the officers.

"You're in range, and we *will* fire on you!" shouted another.

Trace and Risa released their handguns from their holsters and turned to face the onslaught of officers that were starting to fall into

position before them. Risa chanced a glance skyward. She could hear their helicopter, but it wasn't close enough yet.

Trace put his hand to his earpiece. "We're going to be full of lead if you don't show up now!"

"Just need a few more minutes! I'm almost on you!" Frisk responded.

"Throw aside your weapons and get down on the ground. Now!" the lead officer shouted.

"That's not going to fucking happen!" Renji's voice roared through the commotion, momentarily silencing the officers. "I *won't* stand here and let you stupid fucks destroy what's left of our people!" His voice was filled with rage as he slowly made his way to the officers at the bottom of the hill.

Risa glanced at him, realizing the whites of his eyes were now red, and his voice had taken on an echo as he spoke.

He's barely holding on to his sanity. God damn it, Renji, this isn't the time!

The quieted officers watched as their murderous former alpha slowly approached them. Many of their mouths were agape as they stood wide-eyed.

Roukan, who was quietly observing the scene from the hood of his police car, began to make his way over to Renji through the sea of officers.

"And just how do you think we're going to destroy our people? You're no longer our leader, Renji. You don't command us," he shouted as he walked forward.

Take the bait, Renji. You have everyone's attention. Speak to them. Let them know.

"With this disease, you risk exposing our race to the humans," Renji growled. "They will retaliate, and that's a war we can't win! Does your hate for humanity run so deep that you'd risk the survival of our own people? I have given my life for this tribe, I will not have it thrown away over century-old prejudices."

"We have it on good authority that the human race will be wiped out within a few weeks. There's nothing the humans can do to

retaliate. This is a sure win for our tribe!" Roukan continued in a challenging voice.

"We already have a cure!" Risa shouted, praying no one would see through her bluff.

The entire police team turned to look at her as they processed her words. The edges of panic began to ghost across their faces as they shot each other worried glances.

"They have a cure?" came a whisper in the background.

"That's impossible!" said another.

"We've had access to all of Enzyme's research through Sleeper's notes. We've been working on a cure for weeks and just finalized mass production. Anything you release will be immediately countered," she continued, further inciting the hysterics.

"The humans already know about your plans to release the virus at the subway stations this morning," Renji spat. "They already have countermeasures in place. By going through with your plot, you'll expose our people. The wolf demons will be slaughtered."

The wolf demons looked horrified. Some lowered their weapons as they turned to each other in hushed tones.

"Yuna mentioned there were whispers about your organization finding a cure. But she sure as hell wasn't the type to be swayed off course, regardless if there was evidence advising to do so," Roukan said, playing along.

"Haru, what the fuck are we going to do?" one of the officers hysterically asked.

"If they know about the release of the virus, then they probably already know all about us!" another officer screamed.

"They'll kill our children!" yet another officer shouted.

"No one is killing anyone!" Renji roared. "Hand over the virus. Once you do, my organization will keep the knowledge of our people a secret from the rest of humanity."

"And why the hell should we trust you?" another officer retorted.

"Because he was our alpha," Roukan answered, simply. "Regardless of how much time has passed and how much our society

has changed, Renji has always been our one true alpha. He'd never allow any harm to come to the tribe. He always protected us, whether we liked it or not." He held Renji's eyes. "I'll trust in him now just as I trusted in him back then. I vote to hand over the virus. I vote for the wolf demon tribe to live."

A few moments passed before hands slowly began rising, signifying a vote in agreement.

Roukan looked around, noting that nearly all of the officers were raising their hands before speaking again. "Kaito, do you believe we have enough votes here to make up the majority?" he called out behind him.

Raiju slowly made his way through the crowd, approaching him. "More than enough," he happily said. "Glad I was able to make it here in time." He smirked as he barked loudly, calling the black wolf out of the shadows and to his side.

As the black wolf stood in front of him, he bent over the animal, unzipping a small pocket on the animal's vest. After he finished, he raised his fist, showing the crowd the clear vile within, before setting off in Renji's direction.

Renji tested the air while he watched the man with the vial approach him.

"Long time no see, Renji." Raiju handed him the vial, quickly looking him over. "You look like shit," he said, through a toothy smirk.

Renji studied his former beta's uniformed look. "You look like an overpaid meter maid," he muttered in response as the wind around the park began to swirl around them.

"Looks like our ride is here!" Trace shouted as he looked up at the helicopter that was now visible above.

Wraith, Trace, what the hell is going on down there? Should we open fire? Quake's booming voice came through their renewed psychic connection.

No! Whatever you do, don't shoot. They just handed over the virus. Fang made peace with them. Do not fire! Risa shouted.

With those words, the helicopter positioned itself above the small team, throwing out a rope ladder for the group to ascend.

"You'll hear from me again, now that I know where to find you," Renji promised Raiju as he shot a glance over in Roukan's direction, meeting his eyes.

"Look forward to it, boss," Raiju said with a slight nod before he turned down the hill to join his comrades.

Renji's eyes drifted over the faces in the crowd before he was interrupted by a hand on his arm.

"Ready to go?" Risa asked in a soft voice.

He nodded slowly before turning. He led the way to the rope ladder, and once there, he motioned for Risa to go first. Risa passed Terrain over to Trace as she made her way up the ladder with Renji following right behind her. As soon as Trace and Terrain were reunited within, the aircraft took off, making its way to the rendezvous point.

Time to update the big guy. Risa scanned the team quickly before taking out her cell phone. "General Hush! We have Fang *and* the virus!" she proudly said, before pausing. "Yes, you heard me right. It's a long story, but the police force decided not to go through with it. I'll fill you in once I get back to base." She paused again and nodded her head. "I'm going to need medical support. Fang is injured, and Terrain is unconscious. Yes, sir. Understood," she said, before disconnecting the call.

"Good job today, Alpha Team!" she shouted. "I'm so very proud of each and every one of you. This mission was a success!"

All conscious Alpha Team members responded to the compliment by raising their right fists in the air, before bringing them back down to rest over their hearts.

"Time to go home."

Renji studied Risa's sleeping form across from where he sat on the private airplane. Their previous ride dropped them off at a waiting naval ship where they received brief medical attention before transferring to the aerial means of travel they now found themselves on. They were currently enroute to Risa's home base of South Korea.

His knee was briefly looked at and bandaged, and he was offered a saline IV drip to help fight off his dehydration. He was also

provided food, which was a godsend as he was within the throes of starvation after going so long without any form of nutrition. If he were human, he certainly would have perished.

As he looked upon her, he wanted nothing more than to pull Risa into his lap and hold her. But, he knew he couldn't as they were still, technically, on a mission. Now that they were safe and he could really study her, he finally noticed the bags under her eyes and her hollowed-out face.

She's lost a lot of weight.

He instantly felt guilty, knowing her current state was brought on due to worry for him. His hand shot out without his permission, smoothing its way across her sleeping face and tenderly tucking her bangs behind her ear.

"Brace for landing," came the pilot's crackled voice through the plane's intercom system.

As the plane circled to make it's landing, Renji noticed a small convoy of people positioned on the runway. The General stood out in his black tactical uniform. The man's physical presence was almost as large as his voice.

"Wraith," he whispered. "We're landing now. You may want to wake up. The General is about to rush you the moment we hit the ground."

Risa frowned and slung her arm over her face, covering her eyes.

"Wakey, wakey, Rai!" Frisk shouted over to her, from his seat across the aisle. "You may want to listen to your new boyfriend. You're about to be kidnapped for an undisclosed amount of time."

"Grrrrrr. I hate you sometimes. Why do you always have to be so obnoxious?" Risa straightened while trying to blink the sleep from her eyes.

"I don't hate *you*, babe," Frisk smiled. "Ever," he swore as he blew a kiss in her direction.

The action elicited a murderous look from Renji.

"Don't get your panties all bent out of shape, Fang. If anything, Wraith should see me as a threat, not the other way around. As far as I'm concerned, any man that can kiss like you do is open game. However, I'm a fan of a little more tongue and a lot less teeth. But

hey, what can you really expect from a guy that calls himself, Fang?" he rambled, while the rest of the team chuckled.

Renji felt as though he should be very pissed off, but didn't have any idea about what Frisk was talking about.

Any man that can kiss like you do... More tongue and a lot less teeth, he mentally repeated, trying to make sense of it all.

Risa reacted to Frisk's statement by launching her boot over at him, spraying him with dirt while hitting him in the head. "You're such an asshole sometimes! Seriously, grow the hell up!" Her face slowly heated. "How many times are you going to keep bringing that up?"

Frisk sputtered, attempting to gather his bearings. "I'll bring it up until it no longer rattles you. Then I'll just move on to something else. By the way, your feet smell putrid. You should be embarrassed."

Risa tried to launch her other boot at him before she was interrupted by Renji.

"What's he talking about?" he demanded, his voice was deep and menacing.

"I'm talking about our pornographic make out session from earlier today!" Frisk shouted, now using Quake's body as a shield against being attacked by any more articles of Risa's clothing.

Renji ignored Frisk's explanation and was expectantly staring at Risa for an answer, while she turned several shades of red.

"Ahem," Mystic broke in. "When we're mentally linked, we all share in one another's experiences," she gently explained as she placed a hand on his arm.

So everyone participated in that kiss with Risa?

Too tired even to feel embarrassed at this point, Renji broke out in a hearty wave of laughter. The loud sound falling from his lips proved to be contagious, with the entire team soon joining him.

Unfortunately, the group's laugh-fest was only able to last so long before it was interrupted by the plane's small door opening, signaling the team to exit.

As Renji warned, the General was on Risa the moment her feet touched the runway. Renji, however, was whisked away with Terrain for medical care. As he looked back at Risa, she smiled at him as she mouthed, "I'll be right there."

Chapter 27

Risa made good on her promise and found Renji's room within the base's hospital. However, it didn't seem she was able to shake the General as the man walked alongside her.

Renji scowled. *Am I ever going to get a minute alone with her? This is torture!*

Apparently, Risa felt the same way as she was frowning when she entered the room.

"Fang! It is so very good to see you alive!" the General boomed. "Wraith moved mountains to find you. She did an excellent job!" He approvingly eyed Risa.

"Well, like you once said. She's one of your best," Renji replied, giving Risa a sly smile.

"Indeed, she is. How are you feeling?" he curiously asked.

"Like I got hit by a truck."

"I spoke with the doctor before I got here. Seems you should be all healed up in about a month or so, and you're now free to go home to recover."

Home. The word made Renji blanch, which didn't go undetected by Hush.

The General rose an eyebrow before turning to Risa. "Wraith, go up to the eighth floor's conference room. I want you to debrief the remaining department heads on all the information you gathered on this retrieval mission. There's a call scheduled in twenty minutes. After you finish, you can come back here."

"What? Oh, come on! Don't I get a small break?"

"That's an order, agent," he bit out, before turning his full attention back on Renji.

She hesitated before leaving the room in a huff. Once the hospital wing's large double doors slammed, signaling her exit, Hush addressed Renji.

"I hear you were instrumental in negotiating peace with the dirty Japanese police officers. Wraith informed me that these people are your long lost family. Is this true?" he asked, studying his face.

"Kind of," Renji hesitated, keeping the answer brief. *Risa said she didn't tell anyone outside of her team, and Circuit, about the existence of wolf demons.*

"What do you think we should do about this family of yours, Fang? They almost took out the entire human race. There needs to be some sort of repercussion, don't you agree?"

Renji sighed. "My people are... different, and we don't consider ourselves to be human. We've existed for a long time, and humanity has almost led to our extinction. Our species is bitter and afraid. In the end, they made the right choice by giving up the virus. They don't want any trouble. They just want to live in peace."

"So, you're saying we should just look the other way and ignore this?" the General spat, with suppressed anger. "They caused a hell of a lot of trouble."

"I'm not saying to ignore it. I don't know what should be done, really. Not everyone wanted this, just the majority. I don't want innocent people punished for the sins of others."

"Wraith tells me they have the same abilities as you do," Hush said, changing directions.

"Yes. We all have similar abilities," Renji answered. *Where's he going with all this?*

"Do you think any of your long lost family members could be recruited to our side?" he curiously asked.

"Huh?" Renji sputtered. He definitely wasn't expecting that. "Uh. Maybe. I'm not really sure. Why?"

"This family of yours was able to break into our system, develop a virus capable of destroying the world's human population, abduct an elite agent, and infiltrate an entire country's police organization. I'd say they're highly qualified to work inside of this organization. They'd be an asset to us. The only problem would be where their loyalties laid," Hush clarified. "What do you think?"

Renji pondered this. *Wolf demons being free to be wolf demons. The option would most likely appeal to most.* "I think some would actually be interested. If you give them some time, I could approach them about it. They're already familiar with *ROOT*. But I can't promise you anything."

"That's exactly what I want. I want you to talk to them. Consider it to be a side job."

Great, just what I need. A political side job. What fun. Renji sighed. "You won't move on any punishments until then?"

"I won't. Talk to them, and we'll take it from there."

Renji sighed, his imagination now conjuring up boring negotiation scenarios in his head.

"One last thing," Hush said, interrupting Renji's musings. "Are you ready to go home?"

He paused before answering. The General was studying him under an intense gaze. "Not really," he managed to say. "I don't mind staying here for a while during my recovery. There's no rush to return to Japan anytime soon."

He doesn't want to leave her, Hush realized. But, this was just the reaction he was hoping for. "You know, we do have an opening for a vital position in the Reconnaissance Department. Your tracking skills would be perfect for it, and it's yours if you want it. The only setback is you'd have to live here and work within a group."

Agent Fang didn't immediately speak.

"I've been trying to promote you for years now. I've always thought you were more of a pack kinda guy versus a lone wolf anyway. Once you're better, you can do a trial for a few months. If you don't like it, you can go back home and keep doing what you're doing for the Assassination Department. No harm in trying something different on for size, right?" Hush compassionately said.

He frowned. "I prefer my freedom. Living on a base only serves to... domesticate. I don't see myself writing reports and sitting at a cubicle. That kind of work is beneath what I'm capable of. It's more a means of torture for someone like me," he grunted out.

"That's unfortunate to hear. Paperwork is always going to be part of the job in the Reconnaissance Department. There's no way around it." Hush got up and turned to leave. "Wraith is going to be so upset. To think that you turned down a role on her infamous Reconnaissance Alpha Team. What a terrible waste of talent," he loudly grumbled as he exited the doorway.

A broad grin spread across his face as he quickly made his way to the hospital wing's double doors. It was only a minute before he

was halted by the panicked words loudly shouted from one of the rooms behind him.

"Hey! Wait!"

"So that's all the information we have at present," Risa huffed as she addressed *ROOT's* departmental heads through the shared video chat. "As far as next steps, I trust Hush will be in touch with those. Please feel free to reach out to me directly if you have any questions or if you need any additional information."

"Wraith, you've done an outstanding job. I'm sure the General has already said this, but thank you. You've saved all of us," Inspect, the Reconnaissance Department head said. "It makes me proud you're one of my own," she finished, before saluting.

A combined 'thank you' was spoken in turn by all the other departmental heads along with a salute before they each signed off the line.

Finally! I swear, if anything else gets in my way today, I'm going to lose my shit! She turned, attempting to make her way back to Renji.

Of course, this was the moment when her cell phone rang.

Risa silently cursed as she watched the General's name flash on the caller ID.

Son of a bitch! What the hell does he want now? I swear he's doing this on purpose! She answered the phone. "Yes?"

"Stay in the conference room. I'll be there in a few seconds. I need to talk to you."

Risa grit her teeth as she turned on her heel, making her way back to the stuffy conference room. Hush graced her with his presence only a few moments later, quickly taking a seat at the table's head.

"Remember how we discussed adding a seventh member to your Alpha Team?" he asked, getting straight down to business.

"Yes," she answered, taken aback. "Can we actually talk about this later? I don't want to come across as being insubordinate, but I really just want to check on Fang. I've been working nonstop for weeks. Can I just get a few hours break?" she pleaded.

The General gravely studied her. "I think you're going to want to deal with this first. After we talk, I promise, you'll be off the clock," he said, compassion finally making its way into his tone.

Risa sighed as she waited for him to continue.

"I want Fang on Alpha Team. But seeing as though there's obviously a relationship going on between you two, I want to make sure it won't get in the way of the work. If you two end up parting ways romantically, I don't want the team falling apart because of it."

Risa felt the air leave her lungs, and it took her a few moments to recover. "That's great! Yes! I'd love to have him on Alpha. But..." she hesitated. "His home is in Japan. I don't see him leaving his life to come and live here on the base."

"He already agreed to it," Hush retorted.

"Wait. *What?*"

"Already done. He's going to do a trial run for a few months to see if he likes it. Leaving Japan didn't seem to be as much of a hurdle as doing paperwork was," he snorted.

"Trial run? You didn't even ask me first!" Risa spat. "What the hell is the matter with you? This is my team—"

"Do you have any objection?" he asked, completely cutting her off.

"Uh. No. But that's not the point!"

Hush held up his hand, silencing her. "I already knew you'd say yes, so asking was a waste of time. All I need to know is that your personal life won't affect your professional one. That's all I'm asking."

"My personal life will not interrupt my work obligations."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Now, go. We'll discuss the specifics another time. You're off the clock. You've earned yourself a break."

Risa jumped up with a spring in her step, attempting to leave the room.

"Agent Wraith!"

I am going to kill him!

"Thank you for everything." He widely smiled at her. "Now, go."

Risa burst into Renji's hospital room with so much enthusiasm she scared the living daylights out of the nurse that was working to remove the IV from his arm.

"Ow!" The outburst earned Renji a stern look from the young medical professional.

"I'm sorry!" Risa said, trying to suppress a giggle.

"You're free to leave," the nurse advised. "You just need to use the crutches and avoid putting any physical demands on that leg." She looked him over before continuing. "I'm shocked at the rate of healing that was present in your knee. To take a close-range shot in the knee only two weeks ago, it's nothing shy of a miracle that you can even walk again."

"What can I say? I'm a gifted healer, I guess." He flashed the woman a sly smile.

The nurse blushed before scurrying away from him.

Renji's instincts washed over him in warning as he chanced a glance at Risa, who was smiling widely at him. *That didn't go over well.*

"So, if you're done flirting with the staff, I'm ready to take you back to my place. But, if you'd rather stay here..." She eyed the nurses outside the room. "Then I'll just come back later."

Renji moved so quickly she wasn't able to interpret his movements. The next thing she knew, his lips were planted over hers.

Renji couldn't hold back, he was utterly starved for her, and he was vaguely aware that Risa was swaying beneath the pressure of his kiss.

Risa's arms wrapped around Renji's neck as she leaned into him. The motion pressed his member against her lower stomach.

So ready for me, she smugly thought.

Breaking the kiss, she delicately traced her tongue down his neck, tasting him. This caused Renji to groan into her ear, and his hips slowly ground against her. A delicious musky scent she had just recently committed to memory began to roll off him in waves.

God, how I missed how good this guy smells, she inwardly admitted. "You smell amazing," she groaned as she reached up to ghost her teeth against his ear. "How do you do that?" She pressed her hips against him.

"Hey! No sex in the hospital!"

The nurse that took out Renji's IV returned, unnoticed, before shouting at the couple from a few feet away. This resulted in Renji and Risa nearly jumping out of their skin.

"What in the world is wrong with you two?" the nurse incredulously scolded before turning and pointing to the door, silently requesting they leave.

Renji held Risa against him, obviously using her body to shield his manhood as he waited for his erection to subside. This resulted in an awkward stagnant moment between all three parties.

The nurse was frowning at them. "Well?" she said. "There's the door. Please leave."

"We need another minute," Risa said from her hiding place against Renji's neck, attempting to stifle her laughter.

The nurse shook her head and walked to the exit before pausing to smell the air. "Is that cologne?"

"Huh?" Renji responded.

"It smells lovely. If you don't mind my asking, what's the name of it? I'd like to get some for my husband."

"I don't smell anything," he said, confused.

"How do you *not* smell it? It's everywhere," Risa said near his ear. "It's all you."

"What's it smell like?"

"Sexy," the nurse answered. "Musky, earthy, and seriously masculine. I've never smelt anything like it."

"That's his personal scent," Risa said, finally peeling away from his body.

"Shit. Well, you should bottle it and sell it. You'd be rich," she stated, before finally exiting the room.

"My personal scent?" he said, cracking a smile. "I can't smell myself. Do you like it?"

"I'm addicted to it. It's a huge turn on. It kicks up during..." She paused. "During some of our intimate moments. And it lingers long afterward."

So that's what Emica was talking about. "It's a marking scent." Renji snaked his arms around her waist, pulling her back to him. "I'll tell you all about it on our way to your place," he said, before dropping a kiss onto her nose.

"Okay, then. Let's get out of here." Her hand entwined with his as she led the way.

Chapter 28

Renji and Risa walked hand-in-hand along the grounds leading from the office building to the apartments across the base.

"So what you're telling me is that you've mated... with me?" Risa said, attempting to make sense of Renji's fragmented explanation as they walked along.

"Well, yes." He hesitated. "I'm not sure when it exactly happened, but it did happen. The scent you smell is... proof of that." He looked as if he were trying to place a specific timeframe in his head.

"So, when wolf demons have sex, they cover their partners with their scent?" she wondered out loud.

"No, it doesn't really work like that. Sex is just sex, but when the sex is more than just sex, it's called mating."

"When is the sex more than just sex?" she asked, confused. *Why is it so hard for him to explain things clearly at times? What the hell is he trying to tell me?*

Renji sighed. He didn't know why he felt so vulnerable explaining this to her, and it was tripping him up, flustering him. *Am I fearing her rejection?*

"Well?"

He attempted to explain, this time using different words. "When a male and female — *love* — want to commit themselves to each other for an extended period, they instinctually mark each other with a special scent. This natural act that's exchanged between a pair is what wolf demons call 'mating.' The scent you smell from time-to-time is what we call a 'marking scent.' I'm not even aware I'm doing it."

Risa appeared to turn this information over in her mind. "What if the female isn't interested? Then what happens?"

"It doesn't work that way. There has to be a connection shared by both parties to trigger the instinctual exchange of scents. It's impossible to mark a female that isn't interested and vice versa."

"But, I'm not a wolf demon. I'm not able to mark you. So why were you able to mark me?"

Renji shrugged his shoulders, not giving his answer much thought. "I have no idea. But, you can't tell me that you don't feel the connection between us. I mean the sex is, well, it's incredible. But, it's so much more than just physical. Do you know what I mean?"

"Nope," she stated, now fully teasing him.

"What do you mean, 'nope'? You really don't feel a deeper connection when we're together?" he incredulously asked as they approached her apartment building.

Risa swiped her keycard into her building's lock, before positioning her eye into a small area for a retina scan. With a low ping, the door swayed open for her. She then entered the building's decorated lobby, before making her way to the elevator as Renji limped along beside her.

"Of course, I feel a deeper connection when we're together, and now, even when we're apart." She studied him as she pushed the button, signaling the elevator.

"Not sure what you mean," he said, furrowing his brows.

Risa closed her eyes, and Renji's body was suddenly engulfed in her essence, signified by a warm glow.

He stared at his hands.

"I mean, *that*," Risa said as she opened her eyes and pointed to the glow while entering the elevator. "I think I'd be able to find you anywhere. Looks like a part of me, somehow became a part of you at some point."

This is the same exact feeling that would remind me of her when I was in that drug-induced coma, he realized. You were looking for me when I was down in that bunker. That's why I kept sensing you.

"Maybe this is how priestesses mark their mates!" Risa exclaimed as she exited the elevator and made a sharp right, before falling into a fit of hysterical laughter.

Renji shook his head. *So much for our serious conversation.*

Within a moment, Risa brought Renji to an isolated door at the end of the hall. It only took her a second to scan her card before the lock released automatically. As she swung the door open, she hesitated for a moment, before turning around and meeting his eyes.

"So this whole mating thing, you're explaining it plainly, but it really is more serious than what you're leading me to believe, isn't it?" She remembered Emica's warning about mated males being dangerous.

Renji sighed. "It's a serious instinctual attachment. There may be times where I become overbearing and protective."

"Is this going to get in the way of us working together? I need you to be straight with me. I'm going to be giving you orders and depending on the situation, those orders could very likely be for you to leave me in a situation you find to be dangerous. If you can't follow orders, then you'll jeopardize the team's safety."

"*That's* what you're worried about?" he grumbled. "Well, to be honest, there may be situations just like that. I can't promise anything, but I'm going into this knowing your life depends on me following instructions," he sighed, exasperated.

"What else would I be worried about?" she asked, considering his answer.

"I don't know. I'd think it would be a little unnerving to hear that the guy you're with has mated with you so quickly. I don't want you to feel as though I'm rushing things. We've only just found each other again, and I don't want to suffocate you or anything. Mating is a very big deal—"

"Renji!" She cupped his face and held his eyes, gathering his undivided attention. "The idea of being in a serious relationship with you isn't at all suffocating. I went through hell and back just to get you. I want this. I may not understand all the specifics about mating, but I think I know what it means and... well... I love you, too, Renji," she said as her voice quivered at the honest admission.

Renji's eyes searched Risa's face with such intensity she thought she'd melt. When she didn't think she could bear the scrutiny or his silence any longer, he finally spoke.

"Say that again. I *need* to hear that, again," he fiercely demanded as a grave expression crossed over his face.

"What?" she sputtered. *Did I say something wrong?* Her heart began slamming against her ribcage.

"Just one more time." His voice lowered several octaves into a rumbling timbre.

"I'm in love you with you, Renji," she swore as her eyes desperately searched and tried to read his.

The next thing she knew, she was in her apartment, in the dark, and under the assault of his mouth. He managed to swing her inside the doorway and close the door behind him within seconds. Once they were inside, he flattened her against the wall with his body and hoisted her up by the backs of her thighs.

She hurriedly wrapped her legs around him and allowed his tongue the full access it was so desperately seeking.

Renji found he could no longer form thoughts. Risa's words completely shattered all the chains keeping his inner beast at bay. He melted into her, truly losing himself in the feel of her. His hand somehow managed to find its way into her hair, and he used it to arch her beneath him while his other arm wrapped securely around her lower back. The weight behind his hips was keeping Risa's pelvis pinned against the wall, and he was assaulting her core with his hardened member.

When their breathing became too rapid, she rolled her head back, pulling away as she attempted to catch her breath. The newly exposed flesh of her neck was now an open invitation, and Renji dragged his elongated fangs over the creamy expanse of it, before sinking in to suck on the pulse point under her ear.

This is heaven, Risa thought as Renji's scent exploded around them, filling the very room with his essence.

Her hands roamed the muscled expanse of his chest, and her hips struggled to keep up with his manic thrusts. As her hands finally found the edge of his vest, she struggled to rid him of the nuisance

article of clothing, failing spectacularly as there wasn't even the smallest amount of space between their bodies in which to do so.

"Renji," she whispered, between groans. "Renji, I need you to take this off."

She found it difficult to speak. She was quickly losing the use of her mind, becoming lost inside his wild intensity. When he didn't respond, she snaked her arms up and palmed his face with her hands, gently pulling it so he could look at her.

Renji released his mouth's hold on her neck and allowed her to reposition his face in front of hers.

His eyes are red. Her eyes swept over the rest of his face. *His fangs are resting against his chin, too.*

She instantly startled. "Renji, your eyes," she whispered as she tried to speak between frantic breaths. "Are you—"

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I would never hurt you," he swore. His voice was a deep, echoing growl.

Risa continued to stare at his glowing, red eyes before finally breaking the contact in an attempt to commit his newly hardened features to memory.

She traced her index finger down his elongated incisor before he suddenly leaned forward and took her finger into his mouth, rolling his tongue over the digit and sucking it gently while reclaiming the hold of her eyes with his.

Becoming hypnotized by the motion, she watched as he slowly released his mouth's pull on her finger and allowed it to slowly slide over his sharp bottom teeth as he stared down at her.

"Your. Clothes," she sputtered.

She vaguely remembered what she'd initially wanted from him and was attempting to will her newly frozen limbs to somehow return to life as she once again tried to lift his shirt.

Leaning back, he provided some space between them. He then watched as she pulled off his shirt and repeated the action with her own. The moment she was free of the clothing, her nails quickly returned to his chest and scratched their way down his torso. She followed the motion by leaning into him and sucking and biting her way across his chest.

After a few minutes, she released her legs from around his hips and recaptured her footing. Once back on her feet, she snaked her

way down his torso, slowly sinking until she was kneeling before him.

Looking up at him through hooded lids, her hands made quick work of unbuttoning his pants and sliding them, along with his boxers, from his hips. The movement released his throbbing erection, which she smoothly captured with her wet and waiting lips. She closed her eyes as she pulled him deep into her mouth and ran her tongue roughly over his head, basking in the feel and taste of his velvety, soft skin.

Renji loudly groaned while his hands flew to her head. He cut the band holding her hair with his claw and fisted her hair, using it to pull her slowly down his length and guide her pace. He quivered against her when she released her tongue from her mouth and began to glide it over his sack after each of his heavy thrusts.

Her hands flew up to his hips and assisted in his fevered, pumping motions.

It was when she intentionally began to moan deep in her throat, the vibrations of which rolled over the head of his cock, that he seemed to give up all control, throwing his head back and calling out her name.

"Risa, baby, I'm going to come," he bit out in warning, between his harsh, panting breaths.

She responded by wrapping her arms tightly around his ass and taking him down to the hilt, sucking down on him hard.

Renji cried out, his body swaying from the intensity of his explosive orgasm. As he released his seed into her, his hands firmly held her in place.

Risa held her position while she felt his manhood pulse inside of her, and she worked quickly to swallow down all he offered. As she did, she softly rumbled against him in approval. The vibrations ghosted over him, greatly intensifying his orgasm.

She stayed this way until Renji's muscles softened along with his hold on her hair. Once he released her, she gently slid the length of him from her mouth and tenderly kissed the head of his manhood before looking back up at him.

Renji was peering down at her from hooded lids.

Slowly standing, she took his clawed hand in hers as she led him through the dark to her bedroom. Once there, she stopped before her

bed as Renji approached her, once again taking her mouth with his in a passionate kiss.

His hands worked their way over her torso and made quick work of removing her bra. He then arched her back and hungrily took her breasts with his mouth. As he suckled her, his hands made quick work of undoing her pants. He released her only to slowly drop to his knees and peel the apparel down with him. Once she was freed, he dipped between her thighs and nuzzled her pulsing bud with his nose.

"You smell so fucking good." He flicked his tongue over her engorged nub.

Risa groaned and dropped her hands into his hair, pulling his face closer to her sex in response.

Renji ran his hands down her hips and the insides of her thighs, before gently snaking a finger inside of her. When she shuddered, he began to suck on her soft bud in a slow and lazy pace.

"Renji, God damn it! No," she cried, through huffed breaths. "I won't last. I need you. I want you."

He added a second finger and slowly twisted the two digits. Applying pressure to her G-spot, he gently rolled his teeth across her aching nub, causing her to jerk back in response.

"Are you fucking listening to me?" Her voice cracked as she struggled to subdue her impending climax.

Renji slowly withdrew his fingers from inside of her and roughly pushed her hips back, resulting in Risa landing on the bed behind her. He was then instantly on top of her, sliding his bulging erection over the slick and heated folds of her sex.

"Is this what you want, Risa?" he drawled out as his heat washed over her.

"I want you," she managed to get out, between gasps for air.

Renji's red eyes were staring down at her like a starving predator about to make quick work of injured prey.

"How? Tell me." He took her right nipple back into his mouth.

"I want... you inside of me," she sputtered, trying to make her mouth work in spite of what he was doing to her body.

He released her breast to, once again, meet her eyes. "Like this?" he seductively asked as he slowly pushed himself inside of her.

"Oh. Fuck. Jesus. I can't..." She struggled to breathe. "I'm going to—"

"Do you want me to stop, baby?" he whispered, now fully toying with her.

"No... I..." Risa's mind was quickly abandoning her.

"No? Do you want me to go slow?" He laid his full weight on top of her, nipping on her ear. "Is that what you want, *baby*?"

The way he kept saying 'baby' was driving her insane.

"Fuck me." She demandingly ran her hands down his back and dug her nails into his firm ass. "I want you to fuck me, Renji."

He didn't hesitate to fulfill her request as he raised his hips and began to furiously slam into her in response. "You are mine," he growled into her mouth as he assaulted her tongue with his. "Say it," he demanded.

"I. Belong. To. You," she groaned, managing to get out only one word at a time in between each of Renji's heavy thrusts.

"Tell me you love me," he commanded, his body tightening as he prepared to fall over the edge.

"I love you." She gasped as her orgasm exploded around her, her inner muscles clamping down on him viciously.

"I love you, too," he grit out before his own orgasm ripped through him.

Chapter 29

Risa didn't know how many minutes passed while she watched Renji hover over her, futilely attempting to stop a barrage of multiple orgasms.

"I don't know why this is happening..." He grunted as he once again exploded inside of her.

So far, she had counted five. She looked on in amusement as he tried to gain some type of control over his body.

"Oh, my... *God!*" His body stiffened above her.

Six. "Should I call a doctor?" she teased as she watched his body crumple over hers, shuddering yet again. *Seven.*

"No, I just... can't stop..." he growled as his muscles once again began to tighten.

"Just enjoy it, baby," she whispered into his ear, using her lowest and most seductive voice.

"Jesus, Risa... Mmm." He bit into the pillow underneath her.

Eight.

Renji was left panting for air, his body covered in sweat as he trembled. Sensing that he was finally done, she reached up and released his hair from its binding. She chose to spend his recovery time by running her fingers through the silken length of it.

Once he managed to regulate his breathing some, he rolled over, taking a still connected Risa with him. He shakily tried to shuffle them over the bed, which forced her to wrap her body around him when he stood up.

"Where are we going?" She giggled as she stared deeply into his now golden eyes.

"Where's your shower? Hurry up, or there's going to be a giant mess on your floor."

Risa's eyes went wide as she understood his meaning. She realized he was beginning to slide out of her. "All lights on!" she commanded, watching as the apartment responded by showering them in a warm glow from above. "Down that hallway and first door on the left." She pointed over his shoulder.

He briefly stumbled as he carefully tried to get to her bathroom.

"Should you really be putting the extra weight on your leg?" she worriedly asked.

"I'll be fine, I heal quickly. Plus, you barely weigh anything anyway. You've lost way too much weight recently." He brought them into the large walk-in shower and finally released her.

Risa set the temperature and activated the shower, engulfing them in a warm onslaught from the multiple heads above. She then poured a small amount of her shampoo into her hand before reaching up to work it through Renji's hair.

"You're going to smell like lavender. Sorry." She scratched her nails against his scalp and pulled the suds through to the ends of his hair. She repeated the process on her own hair as he lathered up with her soap.

"Should I be concerned when you change like that?" she asked, referring to his previous demonic state. "That was a little scary," she admitted as she remembered how dangerous demons became when they went into bloodlust.

"The only time it would be dangerous would be if I were to fly into a fit of rage. But, more so for others. Never for you. I would never hurt you, Risa. There'd never be a point where you wouldn't be able to get through to me. My instincts would never allow me to harm you," he softly said. "And to clarify, what you saw just now wasn't rage. Don't forget that this isn't my true form. Wolf demons disguise themselves to look like humans," he explained as he sweepingly motioned over his body.

"So *that* was your true form?"

"No, that's what happens when I let myself go. That form is only brought about by strong emotion. My true form is that of a wolf."

"I'd love to see that one day," she honestly said.

"One day, you will," he promised. "Just know that I could never hurt you. I'm sorry if I scared you," he tenderly said as he pulled her body against his chest and stared down into her face.

"It only did at first until you reassured me. I'm actually pretty okay with it."

"What *is* truly scary are those purification powers of yours," he mumbled. "One hit from that white light, and I'm a goner. How well are you able to control them?" He placed a kiss upon her forehead.

"I haven't ever used them in this lifetime. I've never needed to. It's a completely different kind of channeling in comparison to my blue protective, tracking, and explosive powers. White purification light won't come forth unless it's directly called upon. So, I don't think there will be any issues. But, I certainly have to practice more... now." She thought back to her recent bout with Emica and instantly felt ill.

I have to be careful, or I could kill him.

"Have you put any thought into where you'd like to stay during your month of recovery and during your Alpha Team trial?" she asked, trying to change the current morbid subject. "You're more than welcome to stay with me. I'd love to have you, but I don't want you to feel crowded. If you want your own space, I'd understand, and an apartment can easily be assigned to you."

"I don't care where I stay as long as I'm with you."

"Are you sure? You're going to go from living as a sleeper agent out in the real world to living on a base. This is going to be a *huge* adjustment Renji. Trust me, it can be suffocating at first."

"I'll be fine as long as I'm with you," he promised. "I love you, Ri—"

Before he could finish the endearing admission, Risa pressed her index finger gently against his lips, silencing him.

"My name..." she whispered as her sparkling blue eyes bored into his honey-colored orbs. "Is Amari. Amari Yagami." She withdrew her finger from his lips. "Risa is dead, Renji."

Renji's brows furrowed and his expression slowly saddened as it finally dawned on him that the woman he was holding in his arms once had her *own* identity before joining *ROOT*. Her soul was one that he *remembered*, but, just as her body was completely different from the woman's that he once knew, her life in *this time* was completely different as well.

This woman was born into a different world to different parents who gave her a different name. She grew up with different experiences, and she felt completely different things.

She *wasn't* Risa.

"I'm... I'm so sorry," he sputtered. "All of this time I've—"

"I know. Don't worry about it. It's okay. I don't mind that you call me by that name. I actually really like it. It was the name you always used in all of my dreams of you, and it is the name of my previous self," she admitted. "But, please don't say those three special words to me, unless they are really meant for *me*," she softly requested.

Renji released the breath he didn't know he was holding and slowly brought his lips down to hers. He took her mouth in a soft kiss before breaking away and looking back into her eyes.

"I'm in love with you, *Amari*," he devotedly said. "I am in love with your soul. I always have been. And I can't wait to learn everything about who *you* are now," he stressed.

She beamed at him. "Thank you. I can't wait to learn everything about who you are now, too."

Renji released his hold on her and finished hosing off under the shower's spray.

"Since I'm going to be living here, you're going to have to show me around the base."

"Of course. I'll take you around in the morning. In the meantime, are you hungry, Renji? The base has room service. I have a menu in the kitchen if you're interested."

"You don't cook?" he asked, wondering how any food she prepared would taste.

"Hell no. I just got you back. The last thing I want to do is kill you with my cooking. I usually eat on the go anyway. I never really had time to learn to cook." She rinsed the last traces of soap off of her body.

He chuckled. "I'd be happy to teach you one day, so when you finally become an adult and need to feed yourself, you'll know what to do."

She playfully punched him in the arm before she killed the spray and exited the shower. She walked several feet before she wrapped herself in a towel and chucked another at his head as he made to follow her.

Unfortunately for her, he quickly caught it and wrapped it around his waist.

"Come on, I'll give you the tour," she said once he caught up with her, grabbing his hand and leading the way.

While Risa took him into each of the apartment's large rooms, Renji realized that *ROOT* team leaders were treated with a certain quality of luxury.

The home was spacious and state of the art, including an A.I. system that would regulate all the electronics, the temperature, and anything using the electricity. The kitchen and dining rooms appeared to have never been used. The living room was large and cozy with a large flat-screen TV at the center, which was surrounded by a giant, white wrap around couch. The bathroom he was just in included a Jacuzzi tub and a separate stand up shower, along with two vanities. The bedroom contained a large king-size bed and two mahogany nightstands. There were two large matching dressers across from the bed, along with a giant walk-in closet off to the side.

Once *Amari* finished the tour, she went off to find the food service menu, and Renji took the opportunity to investigate the living room further. There was a large bookshelf with a fair amount of leadership books and a ridiculous amount of fantasy romance novels within. He also noticed a few educational books about wolves and wolf behavior.

Interesting choice.

He then turned his attention to the numerous pictures that littered another small shelf in the main hallway. He noticed that most of the photographs were of her with her team in different locations all over the world.

If I'm going to stay here, I want some pictures of us up, he thought as his mate reentered the room.

As the couple took care of ordering dinner, she fired up her laptop and expectantly pushed it over to him.

"You're going to have to order clothes. They'll be delivered by morning. Pick whatever you want. *ROOT* will pick up the tab."

As the wolf demon got to work picking out his wardrobe, *Amari* pulled out her phone to check through her work messages. Once up

to date, she sent an email to Mystic to schedule daily training sessions for Renji.

You may not be able to do any physical training for the next month, but you will be able to start doing the psychic link training with Mystic immediately. It's going to be harder than any physical exercise you've ever done.

The subject of training brought a random thought into her head, and she sent out an email to General Hush in light of it.

"Requesting permission for Alpha Team to potentially use wolves in reconnaissance efforts, much like the Tokyo and Osaka police forces do."

Only a minute passed before the General responded.

"Where would they be stationed? At the base?"

"I don't want them kept in crates or in a kennel. I want them to be free, only calling upon the animals when needed."

"If you can figure out how to do that, then I'll approve the request."

She huffed. She lived in South Korea for a long time. She knew that the Dobongsan nature preserve was reasonably close to their location outside of Seoul. It had a healthy wolf population and was only four miles away.

"I'm going to take Fang to the Dobongsan nature preserve tomorrow to get his thoughts. The preserve is close enough to be accessed often."

"Okay. Report back tomorrow."

That takes care of that, she thought, smiling.

"Hey, Renji!" she shouted over her shoulder. "How would you feel about using your very own pack of wolves to assist us in reconnaissance efforts?"

Chapter 30

Green eyes peeked out from the clearing's outskirts, intensely studying him as he made his way over to the animal. The gray and white wolf sniffed at the air before barking and leaping out from the forest's confines and into the clearing, meaning to greet him.

Renji had been working with this specific pack for almost a month now. The alpha male, who he named Kiba, was a young and temperamental animal that reminded him much of his younger self. The animal was fast to connect with him and had introduced him to the remainder of his pack, which was currently six wolves strong. The alpha female, Tsume, was pregnant with her first litter, and the pack was anxiously awaiting the new pups' arrival.

Renji scratched the wild animal behind the ear as a way of greeting before it began frantically barking, alerting him to the birth of the puppies. After the declaration, it shot through the trees to proudly show him the litter.

Not sure Tsume is going to be okay with that.

Kiba was young and was apparently going to learn the hard way how females reacted to *any* intrusive visitation attempts on their newborn pups.

Give her some time. When they're a little older, she'll introduce them to the pack. It's not up to you.

Renji followed Kiba, keeping his distance as the alpha male made a beeline for the alpha female's den. Only a moment passed before he heard vicious snarling followed by frantic yipping. Kiba reappeared a few seconds later with his head down and a slight gash on his nose.

That's pretty much how that goes. Renji laughed.

The pack's remaining members slowly came forward, wagging their tails. He knelt down and allowed each of the wolves to approach him.

All took turns greeting him in order of their ranking within the pack.

In another week, he would be taking the animals with him on a mock mission, the first of many training sessions he'd be having with

this particular group. The animals were interested in the work and seemed very eager to please him.

My life has changed so much in this past month, Renji thought, indulging in his newfound happiness as he watched the wolves before him.

Renji finally told General Hush about the existence of wolf demons and admitted he was one. He also explained his clan's history and their current place within society. The information was passed along to the Intelligence Department, and Hush promised, on behalf of *ROOT*, to try to help him preserve his people in any way he could. The revelation was actually quite freeing as Renji no longer felt he needed to hide who he was, and that suited him just fine.

He'd made several visits back to Japan, negotiating and reconnecting with the wolf demons in the police force. It felt nice to be with his people again, not as a leader, but as a part of their family. For the most part, the wolf demons were remorseful for their past actions against humanity and wanted a second chance to make things right. Renji was able to proposition the clan, inviting any member that wanted to assist in protecting the world, to contact him for possible placement within *ROOT*.

Roukan was even promoted to the new Police Commissioner, filling in the gap created by Emica's death.

During his many trips, he was slowly moving his things to the apartment that he now shared with Amari, which he considered to be his new home.

Unfortunately, his mate was only able to take two weeks off before needing to return to work again. They spent the time she did have doing anything and everything that normal couples would do. She took him around South Korea, exploring the sites, museums, parks, and the food with him. Renji managed to fill their apartment with numerous photos of the two of them from all of their touristic exploits.

With exception to his quick travels back to Japan, Renji worked with Mystic every day. The subconscious suppression exercises he'd been doing were challenging and left him with a splitting headache each time. However, he was getting progressively better at focusing his conscious mind, and soon, he would be involved in a training

session with the team so he could practice communicating with multiple people.

His knee completely healed, and he would be officially starting his trial with the Reconnaissance Department's infamous Alpha Team in another week. For the first time in a long time, he was a little nervous, but more excited over anything else.

Renji momentarily thought back upon his old life, wondering if he could even call it a life at all. He now understood that he was merely existing and trying to pass the time. He'd been welcoming death as a way to end his long and unsatisfying existence on Earth.

How long has it been since I felt so alive? he wondered.

A memory of Amari haphazardly falling off her horse when the head priest of her temple once challenged him came to mind. The memory instantly brought forth mirthful laughter from deep within him.

Since I was last with her, over five hundred years ago, he answered. *My life was always and will forever remain entwined with hers,* he thought, devotedly. *And, now she's going to be my boss.* He mentally sighed at the realization. *I'll always be the boss in the bedroom though, so I'm sure it'll balance itself out,* he smugly thought as he chuckled.

As if she were aware of his musings, his cell phone rang. The sound earned him several confused looks from his new wolf pack.

"Hey," he said, smiling as he answered the phone.

"Where are you right now? I'm free for the next two hours!" she seductively whispered.

"Not far, I can meet you at home within twenty minutes," he said as his voice became a low and smooth whisper.

"See you then. Don't leave me waiting. I'll punish you for it," she threatened, with a hint of a smile in her voice before hanging up the line.

Boss in the bedroom indeed, he thought, grinning from ear-to-ear as he made his way back to his car, speeding off to get to her.

About The Author

Diana Leston grew up in NY and has been an avid fan of reading fiction since she was a young child. In 2018, mostly on a whim, she tried her hand at writing the type of stories that she wanted to read.

After sharing her work on a small free readership platform and receiving fan encouragement, she decided to publish her works – several paranormal romance novels about gifted secret agents and their quest for the protection of world peace.

Diana is a married mother of two young children and works in the advertising/marketing industry. She is a firm believer that everyone, regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, and species, is beautiful. Everything and everyone in this world is unique, and therefore, exactly how they were meant to be. This belief of tolerance and understanding is prominent in all of her works.

Her private interests include fantasy and anime, and all things Japanese!

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