I’m Your Man

by MistressKat

Summary

When a case requires Will to demonstrate a surprising skillset, his adaptability makes Ethan reconsider the practice of putting people in neatly labelled boxes. (Or: Agent Brandt, Super Switch)

Notes

Look, so I only saw MI: Ghost Protocol relatively recent and basically walked out of that experience with a conviction that Will Brandt is the switchiest switch to ever switch. Largely because of this scene (nngghh look at how he goes from bamf to yielding in five seconds ajkfdjkfdjks). Also when a movie gives you a line ‘Next time, I’ll get to seduce the rich guy’, it’s pretty much mandatory that you take it and run like the wind. The gay bdsm wind. So, this is authorial wish fulfilment basically. I REGRET NOTHING. Thank you to moth2fic for excellent beta. And thank you to pushkin666 for help with identifying suitable London neighbourhoods. I hasten to add that the club and pub mentioned are entirely fictional. Title refers to the Leonard Cohen song of the same name.

If you want a lover
I’ll do anything you ask me to
And if you want another kind of love
I'll wear a mask for you
If you want a partner
Take my hand
Or if you want to strike me down in anger
Here I stand
I'm your man

© Leonard Cohen, 1988

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The next time comes around much quicker than Will expected. Not that he’s complaining.

He’s in Washington, playing a political aide, getting increasingly bored and contemplating the ethics of just taking out the dickweed he’s supposedly working for. Surely, it would be a service to one’s country, nay the whole of humanity, to just discreetly dispose of Senator Ellis in the Potomac. The man isn’t even corrupt, just lazy and smallminded, content to waste his time and taxpayers’ money with long business lunches and expensive hookers.

“Your two o’clock appointment is here,” Will says, showing ‘Miss Moorland’ – not her real name – into the office.

“Ah, wonderful!” Ellis comes from around the desk to greet his ‘client’ – hah, the irony! – both hands extended like a kid with a new toy.

“Will that be all, sir?” Will asks, grimacing at the honorific inwardly.

“Yes, Bellson. Miss Moorland and I have many things to… discuss.” Ellis actually winks at Will at that, like he’s expecting some kind of ‘good old boys’ club’ points for his behaviour. “Make sure we’re not disturbed.”

Will nods and quietly closes the door behind himself. He resists the urge to call in a tip to the tabloids and instead heads to the men’s room. Time to check in.

Truth of the matter is that his ‘mission’ here is little more than routine surveillance, the main purpose of which seems to be to see if he can still hack it in the field. Because apparently, helping save the whole goddamn organisation wasn’t enough to prove that his time out in analysis hadn’t somehow made him forget which end of the gun to hold.

Will quirks a smile to himself in the mirror, thinking that if anything he now knew much better which end of the gun to hold and when, Ethan’s little exposé of Will’s skills in that area coming to mind.

He washes his hands and then pulls out exactly five paper towels, watching the mini-disk drop neatly into his palm. Whatever were they going to do when the country finally switched to the more environmentally friendly air driers in public bathrooms? Then again, that probably wasn’t going to happen until after he’d retired. Or died.

Possibly of boredom.
Will locks himself in one of the cubicles, pulls out a player and earbuds from his suit pocket and settles to listen to another recording of ‘keep doing what you’re doing like a good boy while we think of what to do with you’.

Instead of some nameless handler, the voice reaching his ears is instantly familiar, low and oddly intimate, listened to in the relative privacy of a bathroom stall. Surprising too, considering how they’d left it the last time they’d spoken. Or shouted, all without actually raising their voices of course.

“Billy, my friend,” Ethan says and he’s calm and jovial now. Will can hear the barely there smirk and allows himself an eye-roll. “Sorry to interrupt your internship, but I’m afraid Uncle Winston has taken a turn for the worse. Seems the years of smoking have finally gotten to him.”

Something going on in London, Will translates.

“Cousin Lenny and Cousin Martha are already at his bedside but you know you’re practically part of the family so it would be good if you would come.”

So, Benji and Jane could use some reinforcements.

“There’s a ticket waiting for you at the usual place.” Some of the humour leeches out of Ethan’s voice and there’s a pause, long enough that Will thinks the recording is finished, until he continues. “I know maybe you don’t want to,” Ethan says. The words come slower now, like Ethan isn’t sure if he should say them, but still crystal clear on the pristine disc created for no other purposes than to give Will this message. “But I think you should come. I… We all want you to.”

There are a few seconds of Ethan breathing, until the recording cuts off and the usual warning about destroying the disc comes on.

For the first time in his career, Will feels a twinge of regret at following that particular protocol.

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Ethan arrives in London only two hours before Will’s flight, or what will be his flight if the man is actually on it – Ethan hasn’t had a chance to check if Agent Brandt has accepted the mission and at this stage he feels a perverse need to just wait and see. Regardless, their flights land at different airports so he picks up a rental and heads straight to the city. Well, as straight as one can ever head to London which doesn’t so much stop or start than roll out across the land in waves of terraced housing and corner stores and history that clings to every surface with crumbling masonry and blue plaques. There’s a certain comfort in that, in the sense of insignificance it gives him, about his own role in the grand, long long-term view of things.

The safe house is in Hackney; a top floor apartment in a converted Georgian townhouse, full of young professionals spending their years between university and marriage paying a rent that very few can actually afford. Ethan parks around the corner and then circles the block, buying fresh samosas from a tiny shop before trotting up the stairs and knocking.

“Lunch delivery,” he shouts, grinning when the doorway fills with Benji’s face, his hand out of sight, holding a gun if he’s got any sense.

“You’re late,” he says, beckoning Ethan in once he sees that he’s alone, snatchting the snacks with one hand, clicking the safety on with another.
“Well I tried to get an earlier flight but they wouldn’t let me on until I’d unbuckled myself from the explosive belt.”

“What?” Benji asks, still new enough to fieldwork to be horrified.

Jane just *tsks* from the sofa, craning her neck back to eyeball Ethan over the armrest. “Getting sloppy in your old days?”

“Absolutely,” Ethan agrees amenably, knowing that refusing to banter back will annoy Jane more. It’s his duty as the team leader to keep up morale and all that.

He walks the apartment out of habit, checking the layout and exits (tiny balcony off the lounge, close enough to its neighbour to swing across if need be), before circling back to where Benji has set up the command centre.

“So,” Ethan says, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow. “What do we have?”

“I thought you got the file?”

“I did. And now I want a proper report from you two. You’ve been here for over a week, you should have a better idea by now of what we’re looking at than whatever was in the document HQ sent.”

“Of course!” Benji visibly straightens in his seat, clearly about to launch into a lecture when Jane interrupts.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Will?”

“I don’t know,” Ethan says. “Should we?”

The other two stare at him like he just spat on a puppy. Ethan grimaces, rubbing a hand over his face. He’s getting snappy which means he’s ten shades past tired. “Sorry,” he says. “I mean… Do we know if he’s coming?”

“You don’t know?” Benji asks at the same time as Jane states, “You asked him, right? So he’s coming.”

Well. Ethan guesses it’s good that *someone* is confident about it. “Okay,” he says. “Well, he should only be a couple of hours behind me if he was on the flight. We’ll do a proper briefing when he gets here. In the meantime…” Ethan stretches, trying to loosen his knotted muscles. “I’m going to take a nap.”

He heads toward the bedrooms, picks one of the unoccupied ones, Jane’s “Let’s hope he wakes up less grumpy” reaching his ears just as he’s about to close the door behind himself. It is obviously meant to be heard, so Ethan takes a moment to stick his arm back out, middle finger extended, before collapsing face first onto the bed.

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He wakes up to Will’s voice.
It’s dim in the bedroom with the curtains drawn, though Ethan’s internal clock tells him it’s only the afternoon. He’s been asleep for three hours, which is about twenty short of the actual rest he could use, but still better than nothing. He may actually have a chance of keeping everything he thinks off his face. Which is probably a good thing if this mission involves any undercover work. And let’s be honest, Ethan hasn’t been on a mission that didn’t for a long time.

He lies in the semi-dark, listening to the hum of the traffic, his thoughts taking a while to coalesce into something coherent. Laughter drifts in from the front room, Will’s voice the loudest, and settles heavy and warm in Ethan’s chest, until he’s smiling stupidly to himself.

Will came. Of course he did. Ethan had known he would (well, he’d been ninety percent sure, seventy-five at the least) because this is his team and he knows his team.

(Later, had Ethan thought to reflect back on that particular conviction, he would have been forced to kick himself in the nuts for being wrong, so very wrong. But that would be later and by then Ethan was busy kicking himself for entirely new and exciting reasons.)

Slowly, Ethan gets up and pads to the door, nudging it open. The conversation is clearer now, Benji in a middle of a story involving Ewoks that has both Jane and Will in stitches. Ethan walks closer on silent feet, finally coming to rest against the doorway.

Will’s back is to him and Benji is too involved in his tale to notice, but Jane’s eyes flick over immediately, lingering for a second or two before flicking away again. She gives no outward sign that she’s seen him, and Ethan is left with a slightly uncomfortable feeling that she knows exactly why he prefers to observe unnoticed for the moment and is indulging him.

Will looks good, even from behind. It’s been a couple of months since their last mission, a couple more since the one before that. The four of them make a good team, a god damn effective team that gets results, and for all its faults IMF is usually pretty good at taking advantage of that.

Ethan says ‘usually’ because, from what he can tell, between their ops Will’s skills are being wasted on stuff any rookie could do. Or perhaps it’s something that Will has requested; a little down time between being kicked around the globe by that crazy Hunt. Ethan couldn’t exactly blame him after what happened in Tokyo… He grimaces inwardly, remembering the terse not-fight during the last night, target secured and all of them packed, just killing time before their respective flights.

Ethan had wanted to make the team permanent, still does. He’d spoken to Jane and Benji separately, both of them on board, just needing time to tie up various loose ends. Will though… Will had been evasive, reluctant to commit fulltime, unable to give a clear reason not to. Ethan had pushed, angry and disappointed and unwilling to admit either of those things to himself. Not then. Funny the kind of perspective two months undercover with a Columbian drug cartel gave a man. Being strapped with explosives and hung from a bridge in the middle of a jungle had provided an unexpected opportunity for some self-reflection – never one of his strongest qualities – and Ethan could now admit that the whole thing hadn’t exactly been his finest hour.

He’d pushed hard, because he’d wanted Will to say yes. He’d pushed hard despite knowing it would only cause Will to close up and retreat. The more aggressive Ethan had gotten, the blander Will’s expression had turned, until it had been like talking to a wall. So yeah, Tokyo could have ended better. Ethan had thought twice about calling Will onto this mission, not because he didn’t want to, but because he was starting to suspect he wanted too much, and suddenly the prospect of Will not accepting was akin to Chinese water torture; a slow, steady drip of doubt that had eaten at his mind
all the way from the moment he’d sent the recording. Perhaps Will had decided he never wanted to see Ethan’s face again. Perhaps he was rethinking his career plans. He’d been one hell of an analyst as well, the eggheads back at the HQ would probably jump at a chance to get him back.

Perhaps Ethan needs to get a grip and stop standing in the doorway like some pathetic stalker.

“Hey,” he says, voice still scratchy from sleep.

Jane rolls her eyes and sends a lazy wave in his direction while Benji jumps slightly in surprise. “Good nap?” he asks, like he really wants to know. That’s Benji for you, genuinely interested in the minutiae of people’s lives.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ethan says, then, “Hi Will.”

Will has taken his time to turn around, choosing to stand up first. He’s wearing a suit, almost silvery grey, perfectly fitted as usual. Ethan can’t remember ever seeing him in anything but shirt and trousers at the very most and briefly wonders if the man is allergic to casual wear.

Will’s expression, when he’s finally facing Ethan, is somewhat wary but not openly hostile so Ethan is going to take what’s given and make the most of it. That’s what IMF agents are trained to do, after all.

“I’m glad you could make it,” he says, striding over and sticking out his hand. For a split second he thinks Will won’t take it, that offering it was the wrong thing to do, too formal, but then Will’s warm hand grasps his, brief and firm.

“Washington was getting boring,” he says. “Knew you guys could provide the entertainment.” He looks around, including Jane and Benji in the comment, his smile noticeably easier when it’s not directed at Ethan.

“Well, we hope not to disappoint,” Ethan says, unable to suppress a grin. “Good to have you back.” He grips Will’s shoulder briefly before turning to the others. “Good to have the team back. So,” he claps his hands together, shaking off last of the sleep, “What have you got for us, Benji?”

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Will sits back down, this time on the sofa next to Jane, while Ethan perches on the chair arm and Benji pulls out a row of photos, projecting them onto the conveniently bare magnolia walls. It takes him a while to get his brain into gear, the jetlag hovering somewhere at the back of his mind, while part of him is still feeling oddly jittery after facing Ethan. All in all, it had gone better than he’d expected, not that he knows exactly what he’d expected, just… Not that, not the easy acceptance, the almost-relief that had flickered across Ethan’s face when Will had taken his hand.

“So, you’ve all read the file,” Benji starts, “Men with too much money and too little loyalty, international trade masking international espionage, champagne, blow and government secrets, blah blah, everyone wants to be James Bond.”

“Little boys playing spy games,” Jane says, sounding disparaging.

“And getting killed.” Benji pulls up a photo of a corpse, face down in what looks like a backroom of
a bar, neck twisted at an unnatural angle. “And killed. And killed.” He throws up a projection after projection of men, all young and wearing expensive suits, all very obviously dead.

Finally, the next photo is of someone living. The man is in his 30s, or at least looks like it, although something is making Will think he’s older than that. He too is dressed in a smart suit, talking to a phone on the street corner in what is obviously a candid shot from some distance. He’s fit with gym muscle, and has what Will’s mom would call ‘an interesting face’; not conventionally handsome but arresting. There’s a set to his shoulders that is two degrees north of confident and straight into arrogant.

“Meet Mr Ryan McMullan, senior analyst of Chameleon Incorporated.” Benji shows them a few more pictures: Ryan at a café, Ryan walking with a briefcase, Ryan downing a pint. “Born in Salford to a middle-class family, economics degree from Manchester University, moved to London at age of twenty-five and has been making good progress on the career ladder since.” He flips to what is obviously a professional profile photo from the company website. “No criminal record. No girlfriend, though he hangs out with the Chameleon Incorporated young and beautiful crowd aplenty.” There is a shot of Ryan sharing cocktails with a table full of people, all of them looking like they’d stepped out of a magazine spread.

“Tell them what Mr McMullan is guilty of, other than being a rich dickwad,” Jane urges.

“Maybe nothing,” Benji says. “Maybe something. Let’s look at all of these photos again, shall we, class?”

This time he pulls up pictures of the dead men side by side with those of Ryan with various people, taken in cafes, clubs, bars, even what look like business lunches.

“He has really bad luck with his friends, it seems,” Ethan comments.

“Doesn’t he just?” Benji brings up a collage of documents next: names, dates, signed business deals, travel tickets, most of them to mainland China. All the major cities are represented: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin… The rest of the Far East is also represented. There are scans of passports stamped in Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok… “They got around though. All the victims were working for companies with legitimate business connections in Asia. And all the trips here,” he taps at the projection, clicking on the mouse to bring up a cascade of flight details, “are legitimate as well, paid and organised by the companies the victims worked for.”

Benji clears the screen, leaving only McMullan’s profile photo and his professional smile staring at them. “The funny thing, all of them ended up dead within two weeks of returning. After they had a chance to catch up with their good friend Ryan.”

“And all of this has coincided with a sudden influx of sensitive information ending up in the wrong hands.” Ethan sounds supremely unsurprised.

“So he’s using his friends as mules,” Will says. “But where’s he getting the information in the first place?”

“Chameleon Incorporated has a number of government contracts,” Benji answers. “With multiple governments, in fact. I do not believe their company name is even a little bit ironic.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Ah, privatisation. Gotta love it.”
“We still don’t get why he’s killing his associates though.” Jane leans forward, gesturing with her hands. “He’s obviously recruited them and they’ve completed the handover successfully. Why terminate the relationship?”

“Risk management,” Ethan says, getting up to pace as he talks. “Think about it. International espionage sounds exciting and glamorous when someone is telling you about it in a club over martinis…”

“Shaken, not stirred!” Benji pipes up, clearly unable to resist.

“…but having done it once, reality sets in. Regrets often set in as well.”

“So,” Jane summarises, “Ryan steals secrets, passes secrets to gullible friends, who pass them on to the highest bidder. Ryan collects the payment and cuts off the middlemen. Literally.”

“It is pretty clever.” Benji has turned back to the computer, clicking away with intent. “He’s not the one travelling abroad, he’s not the one directly selling the goods, he gets to pocket the money and keep his hands clean. Well,” he adds, with a wry twist to his mouth, “figuratively.”

“The money…” Will’s mind is turning things over, his analyst instincts already kicking in. “There’s got to be a trail.”

“Sure,” Benji says. “There’s got to be. It’s just very, very well hidden. That’s why I was sent in, to do some digging, but – and trust me, I hate to admit this – so far I’ve found nothing.” There’s an unhappy hunch to Benji’s shoulders, unaccustomed to defeat.

“You’ll get there,” Will says, and the others nod. Benji is the best. He wouldn’t be in the team otherwise.

“Damn right!” Benji seems momentarily buoyed by the show of faith but then slumps again. “But not fast enough. And since there is nothing but circumstantial evidence to tie him to the murders…” He turns to Jane.

“I’ve been working on him for the last week or so,” Jane explains. “Margaret ‘Maggie’ Phillips, executive data analyst, just transferred from Atlanta.” She affects a southern twang. “And looking for some excitement in this drab city.”

She drops the role as quickly as she donned it, explaining in her normal voice, “So far nothing but a lot of cocktails and meaningless chats. I’ve talked about my up and coming business trip to Singapore until I’m dry at the mouth and all he’s given me is some tips for good restaurants to try. I believe,” she purses her lips, hand dropping absently to finger her hip holster, “Mr McMullan doesn’t quite believe in gender equality when it comes to spy games.”

“Hence, reinforcements.” Benji waves a hand at Ethan and Will.

They look at each other for three long heart beats. Will can practically hear the gears in Ethan’s head turning, his eyes flicking to Will’s suit jacket that’s hanging over a chair by now, eyebrow quирking in an almost audible ‘well, don’t you look the part’.

Will thinks about arguing the point, but Ethan is right. Besides… “Don’t you have local contacts you can tap for some intel?”
Ethan grins, wide and brilliant, like their little silent but shared decision-making has just made his day. “Oh I do,” he says. “Tomorrow. When Whitehall opens. Now…” He looks around, still smiling. “I fancy some fish and chips for dinner.”

Benji and Jane groan, protesting that they’ve had that three times already since arriving, and making a case for some Indian instead.

They end up placing four different take-away orders: fish and chips for Ethan, chicken kebab for Jane, lamb Rogan Josh for Benji, and shrimp Chow Mein for Will. (“What?” he asks when the others stare at him, “It felt appropriate.” “I think it’s the opposite of appropriate.” “Shut up and eat your disgusting mushy peas, Hunt.”)

The evening is surprisingly pleasant, though that may be because Jane and Benji are keeping the easy flow of conversation going, catching up on everyone’s news and coaxing both Will and Ethan to share some of their exploits from the time they’ve all been apart. If it had been just the two of them…

Will shakes the thought away before it has a chance to finish. Mostly because he doesn’t want to know how it ends. Instead, he focuses on his dinner, on the way the corners of Benji’s eyes crinkle when he laughs, how Jane’s shoulders seem looser every time he sees her, like she’s letting go of the past one small chunk at a time. He doesn’t get distracted by Ethan’s smile, or the curve of his spine when he sits cross-legged on the floor like a kid at playtime, doesn’t dwell on the gaps in his story about his time in Columbia, wondering just how many close calls he’s missed, just because Will wasn’t there to watch Ethan’s back. (Except he does, and does, and definitely does, because he said ‘no’ and that’s on him.)

They eat dinner. They exchange stories. They watch BBC news. Normal night. Or as normal as it ever gets.

The apartment is big enough for everyone to have their own room, although Benji’s is mostly a place where he keeps his clothes and a lot of other gear, preferring to sleep on the sofa and within touching distance of the main computer set-up. He sends them all to bed around midnight, saying he needs his beauty sleep even if the rest of them don’t. Jane pecks them all on the cheek before retiring to her room, which makes Will smile softly to himself, pleased to see her more open.

He follows Ethan down the corridor, figuring out which room is left for him when Ethan pushes open the door on the right. Will is determined to say a quick goodnight, but Ethan’s hand on his arm stops him. He drops it as soon as Will turns around and he determinedly does not miss it.

“I… I just wanted to say thank you.” It’s dark in the corridor, the only light coming through from the living room, so what little Will can make out Ethan’s expression is still cast in shadows.

“There’s no need,” Will says, trying for casual and probably missing by a mile.

“There is.” Ethan makes an aborted movement like he wants to grab Will’s arm again.

Will makes himself stay still.

“There is need to apologise as well,” Ethan says.

*That* makes Will flinch. “No.” It comes out harsh, all jagged hurt that he doesn’t even bother hiding. “There really isn’t.”
He turns around, goes to the empty bedroom and closes the door. He doesn’t slam it, but only because suddenly he is too exhausted to have the energy.

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Ethan gets to Whitehall by half past eight in the morning. It’s a ridiculous time of course, there’s no way he can meet with any of his contacts until lunch time at the earliest. Even the most accommodating civil servant wouldn’t appreciate him showing up out of the blue before they’ve even had a chance to check their emails, much less down the requisite amount of caffeine to deal with them.

So instead of alienating his sources, Ethan finds an empty table (easier after nine) at one of the branded cafés, orders three espressos, and sends some ‘I’m in town, fancy a bite to eat’ emails from one of his anonymous accounts. He could’ve done all of this from the Hackney flat of course, but then he’d have had to face Will over breakfast and stilted conversation and Ethan would rather wear another explosive belt than do that right now.

So here he is, downing coffee in shots and wondering how their tentative truce has turned to shit so quickly. Short of apologising again, he’s not sure what to do. Plus, apologising for apologising seems kind of… Overkill? Desperate? Stupid? All three, Ethan decides finally, ordering a fourth espresso and knocking it back like it’s cheap whisky.

Luckily, his phone vibrates with an incoming message and within minutes he has three meetings with three separate contacts set up for later in the day. It’s nice weather and Ethan wanders into St James’s Park, walking and people watching to kill time. Part of being a successful agent is learning how to hurry up and wait and not go crazy doing it.

Just before he has to head back to his first date, he calls the safe house.

“Hey, Ethan!” Benji says. “Do you want me to put you on speaker?”

“No! There’s no need.” He softens his instinctual bark. “Got nothing to report yet, just calling to check in.”

“Ooookay… You know I’ve got your location, right? Look to your four o’clock, up, up… There you are. Wave at the family!”

Ethan rolls his eyes and gives the CCTV camera a subtle middle-finger.

“Charming,” Benji comments. “But hey listen, Jane got an invite to Club Sen— what? Okay, just wait, I’m going to, just hold your horses…”

There’s a brief sound of struggle and then Jane comes on the line. “Is it nice, spending a lazy day in the park while the rest of us are working? Did you feed the ducks?”

“Funny.” Ethan casts an eye over the people doing just that, identifying at least one MI6 agent, two who scream DI, and a Mossad agent arguing into her phone. She ought to be more careful, Ethan thinks, London isn’t exactly lacking in Hebrew speakers. There’s a pair of men sitting on a bench not too far away from the lake shore that also ping his radar, and hard. One of them is blond, wearing a
fussy tweed jacket and projecting an air of distracted benevolence, while the other one wouldn’t look out
of place among Mr McMullan’s party crowd, all slicked back hair, designer sunglasses and a suit
so black he looks like he’s come straight from a funeral, possibly yours.

“…going to go tonight. Benji’s got Will wired and—“

“What?” Ethan snaps back into the conversation guiltily. Jesus, what was wrong with him, losing
focus on a job like this. If it kept up he was going to get someone killed, probably himself. “Sorry,”
he says, “bad reception there for a bit. Can you say that again?”

Jane’s hum is full of doubt and irritation which Ethan more than deserves, but she repeats herself.
“Ryan texted me. Apparently, everyone is meeting at Club Senses tonight. And as luck would have
it, my friend and casual hook-up James ‘Jimmy’ Hamilton is visiting. He’ll be subletting my flat
while I’m gallivanting in Singapore, it’s only fair he’ll get the benefit of my social circle as well.”

“Jimmy and Maggie? Isn’t that selling it a bit thick?”

“We’re Americans. It’s practically expected.”

Ethan bites down on his objections. The whole thing makes sense. The downside of Jane’s ‘off to
Singapore’ ruse was that she’d actually have to disappear when her supposed trip was happening.
Setting up Will to take over and provide a target of correct gender for their misogynist bad guy to
recruit was the perfect plan.

Didn’t mean Ethan had to like it. “Where’s this club?”

“Knightsbridge. Where all the rich kids party.”

“Make sure Benji…”

“Yes, yes, what do you take me for?” Benji asks, coming back on line and sounding indignant.
“They’re both going with mics and cameras. If you’re back from your summer picnic in time, you’ll
get to watch it live with me. I’ll even make the popcorn.”

“I’ll have mine sweet.” Ethan is pretty sure he will be done in plenty of time to get back to Hackney
for the show.

“Heathen,” Benji says. “Catch you later.” The call cuts off and Ethan drops the phone into his
pocket, scanning his surroundings by habit. The Mossad agent is still there, now staring moodily at
the squabbling ducks, but the odd couple on the bench have vanished. Ethan looks around but can’t
see even a flash of tweed. He’d be more worried but doesn’t have the time, almost late for his first
meeting already.

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Contrary to his expectations, it’s almost midnight by the time Ethan makes it back to the safe house.
The first two of his information gathering lunches had been total losses – except for the truly
excellent Pad Thai he’d eaten – but the third one, a MoD contact from way, way back when Ethan
was still a wet behind the ears newbie, had turned out to have some solid info about exactly what
kind of work Chameleon Incorporated had been commissioned to do. That had led him to knock on
a few more doors around the city, and then a few more in the outskirts of it when he’d decided to follow the other end of the case and apply his spirit of inquiry on the question of where a guy like McMullan would subcontract his wetwork.

“How was Chelsea?” Benji asks, turning around to look as Ethan enters the flat. His face is illuminated in the blue-white glow of computer monitors, one of them showing a map of London with three dots. Ethan’s is back at their current location while Will’s and Jane’s seem to be moving steadily closer.

“How was Chelsea?” Benji asks, turning around to look as Ethan enters the flat. His face is illuminated in the blue-white glow of computer monitors, one of them showing a map of London with three dots. Ethan’s is back at their current location while Will’s and Jane’s seem to be moving steadily closer.

“Informative,” Ethan answers, tossing his jacket on the sofa. He’d done rounds at the seedier pubs near Kensington and Chelsea barracks, areas where ex-squaddies congregated. You could buy a hit almost anywhere in London but if you wanted it done right, it was best to go for someone who had some guaranteed professional experience. And were either broken or hardened or just plain bored enough to take your money and not ask questions.

“I’ll tell you about it when the others get in,” he continues, following his jacket and falling on to the sofa cushions with a grateful sigh.

“Should be soon enough, they’re in a cab. In the meantime…” Benji hands him a bowl which Ethan takes on instinct, discovering remains of popcorn. “How about the highlights, since you missed the full show?”

Ethan shoves a handful of popcorn into his mouth – it’s salted but he’ll take it, not having had any dinner – and twirls a greasy forefinger at Benji. “Roll it, Guillermo.”

“Here we have our hero and heroine, off to meet the dragon…” Benji pulls up what is clearly test footage for the cameras, taken at the flat, as Will’s camera captures Jane in her little black dress and red heels, while hers gets equally crisp footage of Will. Ethan has to swallow hard at Will’s outfit or risk choking on a piece of popcorn. It’s still a suit, unsurprisingly, but one that fits like a glove. As the clip plays, Will takes off his jacket, revealing a shirt of some shimmery grey-blue fabric that moulds itself over each contour of muscle in a way that is more than a little distracting.

“I don’t think I can run in these trousers without breaking some public indecency laws,” Will-on-camera says. He turns around as if trying to see behind himself and both Jane and Benji wolf-whistle.

“Stop complaining,” Jane’s voice says. “There’s not going to be any running tonight.”

The clip cuts off. Ethan pushes more popcorn into his mouth in lieu of talking, and Benji, sensing his mood, starts the next one.

This one is from the club. There’s a steady bass in the background, but the place is classy enough that the music doesn’t interfere with the conversation too badly.

“Maggie, darling!” a male voice shouts, and after a few seconds, Ryan comes into view. He leans close, presumably to kiss Jane’s cheek. “And who’s this?” he asks then.

Benji switches to Will’s camera then, giving Ethan a perfect view of Ryan’s face when he takes in the newcomer.

It’s all jovial curiosity on the surface but there’s something darker there, in the flick of his eyes over Will. Jane’s voice comes on in the background: “I told you I was bringing a friend. Jimmy and I go
Benji turns the recording off, queuing up the next clip. “And now for the big finale…” But before he has a chance to press play, the stars themselves spill through the door, sporting expressions in complete opposition to one another.

Jane looks like the proverbial cat that got the keys to the cream storage, while Will’s face is one of annoyed resignation.

“Behold!” Jane declares, throwing up her arms and kicking off her heels. “The triumphant troops return!”

“Hey,” Will says, raising a hand in Benji and Ethan’s general direction.

“I was just about to show Ethan the recording,” Benji says.

“Oh no, let me, let me, let me!” Jane practically skips to the computer screens striking a dramatic pose in front of them. “I would like to preface this moment with a few observations.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Will sighs, and then, to Ethan’s surprise, collapses onto the sofa next to him.

“There’s no need for this level of production.” Will’s shirt sleeves are rolled up, top two buttons undone. His hair is messy, as if someone had run their hands through it and tugged. “Ryan took the bait.” Will turns to Ethan when he says it, smile tired and genuine, offering their success like he’s making amends.

“Well done.” The approval is automatic but no less real for it. Ethan remembers to look at Jane at the last minute, including her in his congratulations.

She waves a hand. “Oh it was all Will. Trust me.” She grins. “So, like I said: a few short observations. One,” she raises an illustrative finger, “we indeed have Ryan close to hooked, and I feel confident that Will’s… recruitment, shall we say, is imminent. Two,” another finger follows, “turns out that Ryan isn’t perhaps as big of a sexist asshole as I first thought. He simply seems to like to mix business with pleasure, and I just don’t have the right equipment for the latter.”

Ethan feels his eyes widen when the penny drops. And then narrow when the other penny follows it, this one a whole lot weightier with the full implications of Jane’s revelation. He glances at Will, who is simply leaning his head back against the couch cushions, his eyes closed and a look of serene resignation on his face. It seems he’s given up on trying to ruin Jane’s moment.

“Incidentally, shame on all of us for our heteronormative assumptions about Ryan and his lack of girlfriend. Cleary IMF could use some diversity training.” She looks at Ethan meaningfully at that and he holds up his hands in supplication because yeah, fair point, they all missed the mark on that one and probably delayed solving the case by at least a week.

“Thirdly,” Jane holds up all three fingers briefly, before snagging her phone out of her purse and tapping a few keys, “I’d like to highlight tonight as the perfect example of that old adage ‘careful what you wish for’.

“What..?” Ethan frowns.

“Oh come on!” Will groans next to him, sitting up again.
Gleefully, Jane holds her phone aloft, playing a sound clip of Will’s voice going “Next time, I get to seduce the rich guy.”

“And so you shall!” Jane makes a twirly ‘my liege’ type of wave in Will’s direction, full of mirth and mockery, while Benji is laughing openly.

“Play it now,” Jane urges and before Ethan has a chance to digest what just happened, Ryan’s face fills one side of the monitor. Benji has synced both recordings so there’s another angle on the scene, from much further away. The close-up picks up the voice and some of Ryan’s expressions when he isn’t too near, but Jane’s camera shows both men properly, leaning against a high table by the fire exit. The overall effect is slightly disjointed but incredibly… illuminating, nonetheless.

“Maggie tells me you’re in data analysis too,” Ryan on the recording asks.

“That’s right.” Will’s voice is casual, the smile in it audible even though the second camera is too far to pick up the actual expression.

“A bit boring, eh?” Ryan’s body language is easy and open; one elbow on the table, hand curved around a glass, another in his trouser pockets.

“You think so?” Will tips his head to the side. “You’re in the same line of business, man. You don’t seem bored.”

Ryan barks a laugh, like Will has genuinely taken him by surprise with his answer. “Aren’t you observant?” he says, and there’s a slight suggestive tone to the question, nothing overt but definitely present.

“Good thing in an analyst, I’m told.”

“So not bored. Why’s that?” Ryan takes a drink, shifts closer.

“I find my own excitement.” Will says. “There are plenty of opportunities for someone who knows where to look.” He leans away a little, but only to get a better view of Ryan.

Even from the distance of the second camera angle, Ethan can tell Will is giving Ryan a onceover, and damn, damn, he’s good. Will’s picked up on something in Ryan’s tone, in his body language, and he’s adapting with ease, pushing just the right buttons with just the right pressure. Ethan can practically see the moment when Ryan goes from casual interest to intense focus.

“Is that so?” Ryan finishes his drink, expression considering. “Maggie also tells me that she and you used to be an item?” He makes it a question, together with a raised eyebrow.

Will laughs, low and throaty.

On the sofa, Ethan forces himself not to look sideways, to keep his eyes on the screen. It’s much more difficult than it has any right to be.

“Item is putting it strongly.” Will’s voice drifts from the speakers. “And I doubt that’s how she put it either. We used to fuck. We may fuck again in the future. We are not,” he knocks back the remains of his drink, puts the tumbler down, “currently fucking. She’s too busy with the new job anyway.” He shrugs like ‘hey, them’s the apples’.
Ryan stares at him for a few seconds, before chuckling. “You’re something else, Jimmy, my boy.”

Something about that, about the casual use of the possessive pronoun, grates at Ethan’s nerves but Will on the screen offers no objection.

“So, you’re looking for opportunities for excitement both professionally and... personally.” This time it’s a statement, not a question and Ryan shifts closer still, almost looming now.

And Will... Will stands his ground, tilts his head back to keep eye contact, the long line of his neck open and exposed, and says: “Yes, sir.”

Back in the present moment, Jane claps her hands in delight like they’ve just gotten to her favourite scene of the movie and Benji snorts, clearly amused, snagging the popcorn bowl back from the floor.

Ethan bites on his tongue hard to keep from reacting in any way, even though his thoughts scatter like a startled flock of sparrows, unwilling to quite grasp the shape of what he has just witnessed. Next to him on the sofa, Will is still and silent like a stone, seemingly unbothered by any of it.

On the screen, Ryan is the exact opposite of that. Will’s gamble – for that’s what it was, for all the signs and signals, a leap of fucking intuition that paid off with interest – hits him like a shot of electricity and suddenly he’s crowding Will against the wall, blocking him out of sight for Jane’s camera. The picture jerks forward for a second like Jane’s instinct was to run to Will’s aid but she’s quelled it quickly enough to be unnoticeable.

Will’s camera shows a slice of shoulder and corner of Ryan’s jaw, he’s too close for anything else, but it picks up the sound perfectly.

“I knew it,” Ryan growls, “I knew it as soon as you walked in. You like to play dangerously, don’t you?”

“What’s the point in any other kind of playing?” Will’s asking. His hand comes into view, wrapping around Ryan’s silk tie and sliding it through his fingers.

“Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy...” Ryan visibly shakes himself, stepping away. “This isn’t the place. But.” He pulls out a business card, turns it over, and writes something on the back, handing it to Will. “If you’re still after some excitement, I just may have the opportunity. Opportunities,” he adds, smiling like a shark, all teeth and predatory intent. “Give me a call.”

“Bet on it,” Will says, pocketing the card.

Without a further word, Ryan collects their empty glasses, heading to the bar. Will looks at Jane across the floor, adjusting his collar whilst giving her a subtle thumbs up.

The recording cuts off.

The room is very silent. Benji and Jane are openly staring at Will but Ethan can’t bring himself to turn just yet, not quite sure what is showing on his face.

“So,” he says, after the quiet has gone on for longer than is strictly comfortable, “Good work, team. We got him.”
“Correction.” Will’s voice is startling, suddenly live and close by. Ethan risks a glance, finds Will’s eyes intent on him when he says: “I got him.”

***

Will gives it a few days before contacting Ryan. The man may like his playthings submissive, but at the same time he’ll want his couriers independent enough to complete the sell on their own. A man like Ryan isn’t looking for pushovers, he’ll want someone who pushes back just enough to keep things interesting. In other circumstances, with a person who wasn’t a cold-blooded thieving murderer, Will might even find that quality appealing.

As it is, he spends some time thinking about how to best play it. He’d rather not actually bend over and let Ryan fuck him if he can avoid it, although it wouldn’t be the first time Will’s had sex as part of his cover, to secure the target or accomplish the mission. It’s not something most agents enjoy, but when you work the kind of missions they do, you either learn to shut off the part of you that cares or you transfer to other roles.

He half expects Ethan to make a comment, to offer some kind of pointless ‘you don’t have to’ or even hint at this not exactly being a vanilla seduction, but he doesn’t say a word about it. And for that Will is grateful. Things between them are still strained and Will doesn’t feel like having a heartfelt conversation about how having to kneel and call some jerk ‘sir’ for the sake of a mission is neither unprecedented nor that far out of his comfort zone. Will is… flexible in his tastes, has always been, and this isn’t qualitatively different from any other faked act of intimacy done as part of a cover role.

And it’s not that Will’s ashamed, but it’s private, and other than his mom or gran, Ethan is the last person he wants to discuss his sex life, real or pretend, with. Why that is… Well, that’s something Will chooses not to analyse or to put into actual words right now. Ethan hasn’t reprised his offer to make their team a permanent arrangement and Will’s not sure whether he’s disappointed or relieved about that, but he’s certainly not going to bring it up.

While Will is considering the best way to deal with Ryan without having to deal with quite everything the man obviously wants to do, and keeping him keen with a few strategic text messages, the rest of the team are working the case from different angles.

Benji is elbow deep in accounts, hacking into all sorts of financial institutions to figure out where Ryan is keeping his ill-begotten profits. Will is lending a hand every now and then. Forensic accounting isn’t his forte, and neither is it Benji’s, but he is good at spotting patterns or what could potentially be patterns, if you looked at the thing sideways and with one eye closed. They haven’t gotten far yet, but even if it doesn’t end up being what breaks the case, they’ll need the finances as added evidence at some point.

Jane and Ethan are following up on the lead Ethan dug up from among the angry leftovers of British military, pulling out a story of an ex SAS sergeant unburdened by ethics and with too much money to come from an army pension alone. They managed to get a name, then another, until after shredding through about five aliases with Benji’s help, they actually have what seems to be a genuine current address. This part of the case is an important one to pick clean as well but will probably take as long as tracing the money, as they can’t exactly go knocking on the guy’s door and ask if he’s committed any murders for profit lately. Ethan and Jane are taking it in turns to stake out his place, while Benji and Will split their focus on amassing what little surveillance footage there is
from the streets and pubs and clubs where the victims met their fate.

All in all, it’s Will’s in with Ryan that’s likely to turn fruitful the quickest. So when he messages with ‘Drinks tonight, just you and me?’ Will responds with ‘Sounds great’. Then he counts to ten and sends ‘SIR’ after that, quirking a sardonic smile when it’s followed up by a ‘Good boy’. God, sometimes doms were so predictable but as it’s making Will’s job easier right now, he’s not exactly complaining.

He tosses his cell on the bed and goes to the living room to share the good news. Jane is out, following Sgt Haines and Benji’s got his headphones on, a tinny sound of Queen’s Killer Queen filtering through as he hunches over the keyboard, eyes scanning some complicated looking document. Will doesn’t want to interrupt what is obviously a Deep Zone of Geekitude so he turns to the other occupant of the room.

Ethan’s sitting at the kitchen island, feet hooked around the rungs of the bar stool and a laptop open in front of him. He’s browsing through what looks like CCTV captions and eating a cold slice of pizza. His eyes flick toward Will briefly, before returning to the screen.

After a moment’s hesitation, Will pulls up another stool and sits down opposite, stealing lunch. He picks off the olives, resists the urge to lob them at Ethan’s face, and says: “Jimmy’s got a date.”

That gets a reaction. Ethan puts his half-eaten pizza down and drops his hands to his lap, out of sight, and focuses his attention to Will. “Yeah?” he asks. “Where?”

“Don’t know yet,” Will say. “Presume he’s gonna text me the address later. Probably last minute. It’s the kind of thing guys like him would do.”

Ethan raises a questioning eyebrow so Will elaborates: “Control. Keep the sub in the dark as long as possible. Heh, sometimes literally.” It’s a lame joke sure but Ethan seems really unamused, the line of his mouth tightening. Will sighs. “Look, it gives him a sense of power. Means the other guy will arrive at the meeting late and frazzled, already apologetic, eager to please and make amends. Well,” he adds, musing aloud, “Jimmy won’t. And that will both irk and intrigue him. And when guys like Ryan are irked and intrigued they overplay it. He’ll want to assert control. He’ll want to show that he has all the best cards in the game and maybe, just maybe, one of the cards he’ll flash is the one we’re after.”

Ethan regards him silently for a while. Will stares right back, chewing on the pizza.

“Shit,” Ethan says eventually. He rubs a quick hand over his face and when he looks up again, he’s grinning: sharp and somehow proud. “You sure got his number.” He sounds impressed, and coming from Ethan who plays targets like Menuhin, that’s no small compliment.

“Nothing.” Will shrugs, clamping down hard on the sudden urge to preen. Because no. Ethan’s regard may make heat pool in his stomach, like something catching alight, bright and hot, but that’s no reason to—

“It’s something,” Ethan corrects, insistent.

“Well sure,” Will says, still dismissive where he’d been willing to stake claim on his success only a couple of days ago. He gets up, rounds the island. “I’ll go rouse Benji and get kitted up for—”

Ethan’s hand shots out and closes around his wrist. Will freezes, looks over from the corner of his
eyes without actually turning his head. Breathes out slowly.

“I mean it,” Ethan says, squeezing Will’s wrist a little, as if for emphasis. “That’s a hell of a job you’ve done with the mark. I know it can’t be easy to—”

“Do you?” Will hears himself interrupting. He steps closer when the voice at the back of his head tells him to step away, demanding to know what the fuck he thinks he’s doing. But that’s the thing: Will isn’t thinking, he’s doing. “Do you really?” he asks, soft and low. Deliberately, he turns his wrist around in Ethan’s grip, until his thumb is resting against the delicate inside.

Ethan’s eyes go wide, his mouth opening, lips starting to form something that looks like Will’s name.

He never gets to hear it though because just then Benji jumps out of his seat and shouts: “Fucking Jersey!” He yanks off his earphones and tosses them to the table almost violently, shaking a fist at the monitors. “Caught you now! Well,” he amends, “sort of. I caught something. Finally.”

By the time he turns to look at the two of them, Will is halfway across the room. “Come on,” he says, clapping Benji on the shoulder. “Show me.”

***

Benji’s discovery turns out to be more like a good clue, but in jigsaw terms they seem to have located a corner piece. It’s more solid than anything else so far and Will is feeling cautiously hopeful when he sets out for his meeting.

True to his prediction, Ryan has texted the name of the pub, somewhere in Belgravia. Will can’t help but wonder if the location is deliberate, dotted as the area is with embassies and consulates. Does he have an inside contact among them? Is this a meeting point for something other than casual dates?

The Gardener’s Arms is an unfussy Victorian boozer, and Will feels instantly overdressed. He tugs off his tie with one hand as he walks in, easily spotting Ryan who is sitting at the back, two pints already in front of him. Will grimaces inwardly. He’d rather not drink anything anyone hands him without seeing them pour it out of a sealed bottle, but this time it looks unavoidable. He just hopes Ryan isn’t in a habit of drugging his recruits/boy-toys to ensure compliance.

“Jimmy!” Ryan greets him loudly, rising from his seat to give him a handshake, a clap on the shoulder and a brief squeeze to the back of his neck. “I got you a drink while I was waiting.” A full treatment of ‘I’m in charge and you should feel grateful for my time’ then.

“Thanks, that’s great,” Will says, smiling. He slides into the booth opposite Ryan and takes a sip. It’s a pale ale of some kind, not bad, if not Will’s first choice either. He doesn’t taste anything off with it, but then again, he wouldn’t. “Traffic was a bitch. I thought it was bad back home but boy you have it covered here too.” He makes no apologies for being late, because he isn’t, and because he can see the way his nonchalance makes Ryan’s mouth tighten temporarily before it smooths into an easy grin.

“Oh totally. This one time I got stuck on the M11 for three hours…”

They shoot the shit for a good hour, going from traffic to differences between US and UK, before Ryan steers the conversation to Will’s work, grilling him about his cases and contacts. Will keeps up
the pleasant chatter without breaking a sweat, falling back on the comprehensive and entirely imaginary portfolio someone back at HQ had prepared for his cover.

At some point Will gets up to buy them another round and as he’s leaning on the bar Benji’s voice comes in his ear. “I’m dying of boredom,” he says, “Next thing you know he’s going to start talking about the weather. I’ve got Ethan on the other channel, watching Sgt Haines eat curry and even that’s more interesting.”

Will rather agrees but can’t exactly say so. He pays for their drinks; rum and coke for Ryan and just coke for him but Ryan will hopefully take it on faith that it has a double shot like his.

“Here you are.” Will puts the glasses on the table and then decides to move things along slightly. “I have to say…” he drawls, taking an exaggerated look around, “nice as this place is, it isn’t exactly brimming with excitement.”

Ryan quirks an eyebrow. His smirk is somewhere between amused and annoyed. “My company not enough titillation?” he asks, and it’s not a joke, only dressed as one.

Will takes a sip of his coke, thinks ‘watch this’ at Benji, and pushes: “Well the chat’s been fun, pal, but I think I ought to head back, got an early morning tomo—”

Ryan’s hand shoots out before Will has even finished the suggestion and for the second time that day he’s interrupted by a grip on his wrist. Unlike Ethan’s earlier gesture, Ryan’s hand is bruising, and Will has to stomp down on his instinctive reaction to break the hold and then break the man’s fingers. “…unless you had something else in mind?” he finishes smoothly.

“And here I thought you were well trained,” Ryan says.

“And I thought you had something better than piss poor beer to offer,” Will shoots back. For a moment he thinks Ryan might actually slap him, right there in front of the other patrons, but the man visibly takes hold of his temper. He’s got a slight sheen to his upper lip, pupils dilated, and with a jolt Will realises Ryan is both angry and turned on, but has little grasp on how to deal with it. He may need recruits with some backbone but obviously none of them have been quite this dismissive of his authority.

“I don’t think you could handle what I have to offer, boy,” Ryan hisses. His grip tightens until Will can feel the bones in his wrist grinding together. That’s going to bruise for sure. He won’t let the pain show on his face, much to Ryan’s obvious disappointment but since this is nowhere near the worst Will’s dealt with during his career, he’s just going to have to learn to live with it. ‘Got you now,’ Will thinks and then deliberately misinterprets.

“That’s a hell of a thing to insinuate on a first date. Sir,” he adds, lacing the honorific with zero respect. “Yours won’t be the first dick I’ve had in my mouth or… elsewhere, and I seriously doubt it’ll be more than I can handle.”

Ryan releases his wrist so suddenly Will almost loses his balance, falling back into his seat a little from where he had been half dragged across the sticky table. “Hah!” Ryan tosses back his drink. “Not talking about my cock, though that’s nothing to sneer at either.”

Will makes a show of cradling his wrist, knowing it’ll appease Ryan’s delicate domly ego. “What
then?” He affects a slightly wary look. “Because I’ve got to tell you mate, I’m not into anything too hard core so if you’re looking for someone to wrap in cling film and breathe through a tube while you beat them with a cricket bat or whatever it is that you limeys use, then I’m out.”

“Nothing like that,” Ryan says, leaning close, “though I thought you said you liked to play dangerously.”

“There’s dangerous, and then there’s plain stupid.”

“Fair enough. But what I’m thinking about is more of a… business proposition. Not that I don’t want to mix in a little personal fun too, because I definitely do.” He gives Will a slow onceover, eyes lingering on his wrist, already reddening.

Will lays it on the table, on display, and reels the mark in. “Oh professional risks… Well those are a different thing. Not much there that I can’t handle either,” he boasts. “Maggie ever tell you about that time we pulled a fast one on this guy…” He launches into a tale of some low level corporate espionage, designed to make Ryan see that Jimmy is the kind of guy who is willing to blur the lines for little profit and excitement.

Ryan’s laughing in all the right places and by the time Will’s gotten them a third drink he’s dropping heavy hints about the gig he has that makes Jimmy’s little adventure seem like child’s play. Will acts suitably curious and keen, going for ‘I could do it, let me prove it, sir’ angle, though not quite blatantly enough to use the actual words. He’s slurring a bit, faking at being drunker than he is.

The strategy backfires slightly because Ryan’s “Let’s see what you got then,” is decidedly not about Jimmy’s business acumen or his prospective skills in international espionage. He cuts his eyes meaningfully toward the men’s room and Will’s backed himself into a corner with this one, has no option now except to grin and head to the toilets or lose the mark. It’s not really a surprise, considering that Ryan’s gaze has been hot and heavy on the exposed line of his throat for a while now, lingering on Will’s wrist that is turning darker the more time passes.

Once in the bathroom, Will quickly checks that the cubicles are empty. “You may want to clock off for the next fifteen minutes,” he murmurs into his mic, hidden in the button holding his shirt collar straight.

“What if something—?”

“Nothing’s gonna happen,” Will cuts Benji off. “He’s not following me to the bathroom to give me the details of his contacts in Asia,” he adds sarcastically.

“Yeah okay, I’ll mute you for a bit,” Benji says, sounding sympathetic but thankfully not trying to convince Will that what he’s about to do isn’t necessary because they both know it is. “But Will, you should know—”

“Later,” Will whispers. He can hear Ryan’s steps outside, which means they’re out of time. He’s out of time, to be more precise.

The door opens, Ryan stalking in with slow, predatory focus. The lock clicks shut behind him.

Will doesn’t particularly want to end this evening on his knees with Ryan’s dick in his mouth, not least because a man like him probably won’t put too much emphasis on being polite about it, not when his fuck toys are all expendable.
There’s a way to play this that might, just might, avoid the issue. And that’s to take the initiative.

He doesn’t give Ryan a chance to say anything, just takes three long strides and pushes him against the wall, surging up to kiss him, moaning like a cheap whore as soon as their lips touch. Ryan grunts in surprise, his hands landing on Will’s waist as much for balance as anything.

“Oh god, want you so much, sir,” Will pants, manoeuvring them around until it’s his back pressed against the grimy tiles. Ryan – true to the stereotype – likes that a whole lot, muttering filthy promises in between tongue fucking Will’s mouth.

He keeps up a steady litany of whines and groans, insinuating a thigh between Ryan’s legs so that the man has something to rut against, whilst simultaneously angling his own hips away as much as possible. Hopefully the guy is too far gone to notice – or care – that ‘Jimmy’ isn’t even a little bit hard.

Don’t get him wrong, Will could get there if he really needed to – imagination is a wonderful thing, and most male field agents learn the power of conditioning quickly enough – but he’d rather not if he can avoid it. “Please, sir,” Will pleads, making it as breathy as he can, sneaking a hand between them and fumbling at Ryan’s belt before the man thinks to grab for his wrist again, “Please come on me?”

“Fuck!” Ryan grunts. “Knew you were a dirty slut.” He kisses him again, aggressive and sloppy, and Will pushes down his revulsion and just makes his mouth slack and pliant, wrapping his hand around Ryan’s erection. “Ohhh, yeah,” Ryan groans, hips snapping forward. “Squeeze it good, boy. Gonna come all over you.”

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“It seems the universe is about to teach him a lesson about not getting too cocky though, because Ryan suddenly grips Will’s collar in both hands, pulling the shirt open as much as he can and ripping off a button or two in the process.

“What…” Will’s rhythm falters for a moment, which is enough for Ryan to push forward and latch his mouth onto the now exposed junction of Will’s neck and shoulder.

“Gonna mark you, boy,” he grunts, before biting down hard enough that Will’s cry of pain and surprise is one hundred percent genuine.

For a split second he tenses, muscles punching in preparation to put some serious and violent distance between them, but then his mission brain overrides his instincts and Will forces himself to relax, sagging against the wall and moaning all he’s worth as he brings Ryan to completion.

True to his word, Ryan comes all over Will’s shirt and trousers, and judging by the sting on his neck, he’s also marked him. Twice now, if you count his wrist.

“Damn,” Ryan sighs, pushing off and tucking himself away, “You’re eager, aren’t you?”

“Hey!” Will affects a light tone, grinning big and bright. “I’m not the one who promised excitement and then made me sit through an hour of small talk. Can’t blame a guy for being a little impatient.”

Ryan laughs, and then glances at Will’s crotch questioningly.
“Nah,” Will says, “I’m good. That bite of yours made me come in my pants like a teenager.” He’s hoping Ryan will take his own prowess at face value and won’t demand evidence.

“Slut,” Ryan says, shaking his head. It sounds almost… affectionate, which is a whole new level of fucked up, considering the man is planning to kill him as soon as he’s served his purpose.

“For the right guy. So…” Will goes to the sink to wash his hands, glancing at Ryan through the mirror.

“So.” Ryan’s watching him back. Will lets the silence stretch.

“Senses on Friday?” Ryan finally asks. “The usual crowd is going. I know Maggie’s off to Singapore this week but you’re more than welcome to join us.”

“Aww man, I wish I could.” Will shrugs apologetically. “We got this conference call to Beijing, kind of have to be there.” ‘Five, four,’ Will counts to himself, ‘three, two…’

“Beijing?” Ryan asks, “You got business there?”

‘And jackpot!’ “Oh yeah, got this trip coming in a couple of weeks…”

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Ethan doesn’t get back to the safe house until the small hours, and for that he is grateful. Even Benji is asleep, though he wakes when Ethan crosses the living room, hand going under the sofa where he has presumably hidden his gun.

“Only me,” Ethan says, and then, because he can’t let a teachable moment pass, “though if I’d wanted to kill you, you’d definitely be dead already.”

Benji regards him in the semi-darkness and when he talks, his voice is uncharacteristically serious. “There’s no need for dead threats, Hunt. I’ll let you tell him in your own time.” With that he closes his eyes and turns his back to the room, leaving Ethan speechless, flushed with sudden embarrassment and guilt.

Silently, he creeps into his room, lying down fully clothed. He’d known that Benji had disapproved of his actions, but somehow he hadn’t expected to be called out about them so directly. Though, really, he should have. Benji wasn’t one to mince his words if he truly believed in something. In that sense the man had been downright kind about the whole thing, which was more than Ethan deserved.

After all, what he’d done – listening in on Will’s… god, he doesn’t even know what to call it. Encounter? Seduction? without the man’s consent or even his knowledge, when there was no mission-related reason to do so – was at best conduct unbecoming of an agent-in-charge. At worst it was a violation of trust, one Ethan isn’t at all sure he can ask forgiveness for.

Will had been right; the danger had been minimal, and to ask for some privacy for what they’d all – barring Benji, though that was more of a ‘so far’ exception than any lifetime guarantee – had to do at some point for the sake of the mission and none particularly enjoyed, was entirely within his rights.
But Ethan had made a different decision, first asking Benji to patch him through to Will’s mic and listening in on the whole thing – overruling Benji’s entirely reasonable “I’ve got this, Will’s not going to need two babysitters,” – and then telling him to keep the connection going when it became clear that Will wanted even Benji off the lines for what he’d had to do in the pub bathroom.

And for what? There was no professional reason that Ethan could give, no excuse about wanting to make sure Will was safe – although that had been part of it, a big one – that he could make stick. The truth was far simpler than that, and far more damning: Ethan had wanted to know. Ethan – not ‘Agent Hunt’ no, Ethan – had been intrigued. Ever since the conversation where Will had dissected Ryan and his actions and motivations with near surgical precision, Ethan had wanted to see – or hear – that in action. Oh it had been partly professional curiosity, and frank appreciation of Will’s somewhat unexpected skillset in this area, but mostly it had been a personal desire to find out what Will would say and do, how he would sound when…

Ethan flops onto his stomach, burying a groan into his pillow. What was it that Jane had said? ‘Careful what you wish for.’ Well, that’s certainly was one proverb getting a hell of a lot of traction lately.

Because he knows, he knows, that it had been pretence, that that’s not how Will would really sound, moaning so sweetly and begging Ethan to… Fuck.

Fuck.

He knows it’s fake, nothing Will had actually enjoyed, knows that to have listened to it was wrong, but despite all of that shame isn’t the only thing burning in his gut at the moment.

Shame isn’t what’s making his hips grind against the mattress almost of their own volition, and it isn’t what’s been making his cock half-hard since Will’s needy ‘please come on me’ had reached his earpiece, as intimate as if Will had been right there next to him.

Then again, shame is most definitely what makes him stop, what makes Ethan force himself to stillness. He’s already violated Will’s trust once today, and if he lets himself take what his body wants now… Well, it’s going to be difficult enough to look Will in the eye as it is.

With a frustrated grunt, Ethan turns onto his back and crosses his arms behind his neck, resolutely ignoring his hard-on. It’s too late, or too early, to do anything about the situation at the moment. Will would not thank him if he went to wake him now just to mumble through a half-assed apology simply because Ethan would rather get it over and done with. There is also no need to wake Jane yet to take over the surveillance on Haines. The tracker will alert them if the former-sergeant-turned-hitman strays from the immediate vicinity of his home, which he is unlikely to do until much later in the day.

Ethan may as well try and get some sleep. He closes his eyes, not expecting to succeed, but falling under almost immediately.

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It’s Will who wakes him, a few hours later. Ethan is on his feet by the second knock, wrenching the door open by the third.
“What?” he snaps, barely awake but body thrumming with adrenaline.

Will takes a step back, expression caught somewhere between amused and placating. “Nothing life or death, man,” he says, raising his hands palms up, like calming a threatening dog.

Is this how he would pacify Ryan, or someone like him? The thought comes unbidden and insidious, and for a fleeting moment Ethan wants to let his irrational anger carry him forward, to crowd Will toward the corridor wall just to see what he would do.

But then reason takes over and he steps back, running a hand through his hair sheepishly. “Sorry,” he apologises. “I’m a light sleeper.” His eyes latch on to the bruise on Will’s neck, not fully hidden by his open shirt collar, and a confused mix of anger and lust flares again, making his hands curl into fists without any conscious input from him.

Thankfully, Will doesn’t notice, or if he does, he clearly chalks it up Ethan’s morning crankiness. He nods at Ethan’s explanation, understanding and sympathy flitting across his face before he turns to go. “There’s breakfast, we’ll brief when you’re ready.”

Ethan closes the door and undresses quickly. He’s showered and wearing clean clothes in record time, towel-drying his hair as he walks to the main part of the apartment. Everyone is congregated around the kitchen island, picking on a spread of croissants and cheeses and jams and talking intently.

Ethan murmurs a ‘good morning’, tossing the towel over a chair back. He heads straight to the coffee pot, pouring himself a large mugful and downing a half of it standing up. He tops up his cup and sits down on the only available stool, which – because apparently the universe is out to punish him today – is next to Will’s.

“So…” He reaches for a pastry, casting an inquisitive eye around the table. “You had some news?”

“You could say that.” Jane drops a photograph onto Ethan’s plate.

It’s a slightly blurry shot, taken clearly from a surveillance camera. In it, a man in a business suit is buying a newspaper, three quarters of his profile visible. He’s young, maybe in his late twenties, and good looking with blond hair and sharp features. There’s not much of the background but it seems crowded.

“Where was this taken?” Ethan asks. “And who’s the guy?”

“The photo was taken at Incheon International,” Benji says. “And the guy is the metaphorical spanner in our works. The shit that is about to hit our collective fans.”

South Korea. Suddenly, the all-butter croissant tastes like dust in his mouth and Ethan has to take an extra-large gulp of coffee to wash it down. He has a very, very bad feeling about this. “Any time you want to start making sense…”

“This is Samuel Miller. Executive Assistant to one Dorothy Pearlman, CEO of Chameleon Incorporated, who has spent the last two weeks in Seoul, as a civilian contractor to a retinue of senior NATO representatives,” Jane explains.

Before Ethan has a chance to even open his mouth, Benji holds up both hands in a gesture eerily similar to Will’s earlier one. “I know, I know, I fucking know, alright? He wasn’t on our radar
because… Well, he just wasn’t. He doesn’t work with any of the data directly and wouldn’t have access. There was nothing linking him to Ryan, no pictures of the two of them partying together, nothing. That is…” Benji pushes his tablet across, pointing at the screen, “…until this.”

It’s a text message, and a short one at that. ‘Think you’ll love your Korean souvenir,’ it says.

“That,” Benji taps at the recipient, “is Ryan McMullan’s number.”

Well. It had, Ethan supposes, all gone rather swimmingly so far, his personal drama notwithstanding. In other words, he should have remembered the core lesson every agent learns sooner or later: if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Will finally joins the conversation from where he’d been sitting silently, observing the proceedings. “You haven’t yet asked the most important question,” he says, voice calm.

Ethan turns to look at him, manages to act normal and hold eye-contact and everything thanks to the mission related situation that is taking most of his attention, and perhaps partly because of his self-control last night. “What’s that?”

“Ask when that photo was taken,” Will tells him.

The sinking feeling in Ethan’s stomach plummets further. “When?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” Will says. “They’re travelling with Lufthansa and changing in Munich. The flight hits Heathrow in about…’ he consults his watch, “two hours.”

This is bad. Not only does it sound like Sam Miller will be bringing something to the country he probably shouldn’t, but he is also about to drop into the middle of their carefully built string operation and likely knock down a few dominoes in the process.

“We can’t let him contact Ryan,” Ethan says. “Much less meet him.”

“Yeah,” Jane adds, shaking her head as she decimates a pain au chocolat, “won’t be good for Sammy’s health for one. And before anyone suggests it,” she glares at everyone, “we are not going to dangle a civilian as a bait to Haines, just to see if he has orders to bite.”

“No… We’re not,” Will agrees. “And then again…” He grins, looking straight at Ethan. “We are.”

***

Will’s plan is simple. Well, simple in IMF mission terms in that no one needs to swing upside down from a high-rise or break into the Kremlin (“It was one time!” “That we know of.”) but instead uses good old fashioned spy craft, otherwise known as Manipulating People. Something Will has shown a surprising aptitude for.

Not that Ethan is going to voice his surprise out loud. He has a feeling that what he is about to voice is enough to shatter their fragile peace as it is.

“So, let me get this straight,” he says in the brief silence that follows Will’s suggestion and murmured ‘yeah, that could work’ from the others. “You are going to meet Miller from the airport, convince
him that you’re now Ryan’s… Second-in-command?”

“Right-hand-man?” Benji suggests.

“Alpha sub?”

Will rolls his eyes at Jane. “That’s not a thing.”

“It could be!”

“And he’s going to believe you because…” Ethan tries to desperately get the conversation back on track.

“Because ‘Ryan’,” Will makes air quotes and points to the case where their high-tech mask creation kit lives, “is going to tell him so. And because,” he adds, grinning like a shark, “I am going to make him believe it.”

“And we’re going to stock up on popcorn.” Benji and Jane exchange a less-than-subtle fist bump.

“We’ll stash the real Sam Miller in a safe house somewhere, get you a new mask to wear – don’t lie, you love it – and voila!” Will’s hand sweeps out, palm up, as if presenting a devastating closing argument. “We have our bait to dangle in front of McMullan and his attack dog.”

“Only this one is going to bite back.” Jane nods in grim satisfaction.

“Exactly.”

“Alright,” Ethan says and then, even though he knows he should leave well enough alone, he can’t help adding a “But.”

Will’s eyes narrow. “But what? If you’re seeing a problem that the rest of us aren’t then speak up. We’ve got about ninety minutes before Miller’s plane touches down and frankly I’d prefer to be half way to Heathrow by now. Not to mention that the prosthetic is going to take twice as long as that to finish.”

“I’m on it!” Benji gets up and starts inputting the relevant measurements and other information needed for replicating Ryan’s features.

“It’s not the plan,” Ethan says, “it’s just that… Well, correct me if I’m wrong but wouldn’t Miller be expecting someone like Ryan?”

Will frowns at him. “What? Well dressed and corrupt to the bone?” He gestures at his impeccable dove grey suit meaningfully.

“No, I mean someone… dominant.”

Jane’s sharp gasp is the only sound in the otherwise suddenly silent room. If Ethan hadn’t already known he’d just put his foot in it but deep, that alone would’ve told him.

“I see,” Will says finally, his voice neutral. “This isn’t about a weakness in the plan. This is about a perceived weakness in my ability to execute it.”
“That’s not what—”

“You don’t think I can do it,” Will interrupts. And now there’s some colour in his voice, a timbre that is somehow slower and deeper, but still utterly calm. In control. “Perhaps you think that my little performance to reel in Mr McMullan has been so good that maybe it isn’t all fake, maybe it’s a natural predisposition?”

Will is getting up now, every movement measured. He is angry, livid in fact, but you couldn’t tell by his expression or body language, both of which are deceptively constrained. He doesn’t have to round the table or anything, having sat right next to Ethan he is very much there, and more so all of a sudden. They’ve been sitting on bar stools so even standing up, Will isn’t that much taller than Ethan who is still seated, but somehow he seems to loom, like Will’s presence has gotten bigger even though the man himself is the same size as always.

Ethan refuses to turn around or get up, even though his instincts are suddenly screaming ‘threat’, which is ridiculous, there is no such thing here.

“Perhaps…” Will is saying, now deliberately leaning over Ethan’s shoulders. “I’m such a good little sub that there’s no way I could be anything else?” He braces both hands on the table edge, arms bracketing Ethan and effectively trapping him in.

Ethan inhales tightly without meaning to at the feel of Will’s chest pressing against his back, the heat of it shockingly intimate. This is the closest they have been without the excuse of an imminent death, and suddenly Ethan can’t breathe, because it’s what he’s wanted without even properly voicing it to himself and yet utterly, utterly wrong.

“And maybe…” The word is a harsh whisper now, some of the anger finally bleeding through as Will bends down to speak directly to Ethan’s ear, like he’s imparting a secret. Except they are not alone, and on the other side of the kitchen island both Benji and Jane have frozen on the spot to watch their little interpersonal drama.

“Maybe,” Will continues, “that’s the way you prefer it?”

For a second or three, Ethan panics. He never panics, not when falling from a plane without a parachute, not when he has a gun pointed at his face, not when there are five seconds left on the timer and the bomb is about to explode. But right now, all he can think of is ‘He knows. How does he know?’ because even though what Will is suggesting isn’t quite right, it’s close enough to the truth to be dangerous.

“What? I don’t, I…” His protest comes out sounding weak and useless, but it doesn’t matter because Will talks right over it like Ethan hadn’t even spoken.

“Isn’t that what you like to do, Ethan?” Will asks, and the contempt in his voice is easy to hear now. “Label people and keep them in their neat little boxes. Makes things simple, doesn’t it?”

With that he straightens up and steps back, leaving Ethan cold and reeling. Because Will’s assessment of the situation is somehow even worse than what he’d feared. And maybe not entirely untrue either. After all, somewhere in Ethan’s head Will had broken out of his ‘casual work colleague’ box a while ago, and maybe that’s at least partly why he’d been pushing Will so hard to commit to the ‘team mate’ label. Because it would give Ethan an acceptable reason to keep him close.
“Ain’t such a thing as simple,” Jane says quietly, breaking the moment. Ethan looks up just in time to catch the grief that flickers over her face, before she packs it away again.

“Yeah,” Will agrees and it sounds defeated, all the anger leech out. “I have to go now or Miller’s going to slip the net.” He doesn’t make a move though and it takes Ethan embarrassingly long to realise that they are all still waiting for his final approval of the plan.

“All right,” he says, clearing his throat. “Benji’s got tabs on you right?” Will taps his subtle earpiece and by the computers Benji gives a thumbs-up. “Ryan’ will meet you at the safe house then,” Ethan says, “Once his face is ready to be worn.”

Will nods curtly at that and without another word walks out, the door closing softly behind him.

“Well,” Benji says after a long moment of awkward silence, “that was… a new side of Agent Brandt.”

“That’s just it,” Jane shakes her head slowly and looks at Ethan meaningfully, “I don’t think it was.” And yeah, fuck, Ethan doesn’t either.

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Miller’s flight from Munich is delayed, which is about the only blessing in this latest clusterfuck. It means that while Will gets to the airport late on the original schedule, he is in fact early by a good half an hour. He opts to use the time for getting a hot chocolate (because he needs the sugar), trying to calm the fuck down and get his head back in the game.

It’s no use. By the time the arrivals board shows ‘baggage claim’ Will is still seething; the kind of anger that makes his teeth grind and his blood feel hot in his veins. He knows of course why that is. Will isn’t just angry, he’s hurt, which in turn makes him even angrier. Because it shouldn’t matter what Ethan thinks, not this much, not in a way that makes him want to lash out and snarl.

Will breathes in the steam from his hot chocolate and closes his eyes just for a second or two. Ethan’s regard for his skills earlier in the week had been… Good. Really good. So to find out now that it was still a narrow-minded regard, that Ethan like others wanted to shove him into a box and nail it shut: analyst or field agent, part of the team or not, submissive or dominant, gay or straight, colleague or… friend. Will is sick of it. He’d thought Ethan who treats the team as both trusted colleagues and tentative friends, who helps Benji develop into a competent field agent whilst respecting his expertise in all things technical, would see past those kinds of dichotomies.

Apparently not.

Giving up on finding zen anytime soon, Will channels his anger to productive use and by the time Samuel Miller walks through the arrival gates, he’s far enough in dom headspace to almost forget that he’s playing a role here.

He’s fashioned a quick sign out of a spare piece of paper and a pen he borrowed from someone, holding it aloft among the throng of drivers waiting to pick up their charges. He sees the moment Sam spots his name, frowning in confusion before walking over slowly.
“Mr Miller?” Will asks, keeping the chauffeur mask on for the moment.

“Yes. But probably not the right one… I didn’t book a car, perhaps you’re—”

“Mr McMullan sent me,” Will interrupts. “He said to tell you that this was his treat and that he was eager to see you after your trip.”

“Oh!” Sam is flustered but clearly pleased and for a moment Will feels sorry for the guy who obviously harbours actual feelings for Ryan. But then he remembers that Sam’s also neck deep in trading all sorts of illegal information, and the moment passes.

“Follow me, Mr Miller,” Will says, and it comes out less ‘polite chauffeur’ and more ‘snapped order’ but Sam does as he’s told which is promising for their operation, and also soothes something tangled in his chest.

He keeps up the charade until they’re pulling up to the safe house – this one a semi-terrace in Docklands – whereupon Sam finally starts getting suspicious.

“This isn’t Ryan’s flat,” he says, looking around uncertainly as he gets out of the car.

“No it isn’t,” Will agrees. Then he grabs Sam’s elbow and digs his fingers in, hard. “But this is where he’ll meet you.” He propels the man to the front door and through it before he has a chance to protest.

"There’s been a slight change in plan. And in the chain of command,” Will explains once they are inside. It comes out sounding a bit more vicious than he intended.

“What do you mean?” Sam’s backing away now, eyes flitting this way and that. “Who are you and how do you know Ryan?”

Will sighs. He doesn’t want Sam scared enough to run. “My name is James,” he says, this time softer, following Sam to the sparsely furnished front room. “Like you, I am Ryan’s.” There’s no qualifier after the possessive, but there doesn’t need to be.

“With one crucial difference.”

Sam is flushed but defiant, folding his arms as he attempts to stare Will down. “Oh yeah? What’s that then, mate?”

“I am Ryan’s,” Will repeats, stepping right into Sam’s personal space. They are pretty equal in height but it doesn’t matter because the advantage he’s going to press has nothing to do with physicality. “But what is Ryan’s…” Will continues, raising a hand and cupping the side of Sam’s neck, squeezing tightly when the man tries to wrench away from the touch, “…is also mine.”

With a swift move he sinks his fingers into Sam’s hair, grabs a fistful and pulls his head back while deftly capturing the flailing arms with his other hand. “You should do well to remember that,” he whispers, speaking the words right into the exposed line of Sam’s throat, so close that he can smell the faded cologne and sweat.

“Fu-uck!” The exclamation comes out stuttery and breathless, Sam’s face going slack with lust for an instant until he visibly tries to rein himself in.
“If you’re lucky,” Will says casually, a promise he has no intention of keeping. He’s pretty sure that if he were to press his leg between Sam’s, he’d find the man hard and ready. He’s not proud, but there’s something about that too that is deeply satisfying. It’s not sexual – because there’s taking advantage and then there’s taking advantage, and Will’s going to do what it takes for the mission but only what is absolutely necessary – but more a reassurance of his own skills, the calm focus that comes from being in control, even if only momentarily.

He pushes Sam away with casual disdain, watching him stumble and ruthlessly squashing his instinct to steady him. Ryan is not that kind of dom. Anyone playing by his rules is not that kind of dom.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Will instructs, waving at the couch. “You’re going to be here for a while.”

Sam sits down gingerly, casting uncertain glances around the room, gaze flitting over Will every now and then like a moth circling a lightbulb, close but never quite touching down.

Will suppresses a sigh and goes to the kitchen to make coffee. Not like more caffeine was going to make a difference at this stage.

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By the time Ethan gets to Docklands, wearing a suit, heeled boots and Ryan’s face, he’s reached some equilibrium, enough hopefully to do his job and stop fucking up. He’s also made a promise – to himself, but also to Jane and Benji who had told him to ‘sort it out’ except in less polite terms – to have a proper talk with Will as soon as the mission is over. And by ‘talk’ Ethan means ‘apologise and figure out what he needs to do to get Will to say yes to the team’. Never let it be said that Ethan Hunt didn’t learn from his mistakes. If you looked at it that way, the last few days had been very educational.

He asks Benji to patch him through to Will’s earpiece when he’s five minutes away, biting down on the words that are crowding to be let out and only giving his ETA. He gets a short hum in return, Will acknowledging the information.

The front door is open and Ethan walks straight in, making no effort at subterfuge. In the lounge, Sam is sitting on the sofa, his head snapping back in surprise when he sees ‘Ryan’ suddenly looming in the doorway.

Will doesn’t bat an eyelid, leaning on the window sill and cradling a mug of coffee. “Sir,” he says in greeting and for a split second the title jolts him until Ethan remembers this is ‘Jimmy’ talking to ‘Ryan.’

He nods briefly, attention already caught by Sam who has flown to his feet, voice shaky with relief and fear as he babbles. “Ryan! Sir! Thank god, you’re here. Who is this guy? He practically kidnapped me from the airport and he says he’s yours, but that can’t be, you would’ve told me! I did what you wanted in Seoul, I just…”

Ethan lets it go on for half a minute, listening to Sam incriminate himself and Ryan. Finally, he holds up a hand, stemming the stream of words somewhat. This isn’t… natural to him, not the way it apparently is to Will, but Ethan knows about authority, and thanks to the last week, he knows Ryan too – enough to fake it for a few minutes at least.
“Quiet,” he says, and then points to the floor. “Down.”

It works. Sam shuts his mouth and drops to his knees as expected – Ryan, after all, seemed to train his boys very effectively – but for some reason Will doing the same takes Ethan completely by surprise. Granted, he’s deliberately much slower – and more graceful, Ethan can’t help but notice – about it than Sam, taking the time to put his coffee cup on the table first before folding to his knees in a move that is somehow only half acquiescence and all power.

‘See that,’ he wants to say to Sam, ‘that’s how you do it.’ It’s even something Ryan might do, but it’s also unnecessarily cruel. The man’s going to have enough disappointment in his life soon enough without adding this to the list. Instead, he goes to Will and offers him a hand.

Will’s eyes flash once with something like approval before he accepts Ethan’s grip, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. “Good,” Ethan says simply, before turning to Sam who is still on the ground, now glowering.

Ethan repeats their story – that ‘James’ is Ryan’s second-in-command now, his word as good as Ryan’s in his absence, and that Sam is to stay here for the time being – chipping away Sam’s protests one at time. Everything is arranged at work. He is very pleased with the work Sam did in Seoul, and could he just go through that in detail again.

“…is that alright, Sir?” Sam asks some twenty minutes later when he gets to the end of his narrative.

“Fine,” Ethan says, “but aren’t you forgetting something?” He waits a few seconds but when Sam only stares at him, he prompts: “The Korean souvenir?”

“Oh!” Sam grins, digging into his pockets. “Of course. Your contact said that this was in lieu of the usual payment but it would be worth at least double that.” He hands over a memory stick.

Ethan turns it in his hand before slipping it into his jacket pocket. Information for information. Benji’s evening sure was going to get more interesting.

He leaves Sam with a casual ‘good boy’, indicating that ‘James’ should walk him out.

Once outside and safely out of Sam’s earshot, Ethan murmurs: “Got that, Benji?”

“All recorded for later use,” Benji promises. He’s clearly talking to both of them as Will nods in satisfaction next to him. “You just get that little Korean bundle of data to Uncle Benji for a close inspection.”

“You can be really creepy, when you want to, you know that, right?” Will says.

They’re at the car and Ethan ducks in, pulling off his mask. It’s a risk but a calculated one. There is a chance that Sam is going to come running out of the house and see that Ryan isn’t quite what he thought but then again it’s a small one. And one Ethan is willing to take for the sake of talking to Will without any barriers between them.

“Benji, can you give us two minutes?” he asks, the click and sudden silence of his earpiece indicating his request had been granted.

If Will is surprised, he hides it extremely well. They are standing by the car, angled so that Ethan’s
face is to the street rather than the house, just in case.

“Look,” Ethan starts, and then has to run a frustrated hand through his hair because there’s a longer talk, a longer explanation that’s only slowly taking shape at the back of his mind, but they don’t have time for that now. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I was out of line.”

Will’s expression goes soft, just for a moment, and he nods. “All right. Apology accepted.” He turns as if to walk back to the house, seemingly assuming the conversation is over.

Ethan snags hold of his sleeve, just for a moment, just to get him to stop, to wait. “And you were right,” he continues, forcing himself to look Will in the eye for this. “About me wanting to keep people in neat little boxes.” He shrugs. “With the job… it’s easier.”

Will exhales, looks down and then up, and it’s all him now, all vestiges of Jimmy and James gone, and it’s just Will, with enough understanding in his eyes to shake Ethan to his core. “I guess I get that,” he says.

“No.” Ethan shakes his head. “Not fully. I can’t…”

To his credit Will doesn’t instantly argue back, just tilts his head a little. There’s something in his eyes, something wary but warm all the same. “What can’t you, Ethan?” he asks finally, when it’s clear Ethan isn’t going to finish the sentence on his own.

And fuck, why is this so hard? Ethan swallows, knowing the answer as soon as he asks the question. Because this matters. Because Will matters.

“I can’t keep you in a box.” It comes out harsh and strained, like the confession it is, and Ethan sees it hit Will, sees his mouth open and his eyes darken and fuck, fuck they don’t have time for this, not now. Maybe not ever. And that is why, that is why Ethan can’t…

He doesn’t realise his fingers are still gripping Will’s jacket until the man suddenly steps closer, breaking the hold. “Then don’t,” he says, voice low and shockingly intimate for all they are out on the street in the middle of Docklands in broad daylight. “I don’t want to be in any box.”

Ethan’s pressed against the car now, Will almost close enough for their chests to brush against each other at each inhale, close enough that Ethan can smell him; peppermint and coffee and sweat. His hands twitch, desperate to either push Will away or grab hold and haul him in. He’s not altogether sure which way it would go. “Then what do you want?” he asks, keeping himself still. It has to be Will’s choice, he knows it now, knew it in Tokyo if he’s honest with himself, for all he’d ignored it then and barrelled in all guns blazing, putting his own wants first, his need to have the team neat and tidy and his.

Will looks shocked to be asked, now, and his openly confrontational stance falters, the taut line of his shoulders softening. “I…”

“Sorry to interrupt, guys.” Benji’s voice crackles to life, making them both jump. “But McMullan’s been texting Sam. I’ve intercepted the messages of course but we should probably get back to him before he resorts to calling. I mean, Sam gave me plenty of voice samples but…”

“Yeah. I’ll be there shortly.” Ethan opens the car door. “I’ve got to go,” he tells Will.

“Then go,” Will says, “I’ll sort a pick-up for Mr Miller there and meet you back at the flat later.”
Ethan nods. Now that they have what they needed from Sam, he can actually be detained properly. Some time with representatives of the British government would probably help him see the benefit of full disclosure what with the looming charges of treason. The mission certainly seems to picking up pace, racing toward a finish line.

And after that… Ethan thinks about the four of them scattering across the globe again, of Will being shunted away onto some other pointless task that is so beneath his skills it should be classed as an illegal waste of resources, only because those in charge don’t know what to do with a man who can do it all. Because they can’t fit him into a box, Ethan realises with a jolt of guilt. Just like him.

Will’s already walking away now and Ethan… Ethan can’t have that. “Hey,” he calls out, relieved when Will turns around to look. “We’re not done here,” he says. “I want to hear your answer.”

Will stares at him for a moment, expression unchanging, but finally there’s a nod, almost imperceptible, but there.

Ethan watches until Will’s back in the house before getting into the car. He meant what he’d said; Will and he have some unfinished business. But first, they have a mission to complete.

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Things move quickly now. That’s how it always is; weeks of laying down the groundwork and then BAM! you go from planning to pure reaction in the space of a heartbeat. Will doesn’t know whether to be annoyed or grateful, because he could really use some time and space to think but on the other hand he’s relieved to have a valid excuse to push his conversation with Ethan to the back of his mind for now. It’ll be there, waiting for him like some kind of patient predator, but for now Will ignores the confused mess of dread and anticipation that churns in his gut, and concentrates on the job at hand.

By the time he gets back to the Hackney flat that evening, the others are already laying out game plans, three for each scenario they can predict now, which is not an inconsiderable number. Will watches them for a while, then grabs a laptop and dives straight in.

Ethan and Benji have managed to pacify the real Ryan with a couple of texts about a lost charger and a post-flight stomach bug, buying them some time to put together a plan or three that has a chance of actually working. The Sam Miller mask is being constructed, the pimped up 3D printer humming in the background while they work.

Sometime around three a.m. Jane throws a folder on the floor in frustration. “We’re going to have to make a choice here,” she says. “Either we nail McMullan when the memory stick exchanges hands and hope we can tie him for the murders as well as espionage. Or, we wait for him to actually make that call to Haines by which time the info he’s sold and gained has probably been put to all sorts of unpleasant uses.”

“Well this is harmless now,” Benji says, waving a memory stick identical to what Sam gave Ethan, except in its content. “Looks good but is complete gibberish when you get down to it.”

“Sure, but whatever Sam passed on in Korea won’t be,” Will points out. They’ve got a team there, trying to intercept it but without more details from Ryan, it is taking time.
“And in the meantime, Ryan is moving on to the next gig,” Ethan adds.

“Which is me so not too bad, but…” Will shrugs, and then winces. His back is protesting the hours spent hunched over a laptop.

“But not ideal,” Jane summarises. “The time lapse between Ryan’s mules returning from their shopping trip and getting killed has been at least two weeks. We can’t afford to wait two weeks.”

“I don’t want to wear the fucking latex mask for two weeks, that’s for certain.” Ethan’s eyes flick to Will and he reads the message in them loud and clear. Ethan doesn’t want to wait two weeks for them to finish their discussion either.

“Right…” Will cards his hands through his hair, getting up to stretch his back. His shirt feels restrictive, even though he’s discarded the tie hours ago, the top few buttons are undone and the sleeves rolled up. All of it leaves Ryan’s marks on him exposed but everyone’s too professional to mention them. He can still feel Ethan’s gaze though, zeroing in on the bruises every now and then, hot and heavy and somehow angry, except Will is pretty sure it’s not directed at him. “So…” He wrenches his gaze away from Ethan where it’s landed without his conscious decision. “How about we hurry things along then?”

“How?”

“We’ll make Ryan’s two week grace period too risky and force his hand.” The plan is taking shape as Will speaks, the others quickly catching on and adding details and suggestions.

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Two days later, with ‘Sam’ recovered from his stomach flu, and a promise of Friday night clubbing bringing invitations to meet Ryan to him and Jimmy both, they are in position to put things into action.

Ethan and Will are getting ready, while Benji is hacking into the club’s CCTV system in preparation for covering all angles. Jane is out keeping tabs on Haines because if everything goes to plan, Ryan may not wait even until the morning to contact him.

Will is just about to leave his room and go get kitted up with Benji when there’s a knock on the door. He opens it to reveal Ethan, dressed in black jeans and a t-shirt so tight Benji is going to have his work cut out for him to make the camera blend in. It’s not that different from what Ethan wears normally, although everything is much more closely fitting, and Will can’t do anything about the scenic route his eyes decide to take, travelling over Ethan’s form in a way that is only about one quarter professional assessment and three quarters blatant hunger.

‘See,’ he wants to say by the time his gaze makes it to Ethan’s face, ‘this is why it’s a bad idea for me to stay.’ It’s as if their aborted conversation outside the Docklands safe house has cut through all of Will’s, admittedly already flimsy, self-denial and now he’s just caught somewhere between aggressively pushing for something more and running in the opposite direction as fast as his legs will carry him.

Not that Ethan is giving him a choice to do the latter right now, shouldering through the gap in the
doorway and all but crowding Will into the room.

Will inhales sharply, muscles tightening. He thinks that if they weren’t in the middle of an op, this particular scenario would end with them either fucking or fighting. Quite possibly both. As it is, the look in Ethan’s eyes – all heat and frustration and more than a little anger – doesn’t let him rule out the possibility as it is.

There’s a tense moment where they teeter on the edge of *something* and then Ethan takes a deliberate step sideways, breaking their gaze. “Sorry,” he offers gruffly. “I didn’t come here to…” He shrugs, casts a brief glance at Will, eyes landing on the bruise on his neck again briefly before he visibly wrenches them away.

And yeah, alright, Will doesn’t need Ethan to finish that sentence. He can be a professional about this. He *can*. He has to.

“What…” Will clears his throat, starts again. “What do you need?” And fuck, even that sounds dirty, the words thick and slow, like his voice is already shot from giving Ethan *exactly* what they both need.

If the flare of Ethan’s nostrils is anything to go by, Will’s isn’t the only mind jumping to the worst – the best – possible interpretation here.

“To apologise,” Ethan says, ploughing through the tension with grim determination. "And some advice too. If you feel like helping me out afterwards."

Will frowns. "You're doing that a lot lately. Apologising, I mean. Is this about Tokyo again?" he asks. "Because I told you before, there's nothing to…"

"It's not about Tokyo," Ethan interrupts. "Although, for what it's worth, I get why you said no then. And I shouldn't have pushed."

Well. That's... More insight than Will was really expecting, even after their recent talk. "Alright," he says slowly, resisting the urge to cross his arms defensively. "Something else then?"

"Yeah, I..." When Ethan visibly steels himself, Will can feel tendrils of cold thread starting to wind around his heart. Whatever it is Ethan is about to say, he clearly thinks it has a chance of breaking things just when they’ve started fixing them.

"I heard you." Ethan meets Will's eyes head on. "With McMullan."

Technically, Ethan could be referring to any number of occasions but there is no doubt in Will's mind which one he means.

"I asked Benji to patch me through," Ethan continues. "And I listened in without your knowledge. Or permission."

"You're the team leader," Will hears himself say, voice perfectly even. He thinks he should be angry but somehow the feeling just doesn't come. Everything seems... removed. "You don't need my permission."

Ethan flinches. Will's seen the man take a fist to the mouth without so much as blinking, seen him grin like a kid at Christmas when faced with an incoming bullet but now, here, with him... Ethan
rears back like Will's just kicked him in the solar plexus.

And that? That breaks through the insulating numbness that had started to creep in.

"Will..." Ethan looks stricken.

"Okay, just tell me... Why?" And now the anger is there, snapping on the heels of each syllable.

Oddly enough, that seems to make Ethan relieved, the chance to explain bringing his shoulders down from around his ears.

"Partly because I was worried. And not because I thought you couldn't handle it." He raises a placating hand before Will has time to do more than draw an indignant breath. "I know you can. But like you said: I'm the team leader. And that makes you mine," an infinitesimal pause that Will is sure he imagined as soon as it's over, "to worry about, just like Benji and Jane."

Will gives a tight nod at that, because it's clearly the truth... just not all of it.

"But mostly..." Ethan continues, "because I wanted to hear you. To hear how..." He runs a frustrated hand through his hair, making it stand out, and for a moment he looks as uncertain as Will's ever seen him.

"You played him as well as I've ever seen anyone play a target." It's as sincere as it had been earlier. That Ethan means what he says, Will doesn't doubt for a second.

That it still matters, that despite everything Ethan's praise makes him want to stand straight and preen... That burns.

That makes him want to lash back, to take three steps right into Ethan's personal space and lean close, relishing the tell-tale tension in his body that lets Will know that Ethan is not backing away only because he's forcing himself to stand his ground. "I bet it wasn't the only thing you wanted to hear, was it?" Will hisses, low and mean.

He wants a fight, but Ethan isn't giving it to him.

"No," he says, quiet and so close that Will can feel his breath against the side of his neck. "And that's the part I'm sorry for. Because I had no right."

Will slumps, steps back. "You're a dick, Hunt," he sighs, rubbing a weary hand over his face.

"Yes," Ethan agrees.

"That was a dick thing to do."

"Yes, it was."

They stand in silence for a moment. It's surprisingly not uncomfortable.

"And stupid," Will adds finally. "That wasn't..." He trails off, unsure how to say 'the real thing' without, well, saying just that.

Doesn't seem like he has to though.
"I know," Ethan says. "Never thought otherwise. I'm sorry."

And the thing is, Will believes him. On both counts. He's pissed off, sure, but not angry anymore, not really. Perhaps because he can't say that if the roles had been reversed he wouldn't have done the same.

"Alright," Will says, " Fucking... Alright!" It comes out explosively, full of frustration at Ethan, at himself.

To his credit, Ethan doesn't ask if Will is sure. He just nods, smile small but relieved. "So..." He scratches the back of his neck. "The advice part?"

Why the fuck not, Will thinks. "Yeah, what is it?"

"I could use some suggestions on how to play it with Ryan. I know I’m good with undercover work but...” Ethan shrugs, spreading his arms. He’s not boasting, he’s stating a fact. “But you’ve got… insight here, on Ryan, on Sam, that I’d be a fool not to take advantage of.”

Okay, all right. Ethan’s right, smart too because using each other’s strength is what makes a good team, and Will would be lying if he didn’t admit that the open regard for his skill isn’t flattering. But even so what this boils down is… “You want tips on… How to act subby enough to pass as Sam?”

“Yes.” Ethan frowns. “And no. It’s not just that though. With you, with ‘Jimmy’ he seems…”

“Off balance,” Will finishes. “Yeah, because I’m keeping him off balance. But you don’t need that as Sam. Sam’s needier, doesn’t push back like Jimmy. Though he is probably a bit of a brat.” He grins. “You shouldn’t have any problem pulling that off.”

“Oh, thanks.” Ethan rolls his eyes, the momentary flash of humour cutting through some of the tension between them. “Okay, I’ll take your point but I could still use… a practice run.” He licks his lips then, a nervous tell that takes Will’s breath away more effectively than what Ethan is actually suggesting.

Well, there’s no way for this to blow up in their faces… right?

“Alright,” Will says, and then hardens his voice, slipping into role of ‘James’ like pulling on leather gloves. “Show me what you’ve got.”

It’s obvious that Ethan hadn’t expected him to just agree, not that quickly or easily, and it takes him a few seconds to switch from Ethan to Sam. Even without the mask the change is noticeable, Ethan’s posture slumping ever so slightly, the line of his shoulders rounding, head tilted back and to the side just a fraction. And yeah, he is good at this, Will knew that. Still, it’s something else to witness it like this, first hand and right in front of him rather than through surveillance camera footage.

Ethan steps closer, hand coming to brush against Will’s side in greeting. “Hey,” he breathes, his voice dipping low and honey-sweet, all eager to please. It’s both hot as fuck and entirely foreign coming from Ethan, and Will grabs his wrist before he’s made a conscious decision to do so, spinning Ethan around and pushing his trapped hand to the small of his back.

He could lie to himself and say it’s all part of testing Ethan’s role – and, to be fair, it does serve that function too because Ethan only tenses for a split second before he relaxes into Will’s grip, not
fighting back at all even though Will knows that if he wanted to break free he could – but really he’s going on instinct now because he wants to rattle Ethan like he’s been rattled. And so he pushes further, slamming Ethan face first into the closed door, stepping in, his front flush to Ethan’s back, only their joined hands separating them.

Ethan grunts, going rigid again, and Will presses in harder. “No,” he says, “Jimmy would push back. Sam would yield and beg for more.”

He feels more than sees Ethan’s nod, and then his body flows loose like water, head tipping back onto Will’s shoulder. “Please,” he whispers, “Sir?” And it’s fucking perfect, the long line of Ethan’s neck just there, inches from Will’s lips, and the whine that escapes from Ethan’s mouth when Will breathes hotly against the skin is nothing short of gorgeous, but it’s not right, not right, not real. Except maybe it is. “Good,” Will says, “That’s Sam.”

As soon as the words are out, Ethan moves, his leg hooking around Will’s as he twists, fast and lethal, and then they’re both on the ground, Will on his back, Ethan on top. His hand is still clamped around Ethan’s wrist, but Ethan’s other hand is free to mimic the move with Will’s unoccupied one, wrenching it above his head. They freeze like that, holding and being held, locked somewhere between push and yield, give and take. This is the middle of the seesaw, the still point through which movement flows, and it is blinding, searing through Will with white hot pleasure until he can hear himself make a noise somewhere between a groan and a growl. “And this is me,” he spits out, teeth bared.

Ethan’s weight settles on his hips, heavy and deliberate, his mouth opening in reply and…

There’s a sharp rap on the door, Benji’s voice like a bucket of cold water. “Guys,” he calls, “Time to hustle.”

A beat of silence and then Will puts a foot flat against the floor, deftly rolling them over. He pushes to his feet, probably less graceful than he wants but beggars can’t be choosers and at this point he’ll take the wins where he can.

“Be there in a sec!” Ethan says, loud enough to carry through the door. He too is up by now, keeping a careful distance between himself and Will. “You go,” he tells him, eyes somewhere over Will’s shoulder which is probably for the best. “‘Sam’ will see you at the club.”

Will nods curtly in acknowledgement, straightens his clothes, and goes to get his surveillance equipment from Benji. One way or another McMullan is going down and soon, because Will’s patience is fraying rapidly.

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The club is heaving; the music loud and the crowds louder. Will shoulders his way back from the bar, unashamedly using every close combat technique at his disposal to make way, tray of drinks held aloft. He and Ryan are a part of a bigger group of colleagues, friends and hangers-on tonight, so Jimmy is playing it friendly and only flirting when he’s sure no one but Ryan is watching. He thinks Ryan is planning on taking Jimmy home tonight but doesn’t really worry about it, certain that the little bomb ‘Sam’ is about to drop in Ryan’s lap will more than derail any such activities.

Will’s glad. He doesn’t want Ryan’s hands anywhere near him now, not after… He shakes his head,
ruthlessly pushing away any thoughts of what almost happened earlier and focusing back on the small talk at the table. He’s sitting with his back to the wall, perfectly positioned to be the first to spot ‘Sam’ as he makes his way through the throng of people.

Ethan is playing it perfectly, accepting greetings and backslaps from people who know him but keeping it light. He’s suitably flustered and apologetic for being late, casting anxious glances in Ryan’s direction, obviously – well, obviously for anyone who knows how to look – desperate for some acknowledgement beyond the brief ‘hello, how was your trip?’ that he’s got so far.

For his part, Ryan is clearly enjoying it, his sadism seemingly tending toward the psychological rather than physical as he watches ‘Sam’ squirm like a worm on a hook. As far as anyone here, Ryan included, knows, Jimmy and Sam have only just met for the first time so Will keeps his distance, watching Ethan work.

Once the table empties somewhat, ‘Sam’ finally makes his move, plastering himself against Ryan’s side and speaking intently in his ear. Will doesn’t need to hear to know Ethan’s begging for a private word, his body language transmitting urgency as effectively as a neon light. It’s not subtle and it’s going to draw attention soon enough, something Ryan is not happy about. His eyes find Will’s over ‘Sam’s’ shoulder and Will arches an eyebrow, playing Jimmy’s reaction as half amusement, half irritation. Ryan’s face tightens, his hand coming up to clamp down on a bruising grip around Ethan’s bicep. He says something, harsh and brief, and ‘Sam’ nods shakily, getting to his feet as soon as Ryan releases him and heading toward the back of the club.

Will and Ryan watch him go, Ryan distinctly pissed off. He knocks back his drink, getting to his feet. “If you’ll excuse me…”

Will huffs, giving Ryan a smirk full of teeth. “Unfinished business, huh? Go on then.”

Ryan looks around and when he sees no one is paying them any attention he leans close enough to whisper: “Five minutes. And you’ll get it for the rest of the night, boy.” His breath is hot and wet against the side of Will’s face but Jimmy only whines, like he’s needy despite himself, mouth open in invitation.

It does the trick and Ryan’s gaze is dark with lust, all of it for eager Jimmy, Jimmy who bends but won’t break, Jimmy who is a challenge where Sam is anything but. Good, Will thinks. If Ryan is distracted enough by the promise of having Jimmy, he won’t be tempted to make any final memories with Sam. It’s not that Will thinks Ethan couldn’t handle it, but he’d rather it won’t be necessary if he can help it.

Benji’s voice cuts into his thoughts. “Ethan wants you to spot him,” he says. “I’ll patch you in now.”

There’s a brief crackle and then an increase in the background noise, the distant sound of cars driving past and people laughing indicating that Ethan is outside, probably the alley behind the club, rather than the toilets. “Will?” he asks, under his breath.

“I’m here,” Will says, the acknowledgement automatic even though he’s surprised by the request.

“Good,” Ethan says. “Quid pro quo.” And then, before Will has time to properly decipher the implications of that, there’s a sound of a door being slammed against a wall and Ryan’s heavy footsteps approaching.

“The fuck are you playing at, boy?” he demands, loud and angry. “I’ve told you we’d deal with this...
next week. In the middle of a fucking club isn’t exactly the time nor the place, is it?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” ‘Sam’ pleads. “I know you said that but this couldn’t wait. I just… I don’t think I can do this anymore!”

“…Do what, exactly?” Ryan asks, and he sounds cautious now, worried.

“This!” There’s a rustle of clothes as Ethan paces back and forth, playing up the agitation. “It’s too much! I looked at this,” another rustle as Ethan pulls the fake memory stick out and thrusts it at Ryan, “and god, there’s stuff here about… About weapons and, and double agents and I… I just didn’t think! You said it was business information, rich people’s money! Not, not this!”

Perfect, pitch perfect. Will takes a sip of his coke and tries his best to look like he’s absorbed in watching the dancers.

“You what?” Ryan is hissing now. There’s a gasp – Ethan’s – and the distinctive sound of someone being slammed against a wall hard enough to knock a breath out of them. “You fucking moron! I told you to complete the sale, not to peek at the merchandise.”

“Ryan, sir, please!” ‘Sam’ is close to sobbing now, begging. “Please, please, I can’t… I think we should go to the authorities. I didn’t know. You… you didn’t know either, did you? Did you?”

Will listens to the silence that follows, tensing with every passing second. Just as he reaches the point of ‘fuck it, enough’, getting to his feet because maybe they miscalculated, maybe they pushed Ryan too far and he’s going to pull out a knife and decide to dispose of his problem personally, his voice comes through Will’s earpiece.

“No,” he says, eerily calm now, placating. “Of course I didn’t, baby.”

Will sits his ass back down, exhaling almost as shakily as ‘Sam’ does in his ear.

“Knew it. I knew it, sir.”

“Shh, shh. Come now, I’d never have put you in that kind of danger if I’d known.” It’s a blatant lie of course but Ryan sells it well. The real Sam might’ve bought it hook, line and sinker. “I’m going to take care of everything,” Ryan continues. “Just give me a couple of days to think, okay?”

“All right,” ‘Sam’ promises. “Yes.”

“Good boy. Now, I think it’s best if you just went home and calmed down, don’t you, hmm? I’ll be in touch soon. We’ll meet up and talk properly, yeah? We’ll sort it all out.”

Ethan keeps making all the right noises for an obedient little sub sent to the naughty corner until Ryan leaves.

Once the back door bangs closed, Will chances a low “Well done.” In his ear Ethan hums in acknowledgement, and Will can picture his wild grin of self-satisfaction so vividly he almost tastes it, biting his lip in an effort not to tell Ethan exactly that.

As predicted, Ryan is more than a little pissed off when he comes back, though he tries to hide it. Will thinks about going for the sympathy angle but doesn’t actually want to risk Ryan taking him up on it, especially as it would be less ‘shoulder to cry on’ and more ‘ass to belt’ and that’s not
something Will’s going to volunteer for unless they have no other options.

He lets Ryan stew for a bit and then sighs, downing his drink. “I can see your mind is elsewhere,” he says, going for resigned rather than angry. “Perhaps it’s best if we just make a rain check?”

Ryan looks like he’s about to argue back for a moment but in the end he lets Jimmy go with a distracted apology and a promise to be in touch.

Will leaves the club only ten minutes after Ethan but makes no effort to catch up. It’s best for the mission – not to mention his own peace of mind, relative as that is – for the two of them to keep some distance for now.

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Over the next couple of days, Ethan makes a point of not being alone with Will for any more than absolutely necessary. At least they seem to be on the same wavelength about that because Will is just as quick to find something else to do somewhere else whenever the possibility of prolonged and unsupervised proximity presents itself.

Their awkward dance of avoidance doesn’t go unobserved by either Jane or Benji, but mercifully neither of them comments on it although Jane keeps sending Ethan stares that say plenty. Of course, the fact that they are also kept busy enough by the case helps. It doesn’t take Ryan even twenty-four hours to contact Haines and arrange for a hit, and Jane keeps on his heels, documenting every phone call and cheque cash-in, getting a series of photos of his visit to scope the intended location – a bar in Borough Market.

In the meanwhile, Will and Benji are unspooling Ryan’s finances bit by bit, the evidence amassing faster and faster the deeper they dig, sometimes swapping laptops mid-sentence. Ethan tries not to find Will in research mode – all rolled sleeves and frown of concentration – hot and fails miserably. It’s not even that, not fully. It’s knowing how quickly Will can shed the fussy analyst and come up swinging, all the fluid strength and skill of one hell of a field agent.

What was once an irritation is now a source of admiration, and – if he’s honest with himself – helpless lust. The effortless way in which Will flows from one role to the next, moving from box to box like they aren’t even there because – and Ethan is only just now starting to see the truth of it – for Will they aren’t, is something rare, something that pushes buttons Ethan didn’t even know he had.

It’s exhilarating to know that whatever he throws at him, Will would adapt, would meet him step for step, hit for hit, push for pull. In between liaising with the IMF HQ and various local agencies to get all the pawns to their proper places ready for the final showdown, Ethan tries not to think about the moment in Will’s room, the way his back arched off the floor like a bow string pulled tight, the perfect, bruising grip of his fingers around Ethan’s wrist, what his lips had felt like so tantalisingly close to his throat… Needless to say, he fails at that too.

All in all, it’s a relief when Ryan’s text to Sam finally arrives. It’s a simple time and address to the pub Haines got but hey, why waste words on someone who you’ve just set up to be killed. Ethan knows the grin on his face is feral. It’s not what he wants but for now a chance to release some of the tension build-up by taking down an ex-SAS current hitman, sure as hell is better than nothing.
“We’re on,” he announces, more a formality than anything else because the message would’ve pinged on everyone’s phones, not just his.

Across the room Will catches his eyes, and the smile on his face is as wolfish as any Ethan has seen in the mirror, and just like that the reality of it slams into him like an adrenaline soaked fist of sex-and-violence, his skin suddenly feeling three sizes too tight. Ethan sees his every single thought and emotion reflected on Will’s face, bouncing back two-fold and it’s like they’re caught in a feedback loop of soon-now-please.

“Do you think we could bottle this?” Jane asks, deliberately stepping into Ethan’s line of sight. “Benji? What do you think?”

“Probably not,” Benji mutters drily, “Though I do suggest you two bottle it up for another day or so.” He looks up, giving Will and Ethan a hard stare over his computer monitors. “If only to give Jane and I a chance to clear the detonation area.”

“There’s something else too… What is it…?” Jane snaps her fingers a few times, frowning in mock puzzlement. “Oh yeah, arresting McMullan’s treasonous ass and earning our frankly indecent pay checks! Remember that, boys?”

Will barks a laugh, holding up both hands in surrender. “Yeah, yeah, sorry.” He makes no effort to deny that something is going on, only rubs a hand over his face briskly, gaze avoiding Ethan’s side of the room. “I got it.”

“We got it,” Ethan adds. Jane is right, he’d better get his head in the game or risk losing it. Or worse, someone else’s.

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Three hours later they are in position: Benji on the comms, Ethan with Sam mask on walking to the bar, Jane already there for back-up. Will, however, is clear across the city because Ryan had called to arrange for the rain-check date on the exact same time as he was supposedly meeting with Sam, giving himself a neat alibi while prepping his next target. Will hates not being with Ethan to watch his back even though he knows Jane is more than capable of handling Haines. And it’s not like Ethan is actually the clueless, vulnerable victim he’s playing.

Still, they have no choice. It won’t do to ping Ryan’s radar now. Besides, there is the positive of Will having a prime seat for watching MI6 agents arrest Ryan’s ass as soon as Haines is in custody.

The Gardener’s Arms is quiet when Will gets there, and Ryan is already waiting for him just like the last time. He’s all smiles and open flirting, relieved now that he believes his little problem is being taken care of. Slipping into Jimmy’s persona is almost routine by now. It helps that he’s not actually listening to what is going on at Ethan’s end, knowing full well that it would be too distracting to have the live link on whilst trying to carry on a normal conversation with Ryan.

Benji is keeping him up to speed with the main developments though. “Haines just arrived,” he says into Will’s ear, just as Ryan asks: “So, when did you say you were going to Beijing again?”

Will breathes through the nervous tightness in his chest, takes the opportunity to lead Ryan down the yellow brick road of incriminating himself further with his proposal of a ‘little side business’. When
Benji tells him “Going down now,” he excuses himself to the loo, making it clear that it’s a genuine trip rather than invitation for something else.

He gets Benji to patch him though, ironically, finishing the mission the same way he started it: listening to Ethan’s voice in a bathroom cubicle. Only this time, it’s more grunts of bodies being slammed against walls, the distinctive tingle of a shattering glass, and the dull smack of flesh hitting flesh. It’s over in less than a minute, Jane’s “Move one more finger and I’ll blow your brains out, Haines” bringing a halt to the fight before it even really gets started.

Will grins at Ethan’s frustrated “Fuck!”

“Didn’t quite get it out of your system, huh?” he asks, knowing full well that they’re on an open channel but not caring right now, too relieved to have this thing almost over.

There’s a beat of silence, Ethan clearly thrown to hear Will’s voice in his ear when he’d been maintaining studious radio silence until now. He recovers quickly though, voice dark with recent violence as he grits out, “Not even close,” before muting the connection.

Will thinks he should perhaps feel slighted but there’s nothing but anticipation curling at the pit of his stomach.

“There you are,” Ryan says when he gets back.

Will smirks and there’s not a shred of Jimmy left now. “Here I am,” he agrees. “And look at that, here are my good friends from MI6.”

“Wha—?” Ryan blinks at him, but before he has a chance to finish the question, Will raps his knuckles against the table top in a pre-arranged signal.

On cue, three of the pub’s patrons put down their pints and newspapers, standing up to block exits. One of them is holding out her credentials, face expressionless.

Ryan goes white as a sheet and Will is not above taking some pleasure in it although mentally he’s already half way across the city. “Ryan McMullan,” he says, getting to his feet. “I believe you’re about to be detained on your Majesty’s pleasure.”

With a nod to the agent in charge he walks out, not even turning around to witness Ryan’s downfall. He’s got more important business to finish.

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Of course, things are never that easy. The clean-up takes longer than expected, IMF and MI6 being only the start of the alphabet soup being stirred by McMullan and his not-so-little operation coming to light. As the team leader, Ethan is forced to sit through twice the number of briefings than others.

Benji is first to leave. Being on the home ground makes the opportunity for some downtime too tempting, and he packs his toys a mere twenty-four hours after they take down McMullan and Haines. “Time to go say hello to my nan,” he tells Ethan cheerfully, shouldering a messenger bag. “But if that offer from Tokyo still stands…?”
“It stands,” Ethan says, clapping Benji’s shoulder. “I’m working on having the whole team in the books for good,” he promises.

“Good.” Benji holds his gaze for a moment, before breaking into a sunny smile. “See you soon then, Hunt.”

Ethan expects Jane to be the next out of the door, but the following day he comes back from some indeterminable meeting in a windowless back room of Scotland Yard to find Will’s room stripped and bare.

The disappointment hits him like an ice bullet to the chest. Fuck, he knew they hadn’t had a chance to so much as exchange two words after the op but he’d thought they were on the same page here, that Will was going to wait just a bit longer.

“Don’t trash the place,” Jane’s voice comes from behind him. “HQ will want their deposit back.”

Ethan’s grip on the doorframe tightens and he takes a long breath, lets it out slowly. “Jane,” he says without turning around. “Last to abandon the ship, eh?”

Jane huffs a laugh. “Stop being such a melodramatic child, Hunt. He hasn’t abandoned you, jeesh!”

Something white flickers in his peripheral vision and Ethan snatches the envelope from Jane before he has time to fully figure out what it is he’s being handed.

“That’s right, lover boy,” Jane sing-songs, “If you’d checked your room before jumping to conclusions you might have discovered this little note left for you.”

Ethan isn’t listening, too busy ripping open the envelope. Inside, there’s a single folded sheet of paper and on it one line of text, written in neat block capitals.

The relief that floods him is imminent and the only thing stopping his knees from buckling is the certain knowledge that if he swoons now like a maiden in a storybook, Jane is never, ever, letting him forget it.

“Well?” Jane asks. “What is it?”

Ethan pulls a lungful of air and wills himself to keep going for just a little while longer. It’s going to be fine. “It’s an address,” he says, unable to help the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Jane punches him on the shoulder, grinning hard enough to look painful. “Told you!” she says. Then she hits him again, and this time without any playfulness whatsoever. “Don’t fuck it up, Hunt.”

He’s going to do his very best not to.

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The address Will left him is in San Francisco. If Ethan had to have guessed, he would’ve named any one of the East Coast cities over California. Then again, if the last few weeks have taught him anything it’s not to make assumptions when it comes to Will Brandt.
Ethan gets a nonstop flight from London as soon as the last details are wrapped up. He’d gone straight to the Secretary, bypassing at least three steps in the organisation’s hierarchy but frankly, at this point he’s more than owed and the Secretary and those Ethan steps on in the process of getting to him know it too. Sometimes it pays to be an obnoxious little shit.

Who’s he kidding, it always pays to be an obnoxious little shit when you’ve got the skills to back it up.

Ethan’s plane lands early morning, and by the time he’s standing outside the apartment complex, the streets are only just starting to get busy. He’s leaning on the corner of the building opposite, a baseball cap pulled deep over his eyes, and trying not to jitter too obviously. For a trained agent on top of his game, he’s putting on a frankly pitiful performance right now.

Probably because it’s not a performance.

Ethan watches the steady stream of joggers, dog walkers and commuters rushing by, eyes tracking people and their patterns automatically, looking for outliers.

Of course, an outlier finds him. He senses the presence behind him a fraction of a second before he hears the scrape of a shoe against asphalt. The only thing stopping him from whirling around is the familiar rhythm of the breathing, his hindbrain interpreting it as ‘safe’ while his conscious mind is still stuttering through the surprise.

Instead, Ethan turns slowly, trying to give himself time to pull on a mask of… something, anything, but he knows his face is still caught somewhere between studied blandness and the nervous smile that keeps pushing to forefront.

To his credit, Will doesn’t seem inclined to call him on it. He’s clearly back from his morning run, dressed in loose tracksuit bottoms and a white t-shirt that clings to his chest, translucent from sweat.

Ethan lets his gaze wonder over the span of Will’s shoulders, the curve of his bicep, the solid strength of him. There’s no point in hiding after all, not anymore. He’s here, committed.

He’s rewarded by a quirk of Will’s lips. “Come on, then,” he says. “I’ll make us breakfast.”

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The apartment Will takes him to is on the third floor, open-plan yet cosy with a large sofa and shelves full of books and knick-knacks. Ethan walks to the window, checking the exit routes automatically and nodding approvingly at the fire escape that’s a swinging distance from the ledge. In the kitchen area, Will huffs at him in amusement before opening the fridge.

“Omelettes okay?” he asks, already pulling out a carton of eggs.

“Sure,” Ethan says, watching Will load the coffee machine and grab a frying pan. The realisation hits him like a jolt of electricity, the burn of it settling in his gut. This isn’t some company safe house or an anonymous crash pad that Will’s invited him into, this is his home.

They eat at the kitchen island, the silence almost companionable. Ethan can’t help the way his eyes flit about, greedily drinking every small detail from the eccentric collection of fridge magnets to the
worn blue throw on the sofa. He doesn’t kid himself that his observations go unnoticed but Will seems content to let him get on with it, asking how tying up the loose ends in London had gone, if Jane got off okay, if he’s heard from Benji, the conversation easy and harmless and absolutely nothing to do with why Ethan’s here in the first place.

The ball is very obviously in his court. He’d asked what Will wanted and been answered already, the paper with the address still neatly folded in his pocket. And now… Well, Will may be willing let Ethan walk out of here without demanding some answers of his own, but Ethan’s not. He doesn’t want to pretend nothing’s changed.

“Here,” he says, pushing his phone across the table top.

Will raises an eyebrow at him but takes it. “What’s this?” He’s already flicking the screen on though, eyebrows climbing even higher as he reads.

“A new contract,” Ethan explains, somewhat unnecessarily. And not just any contract, but one that gives Will an unprecedented freedom to choose his assignment, his team, instead of having to accept whatever shitty errands gets sent his way by people unable to comprehend the sheer breadth and depth of Agent Brandt’s skillset. The Secretary had been rather taken by Ethan’s argument about wasting talent.

“Any team?” Will asks finally, having obviously read the whole thing through at least twice while Ethan stirred the dregs of his coffee and pretended not to get increasingly nervous with every passing second.

“All team,” he confirms, “but…” He swallows, looks Will in the eye. “I want you in mine.”

Will regards him for a moment and then he exhales, dropping his gaze to the table top. “I’m not—” he starts, but Ethan has no intention of letting him finish that sentence.

“I am,” he says firmly, hand shooting out to wrap around Will’s wrist before the other man has a chance to retreat fully.

Will freezes. Breathes. “And this?” he asks, raising his eyes to Ethan’s, startlingly green in the morning light, “You sure about this too?”

“Yes.” There’s no hesitation in his answer, even though it hurts to say, to flay himself open. The truth of it lies between them, heavy and… incomplete. “At least… from my end,” Ethan amends, owing Will this much. And more.

He releases his grip on Will, rests his hands palms up against the counter top. “If you’re not…” He swallows, forces himself to continue, “I’ll still want you on the team. That won’t change.”

The moment stretches, tension singing in the space between them. Ethan wills himself to be still, to wait it out. And then Will blinks, picks up the phone again, pressing his thumb into the screen, the inbuilt scanner beeping once in confirmation. “Signed,” he says. “I’m in. And Ethan…” He’s getting up, circling around the kitchen island, Ethan turning slowly in his seat to face him.

“I told you,” Will says, close enough now that Ethan has to look up, close enough that he can feel his body heat, “I don’t want to be in a box.”

Ethan inhales sharply, coffee and sweat and Will’s familiar scent settling on his tongue, making his
mout water.

“Never,” he promises, tipping his head back further, deliberate and open, while his fingers dig into his own thighs.

“Okay,” Will breathes, “okay then,” and when he smiles down at Ethan, it’s like a honey-dipped dagger, both sweet and piercing.

Somehow, it seems wrong that this is happening during daylight hours, a robin egg blue sky outside the windows and Will standing in a pool of sunlight, golden. Men like them, all jagged edges and darkness, should be drenched in shadows, not the warmth of a new day pouring over them like salvation.

But there is darkness here too. Ethan can feel it coiling inside him, see it deepening in Will’s eyes. And when his hand cups the side of Ethan's neck, thumb coming to rest over the pulse point like a lie detector of flesh and bone, Ethan presses right into it, eager for the darkness that crashes over them both, breaking into a thousand fragments of light.

***

The first kiss is... slow. Quiet. For all they'd been a hair's breadth of throwing each other against the nearest wall – and actually done that in the name of practicing for a role – right now the moment stretches between them almost languorously, Ethan's mouth soft and pliant, the curve of his throat against Will's palm a steady, reaffirming pressure.

He crowds closer, pushing his way between the open vee of Ethan's legs, spreading to welcome him and the thrill of it, of knowing that Ethan is letting him, burns through him like wildfire. The last few weeks come rushing back, every interrupted moment, lingering touch, each comment with layers of layers of hidden meanings and unanswered questions, it all pours out into a kiss that deepens to the point of violence. Under Will's hands, Ethan's back arches sharply, the kitchen stool tilting back onto two legs, the only thing stopping it crashing to the floor and taking both of them with it is Will's grip, his fingers leaving bruises on the curve of Ethan's ribcage.

Will slides a hand under Ethan's denim-clad thigh, urging them up until Ethan takes the hint, his strong legs wrapping around Will's hips, arms locking themselves around his neck. Will bends his knees for leverage and, without breaking the kiss, lifts Ethan up, the chair clattering to the floor.

"Fuck," Ethan says, looking down at Will, pupils blown wide and grin more than a little wild around the edges. He doesn't offer even a token protest, seemingly delighted by Will's effortless ability to manhandle him, to carry him right across the room. He uses Ethan's back to push open the bedroom door and walks in, something dark and dangerous skittering across the man’s features when Will drops him onto the messy sheets.

He licks his lips, taking in the sight of Ethan Hunt sprawled across his bed, all lethal beauty and dishevelled clothes. Will thinks about a car spinning over and the icy cold waters of Moskva, hauling Ethan across broken glass hundreds of meters above ground, sand whipping the towering walls of Burj Khalifa. He remembers pulling his gun and giving it up, the glint of Ethan's eyes in Tokyo, angry and hard when he'd demanded ‘why not, Will? Why not?’

Will thinks 'finally' and 'I won't be able to give this up' and the fear that chases itself down his spine is
a welcome friend. Every good agent knows that fear is what keeps you alert, aware of the risks as you jump off the building, reach for the loaded gun, do what needs to be done and live to see another day. He doesn't want to ask but Ethan sees the question anyway because he lifts himself up enough to kick Will's knees from under him, flipping him onto his back.

"I'm sure," Ethan repeats. He grabs one of Will's wrists and brings it up above his head, pressing it to the mattress. He could have captured both of Will's hands, not easily, granted, but he could have. That he chose not to is an opening large enough to be an invitation, one Will accepted a while ago. This? This is just a long overdue follow-through. He curls the fingers of his free hand around Ethan's other wrist and twists it behind his back, using the leverage to bring their hips snug together, swallows the moan the contact wrings out from both of them.

It’s the same position they ended up after the impromptu lesson in London, what feels like a lifetime away but is barely a week ago. This time there is no one to interrupt them, this time the balance of power is free to tip back and forth unchecked, the rhythm of it building between them with every grind of hips, every slow curl of tongues. Will knows he could come from this, the almost painful press of Ethan’s denim-clad cock, the way his back muscles bunch and shift against Will’s arm, how his name sounds, slurred into the hollow of his throat.

They’re not going to last long enough for this to be anything more complicated than a drag of skin-on-skin, but Will wants that at least. He hooks a leg around Ethan’s and rolls them to their sides, sacrificing his grip on the man’s wrist in favour on slipping a hand under his shirt, fingers skating over ribs, tracing the deep vee of muscle to where it tapers into the gap between warm skin and jeans. It doesn’t take long for Ethan to catch on and together they make short work of Ethan’s belt and zipper, Will’s jogging bottoms only taking a determined tug downwards to get out of the way.

“Fuck!” Ethan’s hips snap forward, the drag of his cock against Will’s bare skin leaving a wet trail. “I’ve wanted this since Tokyo, maybe since the safe house in Dubai,” he confesses, mouth hot against Will’s, and he knows exactly what Ethan is talking about, the moment Will took the gun away from him and then gave it right back, a penance and a gift and something far more complicated than either. “I didn’t realise then but…”

“Yeah,” Will says and thinks that maybe they did, on some level, because otherwise they wouldn’t be here now.

Ethan, too, has let go of his wrist and Will curls his free arm under his neck and shoulders, pulling him to another kiss, this one open-mouthed and frantic, teeth clicking together painfully. Their hips pick up a rhythm, faltering at first, both of them distracted by getting access to more skin, the collar of Will’s t-shirt irreparably stretched as Ethan pulls it out of the way, licking sweat off the dip of his sternum, tongue impossibly hot against Will’s already heated skin.

Panting, he captures one of Ethan’s wandering hands long enough to lick his palm thoroughly, laving the spaces between Ethan’s fingers and tasting salt. He shoves it unceremoniously down between them before giving the same treatment to his own hand and following suit. Ethan catches on quick and once their joined hands wrap around their cocks, tight and wet with saliva and spreading pre-come, all bets are off.

Ethan’s free hand fists in Will’s hair, wrenching his head back. “I want you to fuck me,” he gasps into the hollow of his throat, teeth grazing at the stretched tendons of his neck. “I want you to, I…” It’s somewhere between begging and a demand and Will doesn’t care which, because he’s going to give it to Ethan, anything, everything, he wants.
“Yes,” he hisses, twisting his wrist just so and feeling the vibrations of Ethan’s moan against his skin. He does it again, and again, forcibly pulling his hair free of Ethan’s grip so he can catch the look of shocked pleasure on his face when comes, the inky black of his pupils blown wide. It’s the sound of his name, slurred and oddly sweet, that pushes him over the edge, and Will fucks himself into the loosening grip of Ethan’s hand, face pressed against his shoulder as he shudders through his own release.

They stay as they are for a few minutes, curled toward each other like parentheses, fingers sticky and tangled between their bodies. Eventually, Will rolls to his back, grinning stupidly at the ceiling. Next to him he can hear Ethan do the same, except first he reaches over and wipes his hand on Will’s rucked up t-shirt.

“Hey!” he protests weakly, but in the end he’s too worn out to muster enough muscle co-ordination to retaliate and resignedly wipes his hand on his own shirt instead of Ethan’s.

Ethan chuckles. “See, it’s beyond rescue anyway.” He sounds like he’s smiling.

They lie quietly for a while and then Will clears his throat. “So,” he says, keeping his eyes on the lazily moving ceiling fan. “What next?” He half expects Ethan to start laying down the parameters of the next mission but instead there’s a measured silence, as if Ethan carefully counts to three before answering.

“Well…” His voice is perfectly casual. “The Secretary said something about two weeks of mandatory downtime.”

Will can feel his grin spreading entirely out of control. “Did he, now? Sounds like a direct order we can’t possibly disobey.” He bites his lip for a moment, forcing himself to sound flippant. “You got any plans?”

There’s another beat of silence, this one somehow disbelieving, and then Will is being hauled over by his wrinkled and dirty t-shirt until he’s sprawling over Ethan’s prone body, shaking with laughter he can no longer suppress.

“Yes,” Ethan mock growls as he pulls Will into a messy kiss, “We’ve got plans.”

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Three Months Later…

The unusually warm autumn has extended Prague’s tourist season – already almost without gaps – and the crowds milling on the Charles Bridge are making the most of the sunshine. It’s a mix of holidaymakers and locals, languages from every corner of world melding cheerfully as families call for their children, vendors try to entice shoppers and couples attempt to get the best angle for a photo with selfie-sticks extended.

Ethan is leaning on the railing, ostensibly admiring the sedately running Vltava and the historic Old Town beyond, but really keeping an eye out for their mark. She’d arranged a meeting with her contact – or what she thought was her contact but really was Jane – yesterday, but none of them were quite sure if she’d actually show up.
“If I have to stay here much longer, I’m going to be too drunk to actually be of much use,” Jane says in his ear at that moment. She’s waiting in the designated pub already, but it’s not the kind of place where people who take up a table but don’t order anything are tolerated for long.

“Just get another beer,” Ethan says, suppressing a smirk. “They’re not that strong.”

“One, you’re wrong,” Jane argues. “And two, I’d rather not miss Heidensohn because I had to take a bathroom break.”

There’s a snort on the line – a secure channel shared by the whole team, scattered as they are currently – and Will’s voice tells her: “You’ve got time for it. I’ve only just picked her coming out of the hotel, heading toward the bridge now.”

“Well thank god for that.” Jane’s mic goes mute for a minute, presumably so that she can pee in private. Ethan is equally relieved, though for different reasons. They hadn’t been sure if Heidensohn had managed to slip the net, perhaps find a different buyer than the one they arranged in Jane, so Will’s update is welcome news.

“Benji? Status report.” Ethan walks a few meters, pretends to be interested in the display of knock-off watches while he waits.

A few miles away, Benji is attending an invitation only cybersecurity conference at one of Prague’s many congress centres. The sound he makes in reply to Ethan’s query is somewhere between an irritated hiss and a thoughtful hum. Now that he’s switched the audio on at his end, Ethan can hear the noise of several people talking in the background, and the clink of glasses. Probably full of expensive champagne.

“Well, there are actually a couple of people here who aren’t complete morons,” Benji mutters under his breath, the background noise receding somewhat as he walks somewhere quieter. “I mean, this one woman had some quite interesting ideas about applying GNU/Linux in—”

“Benji,” Ethan interrupts, though not unkindly. “This isn’t a staff development weekend. Any luck with Morris?”


“Now, now, Benji. There’s no need to sulk about it.” Jane’s voice comes back on line, thickly laced with amusement. “We’ve all got to take a turn.”

“Besides,” Will adds, “out of the four us, you’re best equipped to sweet talk in binary.”

Ethan bites down on a smile at Benji’s indignant spluttering. But Jane and Will are right; this time the rich guy in need of seducing for the sake of the mission is a computer genius done good, which makes Benji the natural choice.

“I hate you all so much,” Benji says, but without much heat in it.

Ethan doesn’t bother replying, instead buying one of the watches from the vendor, slowly moving back to the side of the bridge, leaning his elbows on the stones.

“Heads up.” Will’s voice is sharp, with a hint of command in it. “Coming up on your location in five,
Ethan casually glances over his shoulder, sees Heidensohn ambling toward him at a slow pace. With her sunglasses and large shoulder bag, she looks like hundreds of other tourists, taking in the sights.

There’s a rustle of clothes to his right as Will settles next to Ethan, pulling out his cell and starting to snap pictures of the scenery. It shouldn’t be possible to feel his body heat, not with the careful few inches between them and the afternoon sun making everything already warm, but Ethan swears he does, skin prickling with the sense memory from much earlier that morning, Will’s body moving under his, fingers digging into Ethan’s shoulder blades.

He indulges in a lingering look, taking in Will’s windswept hair, the rolled up sleeves and the open top buttons of his shirt, revealing the warm, tanned skin forearms, the tempting hollow of his throat.

“Eyes on the target, agent,” Will murmurs, sounding exasperated and pleased in equal measure.

“Oh, they are,” Ethan reassures him, brushing past close enough to their arms to drag together for a fraction of a second before he moves to take over trailing Heidensohn, leaving Will to prop up centuries old stonework.

Will barks a laugh and Ethan grins, settles easily into the rhythm of surveillance as he informs Jane that the mark is still heading toward her location. The day is glorious, the operation progressing more or less on schedule and he’s got the best team in the world with him. Feeling content, Ethan fishes out a pair of sunglasses from his breast pocket, slips them on and lets the crowd swallow him out of sight.

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