Summary

The year is 2031, and the world is addicted to sim-tech, a virtual reality technology that has a secret application - recording memories and experiences. When the world's greatest con artist meets the world's greatest identity thief more than just sparks happen to fly. What starts out as a partnership-in-crime turns into something more when a simple heist sets off a chain of deadly events where lost memories become the loot and identity becomes the ultimate prize in a tale of lust and betrayal.

Notes

New year, new fic. Something completely different from what has gone before, miles away in tone from HoC. It'll be more caper-like, and then get more serious, I suppose, as it goes. I don't know yet since I got a fair ways into this (like 160 pages or something), and it went pear-shaped and I had to start again from about 60 pages in. So there might be longer waits between updates as I juggle rewriting this with my PhD thesis write-up and work and, ya know, real life. ;)
As always, please review and let me know what you think. I'm always learning as a writer and always appreciate your thoughts and suggestions - and many thanks for all that my readers have given me by way of praise, encouragement and constructive crit - I appreciate it so much. A special thanks here to jpraner, my amazing beta, for reading this so far and for her invaluable feedback - this is dedicated to you, hon. If you haven't already, please do give her writing some support - she's good. ;)

And may 2017 be a wonderful year to all you lovely Romy fans out there!

Much love,

-Ludi

x
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Movie poster art by the wonderful Spasticatt <3

It all began at the hotel bar.

He had been busy knocking back his third bourbon of the night whilst simultaneously
flirting with the sultry bargirl, when the man next to him had drunkenly stumbled off his stool and knocked right into her as she’d walked past. The black leather clutch she had been holding jerked out of her hand, spilling its contents unceremoniously on the floor.

“Shit,” she’d hissed, with an urgency that should’ve signalled a shitload to him, but that he’d been too tipsy at the time to notice.

His innate sense of chivalry had got the better of him.

He’d slipped off the stool and knelt down to help her pick up the contents of her purse.

His fingers had wandered over each item with the casual lightness of one who was used to lingering over unfamiliar objects.

Lipstick, car keys, compact, earphones… a hotel room keycard; an ID.

*Tanya Trask.*

Only the reclusive and mysterious daughter of the world’s richest and most secretive mem-tech mogul.

He’d lifted his eyes to match the photo on the ID card to actual flesh and blood.

Curiosity itself would have led any old Joe to do so. No one had photographed the woman in question since she had been 12 years old, and that had been sixteen years ago. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting when he’d looked up at her, but it hadn’t been what he saw.

Brilliant green eyes to stun any man at a hundred paces, in a face that was confident and pre-possessed and beautiful. The face had matched the one on the card, right down to the white streak in her cinnamon-coloured hair; yet somehow, it hadn’t matched at all. It hadn’t done a single ounce of justice to the steely beauty he’d seen before him.

“Thanks,” she’d said in a voice that had seemed to imply anything but thanks.

She’d snatched the ID card from him, and that should’ve told him even more than her barely stifled sense of urgency, but he’d been too distracted by her unwitting charms to notice that too – pretty faces had always been a weakness, one he’d never summoned up the inclination to conquer.

“M’pleasure,” he’d murmured in that soft, hard accent that always got the ladies’ attention; but she hardly appeared to have noticed. She’d busied herself gathering the remaining items into her purse, before flicking her mascara-flecked glance back up at him. One second, two seconds had passed. Her lips, coloured only with a transparent sheen of gloss, had been flat, betraying nothing.

“Thanks,” she’d said again, in a voice that had been slightly softer if no less uncompromising than before.

And she’d stood up and swept away.

He’d got to his feet and stared after her, watching the self-assured grace of the woman in the white silk blouse and the black satin pants as she walked away from him and out the bar.

If it was her eyes that had hooked him first, it was her walk that had kept him wondering after.
She’d walked with all the softness of every woman who’d walked a certain way to get his attention. And yet she'd walked with all the poise of a gladiator heading into the ring.

The entire episode had barely lasted 30 seconds, but it was a 30 seconds that would come to change his life in ways he’d barely believed possible.

After a moment he’d slid back up on his stool and smiled at the scarlet-lipped bargirl.

“‘Nother,” he’d said.

-oOo-

Five hours and a tussle with the bargirl later, he’d stood outside room 554 and considered his options.

The number on the door had been the number on the hotel keycard that the woman had dropped from her purse.

A giggling couple had interrupted him, entering the corridor, kissing loudly and ignoring him completely before stepping into a room and banging the door shut behind them.

He’d heaved in a breath and slipped his hand inside the inner pocket of his suit jacket, brought out the digital lockpick, slipped it into the keycard slot. Then he’d flipped out his cellphone and remotely connected to the device, silently thanking God for the hotel’s free high-speed wifi service. The next few minutes he spent concentrating on hacking the high tech lock, the app on his phone happily running through every line of code on the hotel system’s databases. It was a ritual he’d gone through about a thousand times before, routine enough for him to be almost bored by the time the lock finally gave its tell-tale click.

He’d put away his phone and pushed himself away from the wall, pocketing the lockpick. He’d stood by the door a long moment, his grip on the handle, listening intently. There hadn’t been a sound to be heard, and he’d figured she was either out or asleep. Satisfied, he’d pressed gently down on the handle and felt the door give way slightly. He’d paused a second or two, holding his breath, seeing only partial darkness inside – but there had been a slat of light glowing under the bathroom doorway, and he’d heard the susurration of the shower on the other side.

He’d opened the door fully then and stepped inside, neatly sidestepping her heels and taking in the room in one quick sweep. A standard double room, lit only by the dim glow of a bedside lamp, its paltry light casting shadows over a landscape that had barely been touched. The bed had been unslept in, the curtains had still been partially drawn. The doors to the balcony had been slightly ajar though – a good escape route if he’d needed a quick, unexpected exit. There had been a single jacket hung up in the vestibule; an unpacked overnight bag lay on the bed. Her purse had been open on the dresser.

He’d noted everything in a few short seconds.

The only other sign of her presence had been the subtle scent of her perfume – something between fruity and flowery that he hadn’t quite been able to place.

Hm, he’d thought to himself. Trask’s daughter sure travels light for the kid of a trillionaire.

He’d walked up to the dresser, rifled lightly through her bag – and his fingers had just slid over the tight pack of plastic cards in a side pocket when he’d felt the barrel of the gun at the small of his back.
“I think that’s enough now, don’t you?” came that same barbed voice he’d heard in the bar downstairs. If the words had been hard, their steeliness had been more than tempered by the warmth of her breath on his neck. It had been a token he’d only subconsciously been aware of. What he’d been doing most at that moment was kicking himself. For underestimating her, for being caught out by the old ‘I’m in the shower’ trick.

“Take your hands outta my purse and put them where I can see them,” she’d hissed, and he’d done so, slowly, mentally measuring the distance between them. Close enough to sense the heat of her body against his back. Not close enough for her to be right up flush against him.

As soon as he’d raised his hands she’d pushed him up against the wall and frisked him. He’d let her because he’d been intrigued. There had been a clinical matter-of-factness to her movements, like it’d made no difference at all to her that she was touching him in places where the bargirl had been touching him so intimately only half an hour before. She’d sussed the lockpick in a few quick seconds, the first knife a few more later, and the second almost straight after that.

She hadn’t found the third.

When she’d divested him of his accoutrements, he’d felt her take a step back, and then:

“Turn around,” she’d hissed. “And keep your hands up.”

He’d done so, slowly.

She’d been holding a pistol in her hand, and he’d figured from the way she’d been holding it that she knew how to use it.

She’d still been wearing exactly what she’d been wearing downstairs in the bar, still held herself with this cool, business-like professionalism that told him that this hadn’t been the first time she’d done exactly this.

Her face had been amazingly composed for someone who’d just found a strange man in her room, but she had still been exactly what he’d thought she’d been down in the bar – beautiful. In this strikingly unconscious, natural way. Green eyes had held his with a ferocity that was completely at odds with the calm coldness of her demeanour. They were almost golden in the dim, tawny light of the lamp.

“How did you know I was here?” he’d asked her, and she’d indicated to the door with a jerk of the head, replying, “I heard the lock click.”

His eyebrow had shot up.

“You a light sleeper.”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“Hm. Spendin’ your night alone awake in an empty hotel room? Don’t sound too much fun to me. Figure now you got someone t’ spend it with, neh?”

Her eyes had flashed but she’d chosen to ignore his comment.

“Who sent you?” she’d asked him instead. Resolute, to the point. Brooking nothing less than a straight answer. He’d allowed himself a slow smile. Her question implied more than anything else she’d hit him with so far – it made her something more than interesting. It gave her an air of mystery.
“No one,” he’d answered, and when she’d looked disbelieving he’d added dryly, “I’m a thief. You’re Trask’s daughter,” as if the fact had spoken for itself.

Her eyes had narrowed. A hard little grin had creased the corner of her lips.

“A girl like me doesn’t carry cash.”

“Non,” he’d agreed. “But you sure do carry a lotta plastic, chere.”

The words had wiped the smile off her face.

“You’re lucky I don’t shoot you where you stand,” she’d sneered, and he’d chanced himself the gamble of answering; “Looks like daddy taught his little princess to take care of herself. I like that.”

There had been a little pause, a little twitch of her eyebrows like she had been surprised at the fact that he’d actually dared to banter with her when he had a gun trained on his heart. But it had done the trick. It had brought that wry little smile back to her lips.

“Yeah, well… when your daddy’s had as many death threats as mine has, when about five terrorist organisations have made out they were gonna kidnap you for ransom by the time you’re ten…” She’d shrugged, letting him work the rest out. “Now I just have to figure out what I’m going to do with you.”

She’d given him the once over then, a slow, considering sweep of a glance that somehow managed to be both clinical and sexy at the same time, one that had stirred him in a way he hadn’t been stirred in a long, long time. He didn’t even think she’d been aware of the way she’d looked at him. The way she’d sized him up, like a predator surveying its prey.

A second or two, and the moment had ended.

She’d indicated to the walk-in closet door with a twitch of the gun.

“What’cha gon’ do wit’ me?” he’d asked her quietly as he’d walked slowly over to the closet, hands still in the air.

“What’cha gon’ do wit’ me?” she’d snapped back sarcastically; this time she’d been right behind him, and he’d made a quick mental calculation, figured out the angle of her body, the height and trajectory of her aim, the mental mathematics skimming through his mind at a million miles a second as she continued, “I’m gonna lock you in there until I figure out what I’m gonna—”

And that’s when he’d made his move.

Spinning round and ducking down as low as he could, launching himself at her legs and pulling them out from underneath her. The gun had gone off – a muffled, metallic snap that had told him silencer – the bullet embedding itself in the bathroom wall as she’d crashed to the floor and he’d covered her, making a grab for the gun.

She’d been stunned, dazed, confused by his attack – but he’d been surprised by the fact that she’d recovered her wits quickly enough to give back as good as she got. Before he’d even had the chance to wrest the firearm from her she’d pistol-whipped him in the face, and for a moment he’d seen stars and tasted blood, and when he’d come out the other side it was to find she’d tackled him right over onto his back and was straddling him, panting from the exertion of their brief struggle, the
gun barrel pressed firmly against his temple.

“Fuck, woman,” he’d rasped around the blood on his tongue. “You’re good.”

“You’d better fuckin’ believe it!” she’d seethed at him, and for some reason the only thing he’d been aware of at that moment was the shape of her thighs pressed against his hips. “And here I was, thinkin’ I was gonna cut’cha some slack and letcha get off light. More fuckin’ fool me.”

He’d heard it. Right there, right then. A hint of accent.

“ Couldn’t letcha send me away, chere,” he’d ground back up at her, “otherwise we wouldn’t get ta have dis fun li’l tussle on de floor now, would we.”

His vision had finally begun to clear. The first thing he’d been aware of was her eyes only inches from his, pale green with barely-suppressed rage, fierce and beautiful as a wildcat.

And that was the last impression he’d had of her, before she’d slammed the butt of the gun into the side of his head and the lights had gone out.

-oOo-
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Our hero and heroine strike a deal.

_The world swam for a few hours, and he swam with it, floating lazily with the current as he’d done so often on the Mississippi River, as a boy, as a man, in better days now long gone by._

_And there were the memories again, the ones he’d fought so long to suppress, submerged like silt beneath the currents, but just as durable and just as heavy…_

_He’d lain on the shore, on its banks, with Belle, making love under the sun, her cornflower blue eyes as bright as the sky, as sunlight sparkling on the water, and he’d said to her, I love you, I’ll love you forever, and she’d replied to him…_

“Mister, mister…”

He groaned.

And it all began to slowly unravel, those cornflower blue eyes turning as fierce and green as a wildcat’s, pain washing in on the tides of the Mississippi, centring in on the side of his head as she prodded his bicep, echoing, “Mister, mister…”

He groaned again and slowly opened his eyes.

A Hispanic maid was peering over him, poking his arm with a blood red fingernail.

“Mister, you get up now,” she importuned him in a dispassionate tone. “I clean the room now, okay.”

For a few seconds he was confused. He sat up slowly, feeling the pain funnel right into his left temple and throb there with an agonising clarity. The world span and then gradually became still. He was in a hotel room that was completely empty apart from himself, the maid, and her laundry cart.

“Mister, I turn down bed now,” the maid was saying in a deadpan voice – it was entirely as if she was used to finding strange men in supposedly unoccupied hotel rooms. “You go now.”

He held the side of his head and winced.

Tanya sure had knocked him for six.

“The girl that was here last night…” he muttered – there was a pain in his mouth too, although he couldn’t remember for the life of him where it had come from.

“She gone. Checked out.” There was just a hint of irritation in the maid’s voice now, the kind of impatience that came with someone who was tired of dealing with the aftermath of other people’s one night stands. “You go too. I clean room.”
“Fuck,” he grumbled, and slid off the bed stiffly, dragging his sorry ass out of the room behind him.

By the time he’d found his way down to the washrooms in the lobby, the previous night had come back to him in painfully vivid detail.

He’d cleaned himself up as best he could, wiping the dried blood from his lip, checking there was nothing busted, nothing missing. The headache was a bitch but nothing a few Tylenols couldn’t sort out… or something harder. He checked his pockets and discovered that she’d taken his lockpick and his knives. She’d been kind enough to leave him his cell phone and the blade she’d missed when she’d frisked him the night before.

He’d allowed his mind to wander at that point, remembering the single-minded confidence of her touch, the heat of her body and the sensation of her thighs wrapped round his hips. It was only when his head had given a particularly painful twinge that he’d snapped out of it.

“Fuckin’ femme,” he muttered to himself. “A real fuckin’ piece.”

He took out his phone and kicked in his tracker app. The red beacon was flashing about halfway across the city, south-southeast. By the river.

He gave a grim smile and left.

-oOo-

She was sitting outside a café on the riverside, sipping a latte out in the morning sunshine, her cinnamon hair caught up in a graceful chignon that shimmered like bronze in the light.

She made a pretty picture – there was something almost Continental in the setting, with the sun shimmering on the jewel-like waters, with her sitting there, relaxed and poised and effortlessly elegant, perusing the latest edition of the New York Times.

Cute, he thought to himself with a grimace as he watched her from a newsstand across the street. Too damn fucking cute for someone who’d held a gun to him and knocked him out cold 8 short hours before. He didn’t like that she’d got the better of him, but even he had to admit there was something kind of exciting about it. He was rarely ever bested, and almost never by a woman. The fact that she’d managed to do so… it stuck in his craw and then some. But it also interested him, in more than just the professional sense. Though that was the last thing on his mind right now. He had other things to attend to.

He approached her slowly, sidling up with all the cocksure insouciance that came as naturally to him as a fish swims in the sea. He walked right up to her table, slid into the seat opposite her, saying as he did so, “Mind if I sit here, chere?”

At the sound of his voice she’d started, her eyes snapping to his over the top of her newspaper; and his wounded pride was at least partially appeased when her mouth dropped slightly open and she gaped at him with recognition.

“Nice day out, huh, chere,” he observed with exaggerated breeziness. “Thought I’d go take a walk, clear dis ragin’ headache I seem t’ be havin’. Never figured I’d run into you again.”

For all his jibes, her expression was stoic. She laid her paper down carefully and stared at him.
“How did you find me?” she asked quietly.

He shrugged, passed her a lop-sided smile.

“It’s called a homin’ instinct, chere. I got an in-built one for pretty ladies.”

Her eyes went wide. In a split second she’d gone for her purse, and he’d watched on, amused. A few seconds later and she’d found it. She held up the tiny little disc of a transmitter that he’d planted in the seam of an inner pocket the night before. She glared at him as if he hadn’t beaten her fair and square.

His only answer was a complacent grin that brought her to her feet, and at first he’d thought she was going to slap him, but instead she took aim and pitched the transmitter straight into the river. He half got out of his seat, exclaiming in dismay, “Hey! Dat was an expensive fuckin’ piece of tech right there!”

“Oh really?” she shot back sarcastically. “I’m so sorry.”

He expected her to walk away at that point, but she didn’t. Instead she sat right back down, slung her arm casually across the back of her seat and glared at him, a look all the more poignant for the fact that it was highlighted by a glacial smile.

“You obviously went to a lot of trouble to track me, Cajun,” she remarked, pinning down his accent with effortless accuracy. “I’m intrigued. What is it that you could possibly want with me?”

His eyebrow shot up. This was unexpected. It wasn’t often that he met anyone who was willing to cut to the chase. Not when there were so many cards to deal, to take account of, to bet with.

“I want to make a proposition,” he said, answering her forthrightness in kind.

“Really?” This time it was her eyebrows that went up. “And what makes you think I’d be interested? You had some pretty unoriginal propositions to make last night.”

She shot him a meaningful look that instantly took him right back to him standing there under the slow sweep of her gaze back in her hotel room. He took in a quick, light breath, said, “Yeah, well… I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t try and proposition a pretty girl.”

“Is that so,” she drawled with that hint of accent peeking through again. “No offence, but it seems to me like you could do with some practice.” And she took a sip of her latte with a casualness that almost matched his own.

He let it slide, but only because this was a line of conversation that he didn’t really have the time or inclination for. He merely sat there silently, perfectly aware – just as she was – that a delicate bout of power play was about to ensue, and that each was wondering just how many cards to play and just how many to hold to their chests. She considered him over the rim of her cup, and at length she set it down and started first.

“What’s this proposition then?”

“A business proposition.”

“Huh. With a thief. Why would I want to work with a thief?”
He shrugged.

“For the thrills.”

“For the thrills.” She looked at him witheringly. “I’m heiress to a gazillion dollar fortune. I can buy myself any kind of thrill I want, any time of the day. All it’d take is just a snap of my fingers.”

She looked bored. He almost had to hand it to her.

“All the more reason to at least hear me out.”

She was sceptical.

“How so?”

“Well, first up,” he began, leaning in conversationally, “a business proposition wit’ a thief ain’t the usual kinda cheap thrill you can just buy, chere. And second,” his eyes flicked up to hers meaningfully, “you ain’t Tanya Trask.”

To her credit, she didn’t deny it.

She merely stared at him. Green eyes narrowed, lips pursed.

“What makes you say that?” she asked with a softness that was dangerous in every way.

He leaned back in his chair and smiled.

“You got an accent, cherie. What is it? Mississippi? Buried under years o’ fine, but still there, underneath. I’m pretty sure Tanya Trask ain’t got no Southern twang in her. But more to the point,” he added as his final coup-de-grace, “I happen to know Tanya Trask got institutionalised jus’ last week. Sensitive information, and not too easy to come by… but I guess that’s why you moved in when you did. It’s the perfect opportunity. Zero activity on your mark’s accounts gives you time to move in and take over her identity. You spend a few weeks syphoning money off her accounts, and by the time someone figures it out, you’ve already moved onto someone else. Am I right?”

Her eyes had narrowed to bare slits. She was practically radiating hostility now.

“Who are you?” she asked him, each word like a dagger. His smile didn’t even flicker.

“Etienne,” he replied without missing a beat, and she just sat there and stared at him, hard as flint, and he prompted her, saying, “You?”

“Marie,” she answered in a stone cold tenor.

Both knew that neither was telling the truth.

But it was an exercise in trust. You give a little, you get a little back. These were the games that were always played in his – their – kind of business. Dance around a bit. Fence. See how far you can push open the envelope. Figure out just how much each is willing to give.

She shifted, looked aside, at the water. After a few heartbeats she looked back at him, asked, “And what could a man like you possibly want with a woman like me?”

The question was an invitation to flirtation that was like second nature for him to respond to; he curbed the impulse with an effort.
“We both got the same mark.”

She snorted inelegantly.

“Tanya Trask? She’s not my mark anymore, ‘Etienne’. I’ve already moved on.”

“Sure,” he rejoined easily. “But she was your mark, at one point. And right now, to all intents and purposes, you are her, neh?”

Her teeth caught on her lower lip, ever so slightly, before letting it go. It was a barely-there gesture that suddenly made him wonder exactly what her lips tasted like.

“You’re a thief,” she reasoned slowly, squinting at the table. “And thieves aren’t interested in people, they’re interested in ‘things’. Tanya isn’t your mark – it’s what she can get you.” Her gaze flickered back to his. “And you expect me to believe that whatever it is you want is something you can’t get yourself?”

He lifted his shoulders. His head was beginning to throb painfully again and he reached inside his shirt pocket for a fresh pack of smokes.

“Let’s put it dis way, p’tite. You can open doors I can’t.”

He shook out a cigarette, held it up to her with a look that said, you mind? She shook her head absently and he flicked open his antique gold lighter, lit up, waited for her to say her line.

“You didn’t have much trouble opening my door last night,” she pointed out acidly.

“Chere, please.” He looked a little offended. “We’re talkin’ ‘bout Trask Technologies here, not some hotel. Five-star, I grant you, but not enough to warrant military-grade security.”

“Huh. I betcha you’ve broken into a few of those in your time,” she commented wryly, and there it was again – the faintest trace of an accent, like honey dripping from some hidden place. It was a tease, a reminder, of something close to home.

“I’m on a deadline,” he deadpanned the next line. “Bringin’ you in is faster.”

“And what’s in it for me?”

“Whatever you find on the other side of dat door.” He sucked on his cigarette slowly, blowing smoke aside and adding, “Except for the thing I want.”

She laughed at him then. It was something between a genuine laugh and the kind of laugh he reckoned she put on for show most of the time – dry, sarcastic. It made him want to know what it sounded like when she did it for real.

“God, you must be fucking desperate,” she muttered.

He said nothing.

He let her construe his silence whichever way she wanted.

“Mr… ‘Etienne’,” she spoke at last, the lilt of her voice heavy with sarcasm, “You rob people of their property. I rob people of their identities, their lives. I work in the shadows, not out in the field. Unlike you,” and she lifted her cup with a sneer, “I try not to wander into situations where I’m likely to get caught, or maimed, or killed. You’re barking up the wrong tree. I’m not interested.”
She drained the rest of her cup and stood, but she’d only walked a couple of steps when he’d asked, “So what are you interested in then?”

And she halted, turned to him and answered with a cold smile, “What do you think? Money.”

And she’d just about turned away again when he chose to put his trump card into play.

“Five million sound fair then?”

If he’d doubted she was the daughter of a trillionnaire before, his suspicions were entirely confirmed when she dropped heavily back into the seat opposite him. They both knew, at that point, that she’d completely given herself away.

“You’d better not be shitting me,” she shot at him breathlessly, testily.

“There’s a lotta things I talk shit about, chere,” he told her seriously. “This ain’t one of ‘em.” He exhaled smoke. She glared at him through wreaths of it.

“You’re talkin’ about breakin’ into Trask’s walk-in safe,” she levelled at him accusingly; the corner of his mouth hitched. This was the kind of sensitive information only someone like him – someone who was in 'the business' – could possibly know.

“You’re smart.”

“And you’re crazy. Word on the street is there’s five hundred safety deposit boxes in there, and you think I’m gonna go through each and every one for you?”

“Non.” He pulled in a drag, let it spill out of his mouth slowly. “I know exactly which one I’m lookin’ for.”

Her mouth opened, then shut. Then she opened it again.

“How the hell do you know what’s in there?”

He pulled a face.

“I do my homework.”

She was silent again. If she’d wisely doubted his name was Etienne – and just about everything else about him – there was one thing plainly obvious to her now. He wasn’t just your average common thief.

“I also happen to know,” he continued, stirring in his seat and leaning forward to tap his cigarette against the plain metal ashtray on the table, “dat the box I want broken into holds about five mil’s worth of bonds, cash, jewellery, antiques, and some gold bullion. You could make a grab for the heavy stuff, but I’d stick wit’ the paper if I were you. It’d look kinda weird, going in there with an evening dress and a swag bag, neh?”

Her eyes flickered – he could almost see the clockwork in her brain moving.

“Trask’s annual charity fundraising gala,” she stated quietly after a short few seconds putting two and two together. “It’s tomorrow night. You want me to go as Tanya Trask and pull the heist for you.”

He nodded.
“Like I said. You smart.”

“And why the hell are you working to such a tight deadline?” she asked him outright.

He frowned; an arrow of pain shot through the side of his head again and he answered dully, “Les’ jes’ say dat I got side-tracked and leave it at dat, huh?” His speech was thicker, more slurred than usual. He dug absently in his side pockets for the codeine. “Point is,” he continued, popping a few pills and recovering himself a little in the process, “I ain’t got time now to figure out their security system and get past dat safe door. Was seriously beginnin’ t’ think I’d haveta skip town before you showed up and dis li’l plan started to take shape.”

He took another drag and looked at her.

“I prefer to work in the shadows. Alone,” she reminded him flatly, but there was something like doubt in her voice now and he knew he’d found an in with her.

“Mebbe,” he rejoined. “But seems t’ me dere was a time you used t’ work out in de field, chere, am I right? You got some pretty neat combat skills dere.”

She was quiet, but her gaze was watchful and he knew he was right.

“But seems t’ me dere was a time you used t’ work out in de field, chere, am I right? You got some pretty neat combat skills dere.”

She was quiet, but her gaze was watchful and he knew he was right.

“Not to mention which,” he carried on – the codeine was slowly starting to kick in now, “workin’ backstage can get kinda borin’ after a while, can’t it. Been there often enough myself. Sometimes you gotta lie low for a few weeks, months… years.” He paused. “But the excitement, it pulls at you, chere. You remember how it used t’ be… the adrenaline kickin’ in, the thrill of the chase, of the fight… Sometimes you don’t go back to it… It just calls you. You know what I’m sayin’?”

She didn’t reply. She just sat there and stared at him; but there was something else in her eyes now. A tacit assent. She knew what he meant. He’d sensed it from her, the first moment he’d laid eyes on her. There was a time she’d been a fighter. Just like him.

“So,” he asked when she gave him nothing, bringing the cigarette to his lips again, “you in?”

She leaned back in her seat and considered him like there was something to be considered. Again her teeth bit into her lower lip and he stared at it. She wasn’t wearing lipstick. Just the same gloss she’d worn the night before. He thought vaguely that the more he saw of her the more he liked her. He liked the fact that she kept him guessing. He liked the fact that she could parlay as well as he could. He appreciated more than anything the fact that she was also easy on the eyes.

“Okay,” she said at last, like she was agreeing to a round of tennis or something else similarly trivial. “But only on one condition.”

He paused mid-action, stubbing out his cigarette in the grubby ashtray.

“What?”

He’d made a million deals before, but never with a woman like her.

And she’d stood, grabbing her clutch purse before saying:

“You, Mr. ‘Etienne’, are gonna pay for my new dress.”

-oOo-
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The heist begins!

There were men and women in the window of the interfacing parlour.

Row upon row sitting in their silver reclining chairs with their eyes hidden underneath a sleek black strip of visor. On the other side of those goggles another world, another life would be playing out. Something to take them away from the pain, the monotony, the dreariness of everyday life. Something to make them forget there was a world to go back to, until the program ran down.

Virtual reality had become the human race’s anodyne, its antidote, its soothing balm.

So much so that you’d get men and women like these, office workers who’d spend their coffee or their cigarette break plugging in for a few minutes before scurrying off back to their mundane lives.

The woman with the wildcat eyes and the white streak in her hair stared at them dully from the other side of the window pane.

She knew that a fair number of them would get straight back onto their personal units when they got home in the evening. And there were one or two, she also knew, who’d spend every free moment they got on their devices, risking their sanity to the sinister creep of the bleed effect, where the virtual would begin to tip slowly into reality, where they'd no longer be able to tell the difference.

“Funny,” the man named Etienne commented as he sidled up beside her. “Didn’t think that was your kinda entertainment, chere.”

She stared at the slightly parted mouth of the woman on the other side of the glass. She wondered what kind of unreality it was that she was viewing.

“It isn’t,” she murmured, before shaking herself and turning to him. “Why? You don’t like interfacing?”

He shrugged.

“Now and then, I guess. When I get bored. But real life has more than enough high octane thrills for me.” He said the words entirely seriously, completely self-deprecating. She snorted.

“I just bet it does.”

His eyes slid from the rows of reclining bodies on the other side of the window to hers.

“Figure yours does too. Figure you got a lot more interestin’ things to do with your free time than sit in a chair, plug in one of those sim-chips, and immerse yourself in a boring, make-believe world.”
She pulled a face at him.

“Why boring? The world you interface with is whatever you want it to be. That’s the whole point.”

He smiled that lop-sided grin she was beginning to think of as his trademark.

“It’s always better in real life.”

She wasn’t particularly keen on continuing this line of conversation and so she decided to change the subject to business.

“You got us on the guest list then?” she asked. While she’d been busy shopping for eveningwear he’d been busy working away on that high-tech phone of his, and the past half-hour he’d disappeared somewhere to make some mysterious calls. She wasn’t particularly interested in the whys and the wherefores, as long as whatever he was doing made sure everything ran all nice and smooth for her that night.

“Yeah, I got us on,” he answered. “Looks like we’re all set to go. If you’re still up for it, that is.”

He gave her a penetrating look from those deep, chocolate brown eyes of his, eyes that were dark and soft with just a hint of chicory. He had this way of interrogating her with his gaze that seemed to suggest a whole lot more than just your usual inquisitiveness.

“Would be kinda rude of me,” she commented wryly, averting her gaze without consciously knowing why, “to get you t’ pay for a whole new outfit and then just bail out on you at the eleventh hour.”

She’d meant it playfully, but to her surprise his expression had remained perfectly serious.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” was his only comment, before he’d turned and walked off.

She’d cast a final glance at the catatonic rows of humanity in the window, before finally following.

-oOo-

His hotel room was dull and non-descript – a shock to the system after all the fancy penthouse suites she’d graced in her time.

And yet was it strange that she sensed that he was used to – or had been at one time – the finer things in life.

She took in her surroundings curiously as she walked inside and let him close the door behind her.

Like her he showed evidence of possessing very few belongings. Just a carryall on the bed, a leather trench coat slung across the back of a chair, a half-empty packet of cigarettes on the small round breakfast table. The well-worn first aid kit on the dresser gave away the most – it spoke of a man who lived on the edge, who was used to getting injured frequently. Its prominence in the room spoke volumes to someone like her, who was a keen reader of people, of the minutiae of life.

The sparseness of his life intrigued her, when the person himself presented her with a thousand deep and richly hued mysteries just waiting to be prised open.
“Not much, I know,” he remarked flippantly when he saw her expression. “I’ll be gone by tomorrow.”

He moved into the room, brisk, business-like.

“You sure you’re still up for this?” he asked again as he brushed past her, going straight for the cigarettes on the table; she bristled ever so slightly at the idea that she might not be.

“Sure. Just tell me what I have to do and I’ll do it.”

He looked amused to hear her nettled tone. She was surprised when he lit up a cigarette in what was obviously a no-smoking establishment, until she looked at the ceiling and saw that he’d already disconnected the fire alarm.

“We’ll get to that in a bit,” he retorted calmly. “First, you got somethin’ of mine that we’re gonna need.”

Up till that point she’d forgotten that she still had his contraband on her. Only begrudgingly did she dip into her purse, retrieving the knives and his lockpick. When she held them out to him he took them back with a small smile.

“I’m guessing I’m gonna need that to break into the safe,” she commented as he was doing what she assumed was calibrating the lockpick device.

“Yeah,” he answered absently. “You know how to use these things?”

She merely raised an eyebrow at him, and his mouth creased into a conspiratorial smile.

“Great. Saves me havin’ to give you a walkthrough.”

She observed him closely. It unnerved her, the way he made absolutely no attempt to gain her confidence, or to have her gain his. It was as if he’d taken it completely for granted – within the space of a few mere hours – that they were in this together, come hell or high water.

“I’m gonna go get dressed,” she muttered, pulling the evening dress he’d paid for out of the fancy store bag. It was a long designer dress of shimmering black satin, its only concession to immodesty the sharp slash of the V-shaped neckline. Tanya, she knew, was not a woman to make overly flamboyant statements; and besides, she hadn’t worn colours since she was twelve.

He gave a grunt of acknowledgement, obviously engrossed in his task, his teeth still clenched around the cigarette. It was her cue to leave, and so she slipped into the bathroom, shutting the door gently behind her.

-oOo-

She didn’t know what had made her agree to this insanity.

He’d been right about a lot of things, of course, unimportant things – and too close for comfort on other points she’d rather not dwell on entirely.

She had begun to feel the inertia of boredom beginning to set in lately, inciting her to riskier and riskier projects, onto marks that any regular identity thief would have shunned. It was partly the reason she’d gone for Tanya Trask, and she’d been beginning to get to the point where she hadn’t really cared whether she was caught anymore.
It was always dangerous when that kind of feeling set in – like wood rot or something. Hard to fight off when you’d got to the point that she had, when there wasn’t much left in the world to excite her anymore.

Perhaps that was it. The promise of some excitement, however short-lived. The promise of some adrenaline kicking in, just like he’d said. But no. It wasn’t just that. Not entirely.

She concentrated on putting on her mascara and avoided looking at her own gaze too directly.

He wasn’t the type she usually went for. She usually went for rich, sophisticated men who would pay for lavish dates and expensive gifts. On a baser level she went for blue-eyed, blond-haired and well-groomed. Not dark-haired, dark-eyed and rough round the edges. But there was something about him. Something that was making her re-evaluate whether she actually had a type. Because underneath the shaggy auburn hair and the five o’clock shadow, he was pretty much the most beautiful man she thought she’d ever encountered. And she liked the way he moved. All 6 foot two inches of his angular, lean-muscled frame. Subtle elegance. Unconscious grace. It promised a lot, and she’d felt exactly what it promised the other night, when he’d been lying on the floor with her legs around his waist and his hands on her thighs.

He’d put them there like it was instinct and she didn’t even think he knew he’d done it.

Marie, Tanya – whoever she was – subconsciously ran her tongue over her bottom lip, tugged on it with her teeth.

It was a long time since she’d last been with a man, and it was even longer since she’d last been even interested in a man on anything more than a superficial level, but since meeting this ‘Etienne’ there were things beginning to stir inside her that frankly were things she didn’t need right now.

She noticed the finest of tremors in her hand and went for the pills in her make-up bag. A minute or two later and they had stopped.

Ninety seconds, she thought wearily to herself. These things are taking longer and longer to kick in…

The eye drops came next. She administered them carefully, one single drop into each eye, taking care not to mess up her makeup, like she’d done it many, many times before. When that was done she felt calmer, her heartbeat slowing, her breathing deep and regular. She put away the phial and left the bathroom.

The man called Etienne was waiting for her on the other side, standing in front of the mirror of his non-descript hotel room, smoothing out the lapels of his dark grey suit. He turned as she entered, letting out a long, low whistle when he saw her.

She smiled and walked towards him, only to turn around and show him her back.

“I need a zip up.”

There was a pause during which she could sense the heat of his gaze running the entire length of her bare back. Several heartbeats passed before he finally zipped up the black silk evening dress. He took his time. The entire movement was slow, sensuous. It gave her a thrill deep down in the depths of her stomach, one she’d invited just so that she could feel it again. She wasn’t stupid. She knew he’d done it about a thousand times before, but it was nice. Nice to feel sexy and
desirable and wanted again.

He didn’t move when he was done, and she took her cue. She didn’t move an inch either.

“Y’do know you’re gorgeous, right?” he murmured; he was closer than she’d first thought – she could feel his breath on the back of her neck. It made her spine tingle from top to bottom, made her step away from him on a sudden impulse; but even as she did she turned, cocked him a sardonic smile and said: “You don’t clean up too badly yourself, sugah.”

This time she let him hear the full force of her natural-born, all-Southern accent, one she hadn’t spoken in for years now. It was exactly what she knew he wanted to hear and the effect it had was exactly what she’d hoped to elicit. An appreciative smile slowly lit his face.

On second thoughts, she decided she liked his smile too. So cocksure and effortless and sexy. So everything she usually turned her nose up at, that unimpressed her. She wasn’t sure why she liked it all so much in him.

It was so unnerving that she turned away and went for her purse.

You barely know the man, you don’t even know his name, girl.

But things like that didn’t really matter and she didn’t know why she was suddenly making excuses.

“So what is this thing I have to get you?” she asked him, all traces of her accent carefully buried once more.

“You’ll find out once you get it,” was his only reply, after a moment’s pause. It was almost as if he were disappointed she’d cut their spontaneous flirtation short.

“Why all the secrecy?” she shot at him testily.

“Plausible deniability, chere. You get caught…”

He let the sentence hang. She glared at him.

“I won’t.”

“You seem pretty sure about that.”

He was too damn calm for his own good.

“Cajun, you don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

He looked amused by her statement.

“I might have an idea…”

He let that statement hang too. She put it down to bravado, nothing more. She was certain he was chock-full of it.

“So how do I know where to go to find your precious haul?” she quizzed him. She’d studied the blueprints he’d shown her, had learned by heart exactly how to get to the strong room. But once she was there, that was a different matter. She’d need some directions.

He made no answer but walked over to the dresser. There was a small case there and he
opened it up, took out whatever was inside. When he walked back to her she saw there were two tiny metallic discs on the tip of each forefinger.

“Put it in your ear,” he explained. “It’ll transmit what I say to you.”

“And what if I want to say something to you?” she queried, pressing the small disc just into the entrance of her ear canal. There must’ve been some sort of adhesive on it because just a slight pressure caused it to stick there without even an inkling of discomfort.

“It’s a two-way device,” he replied nonchalantly. “It picks up the vibrations in your head when you speak and amplifies them.”

It was clear to her now – a hundred percent – that he wasn’t just any common thief. She levelled a look at him that said so, but he appeared to be uninterested in what she thought. He cocked his head to one side and pressed the device into his ear. Then he turned away, taking out his phone and making a few gestures on the touch pad. She felt the transmitter kicking in.

“Y’hear me, chere?” she heard his voice in her ear, clear as if he’d been standing right there next to her, even though he was facing away from her, head down, by the window.

“I hear you,” she replied, quietly.

“Bon.”

He turned and walked back over to her, a completely different overtone to his movements now. Gone was all the lackadaisical sensuousness. Now he was all entirely efficient professionalism. All business. It wasn’t her usual tactic to follow a man’s lead, but she found herself taking his cue almost unconsciously, and not without a certain resentment. It was a long time since she’d worked with anyone else, and she was suddenly reminded why.

“I ain’t gon’ ask how you’re gonna get past de neural scans,” he commented in a voice that suggested he’d very much like to do so nevertheless.

“Cajun, you wouldn’t have asked me to do this if you hadn’t known I had a way,” she retorted dryly. “And I wouldn’t have accepted if there wasn’t.”

“Hm.” There was the easy smile again. “There’s always a way, chere. I’m just interested to know how you do it. But I know,” he added quickly, when he saw her face, “trade secrets and all dat. We ain’t s’pposed t’ ask about those.”

“No,” she replied with a smirk. She had a feeling she’d already given away more of herself to this man than was strictly safe or necessary, but things being what they were, she didn’t mind raising the stakes. It was something, at any rate, to alleviate the meaningless monotony of the days.

She picked up her coat from the nearby bed.

“This’d better be worth it, Mr. ‘Etienne’.”

He moved forward to help her slip on the jacket, completely uninvited.

“Yeah, well… Jes’ take whatever you want from dat safety deposit box dat’ll make it worth your while, chere. I don’t much care. S’long as you get what I want.”

His voice was almost a monotone, but his body was putting off all sorts of signals she
could read about a million miles away. He had a way of standing, close but not too close, that made her stomach somersault.

“I’ll get what you want,” she assured him, ignoring the insinuation of his body heat – or trying to at least. “You just make sure you get me in and out of there as quick and tidy as you can.”

“Hm,” he mused. “Sounds like a challenge.”

“Cajun,” she rejoined, turning and refusing to step out of the ring of his body space, “games like this always are.”

-oOo-
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Marie and Etienne head to the Trask fundraising gala and steal the mysterious loot Etienne's been looking for.

By mutual agreement they took separate taxis to the venue, separated by roughly half-hour intervals. She left first. The taxi ride was uneventful, and when she arrived a sizeable gathering of people were already milling about outside the Trask Technologies building – the perfect cover.

She exited the car and joined the growing crowd, flashing her fake invitation and one of her many false ID cards at security. The plan was never to enter the gala as Tanya Trask – that would be too blatant, too obvious. Tanya’s identity would only be important at a certain phase of the mission, and this wasn’t it.

She followed the couple in front of her into a large hallway made of chrome and glass, grey steel columns and pale shimmering mirrors. The usual scanners were set up there – the other guests were walking through the flickering green ambient field as if it wasn’t even there. But she was only all too aware of it, and she hoped to God she was still good enough to trick the darn thing; when she managed to get through without tripping any alarms, it was still a relief, despite the fact that she’d never set them off in her life, not ever.

The hallway opened up onto a gorgeous and brightly-lit ballroom decorated with flowers and fountains and every ostentation available to Trask and the world that the sim-tech had brought him. She slid naturally, easily, into the room, into the role, into the crowds of gaudily-clad women and their partners, standing upright and erect like two-toned piano keys in black and white. She stepped into the bosom of the city’s elite with effortless sophistication, immersed herself in the silvery laughter and the clink of the crystal glasses and the elegant lilt of the classical music. She sampled the delights of this world liberally, as she always did, drinking the champagne on offer, tasting the titbits lined up on large silver platters. She helped herself to it all as if she had been born to it.

She kept to the sidelines whilst she waited for Etienne to arrive, mindful of the fact that the less seen of her the better. She ignored the inviting stares of a few men, getting halfway through her champagne before her rangy partner finally made his appearance in his perfectly cut dark grey suit.

It was as if the heads of half the room – the female half, and a handful of the rest at least – turned at his entrance.

Or so she fancied anyway.

She watched him move through the crowd, oblivious to her presence. It was hard not to look at him. The grace of his gait, the line of his frame, the sculpt of his body as he stopped in the middle of the floor and turned a full circle, looking for her. It was hard not to wonder at it, the thing that made him stand out in a crowd, this intangible something that was all at once sublime and profane.

She emptied the rest of her drink, never taking her eyes off him.
“Where are you?” she heard his whisper kick in over the transceiver.

“Six o’clock,” she murmured back, and he turned towards her nonchalantly, searching for her through the bodies shimmering in all their finery, finding her at last.

It was also hard to ignore the fire in her gut when his gaze finally locked onto hers.

He hitched a small smile and turned away again.

“How long you been watchin’ me, chere?” his voice mused knowingly in her ear, and she smirked at being so easily found out.

“Hey, I’m just making sure you’re not gonna bail out on me at the last minute, Cajun.”

It was a weak defence and she knew it. She turned away and headed for the bar, kicking herself for not just saying that it was her job to keep an eye out for him, that she had to make sure he was going to turn up in the first place, that she hadn’t been watching, that she’d only just caught sight of him when he’d chosen to contact her.

His laugh was soft, sardonic, telling her he knew exactly why she’d been really watching him. But he didn’t call her out on it.

“Chere, bailin’ out now would be incredibly counterproductive,” he stated instead with a twist of humour. She chanced a quick glance over her shoulder and saw him halfway across the room, weaving his way through the throng in her general direction, as if unwilling to let her out of his sight.

“Yeah, I know,” she bantered back lightly. “I’m your only shot at making this happen. You need me.”

“You can’t imagine how,” he murmured under his breath. She gave a wry smile as she reached the bar.

“You never did tell me why exactly the stakes are so high,” she teased him. “What would happen to you if you didn’t get this mysterious McGuffin.”

His laugh was humourless.

“Let’s just say,” he said flatly, “that the person who wants dis ain’t the kinda person who takes kindly to failure.”

It was obvious that any further questioning would be unwelcome. She decided to drop out of the conversation at that point and concentrate on her line of attack. Now that she had got the lie of land, all that was left to do was psyche herself up and then go for it.

And as soon as she was about to go and do just that, she noticed the tremor in her right hand.

_Damn_!

She hastily put the glass down on the marble bar – it tottered slightly before righting itself, and she covered her right hand with her left, willed the tremors to stop.

_Not now, not fucking now…_

Her grip was so tight it almost hurt. It seemed an age before the trembling finally stopped;
and when it did she heaved a sigh of relief.

There was no way in hell she could deal with that right now.

She was surprised when Etienne suddenly appeared right by her side, ordering a bourbon on the rocks from the Italian bartender. It was a surprise that displaced the consternation of the last couple of minutes. She forgot all about the tremors. She wondered instead why he was here when they’d made a deal not to cross paths during their mission.

He cast her a sidelong glance that could’ve been construed as sizing her up for the first time, but that was something far more pointed, far more intimate.

“Buy you a drink?” he finally offered in that low, soft voice. It was seriously tempting fate to even talk to one another, but she couldn’t help but respond to him.

“Another one of these, thanks,” she rejoined, touching her empty champagne flute. He smiled – that sexy crinkle of a smile – and ordered her another with nothing more than an eloquent look in the bartender’s direction. She swivelled away from the bar, feigning nonchalance. By the time he’d handed her her drink she’d managed to bury the acceleration of her heartbeat deep down where all the other emotions she couldn’t handle were kept.

“It’s dangerous for us to be seen together,” she reminded him in an undertone. He knocked back his bourbon, seemingly unconcerned.

“I like livin’ on the edge.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“I can believe it. Either you’re crazy or you’re stupid.”

He grinned, looking aside briefly to signal another drink from the bartender.

“Neither. Does easily bored count?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Oh. Great. Looks like I’ve hooked up with an adrenaline junkie.”

“Who has a thing about attractive women.”

She didn’t think he stopped. Ever.

“Jesus Christ.” She turned away, thinking this was the perfect excuse to cut short their dangerous little conversation and get the real business of the night underway. “There are plenty of ‘attractive women’ here, so why don’t you occupy yourself with one of them and let me get back to work?”

And so saying she sauntered off.

“The women here are borin’,” he observed, the transceiver in her ear kicking in again.

“Oh,” she mused sarcastically. “So you prefer women who hold a gun to your back and pistol whip you upside the head?”

“I prefer a woman who makes things interestin’.”
She smirked, caught between feeling flattered and irritated by his blatant pursuit of her.

“And when she hands your ass to you?” she quizzed mockingly.

“The more interestin’ she is,” came his glib reply. “And the bigger the challenge.”

She snorted indelicately. All this talk was worse than a pain in the butt, but only because it was starting to get under her skin.

“This is all assuming,” she retorted pointedly, “that you get a second chance to meet the challenge. Now hush, swamp boy. I’m going in.” She said it more to shut him up than anything else. “Don’t contact me again till I contact you.”

To his credit, he did as he was told. The transceiver went silent; and she began her journey down into the bowels of the building.

-oOo-

She took a detour to the bathroom and gave herself another dose of eye drops. Then she wandered down towards the basement. She passed a couple of security guards along the way, but she simply flashed her ID card at them and they let her pass without further mishap. All in all, it was shaping up to be wonderful evening.

The basement level was a sprawling maze of corridors that was as sparsely constructed as a hospital, a laboratory, a military compound. She’d been in enough of these kinds of spaces to feel comfortable in them; and between that and the thorough study of the blueprints Etienne had shown her, she managed to locate the strong room pretty quickly.

She paused when she got there.

The door was twice as tall as her and looked to be high-grade titanium. It was defended by the usual neural scanner and the usual bored looking security guard who snapped to attention when he saw her.

“I’m sorry,” he said, in that same peremptory tone security guards the world over seemed to employ when faced with potential prey. “Guests aren’t allowed down here.”

She said nothing, just showed him her ID. He stared at it a moment, then back up at her, then back at the card again. His demeanour took a 180 degree turn. A blush suffused his face.

“Ms… Ms. Trask!” He looked surprised. “I didn’t… I wasn’t informed that you’d be paying the strong room a visit tonight.”

It was as she’d suspected. She was pretty sure he’d never met Tanya Trask before. She was almost certain none of the staff on duty that night had ever laid eyes on her.

“I wasn’t planning to,” she replied in a carefully neutral tone. “But there’s something I wanted to get.”

He nodded stiffly, stepping aside, indicating to the scanner outside the door. And here was the real test, the real challenge. She didn’t have the luxury of changing her mind now. She walked on through without hesitating. Almost immediately the scintillating green mesh washed over her, and she stood there, letting it penetrate her, closing over every single part of her but for that one single slither of her mind that belonged to somebody else.
The green mesh flickered out and then the solid titanium safe doors gave a heavy *clunk*. It had worked. The strong room was unlocked.

The security guard stepped forward to do his duty, cranking open the door and moving aside.

“If you need me, Ms. Trask,” he began deferentially, “I’ll just be outside.”

“Thank you,” she answered, and stepped over the threshold.

The door ground shut behind her; halogen lights flicked on, one by one, overhead, illuminating the room to her. The word strong room didn’t do it justice. It was more like a stronghold, its titanium vaulted ceiling looking more like a modern-day temple than anything of utilitarian purpose. Row upon row of square-doored safes lined the walls from top to bottom.

“Okay,” she murmured, as she took the black satin opera gloves out of her purse and slipped them on. “I’m in.”

“Hm.” There was begrudging admiration in his voice as it filtered in through the transceiver. “You work fast.”

“Yes, well, unlike you, I don’t have to go sneaking around.” She moved into the centre of the room, glancing at the line of identical doors to her right. “So,” she began, “which one?”

“Number 361,” he answered faintly into her right ear. “Should be on your right. Five rows up, six columns from the back wall. You see it?”

She walked on over in the direction he’d indicated. Thanks to his simple instructions, she found it almost immediately.

“Got it,” she said.

“Great. Use the lockpick.”

She was already way ahead of him, having already attached the device to the key panel. She had to see the irony in it – a piece of Trask black ops tech breaking into a Trask safe full of Trask treasure. She watched as the panel’s screen rained a torrent of random numbers and glyphs, as somewhere upstairs the Cajun worked his magic on the security via his cell app. Hardly any time at all had passed before the key panel gave a high-pitched chime and she heard the door’s internal mechanism whirr and click. The safe was open.

“You make it look easy,” she commented appreciatively.

“Ha. Workin’ with you actually *makes* it easy.” There was a pause, and she could almost sense his smile. “So. Whaddaya see?”

She swung open the door and peered inside. She took in a breath. He hadn’t been lying.

“About ten jewellery cases, a pile of gold bullion, a stack of currency and a king-sized folder of what I’m guessing are stocks and bonds. Some pretty ancient mem-ware in here too. Cool.”

“Hm. Sounds about right.”

She dipped a hand in and opened a jewellery box. A single fifty carat teardrop-shaped
diamond lying on a bed of black velvet winked back at her.

“Fuck.” She snapped the box shut, wondering whether she should go with it or something else. She wasn’t particularly a fan of diamonds. Emeralds were more her thing. “So what am I supposed to be looking for?”

She figured it was only polite to get what she’d come here for first.

“There should be a li’l case in there. ‘Bout an inch by an inch. Ribbed steel. Y’might mistake it for one’a them jewellery boxes at first.”

She rooted around a bit and finally found it, wedged up between a briefcase and the stack of bullion. As soon as her hand closed over it she paused. She recognised the feel, the shape of it, immediately.

“Well? You found it?” his voice kicked in.

She pulled out the box and looked at it. She let out a noisy breath as she turned it over in her hand. Suddenly everything else in the safe seemed inconsequential to her.

“Yeah,” was all she said.

“Bon. Now take whatever you want and get outta there.”

He clicked off. She was on her own.

She turned the box onto its underside, read the label there. **Trask, Bolivar**, it said in small print. **August 15, 2016**. She flipped it back over and undid the safety catch. Inside the box, on a bed of protective foam, was a single gold microchip.

*Fuck.*

She snapped the box shut.

For the first time she wondered who Etienne’s client was and why they wanted the thing that was in her hand so badly.

-oOo-
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Marie confronts Etienne about the goods, before they share an intimate moment.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this agitated.

The feeling chased her out of the strong room, back upstairs and into the ball room. By pre-arranged design she left pretty much as soon as she’d stolen the goods. She didn’t even bother looking for him in the crowd. He was the last thing on her mind, and she reasoned to herself that the less eye contact between them the better. They’d already broken the rules on that score and then some.

She hailed a cab and when she finally got back to the hotel she threw aside her coat and purse and paced the room.

_I don’t want it. No. No, I don’t._

She stopped and took in a long, shaky breath.

Her hands were trembling again when she took the box out of her bag, but she ignored it. She opened the tiny case and stared at the chip inside. She felt stupid, looking at it. Foolhardy. Weak.

She’d left behind a safe full of riches just to have it after all.

_Who wants you?_ she wondered. _And why?_

And how much was Etienne getting paid for this?

She closed the box and waited for him to return.

Half an hour later and she heard the tell-tale click of the lock in the door; she rose from her seat as he entered. He paused in the doorway when he saw her standing there staring at him, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. She realised how anxious she must look and she let her hands drop neutrally to her sides.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

Whether he bought it or not didn’t appear to interest him. He stepped into the room, shrugged off his jacket and pulled off his tie, slinging them over the back of the nearby armchair.

“You got it?” he queried as he did so, and she gave a nod he didn’t see.

“Yeah.”

He stopped and looked over at her expectantly, and she took her cue. She walked over to the bed, took the box out of her purse – but she didn’t throw it to him.
“Etienne,” she spoke with forced control. “Do you know what this is?”

Whatever was in her voice, he heard it. He looked at her sharply with those dark eyes of his, his gaze piercing.

“Why? Do you know what it is?” he turned the question right back on her.

She blinked. It wasn’t her intention to have him quiz her, but for some reason she replied anyway.

“Of course I do. I’m an identity thief.”

She wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting her to say, but whatever it was her actual answer made him relax.

“Of course you do,” he echoed wryly. He nodded at the box in her hand. “It’s a mem-chip.”

“It’s Bolivar Trask’s mem-chip,” she said with an edge to her voice.

“One of ‘em anyway.”

“Yes.”

There was a pause. She didn’t want to ask him the questions that were so dangerously pushing at her lips right now. He didn’t owe her anything – she didn’t have a right to be curious.

“Why are you interested?” he asked at last.

She lifted the box and glanced at it.

“Professional curiosity,” she half-lied. “Trask doesn’t upload his mems to the cloud. He’s a closed book. This is gold.”

She wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t know already. He’d practically lost interest in the conversation already.

“Yeah. Well,” he shrugged flippantly, undoing the top buttons of his shirt – she fixed her gaze on his bare collarbone as he did so, momentarily distracted. “Dat’s why my client wants it so bad. ‘Cos it’s a one-of-a-kind. And priceless.”

She snapped her gaze away from his body. Flicked open the box one-handed. He stopped mid-action, his hand at the third button of his shirt, as she thumbed out the chip and walked over to him. He didn’t move. When she was right in front of him she held the metallic square up.

“Take a look at this,” she ordered.

He did so, apparently seeing nothing. His gaze flicked back up to hers.

“What am I lookin’ for?”

She took in a breath and shifted so that the chip fell under the yellow, greasy light of the hotel room.

“See those notches?” she asked him. He dipped his head, gazed at the fine latticework of lines on the chip closely.
“I see ‘em.”

“You know what they do?”

“Sure I know, chere.” He eased back into a standing position. “They hold personal data. Stats, medical details, qualifications, biological information, brainwave readings, DNA—”

“You know what this line holds?” she interrupted him, pointing out a gold-coloured groove in the metal. He shrugged, shook his head. “It holds his memories, Etienne,” she explained quietly. “His thoughts, his emotions… his experiences.”

His gaze darted sharply to hers and stayed there.

“How come you know so much about mem-chips, chere?”

She didn’t reply. Instead she turned, went to her purse and unzipped an inner pocket. She took out a pack of plastic cards tied together with an elastic band and threw them to him. He caught them deftly in one hand.

“Take a look,” she said.

He did so, pulling off the band and shuffling through them one by one. When he was done he looked up at her narrowly.

“ID cards. From the people whose identities you’ve stolen.”

She nodded.

“Turn one over,” she said.

He took the top one. A mem-chip was embedded into the recto side, just like his was embedded into his own ID. What was different was the fact that the same gold line – memories – was scored across the chip that he had seen in Trask’s. Every card in the pack possessed the same.

He gave a long exhale, fastening the cards together again slowly, thoughtfully.

“They all have memories recorded in them,” he stated in a low voice.

She nodded.

“Yes. You plug them into the interfacer and you can experience them, just like you can with any other sim. Except these are real. Not a simulation.” She turned back to him. He was standing there, staring at her, his arms at his sides. Watching. His eyes intent. She could almost feel his mind working.

“Yeah… I heard about that,” he said slowly, musingly. “But ‘facin’ with other peoples’ mem-chips… that’s illegal. Except for military, medical or research purposes.”

The look he gave her was knowing – too knowing. She chose to ignore the comment, since it was clear a protestation of innocence wasn’t worth the waste of breath.

“There’s a label under this box,” she continued instead, showing him the square of white under the case that housed Trask’s mem-chip. “It has a date on it – August 15, 2016. You know what the significance of that is?”

He didn’t answer her.
The chocolatey warmth of his gaze held her own for a long, lingering moment, and she found she couldn’t look away. She was used to being under the scrutiny of men, but what she felt under his was entirely different. It was a summons, soft and insinuating. A pulse of desire rippled through her and she fought perfunctorily to keep it in check.

“You’re the Rogue,” he murmured at last, breaking the spell, his tone even, knowing. “Ain’tcha?”

She stared at him. Didn’t even blink. Expressionless. And the suggestion of a smile creased the corner of his lips, like he could read her even when she gave him nothing.

“The world’s greatest ID thief. Flits between identities like a ghost. Never been caught or even seen in all the five years she’s been workin’. Managed to almost drain all five of the Worthington empire’s bank accounts in 3 days flat before vanishing into the night. No one’s been able to work out how you did it.” He leaned back on his heels with a shrewd smile. “Shoulda known the moment you got the drop on me…”

It was ridiculous, but the way he looked at her with that appraising, appreciative glance made her feel a glow of pride she rarely ever felt. The fact that he was complimenting her when he was a professional criminal himself – not to mention a fucking good one at that – was only the half of it.

“Nice to know a girl’s work gets noticed…” she murmured dryly, trying unsuccessfully not to let the pleasure show on her face, knowing she was failing when she felt the beginnings of a smile begin to twitch across her lips. She suppressed it with an effort. “I suppose I should congratulate you for finding me out.”

He said nothing, but that easy grin of his grew; and it kind of irked her, not so much the fact that he had found her out, but that if he’d been anyone else she’d be going into damage limitation mode right now, and she didn’t like to ask herself why, but right now she wasn’t. There was only one other person who’d figured her out and he was dead now… … And she figured this Etienne had to know. He had to know that he was skating on thin ice with her right now, but he was still standing there, all ease and grace, smiling at her.

It was that that irked her.

“So what are you gonna do?” she asked him quietly, pointedly. “You gonna call the cops? Turn me in for that 10 million dollar bounty they got on my head?”

The words were said with disdain, with cool bravado, but nevertheless she felt a thin thread of apprehension snake its way through her and she kind of hated him for it.

Whether he heard that suggestion of anxiety or not he didn’t let on. He merely cocked his head to one side as if considering her, said, “Y’think it’d be in my best interests to turn you in, chere?”

She shot him a quizzical look, one that simultaneously said, don’t fuck with me, and he gave a low chuckle.

“Marie… the last thing I need is to get involved in a high profile case. The last thing I need is to have the feds and the cops and national security millin’ round to clap me on the back and force money into my hands. True,” he added with a smirk, “it’d be nice t’ have the cash in hand, but there ain’t no way it’s worth the fuckin’ risk. At least,” he finished enigmatically, “not right now.”
Her emotions vacillated between a shaky sense of security and a heightened thread of irritation. So far the power play between them had teetered on a fine skein of equilibrium, one based on the fact that neither knew the first thing about the other. That no longer stood, and she was palpably at a disadvantage. Now, if ever, was the time for her to get up and go. Leave. Cut her losses and run. Move on to another identity, before he could change his mind and turn her in.

But she didn’t.

“So now you know all about me,” she spoke in a low voice, as he went to her, the chips in his hand. “But I know nothing about you. Hardly seems fair.”

He walked right up to her – closer than he needed to be – and she somehow felt that he was goading her in some way, because now the rules of the game said he was too dangerous to push away – even if she’d wanted to.

“But, chere,” he said softly, handing her the chips; she took them slowly. “I don’t know anythin’ about you either.”

She looked up at him from under her eyelashes then; saw that goading her hadn’t been on his mind at all. She could tell from the softness of his gaze, its warm intensity. It made something in her stir.

“You know enough,” she murmured. “You know everything that’s important, at any rate. Enough to make things pretty difficult for someone like me.”

He was standing so close, so close that the heat of his body was eating her up. And she couldn’t move out of it.

“I ain’t interested in makin’ things difficult for beautiful women,” he murmured, and she saw his right hand twitch, as if for a split second he had been about to reach out and touch her, but had reined himself in at the final moment.

“Oh?” she said, her heart suddenly in her mouth. “Then what are you interested in, swamp boy?”

And he didn’t blink, didn’t even bat an eyelid as he said, “Pleasure, chere.”

Again she felt that involuntary pulse of desire, and it was so intense, so visceral, that it almost scared her.

“I don’t mix business with pleasure,” she told him, turning away abruptly, throwing the chips on the bed next to her purse. There was a silence. She could almost feel the confusion rolling off him. It was a token of one-upmanship that revived her sense of the finely-tuned balance between them.

“Who says dis is business?” he murmured almost helplessly behind her, and she made up her mind.

“It’s business ‘till I get out of my work clothes, Cajun,” she replied silkily, over her shoulder. He was silent, standing there with this unreadable look on his face, his eyes moving slowly over her body like he was analysing every inch of her; and that was when she turned back, stepped right into his space, and when she looked up at him she met his chicory gaze without flinching, whispered in her best magnolias accent: “Well? Ain’tcha gonna help me get unzipped?”

Something in his dark, dark eyes flashed; and she knew he wouldn’t refuse. His left hand
slid round her waist, slid up her back to her shoulder blade, his gaze never once leaving her own. His gaze was charged – thrilling, exhilarating – and she answered it like she answered everything else, staring him down, daring him to make a move she couldn’t match.

His answer was sudden, unequivocal. With a few short, commanding steps he had practically swept her across the room, backing her up against the wall and pinning her up against it with his body. The unexpected move stole the breath out of her as she felt his body cover hers, every sharp, hard angle of him pressed up against every soft curve of her. What surged through her at that moment was the awakening of something she hadn’t felt in years. It was lust, pure, animal, unadulterated. It curled up from the pits of her, a dark and insidious magic, as his palm moved up from her back to her hair, fistng it tenderly, tilting her head back, baring her lips to him. And still she didn’t break their shared gaze, not even in that moment of inherent vulnerability when he looked at her as if to say, this a challenge enough for ya?

She responded with her hands, bringing them up against the hard planes of his chest and over his shoulders, and that was when he moved, lowering his head, swooping in as elegant as a bird of prey, kissing the dip between her chin and her lower lip, licking, sucking, all sensuous aggression, and it wasn’t what she had expected, not at all, this line of attack… And suddenly she was reconnecting with all the things, all the mess she’d hidden away all those years ago… She threw her head back, she closed her eyes, she opened her mouth and whimpered… And no sooner had she done so than his mouth came up and over hers, and god his kiss was like every amazing thing under the sun, things she’d forgotten existed until that very moment.

Her hands were in his hair now as she kissed him back with equal fire, and she felt his right hand trail her back, her waist, her hip, settling on her thigh with a warm and insistent touch, and she acquiesced, sliding her leg up against his hip, pressing her body up to his as intimately as she could; and he broke their kiss with a hiss of pleasure, one that made her inwardly sing with pride that she’d managed to elicit such a sound from someone like him.

Whoever he was.

Not that it matters.

She went for his mouth again, unable to be without it now that she’d tasted it, sucking his lower lip back into a blistering kiss.

And that was when the cell started to ring in his pocket.

Half a minute in and it was clear that it wasn’t going to stop ringing until it was answered.

When he finally pulled away from her, it was only by a fraction; he rested his forehead against her own as though reluctant to fully break contact, whispered:

“Sorry, chere. I better take dis.”

“Sure,” she whispered back, her hands dropping back to his shoulders, sliding back down his chest before finally letting him go. Nevertheless he leaned in for one more kiss, one that was slow and lingering and made her toes curl, before finally pushing away from the wall and turning away from her.

She watched as he walked to the other side of the tiny room, palming his cell phone; and she panted, letting the wall prop her up because her legs suddenly felt like they had all the structural integrity of jello. Her life as a criminal had led her into all sorts of high-octane situations; and yet she couldn’t remember the last time her heart had beat so fast.
He passed her a short, smouldering glance over his shoulder, only breaking eye contact when he put the cell phone to his ear with a brisk, “‘Lo?”

It was only then, when his eyes were off her, that she could recapture a modicum of self-control. Easing herself away from the wall, she tried to concentrate on the content of his conversation – difficult, when her body was on fire, when her lips still tingled with the imprint of his own.

*That boy is a whole mess of trouble,* she told herself sternly. *The last thing you need is to get mixed up in his kind of business.*

She was having a hard time convincing herself – but the words were enough to get her heartbeat to slow down to a more reasonable pace, for her to actively follow the course of his conversation.

Not that he appeared to be hiding it from her at all. In fact, he seemed entirely comfortable with her listening in on him, and she did so intently, fascinated by the easiness with which he had slipped from the sultriness of his sweet-nothings with her, to the cool, clipped, business-like tone with which he was now conversing. She’d been called a chameleon more than once, but there was something about it – more than just a little – that shouted out the exact same thing about him to her.

“Oui. Yeah. ‘Course I got it. Hey, do I ever disappoint? Non, wasn’t much trouble. Security was a breeze. What is dis anyway, twenty questions? What the fuck do you care?”

She almost smiled, caught up as she was in his quick-fire repartee – she was almost surprised when he suddenly fell into a lengthy silence, one that made her glance over at him questioningly. He was turned towards her now, his expression serious, his gaze fixed firmly on the floor.

“What – now?” he said a low voice, carefully pitched, giving away nothing. “Can you gimme an hour or two? I’m kinda busy right now.”

His eyes lifted on the tail end of his sentence, and he fixed her with such a hungry stare that it brought her heart right back into her mouth.

“Uh-huh. Yup.” His gaze dropped again, and she was more than a little disappointed when he continued, “Okay, you got it. Gimme thirty minutes. I’ll be there.”

No more was said. He cut the call, flipped the phone into his back pocket and looked up at her again. His expression was apologetic.

“Sorry, chere. Looks like bus’ness tops pleasure tonight.”

She made a vague gesture with her hand, one that she was pretty sure didn’t disguise the depth of her disappointment.

“Yeah, I know. You take a job, your client calls the shots. Maybe you should start thinking about another line of work.”

He laughed softly.

“What? Like your line of work?”

“It has its pros. One of them being you get to spend your time however you like. No clients, no deadlines… No calls in the middle of the night when you could be doing far more
She trailed off meaningfully, letting the suggestion of her words tease herself as much as she imagined they were teasing him. She felt certain she had hidden any trace of wistfulness from her voice; but when she saw his smile, so penetrating, so knowing, she naturally began to doubt herself.

“Hm. I’ll keep that in mind when I’m next thinkin’ of a career change.”

They stood a long moment, words having run dry, knowing that any further exchange would be a waste of breath with the tight schedule he was on.

And she didn’t need his brand of fun. She didn’t.

She was almost thankful when he finally turned to the bed and picked up the duffel bag, stowing the night’s winnings carefully inside. It was all he’d come for after all, and it was all he needed to leave with.

He crossed the room with long, easy strides, but just as he’d brushed past her he stopped, turned and stepped in close to her.

She held her breath as the scent of him stole over her – cigarettes, diesel, whiskey and cologne. He slid his palm through her hair, twisted the locks round his fist, cupped the back of her neck with his hand, the pressure of his grip all at once tender and insistent. She couldn’t resist. She tilted her head back, met his gaze as she had before – no flinching.

That same wolfish smile creased his lips, the one that told her he could take whatever he wanted from her and run with it. She let him believe it. She let him only because she loved the sort of woman he made her feel when he looked at her the way he was looking at her now.

“Thanks for the assist, chere,” he spoke with a velvety softness. “Sorry we couldn’t spend more time t’gether. I think you woulda been somethin’ else t’ get t’ know.”

And he leaned in, favouring her with a final, passionate kiss before letting her go and heading for the door. She only just managed to regain her voice before he left her for good.

“Etienne.”

He stopped in the doorway expectantly, and she went for the purse on the bed.

“Don’t forget this.” She tossed him the lockpick he’d given to her and he caught it one-handed. “You’ll probably need it more than I will.”

A slow grin crossed his face. He slipped the device into the pocket of his jacket, his hand resting lightly on the door handle. There was a horrible pause during which she gripped her elbows as if to hold herself together. Never in her life had she felt so exposed, so vulnerable, in front of another person.

*Go on, swamp boy. Get.*

It was almost as if he’d heard her.

He pressed down on the handle and cracked the door open an inch. She held her breath, waiting for him to disappear out of her life as quickly and unceremoniously as he had entered it. She didn’t have to wait long. One, two, three heartbeats passed before he walked out without so much as
a backward glance, and when the door swung shut behind him she heaved a lingering sigh, of relief, of unrepentant longing.

It was only later, as she was going through the mem-chips in her purse, that she found the playing card tucked in between the thin slivers of plastic.

He’d written his phone number in the thick white border around the Queen of Hearts, the black numbers curving round the corner, followed by the message in neat, bold print: *ONLY GOOD FOR THE NEXT 7 DAYS.*

-oOo-
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The Rogue gets an unexpected call...

Row upon row of uncatalogued mem-chips lined the walls of the tiny illegal mem-clinic like dominos standing at attention.

They were the last thing the Rogue saw as the nurse lowered the headset gently over her eyes. Almost immediately the parade of swirling colours and geometric patterns washed over her, and she let them do their job, allowing herself to be nudged into a soothing state of relaxation as the scanners bathed her in their static glow.

Three minutes later and it was over.

The nurse lifted the headset and removed the sensor pads. The Rogue watched on as the brick-faced woman tapped on the touch screen of the nearby computer terminal. Unlike most mem-clinics, who sent their patient’s data to the cloud, everything here was backed up and stored locally. The cloud was too easily hacked.

“You want a copy?” the nurse asked in what the Rogue guessed was some South-East Asian accent.

“Please,” she replied.

The nurse hit a button and put her hand out under the printer with mechanical boredom. The machine ground out the print job in a series of clunky jerks and stutters that almost made her wince. A few moments later the newly minted mem-chip had been ejected into the nurse’s hand.

“You’re down for another appointment in two weeks,” the nurse informed her flatly as she handed the Rogue her chip. “Ms. Darkholme’s booked you in for the five O’clock. Don’t be late.”

No reply was needed and she gave none. She pocketed the chip, stood, grabbed her coat and her purse, and left the room.

Ms. Darkholme was still standing on the other side of the one-way window from which she’d been observing the entire episode.

“Well?” the Rogue asked with only mild expectation. This was a well-worn routine after all.

“Well,” the tall, grey-eyed woman with the impossibly black hair replied, indicating the usual laconic disapproval. “You know what I’m going to say.”

*It isn’t good.* The Rogue nodded absently.

“What were you thinking?” the older woman suddenly hissed. “Interfacing with Tanya Trask, for fuck’s sake?”
She shrugged. She was suddenly very tired.

“It was a challenge.”

“A challenge.” Ms. Darkholme’s voice was flat and cold. “Tanya Trask is mentally ill. And that’s the least of it!”

The words made her want to laugh. She wanted to say that in that case both her and the tech mogul’s daughter ought to be a good fit. But she didn’t.

“What do the scans say?” she asked instead.

“The usual,” Ms. Darkholme replied sourly, looking down at the printout in her hand. “Your brainwaves are all over the fucking shop. I don’t know how you keep them straight.” She eyed the Rogue suspiciously. “Have you been taking your medication?”

She sighed.

“Of course I have,” she retorted defensively. It still amazed her how competent this woman was at making her feel like a recalcitrant child. Ms. Darkholme’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“For your sake, I hope so, dear. The amount of ‘facing you do, I’m surprised you even have a brain left.”

She wasn’t in the mood to argue. Not right now.

“Raven,” she said the woman’s name in a weary voice, “I appreciate the concern, but it isn’t needed. You know what I’m capable of, what I can take.”

“What you’re capable of is exactly what I’m afraid of,” the taller woman returned – not without a tinge of real concern this time. “Look – I know things are different between us now, and now that you’ve cut loose I don’t have any hold over you. But I still care about your welfare. And this… it isn’t good.”

It was a rare admission of affection from a woman who never showed it. The Rogue knew it and appreciated it, but it didn’t change anything – not much. Not enough.

“That means a lot to me, Raven,” she answered in a deadtone, “but there’s no point in wasting your time worrying about me. I’m fine. I always am. You made sure of that. Now,” she added quietly, “I’m gonna head home. Get some rest.”

And she turned and left.

-oOo-

She made the short journey to the little apartment that she barely lived in as the sun went down, and when she was inside she threw herself onto her bed and stared at the ceiling.

For a moment the swirls of colour and pattern danced across the grey expanse and she shut her eyes against them, swallowed the urge to retch.

Two or ten minutes went by before the sensation passed.

She sat up and pulled the mem-chip out of her pocket. She got to her knees at the foot of her bed, pried open the creaky floorboard. Her latest acquisition
joined the custom-made boxes of identical white chips, arranged in chronological order, slotting in next to its neighbour with a satisfying click. She knelt there and stared at them a moment. Another box, she thought. She’d have to order another box soon.

She sighed, replaced the floorboard, covered it back over with the rug. She got up and walked over to the notebook above her desk. The Queen of Hearts was still there, nestled between a rent bill and an invoice for blank chips. She took it down and stared at it.

She hadn’t called him. She wasn’t entirely sure why, but she knew that part of it was to do with the fact that she’d pulled a fast one on him and she was fairly sure he wouldn’t want to have a lot to do with her once he found out.

But she didn’t regret it. Not entirely anyhow.

She gave another sigh and slipped the card into the back pocket of her pants. Come tomorrow and there wouldn’t be a number to call. He’d have destroyed his phone, and any way of contacting him would be gone for good.

There wouldn’t be any way to relive the texture of his lips and the taste of his mouth. Or the pattern of his hand and the weight of his body.

*Damn.*

She was still thinking about it a whole week on. She was still wanting it.

But no. There was no way. He would’ve found out by now. And if he’d been interested then, he definitely wouldn’t be now.

Her heated train of thought was interrupted by an impromptu knock at the door. This was unusual – she wasn’t used to social calls, and she definitely hadn’t arranged for an order to be delivered.

“Who is it?” she called out.

“Yashida Energy,” came the quick reply in a pleasant, male voice. “We’re here to read your meter.”

The Rogue crossed the room, peered through the spyhole. A good-looking man with a shock of platinum blond hair was on the other side, dressed in the usual grey and orange uniform of the company he worked for.

“You’ll have to show me some ID!” she hollered through the door. She watched as he gave a roll of the eyes, unclipped the badge from his breast pocket, and held it up to the spyhole. His badly-lit employee photo stared back up at her, and she scanned it carefully, measuring it up against the original. It looked legit. She was, after all, an expert in fake ID cards.

She threw back the locks and bolts, finally swinging open the door and saying:

“You better make this quick. I was just about to go—”

Her sentence was left unfinished. A split second later and he’d landed a fancy Asian blow to her solar plexus, and she was sprawling back across the room and onto the bed, coughing and spluttering, completely winded.

The attack was so quick, so unexpected, that she was barely able to get her wits together.
She heard the clomping of heavy boots and she realised – with a flare of anger at her own stupidity – that there were others, men who’d probably been hiding at either end of the corridor, waiting for their comrade to gain entry. She heard the door snap shut behind them and she began to sit up, slowed by the pain radiating from the pit of her stomach, when she felt the back of a hand smash into the side of her face, landing her right back down against the unmade sheets.

“Where is he?” a voice demanded in a feral growl – a voice that was different to the one belonging to the man at the door. She twisted her head, looked up. A man was standing over her whilst three others were busy working away behind him, turning her apartment upside down, looking for something she hoped wasn’t the chips under the floorboards. He was massive, three hundred pounds plus of hulking muscle, his head and jowls covered with thick, frizzy hair the colour of a lion’s mane. His face was lined with wrinkles and scars, its criss-crossed surface punctuated by piercing blue eyes that glittered coldly in the sickly light of her single room.

“Where is who?” she asked him hoarsely, her breathing still clipped, irregular, and he back-handed her across the face again with his block of a fist, leaned in so that she could feel his rank breath on her and snarled; “You were seen with a man. Last week. At the Trask Technologies building. We want to know where he is. We need to pay him a little visit.”

The blond-haired man in the Yashida Energy uniform was moving dangerously near to the floorboard where her stash was hidden. She took extra pains not to look at him, said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A growl rumbled in the man’s throat, and he lifted her off the bed by the scruff of the neck one-handed. It was the perfect opening. Without even thinking, guided only by the instinct years of training had taught her, she struck, jabbing him in the eyes like a snake lunging at its prey. The man roared and dropped her, and she ducked around him, making a run for the door. It was a desperate bid for freedom and she knew it. She’d just about reached it when the other three men had pinned her up against the door roughly, one of them spinning her around and slamming her back into it. It was only then that she noticed that one of the men wasn’t a man at all, but a woman, with dark hair and the physique of a body-builder.

“Stupid bitch,” she rasped. “Thinkin’ you can get the drop on us.”

“Maybe I didn’t,” the Rogue panted brazenly. “Maybe I was just givin’ your friend over there somethin’ to remember me by.”

The woman’s face broke into a sneer. The Rogue had been expecting the punch to her gut even before it hit, and she doubled over, clutching her stomach, wheezing painfully.

“A growl rumbled in the man’s throat, and he lifted her off the bed by the scruff of the neck one-handed. It was the perfect opening. Without even thinking, guided only by the instinct years of training had taught her, she struck, jabbing him in the eyes like a snake lunging at its prey. The man roared and dropped her, and she ducked around him, making a run for the door. It was a desperate bid for freedom and she knew it. She’d just about reached it when the other three men had pinned her up against the door roughly, one of them spinning her around and slamming her back into it. It was only then that she noticed that one of the men wasn’t a man at all, but a woman, with dark hair and the physique of a body-builder.

“Stand back,” the lion-maned man ordered in a growl – he was obviously the leader of the pack. At the peremptory bark the others obediently backed away and she looked up at him through the haze of pain, seeing, to her intense satisfaction, that one of the man’s eyes was puffy and swollen, the other bleeding openly. If only she hadn’t been taken by surprise, if only she wasn’t so tired and out of it and in pain… she reckoned she could’ve done a lot more damage. He was lucky.

“So, you’re a feisty one, eh?” he remarked with a sinister smile, stepping in close to her, backing her against the door. “Reckon you got some sweet, fancy moves, huh? Well, you just try them again, and we’ll wreck you. You’re outnumbered.”

His gaze was menacing, but she held it. She wasn’t afraid. She’d pretty much cut off the part of her that registered fear.

“Didja find anything?” he hollered at the others, not breaking eye contact.
“Nothing,” the blond-haired man replied.

“Just a load’a invoices and a shitload of ‘facing-chips and headsets,’” the woman added. “Looks like we’ve got a regular junkie here.”

“Graycrow?” he threw over his shoulder at the third heavy – a native American guy who was holding her phone in his hand – there was some fancy tech connected to it.

“No outgoing calls to him. Her cell’s clean.”

The big man’s eyes narrowed, and he leaned in further towards her – his manner would almost have been confidential if it wasn’t so intimidating.

“I ain’t so sure,” he murmured disdainfully. “Looks like you were gettin’ really cosy with that smartass Cajun fuck at one point, am I right?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, expecting an answer. She was unfazed.

“If you’re talkin’ about the guy who was hitting on me at the party,” she replied breathlessly, “then sure – I talked to him. I even went back to his room. But then he got a phone call and bailed on me. Left me heartbroken.”

His eyes had by now narrowed to mere slits, like an insect considering a tasty morsel. He could see she was unafraid, and that was unusual – suspicious.

“We should go,” the woman said behind him. “She’s probably tellin’ the truth. There ain’t nothin’ here.”

But the lion man had been playing the game long enough to smell a rat, and she knew he smelled the faint whiff of one now.

“That low-life Cajun snake pulled a pretty fuckin’ ballsy move for someone who’s such a shit-faced coward,” he lilted ominously. “Pullin’ the old switcharoo with the goods, handing in some shitty dud instead of the real thing. Of course the slippery weasel went underground as soon as the transaction was made, but…” and he sneered at her, leaning in even closer, flooding her ear with his stinking breath, “the next time he pokes his head outta the ground and you see him, you better let him know. Dr. Milbury don’t take kindly t’ bein’ messed with. And now he’s a marked man.”

He backed away, barking over his shoulder to the others.

“Let’s get outta here. She knows nothing. Yet.”

Yet.

But she did know something now. She knew it and it stung like a barb, like the blade of a dagger.

Her ears buzzed with the knowledge as the lion man and his cronies finally left her, the words cancelling out the fuzz of pain in her head.

Dr. Milbury.

Dr. Nathan Milbury.

-oOo-
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Marie and Etienne finally reveal their true identities, although there's still more to Marie than meets the eye...

The club was throbbing, pounding to the primal rhythm of drum and bass, the seething mass of bodies heaving along to the thunderous beat, all sweat and heat and pheromones.

The pretty redhead with the pert, petite body pulled the man with the chocolatey velvet eyes into a corner and into a passionate kiss. A kaleidoscope of colours washed over their embrace, electric blue and pink and orange. It was only when they began to flash green and gold and white that she pulled away, got onto her tiptoes and said into his ear, “Let’s get outta here, Etienne…”

He gave that slow slide of a smile, leaned in and grazed his lips against her neck, hearing her whimper and shudder and sigh before he led her off the dancefloor.

He’d almost got to the doors when he felt her tug back.

“Hang on,” she shouted at him over the crash of the music. “I gotta use the washroom. Gimme a sec.”

“Sure thing, chere. I’ll wait for you in de foyer. But don’t make me wait too long.”

She bit her lip and shook her head playfully, and it was only then that he let her go. She tottered away into the depths of the club, a weave in her step that told him she was more than just a little drunk.

He wished he was drunk too. He figured it wouldn’t hurt to steal a six pack on the way home.

He stepped out into the lobby and eyed up the other pretty girls gathered there. And that’s when his phone rang.

He hoped to God it wasn’t anyone he was trying to avoid, which happened to comprise more people than he was comfortable with right now.

He didn’t recognise the number on the screen, and all things considered he didn’t know whether that was a good or a bad thing.

He took the call anyway.

“‘Lo?”

“Etienne.”

The voice on the other end was firm and feminine, one he wouldn’t have forgotten in a hurry. His pulse raised a notch just to hear it.
“Marie,” he greeted her with a genuine smile. “Lucky you called when you did, chere. Dis phone was earmarked for death ‘bout five hours from now. Was beginnin’ t’ think you didn’t get my callin’ card…”

“Nah, I got it all right.” There was something about her voice. Something… different. “Etienne,” she continued quickly, “can we meet?”

His night was rapidly improving.

“Sure. Your place or mine? Or mebbe somewhere in-between…”

“In-between,” she interrupted quickly. “I’ll text you the coordinates.”

He read it clearly now. Whatever it was in her voice, it wasn’t good. Her tone was strained, anxious.

“Marie, are you okay?” he asked, his libido fading fast.

“I’m fine. Just get to where I tell you to go asap. And Etienne… You need to watch your back.”

The line went dead – he heard the click of the receiver. A payphone. She’d called him from a payphone.

It definitely wasn’t good.

He cursed under his breath just as the redhead made her reappearance.

“Anythin’ wrong?” she asked, seeing the serious expression on his face. “Who was that on the phone? Can we get outta here?”

Her tone was breathless, impatient, ever so slightly slurred with the fuzz of alcohol. He pulled himself together quickly, shot her an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, chere. Looks like somethin’ jes’ came up. I gotta go see t’ some business.” He looked down at her disappointed pout and took pity on her. He was what he was, but it was still nice to feel wanted. “Here,” he dipped into his breast pocket and took out a playing card, jotted down his number. “Call me.”

She took the card like it was gold dust, slipped it into her purse like a cat who’d got the cream. When she raised on her tiptoes he kissed her, but only because she was cute and pathetic and he felt he owed her something. He’d deliberately set her up for a disappointment after all – by the time she tried to call his number, it’d be dead and buried and he’d have another.

“Bye, then,” she said when he’d broken their kiss a little hastier than was strictly noble. There was a shyness to her now, as if this really mattered to her. It perplexed him. It wasn’t as if he ever promised anything to any of these women, and yet they still managed to get their heads and their hearts turned. It wasn’t his fault.

“Bye, chere,” he murmured, and he turned and left just as Marie’s text pinged on his phone.

-oOo-

He took a circuitous route through the night on his motorbike, guided by the coordinates
he’d punched into the sat nav app on his cell.

He doubled up on himself several times, doing exactly as Marie had suggested, glancing in the side mirror every now and then to make sure he wasn’t being followed.

When he finally got to his destination, he saw that it was the old asylum.

*Way-fuckin’-hey,* he thought grimly to himself. *Looks like she chose the creepiest place in town.*

It was 100% clear at this point that she hadn’t called him for some passionate rendezvous, and that riled him more than it unnerved him. After they’d split he’d been so sure, so certain, that she would call him. He’d waited a day, two days, three days. By the fourth day he’d begun to lose hope. By the fifth he’d finally come to the long overdue conclusion that she wouldn’t call at all.

He killed the engine, swung off the bike.

The place was deserted, lit only by a fizzing, popping streetlamp.

He walked in under the shadows and scuffed his boots in the gravel. He lit a cigarette and waited.

It was uncharacteristic of him to be at the beck and call of a woman, but then a part of him was intrigued to find out just what exactly had made her call him… And yeah. If there was still an outside chance of messing around some with her then he figured it had to be worth it. Right?

He pulled on his cigarette thoughtfully.

Fuck. Who was he kidding? Whatever it was she wanted to meet for, it was gonna be bad. Sexy as hell this Marie might be, but he was pretty certain she’d whup him upside the head if he tried anything on during what he knew was going to be strictly business.

He paused and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Fuck, the anticipation was killing him right now.

His train of thought was interrupted by the light tread of footsteps, and when he looked up he saw her walk into the circle of light thrown by the streetlamp. She was dressed down in a leather jacket, khaki cargo pants and engineering boots. Her hair was loose and wild, the unusual white streak at her temples glimmering brightly in the lamplight. Her face was partly obscured by a large pair of visor-like shades.

She paused, she glanced over her shoulder, then back again. She clocked his presence and moved forward with purpose, right past him and into an alleyway that ran between the main building and an annex. He took a final puff of his cigarette, stomped it out with his heel, and followed.

She was leaning against the wall of the annex, waiting for him.

“What have to be careful,” she told him when he was close enough, skipping any preliminaries. “I might’ve been followed.”

He glanced over his shoulder, saw nothing.

“What’s dis about?” he asked her quietly.

“There are some people who are looking for you,” she told him seriously; he snorted.
“Chere, there’s always someone lookin’ for me…”

“No,” she cut him off urgently. “These guys were different. Trust me, I know.” She shuddered slightly, dug her hands into the pockets of her jacket. She was tense, unsettled. “They were working for your client.”

“What?” He was confused. “What they want wit’ me?”

She glanced over at him with what he thought was nervousness. He could see her hands bunching and unbunching inside her pockets.

“You gave them the wrong chip,” she told him in a taut voice.

“Huh? What de fuck you—?”

“I swapped Trask’s chip out,” she blurted out in a rush. “Substituted it with one of the ones in my purse.”

It was the last thing in the world he’d been expecting. He gaped at her.

“Why the fuck would you do that?” he finally managed to get out. She shrugged agitatedly.

“I wanted what your client wanted. I’m sorry.”

He stared at her. Couldn’t stop staring. He let out a short, mirthless bark of a laugh.

“You’re sorry,” he repeated coldly. “You’re fuckin’ sorry.” The words sounded hollow to his own ears. He turned aside, ran his hand through his hair, walked a few steps… his head buzzing as he digested the consequences of what she had done. This was bad. This was fucked. He walked back to her, anger and anxiety driving him as he practically got into her face and hissed, “Do you know what th’ fuck you’ve done, woman?”

She shifted guiltily.

“I didn’t… I didn’t know back then who your client was. If I’d known… I wouldn’t have done what I did. I wouldn’t have taken it.”

That got his attention. He could hardly believe what he was hearing, and it was only her thorough earnestness – her obvious consternation – that told him that it was the truth.

“You know who my client is,” he echoed flatly, and she nodded.

“Yeah… under another name… But I know him… Know the kind of man he is… what he’s capable of… And now he wants you dead… ‘Cos of what I did…”

She was pacing that same little spot on the floor, almost as though he wasn’t there. He noticed, with some surprise, that she was shaking, actually trembling.

He was still more than pissed at her, but an impulse took him and without thinking he reached out and touched her shoulder. She started as if waking from a trance and he raised his hand, lifted the sunglasses from her face. She stood stock still, making no move to stop him. Everything fell together when he saw the black eye, the bruise on her jaw. He grimaced.

“He sent his flunkies out t’ pay you a visit, didn’t he,” he stated tautly.
She made no attempt to answer the question – not that he needed it. She snatched back the shades and slid them back on, her mouth a thin, defiant line. She hadn’t appreciated him taking off her glasses, but at least she was calmer now. And at least she had some of her old brass back.

“Who were they?” he questioned her with quiet seriousness. She lifted her shoulders, letting out a pent-up breath.

“I don’t know. There were four of them… three men and woman. There was some guy – Redcrow, Gracrow, I dunno – and some blond-haired punk in Yashida Energy overalls. And then there was the guy that did this,” she indicated vaguely at her face, “a big guy. With scars on his face. He had all this hair on him. Kinda looked like…”

“A lion?” he finished for her. She stared, swallowed – nodded.

He swore under his breath.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. He knew she meant it, but it didn’t take away the sting of her betrayal. He didn’t have the time to chew her out for it right now. What he needed to do was some fucking damage limitation.

“Dis man,” he changed the subject, figuring the whys and the wherefores of her little stunt would be best left till later, “the one who sent out those heavies… you said you knew him.”

There was a long pause during which her expression changed, and for a second he almost thought she’d lose it again.

“Dr. Milbury, the man called him,” she finally replied in an undertone. “But… I knew him by a different name.”

He glanced at her quizzically. It was obvious to him that there was a story here, and it was equally obvious she wasn’t willing to divulge it. He decided to press on.

“Dis Milbury… he ain’t my client. I work for him, for his company, Empharma.”

This was a startling piece of information to her. Or troubling; he wasn’t entirely sure gauging from her reaction. She fixed him with a stare from under those dark glasses, but since he couldn’t see her eyes he couldn’t quite make the flavour of it out.

“Let’s jes’ say I work the less-than-legal detail for him,” he continued dispassionately. “An’ he pays me well for it. Those other guys, the guys who came and rouged you up… they work for him too. The man who hit you… his name’s Creed. Victor Creed. He’s Milbury’s head of security, so to speak. The others… they’re John Gracrow, Janos Quested, Philippa Sontag. They’re Creed’s unit.”

He paused. She’d gone still again, quiet. Almost statue-like. There was none of the sensuous, self-assured beauty he’d seen at the hotel, at Trask’s fundraiser. There was a hard stoicism to her now, a steely resolve – but, oddly enough, that intrigued him more than anything else he’d seen of her so far.

“Who are you?” she asked him in a low voice.

He looked aside with a frown. He didn’t want to answer. He hadn’t planned to answer. But for some reason he couldn’t fathom, he did.

“My name’s Remy,” he confessed after a moment’s pause. “Remy LeBeau.”
Her lips parted as if this was the greatest surprise of all; and despite himself, despite the shit she’d landed him in, he felt the urge to kiss them, long and greedy.

“LeBeau,” she murmured in enlightenment, “y’mean that crime syndicate down in New Orleans?”

He cocked his head to one side, cynically amused.

“Yeah. Once. Not anymore.”

There was a story there too, but this time he was the party unwilling to divulge it. He knew she could sense it, the way his words had been carefully pitched to not so subtly say back off.

“So,” he asked her bitterly instead, “jes’ how much did you tell ‘em? Hell… how do I know I can even trust you?”

Her lips went hard then, and he thought he had offended her – not that he cared much at that particular moment in time.

“You don’t have a reason to trust me,” she answered in a low tone – as humble a tone as he figured he was going to get from her, anyhow. “But for what it’s worth, I’m being honest now. They don’t know where you are,” she explained quietly, “and they came after me to find that out. Looks like they pulled some tapes from Trask’s gala… They must’ve seen us together…”

She could’ve added that she had warned him not to be seen with her during the mission – but to her credit, she didn’t.

“Merde.” He ran a hand through his hair irritably – this was turning into one big, fucking mess. “Yeah, sounds like Creed’s kinda MO all right. Find the lady, find me.” He let that statement speak for itself. “Lucky thing I went dark after the heist we pulled. Looks like it came in useful in more ways than one.” This last he muttered mostly to himself. He didn’t have the time or inclination to explain his movements to her – not that she was entitled to it anyway. Far from it.

He turned aside, away from her. He tried not to reflect on the irony of this. That he was at the mercy of yet another woman’s betrayal.

“Etienne… Remy…” she was saying nervously over his shoulder, like she didn’t expect this to end well – as if it could. “You should get out of here… Leave the country. It ain’t safe for you to stay here…”

He swung round to face her, half surprised to see that she’d reached a hand out to him, to put it on his shoulder; she dropped it quickly, and he glared at her.

“Just how much d’you know dis Milbury?” he interrogated her heatedly, not liking the knowledge that had been implicit in her warning; and she’d just opened her mouth to answer, when the red laser beam wandered into his peripheral vision.

She’d seen it about half a second before he had.

In a mindboggling display of strength and reflexes she had tackled him to the ground; the bullet slammed into the wall they’d been standing against a mere moment before.

It wasn’t the first time he’d dodged a bullet, and it wouldn’t be the last – but this brush with death had hit way too close to home for his liking. Beside him, Marie had lost her shades and was spitting out grit, and between that and being under fire, he was starting to sincerely wish he was
in bed screwing the redhead right about now.

“Looks like you were right!” he yelled at her sarcastically as he scrambled to his feet. “You were fuckin’ followed!”

He held out his hand to her but she didn’t take it, springing up like a gazelle just as the laser beam swept over them again.

Fuckety-fuck-fuck-fuck!

Marie had already taken off down the alleyway and he was just about to conclude she’d actually been in on this in some way when she hollered back over her shoulder at him, “This way!”

Since he didn’t have a better option, he did so, the thud of ricocheting bullets chasing his path.

She ran like a panther, weaving through the asylum’s out-buildings, left, right, darting this way and that, and at some point he realised she knows dis place. He was caught between admiration, anger and curiosity for this mysterious woman who never ceased to throw him curveball after curveball. She’d chosen this as their meeting place precisely because she’d figured she would be followed, and if that was going to be the case, it was going to be on her home turf. He was beginning to wonder whether he could actually keep up with her at all.

She finally skidded to a stop round the back of what looked to be an old laundry; the shots had stopped now, but he knew, as he paused to catch his breath, that whoever had been firing at them wouldn’t be far off. He glanced over at her to see she was kicking around in the dirt.

“We ain’t gonna be alone for long, chere,” he panted; but she ignored him.

He heard her boot hit something metallic and she gave a quiet exclamation. The next moment she’d bent over and opened up a trapdoor in the ground.

“Get in.”

She issued the command like a soldier, and he hesitated. There was something about her – more than her betrayal – that made him doubt…

She didn’t wait for him. Before he could quiz her she’d already jumped down into the hole; and he could hear the quick, light footsteps of more than one person closing in on their location.

It was all the prompt he needed.

He leapt down into the hole and lowered the trapdoor shut behind him.

-oOo-

“Dat was Kodiak Noatak,” he muttered breathlessly as they ran through the underground tunnels that had once served as a conduit for deceased asylum patients on their way to the morgue. Their only guide was Marie’s flimsy keyring flashlight.

“Who?” she asked, her voice echoing in the damp and slimy passageway; her tone showed only peripheral interest.

“Kodiak Noatak. Creed’s sharpshooter. And if he’s here, dat means the rest of the team’s
“So that’s five of them,” she calculated quickly. “Anyone else on this Creed’s team?”

“No. Not unless there’s been a recruitment drive since I went dark.”

She grunted. It was almost as if this was just a job to her, and yet again he wondered.

“Marie,” he heaved as she zipped left at a fork in the tunnel, “you should also know… Graycrow… He’s a tracker.”

They’d reached a metal ladder leading up to another trapdoor. She came to a stop at the bottom, grabbed a hold of the railings and glared at him.

“Great. Anything else I need to know about your friends out there?”

He didn’t have time to answer.

Before he could even open his mouth a gunshot rang out through the tunnel, and the next second Marie had hit the ground, clutching her right shin with a cry of agony. The flashlight hit the floor and his first instinct was to go for it, but he heard the clomp of a heavy-booted footstep, the click of a rifle and:

“Put ya hands up,” said a gruff voice.

He did so, and suddenly there was light, the glare of a high-powered flashlight sweeping over them. Remy looked away, the light dazzling his eyes, and when he looked up again he saw Graycrow advancing slowly towards them from the depths of the tunnel, the sights of a rifle scope trained on him.

“You did a dumbfuck thing, LeBeau,” he greeted the Cajun in a rasp. “Playin’ the boss for a fool.”

He considered, briefly, explaining everything to his former comrade-in-arms; that this had all been a misunderstanding, a case of crossed wires, the source of which was currently curled in a ball at his feet, whimpering in pain. But he knew it would be a waste of breath. His people didn’t tend to ask questions. Not even after the fact.

“Lucky for you,” Graycrow added, coming to a stop several metres away from them, “the boss wants you alive. The woman,” he continued, looking down on Marie’s writhing form with a sneer, “not so much.”

“She’s got nothin’ t’ do wit’ dis,” Remy answered then, guided – against his better judgement – by his innate sense of chivalry. “She ain’t worth your time.”

“It don’t take a lotta time to plant a bullet between some bitch’s eyes,” Graycrow smirked malevolently. “But if you’ve got that mem-chip, you might just put me in a good mood. Hand it over, and she gets to keep her life.”

“Sorry,” he retorted smoothly, with a smile that he had to force. “I don’t have it. Not here, anyway.”

It was the truth, after a fashion. He dared not look down at Marie, who was on her side, clutching her leg, moaning softly.
“That’s a shame,” Graycrow grimaced. “For your girlfriend anyway.”

He lowered the rifle towards Marie and there was a sudden heartbeat of confused and jumbled movement – Marie was on her back with a pistol in her hand and —

\textit{BLAMBLAMBLAM!}

First Graycrow’s left knee erupted out from under him, then his right; he dropped the rifle and crashed to the ground with an agonised groan just as the third bullet slammed into his stomach.

Remy stared, rooted to the spot with his mouth agape, totally unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Marie was already back on her feet and halfway up the ladder.

“C’mon, Cajun!” she shouted down at him, her voice thick and husky, enough to tell him she was actually hurting.

Graycrow was on the floor, twisting in pain.

“You… fuckin’… bitch…” he moaned. She ignored him.

“Remy!” she hissed.

And he moved.

-oOo-

She already had a four-by-four waiting for them out in the grounds.

Together they jogged to it, and even though she was injured she was still pretty damn fast.

“Sure looks like you came here wit’ a plan, chere,” he exclaimed as she hit the automatic locks and threw him the keys. He took the cue and hopped into the driver’s seat, starting up the car as she slid painfully into the passenger side.

“Of course I came here with a fucking plan,” she retorted breathlessly. “You would’ve too… if you hadn’t come here thinking with your fucking dick.”

He levelled her a glance that said \textit{really}, and a smile twisted round the pain on her mouth. She eased her leg into a more comfortable position and he saw it was bleeding freely.

“Start driving,” she ordered, ripping up the hem of her shirt into bandages with quick efficiency. He put the gears into reverse and backed out of their hiding place. The battery-powered engine was smooth, silent. Perfect.

“Nice set o’ wheels you got here,” he remarked appreciatively. “Where’re we goin’?”

She took out her phone and jabbed at the screen a few times.

\textit{At the end of the road, turn right}, a perfectly-pitched female voice instructed him, and Marie leaned forward with a whistle of a groan, snapping the phone into the holder stuck to the windshield. “Do what she says,” she told him. “I gotta zone out for a while.”

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he steered the vehicle out of the asylum grounds, seeing her slip the gun back into the thigh pocket of her cargo pants. He realised then that
all that moaning on the floor back in the tunnel… all that writhing, all that clutching her leg… It’d all just been a feint. So she could whip out that pistol and make her move.

He pressed his lips into a tight line.

“So, chere,” he spoke casually as they sped out onto the main road, “you gonna tell me who the fuck you really are?”

She paused in the middle of tying her bandage, the defensiveness oozing out of her, and he steamed through an unpopulated red light, saying, “C’mom, chere. You’ve taken more than your fair share from this thief. Think it’s time to give a little, neh?”

The pain was getting worse. He could tell from the hoarseness of her breathing.

He shot her a look, said with concern, “Marie—”

“Anna,” she corrected him on a sharp exhalation. “My name’s Anna. Now just keep drivin’.”

-oOo-
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Remy manages to get Anna to safety, who asks Raven to get him out of Essex's line of sight... Although the two of them don't exactly part on good terms.

He followed the sat nav’s instructions, every so often glancing over at Marie – Anna – whoever she was.

Whatever spurt of energy had powered her during their escape from the tunnel, it had taken everything out of her. Her breathing became more laboured, a low rasp of a wheeze that didn’t sound good.

“Hey, Anna,” he shot over at her. “Anna. Stay wit’ me now, chere.”

She didn’t answer and he looked over at her. Her eyes were closed, her head lolling to one side, her skin a pasty shade of white.

“Hey, Anna,” he shouted at her this time. “C’mon now! Don’t’cha dare go to sleep on me now!”

Her eyes obediently rolled open, vividly green in the pale expanse of her face.

“There wash’is thang…” she slurred and he leaned in towards her slightly, trying to make out her words.

“Say what?”

Her eyelids flickered slightly.

“Daddy did it’ta try an’ fix meh…”

She was raving. Not a good sign.

“You ain’t makin’ no sense, chere. Jes’ sit tight, ‘kay?” He gritted his teeth and looked over at the sat nav. At his current speed there was about 5 minutes of journey left. “We be there real soon, chere. We be there real soon.”

He doubted she’d heard him. A minute or so of silence followed before he heard her speak again in a half-conscious monotone:

“Ah’m sorry… Sorry Ah stole from yah… Ah shoulda known who was bankrollin’ yah… If Ah’d known… But it still wasn’t right… Ah’im sorry…”

For the first time he had the full effect of her native Southern drawl, and if they weren’t both in such serious trouble it would’ve brought a smile to his lips.

“Shhhh, chere. We’re almost there.”

She didn’t respond this time and when he looked over at her he saw that she was
unconscious.

“Anna? Hey Anna!” Still no response. “Shit.”

They were nearing their destination – or so the smooth-talking lady on the sat nav was saying. What he actually seemed to be approaching was something a lot less appealing than he’d imagined – a row of seedy-looking Asian restaurants, a newsstand, a sex shop, and a store that was selling traditional herbal medicines.

“You have reached your destination,” the sat nav declared, and gave a little custom-made victory fanfare. He hit the brakes and stared at the newsstand entrance. A gnarled-looking little Chinese man who looked like he was a hundred stared back disinterestedly over a battered cigarette.

“Reached our destination, huh?” he muttered despairingly. “Yeah. Right. An’ where didja figure I was s’posed t’ take you now?”

He hadn’t been expecting an answer, but he got one.

“Round the back,” she said in a barely-there voice. He looked over his shoulder at her. Her eyes were hardly open, but she was evidently still conscious.

“Chere.” He figured he wasn’t supposed to be feeling this relieved, but he was. “Glad to hear you’re still with us.”

“Ah never left, Cajun…” She tried a smile that became a grimace of pain. “Go round the back… It’s the red door… The password’s ‘leech’… They’ll letcha in…”

Her voice trailed off and she looked pretty much out of it again, but he wasn’t sure anymore, not with the way she kept coming in and out of consciousness. He concentrated getting the car round the back; there was a small, narrow alleyway between the medicine store and what looked to be a chop shop. Behind the row of buildings was a courtyard that was half-junkyard, half-parking lot. He parked the four-by-four haphazardly and got out. When he got over to Anna’s side she was already trying to get out, but as he opened the door she literally fell into his arms.

“Shit, you’re in bad shape,” he grunted, propping her deadweight up against his shoulder.

“Ah’m fine…” she rasped, but he wasn’t in the mood for any of it.

“Uh huh,” he replied dismissively as he hoisted her effortlessly into his arms and swung round towards the line of buildings. She didn’t make a sound or movement of protest, and he jogged over to the one red door he could see, pounding on it as hard as he could.

“Lo?!?” he hollered. “Hey, anyone in dere?!”

Finally.

“Leech,” he shot breathlessly at the disembodied eyes. “Leech. We gotta get in. Open the fuckin’ door. Please.”

The eyes regarded him with open suspicion before resting on the half-conscious women in his arms. They widened, the pupils contracting to pinpoints; the panel slid shut and he waited
impatiently whilst bolts were thrown back and locks released. At last the door swung open to reveal a tall, gangly man with a permanently disaffected look on his face and an uber-fashionable hairstyle that looked too flamboyant for the rest of him – short back and sides with an out-sized pompadour on top. He looked first at Remy with overt cynicism if not outright dislike, before moving onto Anna, who was now lying quiet and still in his arms.

The man pursed his lips, looked over his shoulder and shouted out in a thick Australian accent: “Raven! Raven, c’mere! You need t’ see this! Now!”

There was stirring from some room not too far off in the building, and the next moment a statuesque woman with shoulder-length black hair, steely grey eyes and a killer stride was approaching them like a hurricane. She stopped short when she saw what he was holding, and something like horror crossed her face. Then she was moving again with an agitated step, stopping only to hover like a mother vulture over the injured woman, sizing up her wound in a few short moments.

“St. John, get the surgery prepped,” she barked out to the gangly man beside her; he made no acknowledgement, just hastened off to do as he was told. When he was gone, the woman called Raven glanced up at him with daggers in her eyes.

“What the hell happened?” she demanded in a voice that was as cool and calm as ice. There was something so chilling, so disturbingly unbreakable about this woman that he found all words stripped from him for a couple of moments.

“There were these men…” he began, stopping only when he realised how absurd it all sounded. Raven glowered darkly at him.

“There are always ‘these men’,” she intoned acerbically. “Now tell me from the beginning.”

He didn’t have time for this. Luckily Anna forestalled his reply, stirring in his arms, roused from her stupor by the hostile questioning going on above her.

“Essex…” she murmured, and Raven looked down on her like she’d been shot.

“What did you say?” she hissed, and Anna reached out, touched the other woman’s sleeve roughly, answered, “Yah heard me… It was him…”

Raven didn’t have time to make a reply. The gangly guy had made a reappearance, poking his head round the corner of what appeared to be a stairwell down to basement level.

“Raven,” he announced. “Cece’s gettin’ ready. She says to bring her down.”

He disappeared again and Remy stared after him. He could feel Anna’s blood seeping from her wound and over his right hand. He could also feel the full force of Raven’s openly frosty and suspicious stare on him, but that was the least of his worries right now. It was the least of Raven’s too.

“This way,” she directed him in a voice that was clearly used to giving orders – and having them obeyed. He didn’t waste another second. Readjusting Anna’s weight carefully in his arms, he followed the woman called Raven down the corridor towards the stairs.

-oOo-

The doctor was a thoroughly competent-looking Hispanic woman with sympathetic eyes
that immediately put him at his ease.

As soon as she’d hooked her patient up to a drip, a heart monitor and some gas, Anna appeared to regain herself somewhat, doing an admirable job of staving off Raven’s half-angry, half-concerned fussings. He stood to one side and watched on silently, not quite knowing what to do or say. It was only when Anna fixed him with a penetrating stare that words began to push at his lips.

You want me t’ stay, chere?

She didn’t break their gaze and he thought she might’ve answered yes, had it not been for Raven coming up and getting in his face.

“You. You’ve done your part. You need to get out now.”

He stared back at her wordlessly, unmoving. Defiant.

“It’s okay, Remy,” Anna called over from the bed. “Leave it. Let Dr. Reyes do her stuff. We’ll talk later.”

He glanced over sideways at Anna, then back at Raven, who looked like an asteroid landing wouldn’t budge her. When he left the room, he made sure Raven knew that it was only because Anna had instigated it, not her.

He stood at the window on the door and watched on curiously whilst Anna and Raven had a heated discussion about something he guessed covered more than just the night’s events. Again he thought about where he could’ve been right now and he felt like he’d been cheated out of more than just his income, his liberty, and a million dollar mem-chip.

He leaned against the wall and thought about Belle. About the life he’d left behind. About the new life he’d made. About the fact that it was all gone now too. Everything.

Everything.

His maudlin thoughts were interrupted by the door opening and closing, and he turned to see Raven standing there, a scornful glower on her porcelain face. She didn’t say a word. Whipping round she turned her back on him and marched off without a single look back.

-oOo-

He sat on a bench in the corridor and waited.

He thought he slept for an hour so, and when he was awakened it was to St. John sitting next to him with a couple of packets of sandwiches and a polystyrene cup of lukewarm coffee. He took both gratefully even though he was fairly sure they’d come from the seamy newsstand next door.

The coffee turned out to be shit, but the sandwich was surprisingly passable.

“Why’re you still here?” the blond man asked halfway through their improvised meal.
“What kind of a name is St. John?” he countered, not sure he wanted to answer the question or even if he knew what the answer might be. The other man grinned over the rim of his cup – he didn’t seem to mind the coffee, and Remy guessed he’d drunk enough to become immune to its taste.

“It’s a family name,” he explained jovially. “Spelled ‘Saint John’. Pronounced ‘sen-jen’. Pain in the fuckin’ arse when I was growin’ up.”

“Huh. So why’d ja keep it?”

“I dunno.” St. John shrugged. “Mostly ‘cos the girls think it sounds cool. Think it’s some exotic name, like I got some aborigine blood in me or somethin’.”

“Huh,” he said again. He could certainly understand the mystique of an exotic background to some women… but on the other hand, he thought that attributing such a thing to the pale-skinned, blue-eyed blond in front of him was stretching credibility.

He stretched out the kinks in his shoulders and neck and asked: “So. What is this place?”

St. John lifted his shoulders nonchalantly.

“It’s Raven’s place,” he answered simply, biting into the remainder of his sandwich with relish.

“Meanin’?”

“Meanin’ it’s difficult to come by, completely underground, and totally illegal.”

He leaned back against the wall and thought about it.

“So…” he concluded after a moment. “Your Raven is head of a private militia… An organised crime syndicate… An underground racket… And this here is your li’l base of operations…”

St. John seemed to find something amusing in the statement. He gave a high-pitched giggle.

“Yeah, you could call it that, I guess. But we ain’t nothin’ so formal. People come, people go. As and when, you know? But yeah,” and he downed the rest of his coffee. “Raven pretty much runs this place.”

“And Anna,” Remy probed casually, “she works for Raven?”

St. John stared at him.

“No,” he replied presently, with an edge to his voice. “She’s freelance, as far as I can tell.”

“Freelance.” He sniffed humorously. “She seems pretty tight with this Raven lady.”

“They know each other. Somehow.” St. John didn’t appear to be enjoying this conversation so much anymore. “I never asked Raven about it, so I dunno how. Or when. Or why.”

“You work for Raven?”

“Yeah.” St. John polished off the rest of his sandwich. “I work for her.”
Remy sensed by now that he didn’t want to elaborate on his role here and so he didn’t push the kid any further. As it was, any further small talk was curtailed by Dr. Reyes emerging from the operating theatre.

“St. John,” she addressed the blond-haired man. “You can go tell Ms. Darkholme the operation was successful. She’ll be fine, just needs some bed rest. She can come visit her if she wants.”

St. John stood gratefully.

“Well, looks like that’s my shift’s over. Catch ya later.”

And he wandered off to pass on the doctor’s message.

“You’re Remy, right?” Dr. Reyes threw at him without waiting for an answer. “She wants to speak to you.”

He stood, wiping his palms on his thighs. He didn’t know whether to be surprised or not.

“What was the damage?” he queried as he approached the door. Dr. Reyes took off her cap, shook out her dreadlocked hair.

“Luckily it was only a flesh wound… no serious damage, but a lot of blood loss that made it look worse than it was. No arteries were hit, thank God. She’ll be fine… But it’ll be a while before she’s back on her feet again.”

He nodded. Somehow he didn’t think sitting around with her feet up was going to go down well with the feisty identity thief.

True to form, when he entered the room she was already half-sitting up against her pillows, looking pale and drawn but determined. He shut the door quietly behind him and positioned himself squarely at the foot of her bed.

“You owe me an explanation,” he said coldly.

Her eyes lowered in an appropriate gesture of contrition before lifting again.

“The mem-chip belongs to Trask,” she replied. There was a pause, as if, laughably, she thought it should be answer enough; realising it wasn’t, she continued: “Trask and your boss used to work together.”

There was a finality in the statement, indicating that no qualifier was to be given. Her caginess, even now, pissed him off.

“So?” he asked.

Her eyelids flickered again, but she said nothing. Either she didn’t know what was on the chip, or she wasn’t willing to tell. His anger flared – either way it was bad.

“Lemme get this straight,” he began acidly. “You screwed me over for a mem-chip that you have no fuckin’ clue what’s even on it? Is that what you’re tellin’ me?”

Her gaze lowered again.

“I’m sorry.”
He halted on the spot.

“Sorry.” He shook his head, laughed in disbelief. “Jesus H. Christ, chere.”

To her credit she remained silent. Excuses weren’t going to cut it, especially not when she’d railroaded the entire past five years he’d spent trying to put his life back together.

He heaved out a breath, attempting to get his head round the magnitude of this.

“You sure as hell ain’t just an identity thief,” he reasoned out loud. “And whatever’s on that chip ain’t just some identity you can interface with. What is it, chere? Somethin’ you can blackmail Milbury wit’? He got some hold over you?”

He shot her a glance, not expecting an answer, which was just as well because he got none.

“Have you ‘faced with that chip yet?” he quizzed her pointedly. That at least got a reply.

“No. I haven’t even touched it. Yet.”

He didn’t know whether to believe her or not, but when he looked into her face he was almost 100% certain she was telling the truth.

“Well, whatever’s on it,” he rejoined sarcastically, “I hope it’s worth it.”

He turned aside, wondering just what the hell he was supposed to do next.

“Remy.”

Despite her obvious tenseness, she said his name with a casual familiarity, two subtly accented syllables that rolled effortlessly off her tongue in a way that, despite himself, he couldn’t help but like. Still, he couldn’t quite bring himself to turn to her, and so she continued quietly:

“It ain’t safe for you to be here. You’ve gotta leave the country. Those bastards out there will be out for your blood and I kinda get the feelin’ they won’t be easy to shake off.” She paused, finished, “I got Raven to buy you a one-way ticket to France. She’ll set up a new ID for you too. You’ll have all your papers and stuff ready by this evening. She’ll get one of her people to take you to the airport. They know what they’re doing, they’ll keep you safe till you’re in the air.”

Ha. So there it was. Another exile. All instigated, yet again, by a woman. How appropriate.

“And I s’pose,” he muttered with bitter anger, “I should be grateful.”

He would have chewed her out a whole lot more at that point, but was interrupted by the door suddenly opening and none other than Raven walking in.

“Did you tell him?” Anna’s prickly benefactor snapped rather than asked. Anna seemed used to it. She merely nodded.

“Yeah, I told him. You getting his stuff together?”

“Of course,” Raven replied sourly. “The papers should be ready by this afternoon. They’re working as fast as they can. But there are limits to how quickly this process can go, Anna.”

“I know. But he needs to be out of here asap. It ain’t safe for him to hang around.”
Raven threw him a look that said she agreed wholeheartedly.

*Okay. So there’s at least one woman in the world who’s immune to my charms,* he thought with sour humour.

“You should take care of yourself, chere,” he observed dryly. “After what you pulled on Graycrow, Milbury will be out for your blood too.”

She smiled faintly at him.

“Remy, I’m the Rogue. By tomorrow I’ll be somebody else, and nobody will be any the wiser.”

“No,” he corrected her laconically. “You’ll be stuck here. Healin’ up. At least I hope you’ll be. And Creed and his pals don’t fuck around. I should know.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“You would, huh?”

“Yeah. I was a part of Creed’s unit until you screwed me over.”

That troubled her. She went quiet. He knew exactly what she was thinking. If he’d worked on Creed’s team then that meant that they knew how he operated, that they knew things about him that they could use to their advantage. But then both of them also knew that such things went both ways – he knew how they worked too, which levelled the playing field just a bit.

“We’ll take care of her,” Raven informed him coldly. “You don’t need to concern yourself on her account.”

“Don’t I? Seems t’ me like your friend here has a fuckin’ death wish.”

“Mr. LeBeau,” she retorted testily, “I have a certain expertise in these matters. More than you have, I should imagine. Now,” she swept on briskly, “you need to start getting your things together. I assume you have a bug-out bag stashed somewhere?” She didn’t wait for confirmation. “I suggest you grab it and get ready to leave.”

He glanced over at Anna. He knew, logically, that her organising this escape to France was her way of making things up to him, of ensuring his safety. What she didn’t realise was that it would also be a salvage mission – a salvage mission of a salvage mission that, up to this point, had been working fairly well, thank you very much. This wasn’t the solution he would’ve chosen, but, knowing how Essex and his old comrades operated, maybe lying low in Paris was a good plan – for now. At least until he’d figured out a better strategy.

“Where’s the chip right now?” he asked her quietly.

She blinked.

“I have it hidden.”

*Of course she does.*

“So you’re keepin’ it.”

“They think you have it. Best not disabuse them of that impression, huh?”
“And if they figure out you have it?”

Her glance turned sharp, as if to say, *then I’ll know it was you who ratted me out.*

“Then I’ll be ready,” she said instead.

A quick exhale of breath was all he could muster in place of a sardonic laugh.

“That’s enough,” Raven cut in dictatorially. “He needs to go. We’re wasting time here.”

He wanted to ask Anna where she’d picked up this cantankerous harpy of a mother-figure of hers, but it was superfluous. He had zero reason to care now – it wasn’t likely he’d ever see either of them again.

“Well,” he said with finality, “I s’ppose that’s it then.” He looked over at the woman in the bed. “Guess I’ll be seein’ you around, Anna.”

“Yeah. Be seein’ you.”

Her tone was muted. She knew as well as he did that there was little possibility of them ever meeting again. Yet the timbre of her words suggested that she felt there was still something left unfinished between them. He thought that perhaps she regretted not having called him sooner. As in, before all this shit with Creed had gone down.

*Oh well. Whatever.*

He moved to the door, paused, then turned back to Raven.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Your guys’ll be ready for me then, I take it?”

Raven’s expression was as impassive as a stone edifice.

“Young new papers will take a little longer to come through, but we’ll have them dropped off to you at the airport.”

He nodded. Either Anna had told Raven to make sure everyone worked to get this done as fast as possible, or Raven really wanted him gone. Fair enough. He was an interloper, a trespasser on their territory. In their shoes, he’d want him gone too. And considering what he knew Milbury would do in Raven’s shoes… he figured the people here had actually been pretty damn generous.

He glanced back over at Anna; her expression was inscrutable.

“Get well soon, chere.”

It was as much of a truce as he was willing to extend – he figured he could be generous if he wasn’t going to see her again. If nothing else they were both professionals, and in his line of business it was always the rule to be polite.

Her reply was a tight smile – gratitude enough.

He turned and left the room.

By six o’clock that evening, he was on the plane to Paris.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Anna finally interfaces with Trask's mem-chip

Anna lay back in the black leather reclining chair and stared at the abstract patterns dancing a waltz across the ceiling.

It felt like she’d been at this for hours, and the sensor pads on her temples were starting to itch. In fact, her whole body felt like a fault line just waiting to crack and she wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take.

But she willed herself to concentrate. Because this – the mem-therapy that was supposed to cure her of her addiction to the mem-tech – was a challenge and she did what she always did when she was presented with a challenge. She met it head on.

The patterns on the ceiling coalesced into a spiral of colours that turned from rainbow-hued to red to green to blue and finally to gold. They paused and shimmered and swayed like a buttercup under the sun.

She stared up at them, and a memory swam to the surface. A little girl … her at five or ten or twelve… No, seven… Standing in a field, by a rickety old fence… Looking up at the sunflower… Thinking it was beautiful, that the petals were such a bright, rich, silky yellow… … But she was scared. Scared of the big black circle in the middle where the seeds were… It was just so huge, it felt like it could swallow you up…

*Why are you scared of the sunflowers, Anna?* her momma asked.

*Because… I don’t like the middle. Why is the middle so big and dark?*

Her mother’s laugh…

*That’s where the seeds come from. You like to eat the seeds, don’t you? Well, that’s where they come from. There’s no need to be scared of it, silly!*

But in the child’s irrational mind there was still something sinister about that big black hole of seeming nothingness, and it seemed more irrational that Nature could have created something that grew new life in the centre of such darkness…

*“Good,”* Dr. Braddock murmured somewhere vaguely to her right. *“Good.”*

The patterns melted into abstract forms again, and the memory faded. Again Anna steeled herself, straining to focus on the lightshow above her. There were five pinpoints of light frolicking together in a tight formation, slow, fast, slow, fast, then round and round and round until they seemed to meld together under some centrifugal force and… Now it was one big bright light, a huge spotlight shining down on her… How old is she now? Twelve? Thirteen? She’s in a lab… Lying back in a recliner… The light is in her eyes… They’re putting eye drops in her eyes…

*What are you doing daddy?* she asks.
We’re making you better, stronger, faster, cleverer, he says.

They attach the nodes to her head. It hurts it hurts it hurts…

Take it off daddy, it’s hurting me…

She’s beginning to panic… Tears are streaming down her face, but they won’t take the pain away, they won’t take it off…

We can’t use the anaesthetic, honey. We need to have you conscious. We need to see your brainwaves…

They lower the visor over her head and it gets darker and darker and darker and darker and darker and darker and darker—

“Stop it!” Dr. Braddock’s voice snapped somewhere to her right, “Stop the bloody machine!”

There was a click and a whine and the patterns flickered out. The lights came up and all of a sudden Anna was sitting in the therapy room again, sweating, crying, shaking so hard that she almost appeared to be convulsing. To her left Raven got her feet with a muttered oath, but before she’d even crossed the room to the reclining chair Anna had already leapt out of it, ripping the pads off her head and throwing them to the ground like they were something poisonous.

“I need my meds!” she shouted breathlessly. “Get me my meds!”

Dr. Braddock was as calm as every mem-therapist, doctor, nurse or health practitioner on the planet was.

“Considering the circumstances that wouldn’t be wise. You’re going through withdrawal symptoms right now and—”

“Get me my fucking meds!” she screamed. Her feet could barely hold her now, she was shaking so hard. She fell to her knees and Raven was there, kneeling beside her, putting a comforting arm round her.

“Just get them,” the grey-eyed woman commanded Dr. Braddock. “There’s no use fighting with her in this state. She’ll just end up wrecking the room.”

Dr. Braddock looked far from happy about her orders, but wasn’t particularly up for a fight with her employer either, so she turned aside and retrieved the pills and eye drops from Anna’s purse. Raven and the therapist watched on quietly as Anna snatched at the medication and dosed herself with what steadiness she could muster – both knew she wouldn’t let either of them administer the drugs for her.

Thud thud.

The bottles dropped to the floor and Anna curled up in a quivering little ball.

Three minutes later and the tremors had finally passed.

Only then did Raven deign to ask, “What happened?”

Anna didn’t answer, couldn’t answer. She let Dr. Braddock do so.

“It’s the bleed effect. She’s still having difficulty separating. She was experiencing
someone else’s memory. Her brainwaves did a complete shift on the final test. She wasn’t her.”

She hated it. Hated the knowing smugness with which every doctor she met felt that they could pronounce their judgement on her ‘condition’. She sat up shakily and glowered at the imperious-looking British mem-therapist, the one Raven had hired because she was supposedly the best there was.

“I don’t have any trouble separating,” she retorted quietly, her voice wavering with barely suppressed anger. ‘I’ve just been havin’ a rough time because I was stuck in a bed recovering from a leg wound last week, and while I was on the painkillers they wouldn’t let me have my damn meds. Okay? Otherwise… I’m just fine.”

“I don’t think so,” Dr. Braddock corrected her with more sarcasm than was strictly necessary for a doctor. “You’re completely addicted to the mem-tech, not to mention you’re also addicted to the medication that’s meant to control that addiction. Your body is going through withdrawal symptoms, and your brain is having real trouble compartmentalising all the different identities you’ve interfaced with. I’ve never seen anything like it before. You’re an index case.”

She might as well have said she was a head case. Or a nut case, or anything similar.

It was what every doctor who’d encountered her the past few years had thought. They’d never seen her as a human, only as a thing, a specimen. It was what she’d been her entire life. And she was so damn tired of it.

She got to her feet shakily, grabbed her purse and went for the door.

“Anna—” she heard Raven say behind her, but she didn’t even stop.

“Raven,” she cut her off wearily. “I’m leaving. I appreciate what you’ve been trying to do for me…. but we both know this is a waste of time. You can’t cure me. There isn’t any cure.”

She went out the door without looking back. She hadn’t even got halfway down the corridor when Raven followed.

“If you’d done as I’d said and lain low,” Raven called after her irritably, “you would never have gotten that leg injury and none of this would’ve happened.”

She halted in her tracks.

“I was laying low,” she rejoined softly, to which Raven merely scoffed.

“If you were laying low, you wouldn’t have gotten involved with that Cajun thief.”

She turned, saw Raven wearing that perfectly sculpted look of contempt that must’ve taken an age to perfect.

“Oh,” she answered with a strain of irony. “I get it. This is about the thief.”
Raven refused to look contrite.

“Pulling that heist with him was both foolish and dangerous,” she rebuked her coldly, with such self-assured righteousness that Anna was riled.

“Maybe it was,” she answered in a low voice that wavered with barely concealed emotion. “But do you have any idea,” she continued, her jaw taut, “what it’s like to live the life I live? The monotony, the mindless boredom? The meaningless of it all? You made me to be the way I am, Raven. You gave me the only life I knew. You can’t expect me to just forget about it. You can’t expect me not to want it back.”

It was a line of attack she knew Raven wouldn’t be expecting. Her former mentor’s expression changed, softened – as much as it could anyhow. That in itself was half the battle won.

“Being with him,” Anna began again slowly, “it made me feel alive. It reminded me what it was to live that life again. No more running, no more hiding. Just me – who I am. Not this shadow of a person who’s lost among a hundred stranger’s memories. And if that means I screwed up… Well, then. Maybe it was worth it.”

She turned away, hearing Raven say, “Anna—” behind her, but she didn’t look back, she carried on walking.

-oOo-

Anna screamed across the city on her motorbike like she was heading to war, teeth grit, knuckles white, her mind a seething mass of contradictions – rage and fear and brutal calculation.

By the time she got to her apartment block it was dark, and as she entered the precinct she killed the lights, slowly guiding the bike into the deserted kid’s playground and parking it in the foliage.

She spent a long time after that hidden in the bushes, silent and still as a spider, sharp-eyed as an eagle. At long last, after about half an hour, she was satisfied that no one was staking out the building. No sooner had she come to this conclusion than she was moving, sprinting soundlessly out the playground to the parking lot and round the corner of the building where she knew the crawlspace was.

The crawlspace was, of course, the only reason she’d made sure she got a first floor apartment when she’d first started renting the place. She was pretty certain that her apartment wasn’t a safe place right now – that it was probably bugged, or booby-trapped, or that some unwelcome guest was holing up there, waiting for her. Lucky she didn’t have any particular attachment to anything there apart for the thing she had come for.

She went right on into the space on her hands and knees, no hesitation, and when she got to the spot she wriggled over onto her back and ran her hands along the floorboards above her. The grains of wood were coarse, rough, and she got herself a couple of splinters along the way, but at last she found the edges she had cut out so long ago. A gentle amount of pressure and the floorboard was dislodged; Anna carefully slid it aside and put her hand inside the gap.

A little bit of stretching and straining and she had found the first box; the other three followed in quick succession. She cautiously manoeuvred each one down, replaced the panel, shoved the boxes inside the backpack she’d brought with her, and wriggled out of the space.

Not ten minutes had passed since she’d gone in before she was speeding away again into
the night.

-oOo-

Her new place was nice, but at the moment it was completely unlived in, and since coming out of Dr. Reyes’ care, she hadn’t really had the time or inclination to decorate. The only thing she’d really set up was her interfacing unit, and she hadn’t really worked up the courage to use that either, not when her mind had been so fragile lately.

As soon as she entered the small studio apartment she flipped on the lights, set aside her backpack, and went for a shower. When she came out again she sat on the bed in her underwear and stared down at her leg. Dr. Reyes had done an amazing job – there was hardly anything left of her injury except a long, thin scar that the doctor had assured her would be gone after a few more laser therapy sessions. Modern tech, and all its many wonders, still scared her. She found that ironic, when she’d embraced the mem-tech so wholly.

She looked up at the noteboard she’d set up that morning. The only thing on it was the Queen of Hearts with Remy’s phone number on it.

She felt like an idiot, having it there. For still thinking about the wily Cajun thief. For still wanting him.

She had barely known the man, and yet somehow he had managed to tap into some deep, uncharted reservoir inside her, one she’d barely known existed. The sexual relationships she’d experienced in the past had rarely been anything fun or exciting or emotionally satisfying – except for the once, but that seemed a very long time ago now. Since then the only times she’d had sex had been to scratch an itch, and those had been calculated and seldom.

But with Remy… she’d wanted to know. She’d wanted to know what it would be like to be with him. For the first time in a long time she’d felt passion, need, desire. And it had been new and scary and exhilarating just remembering the shape of his face and the line of his body and the scent of his skin and the press of his lips and the brush of his tongue and…

_And I ain’t never gonna see him again. So stop perving over him already, gal._

She sighed and leaned over towards the bed, pulling the backpack towards her. She took out the only box that wasn’t yet full to capacity and opened it. She thumbed out Trask’s mem-chip and stared at it. That tiny thread of gold that represented his memories winked up at her in the light. She wished she’d asked Remy more before he’d left. Wished she’d asked him why the man named Milbury had wanted this; whether there were more of these that he’d been asked to steal. She’d never know now. This would remain a puzzle piece without a jigsaw to fit into.

Except…

She set aside the boxes decidedly and got up. She walked over to the reclining chair where she’d set up her new interfacing unit, and when she was sitting comfortably she slotted Trask’s mem-chip into the visor and turned the machine on.

She heard the stern, disapproving voice of Raven over the soft whine of the interfacer starting up.

_You can barely handle what’s in your head already, Anna, let alone another like Trask’s. Your addiction to the mem-tech is getting out of hand. Do you want to end up a demented vegetable for the rest of your life? Because that’s how you’re gonna be, if you carry on like this._
But she wanted, she needed to know what all this was about, and she didn’t really care about her own life, she didn’t have anything left to live for except the next identity and the next life she’d play at being, and even that had lost its lustre. She wanted to know the truth. She wanted to uncover this little bit of herself… her past.

She lowered the visor over her eyes.

Her custom loading screen was playing on the transparent, wrap-around screen – the shores of the Mississippi washing in and out, in and out, over her feet, gloriously cool and soothing, the sun playing on the crests of the water and—

_Shit, I didn’t take my eye drops!_

The thought panicked her and she almost shut the whole thing off when Trask’s mem-chip began to load, and she subconsciously decided to let it play through, she could handle it, she could always handle it, it’d be fine, just—

The Mississippi faded to black, to space, to stars, to the universe.

_“Menu,”_ the computer spoke in a soothing female voice – she made a mental note to turn off the ease of access features the next time she ‘faced – “Please select function.”

Anna shot off a thought, ignoring the given options of medical records, educational history, stats and biomedical information… She went straight for the mnemonic replay function. She shot into a star, came out the other side, saw only one other star dangling in the blackness, shimmering alone and desolate.

_He only has one memory here_, she thought.

That was strange.

She shot off another thought anyway, demanding a replay and … the star grew bigger, brighter, slowly engulfing her mind until she fell off the edge and into the light and for a while Anna was no more.

_He feels pain._

_Terrible, grinding pain._

_The pain of a life once so bold now brought down in ruins._

_Marriage, daughter, gone… Years of work virtually destroyed…_

_Everything wrong, everything gone to hell…_

_He hasn’t slept in 3 days. He’s hardly thinking straight. His thoughts, his emotions, his memories are like a half-formed haze to her, dipping in and out of conscious awareness… But there is one thing he knows. One coherent thought that washes over her as it washes over him…_

_“We made a terrible miscalculation…” he murmurs to the window; there is no answer and he turns, says more loudly, “we made a terrible miscalculation…”_

_The edges of his memory are bleached out, white and fuzzy._

_“Weapon Zero…” he says. “Maybe she wasn’t ready… It all backfired… Maybe she’ll never be ready…”_
There is a conference table – five faces swimming round in the semi-darkness, in the fog of his mind, and she hears them speak, the sounds muffled, far away...

“You’re not thinking straight...” says a woman with white blonde hair, “You’ve been through a traumatic time, we should talk about this at some future point when you are feeling—”

“I know what I’m feeling!” he shrieks at her.

Silence, his heartbeat in his head, beating all around her.

He’s trying not to cry.

God, Trask is trying not to cry in front of this board meeting, in front of—

Who?

“We need to destroy it,” he slumps in his chair and says, “we need to...”

The next few minutes are confused, shrouded in a white mist, the cadence of inaudible voices rising and falling until—

Essex has him up against the wall, his forearm driving into his neck, handsome, lily-white features contorted with rage and fear, and he screams, spittle-flecked, “What have you done?! You fool, all our work will be lost forever...!!!”

The clouds descend again. When he comes out the other side he is on the floor, retching, gasping for breath, feeling the full force of the others’ hostility and—

He’s at the window again.

“There is a way,” he answers in a monotone. “A failsafe, if you will...”

Another jump in time and he’s at the table, throwing them each a mem-chip.

“Record it. Record your part of the code. If we change our minds in the future, if we believe humanity is ready...”

“A secret key?” the Japanese man at the other end of the table says and:

“Yes,” he says, “we each have a piece of the key... Neither one of us can resurrect the project without first having the cooperation of all the others...”

The memory fades out, like acetone being poured over a reel of film. Underneath the blotchy stains is darkness and he sits in it, a glass of brandy in his hand... He’s looking out over the lights of the city, and everything is clearer, apart from the fuzz of the alcohol and he’s laughing and he’s crying, and this time she hears his voice clearly, he says:

“So now you know. At least I hope you do... my memory of it all hasn’t been so good, sorry, I’ve been drowning my sorrows too much lately and everything is hazy... It only happened yesterday and it all seems so far away...

“But if this is really what you want, I’ll give it to you. Hopefully by the time you listen to this I’ll be dead and I won’t care anymore. We’ve unleashed a demon... I’ve caged it... For now... Ha ha... For now. In a generation or two, it’ll kill us all...

“Oh yes. Where was I? Ah... the key. You want my part of the code, don’t you. Well
here it is. Are you ready? Do you have a pen and paper?

“\text{It’s: seven-four-six-one-zero-zero…nine-two-four.}"

“\text{So now you know. Now you know…}”

The memory flickered and winked out.

\text{No. No, I don’t know}, she thought, as she lifted the visor slowly from her head and laid it in her lap.

She sat for a long time in the reclining chair and waited for the tremors to pass. Longer and longer and longer. They took so damn long to go now, and she’d been stupid enough not to take the meds before jumping in, but it was too late to regret that now.

When her legs were steady enough to hold her again she got up and walked to the bathroom. She splashed her face with water and looked into the mirror.

\text{There was, however, one thing she knew now, and that was what Essex wanted Trask’s mem-chip for.}

\text{The code. He wants the code. So that he can finish what he started, all those years ago. That means he’ll be after the others’ mem-chips too.}

But there was another clue in Trask’s memory, a clue that was far more personal. A glimmer of something that had been erased by the very thing that the code now hid.

\text{Weapon Zero.}

A long-forgotten name. One dead and buried what seemed a lifetime ago. A tantalising trace of something she’d long-since given up on ever finding.

\text{What if these memories are the answer? What if there’re more than just codes on them? What if there’s the thing I’ve been searching for all these years?}

Anna looked aside, frowned.

\text{What if there’s my past?}

-oOo-
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Six months later, Remy gets a nasty surprise in Paris.

Remy LeBeau touched down in Paris in the rain and with only a rucksack-full of possessions and a new identity.

His new passport and papers told him his name was Adrien Laval, 30 years of age, hometown Baton Rogue, Louisiana – and he wished like hell that Raven had picked a better name for him.

And here he was. An exile in a strange place yet again.

He booked himself into the nearest not-so-fancy hotel, mindful not to raise eyebrows on his first day of banishment, careful not to draw too much attention to himself. He sat tight for a few days. He bided his time… and thought. He thought about how stubborn fate was to deal him the same hand twice. It made him bitter but he couldn’t help it. Marie – Anna – had been smoking hot and he’d enjoyed working with her… but she’d played him like the damned fool he was. He wasn’t here in Paris because of any decision he’d made and that wounded his pride. The more he thought about it the more it rankled. He couldn’t decide if it was better to fight against his apparent destiny or go with it and accept his new situation.

Over the next few weeks he spent his time wandering the city, getting to know every inch of it, every nook and cranny – the scent of its air, the pace of its life, the manners of its people.

By the end of the first month he’d stolen, cajoled and hustled his way across town and into a more comfortable position. Adrien Laval was dead and buried and had shed his skin to become Léon Moreau. He’d managed to wheedle his way into the penthouse suite in a fancy complex of hotel-apartments. He drifted through the days in a hedonistic haze that lacked sense or purpose.

By the second month the novelty had worn off and the boredom had begun to set in.

A city of frivolities Paris may have been, but there was a knowing cynicism to life there that had at first set his teeth on edge and then seriously begun to depress him. Here, in this new town, in this new city, he felt more open and exposed than he ever had. He wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was the slight language barrier, the different culture. Here there always seemed to be eyes on him – you were always going to be looked at, to be questioned. You were always going to be a nudge-nudge and a wink-wink away from being caught out. And the women were always going to find his Creole patois unsophisticated and unappealing.

He thought of the world he had left behind, Belle and her five years of bliss turned all at once into blistering hate. Of the life he’d tried to make without her. All undone by the hand of yet another pretty woman.

Anna.

He thought of her with the same dread neutrality that one thinks of a natural disaster. It had
been apparent to him at the end that she had been sorry and also a little unhinged. Maybe that was
why he couldn’t bring himself to fully blame her for what she had done. He was a ship that had
sailed into a storm… he couldn’t hate the storm… Or could he? No – he couldn’t… not if he was
going to pretend to be in control of his life.

Six months passed.

Paris had long lost its allure, and he had just decided to jump across the Channel to
London when everything changed.

It, of course, all boiled down to a woman.

He’d been sitting one afternoon outside a café, sipping a cappuccino and smoking a
cigarette, trying to work out whether to skip town under his Léon Moreau identity or as someone
completely different, when she’d caught his eye.

She was sitting three tables away from him with a male friend, her lips round the rim of a
café au lait. What made him notice her first was her pixie short green hair that he guessed was really
brown underneath. What made him remember her was the fact that her eyes were green too when
she looked at him.

The next day she’d been there again with a female friend, and the day after that she was
there by herself. Sending him not-so-subtle looks from afar.

Well this could be interestin’, he thought by this point, and when she showed up again the
day after that, all alone, he got up out of his chair and walked over to her table.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked in French, and she answered back in perfect English with
only a trace of an accent.

“Not at all.”

“How did you know I spoke English?” he asked, pulling out the seat opposite her and
sitting down. She shrugged.

“You spoke with an accent.”

Of course he did.

“You speak English pretty good,” he noted with a wry smile. She said nothing for a
moment but shook out a cigarette from the packet at her elbow; he leaned forward with his lighter
and helped her light up as she finally said, “I did a year out as an exchange student in Pennsylvania,”
she explained nonchalantly. “I go back every year to visit my host family.”

He lit a cigarette of his own, said, “That’d explain it.”

They were silent for a good long moment during which he took the opportunity to study
her. She was attractive, with a small elfin face to match her short elfin haircut. She was young – he
guessed about 22 or 23 – and it was her youth that made her seem brash and confident. She seemed
totally at ease in his presence. No fear, no nervousness. No doubt that she’d nail him at some point
soon. That in itself interested him.
“What’s your name?” he asked her at last.

“Vertigo,” she replied, and he must have given her a quizzical look because she laughed, explained: “My name’s Veronique. But my host-brother always called me Vertigo, ‘cos he said that’s how I made him feel.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“He did, huh?”

This was a statement and a half. It said enough just to be innocuous with half a hint of something more obscene.

“Yes,” she laughed again, and left it at that. He took the silence to introduce himself.

“I’m Léon,” he said.

“Oh. Nice to meet you, Léon.”

He considered her carefully through the cigarette smoke. She was completely unaffected. He liked that.

“So,” she began, tapping ash casually into the ashtray on the table, “where do you come from?”

“Louisiana,” he replied.

“Oh.” She nodded. “I went to New Orleans once. For a couple of days, with my host family. For Mardi Gras.”

“Hm. Not my part of the world, chere,” he lied. “But it’s a pretty amazin’ place.”

She grinned.

“It sure is. I wish I’d seen more of it.”

Their conversation meandered over the course of an hour, never straying far from the mundane and the superficial whilst taking several detours into light and lazy flirtation. By the time that hour was over, he was left in no doubt as to what she was really angling for. Never one to disappoint, he jotted his address on the napkin next to him and slid it across the table to her.

“I’ll be around any time after seven,” he told her as he stood. “Come round whenever. I’ll be waitin’.”

She took the napkin and looked at it, and when she’d folded it and put it in her pocket, he left.

-oOo-

He waited for her impatiently, and by the time seven o’clock came he was pacing the room like a trammelled tiger.

He thought of Belle and her laughing blue eyes, teasing him as he’d tackled her into bed, saying, the problem with you is that you have zero self-control; but he’d learned with her, he’d learned to bide his time, to wait it out, to assess every goddamn eventuality that could come to pass.
He dropped into an armchair and pondered. It was nearing eight when the knock finally came at the door.

He got up, he went to it, he pulled it open.

Veronique was on the other side, wearing a black leather jacket, a Van Halen T-shirt, denim hot pants and a confident smile. Two tanned, toned legs were firmly planted in a pair of cowboy boots.

“Hey,” he greeted her, and:

“Hey,” she said, almost breathless.

He opened the door wider and gestured for her to come inside. She stepped over the threshold and looked around as he shut the door behind her, taking in every nook and cranny of the room – or so it seemed.

“Nice place you have here,” she commented appreciatively.

“It’s okay,” he answered with his usual self-deprecation. “Gotta admit, I was beginnin’ t’ think you weren’t gonna come, chere. You sure know how to keep a guy waitin’…”

He moved forward and put a hand on the small of her back, let it linger. She half turned to him with a smile, answered, “I got caught up.”

“Hm-mm?” He let his hand wander just half an inch lower before continuing; “Can I get you a drink? Anythin’?”

He’d already dropped his hand and was moving towards the minibar when she said, “No… No, thanks… I shouldn’t… I had a drink before I came here…”

He paused and turned to her with an amused expression.

“Pardon me for sayin’ it, chere,” he remarked wryly, “but you don’t look the type to get nervous before a rendezvous…”

She laughed softly, looked at the ground, then back up at him. She pulled at her lower lip with her teeth in a gesture that was almost, but not quite, an exact replica of the way Anna did it.

“Most of the men I meet aren’t like you,” she said as if it should explain everything. There was something almost shy about the way she said it; but the way she looked at him, so shrewd, so knowing, said something else entirely.

This was good. He preferred to cut to the chase. He sidled up to her, slipped a hand around her waist. He gave her that slow slide of a smile that he always gave.

“Chere,” he murmured, “somet’ing tells me you’ve done dis before. But you’re right. Never wit’ a man like me.”

He drew her in slowly till their hips were right up flush against each other and her lips parted and he took the moment of distraction to slip his other hand round her waist and, “So how do you like it, chere?” he whispered.

And her only answer was to press herself against him and kiss him with a fierce passion.

Better and better.
This was exactly the way he needed it to be. No fencing, no waltzing around and pretending. Just straight down to business.

He kissed her back and he felt her right hand trail down his stomach and to the waistband of his jeans; it was a new twist when she thumbed open the button of his fly, and he thought somewhere between amusement and surprise that he had yet to meet a woman who worked as fast and as brazenly as she did. No sooner had he got the thought out than her hand had snaked its way into his pants and he allowed himself to get pleasantly distracted for a moment or two.

That was until he saw the edge of the knife blade glimmer out of the corner of his right eye.

Instinct took over in a flash and his hand shot out, snapping over her wrist before the blade could connect, and he twisted her hand hard, trying to get her to drop the weapon, but she didn’t. Her only answer was to bite hard into his bottom lip.

When he tasted his own blood the only thing she’d succeeded in doing was pissing him off.

He swore loudly, viciously, and shoved her up against the nearby wall, ignoring her muffled cry of pain, slamming her hand violently against it over and over and over until her grasp gave way and the knife dropped to the floor with a thud. Almost immediately his hand came up to grab her throat but she’d anticipated him for half a second, driving her knee into his groin in a move that would’ve made Belle laugh; he doubled over with a groan and almost immediately she went for the knife again, but there was no way in hell he was letting her get to it, no way in hell she was going to best him this fucking time. He dove for it just as she did, and he was just that split second faster. He hit the ground as his fist closed over the hilt and he rolled, thrusting the blade up into her shoulder.

She gave a scream of agony and there was his opportunity. He tackled her onto her back and put the full force of his weight on her.

“Who sent you?!” he demanded in a growl, still reeling with the pain and the adrenaline of their short scuffle. “Was it Milbury or Yashida?!”

She scowled up at him, green eyes wet with agony, baring her teeth like a canine.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she hissed back at him, and he saw red. He pulled out the blade and slammed it back in as far as it could go, twisting it as he went. She shrieked and screeched and yelled with pain, but he didn’t let up.

“Don’t fuck wit’ me,” he seethed at her. “I been playin’ your game a whole lot longer den you have, and I clocked onto your shitty little ploy from de first moment I laid eyes on you. De only reason I let you get dis far was so’s I can figure out who de fuck sent you. So tell me,” and he twisted the knife again – she gasped and whimpered at the torture – “which one was it?”

She glared at him like she could kill him with a mere look and rasped: “You’re gonna haveta kill me, LeBeau. ‘Cos I’m never gonna tell you.”

He grit his teeth. There was a time he would have, without hesitation. But he didn’t have the taste for it, not now. Not with this stupid kid his enemies had sent to seduce and murder him.

“Fine,” he growled, and he yanked out the knife, rolled her onto her stomach and grabbed her by the hair, jerking her head back. It would have been so easy to slide that knife across her throat
and end her. But for better or for worse he didn’t. He smashed her head into the wooden flooring, once, twice, thrice, until she was unconscious. When he let go of her she dropped to the floor, limp as a ragdoll.

He knelt beside her and tried to catch his breath.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and there was blood on it when he held it out in front of him.

_Merde._

He sniffed and scrubbed at his mouth again with the edge of his sleeve before turning Veronique back over. She didn’t make a sound, not even a moan as he did so, which told him she was well and truly out for the count. He patted down the pockets of her hot pants first, although it was pretty evident there was nothing in them; her jacket pockets were likewise clean. So he opened it up and felt for any inner pockets. There were two – one on the right, which was empty (he guessed the knife had been in that one) – and one on the left, in which was a small bulge. He turned out that pocket and was rewarded with a folded up packet of papers.

He got to his feet slowly as he opened it up, and the first thing he saw was a printout of his personnel profile. It was the one that Milbury had on file. Great. So that answered that question. It was Milbury who had tracked him down, who was sending what he guessed would be the first of many assassins.

_Shit._

There were another couple of pieces of paper underneath his profile and he took them out, looked at them.

It was another personnel profile, and the face in the photo staring back at him was Anna’s.

He breathed in slowly. This was, if nothing else, interesting.

She looked young, really young – twelve or thirteen, if he had to guess, but there was no mistaking the green eyes, the up-front stare, the streak of white in her brown hair. He glanced at her name.

_Ana Marie Raven_, it said.

He turned over to the last page and there she was again, only older this time. Seventeen, eighteen, perhaps nineteen. He skimmed through the text on the page. DOB, weight, height, eye colour, hair colour, identifying marks… _Assignment: Weapon X._

He paused. _Weapon X_. He thought he’d heard of it once. One of those top secret outfits everyone talked about but knew didn’t exist. Like MK Ultra, or the Majestic Twelve. He frowned, continued.

There was a long list of medical terminology that appeared to involve drugs or diseases or something he didn’t understand. The rest was a mess of what appeared to be code that he had no hope of interpreting. It was what was at the bottom of the page that most piqued his interest. A small black and white matrix code that he recognised only too well.

He ran his thumb over it thoughtfully, his brow furrowed, before folding up the papers again and slipping them into his breast pocket.
One question had been answered at least.

He now knew there was a definite connection between Anna and Milbury, and it appeared that, at one time, she had worked for him. He could also guess that at some point that connection had been severed— that somehow she had dropped under Milbury’s radar… Maybe that was what the identity thief thing was all about – staying anonymous, staying hidden. And now, through her connection with Remy, through her run-ins with Creed and his old unit… she’d been brought to Milbury’s attention once again. It lit a small flame of undeserved pity in him.

Nevertheless, the fact that there was even a printout of her in Veronique’s possession gave him the biggest pause for thought.

It meant that Milbury had two little birds to kill, and the woman named Anna was one of them.

He grimaced.

But so what? She would only be getting her just desserts. She’d made the choice to steal from him… She’d made the choice to steal from Essex. With Raven by her side she could probably stay underground for a good long time… And she was pretty damn good at taking care of herself, when it came to it.

His thoughts trailed off. He experienced a moral discomfort the source of which he could barely identify let alone admit.

Remy turned, grabbed his coat, wallet and keys and went for the front door.

He’d barely stepped a foot over the threshold when he felt something impact the back of his skull, and the darkness descended.

-oOo-
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Remy ends up making a deal with a devil...

He opened his eyes first to the dull throb of pain, and then to the metallic flavour of blood in his mouth.

When his vision finally kicked in he found he was still inside his apartment, sitting in the middle of the lounge on the most uncomfortable chair he owned – a metal-framed one he usually kept in the corner of the kitchen. When he tried to move his limbs he realised that he’d been bound to his seat with zip ties.

“The past few months have made you soft, LeBeau,” a familiar voice said to the right of him.

He didn’t bother turning his head. He recognised Creed’s voice when he heard it.

“Issa pretty girls that make me soft, mon ami,” he slurred around the blood in his mouth. “When they ain’t makin’ me hard, that is.”

He almost heard Creed’s barely suppressed snarl. That was Creed, always terminally unimpressed, never able to swallow a joke. The only time he ever laughed was when he was murdering someone, and even then only when he was inflicting as much pain as he could.

“Guess you’re right,” Remy began again conversationally, eyeing up the room and seeing that Vertigo was now nowhere in sight. “I got soft enough in the head t’forget we always work in pairs durin’ takedowns. Mus’ be all them lines I’ve been doin’ fuckin’ wit’ my brain.”

He heard Creed shift his weight, his back slide against the lounge wall. When he heard the larger man’s footsteps approach he still didn’t bother to look over. He was too busy, for one thing, counting the floorboards to his left. First the familiar, scuffed army boots Creed always wore came into view. Then, as he bent over, his ugly, sneering face finally appeared. There were still about 100 scars on him, but he was sporting a new one, right over his left eye.

“Nice makeover you’ve had, Creed,” Remy rasped over a mirthless smile. “Now all you need is a patch and you got the pirate look down.”

He’d half been expecting the backhand across the face, enough so that when it hit him the smile didn’t even flicker from his lips. The chair teetered and slowly righted itself.

“I’m gonna enjoy wreckin’ you, LeBeau,” Creed growled right up in his face. It was a waste of bad breath and Remy knew it.

“Ha. Right. If that was the case, I’d be dead by now. Instead I’m still here, playin’ bondage games with my fav’rite big kitty. I ain’t some dumb fuck. The boss still wants me, and as long as he wants me you ain’t gonna touch me.”

Creed’s face twitched, half agreement, half regret. He straightened himself and turned
away abruptly, almost as if to consciously stop himself from striking the Cajun again.

“If I had my way,” he sneered, “you woulda been a dead fuckin’ man the moment you walked out that door.” He stopped and half turned back, glared at Remy narrowly. “And that might still happen, if you push your luck.”

Remy rolled his eyes to the ceiling, bored. He wasn’t in the mood for parlaying and idle threats.

“What does Milbury want?” he cut to the chase.

Creed considered him a moment or two.

“For you to complete your mission.”

Remy was surprised at that.

“He coulda got another thief t’do that,” he answered quietly.

“Not one like you though,” Creed answered with barely concealed disgust. “And I think you know it.”

Remy weighed that up slowly.

“It ain’t so much the gettin’,” he reasoned out slowly, “as the what we do with the goods after the fact.”

“Oh,” Creed nodded disdainfully. “Any old two-bit thief can figure out how to steal a mem-chip. But the readin’ them…”

Remy wet his bottom lip slowly. That’s where the blood was coming from. His lower lip. He must’ve cut it when he hit the floor.

“Huh,” he murmured with a slight smile playing at the corner of his mouth, amused by this unexpected form of immunity. He could almost feel the hostility radiating from his old partner-in-crime at the knowledge of it. Creed wanted him dead. Rub him up the wrong way and he still just might do it. But fear of Milbury, of their paymaster, was enough to rein in the fury of the beast. For now.

“Why do I get the feelin’ that ain’t all Milbury wants me for?” he queried sarcastically. “Your new pal Vertigo didn’t only have my file on her. She had someone else’s too. Someone we both happen to know.”

Creed scowled over at him, but made no attempt to answer, and so Remy ploughed on mercilessly.

“Didn’t know that Anna femme used to work for Milbury too. Would explain why she was able to take out Graycrow the way she did. Lemme guess. She went AWOL and Milbury wants her back. And he figures I might be able to steal her for him too.”

The corner of Creed’s maimed eye twitched. If there was one thing Remy has always enjoyed, it was outmanoeuvring the ugly sonuvabitch.

“Go on, Creed,” Remy goaded him a little too joyfully, “you can admit it t’ yer old partner, can’tcha. For old time’s sake? The boss wants the femme. He wants his old toy back, and he knows
I can get it for him.”

Creed glowered, his lips pulling back over his teeth in a snarl.

“Turns out that bitch is worth more to the boss than the mem-chips,” he retorted in an angry growl. “For what, I don’t know, but I hope it’s to rip her apart nice and slow.” He paused, before continuing in a more controlled tone. “She has… other things the boss wants. Things she took from him. He wants them back.”

Remy grimaced appreciatively to himself. So Anna had stolen from Milbury. A death wish if ever there was one. He was intrigued.

“And what if I don’t wanna play dis li’l game of yours?”

Creed looked over at him again, eyes glittering voraciously.

“Then you die.”

He let that sink in for a moment before he decided Creed was bluffing.

“Ha! I don’t think so. When the boss needs me this much?”

Creed’s expression was suddenly flat.

“The woman is worth more to him than you,” he explained dispassionately.

Well, this was news. The more Remy heard, the more intrigued he became.

“Wow. She musta really pissed him off. Looks like her an’ me should compare notes… find out where I’m goin’ wrong. I really hate bein’ outdone…”

He stopped only when Creed moved towards him, leaning against the arm of the chair, getting right in his face once more and saying, “Lissen, pretty boy. I ain’t come here to lissen to you run your mouth off all fuckin’ night. You got what I’d call a sweet deal here. You gonna play or not?”

It was only then that Remy let the smile slip from his face.

“If it’s a toss up between a pretty lady and your ugly fuckin’ mug, I’m pretty sure we both know who’s gon’ win.”

It came faster than he’d expected, Creed’s fist smashing into the side of his face with enough force to send him reeling onto the hard, wooden floor. It was just as he had calculated, and he didn’t waste a second analysing it. As soon as he was free-falling he was twisting, slamming the left front leg of his chair into the floor. The floorboard snapped up, releasing his carefully laid trap. A volley of spikes shot up out of their hiding place, and he hoped that one of them, any of them, would find their target. The first six missed and careened into the wall opposite with a sharp report. The last four found their mark, embedding themselves into Creed’s shin as he howled in pain.

It was the insane kind of gambit that Remy had spent his life taking, and somehow it worked. With an inarticulate roar of rage Creed hauled him up by the scruff of his neck, spluttering promises of a slow and torturous death, when Remy saw the anaesthetic in the darts start to take effect. About fuckin’ time. Creed seemed to have realised he’d been medicated with something nasty – there was this disbelieving comprehension in his gaze, one that was quickly replaced with an increasing inability to focus. He opened his mouth to say something that Remy figured wasn’t very
nice, before his eyes rolled back in his head, his knees buckled, and he dropped to the floor like a stone, taking Remy with him.

*Great. Fuckin’ great.*

Remy now had two problems on his hands – disengaging himself from under Creed’s deadweight, and disengaging himself from the chair. Releasing himself from the zip ties turned out to be a piece of cake once he’d managed to manoeuvre his old partner aside. Weaselling his way out of bonds was a speciality of his, and Creed had known it, had been expecting it, had been watching out for it. And Remy had never been one to deliver what was expected of him, not under circumstances like these.

His limbs now free, he scrambled to his feet and stood over Creed’s prone body, exhaling audibly at the exertion, the adrenaline.

“Guess you were waitin’ for me t’bite, huh?” he muttered mockingly down at the unconscious lump on the floor. “Figured I’d try t’break m’self free and give you an excuse to beat me to a pulp, neh? You know your problem, Victor? You were *always* way too easy to read.”

He brushed himself down, checked he still had his phone and keys and wallet on him; and he’d just about reached the door again when the phone rang in Creed’s pocket.

He knew instinctively who it was.

He could’ve ignored it. *Should’ve* ignored it.

But for some reason – the pull of curiosity or the need to gloat, perhaps – he went back and retrieved it.

He took the call and put the phone to his ear.

“Milbury,” was the only thing he said.

“LeBeau.” There was a smile in the voice of the man named Milbury, cool and sinister.

“If you wanted t’ get my attention,” Remy remarked soberly, “there were other ways of gettin’.”

Milbury laughed softly.

“Perhaps. But you do so love to play games, don’t you, LeBeau. I thought I was making things fun for you.”

Remy frowned. He slid the packet of Marlboros from his pocket and shook one out.

“Some types of fun I can do wit’out. And this one didn’t impress me.”

“Then I apologise,” Milbury replied with the air of someone who wasn’t apologetic at all. “But I think you should know that despite our past differences you are still very important to me, LeBeau. I was... exceedingly disappointed in your failure to return Trask’s chip to me.” He gave a chill pause. “Where is it?”

Well here at last was a question he could easily answer.

“She has it,” he replied. “Anna.”
Milbury was suddenly silent. So he continued.

“She stole the chip from me, swapped it out with one of her own. Screwed me over good. When she realised you’d sent Creed out for me, she warned me, sent me out here as a failsafe. To be honest, I never figured at the time you’d be bothered with explanations. But if you’re willin’ to negotiate now…”

He trailed off meaningfully. It was a moment before Milbury replied.

“It seems, LeBeau,” he spoke with dangerous politeness, “that we have been labouring under a misunderstanding.”

No shit.

“But,” the scientist continued, “if you’re willing to come to some sort of arrangement, we can let bygones be bygones and you can have your old job back.”

Remy grimaced. Now he was talking.

“Fuck your job. If I do dis t’ing for you, what I wanna know is whether our old agreement still stands. I don’t give a fuck about all the other shit.”

And again Milbury let out that soft, derisive chuckle.

“And if I say yes?”

He wasn’t a fool. He knew enough not to trust Milbury, but he was willing to play along. For now.

“Well, then,” he said. “I’d say we’ve got ourselves a deal.”

-oOo-
Remy and Anna finally meet again, and Remy makes a proposal.

Six months in and his banishment to Europe had been aborted.

Remy LeBeau stepped back onto a plane as Léon Moreau and headed right back to JFK International Airport.

Less than 18 hours after his encounter with Creed and Veronique he was back in New York and Remy LeBeau once more.

He stole a motorbike from the short stay parking lot and sped off without once looking back. He knew where he was headed. He was headed for the place he knew only as the Red Door.

Darkness was drawing in by the time he reached his destination, that seedy row of stores in that rundown part of town. He never forgot a location and how to get there, but necessity – and caution – had forced him to double back on himself just in case he was being followed. Milbury knew he could only be heading back to New York now, had probably staked out JFK International and all the main thoroughfares. What Remy needed was time. And distance. None of this would work without distance.

He brought the bike to a halt round the back of the row of buildings, let it purr there softly before finally killing the lights and switching off the engine. He sat there for a minute or so as if waiting for someone, his eyes casually searching the darkness. There was no one there. He glanced down at his watch, which had automatically adjusted to Eastern Standard. He pondered for a moment. Wondered how to approach this. He considered smoking a cigarette, but… time.

At last he swung off the bike and headed over the tarmac to the same old bright red door he remembered. He lifted his first and pounded on it three times, with the rhythm of purpose. An age seemed to pass, and he was beginning to think no one was in when finally that panel drew back and those same blue eyes materialised on the other side.

“St. John.

“I’m guessin’ the password ain’t ‘leech’ no more,” he greeted the young man on the other side soberly. “But I got a better one for you. Like ‘Weapon X’. Or Nathan Milbury. Or even Anna Marie Raven.”

The blue eyes narrowed before disappearing again behind the panel. There was the usual thunk and click of locks being worked before the red door was thrown wide open. St. John was there, looking exactly as Remy remembered him, pompadour and all. He made no greeting, and Remy didn’t expect one. The Australian merely stood aside and gestured for him to step inside with mock civility. Remy did so; he had no time for games or power play. He heard St. John slam the door shut behind him and shout over his shoulder:

“Raven! You better come here! It’s that lunatic Cajun again!”
Remy made no objection to this description of himself – he’d heard far worse before. He waited patiently; there was rustling out back, and when Raven finally appeared there was a sour look on her face.

“You’re supposed to be in Paris,” she addressed him with something like a scowl, and he sniffed, shrugged as though a hundred things weren’t at stake.

“I was,” he agreed. “Until Milbury sent one of his hitwomen after me.”

He’d expected a flash of concern, even just a hint of it, from the steely-eyed woman, but she gave him nothing. Not even a twitch of a muscle.

“You’d better come inside,” she spoke after a moment, before turning and walking away without any other comment. It was an invitation to follow; and so he did.

They walked past a workshop and a storeroom and what appeared to be a communications hub filled with computers and radar screens and an old school radio transceiver that he guessed was in preparation for a hypothetical EMP-induced blackout.

“You shouldn’t’ve come back,” Raven threw at him over her shoulder at one point as they marched deeper into the building. The flippancy of her statement, so assured and disdainful, irritated him.

“Believe me, I woulda stayed in Paris if I could,” he lied coolly. “But the stakes are higher now than they were before I left.”

“Yeah,” St. John piped up sarcastically behind them – until that moment Remy hadn’t even realised he’d followed. “He knows about Weapon X.”

He fancied he saw a slight jerk in Raven’s step at that point, but he could’ve been mistaken.

“St. John,” was the only response she gave, “get back to the comms room and finish off tracking that flight for me. I want a full report when it lands.” A pause. “Now.”

When Remy slid a glance over his shoulder he was amused to see St. John turning back in the opposite direction in an obvious huff.

“You sure trained him well,” he remarked humorously.

“I should hope so,” Raven replied in a deadtone. “I’ve had him since birth.”

He was surprised at that.

“He’s your kid?”

That at least tickled her.

“Ha! No.”

She didn’t elaborate and he didn’t push her. He wasn’t particularly interested in St. John’s backstory anyway. At last she turned off into a side room which appeared to be her office. Unlike the rest of the building it was sleek and minimal, fresh and modern.
“So,” she began in her no-nonsense voice, sitting herself down elegantly at her chrome and glass desk, “Milbury figured out where you were holed up, did he? Well that’s very unfortunate for you, but I don’t see what it’s got to do with me.”

She looked at him standing there in the doorway like she was expecting an answer, and a very good one at that – but he suddenly found he didn’t know exactly where to start with this woman who seemed like she would throw him out on his ear at the least provocation.

“Dis is less about me,” he answered slowly, “and more about Anna.”

Something flashed in her eyes then. She leaned back in her chair and set her mouth in a straight line. After a moment she indicated to the chair opposite her and he sat.

“You said you knew about Weapon X,” she spoke first, as though discussing the weather, or lunch.

“I didn’t,” he rejoined. “St. John did.”

She passed him a withering look, but let it slide. She leaned forward in her chair again and toyed with a fancy pen that looked like it was inlaid with real pearl. His fingers twitched instinctively.

“Do you know what Weapon X is?” she asked curiously.

“Non,” he lifted his shoulders. “And I don’t much care, if I’m honest. What bothers me is dis.” He dug into the inner pocket of his leather jacket and took up the pieces of paper there. He threw them over the table to her and she stared, first down at them, then back at him. Her inherent distrust of him seemed to be so pervasive that she only appeared to overcome it with great effort. She unfolded the papers slowly, as if expecting something hideous to jump out at her.

But whatever she saw when she looked at the files appeared to be far worse. Her eyes widened and her face went even whiter than its usual pale shade. When she stared back up at him there was fire in her eyes.

“Where did you get this?” she asked him hoarsely.

“It was on the woman Milbury sent to kill me,” he answered simply.

Raven took in a long, heavy breath through her nostrils. There was the faintest tremor in her hands as she held Anna’s profile out in front of her. She exhaled noisily.

“You keep calling him Milbury,” she noted quietly, icily. “That isn’t his name. It’s Essex. Nathaniel Essex.” There was a lengthy silence and for a moment her gaze seemed far-away. When she looked over at him again, the hardness was back. “Milbury is a front. It’s the man Essex became to hide from the world.” Her voice lowered to an almost-whisper as she said almost to herself: “And now he knows she’s alive.”

“Oui,” he agreed.

“And he wants to find her.”

He made no reply. He thought it spoke for itself.

She glared at him then with all the rage of a Fury.
“She should never have gotten involved with you!” she spat. He said nothing to that either. A part of him agreed, and another part of him most certainly didn’t.

“Where is she?” he asked her instead.

He didn’t think there could’ve been anymore rancour in her gaze, but there was then.

“You’re not telling me,” she said in a stone-cold tone that would’ve frozen the devil himself to the bone, “that you’re going to go and warn her.”

She was incensed by the mere suggestion of it, and that piqued him. Why not him, after all?

“Figure it’s only fair I return the favour.”

She snorted loudly at that.

“Return the favour?! Don’t give me that bullshit! If Essex really is after the both of you, the best thing you can do is stay well clear of her! And don’t pretend,” she added derisively, “that you don’t have more than just a ‘professional’ interest in her, LeBeau. You couldn’t have been more fucking obvious, the way you were looking at her.”

There were two ways of playing this. Feign ignorance or toss back insolence. He went for the latter.

“The feelin’ was mutual,” he stated with a smirk.

She didn’t rise to the bait. What she actually did was point the pen at him, and he got a genuine fright when a spike shot out the tip of it.

“I know,” she told him with a feral smile. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

She pressed the side of the pen and the spike shot inside again. He sensed that she had thoroughly enjoyed springing this little trick of hers on him. It was a token of one-upmanship that put her back in full control of the conversation again.

“Just tell me where she is,” he asked in a low voice as she placed the pen aside. She glanced at him coolly.

“I don’t know where she is,” she retorted smoothly.

“Great, so I’ll jes’ hack into Milbury – Essex’s – comms and figure out what his best lead on her is,” he threatened through set teeth, and her expression hardened.

“I don’t know where she is,” she echoed frostily. “But I know how you can find out.”

-oOo-

The abandoned railway had to be a century old at least.

Remy trudged through the dirt and gravel towards the decrepit old semaphore signal Raven had directed him to. He paused only to check the directions on his phone. It had to be the right signal, otherwise the entire endeavour would be pointless.

Yup. This was the right one.
Nice, he thought sardonically. Old school.

Super old school. But at least this form of communication couldn’t be hacked.

He climbed the steel stairway up to the platform and hoisted the red arm into an upright position.

Then he climbed back down and left.

When he came back the next day the signal was still up, and the next two days after that there was still no change. On the fourth day he finally arrived to find the arm set back to the down position.

He ascended the stairs and inspected the structure. He found the paper wedged in between the signal arm and its casing. When he unfolded the paper he found there was just a long string of numbers that he instantly recognised as coordinates. He entered them into his phone, which left four numbers unaccounted for on the paper. 1930. He figured that that could only be a time.

With a satisfied grimace Remy stepped down from the platform and headed into the city.

Their meeting place turned out to be only the most populated mall in New York.

At first he couldn’t work out why there were so many people trying to get in until he managed to navigate through the crowds and figured out there was some sort of local band playing in the stage area.

He had to hand it to her. She had everything down to a fine art.

The band’s music wasn’t to his taste, but he faked interest in the performance for several minutes before wandering over to the fountain and scanning the crowd. When that turned up nothing he glanced over at the storefronts.

And there she was. Standing and staring at the window display of some fancy boutique. Tight jeans, hooded jacket, boots. Hair caught back in a tight ponytail. She looked absent, at ease, oblivious to everything except her own little world, her hands planted casually in her jacket pockets.

He hesitated.

He hadn’t seen her in 6 months… had barely known her before that… but he’d spent the entirety of that time remembering her as some idealised version of the person he now saw before him, reconstructing her from imperfect memory as something she wasn’t. The more fevered his fantasies, the more romantic and risqué his memories had become. Seeing her now was an unceremonious yank back down to earth. She was hardly the goddess time and lust had made her out to be, but it was both time and lust that gave the edge to his perception of her now, that gave the nonchalance of her current attitude the promise of softness under all the hard edges he knew she possessed. Because he felt certain that her casualness was a pretence, that she was actually on high alert.

He sidled up to her with exaggerated insouciance, coming up beside her and glancing at the dresses on display. She was looking at a hideous electric blue sequinned number that was being modelled by an impossibly perfect mannequin with a blonde wig.
“You like the dress, chere?” he quizzed her glibly when he got no greeting. She shrugged.

“I like it okay, I guess.”

She actually sounded as if she wasn’t much impressed with it. He pointed out the model at the other end of the display, a slinky, silky sheath dress in forest green, said: “I think that one’d suit you better.”

She glanced over at it with only mild interest.

“You think I’d like it better?” she asked dryly. “Or you’d like the look of me in it better?”

He smirked.

“Both, I hope.”

“Hmm.” She looked amused but said nothing more. There were a few beats of silence during which he wished she’d look at him.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” he noted out loud.

“Raven warned me you might show up.”

“Huh.” He pouted. “So Raven gets your phone number, but I gotta go through all these old school hoops.”

“I’ve known Raven a lot longer than I’ve known you, swamp boy.” There was something more than the forced insouciance she’d bestowed on him so far – a twist of humour, like she enjoyed the idea of making him work for his prize. When she finally turned it was only halfway, a hand hitched up lazily on her hip, her stance now open and relaxed as she appraised him with that familiar sensuous sweep of a gaze. The look was more intimate than he thought she realised, and he found it… gratifying. Promising, at the very least.

“So,” she began lightly, the corner of her mouth caught in a barely there smile, “I take it you didn’t like Paris. Must’ve been pretty shitty for you to come back. We didn’t exactly part on the best of terms.”

He shrugged.

“I liked Paris enough. Till one of the femmes there tried to kill me.”

The smile slipped from her lips, all at once replaced with a troubled frown. She dropped her arm, she straightened. She turned fully to him, saying nothing. Her attention was still on him, but not in the way it had been only moments before, and he allowed himself to feel a cursory disappointment for killing the mood.

“She also had this on her,” he added seriously, taking out the folded pieces of paper and handing them to her.

She opened them up and looked at the top page for about a second or two, then folded the whole thing up again quickly and handed it back. There were no sultry gazes this time. She was good at hiding it, but he was better at reading expressions, and hers was obviously disturbed.

“We should continue this conversation in some place that’s a little less out in the open, don’t you think?” she rejoined in a flat, unreadable tone. She took something out of her pocket and
held it out to him. It was a sat nav. “Wait half an hour before you leave; gimme a head start. I’ll see you there.”

And she pivoted round on one foot and marched right on out.

-oOo-

She was now living in an upscale part of the city, a sweet-looking condominium in Queens that made him wonder just whose identity she was living under now.

The security was pretty full on, but since she’d been expecting him she buzzed him straight through all obstacles in his way. Her apartment was on the second floor from the top. As soon as he got out the elevator he saw her door right there in front of him. To his left was the stairwell. She’d obviously planned her exits in advance.

He walked on over to her door and pressed the bell.

Almost immediately the door swung open and she was there, all jeans and boots and plain black vest, her hair about her shoulders. The look she gave him was like a test… and something more.

“Don’t worry none, chere,” he greeted her lazily. “I wasn’t followed.”

“How do you know?” she asked, and he hitched an eyebrow in a look that said, really?

“Chere, makin’ sure I ain’t followed is just a thing I do.”

She looked sceptical, a reflection of the fact that she didn’t fully trust him, which was fair enough, he supposed. After a second or two sizing him up she jerked her head sideways, wordlessly inviting him in.

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He walked over the threshold and the first thing he got was the whiff of her perfume – that same faint, fruity-flowery scent he couldn’t place. She poked her head out the doorway, looked first one way, then another. Apparently satisfied, she shut the door and breezed on in, right past him and into the little open kitchenette.

“Can I getcha anything?” she asked him in a tone that would’ve been business-like if it wasn’t so breezy. “A drink? A bite to eat?”

There was a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels open on the counter and he stopped, looked at it.

“I’ll have a drink if you don’ mind,” he replied.

She said nothing, turning and opening a cabinet on the wall, taking down two glasses and laying them down on the counter. Every now and then she’d look at him as she fixed their drinks, and he was too polite to look away when she did. He was an expert at reading women, but her expression didn’t read the way most women’s did. It was at least two parts professional interest, at least another two open suspicion… the other six were almost I want you, but not quite.

She dropped her eyes again when the drinks were poured, and he watched on as she screwed the bottle cap back on, picked up the glasses and came back out from behind the counter. When she handed him his whiskey she stood close enough to him to make it seem like a promise, but when her eyes met his again there was still a wariness there.
He took the glass.

He didn’t bother saying thanks, just stared at her, letting her decide which move to make first. It was only when she turned away and headed into the lounge area that he raised the glass to his lips, a small smile on his face. Fine. He could wait.

He swivelled on the spot and watched her walk over to the nearby couch and arrange herself elegantly down on it, taking up the whole thing like it was a divan.

“Take a seat,” she said. There was only one other chair in the room near her, an armchair next to a glass coffee table; but before he went there he chanced grabbing the bottle of JD that was still out on the counter, and when she didn’t stop him he finally sat down. He laid the bottle on the coffee table between them, and for a few beats neither said a thing.

“So,” he finally began, deciding he’d make small talk if he was going to start first, “how’s the leg?”

She looked mildly surprised, as if she’d forgotten all about Graycrow’s shot to her shin.

“Oh. Yeah, it’s fine now.” She lifted her leg, stretched it out, all luxuriant, like she was fishing for compliments, before laying it back down. “Dr. Reyes is the best at what she does. That’s why Raven pays her the big bucks.”

“Hm.” He took a sip of his drink. “Glad to hear it.”

Another few beats of silence. When it threatened to lengthen into something uncomfortable she looked away, knocked back her drink, swung her legs back into a normal sitting position, and reached for the bottle of whiskey.

“So,” she said, pouring herself another glass nonchalantly, “I’m guessing you have some tall tales to tell me about Paris. Sounds like it wasn’t all fun and games after all. And here I was, thinking I was helping you to turn over a new leaf… have a whole new fresh start…”

“Sometimes the past has a way of catchin’ up with you, chere,” he murmured sardonically. Her reply was bitter.

“Ha. That it does.” She settled back in the couch, lifted the glass to her mouth and regarded him a moment. “Lemme guess. Your old boss figured out where you were and got some lovely lady to assassinate you. But what she actually got was your fucked up brand of foreplay.”

A slow smile crossed his face.

“Couldn’t’a put it better myself, chere.”

“And you’re here because…”

“I wanted to warn you.”

Her expression told him she didn’t buy it.

“Cute. But I think you’re resourceful enough to have figured out at least two or three other ways of contacting me remotely if you wanted to.”

He leaned forward in his seat, his expression one of perfectly-pitched seriousness.

“Anna,” he said with an air of honesty that was, ironically, mostly sincere, “you and I got a
li’l problem in common. A big, fat, ugly fly that needs swattin’. I figured we’d have a better chance swattin’ it together.”

“Hm.” She was still playing it casual, but he could see by the slant of her mouth that she was concerned… worried. “That paper you showed me back in the mall… You said this assassin had it on her. You think she would’ve come after me after she’d finished with you?”

He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and swirled the contents of his glass around.

“Either that, or she was part of a team, and there’s someone else out to get you.” He paused. “And she wasn’t alone neither,” he admitted. “Creed was with her. Looks like my ol’ boss brought out the big guns t’ deal wit’ me. Probably he’s doin’ the same wit’ you.”

He lifted his eyes to hers again; her expression was calm.

“Your old boss doesn’t want me dead,” she stated after a moment.

_Hm. Interestin’._

He leaned back into the armchair.

“Really? And you know dis how?”

He was used to parrying, used to playing back and forth with words. But with her he was never quite sure how she was going to play things herself.

“The file that woman had on me,” she began after a moment of reflection, “I take it you read it?” He nodded silently, and she continued soberly: “The reasons he doesn’t want me dead… they’re right on there.”

He’d guessed as much.

“It said you were on some project,” he probed. “Weapon X, or somethin’.”

She nodded.

“What is Weapon X?” he asked her when she said nothing.

“Was,” she corrected him bluntly. She took a long draught of her drink before she next spoke, almost as if to steel herself. “It was a top secret super soldier program.”

“Ha. I thought it was one of those conspiracy nut theories.”

“No,” she answered simply. He looked up at her through his bangs and saw she was completely serious.

“And you were a part of it,” he stated the obvious, and she nodded.

“Yes.”

“And Raven too?”

A pause.

“Yes.”
“Pretty cute you’re still in touch.”

She blinked.

“We shared a name,” she replied in a deadpan. “It was… a commonality we had between us. She took me under her wing. That didn’t stop after the project wound down.”

Beneath her words he sensed a very strong emotion that she found painful to display. And while it wasn’t his intention to distress her, his curiosity had got the better of him and since she seemed willing enough to answer his questions, he continued.

“You joined the project young,” he observed.

“My parents died when I was a kid.”

“And they tried to make you into one of those super soldiers.”

“That’d explain my combat skills, wouldn’t it.”

“And Milbury – or Essex, right? – was working on the project too.”

“As its head scientist.”

“And somethin’ went really bad and the project was wound up real quick.”

“Pretty damn good for a guess.” Her eyes were stony, her mouth hard. “Anythin’ else you wanna ask me about myself, Cajun?”

His questions had ticked her off – he suspected he was one of an extremely small club that knew this much about her. And yet she’d answered every single one of his questions, clearly, frankly. Telling him exactly enough to tell him nothing at all.

“I don’t wanna piss you off, chere,” he told her quietly. “But there’s a reason I wanted to know all that. Call it professional curiosity or whatever.” He downed the rest of his drink, waiting for her to bite. When she didn’t he poured himself another. “You should know, chere. Milbury – Essex – he asked me to make a deal with him. You, for a very early retirement and an extremely generous pension.”

She didn’t blink, didn’t squirm. But the glass of whiskey slowly lowered in her hand.

“And you said?” she prompted him in a low, stiff voice.

He shrugged.

“No.”

“And why would you say that?”

“For a whole mess o’ reasons. First, Essex has done a pretty good job of tryin’ to murder me, which I happen t’ take exception to. Second, I don’t care much for bein’ blackmailed, not even if it’s to keep my own life. Third, I happen to have some good leverage on Essex. Fourth…” he leaned back in his chair and smirked at her, “fourth is personal, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

Her eyes flickered. He thought he’d given her enough to trust him, for now. He knew she could appreciate the fact that he had to hold something back from her. In their line of business, laying all your cards on the table was a fool’s game. So he wasn’t surprised when she sidestepped
the issue and let him have his secrets.

“You said you had some pretty good leverage on Essex,” she began after a moment. “Care to share?”

He figured it was safe to oblige her. He laid his glass down on the coffee table and reached inside the inner pocket of his jacket. He pulled out the small, ribbed metallic box and slid it onto the table between them. At the sight of it her eyes went wide and instinctively she reached out for it. She was faster than he’d anticipated, because when he went to slide it back towards him her hand was already on it, and he ended up grasping that instead – not an unhappy accident under the circumstances.

“Nuh-uh, chere,” he murmured softly. “This here is security. You may be number one on Essex’s shoppin’ list, but this here mem-chip ain’t that far down below.” She glared at him, defiant, unsurprised. His lips jerked into that familiar, cocksure smile. “But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Her gaze wavered; under his palm, her hand twitched, ever so slightly, reminding him of the intimacy of their touch. Reluctantly he pulled back his grasp, his thumb brushing over her knuckles almost subconsciously. For a few split seconds she didn’t move her hand at all, and he almost thought she’d pocket the thing, before her fingers finally slid off the box. She didn’t take her hand back though, and he looked at it, laid out on the glass table only a few inches away from his prize, like she was getting ready to grab it back again. He tested her. Made no move to take it back. Silently dared her to make a play for it.

“Essex didn’t just ask you to steal Trask’s mem-chip,” she surmised quietly instead. “There were others.”

He cocked his head to one side, regarded her with a knowing look. She knew more than she was letting on, much more. That intrigued him.

“Somethin’ tells me,” he said softly, “that you and I are gon’ haveta do some secret-sharin’ at some point, chere.”

He was surprised and a little interested to see that it was only at that point that she finally drew her hand back. She made no overt acknowledgement of his comment, but something like it moved across her eyes. Instead she stood up and looked down at him.

“You got a place to stay for the night?”

“Is that an invitation?” If it was, he didn’t want to tell her about the motel downtown.

“Ha. Probably not what you’re imagining.” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “The spare room’s down the hallway. You wanna crash for the night, you’re welcome to stay.”

She picked up the empty glasses and headed back to the kitchen. He followed her with his eyes, reaching out for the mem-chip case on the table and slowly sliding it back towards him. She was invested. Invested enough to keep him – and all the cards he held – within arm’s reach at least. She didn’t need to say it. *Keep an ally close. Keep a potential enemy even closer.* Tomorrow she’d tell her side of the story. When and if she was ready.

He pocketed the box and rose to his feet.

He headed for the guest room and thought about how to play tomorrow.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Remy and Anna make a deal... or come to an understanding.

The ‘spare room’ turned out to be a barely furnished space that seemed to be serving as a temporary storeroom. There were boxes piled up neatly against one corner that had never been opened. Slung over these were various expensive-looking clothes with the labels still attached. Unworn shoes lined one wall; a bed had been unceremoniously shoved up against another. There was no cover on it, but he wasn’t particularly bothered. The place seemed luxurious after the motel he’d been staying in, and so he flung himself down on the mattress and slept.

When he awoke the next morning he was momentarily confused as to where he was; it took a moment or two for the previous day to come flooding back.

He got up, went to the window, opened it up, and smoked a cigarette. When that was finished he went out into the hallway and headed for the lounge.

Anna was already there, sitting on the sofa sipping thoughtfully at a steaming mug of coffee, dressed in casual slacks and a sheer, pale green blouse, her hair done up in a messy ponytail. The angle of her neck was bare to him, a few loose curls hugging at the nape, and he had the sudden urge to put his lips right there and taste her, an urge that was dispelled as soon as she looked up at his approach.

“There’s coffee in the kitchen,” she said.

He noted the pointed neutrality of her tone, a level of control that gave the lie to her insouciance. He didn’t comment on it though, and headed for the kitchenette, pouring himself a cup of coffee and positioning himself in the armchair he’d occupied the night before. He sat there and waited for her to begin.

“You sleep well?” she asked him. He shrugged.

“Pretty good. You?”

“I’ve slept better,” she replied quietly. She took a sip of her coffee before adding, “You were right when you said sometimes our past comes back to catch us. When you showed me that file back in the mall last night, it caught up with me and then some. Everything that came after… well, that was just the icing on the shit cake.”

She wasn’t expecting sympathy from him and he didn’t give it.

“You got that mem-chip you showed me last night?” she quizzed him.

His only answer was to take it back out of his pocket and lay it back on the table between them. When she looked at it, there was only one word to describe it. Voracious. But she still didn’t make a move for it.

“Whose is it?” she asked. He’d been prepared for her questions, but this wasn’t the one
he’d been expecting.

“Shingen Yashida’s,” he replied. He figured maybe she’d known that already, but when he saw the expression on her face he knew that she hadn’t. Instead she weighed up his statement. Shingen Yashida, head of the Yashida Energy zaibatsu that powered half the world. He could tell from the furrow in her brow and the length of her silence that it was not a name she’d been expecting. After a moment she looked up at him.

“And Essex asked you to steal three others.”

It was a statement, and yet again he wondered just how much she knew.

“Tha’s right.”

“Whose?”

He shrugged.

“I dunno. Essex was obviously of the opinion that that information was only to be given out on a strictly need-to-know basis. Probably a form of security on his part. Didn’t want me pokin’ round in his bus’ness. Can’t say I blame him.” He nodded at the case on the table. “He only gave me the details of two marks – Trask and Yashida. Yashida’s was the first one I got.”

“Right,” she interjected slowly. “Because getting Trask’s was all a question of timing. The safest time to get it would be the annual gala. The perfect distraction – if you could just figure out how to get into that safe.”

“S’right,” he nodded with an appreciative smile. “Figured it made more sense to head over to Tokyo and grab Yashida’s first.”

Her gaze moved to his warily.

“Why didn’t you deliver Yashida’s?” Her tone was suspicious, but that didn’t concern him.

“Let’s just say it was too hot.” She looked confused and so he continued to explain ruefully: “I underestimated Yashida. When I got to his Tokyo Headquarters, he was waitin’ for me. Looks like he was expectin’ Essex to send someone knockin’. ” He mused a moment. “I found that… interestin’. It gave me some questions to chew on while I was busy gettin’ beaten t’ a pulp in his basement leastways. Like, how come old man Yashida’s keepin’ tabs on Milbury? And what’s so important about a fuckin’ mem-chip anyways?” He paused, not entirely for dramatic effect. These were still valid questions.

“Go on,” she prompted him softly.

He didn’t, not immediately. He took a sip of his coffee and ruminated on those five days of blood, sweat and tears with a sense that he was better than being caught red-handed. The knowledge of his almost-failure irritated him.

“By the third day it was pretty clear Essex wasn’t gon’ bring in the cavalry to bust me out,” he continued his story sullenly. “So I figured out how to make my own escape. Stole Yashida’s mem-chip on the way out, just to leave him somethin’ to remember me by.”

“And you managed to get it past airport security how?” Anna queried sceptically.

“Yashida Energy practically owns Narita. His cronies would’ve been on you like a tonne of bricks
He grinned, distinctly pleased with himself about the next part.

“Yeah. That’s why I fed-exed it to myself before I left.”

She stared at him as if the very idea of letting the chip out of his sight offended her.

“Jesus,” she muttered; but he refused to let her disapproval damp his spirits.

“So when I got off the plane back at JFK, I had less than a day t’ figure out what I was gonna do. Trask’s gala was the followin’ evening, and I needed to work out how to crack a safe that had the tightest security known to humanity. Figured I’d go to the bar and drown my sorrows instead.” He looked over at her and gave her a lop-sided smile. “That’s when you showed up.”

“And presented an out?”

“And presented an out.”

And maybe a li’l bit more, he added cryptically to himself.

She looked aside, mulling on his story.

“I see,” she reasoned slowly. “That’s why you went dark after the Trask heist. Yashida was still pissed with you for stealing his chip and his men were still trying to track you. You disappeared… needed to lay low for a while.”

He nodded.

“S’right.”

She glanced back over at him sharply.

“So how come,” she asked him with just a hint of suspicion, “you never delivered Yashida’s mem-chip to Essex?”

She was still mistrustful of him. That was fine. Understandable, considering her line of work, both past and present.

“Chere,” he explained dourly, “a thief always keeps back a form of security, until he’s sure he can finish a job. Milbury… Essex… he ain’t exactly the easiest guy to work for. He don’t take kindly to shoddy work and missin’ deadlines – but I figure you know that.”

Her eyes flashed, just once – enough to tell him he was on the mark.

“Essex didn’t know I had Yashida’s chip,” he finished in a low tone. “But I’d haveta give it up to him pretty soon. I admit – I wanted to know what was on it. That li’l thing was important to Yashida. You ever been put through Japanese torture methods, chere? Dat’s how important it was to him.” He grimaced. “I was gonna get it copied, keep it as a bargainin’ chip in case I ever needed some leverage against Essex. But b’fore I could you showed up and dragged me on that wild goose chase round the old asylum instead. After that, bargainin’ chips became a pretty moot point.”

She winced.

“I’m sorry ’bout that. Sorry about Paris too… It was supposed to be a fresh start…”
He smiled mirthlessly. “Yeah, well, don’t beat yourself up about it too much. Paris weren’t all that, to be honest.”

“Still,” she sighed. “It was supposed to be my way of making it up for being a shit to you.” She paused and glanced down at the mem-chip case on the table. “Is it okay if I take a look at it?”

He opened up his palm with a gesture of be my guest, although he couldn’t help adding humorously, “You ain’t gon’ steal it out from under my nose again, are you, chere?”

“Hey, I’m just checking to make sure it hasn’t been damaged in transit,” she replied a little too defensively as she flipped open the case with an expert flick of the wrist and thumbed out the tiny square inside. There was no sign of the voracity he’d seen in her the first time she’d laid eyes on it. Her handling of it now was of completely calm professionalism.

“Looks all good to me,” she finally pronounced. There was a moment he thought she’d pocket it, but, in an exercise in trust, she handed it over to him with perhaps a tinge of hesitation. He didn’t put it away. Instead he leaned over and put it right back on the glass coffee table, making sure she appreciated the most important thing right now, which was that they both had equal stakes in it.

“I take it you ‘faced with Trask’s mem-chip,” he spoke expectantly. She gave him a look, before standing abruptly and marching into her bedroom. A minute or so later she re-emerged with a thin mem-chip case in her hand. She walked over, opened it up, thumbed out the chip, and set it neatly next to its partner on the table.

Together they sat there, staring down at the small gold chips on the table.

“They’re part of a secret share,” she finally told him in a soft voice. He looked over at her.

“What kind of secret?”

“A code, I think. Trask’s chip held a part of it. The others each hold a piece of the rest.”

Her hands were on her knees, almost self-consciously posed. She was still looking down at the chips intently.

“So… Five chips altogether…” he conjectured. “We find the other three, we figure out the secret Essex is hidin’…”

“Not five altogether,” she told him quickly. “Six.” She looked over at him grimly. “Essex has one.”

He stared at her.

“What exactly was in Trask’s memory?”

She lifted her shoulders, but with frustration rather than indifference.

“Hard to say really… It was all fucked up… Choppy… Unfocused.” She paused and chewed on her bottom lip. “He was either traumatised, or drunk, or full of tranquillisers when he recorded it. Probably a bit of all of the above.”

He frowned. This didn’t explain very much. She saw his expression and continued matter-of-factly: “He was at a board meeting. There were five other people there. Essex was one of them. Something… terrible had happened. They were arguing over what to do about this crisis, I think… And Trask had made an unexpected move. Whatever it was that had caused this crisis, he’d
shut it down. But... it was like it was too precious for him to destroy completely. Whatever it was, it could be started back up again with a code. Everyone had a piece of the code – no one knew what the others’ piece was. He told them to record it. On mem-chips."

He nodded slowly.

“And one of those other people was Yashida,” he concluded. “And another Essex... What about the other three?”

She frowned and shook her head, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I couldn’t exactly see... at least one woman was there, I think…”

“And you think these people were working on the Weapon X project?” he quizzed her. She dropped her hand and darted him a look.

“Yes,” she replied, as if surprised that he should intuit such a thing,

“Hm.” He mulled over it a while. Something was at last making sense. Not much, but something. Obviously Essex was trying to get this code... But what could be hiding behind that code? A safe? A computer program? A weapon? Whatever it was he got the distinct impression that Anna had some suspicions as to what it could be.

He remembered what Creed had said. *The woman is worth more to him than you.* He didn’t believe for a second that Essex actually wanted him dead, but the implication was there. If Essex had to make a choice, he’d take the woman over Remy himself whichever way he sliced things. It made him wonder about the nature of Weapon X, about his own perceived uniqueness in Essex’s present outfit. More than anything it made him wonder about her.

“What do you know about the head honchos who actually ran Weapon X?” he asked thoughtfully, deciding not to question her directly.

“Yeah, I was thinkin’ about that,” she answered with a wry smile. “Everyone knew Trask was heading it up. And I... I ran into Essex quite a bit when I was on the project. But I wasn’t high up or important enough to know anyone who pulled any weight there. Apart from Raven,” she added. “But Raven worked security, and anything she knew was on a strictly need-to-know basis.”

There was definitely a story there, and he was careful not to push it.

“Seems ’me,” he reasoned out slowly, “that Trask must’a shut down this thing for a reason. Whatever caused this ‘crisis’ in Weapon X, whatever that code is hidin’... It can’t be anythin’ good. So the obvious thing is to make sure Essex never gets the code.” He leaned over, took a hold of the mem-chips lying side by side on the table. “Best way to make sure o’that, chere? We destroy these babies.”

He began to stand, but he’d barely got up an inch when her hand snapped over his right wrist and stopped him short.

“No,” she said.

He stopped, he stared. She met his gaze, unflinching. And he sank back down into his seat slowly, a long, silent breath leaving his mouth.

“You know what these codes are protectin’,” he voiced what he had guessed all along.
She still didn’t flinch. But she was forced to concede a nod.

“Yes.”

“And you want whatever’s on these mem-chips because…?”

She blinked then, and he almost wondered whether he’d pushed her a little too far.

“The why ain’t important, Remy LeBeau,” she answered at last.

“Then what is?”

Green eyes fixed on his, warm and sultry yet steely as all hell.

“What matters, Cajun,” she murmured, “is that I know a thief who can get the rest of these mem-chips – and whatever’s on them – for me.”

-oOo-

*What’s in it for me?* he’d asked her.

It was the first thing that had left his mouth, without missing a beat, without batting an eyelid.

And *sure*, there was always a price to be paid, but she was bidding against Essex for his services now, and she knew exactly what kind of resources were available to the man. They were resources she couldn’t hope to match. A part of her wished she’d stolen the diamond back in Trask’s safe.

_Name your price_, she was forced to say, bold and confident and utterly hollow – she knew he knew it.

And he _looked_ at her. Just looked at her with this wolfish kind of hunger. Not a leer – not anything so crude or suggestive. Just the needful stare of a lonely man who’d spent a lifetime quenching desires and was now faced with one he didn’t quite know how to sate.

Anna stood under the showerhead and let the hot water cascade over her.

It was a look that had opened up some 5 year’s worth of untapped _need_ and even now she was still replaying it in her mind.

Still… she knew one thing. Her body was about the only thing she possessed that Essex couldn’t give him, and she was willing to trade in it if she had to. Such things didn’t much matter to her anymore.

She had expected him to want it, to ask for it… But just as her own certainty had convinced her, the look had dropped abruptly from his face.

_Don’t worry about prices, chere_, he’d said in a low voice. _I do dis for you for free._

And he’d turned aside.

_Why?_ she’d asked, astonished.

_Because_, he’d answered flatly, _reasons._
If she’d doubted before, she didn’t then. He was hiding something from her, just like she
was hiding something from him. The question was, how much was each of them willing to trust the
other in order to get what they wanted?

Anna grimaced and switched off the faucet. Yet another headache was tickling at the
edges of her consciousness, and she stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel round herself and
heading for the medicine cabinet. She opened it up and stared at the pill bottles inside. She couldn’t
even get them straight anymore. She grabbed one and swallowed two pills whole.

The thief was exciting, a taste of a life she’d thought she’d never want back. She hadn’t
lied when she’d told Raven that. But there were other things he’d awakened in her, things that
Raven definitely didn’t need to know. Frustrations, desires that she barely knew she had. Things
she’d buried deep, along with all the demons that haunted her – the shadows her mind had accrued
over a million mem-trips, the sad little girl who stood in the field and stared at the sunflower and sat
in the chair with the screws in her brain…

Anna closed her eyes and leant against the sink.

If she could just switch off, for just a second… If she could just turn back the clocks,
rewind time… If she could just feel like herself again…

But she couldn’t even remember what ‘herself’ felt like anymore.

Did she really care whether Essex wanted her back? Whether he was planning all the bad
things she knew he was capable of? Whether Remy knew what he now knew about her, whether he
suspected more?

She frowned.

The Cajun was more perceptive than she’d first thought. That bothered her, especially
when he knew what he knew about her now.

Anna exited the bathroom and threw on some clothes. The thief was gone, off to
wherever it was he was staying to grab his stuff and then head back on over to hers. She had a few
precious minutes to gather herself, to assess the current situation. She went over to the mem-chips
still lying on the coffee table and chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip.

She knew the Cajun knew. Knew that he’d guessed that she had a personal stake in
whatever memories those chips held. That galled her, but she didn’t have much of a choice. As long
as he stayed close… close enough for her to keep an eye on him… to make sure he was playing
fair… …

As if on cue the doorbell rang and she walked on over to let him in. All he had was a
black duffel bag of belongings, and perhaps she should’ve been surprised he travelled so light, but
then him being a thief and an ex-operative of Essex, she found she wasn’t.

He stepped right on in without a word and dumped his bag next to the couch before
turning and looking at her expectantly.

“A’right,” he said. “I’m all yours. So what’s our first move?”

Despite the flippancy of his words there was an intimacy to them that made her stomach
churn. She closed the front door quietly.

“Come with me,” she said. “There’s somethin’ I want to show you.”
She led him into her bedroom. As soon as he saw the interfacing kit she had set up there he let out a long, low, appreciative whistle. This time she didn’t bother suppressing her smile. His reaction pleased her, as if he’d complimented her hair, or her clothes.

“It’s state of the art,” she offered modestly.

He glanced over at her with raised eyebrows.

“Must be worth several hundred K at least. I ain’t gon’ ask where the fuck you got this kit from, ‘cos I know it can’t be legit.” He smirked, mostly to himself. She let him walk up to the interfacing machine and take a look. The sleek gunmetal casing, the slim line visor, the economical Chinese design. She was pleased enough with his apparent interest that she didn’t protest when he touched the unit.

“I’m guessin’ you didn’t just bring me in here to admire your ill-gotten gains,” he commented, looking over at her with a sarcastic smile. “And I’m guessin’ we ain’t in your bedroom for fun and games neither.”

She feigned irritation and blew a few stray white locks of hair out of her face.

“Sorry to disappoint, but this is strictly business. What you call ‘ill-gotten gains’ actually presents us with the easiest way of figuring out who Essex and Trask’s associates were.”

He straightened.

“Yeah. Not to mention which, you ‘face with Yashida’s chip and you’ll get his part of the code,” he pointed out.

“It’s not the code that matters so much to me,” she replied cryptically, knowing it suggested a kernel of information – enough to keep him curious at least. “As far as the codes are concerned, we don’t ever want them to get out.”

She exited the bedroom, him following close behind.

“You seem pretty sure of that.”

“I am sure of that. You got a problem?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t make no difference t’ me.” He eyed her up curiously. “You’re assumin’ Yashida will give away who his associates actually are.”

“Well, it’s the first natural place to search for clues.” She went and picked up the mem-chip from the table before thinking of something and coming to a halt. “You mind if I take this?” she asked him.

His eyebrow lifted.

“Why should I?”

“We have equal stakes in this, remember? Yashida’s is yours; Trask’s is mine. You mind if I use it?”

It was another carefully played-out civility. He smiled and opened out his hands neutrally.
“By all means.”

She grinned and walked back into her bedroom with the chip. Remy followed her into the doorway and stopped, watching her as she turned on the interfacer.

“What?” she asked him as she busied herself calibrating the machine, making sure the latest software was installed.

“Nothin’.” He was still standing there, leaning against the doorframe, assessing her with his eyes. “Jes’ like t’ see a professional at work, is all.”

She rolled her eyes at him and grabbed the visor off the top of the machine. Then she slid into the reclining seat and stretched herself out a little too luxuriantly, her gaze flickering up to his as she did so.

“You gonna sit and watch?” she asked him teasingly. “Could get boring.”

“Chere, I doubt watchin’ you could ever get borin’.”

His tone was soft and too honest for her liking. She dropped her gaze and slotted Yashida’s mem-chip into the visor – it gave an audible click.

“She’s staring at herself in the mirror, observing the lines on her face with a cool detachment. She washes her hands and looks at the water running down the drain.

She thinks something to herself in Japanese which of course she doesn’t understand apart from basic conversational stuff, and his thoughts are too quick for her to pick apart.

But she senses relief. He is relieved that things have turned out the way they have.

He turns aside and walks over to the hand towel dispenser. He pulls on it with a clunk and as he does so he hears someone enter. He looks in the mirror and sees it’s Essex. He knows he hasn’t come to relieve himself. He turns calmly and greets the taller man with his usual oriental deference.

“Essex-san,” he says with a short inclination of the head.

“Trask,” Nathaniel says without any attempt at the normal pleasantries, “has lost his mind.”

He makes no reply at first. He knows Nathaniel’s true colours. They had reared their ugly head in the meeting, when he had attacked Trask. But now he is calm – too calm. He neither likes nor trusts the scientist, much as he admires his brilliance.

“Yes,” he answers at last, decidedly. “But perhaps his foolish actions are just as well. The project has failed. The technology is useless. I have wasted much capital funding this venture. It is best to, as you say, ‘quit while I am ahead’.”

“Or to run while you still have something left to salvage,” Essex sneers.

“Yes,” he concedes.
“But the technology did not fail!” Essex suddenly hisses. “It worked!”

“In a small handful of cases out of hundreds,” he reminds the other man. “It is not possible to market it as a usable product. In 99.9% of all cases its effects are dangerous, in half of those fatal. Trask was correct in his assessment.”

Essex scoffs loudly.

“He has allowed his sentimentality to cloud his judgement! A year’s more work and we would have had the answer!”

“I think not. Forgive me, Essex-san, but I have been considering cutting off funding for this venture for several months now. Trask’s actions have simply made the decision for me. There were too few returns for the amount I was putting in. And I suspect the Madripoor contingent feels the same. They would have backed out eventually, I fear. At least,” he adds with unflappable politeness, “the technology is safe. If at some point in the future our understanding of how the human mind works improves… if we understand better how the technology affects it… then we have the means to resume the project. For now…” and he bowed slightly, “you will excuse me.”

The memory cuts out.

When it begins again he is in the back of his limo, heading to the airport. He switches on the earpiece and stares at the lights of the city speeding past his window.


-oOo-
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Anna and Remy have a moment, and he reveals what he's been hiding from her all along.

Anna lifted the visor off and ejected Yashida's mem-chip with a shaky hand. She had expected Remy to still be standing in the doorway but he wasn’t there and the door was shut. She could hear him on the other side though, talking to someone.

That didn’t seem like a good thing and she frowned; but she had other things to attend to. Like the fact that she could feel a bout of the shakes coming on strong. So she took his absence as a blessing and headed into the bathroom. She opened up the medicine cabinet and took down the orange bottle. There weren’t many pills left in there and she swore to herself. It looked like another round of begging Dr. Braddock to repeat her prescription.

She shook out two of the pills and swallowed them whole.

Two minutes later and the feeling had passed.

When she went back into the lounge, Remy was just slipping his phone back into his pocket.

“Who was that?” she asked him.

“Jes’ some femme I forgot I gave my number to,” he explained as if it was the kind of call he got every day of the week. “Must’a been drunk.”

“You were talking to her an awful long time,” she remarked suspiciously as she watched him turn and head for the kitchen.

“Yeah, well… Some femmes find it hard to take no for an answer.” He looked irritatingly unconcerned as he pulled down a glass from her cabinet and poured himself a glass of water, entirely as if he owned the place. “Must’a hurt your pride and then some, sugah, when you left me your card and I didn’t call.”

He looked at her, drank a mouthful of water without once taking his eyes off of her. It was the most reaction she got out of laying her all-Southern accent on him.

“But you did call, chere,” he countered, putting the glass back down on the counter.

“I’m guessing being chased by your psychopathic former buddies wasn’t what you had in mind.”

His grin would’ve been annoying if it wasn’t so darned cute.
“I dunno. I actually thought it was kinda fun. I’m all for a bit for foreplay. S’just a shame Graycrow had t’come and shoot you in the leg. After that, the night I had in mind was pretty much outta the window.”

He drank again, but his eyes were still on hers, like he was expecting, wanting her to get pissed off with him. She refused to give him the benefit.

“So you’re some sorta insane masochist, huh?” She sidled up to the counter with a nefarious little grin on her lips. “Lucky for you I’m your client now. You’ve got to do everything I order you to.”

She fixed her gaze on his meaningfully and he raised an eyebrow.

“Why do I get the feeling when you say ‘order’ that actually means you got some intel from Yashida’s mem’ries for me to work on? As opposed to the ‘get down on your knees and let me whip you into submission’ variety?”

She pouted, half put out that he’d swung so fast from open flirtation back to business.

“Ooo, look at you going ahead and changing the subject now.”

“Hey, you were the one going all ‘client privilege’ on me just a second ago.”

“Hm.” She ran a finger over the edge of the bar, wondering not for the first time just what she was going to end up paying this man. She didn’t believe for a second that anything he was doing for her was for free. “Tell me,” she spoke, finally deciding to turn to business after all, “what d’you know about Madripoor?”

He drained the rest of his glass, regarding her closely as he did so.

“Madripoor? Did you pick up somethin’ about it from Yashida’s mem’ries?”

She thought it was self-evident so she made no reply. He set down his glass slowly.

“Madripoor’s a small south-eastern principality on the Malacca Strait. An old Eastern European colony, back when they had them. I done some bus’ness there a year or two ago. Why?”

She shrugged.

“In his memory, Yashida talked about being Essex’s financial backer. And he mentioned a ‘Madripoor contingent’. I was thinking that that someone may be one of the 6 founders of Weapon X and…”

He was chuckling softly as she said the words and she stopped, glaring at him indignantly.

“What?”

He straightened his face and cleared his throat.

“Chere, most of Madripoor – not to mention all its assets – belong to the country’s ruling family. Well, what’s left of their ruling family anyways, since most of them got assassinated or died from ‘undetermined causes’. And as far as I know, there’s only one member left…”

“Lady Ophelia Sarkissian,” she cut in.

“Yeah.” He smiled his usual lopsided smile. “Great legs. Even greater ass. A little bit too
much into bondage for my taste though.”

The look she gave him was withering.

“I hope you robbed her blind.”

He laughed again.

“Nothin’ but, chere. Once I’d settled bus’ness with her, o’ course. So. Do I gotta steal her mem-chip then? ‘Cos it’d be a nice excuse to go reacquaint myself wit’ the femme, dontcha think?”

She wasn’t quite sure whether he was teasing her or being serious. She thought maybe it was a little bit of both.

“What I think, Remy LeBeau,” she murmured silkily, before walking away, “is that you’re trying way too hard to get under my skin.”

“And is it working?”

“You wish,” she threw over her shoulder at him, only to stop short when she remembered something. “Oh. Wait.” She turned and sidled right back over to him, getting as up close and personal as she could without him misreading the fact that she was now entirely serious. She squared up to him like she was about to challenge him to a duel… Or pull him down into a passionate kiss. Despite years of practice reading women he suddenly wasn’t quite sure. “I forgot something,” she murmured.

He watched curiously as she dipped a hand into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out Yashida’s chip.

“Thanks for the share, Cajun,” she said. She hooked the front pocket of his shirt with a forefinger and dropped the chip in. “And just so you’re sure… I didn’t swap it out this time.”

Reason told her that she should step back and turn away at that point… but instead she lingered there perhaps a moment too long, her palm pressing up against the hard plane of his chest, the warmth of his body tugging at the horrible loneliness of her self-imposed exile.

For a heartbeat, maybe two, they held one another’s gaze, until his eyes dropped to her mouth… And almost at once they were kissing, as greedy and insistent as that night in his hotel room, as if hardly a moment had passed between then and now, as if everything else between had been nothing more than a distraction. She was dimly aware at the back of her mind that they’d both been working their way towards this, that every parry they’d calculated and every move they’d made had been nothing but a prelude to this… and that disturbed her somehow. More than the fact that she was kissing him back as greedily as he was kissing her.

She pulled back slightly, breathing hard, wondering at the loss of control he inspired in her, the buried desires he so easily unearthed. He didn’t leave her a moment more to analyse it. In a trice he had chased down what she had so unceremoniously taken away, catching her open mouth again with his own, the pressure of his hand cradling the back of her neck, drawing her closer as if he feared she would deny him again.

She gave up all pretence of resistance.

His tongue brushed against hers and she whimpered, her hands moving to cradle his cheeks, to run her fingers over the tactile texture of his stubble, to press herself harder into his kiss.
The truth was, it was years, _years_ since she’d last felt like this. Years since any man had incited her to this kind of driving hunger. Years since she’d wanted anyone this badly.

She heard the clatter of him sweeping away random objects from the kitchen counter and the next moment he’d cupped her backside, hoisting her up into the now clear space in an effortless display of strength and poise. The movement forced a gasp out of her, breaking their kiss – he looked up at her and she looked down at him. For several moments there was nothing but the sound of their breathing. When he leaned forward to kiss her again it was only to tease her lips with butterfly kisses that were designed to drive her precisely to madness. She tried to chase them, desperate to seek deeper contact, but he evaded her every move with expert ease, and when she caught his face to keep him still she heard him laugh, a low, sexy laugh in that whiskey-and-molasses voice of his.

The fact that he was actually teasing her at this crucial juncture of sweet submission was something she rarely experienced with men but at this moment she found it to be an incredible turn on. She wasn’t going to let his little ruse go unpunished, not for a second. Fixing him with a stare that was all at once defiant and sultry, she slowly wrapped her legs round his waist and worked herself right up against him.

It had the desired effect. A hot breath blasted from between his lips; the sound he made was strangled. She bit her lip, showing him a feral smile, and his eyes flickered, conceding her the point. He moved forward and gave her what she wanted – and as they kissed again she felt his hands on her blouse, unbuttoning it with a practiced pace. In a few seconds the garment was undone, and he pushed the sheer material off of her shoulders impatiently, his mouth leaving her own to make a searing trail over the length of her jaw and the column of her neck. She drew in a shaky sigh, shrugging off the rest of her shirt and rubbing her cheek in his hair as his right hand slid over the smooth expanse of her stomach and waist before moving up to cup her breast through the simple cotton of her bra, his thumb teasing her nipple to attention.

She opened her mouth and moaned, getting a breathful of his shampoo, of his aftershave.

She didn’t know him. Didn’t trust him. Didn’t believe for a second that this wasn’t all just part of some game to him. But she wanted him, even after all this time and after everything that had happened.

She struggled with the need to separate this feeling off into its own little box, to stuff it away in some inner closet before it burgeoned out of control and gobbled her up. But goddammit she needed this. She needed it so bad. She needed to feel this alive again.

Following her instincts and casting all doubts aside, Anna reached downward and fumbled at his flies.

But there was something wrong with her fingers, and she could barely coordinate a movement in them to get the first button undone.

Confused, she looked down between them and saw that her hands were shaking. Violently.

All at once her body was seizing up and the tremors were taking over.

_Shit!_

She shoved him aside and jumped down from the counter, landing unsteadily before
running to her room.

“Anna!” she heard him call behind her breathlessly. “Anna, what th’ fuck…?”

She ignored him, storming into the en suite and leaning heavily on the sink to gain some purchase – mostly on herself. The tremors were coming hard and fast and she looked up at her reflection, pressing her lips together so hard in an effort to contain herself that they went white.

And then Remy was there. His gaze sweeping over her with a touch that scorched like flame.

“Anna, what the fuck…?” He stopped mid-sentence, and she could feel his eyes on her, and it was almost more than she could bear, for him to see her like this.

“No fucking shit!”

His statement was so offensively self-evident that it infuriated her. Her ataxia was increasing rapidly, but she needed her pills. She needed them now. And she wasn’t going to ask him to get them for her.

There was a jumpstart in her brain and for a minute she was Shingen Yashida sitting in the back of his limo calmly reading the Asahi Shimbun and then the next she was reaching up and opening the medicine cabinet in a fast, jerky movement. The bottle was there but she couldn’t aim for it. She just dove her hand right on in, knocking over almost everything on the shelf. She concentrated hard and somehow her fist closed over the bottle, and…

Another jumpstart and she was Bolivar Trask, looking round the faces at the conference table, whilst the woman with the dark hair and the Eastern European accent says, “Then what do we do with the ones who were a success? Do we just let them wander back into society as if nothing ever happened?”, and then she was looking down at her shaking hand as she popped open the lid and shook out one, two of the pink pills into her trembling palm; then three and four. She shoved them into her mouth and swallowed hard. When she moved to shake out two more of the tablets, that was when she felt Remy’s hand close over her own, stopping her.

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled at him, but he didn’t stop, he calmly worked the bottle out of her vicelike grip and set it aside.

“OD’ing on those ain’t gonna do a fuckin’ thing,” he told her evenly. “Lemme help you. I seen dis before.”

“The fuck you have…” she seethed at him, another wave taking her and why weren’t the fucking pills starting to kick in and—

And he moved behind her and put his right palm on her bare back, between her shoulder blades.

“Put your weight on me,” he instructed quietly. She was almost beside herself, tears of rage and embarrassment working out of her eyes involuntarily.

“Please get out, please just go…” she moaned, but he didn’t listen, he reached around her and placed his left hand on her forehead, pushing her head back towards him gently while simultaneously pushing her away with his right. The pressure of his hands immediately had a steadying effect, and while it didn’t take away the pain of the tremors, it eased her body into a
position that could deal with them better.

“Jes’ lemme take your weight, chere,” he murmured softly; she could feel the heat of his breath on the back of her neck. “Don’ be afraid of fallin’ – let your legs go if you haveta. I got you.”

She struggled with the urge to trust him – him, this man she had trusted enough to share the closest possible intimacy just a few minutes ago, but who she didn’t, couldn’t, trust with this. No one else was ever supposed to see her like this, in this horrible, all-consuming pain. But his touch was so soothing, so insistent, that she couldn’t help herself from sinking into it. She was relieved, so relieved, to have someone there to take the pressure of the tremors from her – she let her limbs go, let them do what they wanted – and when she sank slowly to the floor he went with her, never taking his hands from her, holding her in a kneeling position on the ground until the pills finally kicked in and the shaking slowly left her.

It was only when her breathing evened out that he removed his hands. He was careful after that to keep his distance, and while she appreciated it was because he wanted to give her some space, it felt something like a rejection after the kisses they’d just shared.

“How long you been havin’ these episodes, chere?” he asked her quietly. The question was a quaint one to her and she laughed mirthlessly.

“The question you should be asking is how long has it been since I never had one?” she muttered bitterly.

In the following silence she felt him appraising her clinically. It made her bare skin goosepimple and she realised how exposed she felt, sitting there on the cold bathroom tiles in her bra and little else.

“Where did you learn to do that thing you just did?” she asked, more in an attempt to fill in the awkward silence than anything else.

“There were a lotta Essex’s patients who had the same kinda episodes, back in his compound,” he replied soberly. “I seen some o’ them. The mem-therapists used to use that technique to stop them from hurtin’ theirselves.” He paused. “You must be a doin’ a helluva lotta fuckin’ ‘facin’ to have attacks dis bad, chere.”

She was silent. His gaze was on her like a spotlight and she looked down into her hands to avoid it. She was almost surprised to see that the tremors were gone, that her hands were still. What she felt was empty, drained of everything except the slow creep of shame, of humiliation, stealing over her. She felt foolish, unattractive, lost. Broken.

“You call them patients, Remy,” she muttered, shivering from the cold and her own growing sense of mortification. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and took in a shaking breath. “They weren’t patients. They were test subjects. Essex’s test subjects. Sure, they were mem-junkies all right. But they didn’t make themselves that way. Essex did.”

She raised her eyes to his. He was wordless, his lips pressed together, taut.

“He put them through the interfacing process,” she continued in a low monotone. “They did it so many times they can’t comprehend what’s real and what’s the past anymore. That’s what happens when the bleed effect takes over 24/7. There’s no going back.”

Her eyes dropped again as she swallowed down bitter memories, and she found she couldn’t elaborate – she didn’t know if she would break down if she did.
“How do you know all this?” he quizzed her.

She thought he knew what her answer was going to be before she gave it.

“Because he did the same to me,” she whispered.

It was a source of shame, irrational perhaps, but acute and penetrating; silence fell again and after a moment he got up, went into the bedroom. When he came back he had a dressing gown in his hands. Without a word he got down on his knees in front of her and draped the robe over her shoulders. She was a little surprised and a little touched at the gesture. She tugged the fabric round her gently, letting its warmth dispel the cold, letting her screaming mind be comforted somewhat. When she deigned to look into his eyes again, they were serious. He didn’t look shocked, and he didn’t look disgusted.

“You were a test subject,” he stated, coolly, calmly. There was only one other stranger she’d told this to and their reaction she remembered clearly. Shock. Horror. Righteous indignation. Pity, for the indignities she had suffered. These had all been appropriate responses at the time. But she was glad she didn’t see them in him now. He was as accepting as if she’d told him what her favourite colour was. And it opened up in her something she hadn’t really had until that moment. Trust. In him.

She held his gaze and pushed her hair back from behind her ear, turned her head so that he could see. And what he saw was a small square brand on her skin, the tattoo-like imprint of an embossed matrix code.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. It was the only tell-tale sign in a face that was otherwise devoid of expression, and yet again she wondered at his seeming indifference.

She dropped her hair and looked at him. There must’ve been a question in that look because a small, self-deprecating smile touched a corner of his lips and he spoke.

“You asked me why I came back t’ warn you, chere,” he said softly, never breaking her gaze. “Why I wanted t’ work with you, why I let you hire me for free.” She said nothing and his smile flickered, but didn’t entirely disappear. He looked aside and pulled his hair back.

She gaped.

There, in exactly the same spot as her own, she saw that he had an almost identical brand tattooed too.

-oOo-
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Remy finally learns from Anna about the Weapon X project, and what their branding means...

Anna screeched through the city, manhandling the car to a speed even Remy felt distinctly uncomfortable with.

And it wasn’t just the speed that was worrying him. Not even half an hour before she had had a pretty serious attack of the shakes, and he wasn’t convinced she should even be driving.

“You knew,” she levelled at him accusatorily. “You knew. You saw that matrix code on my file. You knew you had one too. You knew what I was the moment you saw it. And you never fuckin’ said.”

She screamed through an amber light about to turn red, hurtled round a corner burning rubber. He wasn’t entirely sure whether she was talking to him or ranting to herself, but he decided he owed her some explanation either way.

“I didn’t know what you were,” he responded defensively. “All that code meant to me was that you were an Empharma employee. We were always told it was a unique identifier for staff…”

“We?” she shot at him sharply.

“Yes, we. All Empharma employees have them. At least, all the ones I know of…”

Her eyes were back on the road, her teeth chewing on her bottom lip, her face white. He decided it was safer not to agitate her even more than she was already. The way she was driving, he was pretty sure he’d be lucky if he was still alive by the end of the night.

“Where we goin’, chere?” he asked instead, quietly, subconsciously gripping the edge of his seat.

“Three minutes,” she answered through gritted teeth. “Three minutes and we’ll be there.”

He was only half-surprised when she peeled into the driveway of the abandoned asylum, the place where, not so very long ago, she’d led them on that wild goose chase with Creed and his thugs.

“Oh yeah,” he muttered to himself as she killed the engine and jumped out. “Got some real good mem’ries of this place.”

He unclipped his seatbelt and got out.

“So dis place is gonna tell me what the fuck’s up with those marks we got, chere?” he shouted over at her sceptically, as she strode purposefully towards the crumbling building without once looking back to see if he was following.
“Trust me,” she yelled back over her shoulder, and there was no choice but for him to jog after her.

The last place he wanted to go was back into the tunnels, but that was exactly where they ended up going anyway. She weaved through the maze of passageways with a familiarity that, yet again, told him she’d been here many times. It also told him that the tryst they’d been in not an hour before was now firmly out of her mind.

It wasn’t out of his.

Was it crazy to feel this cheated?

Anna was damaged goods – if he’d suspected it before, he was certain now. But she was also beautiful and fascinating and sexy, and now, after having been within an excruciating inch of having her… things had swung abruptly back to business and it wasn’t what he wanted. Not yet. The flavour of her kisses and the texture of her skin were unfulfilled promises, teasing him with the notion of something left agonizingly undone.

He watched her as she walked, a purposeful stride that belied all the softness he knew her to be capable of. Every movement she made was a memory of what he was missing, and it was almost painful to ignore it.

Enforced denial had never been a source of so much frustration to him.

“So tell me, chere,” he spoke at last, swallowing that frustration with an effort. His voice echoed ominously around them. “What exactly was it that you did here?”

She glanced back over at him, only to look quickly away again.

“Tactical training. Urban warfare, mostly.”

“So this was a training post?” He looked sceptical.

“Not really. We only came here for certain types of training. Because of the layout of this place.” She didn’t elaborate further on the point, continuing matter-of-factly: “This building was a front for Essex’s experiments. He could keep all the mem-junkies he’d made here and everyone would think they were just asylum patients. It was never used much though. The building was in bad shape – he just happened to own it, so he decided to make use of it. By the time Weapon X was shut down, this had pretty much just become a storage facility.” There was a door and she came to a halt. “It’s here,” she told him.

They jimmied it open together and when it finally juddered open they were welcomed by a cavernous void of dust motes and cobwebs and the dank stench of mould. Anna swung the flashlight into the blackness, revealing the shadows of shelves and filing cabinets, all against a backdrop of filth and decay.

She stepped inside and he followed, his feet crunching on shattered tiles, rotting wood, and collapsed ceiling plaster.

“Be careful of the potholes,” she warned him, just as he narrowly missed one.

The shelves were disintegrating, the filing cabinets rusting. Decayed and mouldering papers lay strewn everywhere, most of their contents illegible. He was at a loss to know what
interest any of it could possibly be to him.

At last she had found a single filing cabinet, and she wedged the top drawer open only after some application of force. There was a single file in it, dog-eared and torn. She took it out and handed it to him.

“Look inside,” she said.

He shot her an incredulous look before opening it up, letting the glow of the flashlight illuminate its contents. The first page was illegible; so was the second. Many, many after that were too faded, too desiccated to read, and crumbled at his touch. The sheets nearer the end revealed more. First a header, ‘Weapon X’. Then photos, names, vital statistics. And then, at the bottom of each page, a familiar square-shaped matrix code. Each one the same, yet subtly different.

Instinctively he went for his breast pocket and brought out the folded sheets of paper he’d shown her at the mall. When he opened it up, there was 13 year old Anna Raven staring up at him, her own code printed below her – the same pattern that was imprinted on the side of her skull.

“They are unique identifiers…” he murmured.

“Yeah,” she agreed quietly. “Of the chips he implanted inside our skulls.”

He stared up at her, his expression flat. He didn’t question her on that, didn’t say anything at all, and that made her wonder. After a few long moments he dropped his eyes and snapped the file shut; the papers hissed their protest inside.

“Why didn’t he destroy all this?” he mused out loud.

“Time destroys,” she replied simply. “Besides,” she added as an afterthought, “no one in the files here was important. These are the ones that died. Like those ‘patients’ you saw back at the Empharma compound will be soon.”

His eyes narrowed.

“And you… You were one of the important ones… The ones who didn’t die…”

She nodded.

“Right.”

He was silent again, thinking of the mem-tech patients he’d seen at the compound – not patients, but test subjects. Living in a world of past and present, merged together. He wasn’t like them – not yet anyhow. Was he?

“Remy.” She touched his arm tentatively. “No one’s had one of these implants in over ten years. Not since Weapon X folded.”

He glanced over at her.

“Anna, I’m not the only one who has one of these things. Creed has one too. And Graycrow and Noatak and the rest of my old team. We all have them.” Her mouth went taut at the statement – he knew what she was thinking. “He’s restarting Weapon X,” he voiced what she hadn’t yet. “And I’m just his experiment.”

“You’re an unfinished experiment,” she corrected him quietly. “He’s never wanted you
dead, Remy. When that assassin came for you in Paris, she was always gonna take you alive.”

Remy pulled at his lower lip, not daring to speak on that point.

“Okay,” he spoke after a long, tense moment. “So lemme guess. Essex needs these codes on those mem-chips to finish whatever he started. To restart Weapon X.”

“Yes.”

“To finish off whatever he was planning to do with me.”

“Yes.”

“Which is exactly the same as whatever the fuck it is he did to you.”

She stared at him. She didn’t answer, but she didn’t need to.

“What did he do to you, chere?” he asked her softly.

“Stuff,” was all he got from her, before she’d turned and walked away. In the faltering light he shoved the file back into the drawer and rammed it shut.

“Anna.” He’d caught up to her in a few seconds. “What I don’t understand is why Weapon X matters so much to him. Why does Essex want to restart a super soldier project so badly? What’s in it for him if the government won’t touch it again?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

He wasn’t sure if he believed her.

“Anna, super soldier programmes have existed since fuck knows when. People die, people get fucked up. What makes Weapon X any different?”

She halted, so abruptly that he nearly walked right into her.

“Remy,” she told him testily, “do you know what it’s like, to have a dozen people in your brain at once? To know all their secrets, all their desires, all their lies? There’s power right there, Remy. There’s power in peoples’ memories. And they’re everywhere. Uploaded and floating in the Cloud for people like me to steal and screw with. I wasn’t made just to read memories, Remy. I was made to change them. To destroy them.”

And she whipped away, the glare of her flashlight sinking into the darkness.

-oOo-

They headed back up topside in silence. As soon as they were back in her car she locked the doors and turned to him.

“You’ve been lying to me,” she said.

There was a gun at her hip and she had the barrel pointed straight at him. Her expression was strangely impassive, but he read one thing in her eyes. She didn’t want to hurt him. He knew that instinctively.

“I always lie,” he told her calmly. “And usually for a reason.”
Her lips twitched. The gun didn’t.

“You weren’t surprised when I told you Essex had implanted chips into our brains,” she said.

“Of course I wasn’t,” he replied dispassionately. “I had the surgery, didn’t I?”

She half-blinked. The gun lowered just a fraction.

“And you trusted him to do that to you?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“He told me he was trialling some new form of therapy, something that would involve putting some sorta implant in my brain.” He paused, holding her gaze meaningfully. “He told me it was a way to stop the bleed effect.”

The gun jerked in her hand as the implication of his words hit her. *A way to stop the bleed effect. A way to get rid of the hallucinations, the tremors, the pain. He knew what it was like. He knew. Because he’d experienced them himself.*

Suddenly his aversion to the mem-tech was cast in a whole new light. Once, just like her, he’d been a junkie.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?!” she demanded fiercely. His eyebrow shot up testily.

“I’m sorry,” he stated smoothly. “But I don’t remember nothin’ in our contract that said you were entitled to my past history. Not that we even have a fuckin’ contract.” He eyed the gun in her hand pointedly. “Although I’m beginning to think we should do.”

His words had the right effect. In a trice the gun was gone as fast as it had appeared, and she’d twisted back in her seat to face forward, bitterness marring her face. There was supposed to be a sort of comfort, she thought, in finally being in a species of two, however mad. But instead she felt hollower than ever. It was an emptiness born from the fact that somehow, despite everything Essex had done to her, *Remy* was still intact.

“So the surgery worked,” she stated almost resentfully. “Whatever he did to you got rid of the bleed effect.”

In the periphery of her vision, he nodded. Her only response was to grip the steering wheel, hard.

“So why doesn’t the implant do the same for you?” he asked the inevitable.

“I’m assumin’,” she replied through gritted teeth, “that it was the sim-tech you were addicted to? Mem-tech is different. Interfacing with a person’s memories isn’t the same as interfacing with a virtual reality. It requires extreme neuroplasticity to re-embodify another person’s experiences, to replicate all those hormonal changes, all those brainwave patterns. Usually the imprint of the memory fades with time, but with me…” she took in a breath, “it doesn’t. Every memory I’ve ever ‘faced with is here.”

She touched the side of her forehead. He was silent.

“Raven says I should stop using the mem-tech,” she continued with a cold laugh in her voice. “She says if I keep using it, it’ll destroy my mind, my brain won’t be able to handle it. And she’s right.
But I can’t stop. Even if I wanted to.” She looked at him sideways. “You’re right not to use the tech anymore,” she told him softly. “Addiction is a horrible thing. But you know that, of course.”

There was a split second of softness in those words that made him a little less angry with her.

“Tell me about this implant,” he asked her quietly, knowing she wanted him to open up about his own past, his own addictions, but instead changing the subject to more pertinent matters. “Why is it that most of us die and a few of us don’t?”

She looked aside again, her fingers working agitatedly against the leather steering wheel.

“The implant lights up all of your neural pathways,” she murmured.

“And what does that mean?” he asked, when she didn’t elaborate.

“It means that your brain is capable of working at 100% efficiency. The implant increases the amount of energy the brain is able to consume. It makes everything faster – logical deductions, reaction times, information retrieval… But,” and she drew in a wavering breath, “most of the test subjects couldn’t handle what it did to their minds. They were driven insane. Some committed suicide; some fell into a coma they could never be roused from; others… well, their bodies just failed. And us… the ones who were left… he called us the 1%. The ones who were worthy.” She darted him a sidelong glance, adding, “The implant gave me perfect recall. Of every memory I’ve ever made. And anyone else’s I’ve ever experienced.”

His jaw was taut.

“So that’s how you tricked the neural scanners back at Trask Technologies…”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Tanya Trask’s neural imprint is up here.” She gave a wry smile. “I just took it out and put it on. Like a pair of pants, or a dress.”

He whistled.

“And you can do that for anyone?”

“Anyone whose memories I’ve ‘faced with, yes.”

She said nothing more. She started up the car.

“Anna, there’s still one thing I don’t get,” he spoke up quietly. “You tell me the codes on those mem-chips will help Essex restart Weapon X, yet you say we can’t destroy them.”

Her hands were still gripping the wheel like she was steadying herself.

“And you want me to collect all of them for you,” he continued. “Why?”

She looked over at him with those fierce green eyes that had first snared him so effortlessly.

“Because, Cajun,” she explained with forced calm, “I think they can help tell me about my past. About the memories Essex and Weapon X destroyed.”

And she backed out of the driveway.

-oOo-
There was every chance Creed, or more likely Gracrow, was tracking them. Anna took a circuitous route back to her apartment, retracing her steps several times. She was quiet, brooding. Nothing like the sassy temptress she had been earlier. His revelation had disturbed her. He still didn’t understand the ins and outs of this, not fully, and perhaps it wasn’t his place to question. Technically, she’d hired him. He was just doing a job for her. But now he had a stake in this. In more ways than one.

Was he supposed to feel sorry for her? Was he supposed to be feeling this guilty, this conflicted?

No – what he was supposed to be doing was asking her. Asking her about her past, about the implication that she’d lost parts of it, that Weapon X had been responsible. The only reason he wasn’t was because he sensed that she wouldn’t tell him a thing. So he did what he always did when he came to such an impasse. He moved back to business.

“So I guess you’re thinking that Ophelia Sarkissian was one of Essex’s old partners?” he asked her.

Her face was like a stone, her eyes fixed on the road.

“Yeah. Going from Yashida’s memories… It’s the most logical deduction to make.”

He nodded, looked outside the window, checking the wing mirror for the umpteenth time. No one appeared to be following them.

“Arranging fake visas into Madripoor can take some time,” he warned her. She glanced at him as if surprised he was still considering helping her out, before her eyes snapped back to the road.

“You won’t have to, Cajun,” she informed him coolly.

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She took a corner fast, the line of her mouth grim. “I’ve already got her mem-

He did a double-take.

“You mean to tell me she was one of your marks at one point? That you stole her identity?”

She allowed herself a tight smile.

“I assumed it for a week. Truth was, she was too high profile to steal too much from; and I didn’t like the kind of weight she could pull with Interpol. But… she did pay for a very nice vacation on Mustique. Only a week’s worth of luxury, but hell. It was worth it.” The memory seemed to have improved her mood. She grinned mischievously at him just as they were pulling into the condo parking lot, expecting a reaction from him.

“Woman,” he declared fervently in reply, “you never cease to amaze me.”

-oOo-

As soon as they got back into her apartment, Anna headed straight for the walk-in closet in her bedroom. Remy followed her with the sense of further revelations to be had. The past couple of hours in her company had been a whirlwind, and he wasn’t optimistic enough to think it would stop
anytime soon. She wasn’t the first woman to send him on this type of rollercoaster ride, but she was
certainly the first woman who only seemed to create more mysteries the more he got to know her.
Opening her up was like opening a matryoshka doll.

He watched on as she kicked open a hidden panel in the wall and got to her knees,
reaching inside. When he peered into the niche he saw that there were clear, plastic boxes inside –
the heavy duty kind that were used to store multiple chips. If he’d had to guess, he would’ve said
that, all told, there were about a thousand chips in her stash – maybe more.

“Jesus,” he muttered under his breath. She ignored him, sliding one of the boxes out of the
hole and opening it up wordlessly. “So whose are those?” he asked her, his eyes running along the
rows of neatly clipped-in mem-chips. She didn’t look at him.

“Back at the archive in the old asylum,” she explained in a low voice, “I showed you the
files of all the Weapon X test subjects that failed, all the ones that died.” She paused and her voice
grew quieter. “These belong to the successes. The people that lived.”

He was suddenly alert. He glanced back at the open recess and the hidden boxes inside.

“You mean,” he said, “those are all the recorded memories of all the original Weapon X
test subjects?”

“Yeah.”

He looked down at some of the names carefully written in minute handwriting over each
slot, all arranged alphabetically by surname: Katherine Pryde, Calvin Rankin, Illyana Rasputin, Piotr
Rasputin, Cecelia Reyes… the list went on and on and on.

“Most of them are dead now, or underground, or missing,” she explained almost
reverently. Remy sucked in a breath.

“When Essex got arrested, the NSA moved in and confiscated all his stuff,” she explained.
“I just got to these first.”

He looked back at one of the boxes still inside the niche, seeing through the clear plastic
that it contained her own memories. He could see her name written over and over – Anna Raven –
with dates going back 16 years. He thought about what she’d told him – that Essex, or Weapon X,
had destroyed her memories. He wondered how, and which ones.

“And some of these belong to the people whose identities you stole,” he concluded out
loud. He looked back, seeing that she was rifling through a set of chips labelled ‘Ophelia
Sarkissian’.

Yeah,” she answered distractedly; she’d stopped at a certain slot and was thumbing the
chip out with a practiced hand. “Here it is – August 15, 2016…” She snapped the box shut and
stood, flashing the small square at him with muted triumph.

“I can’t believe you fuckin’ have that,” he noted dryly. “Do you have her whole frikkin’
inventory or somethin’?”

“Not quite,” she replied modestly. “I only grabbed what I could get. Was pretty sure I had
the ones from 2016 though.”
She walked over to the interfaucer and he grabbed her by the upper arm, stopping her.

“What?” she threw at him testily.

“You ain’t seriously fuckin’ thinkin’ of interfacin’ with that thing right now?”

“This is the best lead we have to figure out who else started up Weapon X,” she told him.

“Yeah. And just about 2 hours ago you were sufferin’ a major attack of the bleed effect. You ain’t gon’ tell me it’s safe to ‘face again, femme.”

She stared – first at his hand on her arm, then up into his face.

“I’ll be fine,” she said quietly, firmly. He gave a cold laugh.

“And you can’t expect me t’ believe that?”

“I’ve done it before,” she said staunchly, shaking off his grasp and turning back to the machine. She’d hardly put a step forward before he’d stopped her again, this time grabbing a hold of her wrist.

“Look, Anna,” he began in an urgent tone, “I ain’t got a clue what it is you’re really tryin’ to find in those mem-chips, and I don’t much care. What I do know is, you’d be takin’ a helluva fuckin’ risk if you ‘faced right now. Believe me, I know.” His countenance went dark. “And you know it too.” He paused, letting that truth sink in a moment. “Give your brain time t’ rest. We’ll figure this one out tomorrow.”

He stared her down, daring her to challenge his logic. One heartbeat, two heartbeats passed, before her gaze began to soften.

“You’re the one who’s supposed to be doin’ what I tell you to,” she reminded him silkily.

She hadn’t yielded to him yet, but by this point he was already pretty sure she would.

“Pffft. I’m doin’ you a favour and you know it, chere. Whatever you may think, I wanna keep you sane and alive long enough for you to pay me at least.”

Again he let the idea of payment hang above them like an especially delicious promise. Her lips tilted into a playful smile.

“And I’m supposed to entrust my welfare to the man who just told me he always lies?” she murmured; her expression was at an intersection between outright cynicism and sultry flirtation. He followed her lead without thinking.

“Non. You’re s’pposed t’ trust the man who prefers you with your mind intact. More specifically,” he added as he reached out and took the mem-chip from between her fingers, dropping it into his shirt pocket, “the man who has a vested interest in keepin’ you with your mind intact.”

He let go of her wrist but she didn’t take it back. Instead she stepped into his space and placed both her hands on his chest.

“How flatterin’,” she lilited sarcastically, “to know that you’d rather not sleep with a madwoman.” She stood on her tiptoes, raising herself almost to his height, gazing deep into his eyes. “But don’t think I believe for a second that that’s the sort of payment you want from me, Cajun,” she warned him in a velvet whisper. “Or that I don’t know how to play the game as well as you do.”
She lingered there, long enough for him to know that she was daring him to kiss her the way he had earlier. It took almost a supreme will of effort for him not to, distracting as her charms were. She knew it. There was laughter in her eyes as she finally backed away.

“You’re right, of course, Cajun,” she said breezily as she walked past him and back to the closet. “This should wait until tomorrow. I won’t be any use to anyone if I have another attack of the bleed effect.”

He turned and saw her sliding the box back into the hideaway with her foot, closing the panel behind it.

“And what makes you think sleepin’ with you ain’t the only thing I want from you, chere?” he asked innocently as she shut the closet door. She put her back to the door and hit him with a withering stare.

“Simple math, Cajun. I’m working on the premise that whatever it is you want from me outweighs the huge paycheck I’m pretty sure Essex is giving you. And I’m fairly damn certain a mindless fuck doesn’t cover it. So,” she concluded with a nonchalant shrug, “what you want from me has to be something valuable, and it has to be something only I can give you. I just have to work out what it is.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at her candour.

“Chere,” he remarked with disarming sincerity, “maybe I’m just here because I like you a lot.” He glanced down at his watch. “You should probably get some rest now. I’m heading out.”

“Oh really?” Her voice was literally dripping with sarcasm as he headed for the door, and he grinned back at her impishly.

“Yeah. Gonna go rob a store. I’m nearly outta smokes.”

She made a rude noise.

“Riiiiight. I know you’re heading out for some hookup.”

His grin grew wider.

“Why? You jealous?”

He knew he was pushing it and was surprised when all she did was roll her eyes.

“Why the hell would I be jealous? You’re just some thief I’ve hired.”

He pouted and shrugged, turning back for the door. He was just about to open it when he thought of something.

“Oh… By the way… I’m assumin’ you’ve got some back up plan in case Essex or Creed or whoever turn up on your doorstep?”

She eyed him suspiciously.

“Are you asking me to let you in on that backup plan?” she rejoined sardonically. He lifted his shoulders.

“I’m workin’ for you now, as you so love t’ point out. If anythin’ happens to you…”
He left the rest unsaid and she cocked her head to one side, as if amused that he cared.

“You call Raven,” she said at last.

“Oh. Right. Of course.” He was openly sarcastic this time. “And how’m I gon’ do that?”

She looked like she was still having a hard time trusting him enough to give away Raven’s phone number, but after a second she nodded at the note board on the wall, saying: “It’s over there. On the wall.”

It felt like another victory just having her give him that little bit of information – but he didn’t let her know that. He merely nodded, and the next moment he was out the front door, shutting it closed behind him.

-oOo-
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Remy's 'hookup' is not all it's cracked up to be, and Anna makes a fateful decision....

As soon as the door had closed behind him, Anna heaved out a long, slow breath.

It took a moment for the seductive frisson of his presence to dissipate, this irresistible feeling of standing on a cliff edge, ready to free fall. The last time she’d felt this much adrenaline was when she had literally been on the verge of death. It seemed like a bad analogy, but it was the most appropriate one she could come up with.

Anna turned and paced the room absently, trying to work the adrenaline off.

She didn’t like the way the thief made her feel, made her act. Years of finely-crafted solitude and composure had been unravelled in less than 24 hours. It didn’t matter about all the shit lurking underneath. What mattered was that she’d managed to bury it deep, cover it over with years’ worth of other peoples’ lives, other peoples’ memories. And now…

How could it all so easily begin to come undone?

She thought of Cody and came to an abrupt halt.

How long had it been now? Five years? Five years alone without ever once really opening up, not to anyone. Five years spent fossilising all her passions, all her desires, all the needs and the wants that normal people had, that she wasn’t supposed to.

It’s all bullshit, Cody had told her. You can be whoever you want to be, feel whatever you want to feel.

She’d believed him. Listened to him. Been happy, for once. And where was he now?

She realised her hands were shaking, and she clenched them tight into fists. The force of will it required to filter the memories back into their own little compartment in her brain was so great that when she opened her eyes again there was sweat standing on her brow.

The thief was dangerous. Raven had warned her so. He unopened things in her that scared her. Things she wanted badly.

She was human, after all. Even if, sometimes, it didn’t quite feel like it.

Anna slowly padded back into her bedroom and shut the door quietly behind her.

There was another reason the thief troubled her.

She didn’t believe for a second he was going out for some hookup, but she’d let him think so because… well. It was easier. It was safer. Jealousy was a great cover, especially when the man in question figured he was under your skin.
Anna sat on the edge of her bed and slipped Ophelia Sarkissian’s mem-chip out from inside her sleeve. It was easy to steal from a thief when you knew that he wanted you. He was, after all, human too. What he hadn’t known, as she’d got as up-close-and-personal as she could to him just so she could swipe back the chip, was just how hard it had been for her to resist him. His hands on her body and his mouth on her own were ingrained into her memory, and she was foolish enough to want more.

She let out another long, shaky breath and stared down at the chip in her hand.

Whatever it was that he was really doing, the chip was safer in her possession. It wasn’t anything personal against him. It was just what years in this cut-throat business had taught her. Take control of your assets.

Take control of my past...

The chip shook in her palm, and she tried desperately to still the tremors.

She knew Remy was right. It wasn’t safe to ‘face right now. To do so would be pushing the limits of even her extensive capabilities. But what he didn’t understand was how it felt. How it felt to have this huge, gaping hole in your life, a place where all the memories had been sucked dry. Cody had always said it didn’t matter to him, but it had mattered to her. More than anything, she wanted to know herself; what had filled the void before her time in Weapon X. She wanted more than what her personnel file had told her.

Without another thought she went over to the interfacer and switched it on. She inserted the chip into the machine, and while she waited for it to load she went into the bathroom and took the eye drops that were supposed to prime her mind for what lay ahead. She hoped against hope that they would work.

When she finally sat at the machine with the visor in her hands, she hesitated.

A couple of days ago, she wouldn’t have thought twice about this.

Why does he make me think twice?

She felt stupid. Stupid at the implication of trust in a man like him.

In the end it was that feeling of foolishness alone that made her lift the visor and slide it over her head.

A few seconds later and Ophelia Sarkissian’s memories were washing over her.

She stands out on the balcony and smokes the cigarette from the long, black lacquer holder.

From the other side of the sliding doors behind her she can hear the pitiful wailing of Trask and she thinks with a contemptuous sneer, how degrading, how uncivilised! She wants nothing to do with it. She stares out onto the lights of New York City and wishes herself back to Madripoor.

Trask’s cries gradually dwindle into silence.
The door slides open and shut behind her.

“Is he done yet?” she asks.

It’s Moira who comes and stands beside her.

“I gave him a sedative,” she says. “He’ll be out till the morning.”

She takes a long drag. Smoke fills her lungs and she blows it out again slowly.

“Good,” she replies. “This whole thing is rather embarrassing.”

Moira pulls a face.

“Embarrassing is one word for it. The entire evening’s events seem to me to be…” A pause. “Extraordinary.”

She looks over at her witheringly.

“Dr. MacTaggert. Everything we have done here the last few years is ‘extraordinary’. What more could you expect?”

Moira looks away with a frown.

“I was so sure it would work. It should’ve worked…”

“Then why didn’t it?”

“I’m not sure. Either all our calculations were wrong, or the test subject was…”

“Extraordinary?”

Moira shoots her a sidelong glance.

“I was going to say unique. But yes. That too.”

They are interrupted by the doors sliding open and shut and Emma joins them on the balcony.

“Essex has called for his driver,” she informs them with a touch of distaste that she entirely sympathises with. “He should take the rest of the week off.”

“And Yashida?” Moira asks.

“He’s already left. Probably for good.”

She blows smoke aside.

“Probably for the best.”

Emma shoots her a look.

“You can’t seriously be thinking of leaving the project too.”

“Why not?” she answers testily. “Trask has effectively sabotaged the project. It is a failure. There is no more reason for us to continue it.”
“It isn’t a failure,” Emma disagrees hotly. “All our reasoning, all our tests were sound. We just need a few more refinements.”

“I’m more inclined to think,” she says, “that you need a wider test sample, Ms. Frost.”

Moira looks troubled.

“She may be right…”

“No,” Emma retorts with an obstinate self-assurance that has always set her teeth on edge. “It should have worked. In theory there was nothing wrong. Trask merely overreacted.”

Moira throws her a look, one that is both troubled and questioning. She ignores it. She is bored of this back-and-forth, of the minutiae of the argument. It doesn’t interest her. It never has.

“Whatever the case, Trask has left us no choice but to cancel the project – for now, anyhow. I do not believe I am needed anymore.”

Emma scoffs rudely.

“Your country has the richest source of the purest silicone in the world…”

“Yes. Which has gone to make billions of mem-chips which are now worth nothing. Hardly a good investment.” She takes a final drag, removes the cigarette from its holder, grinds it out under her foot, and slips the holder back into her purse. “Now if you will excuse me. I have a plane to catch.”

She leaves Trask Technologies’ headquarters, and when she’s out on the sidewalk she takes out the slip of paper Trask has given her. The numbers stare up at her. 4681345447. She commits them to memory. Then she takes out her fancy gold lighter and burns the note. The remaining ash flits out of her fingers and onto the sidewalk and—

“Hey. Anna.”

The voice is soft but urgent.

She turns and sees the girl standing by the revolving doors to the Trask building. Curly brown hair, blue eyes. Twelve, maybe thirteen years old.

Something isn’t right...

“Tanya,” she says. “What’re you doing here...?”

Tanya looks confused.

“What do you mean? I’m supposed to be here. It’s time for our appointment. I’ve come to get you. C’mon.”

She turns and disappears back into the revolving doors and, “No. No, I don’t want to go...” she whimpers, but the memory carries her along with the tide and she can’t help but follow...

The door spins and on the other side...

It’s the Sinister Room. That’s what they all call it.

Computer consoles and monitors and wires and the faint hum of the interfacers running.
Her fear swells with the sound. She’s never been here before, and she doesn’t want to be here now.

In the centre of the room are two black reclining chairs. Anna’s already sitting in the right hand one, the visor already over her eyes. She’s as calm as if she’s done it a million times before. She probably has.

She feels the pressure of her father’s palms on her shoulder blades.

“Come on, Tanya. It’s time for your operation.”

She doesn’t want to go... but he pushes her forward gently, and so she walks up to the left-hand chair... she wants to please him... she thinks this will... So she sits up in the chair and shuffles right down into the depths of it. She looks over at Anna... She’s silent, unmoving... Dead? And the fear takes her again...

Daddy tilts her chin upward and suddenly the light is in her eyes... They’re putting eye drops in her eyes...

What are you doing daddy? she asks.

We’re making you better, stronger, faster, cleverer, he says.

They attach the nodes to her head. It hurts it hurts it hurts...

Take it off daddy, it’s hurting me...

She’s beginning to panic... Tears are streaming down her face, but they won’t take the pain away, they won’t take it off...

We can’t use the anaesthetic, honey. We need to have you conscious. We need to see your brainwaves...

They lower the visor over her head and it gets darker and darker and darker and darker and darkeranddarkeranddarkeranddarkeranddarkerand—

-oOo-

The bar that was always open was already occupied with the usual suspects, thieves and scoundrels and pimps and murderers.

Remy strode past the grimy, beer-stained tables and up to the bar. The bartender barely acknowledged him as he slid into the last free seat and lit up a cigarette. In a matter of seconds his usual neat bourbon was in front of him without a single word having to be said.

“You’re too slow, LeBeau,” the man sitting next to him growled.

Remy slipped the cigarette packet and lighter back into his pocket, not even bothering to look up as he sucked in a drag and blew out smoke, completely unconcerned.

“Yeah, well...” he replied with dry humour, “I’m workin’ on the femme.”

The man next to him growled disdainfully and Remy lifted the drink to his lips with a small smile.

“Whassa matter, Creed? Don’tcha go all disapprovin’ on me now. So happens this femme needs a lotta work.”
Creed passed him a sidelong glance punctuated with a sneer. It was an expression that showed his hand clearly – disgust, mistrust, loathing.

“There’s nothin’ to work on,” he countered sullenly as Remy shook out a cigarette. “You find what she stole and we move in.”

“On the contrary,” Remy returned mildly, “there’s plenty to work on.” He took a drag before saying, “She’s hired me.”

Creed looked at him full on then, open suspicion in his gaze before he turned away again.

“To do what?” he finally asked begrudgingly.

“To help her find the other mem-chips Milbury wants.”

Creed was silent. He knocked back his drink and signalled for another.

“And what’s she givin’ you in return?” he asked with just half an edge of curiosity.

“That’s my bus’ness. But don’tcha worry none, Victor,” Remy rejoined complacently, “I’ll make sure it’s worth my while.” He gave a cryptic little smile to himself. “Look – let’s jes’ put it dis way. Two heads are better than one. If me an’ her work together, I can come up with Milbury’s goods twice as fast. B’sides… she can do things I can’t do. Go places I can’t.” He mused on that a second. “I got a better chance of deliverin’ with her help than I do on my lonesome.”

Creed grunted, unimpressed.

“The boss ain’t gonna like this.”

Remy shrugged and lifted the glass to his lips.

“Sometimes you don’t pick the con, homme. The con picks you. And sometimes the con demands the long game. You just gotta play it out.”

Creed shifted irritably in his seat.

“I don’t get your bullshit ways of workin’, LeBeau,” he snarled. “Don’t much care for them neither. You just make sure you deliver. Or I’ll be givin’ you some well-earned payback for that stunt you pulled back in Paris.”

Remy couldn’t help but grin at the memory as Creed finished his drink and smacked some change on the bar. It was clear he had nothing further to say; he jumped to his feet, and just as he’d reached the door Remy called out to him.

“Oh and by the way… tell the boss he’d best not call me on my phone. The femme’s already suspicious… Don’t want us outed before the game’s up, neh?”

No more elaboration was needed, and Creed’s only answer was a sneer before he’d stomped on out. It was only then that the self-assured smirk slowly left Remy’s face. He turned back to his drink and allowed his mind to wander lazily over his beautiful and capable partner-in-crime. She was becoming a distraction, and that was a bad, if not necessarily unpleasant, thing. He’d known pretty much from the first moment he’d laid eyes on her that he was going to have sex with her, and whilst his irrational certainty in that inevitability lingered, it still hadn’t happened and it was beginning to cloud his judgement.
He wanted her. She was complicated and dangerous and at least a little unhinged, but... *he wanted her.*

Remy frowned.

There was a name for getting involved with a client, or a mark, or a partner, and that was *A-Fucking-Bad-Idea.* It hadn’t stopped him in the past though, and he was pretty sure it wouldn’t stop him in the future, or even in this particular case, but... there was something *different* about her.

Was it the sense that he’d met his match in her? That she was intriguing and beautiful and sexy? That she had some sort of pull on him that he couldn’t quite put his finger on? That she had a tantalising past that was just begging to be prised open?

There was an irony in that thought. A twisted absurdity in the fact that he found himself so interested in the past of another, when he’d tried for so long and so hard to run from his own.

On an impulse he reached inside his shirt pocket for the mem-chip of Lady Ophelia Sarkissian, wondering what secrets it might hold about the woman named Anna Raven – only to find that it wasn’t there.

His pocket was empty.

*Fuuuuuuuuuck!*

In a flash Remy was on his feet and running out the bar.

-oOo-

Remy hit the buzzer to her apartment once, twice, three times.

“C’mon, Anna,” he muttered ferociously to himself. “Open the fuckin’ door.”

He knew she wouldn’t. He knew he was wasting his time – what could be precious minutes, seconds, in the long run.

He abandoned the buzzer and went for the lockpick instead.

*I shoulda been prepared for this,* he thought irately to himself. *We shoulda set up some means of access in case either of us gets taken down...*

It was too late for that now, and yet again he was disturbed and a little resentful at how stupid and careless she made him.

*You’re supposed to be better than this, LeBeau...*

The lock finally gave and he pocketed the pick, pushed the door open. There was at least one thing he was thankful for, and that was that he’d had the wherewithal to fuck around with her security the other night, make sure the scanners she’d set up recognised his own neural signature. He stepped inside without tripping any of the alarms.

Sixth sense didn’t need to tell him exactly where to find her. He headed for her bedroom without a moment’s thought, his stomach churning painfully at what he might find. He hoped against hope that she was just so deep into her session that she hadn’t heard the buzzer.

*Please let dat be it...*
He pushed the door open softly, just in case he caught her unawares and his presence caused her to tear him another one.

“Anna?” he murmured softly.

The room was darkened, the curtains drawn. The first place he looked was the reclining chair at the interfacer, and of course, there she was, the visor resting over her eyes.

He could tell, from the angle of her body and the slackness of her arms, that it wasn’t good.

“Shit,” he hissed to himself. He strode over to the machine and switched it off, before leaning over her to gently slip off the visor.

Her eyes were wide open, the pupils rolled back into her head.

“Fuck.”

This wasn’t addiction, he thought. This was beyond an addiction. This was something else.

*What is it, chere? What is it in these chips that’s so important to you, so important to Essex?*

He reached out and pressed his fingers against her jugular – her pulse was faint but regular, her breathing shallow but even. So far, so good.

He turned and walked quickly back into the lounge.

There were a ton of papers pinned to the noteboard, mostly invoices for custom mem-chip cases and interfacing equipment. There were a couple of medical bills and Remy rifled through them without too much guilt. What he saw when he read them made him drop the papers and swallow hard.

Despite everything, it was only then that he realised just what kind of medication she was taking to control the bleed effect. The fact that it wasn’t controlling it gave him some serious pause for thought. By all rights she should be a mess. A walking zombie, like the ‘patients’ back at Empharma. But she wasn’t, and for the first time that frightened him.

He shook himself, frowned, and moved on.

It took him a little while longer to locate what he assumed was Raven’s number, written on a folded piece of paper pinned up under a sheaf of Yashida Energy bills. He took it down, flipping out his phone and punching in the numbers so fast he wasn’t sure he’d typed them all correctly.

“Dammit, chere,” he muttered irately as he walked back into Anna’s bedroom. “I told you not to hook yourself up t’ that fuckin’ machine. And now you’re makin’ me call fuckin’ Raven. I hope you’re fuckin’ happy now. I hope dis is worth it…”

She was still lying there, still and silent, her eyes still open and unseeing. He hovered beside her uncertainly, listened to the ring tone. Once, twice, three times, then—

“Who is this?” Raven’s unmistakable and irascible voice snapped in exactly the tone he’d come to expect from her. He didn’t waste time beating around the bush.
“Raven, it’s Remy. I need you to come over asap. It’s Anna. She’s in some sorta coma…”

Apparently he didn’t need to say anymore. He heard the scrape of a chair in the background, punctuated by Raven’s hoarse and urgent, “Shit.”

He felt for Anna’s pulse again, just as Raven shot down the line;

“How’re her vitals?”

The curt crispness of the question told him this wasn’t the first time this had happened. He pressed his lips into a grimace.

“They’re fine. Weak… But regular.” He touched her cheek, brushed a white lock of hair away from it with just the tips of his fingers. “But you should hurry. She’s just been interfacin’, and I’ve seen de bleed effect b’fore, but… dis is somet’ing else…”

The statement was more of a giveaway about his past than he’d ever intended passing onto Raven, but it served its purpose. Anna’s friend and mentor said nothing, and from the sound of her breathing, he could tell she was either running or power walking somewhere – hopefully to the nearest available vehicle. “What should I do?” he asked her.

“Keep her comfortable,” came Raven’s uncompromising reply. “And call me back immediately if she starts convulsing.”

The line went dead.

Convulsing?

Remy frowned deeply.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, chere, what the hell have you been doin’ to yourself?”

He lifted her gently into his arms and laid her out carefully on the bed. There was something small and fragile about her lying there that he’d never seen before, not even the time when Graycrow had shot her in the leg, and it made him feel… sad. Sad that someone as strong and indomitable as she was had done this to herself.

He sat down on the bed beside her and closed her eyes gently. For some reason his heart was in his mouth and instinctively he reached down and touched her open hand. There was an odd intimacy about it, one that had nothing to do with the throwaway kisses and the touches they had traded up to this point. It made him self-conscious and he withdrew his fingers slowly, nevertheless unable to help himself from brushing the tips over the curves of her palm as he did so.

It was only then that he noticed them.

The thin, tell-tale scars on her wrist, faded but unmistakable.

Remy pressed his lips into a tight frown.

What happened to you, chere? he asked himself silently. What did they do to you to make things come to this?

He put his hand back in hers then. It didn’t matter to him what it meant. It was an attempt at comfort, at comradeship. It was something to ease the emptiness that he imagined had led her to
The silence lengthened, and for a long while there was nothing but the echo of his thoughts and the warmth of her palm against his.

He held her hand until the silence was broken, and Raven finally opened the door.

-oOo-
Raven opens up to Remy about Anna's past in the Weapon X program.

Raven buzzed herself into Anna’s apartment and headed straight for her room. Remy felt her entrance just as surely as if it had been an icy breeze.

“How is she?” she asked him.

Remy rose from his place at Anna’s side, looking over at Raven with unflappable composure.

“The same,” he answered simply. The expression on his face was calm, almost studiously so. It irritated Raven and she pursed her lips together in an effort to restrain herself from biting at him in annoyance. She approached the bed without another word.

Remy stood aside to make room for her, a mark of respect that he somehow managed to make less than respectful. He seemed to have a talent for insolence that set Raven’s teeth on edge.

“You say she was interfacing?” she said coldly, and she felt rather than saw his nod.

“Yeah.”

“I take it this wasn’t the first time she’d ‘faced since you got here?”

There was a slight pause, one that was a split second too long for her liking.

“Non,” he replied at last.

It had been a test – she’d known the answer already, and he’d given her the right one. Enough to be satisfied, at least, that he wasn’t lying about anything that had happened here.

“What’s the matter with her?” he asked curiously as Raven busied herself taking her pulse again.


“A neural stutter.” He repeated the words with a hint of irony, as if amused by the fact that she thought they might mean something to him. She glanced sideways at him, a scowl on her face.

“Her brain is stuck between two brainwave patterns,” she explained tartly. “Possibly more than two. The mind is unable to separate its own natural state from that of whoever it was she was interfacing with. We call it a stutter.”

Her tone was flat, completely devoid of emotion, cold as a medical examiner giving a report at an autopsy. Only a lifetime spent studying the body language of others told him that she was worried. It was there, in the quick, jerkiness of her movement, in the slight tremor of her hand as she measured the younger woman’s pulse.
“You mean she’s caught between her own identity and someone else’s?” he queried. It was prompt enough for Raven to drop Anna’s hand and glare at him with open suspicion.

“You know an awful lot about mem-tech side effects for a two-bit thief,” she noted acerbically. He shrugged.

“I’ve heard things.”

“Have you now?” She raised an eyebrow, before turning back to Anna. “Perhaps we should have a talk about the things you appear to have heard.”

“Sure,” he retorted smoothly. “Like what the hell Weapon X did to Anna to turn her into a fuckin’ mem-junkie.”

Raven whipped round on him then, ready to question him further, but before she could do so the buzzer for the front door went off. She looked away abruptly, her attention drawn back to her protégé.

“Go open it,” she ordered coldly. “It’s Dr. Braddock.”

He had no idea who or what Dr. Braddock was, but if Raven knew they were supposed to be here he wasn’t going to argue. He got up and opened the front door.

On the other side was a beautiful and competent-looking woman who held a small plastic doctor’s case and looked like she was in the wrong line of business. Supermodel seemed more her thing, but then he guessed most people didn’t think ‘master thief’ when they saw him either.

She gave him the once over like she didn’t mind the look of him at all. It was the kind of look he always got, that he was more than used to.

“I’m Dr. Braddock,” she greeted him in a cut glass English accent. “Elisabeth Braddock. Where’s Anna?”

“Here,” Raven’s voice sailed over from Anna’s bedroom, shattering the impression that they were alone. Elisabeth frowned, and Remy gave her an apologetic smile, gesturing for her to enter. She stepped inside and went right on over to the bedroom; he closed the door quietly and followed.

Dr. Braddock appeared to be the very picture of medical efficiency, unpacking her case with the same ease he handled his knives and his lockpick. She took Anna’s blood pressure, measured her heartbeat, all the while maintaining a diligently expressionless countenance that would’ve given away nothing even if the patient had been at death’s door.

“Well,” Raven said impatiently after a couple of minutes. “How is she?”

“Her vitals are fine,” Dr. Braddock answered reassuringly. She looked up at Remy. “She was interfacing?”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

“How much?”

He hesitated.

“Twice in about four or five hours.”
Raven glared at him like a caged tiger.

“What?! And you let her?!”

He put both his hands up as if under threat of fire.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I was out. When I came back, I found her like this.”

The half-truth came to him like most things – easily. Raven, however, didn’t look as if she completely bought it.

“It’s unlike her,” she insisted sourly. “She knows not to do anything so stupid.”

“She’s addicted to the mem-tech,” Dr. Braddock reminded her in an authoritative tone, and Remy silently thanked God for the good doctor’s opinion. “And you know as well as I do that that could cloud her judgement, Ms. Darkhölme. Especially considering her recent relapses.”

It was a reasonable suggestion, but the way Raven suddenly looked over at Remy – as if he was entirely to blame for said ‘relapses’ – made him hope that she didn’t go straight over to the interfacer and find out just what exactly she’d been interfacing with. Raven seemed to be good at sniffing out rats and he didn’t like it at all.

After a moment, however, she dropped her gaze back to Anna.

“Nevertheless,” she stated in an icy tenor, “it’s been a long time since she was caught in a stutter.”

Dr. Braddock was already busy unpacking some equipment from her case, something which he recognised immediately – a portable neural scanner.

“Quite,” she agreed, moving over to the nearest wall and plugging in the machine. She glanced up at Remy. “Tell me. At any time today did you see her having convulsions? Appearing to run a temperature? Did she seem excitable to you at all? Agitated? Feverish?”

She listed off the symptoms as if reading from a script. Again, he hesitated as she reeled them off, one by one. He wasn’t sure whether he should mention the attack she’d had earlier in the day, lest Raven become more suspicious.

“Not really,” he replied nonchalantly, making a split second decision. “I guess she seemed a bit… excitable earlier on today, but nothing outta the ordinary.”

It was another half-truth. He supposed ‘excitable’ was an accurate enough descriptor of the passionate clinch they’d been in just a few hours before. He forced himself not to look up at Raven just in case the memory of it showed in his face.

Dr. Braddock was nodding absently at his reply.

“Good,” she said, as she attached two sensors to each of Anna’s temples. Whilst she ran the scan through her tablet, Remy sidled casually over to the interfacer. Lady Sarkissian’s mem-chip was still inserted into the visor and he ejected it, slipping it into his pocket quickly.

When he looked back over his shoulder, Dr. Braddock had a small frown on her lips.

“She okay?” he asked, walking back over to the bed.

“Well, it’s not good,” Dr. Braddock said with a sigh. “She’s in a deep catatonic stupor.”
She looked over at Raven. “Her brainwaves are totally messed up. Just…layer upon layer of them latticing over each other. I’ve never seen a stutter this bad.”

“And what can be done about it?” Raven asked in a flat tone.

Dr. Braddock took in a heavy breath and looked down at her patient.

“Well… we can induce a coma. Shut down all her brain functions artificially. Hopefully it’ll give her mind a chance to heal itself.”

Raven didn’t even hesitate.

“Do it,” she ordered.

Remy watched on as the doctor prepared the injection, his gaze wandering over to Anna, who was so still and silent and peaceful she looked as if she was sleeping. He was pretty sure that whatever was going on inside her mind was as unpleasant as it could get, however.

His own brushes with the bleed effect were still a very present though distant memory in his mind – close enough, at any rate, for him to feel bad at what she must be going through. At least, he thought, Dr. Braddock looked capable enough to keep her comfortable. Perhaps not as capable as Essex, but a damn sight more sympathetic – not to mention better-looking – at any rate.

“I’ll go make us some coffee,” he stated after a moment, backing slowly out of the room. When he looked over at Raven he saw that her eyes were on him, and he sent her a meaningful look. Her gaze narrowed, but at least, he noticed, she didn’t look outraged.

He walked into the kitchenette and switched on the coffee machine.

It was a minute or two later before Raven followed him out, shutting the bedroom door behind her.

“Why are you still here?” she asked him without any other opening. He raised his eyebrow without the least suggestion that he had taken offence.

“Well now,” he began conversationally, pouring coffee into the three cups lined neatly on the counter in front of him, “Anna offered me a place t’ stay th’ night.”

Raven said nothing, but the glare she shot him was so violently hostile that he laughed.

“Don’t worry none, Ms. Darkhölme. I stayed in the guest room.”

He went and got milk out of the fridge, knowing it was pissing her off that he was so familiar with Anna’s inner space.

“I thought you were only supposed to be here to warn her,” Raven retorted accusingly.

“Yeah. Good thing I stayed though, ‘cos if I hadn’t, God knows when you would’ve found her.” He’d finished pouring out the milk and went for the sugar.

“Why are you here?” she repeated in that same confrontational tone that would brook no other answer but the truth. He’d figured, by now, that it was a good time to stop messing with her. He wiped the glib smile from his face and came out from behind the counter, offering her her coffee. She didn’t take it, didn’t even look at it. Just stared him down like he was something particularly nasty.
“Fine. If that’s the way she wants ta play things.”

He turned aside and set the cup on the nearest side table. He was beginning to see where Anna got her stubborn streak from.

“The reason why I’m still here, Raven,” he began soberly, going to retrieve his own cup from the counter, “is that me and Anna have a li’l somethin’ in common.”

She wasn’t biting. Her countenance was as cold and unimpressed as if she had been a stone statue. So he decided not to skirt around the issue. He knew enough of her by now to know the tactic would be wasted on her.

“I need to know what Essex did to her,” he finally said; to which she merely sneered.

“You don’t need to know anything.”

“Then I want to know. She told me he experimented on her. That he did something bad to her. That it was all a part of this Weapon X project. That you were a part of it too.”

Something glazed over her eyes then and he sensed a moment of hesitation – there one moment, gone the next. Her mouth went hard.

“You’re in way over your head, LeBeau,” she began frostily. “The best thing you can do is to leave this place and forget you ever met her. You’ve done enough damage. If Essex knows she’s alive then it isn’t safe for you to be near her. If I were you, LeBeau, I’d run. As fast as I could.”

“Lucky you’re not me then,” he rejoined wryly. “’Cos I ain’t got no intention of runnin’. I’m already in. Deeper than you know.” He pushed back his hair, showing her the brand he’d shown Anna earlier. “Essex gave me this. I happen to know he gave one to Anna too, that he gave one to everyone who was on the Weapon X project, including you. So do me a favour, Raven. Tell me what he did to her. Then I might be able to figure out what he plans t’do to me.”

When he looked back at her she’d gone white, her eyes wide as saucers.

“When did he give you that?” she almost whispered; but at that very moment Dr. Braddock entered the room.

“I gave her a shot,” she informed them from the doorway. “She’s resting now. But she’ll need someone to monitor her 24/7. The moment she wakes up, I need you to call me, okay?”

“Of course,” Raven returned, her tone more subdued than usual. “Isn’t there anything else that needs to be done?”

“No.” Dr. Braddock was calm, efficient. “The human brain has the most amazing capacity to heal itself, given time. Leave her till she’s ready to wake. When she does, I’ll be better able to assess her. Then there’ll be more that we can do.”

She walked over to the door and opened it.

“I’ll call later, Raven.” She glanced over at Remy. “See you later, Mr. …”

“Remy,” he prompted her.

“Remy.” She smiled. “Call me, Betsy.”
“I made you a coffee, Betsy.”

She glanced over at the counter, a smile of real pleasure lighting her lips.

“Much as I’d love to stay,” she grinned, “I’m already late for another appointment. But thanks for the thought anyway.”

She smiled again and left.

And now it was just the two of them and the truth.

“So,” he said expectantly. “Tell me.”

-oOo-

Raven dropped down onto the sofa. She stared up at him with a gaze that was all at once disbelieving and hostile.

“You’re a test subject,” she stated, as if accusing him of some crime.

“So are you,” he reminded her quietly. “So was Anna.”

“Yes,” she answered flatly, shrewdly. “We were weapons made to serve Essex. How can I trust you’re not the same?”

“Please,” he said with disgust as he sank into the chair opposite her. “Until earlier on today, I didn’t even know I was a fuckin’ test subject.”

“And you expect me to believe that?”

“You can think whatever the hell you like,” he rejoined dispassionately. “Truth is, I had a problem. Essex told me it could be fixed. Since the name Milbury happens to be shit hot in neuroscience, I had no reason not to believe him.” He paused, making sure Raven understood the implication of his confession, before continuing. “Anna told me what this implant he puts into our brains does – that was the first time I knew that he intended to turn me into an experiment. What I want to know is exactly what Essex intends to do with me. And whether I’m gonna end up like Anna.”

Raven blinked slowly, reptile-like.

“What Essex wants to do with you,” she said after a moment, “is restart the Weapon X project. And as to whether you end up like Anna… Well, I couldn’t say.”

Her smile was grim. She stood and walked to the window, unwilling, or perhaps unable, to continue.

“What exactly was the purpose of Weapon X?” he questioned her. She didn’t reply straight up, but laughed, soft and cold.

“What was it?” she echoed, bitter sarcasm in her voice. “Just another attempt to make the perfect goddamned weapon. An individual who displayed perfect recall, perfect reflexes, perfect self-control. Who never missed a mark, who never forgot a tactic, who never broke down or showed fear. Who could be rewired to suppress their personality utterly, completely, to take on that of another so wholly that even neural scans would be fooled. The ultimate weapon, the ultimate spy, the ultimate asset. A superhuman, you could say.”
She paused, her lips drawn taut.

“But that wasn’t how it started out,” she continued slowly. “When the project began I don’t think anyone really realised what it would become.” She looked aside suddenly. “I think what Essex wanted, more than anything, was just to be the first to push past the limitations of the human mind. I think humanity… I think it disappointed him. He always used to say to me that we could be better; that we could be something more than this walking husk of flaws.”

She trailed off, perhaps realising that her words had given away a previous intimacy with the scientist that she had never intended to share. Remy had been a student of folly long enough to see it in others.

“What was Trask’s motivation?” he asked instead, wisely changing the subject. She looked back at him, all trace of discomfort gone.

“It was simple really. He just wanted to find a way to record memories… human experience… to relive them at any time, just like you could live virtual experiences through the sim-tech.” She leaned back on her heels and sighed. “At some point though Essex’s obsession grew on him. He began to share in his fascination with the idea that memories could be changed… manipulated.” She smiled coldly. “Essex had a way of doing that to people. Of infecting them, corrupting them, with his revolutionary visions.”

“What were you?” he asked her outright this time. Her eyes went hard at the question, but she didn’t clam up as he’d feared she would.

“I was one of his first test subjects – the first one that didn’t die, his first success, if you will.” There was a kind of pride in her voice, tempered by bitterness. “I always had… a special relationship with him. It’s why I came to work for him, in the end, on his security detail. The kind of jobs you were put on, it was always obvious his company was more than just a pharmaceutical corporation. But you know. I’ve never been the kind to ask questions. I just did my job, and I was good at it. That was all there was to it.”

She looked over at him with a knowing stare, one that said that it was probably the single trait they shared; his silence was a tacit acknowledgement that lingered like an accusation, a charge against his real loyalties. He didn’t rise to it.

“Anna looks pretty young in that picture Essex had on her old personnel file,” he noted darkly. “What – twelve, thirteen? Pretty young for a kid to be a test subject on a super soldier program, don’tcha think?”

She was completely unfazed by his words.

“Most of the work Essex did was with children – because their minds are still malleable, and their neural pathways are less fixed than in adulthood. Anna was just one of many children on the program. She was an orphan…” She looked like she would have added more to that statement, but thought better of it. After a moment she continued. “Anna was different to the rest of us. Better, faster, stronger, more resilient.”

She turned back to the window, her hands clasped behind her back, almost soldier-like.

“Most of what we did was work undercover. ‘Face with a person’s memories and you can learn all kinds of secrets. Infiltration, espionage, assassinations, black ops… we were the government’s operatives of choice. But we had our limitations – an imprint degrades with time. Fades, disappears.” She looked back over her shoulder at him with a glacial smile. “Anna though…”
with her a memory, an identity, would never fade. As far as we could tell, it would stay with her indefinitely.”

“Making the perfect identity thief,” he concluded quietly.

“And the perfect specimen,” she added laconically. “Why do you think Essex wants her back?”

Her gaze wandered to the door of Anna’s bedroom. She seemed to fall back into a haunted reverie, and he leaned forward, prompting her.

“What happened to her? She told me that Essex did something to her… that her memories had been destroyed…”

Her gaze was drawn to his sharply, her expression surprised.

“She told you that?” She didn’t wait for an affirmation, continuing without pause, “Early on in the project’s history, there was some sort of crisis that caused Trask to leave and the financial backers to pull out. Weapon X almost completely folded. Anna must’ve been about eleven or twelve… I forget.” Her brow creased. “I was told later – much later, when she was put on my team – that she had been in some way involved in this crisis. That it might have made her unstable. But I never knew what exactly had happened to her, and it wasn’t my place to ask Essex. And Anna… well, she never told me, if she even remembered.”

She looked at him again, a penetrating stare that seemed to suggest curiosity that Anna had confided in him at all. Seeing as he was surprised himself that Raven knew nothing, he decided not to satisfy her curiosity.

“So what the hell happened to bring the Weapon X project to an end?”

“Well,” she began, pacing the room whilst she recollected her thoughts, “let’s just say that in the end it garnered far too much unwanted attention. It was a success to a certain extent, but it was too costly… there were too few returns for the amount put in. For every success there were 99 failures, 99 lives ruined. It was no longer profitable to sustain the project. The irony is, in the end ‘unethical experimentation’ merely became the pretext for shutting down what had become an embarrassment to the government. Only when the money ran out, only when it suited the powers that be, was Essex brought to justice for his crimes.” She stopped and dropped back down into the sofa with an audible exhalation.

“In the end he only got a paltry 5 years jail time – and his ‘one percent’ was scattered to the winds.” Her voice had become hard again. “Some went to work for government intelligence and black ops agencies – some willingly, some coerced. Others disappeared, went missing. Died in foreign war zones and coup-de-etats. Some of us went underground.”

“Like you and Anna. And St. John?” The latter was a guess. She didn’t deny it.

“Yes. That was 10 years ago, when Anna was eighteen. Five years ago, Essex got out of jail. The first thing he did was take on the Milbury identity and go after Anna.” Her voice lowered to a near-whisper. “Luckily, he didn’t succeed.”

She didn’t elaborate. Her reluctance to divulge this part of the story was a clue, and he stored it away in his memory for further study later.

“So Anna was Essex’s perfect weapon,” he surmised softly. “One that could hide in plain sight.” He raised his eyes to Raven’s. “I always wondered how she could just walk through those
scanners at the Trask building and not trip any of the alarms. At first I thought she was using some fancy new remote scrambling device, but that wasn’t it, was it? It was just her. Somehow she reactivated the imprint Tanya Trask left on her mind when she interfaced with her memories.”

Raven was now regarding him with professional curiosity.

“Yes. So far, she’s the only one of the 1% that has that capability – to recall another person’s imprint at will. It’s why she’s so valuable to Essex.” She shifted slightly in her seat, fixing him with an interrogatory glance. “Just how much did she tell you about herself, Mr. LeBeau?”

He gave a soft, sarcastic laugh.

“Dat’s kinda like askin’ me how long is a piece o’ string. I ain’t got a clue. I guess she only ever told me enough to keep me from knowin’ the truth.” He looked down into half empty coffee cup in his hand, smiling wryly at the thought, realising that he was only able to recognise it in her because he played the self-same games with the truth himself. “She never told me just how… special she was, though.”

“It was in her best interests not to tell you,” Raven noted shrewdly. “She was – is – unique. And you, having once worked for Essex…” She trailed off meaningfully, and he filled in the gap, saying;

“I could have sold her on to him.”

She looked at him then, half dubious, half quizzical, as if she thought it wasn’t outside the realms of possibility. He remained silent.

“If you did, I would have to kill you,” she told him in a strangely flat tone. “I don’t think you quite understand, LeBeau. That girl is like a daughter to me. Since she was fourteen I’ve been the only mother she’s had. I… put her through things she should never have gone through, because it was my job. That was a mistake. Ever since then I’ve spent my life trying to correct it.”

She stood and walked away with her back to him, towards the window. He understood then that the flatness of her affect was simply her trying to hide her emotions from him.

“Let me help you help her,” he said quietly. She spun round quickly, glaring at him in disbelief.

“Why are you so interested in her? She’s far too complicated to be worth your while, LeBeau. You’re wasting your time with her. Why don’t you move onto someone else who’s easy?”

“This ain’t about easy,” he muttered insistently. “I know just as well as you do what Essex is capable of. And believe it or not, I don’t particularly want to see her put through whatever it is he has in mind for her.”

She sneered.

“How noble of you.”

Her dogged mistrust of him was almost becoming flattering. He grinned at her.

“Aw, c’mon, ‘Ms. Darkhölme’. You and I are more alike than you wanna admit. We don’t got much time for sentiment – but we both know what’s right from wrong. Neither of us knows exactly what Essex wants her for, but we both know that whatever it is, it’s wrong.”
She levelled a thin smile at him.

“So is thieving. So is extortion, and murder.” Her smile turned grim. “You and I only do what’s right when the benefits outstrip those of doing wrong. You have a vested interest in protecting her. That much is clear.”

“Just like you do, huh?”

She scowled.

“My interest is in protecting someone I care about.”

“And makin’ up for the blind eye you turned to the things Essex did to her, jus’ so you could pursue a relationship with him?” He hazarded a guess that he intuitively knew was right. “Yeah. I get it.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits.

“I know my faults,” she told him darkly. “Do you know yours?”

“Well,” he said, getting to his feet and heading back into the kitchenette, “lessee. I know enough to know you’re wrong about one thing. Sometimes, you just gotta do what’s right ‘cos it’s right. How can you not look at dat femme in there and not want to help her after all she’s been put through?” He glanced over at Anna’s bedroom door before going to the sink and rinsing out his now empty coffee cup. “I may not be a pillar of rectitude, but I ain’t no psychopath neither.”

“Indeed.” She looked down her nose at him. “Your vested interest in her has nothing to do with moral rectitude, I’m sure.”

He laid the cup aside and raised his hands in defence humorously.

“You got me wrong, Raven. My biggest interest is in finding out what Essex plans t’ do wit’ me… And ideally gettin’ him offa my back in the process. Anna jus’ happens to want exactly the same thing as me.”

_Not to mention which_, he added mentally to himself, _she’s kinda hired me._

But he didn’t say it out loud. He had a feeling that that was a fact Anna would rather keep from her friend and mentor, and if she decided she did want Raven to know, that was her prerogative, not his.

“So,” he began again, changing the subject quickly. “Is there anythin’ I need to be on the lookout for while I’m keepin’ watch over her? Convulsions? Should I call you if that happens?”

If anything Raven’s eyes narrowed even further.

“You don’t need to do anything,” she retorted sharply. “I’ll watch her. You go back wherever it is you’re stayin’ and let me take care of it.”

He laughed.

“Sorry, Raven,” he replied good-naturedly, inoffensively – like it was no big deal. “You can watch her if you want, but I’m stayin’ here.”

She sized him up like she was ready for a fight, but, after a moment, she seemed to think better of it, which, in retrospect, he was surprised at.
“How about we compromise, LeBeau. We take it in shifts. You one day; me the next.” The look she gave him made it clear she thought she was giving him a good deal. “I’l go first.”

“Non,” he answered with the confidence of one who was used to gambling. “I go first. All my stuff’s already here – makes sense for me t’ take the first shift.”

He was right and he knew it – despite her obvious distaste at the suggestion, there was no point of contention she could come back with, and in the end she was forced to capitulate.

“All right,” she scowled uncharitably. “You go first. But I’l be calling every other hour, and if you don’t pick up I’l be back.”

“Sure,” he shrugged. “You do that.”

It was a stalemate and he felt a streak of triumph that he’d managed to back her into a corner. He sensed there weren’t many who could. Still – she wasn’t the type to rail against failure. She retreated to the front door with her usual frosty composure and turned back only to say:

“I’l be back tomorrow morning. And you’l better not forget—”

“To call you if there are any changes?” he finished for her quickly. “Don’t worry – anythin’ bad happens to her, you’ll be the first t’ know.”

She still looked slightly sceptical, but didn’t voice it. She nodded, and, without another word, left.

Once she was gone Remy turned and headed back to Anna’s room.

For a long moment he stood in the doorway and watched her. She was still lying on the bed exactly as he’d left her, resting peacefully. He hoped against hope that Dr. Braddock’s improvised treatment would work.

He moved forward to stand beside the bed, not too close, not too far. It was hard to believe that behind the fragile façade lay dark secrets that he felt sure Raven had neglected to fully divulge to him.

“All those mem’ries,” he murmured. “You remember them all. You never forget.”

It seemed like a curse to him, the worst kind of curse he could imagine. But he understood now. He understood why Essex deemed her special, why he wanted her so bad. He understood too the pain that had driven her to harm herself. The void of her lost past had been filled with a hundred others. Perhaps she no longer knew who Anna Raven really was.

The silence settled, thick and impenetrable, and it reminded him just how defenceless she was right now. She had so much to lose – the mem-chips of Trask, Yashida, Lady Sarkissian… the ones she’d stolen and hidden in the wall of her closet… her own freedom – And he was her last line. Her very last line of defence.

He sank down into the chair at the dresser and watched her. He wrestled with himself. He tried to untangle the mess he’d gotten himself into, and before long he’d fallen into a fitful sleep.

-oOo-
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Anna wakes up and discovers she got a bit more than she bargained for from Ophelia Sarkissian's memories.

The gallery is a modern confection in glass and chrome, snaking round the top of the tallest building in Madripoor like Ouroboros, no end, no beginning. It is part of the Sarkissian inheritance, one of the few things her father passed down to her that she truly treasures. All the rest – the principality, the family fortune, the driving ambition, the exacting ruthlessness – these are all things she won through hard battle, or learned through close observation. The gallery, and its contents, is the one thing her father gifted specifically to her in his will.

She stops momentarily to admire the view.

The city encircles her, the best vista in the world, the full, wall-length windows giving a panoramic view of Madripoor’s High City that few ever get to see. The nightscape unfolds before her from the bustling business district down to the sea, its lights winking back at her, paying silent homage. Her home, her kingdom. Her inheritance, wrested from the cold, dead hands of several incompetent and inconvenient relatives.

She begins to walk again, past the exhibits, ignoring the constant presence of the bodyguards that shadow almost every move of her life – they are more or less an extension of her own self now, and have been since she was a child – she has barely noticed them in years.

She stops only when she sees him, standing and admiring the old iron maiden, with its intricate, filigree-like gold inlays.

“Mr. LeBeau,” she greets him. “Welcome to Madripoor. I trust you had a comfortable journey?”

He turns and smiles. It is open, it is genuine… yet it seems to hide a thousand secrets.

“Your Serene Highness.” His accent is warm and soft and one she cannot place. He inclines his head, a gesture of respect punctuated by that knowing smile. “I had a very pleasant flight. Thank you.”

He is a beautiful man, with his suit and tie and his slicked back hair and his dark, dark eyes. Despite his past, despite everything her spies have told her, he looks perfectly at ease, perfectly at home in these surroundings.

“Let’s just dispense with the formalities, shall we, Mr. LeBeau? Ophelia will do.”

Again he inclines his head, that same affectation of thanks that doesn’t quite ring true.

“Remy.” He extends his own name in kind. The name is as soft and insinuating as all the lies she knows he tells. He looks back up at the iron maiden and grins. “Quite a place you have here, Ophelia,” he remarks with a little slide of irony. “I was just admiring some of your collection.”
She follows his gaze back to the iron maiden. There aren’t many she knows who have admired it.

“Spanish, sixteenth century. Worth a couple of million dollars, US. Hardly worth your attention, I’m sure.”

He smiles glibly.

“No as a thief, no. But as a lover of art... It has a certain je nais se quoi.”

He wears the label of thief like a badge of honour. She finds it rather... attractive.

“Shall we?” she says, indicating to the observation deck. Together they sit at the small glass table where there are olives and champagne. She pours them each a glass and eyes him inquisitively. He stares right back with that perpetual half-smile, no discomfort, no self-consciousness.

She’s read his profile, of course. She’s read it thoroughly. He’s the dispossessed son of a criminal mastermind with a penchant for beautiful women and an even greater fascination for strong ones. He’s thrown in his lot with a man who only makes advantageous alliances. The fact that he is so close to Milbury is a tantalising yet worrying clue. There is something to this common thief, several lacunæ in his history that glare at her suspiciously. His reasons for joining Milbury’s employ are a troublesome mystery.

“Let me be brutally honest, Remy,” she begins, cutting to the chase. “I believe your trip here is a wasted effort.”

“Oh?” He sips his champagne calmly, unsurprised. The half-smile on his face doesn’t flicker. His lack of concern is... interesting.

“I believe I know what your employer wants,” she replies. “And I have already told him it’s a wasted effort. I’m surprised he actually thought it necessary to send you.”

She opens up her gilt leather purse and takes out the Laramies and the cigarette holder. He reads the cue effortlessly, leaning forward with an antique gold lighter in his hand. She watches him watch her as he lights first her cigarette, then his own. They both sit back and wait for the other to speak.

“Y’know, of course,” he finally states – the smile is gone, his tone business-like. “That my ‘employer’ is willin’ t’ pay you a very large sum of money to get what he wants.”

She laughs softly, derisively.

“Of course.” She presses the cigarette holder to her lips, eyes him sceptically. “What makes him think I have any need of money?”

He shrugs.

“Milbury has a certain... respect for you,” he says.

She weighs up the statement.

“Respect enough to offer me cash, rather than send one of his best operatives in to steal it?” She sucks in smoke, blows it out slowly. “How flattering.”
He seems completely unconcerned that she has found him out. He merely meets her gaze with a level stare, barely the suggestion of a smile on his mouth. Almost as if he likes that she knows what he is.

She leans forwards and taps the cigarette against the Swarovski crystal ashtray.

“I have no interest in giving up what your employer wants,” she tells him decidedly. “There is very little in it for me. I know what he wants this… thing… for; and I believe this ‘project’ he has in mind is doomed to failure. Now, if it could guarantee me and my country stable revenue and economic stability… well, then, I might consider his offer. I might even give up what he wants freely. But it is, as you Americans call it, a pipedream, Mr. LeBeau. A useless waste of time, money, and resources.”

She pauses, crosses her legs, giving him a flash of thigh – she notices that his eyes are drawn by the movement; that he doesn’t have the decency to look away.

“And if I were to speak plainly, Mr. LeBeau… I do not like your employer.”

That’s when his eyes fix hers once more.

“I’m a thief,” he says, the words level and sincere. “I can get things people don’t want to give.”

There’s a threat in there, and little bit of something else.

“Mr. LeBeau,” she rejoins firmly. “Let’s not quibble. I’m perfectly aware of what you are capable of; and you, no doubt, are perfectly aware of what I am capable of. You are hardly stupid enough to steal what Dr. Milbury wants here, now – knowing, as you must know now, that I have taken every precaution to see that it is safe.”

She pauses and lifts the cigarette holder to her lips, taking a long, slow drag. He waits, patient. He is completely unflappable. She has to hand it to him. He knows how to play the game, and he knows it well. A little smile curls her lips.

“I took the liberty of creating a few decoys. Once I knew who and what you were, of course. The one you’re looking for was replaced with a fake. There is absolutely no point in attempting to steal it.”

“Y’mean this fake?” he asks – and he reaches into the pocket of his suit and throws a mem-chip case onto the table between them.

She lowers her cigarette and stares at him.

And he smiles complacently.

“You are very well-informed,” she murmurs.

“Dr. Milbury values good intelligence.”

“So why are you here?”

He leans forward, taps his cigarette against the crystal ashtray between them.

“Why else,” he says, taking another sip of his wine, “except to scope out who I’m up against? I do my research too. ‘Smart, ruthless, beautiful, deadly’. All words that have described
Lady Ophelia Sarkissian. I find at least the first three are true. I hope I ain’t gonna find out the fourth first-hand.”

She’s amused, by his forthrightness, his intelligence. He is far more intriguing to her than his profile had suggested, and in more ways than one.

“And perhaps you think flattery will get you what you want?” she answers with a cold smile, as the smoke curls around them. They both know that for him to steal from her now would be risky – a death wish. But that won’t stop him from coming back at some future point, when she least expects it.

“Au contraire,” he replies softly, “I think we’re at somethin’ of an impasse.” He pulls on his cigarette and gives a helpless smile. “Such a shame. Guess you were right. Looks like my trip here was wasted.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” She sets down her glass and cigarette, and gets to her feet. “Still… There are ways to make this worth your while, Mr. LeBeau. If, of course, you’re interested in more than just business.”

He looks up at her, considering her statement. After a moment he stubs out his cigarette and stands. She heads towards the elevators without another word and he follows close behind – but when she gets there she comes to a sudden halt.

In the glass doors there is not her reflection, but that of another… wild green eyes and white-streaked cinnamon hair…

Cognitive dissonance takes over, making her nauseous, making her dizzy.

She averts her gaze quickly and jams her finger into the ‘up’ button…

The doors sweep open and she walks into the elevator…

…and the memory swallows her up… …

… …He’s sitting naked in her bed amongst rumpled silk sheets the colour of blood.

She stands by the window in her barely-there charmeuse dressing gown, pours them each another glass of champagne and says;

“Have you thought of alternative employment, Mr. LeBeau?”

She watches his reflection in the French windows, the way he smiles as if permanently holding back some grand secret and replies;

“What, you mean come and work for you?”

“Of course.” She turns and walks back over to the bed, hands him his glass. “A man like you… With your talents…”

She doesn’t think she needs to spell it out, and considering the way the evening has gone, she doesn’t think it advisable to extend him too much kudos. He grins and reaches out, slides his hand under the hem of her gown and over and around her thigh.

“No offence, chere,” he says softly. “But Milbury has somethin’ that you can’t give me.”

She raises a finely marked eyebrow, lets him run his hand up her thigh.
“Oh really?”

“Oh, he says. Of course he doesn’t elaborate.

“And what would that be?” she can’t help but ask curiously. He trails his hand back down her thigh, like running his fingers over marble, or silk.

“That would be tellin,’” he murmurs, all trace of his smile gone. He drops his hand and looks away. He drinks the champagne sombrely, as if his mind is drawn to far less enticing subjects than her body.

“Milbury,” she tells him after a moment’s thought, “is not a man to be trusted.” She pauses and takes a sip from her own glass, adding quietly, “I’ve had… dealings with him in the past. Close dealings. And I am glad that my association with him no longer stands.”

He smiles up at her again, almost sadly.

“Like calls to like, Ophelia,” he reminds her. “What makes you think you can trust me anymore than you can trust Milbury?”

She doesn’t answer and he sets aside his glass, reaching for the ties of her silk dressing gown, pulling them apart slowly without once breaking eye contact with her and—

—and the lights buzz on, one by one, above her head.

She’s standing in the sinister room, daddy’s hand clasping hers tight.

They stand there and look at the machine, the sleek, cold metal column with its grey fluted wires, the circle of interfacing chairs ringing its base.

“That’s the thing that will change you,” he says.

She looks up at him, at his tired yet eager face.

“Did you make it, daddy?” she asks him. She is at once awed and frightened by this colossal, cold and imposing edifice, this gunmetal monster.

“Yes,” he replies.

“What does it do?” she asks.

He looks down at her and smiles. The smile is not reassuring. He seems so tired, so drawn.

“It allows us to change memories, or get rid of them all together. But not just anyone can use the Machine. Only people with the right kind of brain can make it do what it’s supposed to do.”

She doesn’t understand, so she says nothing. His words somehow scare her.

Another door opens to their right and in walks Anna. She glances over at her, a sadly disinterested glance, before looking away and being led into one of the chairs by an assistant. She’s so small in the adult-sized chair that it takes a long time for the assistant to adjust it to her.

“What’s she doing?” she asks.

“She’s running a test,” daddy answers.
“Does she have the right kind of brain?”

“Yes.” He nods. “So far, she’s the only one in the whole wide world that has the right kind of brain.”

The assistant is finished and moves over to the nearby computer console, switches it on. The Machine comes alive in a slow crescendo of sound and light. Anna sits there with the unlowered visor on her head, stares at her with an expression that would’ve been as hard as stone if it wasn’t so sad. It prompts her to ask of her father:

“Did her mommy die too?”

And it’s a few seconds before her father replies, in a funny, almost muffled voice: “Yes. And her daddy too.”

And he squeezes her hand tight, and the world yanks her under.

-oOo-

Anna surfaced from the stolen memories as if through quicksand, slow and painful.

She sat up slowly, her head aching like the worst kind of hangover. It was the kind of headache she normally got when she’d been interfacing too much, but she hadn’t had one this bad in a long time now. There were even days back in Weapon X, when she’d come home bruised and beaten to within an inch of her life, that she had felt better.

She turned to look at the clock on her bedside table, wincing slightly when her head protested as she did so. It read 11:08 about 3 days from the last day she remembered.

That was a shock, and brought into sharp focus the last few things she actually remembered.

I’d been ‘facing. With Lady Sarkissian’s mem-chip.

She frowned, the memories coming back to her slowly as she pursued them, one by one, down the rabbit hole. What she remembered was her, on the sidewalk, in front of the Trask building. Hearing someone calling her name. Turning and seeing—

Tanya Trask.

What were you thinking? Raven had asked her six months ago. Interfacing with Tanya Trask?

And the answer had been simple, even if she’d never owned up to it then.

To find out about my own past, Raven.

Anna scrubbed her face with both palms wearily. The truth was, until this moment, Tanya’s memories had given her hardly a thing – apart from the worst bouts of the bleed effect she’d ever experienced.

Which is what you get for interfacing with someone who’s a madwoman. I can’t even remember what the hell happened. And I’ve been out of action for three fucking days……

There was the murmur of running water in the en suite, breaking her train of thought. She froze instinctively at the realisation that someone was in her house, before yet more memories slowly
filtered back to her.

*The Cajun, she thought. He was here...*

Her stomach churned uneasily at the mere idea of his presence, so visceral were Ophelia Sarkissian’s memories of him.

*Maybe it’s Raven, she decided instead.*

She got out of bed slowly, painfully. Her limbs were like jello, her head was throbbing almost unbearably. She was dressed in loose fitting jogging pants and a tee, something she felt sure Raven had chosen for her.

*Yeah… it must be Raven in the shower...*

She shuffled into the lounge and the first thing she did was head for the washroom. When she came out again she saw that there were pastries and coffee left out on the kitchen counter, and she went for them ravenously, slipping into the stool at the bar and helping herself liberally, the mem-tech hangover giving way only to the hungry protestations of her stomach. She couldn’t remember the last time food had tasted so sweet.

It was as she was eating that the faucet in the shower turned off, and a few moments later she was surprised – but only slightly so – to see the Cajun appear in the doorway, wearing nothing but a towel draped round his waist.

“Welcome back,” was all he greeted her with.

She stared at him, her eyes drawn involuntarily to his body, which he was making no attempt to hide from her. What was disturbing her more than anything was the fact that Ophelia Sarkissian’s memories were so fresh, so viscerally present in her mind right now that she couldn’t prevent a blush from spontaneously suffusing her cheeks. It was infuriating – she’d seen more than her fair share of half-naked men and none of them had had *this* effect on her. All she could do was silently curse Ophelia Sarkissian’s stolen memories.

“I thought you were Raven,” she muttered with a belligerence that only partially covered her discomfit.

“Yeah, well,” he shrugged. “We’ve been takin’ it in turns t’ look after you. I jus’ started my shift.” He paused and eyed her like he wasn’t half-naked. “How you feelin’?”

She looked away, down into her coffee cup.

“Like shit,” she mumbled.

“Ha. Yeah, well that ain’t no surprise. You’re lucky I came back and found you when I did. You were completely fucked. I seen a lot back at the Empharma compound, but nothin’ like that. Dr. Braddock had to induce a coma jes’ t’ get your brain to restart.”

He walked on over, and at first she wasn’t quite sure what he was aiming for – her or something else. His approach had her on edge, on tenterhooks like never before – until she realised he was going for the coffee pot, pouring himself a mug.

“By the way, chere,” he added with a heavy dose of sarcasm, “we really need t’ start bein’ honest wit’ each other.”
He turned and looked at her over the counter, his gaze penetrating. She wasn’t sure whether it was that or the hangover that suddenly made her legs go weak.

“Yeah,” she finally agreed, not daring to say more lest her voice give her away.

He finally broke eye contact, taking a sip of his coffee. She wished like hell that he would put some clothes on. Stolen and fragmented memories of him fucking Ophelia Sarkissian were wreaking havoc with her mind and the more he stood there, within just a few short feet of her, the more afraid she was becoming that she would jump him like some horny adolescent.

“Why’d you do it?” he quizzed her out of the blue.

“Do what?” she asked, distracted.

“Oh, I dunno,” he rejoined sarcastically. “Just the li’l bus’ness of you pullin’ that mem- chip out from under my nose. Again.”

Oh. That. The truth was, she didn’t even know exactly why she had done it anymore.

“I guess I wanted to know…” she murmured.

“About your past? About this ‘crisis’ that took away your mem’ries?”

She nodded.

“Even though you knew what it could do to your mind to ‘face again so soon?’”

It felt like an interrogation. Her gaze snapped to his, and she said firmly, intently:

“There are two things I want, Remy. Truth; or oblivion. I can’t live without the truth, and if I can’t get it, sometimes I really don’t care if I’m caught forever in a fucking stutter.”

The confession was a revelation, even to herself. There was something almost shameful in it. She dropped her eyes again, unable to meet his gaze anymore.

“Do me a favour, please,” she said quietly. “There’s codeine in the drawer next to the sink. Think you can get me some?”

He didn’t move for a long moment, but she waited him out, and eventually he turned away.

“You should know,” he spoke up seriously as he pulled the drawer open, “Raven told me ‘bout the whole Weapon X thing. And your role in it.”

She paused, her eyes burning.

“And why would she do that?” she queried. All the stuff he’d known before had been bad enough, but this… this was a million times worse. Almost a betrayal. If she’d felt vulnerable before, the emotion was magnified tenfold now.

“I made her,” he answered simply as he poured running water into a glass. “It answered a lot. About how and why you can do what you do.”

“Why is it,” she asked him crossly as he finally turned and put the bottle of codeine and the glass of water in front of her, “that you need to know so much about me?”

He braced himself against the counter with his palms, the muscles in his arms tensing –
another unwitting distraction that hooked her attention.

“Simple, chere. I do my homework, jes’ like I guess you do. You hired me to help you. I’m doin’ what you’re payin’ me for.”

“I hired you to find those missing mem-chips.”

“Let’s be honest, chere. What you’ve hired me to do is reconstruct your past. Mem-chips are only pieces of the puzzle. The history of Essex, of Weapon X, are others. Some pieces are still missin’. Once you get all’a them, you put them together. Then you find the truth. Like I said – simple math.”

She glared at him and opened the bottle, shaking two pills into her palm.

“Huh. Is that so?” She threw the pills into her mouth and swallowed them down with the water. “Well. Maybe you’re right. Luckily I got a few new puzzle pieces to work with.”

She slipped down from the stool and headed back towards her room.

“So I take it you found some clues in Ophelia Sarkissian’s mem’ries?” he called after her.

Yeah. Like you, she wanted to say, but didn’t.

“Yeah,” she replied. “But you’re gonna haveta wait a bit. I need a shower.” She got to the doorway and turned on an afterthought. “Oh and by the way… thanks.”

“For what?”

“For looking after me.”

-oOo-

He’d stayed.

Anna stared at the misty tiles as she stood under the showerhead and tried to dissect it.

He’d stayed.

It would’ve been so easy for him to do what she knew Essex wanted – hand over the chips, and hand her over too when she was at her most vulnerable and defenceless. It was what she had suspected he’d been playing at for a while now… But he hadn’t. And granted, they didn’t have all the booty yet, but… he’d been presented with an obvious opening and he hadn’t taken it. Why he hadn’t was a conundrum she wasn’t quite able to untangle. She still hadn’t figured out what he thought he had to gain in helping her, and she didn’t really believe there was anything she had that he could possibly want, if not the mem-chips and herself. She felt pretty sure Essex was offering him a lot in return for both.

She switched off the shower and picked up a towel, running it through her hair.

The idea that he might actually care about her welfare would have unnerved her if it wasn’t so patently ridiculous.

But is it? she wondered. He knows, he understands. He’s been through the bleed effect too. He was addicted to ‘facing once. He knows exactly what it is I’m going through… Maybe he wants to help me. Help me find a cure, like he found a cure too.
It was nice to think that. But in her heart of hearts she knew that people like him – like *them* – always played an angle and that there were cards he had to be hiding from her. In their line of business there was no such thing as altruism. Everything came at a price.

By the time she’d emerged from the bathroom her headache had eased a little, and Remy had changed and was finally looking halfway decent.

She’d suspected that most of the walking round naked thing had been a ploy to get under her skin, and between that and Lady Sarkissian’s half-buried memory of him, she was still feeling a little fragile in his presence.

He was sitting on the sofa contemplating something, and she dropped down into the space next to him, aware that she’d chosen the spot for painfully ulterior motives.

She followed his gaze to the coffee table and saw that he’d laid the mem-chips there, side by side, the golden threads of memory shimmering in the sunlight. Trask, Yashida, Lady Sarkissian, all in a row.

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing she said. He glanced over at her, eyebrow raised.

“For what?”

“For taking Lady Sarkissian’s chip. For pulling that incredibly stupid stunt. For not being up front with you. From now on, we work together on this, two hundred percent. Deal?”

The corner of his mouth dimpled into that all-too-familiar smile.

“Deal.”

It was a truce, a comfortable place to be in. The foundation of trust promised something more, and this time she was completely aware of it. It was the reason why she’d laid aside her pride, why she’d initiated this apology. She was tired of sparring. Her body, her soul… they both ached for closeness.

Together they looked back over the chips on the table, the things they held equal stakes in.

“There out of a six,” he murmured. “We’re halfway there.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “That leaves us with the rest of Weapon X’s six founders – Moira MacTaggert, Emma Frost, and Nathaniel Essex.”

He glanced at her sideways.

“You got that from Ophelia’s mem’ries?”

“Amongst other things,” she murmured, trying not to think of the memories of him that weren’t hers. “You know anything about the two women?”

He leaned back a little, his teeth pulling on his lip.

“Hm. Emma Frost is some sorta celebrity shrink, I’m pretty sure. Moira MacTaggert… the name rings a bell, but that’s about it. Some sorta doctor, maybe?”

“Yeah, I think so.” She took out her tablet and started up a search, letting him watch on as
she typed in the doctor’s name. The first page of hits spat back a biography record and several links to academic papers. Remy leaned in to take a look, his knee touching hers. It was a token of familiarity that brought an absent smile to her lips.

“A world-renowned geneticist, huh?” He sounded amused as she enlarged the photo on the screen. The woman who stared back was in her forties or fifties, a tired and lined yet distinguished face framed by a bob of brown hair streaked with white. “Does the face match up to the memory?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah,” she replied with certainty. “That’s the woman I saw all right.”

She scrolled down the biography slowly.

“The MacTaggert Genetics Research Institute, Muir Island,” he read off the location on the screen slowly. “Know where that is?”

“Nope.” She opened up her satellite app. “But let’s find out.”

It turned out that Muir Island was pretty much nothing more than a rock off the northern Scottish coast, a part of the Orkney archipelago. The weather forecast for the day was 46 degrees, storms and gales.

“Pretty neat place for a research centre,” Remy remarked sarcastically. “A rugged island in one of the least temperate areas of the world… Does that sound like a conveniently defensible spot to you, or is it just me?”

She nodded slowly, digesting his words.

“You might be onto something, Cajun. It says here she hasn’t left the island for the past five years.”

“Right. And five years ago is when Essex first got outta prison and set up Empharma.”

She turned her head to his. Their faces were only inches apart.

“You think she’s trying to hide from Essex?” she murmured.

His gaze was drawn first to her mouth, then back to her eyes.

“I think she’s prepared for Essex to pay her a visit,” he answered just as softly, “or to have a thief steal her mem-chip, just like Yashida was prepared back in Tokyo.” He grinned, a look that only intensified her precarious sense of free-falling. “Figure we shouldn’t disappoint her, neh?”

He was still so close, still within a few precious inches of her, and it was all she could do just to restrain herself from bridging the gap between them and kissing him.

Fuck.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want it. It was the lack of control that was holding her back. These were Ophelia Sarkissian’s wants, desires – not hers.

Right?

“Right,” she said softly. “We really shouldn’t disappoint.”

She stood quickly, removing herself from his space before she could do anything she
“So. Whaddaya think?” she asked, tossing her tablet onto the side table and facing him from across the room – a far safer distance considering the heat burning her up right now. “We go in stealth and sneaky like? Or we take the direct approach?”

He seemed unfazed by her game of cat-and-mouse. He simply leaned back in his seat and slung his arm over the back of the sofa casually.

“I think we do both, chere.”

That got her interest. Her eyebrow shot up.

“Meaning?”

He took the lighter from his pocket, flipped it expertly between his fingers, almost like he wanted or needed something to occupy his hands now that she was out of his range.

“Meaning, I do the stealth, and you do the offence. If Dr. MacTaggert is afraid of Essex, she might be happy to give up the mem-chip. Especially if it’s to Weapon X’s star ex-pupil.”

Anna frowned a little to herself.

Hm. Looks like Raven really did tell him everything she knew about me.

She crossed her arms, thought about it.

“Okay. And I suppose if she doesn’t bite, then you get to steal it right out from under her nose while I distract her.”

He nodded, the lighter still dancing between his fingers.

“S’right.”

She couldn’t help a small smile crossing her lips at the simplicity of his plan.

“I can see why Essex wants you,” she said at last. “The way you intuit things… … You really are one of us. The one percent.”

He made no remark on that point – she wondered if her comment had disconcerted him, but again, there was no expression on his face. She had to admit it – he was good at the whole poker face thing.

“So,” she continued breezily, “if we’re gonna cut this both ways, whaddaya fancy doing? Going out and getting supplies; or staying here and working out logistics?”

The lighter went still in his hand, and, just as quickly as it had appeared, it had suddenly vanished again. Gone was the poker face, replaced by a wide smile that said now we’re talkin’.

“If we’re flyin’ t’ Scotland there’s some strings I can pull, chere, make sure our kit don’t raise too many questions. So I guess I’ll take the logistics – if’n you’re feelin’ up to goin’ out, that is.”

That last part betrayed just an inkling of concern for her, and she was touched that he cared enough not to fake it.
“Sure,” she nodded. “I need some fresh air anyway.” *And to get some time out from you,* she added mentally to herself.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. As long as I have some codeine with me…”

She headed for the packet that was still out on the kitchen counter, then went for her jacket.

“A’right,” he said. “But you should call me if anythin’ goes wrong.”

She paused midway through slipping her jacket on, throwing him a knowing smirk.

“Oh, right. Call my knight in shining armour, huh?”

She took out her phone anyway.

“And I’ll call *my* knight in shinin’ armour if anythin’ goes tits up here,” he added calmly.

She laughed, and they exchanged details remotely.

“By the way,” she told him as she finally headed for the door, “when I was caught in that neural stutter my mind was trying to sift out Ophelia Sarkissian’s memories from my own. All her memories I’d ever interfaced with were spinning round my head like a spinning top.” She turned at the door and faced him, saying, “You were in one of the more interesting ones.”

She let that sink in before finally opening the door, and she’d just about crossed the threshold when she heard him say behind her: “I can guarantee you, chere, dat I’m much more ‘interestin’ in person. You should try me out sometime.”

The suggestion was enough to make her quickly shut the door closed behind her.

-oOo-

The evening was fresh and cool and calming.

Anna popped a couple more codeine pills and hopped onto her motorbike. At least, she thought, she wasn’t having any tremors. She silently thanked Dr. Braddock for putting her into a coma. It’d given her brain a chance to restart itself, which was what she desperately needed right now.

She headed into the City and set about her task. Rope, climbing gear, ammo, GPS, a whole new medi-kit. She even bought a couple of blades, since she figured they were his weapon of choice. It was just as she was finishing up that she got Raven’s text. There wasn’t much to it.

*As requested,* was all it said, followed by a link.

Anna hit the link immediately, her heartbeat kicking up a notch. She knew what it was, and she was half afraid what it might tell her.

The link was to a PDF document that, unsurprisingly, ran to over a thousand pages. She let out a soft whistle, just as Raven’s second text came through.

*Everything you need to know about Remy LeBeau,* it said.
Everything?

She wasn’t optimistic enough to believe that it was *everything*, but it had to be a start.

Anna brought the file back onscreen, headed to the nearest café, and began to read.

-oOo-
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Anna and Remy come to an understanding after laying (almost) all their cards on the table...

Remy spent the afternoon booking a flight to Edinburgh, a rental car from the airport, and a hotel room on the coast. Once all that was done he fired off a message to Essex.

*Finally heading to Scotland. Make sure customs ain’t gonna be a problem pls.*

He attached the flight details and hit the Send button.

He stood for a moment, chewing thoughtfully on his bottom lip. A lingering uneasiness crept over him, one whose name he didn’t dare to speak. In order to stave it off he settled into the sofa and got down to some good old-fashioned research. The MacTaggert Genetics Research Institute just happened to be one of the leading institutions on neurogenetics; its titular head scientist, Moira MacTaggert, whilst something of a recluse, was one of the field’s leading experts.

“A geneticist, huh?” he mused to himself. “Figures a geneticist would be workin’ on a top secret super soldier program.”

It certainly led on to further lines of inquiry that he wasn’t sure he was going to like. He knew Milbury dabbled in genetics and the idea that he could’ve messed around with his DNA was something that made him feel distinctly uneasy.

The idea of what he could’ve done to Anna during her time as a test subject was a further complication he didn’t feel he could tackle right now.

Remy sighed wearily and rubbed his face with both hands.

*Anna.*

He’d been under no illusions as to what she’d meant with that parting shot as she’d left. Truth be told a part of him got a kick out of the idea that she had played voyeur to one of his most intimate moments… but another part of him… It only served to hone a six-month-long frustration that had been nagging at him with an unrelenting insistence.

He was on a job and frankly this – *she* – had become an overwhelming distraction that needed to be quenched.

The screen on his phone had long since gone blank and he set it aside, heading for the window to smoke.

He wanted her. He wanted Anna. Anna and her sharp edges and her hidden curves.
Anna and her fiery temper and her honeycomb smiles. He wanted her in a way he hadn’t wanted a woman in a long time. So far his baser instincts had been held at bay by his dogged detached professionalism in the face of the job, but now… now he was tired of denying himself. This thing between them needed a resolution. And if he had to wait much longer…

Remy blew smoke and thought of Belle. He thought of all the fucked up mistakes he’d made, and all the things they had cost him. Anna was just another mistake. But he wanted her.

He finished his cigarette, closed the window, and was just about to settle down to another hour or so of research when the front door opened and in walked Anna, a bag of what appeared to be heavy equipment on each shoulder.

She didn’t even acknowledge him but walked right on in, dumping the bags onto the sofa as if offloading a pair of dumbbells.

“Remy LeBeau,” she declared breathlessly. “The next time we decide to divvy up the chores, remind me to choose logistics.”

She leaned over and unzipped the nearest bag, giving a sneak preview of some of the goodies inside. He whistled when he saw what she’d got.

“That sure is a lotta gear, chere,” he remarked with approval.

“Yeah. Muir Island’s pretty rugged. Wanna be prepared for any eventuality.” She rummaged around a bit before finally retrieving a roll of knives and handing it to him.

“A present? For me?” he said mockingly, but his face changed when he’d unsheathed one and turned it over in his hands a few times. “Hmph. These are some high quality pieces of art. Who’s your supplier?”

“That’d be telling,” she told him impishly. “So. How’d all the boring paperwork go?”

He turned away, went over to the desk, and returned with a sheaf of papers.

“We’re all booked for tomorrow. Got us a car and hotel room too. Oh yeah, and a boat. Lemme see – what else? I printed out some stuff I found on Dr. MacTaggert and her genetics centre – might be somethin’ interestin’ there.” He looked on as she leafed through the pages, surprised at how much he’d got done in so little time. “Sorry, I hacked into your printer.”

She looked back up at him with a little twinkle in her eyes.

“We’re flying first class.”

He grinned.

“First class is the only way to fly, chere. I’m pretty sure that’s somethin’ we can both agree on.”

“How well you know me,” she rejoined dryly. The way she said it was loaded with sarcasm, but the fact that she didn’t move afterward, that she let her eyes wander over him with an almost absent-minded intensity, made its implication sound entirely different. Earlier on that morning, after she’d just woken up, she’d been giving off a slew of mixed signals, and here they all were again. There was a glaze to her eyes, a dreaminess that made him wonder whether she wasn’t still channelling a little bit of Ophelia Sarkissian.
The thought that she was did weird shit to his stomach.

A few seconds passed and suddenly she’d turned away.

“You’re welcome for the present,” she threw back at him, all her previous sarcasm back.

“Don’t mention it,” he murmured, watching on as she went towards her bedroom. There was a heaviness to her step that made him worry. “You okay, p’tit?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She waved him off, turning to face him only when she got to the door. “Just got a bit of a headache. Think I’ll take some pills and rest for a couple of hours.”

A bit of a bleed effect hangover was understandable, but seeing as she’d been in a coma the past couple of days, he was still concerned.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. A bit of sleep and I’ll be fine. Trust me, I’m so used to this, Remy, it’s not even funny.” She opened the door. “Just… come in and wake me if I’m not up in a couple of hours. Okay?”

The request was another extension of trust from a woman he knew rarely gave it. He nodded.

“Thanks.” She smiled briefly, before disappearing into her room.

-oOo-

One hour passed, then another.

Remy sat and researched some more, then let another hour pass.

When there was still no movement, he got up and knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer.

He pushed at the door gently and slowly let it swing open, stepping over the threshold and coming to a halt just inside the doorway.

She was lying on her side, on top of the covers, curled up in the foetal position. Yet again he was struck by how small and child-like she seemed, how forlorn and defenceless. How much of the impression was real, and how much an illusion, he wondered? Was it okay to want something so broken?

He padded into the room silently and sat down on the bed beside her, leaning over slightly to study her face. She was calm, untroubled. Whatever turmoil was hidden on the inside of her mind, it didn’t show in her expression at all. She looked completely at peace.

He’d never seen her looking like this before, and it stirred something in him deeper and weightier than lust. Impulse drove him to reach out and touch her, to brush the locks of white and brown hair back over her ear and run just the tips of his fingers down over the slant of her cheekbone.

It felt like he’d barely touched her when she snapped into wakefulness, sitting bolt upright, her left hand shooting out to clamp round his wrist whilst her right fist whizzed out in a lightning-quick punch. His own finely-honed instincts propelled him into counterattack mode, and he caught
her fist before it could connect, halting it mid-blow with an ease born from years of practice.

For a second neither of them moved, her breathing hard, adrenaline casting aside all trace of sleep as her eyes scoured his face in the dimness. It was only his own calm, his own sense of equilibrium, that brought her to her senses. She loosened her grip but didn’t release it.

“Remy,” she said on a breath.

The name was low, thick with sleep, her Southern accent lilting over the syllables like the Mississippi lapping against sunny shores on a summer’s day. The way she made his name sound when it came from her lips, the way she was so damn close he could feel her breath on his face… it made his pulse quicken and the blood rush in his ears.

“M’sorry,” he apologised huskily. “ Came to wake you up…”

She blinked.

She dropped her fist, but not the hand that was still clasping his wrist.

“Oh.” She glanced over at the clock on the nightstand. “I overslept.”

“Yeah. Figured you could do with an extra hour…”

She seemed to realise she still had his hand, and she released it slowly, as if reluctant to do so. It was a cue, perhaps, for him to make a move… to lean in, to kiss her… to push her back against the sheets and undress her… to put his hands and his mouth and his tongue on her body and mark out every inch of her… to have her do the same to him… … He was pretty sure she wouldn’t resist, that she wouldn’t say no. All the signals she’d been sending since day one told him that she wanted him too.

He was so certain that she wouldn’t have said no that he was perplexed when he suddenly stood and backed away towards the door. He only knew that now didn’t seem like the right time.

“Is there anythin’ I can get you, chere?” he asked, stupidly, or so he thought.

She was still sitting there, watching his retreat.

“No,” she finally murmured. “I’m fine.”

He gave a small nod – perhaps she could see it, perhaps she couldn’t. Whatever the case he got to the door, and the point seemed moot. It was only when he was about to leave that she stopped him.

“Actually,” she said in a soft voice, so quiet he wouldn’t have been able to hear it but for the deadly silence, “there is something you can do for me.”

He turned back to her. She was still sitting there, looking at him. Yet again her eyes were almost golden in the light spilling in from the lounge.

“What?” he asked quietly.

She didn’t take her eyes from his; her expression was solemn.

“Take me out tonight,” she said.

He didn’t reply. Just stared right back at her. His silence seemed to stir her, and she
leaned slightly towards him, said:

“Take me out tonight. Just like you would if I was any other woman. Make me forget who I am. Make me believe I’m somebody else.”

He paused for a long time, looking at her. He sensed something wasn’t quite right. Perhaps she was still recovering from her coma… Or was she syncing with Ophelia’s brainwaves? Whatever it was, she seemed… disorientated – but he didn’t want to say no.

“Sure,” he finally answered, and he turned and left before he could change his mind.

-oOo-

Later, she would ask herself what it was that had made her ask him for something so foolish and whimsical.

At the time she had rationalised it as a cynical ploy to test his loyalties, but it was something more than that.

It was an exercise in closeness from a woman who was no stranger to it.

She had, after all, hundreds of dates stored in her mind, along with fifty-two weddings, twenty-five secret rendezvous, and a handful of first-times. They all had one thing in common – none of them were hers.

The only ones that belonged to her, irrevocably, were her memories of Cody.

She remembered cradling him in her arms, her gaze fixed on his, willing him to wake up, unable to understand why he wouldn’t, paralysed, uncomprehending. And then looking up, seeing Essex looking down on her, saying:

*He was beneath you, Weapon Zero.*

She still thought about it sometimes. About the judgement call Essex had had no right to make. Was humanity beneath her? Because that was what Cody had taught her about. *Humanity.* And if humanity was beneath her, then what did that say about her? That she was just a stack of other peoples’ memories, a means to an end that always did what it was told?

No – she was human. And it was humanity alone that had made her ask Remy what she had.

She was *lonely* – achingly, grindingly so. It wasn’t just for the lack of physical intimacy. It was for all the basic things, the simple companionship. For the things she knew but that weren’t her own. Or that were too painful to touch.

In the end, she made him take her to *La Princesse*.

She’d dined there several times before, although always by herself – except the once. The first time she’d come was with a rich banker who’d wanted to woo her with caviar and champagne and ‘the best view in the city’. She’d ended up being more enthralled with the view than her date. Afterwards, it was always the view she’d come back for.

Remy had been quiet in the taxi, and equally quiet as they’d stepped inside the building
that was shaped like a hundred faceted diamonds. He had said more with his body than words
could’ve expressed to her. It had been there in the gentle hand he had placed on her shoulder blade
as they had stepped into the gilt and glass elevator and led to the uppermost floor. It had been there
in his eyes as he’d stared at her reflection in the window. It’d been implicit in a thousand little things
that had no name, things that she fed upon selfishly, ravenously. She didn’t care what it made her – a
needy fool taking what she could from a man she didn’t trust but who she knew wanted her. Right
now she was willing to be broken for the sake of a little closeness, even if it was only a pretence.

They took their seats by the window, right by the balcony that looked out over the city –
one of her favourite vantage points. It was twilight, the last failing vestiges of the day casting a faint
purplish glow over the sky as the sun finally set.

“You come here often?” he asked her.

“Now and then,” she replied. “You?”

He hitched her a lazy smile, a forefinger absently tracing the curved handle of his fork.

“Same as you,” he answered. “Now and then.”

She looked across the table at him, sitting there in his black Armani suit, with all his usual
elegance and false indifference. She knew he had to be wondering where this night was leading.
Even at this point she wasn’t entirely sure where she wanted it to go herself.

The waiter came bearing menus, and Remy ordered the most expensive wine in the house
without even bothering to look at the list. It was an affectation that was yet another sign he came
here often – probably with clients, business associates… other women.

It made her wonder which category she fell into right now – business or pleasure?

His eyes were on her, and they should’ve given him away, except that the look wasn’t so
much lustful as assessing, like she was a risk to be weighed up. With most men she had played a
part, pretending she was something she wasn’t, easy to win and easy to read. With him, she had
almost always been herself, right from the outset. She didn’t think there was a moment they hadn’t
been playing games with one another, and it disconcerted her to think that this thief, this conman
who was now sitting so complacently across from her knew more about the real her than anyone
else. Whoever the real her actually was.

This is all a game, she reminded herself sternly.

Because when it came down to it, all they’d been doing was stringing one another along.
Fencing. Dancing. Waltzing to a dissonant tune of desire and deception. Back in her apartment
they’d been close, so close, to just giving in to instinct… And yet he’d backed away. And she’d
reeled him back in with all this wining and dining because… because she was tired of denying
herself. There was a twofold purpose in them being here, tonight. On the one hand, this was all just
an excuse to up the ante and see who would fold first. On the other, it was a ploy on the part of each
to magic away the unbearable freedom of being alone.

The wine arrived, and even then he barely looked away from her. For the first time in a
long time she began to feel self-conscious under his scrutiny, all done up in her red crepe-de-chine
dress and her intricately coiled chignon. It was enough, at any rate, to make her look aside, out of
the window, and comment mostly to herself: “Nights like these… the city almost looks like
Madripoor.”
There was a pause before he finally answered.

“Yes. Yes it does.”

The drinks were poured, and the waiter retreated. Remy raised his glass and leaned towards her.

“Cheers, chere,” he said.

“Cheers.”

She smiled at him with only the barest hint of playful cynicism. They clinked glasses. The wine was surprisingly sweet and rich and she wondered that he’d managed to gauge her taste so accurately.

*Or maybe it was just a lucky guess,* she told herself wryly.

Anna stared down at the menu and tried to concentrate.

Who was she now, she wondered?

Tanya Trask, huddled in some corner, shutting herself off from the smell of the food and the clink of the glasses and the chatter of the guests? Or Shingen Yashida, who disdained all frivolity? Or Ophelia Sarkissian, who had a penchant for crab salad and Dom Pérignon?

Without a second thought she ordered the crab salad and handed back the menu.

“You do know,” he began when they were alone again, “that I was s’pposed to call Raven when you came outta that coma, right?”

She sniffed dourly.

“Sounds about right. I probably scared the living daylights out of her.”

“You sure did. She wasn’t the only one you freaked out.” He toyed with the stem of his glass pensively. “How many times has it happened before, chere? Bein’ caught in a stutter?”

She shrugged, trying to make light of it, but the gesture felt forced.

“Four or five times.”

He glanced up at her sharply and let out a breath.

“Four or five? Fuck me.” He drank some of his wine, recovering from his surprise in the process, said, “There ain’t no way in hell you’re facin’ with Moira MacTaggart’s chip when we get it.”

She glowered at him.

“Why not?”

“Don’t it speak for itself? You ain’t well enough to do it. Let Raven ‘face with it. Or someone else.”

“I’m not letting Raven anywhere near this,” she snapped. “Raven doesn’t know anything about this and the less she does the better.”
“Then let me do it,” he said.

She gaped at him.

“No. Fucking. Way.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she responded hotly, “you already got screwed over once by the sim-chips. Lucky for you, Essex managed to cure you. You have no idea what interfacing with a mem-chip will do to you. I know I have a problem, and I was made to deal with it. You weren’t. Bottom line. I can handle it. You can’t.”

His expression went blank and she thought she might have pricked his pride, but she didn’t care what he thought about her statement – she was adamant that no one should have to go through what she had, and he seemed to read that loud and clear. There was a brief pause; he raised his hands neutrally.

“A’right. Fine. But you’re gon’ wait a few days before you even think about ‘facin’ wit’ dat chip, Anna. Deal?”

She huffed a bit, both a little taken aback that he had acquiesced so easily, and a little indignant that she was still resorting to making disadvantageous bargains with him.

“All right,” she said at last. “Deal.”

Their meals came at last, and she was thankful for the distraction. It was only when the waiter was finally backing away that she saw someone sitting at the table over his shoulder, a girl with a head of curly, brown hair and a forlorn stare who had haunted so many of her memories, of her nightmares…

A moment there, a moment gone.

Just as she was about to call out Tanya to the girl, she moved, ever so slightly – and Anna realised that it wasn’t a girl at all but a woman, a frizzy-haired brunette in a dark blue dress who was listening intently to the man sitting next to her. The name died in her throat.

She frowned, shaken by the realisation that this was yet another symptom of the bleed effect.

“So,” Remy was saying across the table, “tell me somethin’, Anna. All these mem-chips you’ve got stored back in your apartment… have you faced with them all?”

The question was a welcome distraction from her current train of thought.

“Yes,” she answered briefly.

“And you remember them all?”

“Yes.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“That’s pretty insane… when you think ‘bout how many of those chips you have.”

“I guess,” she replied, picking at her salad. “I never think about it much… My entire life all
I’ve ever done is ‘face with other people’s memories.’

“How do you deal with it?” he asked her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… all those painful memories… one’s that don’t even belong to you… How do you deal with all that shit?”

She stared down into her plate, her brow furrowed. This was a question she’d never asked herself before.

“I don’t know,” she answered at last.

A silence fell, during which she felt bothered by not having been bothered by these questions before.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” he finally asked, in a softer tone.

“Sure.”

“Back at your place… I couldn’t help but notice… you’ve got a helluva lotta your own memories stored in those boxes.” He lifted his eyes to hers. “Most people only record and keep the memories worth keepin’, worth relivin’. The amount you have… I’d say there’s hundreds, maybe more there. Why do you record so much?”

More difficult questions. She really wished she knew where all this was coming from.

“I guess,” she answered slowly, trying to articulate an impulsion she’d never had to analyse before, “I guess… in case I ever lose my memories.”

It was the best she could come up with, and somehow it felt inadequate, silly even. But he merely stared at her with his usual equanimity, saying, “You’re afraid of losin’ your mem’ries?”

“I suppose I am.”

She touched the bracelets on her arm and lowered her eyes, somehow ashamed of the admission. He seemed to sense this because he didn’t push her anymore, for which she was grateful. His questions made her feel vulnerable, exposed, aware of the very fragile grip she seemed to hold onto her own identity. Maybe he was having second thoughts about their arrangement. Maybe he thought she was a lost cause, a liability. An addict who couldn’t keep her head straight.

“Remy?” she questioned him on an impulse.

“Hm?”

“Do you ever record your own memories?”

There was a pause, one that lasted a split second too long, before he answered a little too forcefully: “No.”

It was the most serious she’d ever seen him, which intrigued her. Memory recording was such a regular part of human life now that his aversion to it would’ve seemed quaint and old-fashioned, if not for the sudden coolness of his demeanour.

“Don’t you have any memories worth keeping forever?” she asked curiously.
His response was to glance up at her sharply, intently – more so, she thought, than he’d ever looked at her. His gaze was so intense that it made her hold in an involuntary breath.

“The question ain’t how to remember the things you want to keep, chere,” he finally rejoined, quietly, seriously. “It’s how to destroy the things you want to forget.”

There was a truth in that statement that for some reason made her instinctively shudder.

“Memories degrade with time,” she reminded him softly.

“Some do,” he said, and there was weight to his words. “Some don’t.”

He finally averted his gaze, picking up his glass and drinking. She sat, silent, digesting his words. There was an admission there, somewhere inside them, too begrudgingly given for her to unpick. All she knew was that there was a way to make memories disappear – because Essex had stolen every single one she had possessed before the age of twelve – and she would do anything to get them back.

In that single moment the paradox of memory had never seemed so potent to her – that it was all at once so fragile and yet so resilient.

“Earlier on today,” he began, “you said to me that you’d prefer oblivion if you couldn’t have the truth. But there are some truths that are worse than oblivion, chere.”

“Are there?” she wondered out loud.

He paused mid-chew, as if he thought her reply naïve.

“Why do you think so many people are hooked on the sim-tech?” he asked her after a moment. “If it ain’t to forget the pain of the real mem’ries they’ve created?”

“Is that what got you hooked on the sim-tech?” she asked quietly. He looked aside, a rueful little smile on his lips… But he said nothing. “Our memories,” she continued after the silence threatened to lengthen, “even the painful ones… they’re what make us what we are. If they just disappeared one day… we wouldn’t be us anymore. Our pasts make us.”

He grimaced slightly.

“Y’see, that’s where you an’ I disagree, chere. I happen t’ think it’s our present experiences, our present choices, that make us what we are. Bury your past and you’re still here, you still matter. You still exist.”

She frowned. In a way he was right, yet oh-so-wrong.

“Your past affects everything you do in the present,” she disagreed softly. “The man you are… the words you say… the reason why you’re sitting here tonight… They are what they are because of what happened in your past.”

There was a quiet conviction to her voice that immediately got his attention. He eyed her closely, sceptically.

“Guess it’s a shame you dunno the first thing ‘bout my past.”

He seemed so sure, so certain about this fact, that she felt instantly compelled to refute it.

“Maybe I know more than you think.”
Again there must have been something in her voice, because he darted a sharp look at her over his wineglass.

“'My past was scrubbed,” he stated matter-of-factly. “It was one of the first things I got Essex to do when I joined Empharma.”

She shook her head slightly.

“There were still traces,” she informed him quietly. “Copies that were made before everything got wiped.”

She definitely had his attention now. He was still, levelling her an intense gaze that forced her to explain: “Raven’s an information broker. It’s her living, Remy – she’s one of the best at what she does. When you came back from Paris with my old personnel file… Well, let’s just say I couldn’t be sure how you’d gotten it. I didn’t trust you. So I asked her to put a dossier together on you.”

She watched him digest this. He placed down his knife and fork and leaned back in his chair slowly – there was still that infuriating half-smile on his lips, but his eyes were empty now, and it unsettled her.

“And what exactly did she find?” he asked. His smile was cool, as if he thought she was bluffing – it prompted her to take the phone out of her purse and open up the files Raven had sent her.

“Remy Etienne LeBeau,” she read off the first line of the first page flatly. “Adopted son of Jean-Luc LeBeau, head of New Orleans’ premier crime syndicate. One brother – Henri LeBeau. Your adoptive mother, Marguerite, passed away when you were five. Expert marksman; weapons of choice – knives, bolas, spikes. Master in savate and bojutsu. World-class thief by the time you were seventeen. Got engaged to the daughter of a rival mobster when you were eighteen – Belladonna Boudreaux.” She raised her eyes to his, added: “Nobody on either side of the fence liked that, but you went ahead and did it anyway. You married her. And you were both disowned.”

He blinked then, and his amused irritation faded into resentment. After a moment he dropped his gaze, reached for his wine glass, and upended it like it was a shot of whiskey. Then he sat looking at the tablecloth for a few seconds before finally speaking.

“D’you know,” he said with controlled softness, “what a thief and an assassin do when they go out into the ‘real world’, Anna?”

She shook her head, saying nothing; he raised his eyes again, nailing her gaze effortlessly.

“They fall apart,” he told her soberly. For a few moments he seemed lost in a memory.

“You grew apart…?” she hazarded a guess, and he laughed humourlessly, replied:

“We pushed each other apart. We only knew one thing in this life an’ that was crime. Outside of the underworld we had nothin’ but each other.” He seemed to bite out the words. “Nothin’ but each other to blame for the disappointment our lives had become, for the failures we couldn’t seem to get past.”

There was a long pause as he looked back into his empty wine glass. “We lost a baby… I’m sure you read about it.” He didn’t even try to hide the bitterness, the anger in his voice. “Belle’s way of dealin’ with it was to go back to her folks. Mine was to medicate myself… ended up hooked on the sim-tech…” He set his glass down, pushed it away. “Anything else you need to know? The
shit that went down with her brother? My manslaughter charges? My time in prison?” By the time he was done talking he’d become unnaturally calm. He poured himself another glass of wine and she could tell it was just an excuse to look away from her again. She thought for a moment that his hand trembled.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Heh.” He looked out over the city and considered her apology. “It’s only fair isn’t it p’tit? I know about you… you know about me.”

But somehow she knew it wasn’t that simple. Digging into his past, revealing him where he did not want to be revealed even to himself, had hurt him. She could sense that much. And it surprised her. It surprised and confused her, because had he really believed that she would agree to work with him without knowing the first thing about him? Isn’t that what everyone in their business did? Check out one another, whether they were potential enemies or potential allies? Did he really believe he’d buried his past so well that no one could find it?

After all the power play they’d engaged in, it was ironic that now, for the very first time, she had truly wounded him, without even meaning to. And more than that – she felt bad about it. She understood, more than ever now, what had driven him to his addictions. They weren’t so very different from her own.

“Look, Remy,” she said softly. “I get it. I really do.” She looked down at her plate, feeling suddenly embarrassed, self-conscious, but unable to back out now. “Sometimes life becomes so unbearable, so fucked up, that the sim-tech is the only escape. It’s a fantasy, an unreality – a world where we don’t hold responsibility for anything. Where we can just forget we ever existed, where our thoughts and our experiences never happened. Where we never make any memories.” She looked up at him, earnest. “I get it, Remy. I do.”

It was an offer of solidarity that, until that moment, she had had no real intention of giving him. But he didn’t take it. A cloud crossed his face, and he got to his feet abruptly.

“I need a smoke,” he said, feeling his pockets for his lighter and cigarettes.

She watched him stride out onto the balcony, kicking herself for pushing things too far, for saying the wrong thing, for feeling so out-of-her-depth.

Despite all the games they’d played with one another, this newfound power over him was something she realised she didn’t want at all.

She watched him from afar, the line of his body silhouetted against the night sky, smoke wreathing him like a mystery, and she can’t not think about it, the texture of his hands on her skin, the hot press of his kiss…

Were these Ophelia’s desires, or her own?

Ophelia likes to smoke, a voice said in her head, and before she knew it she was up from her seat and joining him on the balcony. He made no move to acknowledge her approach, and when she stood beside him at the railings she said nothing, merely held out her hand to him. He looked at it a moment, maybe two, before handing her the cigarette.

It tasted of him; and she drew on it slowly, sucking the smoke deep into her lungs, expelling it again deliberately. She watched the ashy puffs rise then sink into the inky blackness of the night, keenly aware that his eyes were on her, trained on her face with all the force of a laser.
“I’m sorry,” she told him again in a low voice. “It’s nothing personal, you know. I didn’t want to piss you off, Remy.”

The apology was honest – sorries had never come easy to her. It was a humbling of herself that he read loud and clear.

“I know,” he replied quietly. He said nothing more and she was forced to continue:

“This business we’re in, Remy… This is what we do. Of course I had a file done on you.” She raised her eyes to his, her expression earnest. “I had to know if I could trust you.”

He considered her statement, evaluating it slowly.

“And do you trust me now?” he asked her pointedly, his gaze still warm on her face. She stared out over the city and said; “I don’t know…”

He sniffed with cynical humour.

“All that trouble you went to, and you still don’t know,” he commented wryly. His fingers ran subconsciously over the balustrade, like he needed something to occupy them. “Don’t worry,” he added with a self-deprecating smile. “I know how it is, for people like us, for people who work alone. ‘Don’t trust, unless you’re given a real reason to’. And I admit it – I ain’t an easy person to trust.”

His hands settled and his fingers curled tightly around the rail.

“But we ain’t even, chere,” he continued. “Not by a long shot. You know what I wonder when I look at you? I wonder about the woman you really are – the woman in-between the Rogue and the stone cold soldier from Weapon X.” He looked over at her, his gaze penetrating. “Who is Anna Marie Raven?” he asked her. “What’s her past?”

His words were both insinuating and invasive, implying a desire to both connect with and conquer her inner world. Perhaps she should have felt flattered, titillated, indignant… But instead she felt… sad. She gazed downward, to the streets far below, suddenly feeling the pull of gravity.

“I have no past,” she murmured.

For a moment she let the emptiness of those words envelop her, before she took a final pull on the cigarette and held it out to him. He paused before taking it back; she felt the pad of his index finger brush against her own, an insignificant gesture that lingered too long to mean nothing.

He pressed his lips against the lipstick-stained cigarette. He pulled in a long, slow drag, considering her.

“Who are you right now?” he asked quietly.

It was unexpected. She shot a look at him, saw he was perfectly serious, looked away again.

“Anna,” she murmured. “I’m Anna.”

“Are you sure?” he quizzed her softly. “‘Cos right now I’m gettin’ Ophelia Sarkissian vibes offa you.” He flicked ash off the edge of the balcony nonchalantly, adding, “How do I know it’s you, chere? Not Tanya Trask? Or Shingen Yashida? Or anyone else you’ve ‘faced with?”
Good question. She stared at her hands, neatly folded together over the railings.

“Does it matter?” she murmured at last.

“Yes.”

He said it firmly, decisively, and it hit her right in the belly, warm and visceral. She swallowed, not daring to speak.

He gave a soft laugh, reading her silence as stubbornness, or perhaps an inability to answer, to reassure him that this was her and no one else – at least, she thought so. He turned, leaning against the balustrade with his elbows, savouring his cigarette.

“You do have a past, y’know,” he told her after a few seconds of silence. “Don’t need ta ‘face wit’ one of those mem-chips to figure it out.” She gave him a questioning sidelong glance and he continued: “Everyone’s gotta past. Even if it’s only in the little things between the big things. For example,” and he blew smoke into the darkness, “the way you drive… that tells me you learned when you was just a pup. In adverse conditions. Prob’ly on a farm. And,” he indicated to her hair with his cigarette, “that white streak ain’t a dye job. It’s natural, and you’ve never dyed it out. ‘Cos you love it too much.”

She grimaced, unconvinced, unnerved… unable to validate any of his suggestions with real, living memories.

“And…?” she prompted him, with a sarcasm that was a cover for her sudden discomfort. If he noticed it, he pretended not to.

“And… You had a man once. Who treated you good.” He looked aside, back to the view. “Who made you happy.”

He was good at surprising her – not always in a positive way. She was unsettled by just how much his guesswork bothered her.

“And how can you tell that?” she rejoined quietly, trying to sound neutral and not succeeding.

“I just can,” he answered, that wry little smile tugging at his lips once more. “It’s in you, chere. In the way you walk. The way you talk. The way you dress and the way you smile. In the way you kiss.” He gave her a probing look then that brought her heart into her mouth. “Every time you look at me you tell me a li’l bit about the past you shared with that someone.”

He smiled, straightened, put the cigarette to his mouth.

“You and me,” he began in a lighter tone, “we share somethin’ in common. We both lost someone we cared about, neh? My wife,” he said the word with just a little hint of sorrow, “every month she’d send me the divorce papers. To my dropbox. I signed ‘em, I sent ‘em back. But… I miss her,” he mused, before correcting himself, saying: “I miss what we were.”

He looked back over at her with a tight smile.

“Neither of us is made to be alone, chere. Some people can deal wit’ dat, but people like us… we can’t. So yeah. You’re right. Sometimes life is so fucking unbearable you want to hide inside a simulation. Or pretend you’re livin’ in someone else’s mem’ries. You do anythin’, so you don’t haveta be y’self.”
She smiled sadly. She nodded.

“Yeah. But it doesn’t change the thing you want to cure, does it, Remy. It doesn’t stop the loneliness.” It was the sort of confession she hadn’t meant to utter. She cast her eyes downward, just as he had before, when he’d talked about his baby.

He was completely serious now, no false half-smiles. He said nothing; the cigarette slept in his hand. The silence was deafening, almost painful. She wasn’t sure what it meant.

“There was someone, once,” she admitted after a long-drawn-out moment. “But…” and she looked away, not sure how to say the next words, deciding to just say them anyway, “he’s dead now.”

She turned to go back into the restaurant, but she’d only got halfway there when he called out to her.

“Anna.”

She halted. When she looked back she saw that he was still standing there by the railings, facing her, his expression closed.

“Y’know… there are other services I can provide, chere… ‘part from gettin’ what you want got.” He pulled on his cigarette, never taking his eyes off her, blew smoke aside, adding when she said nothing: “If you figure there’s somethin’ else you want, that is.”

He laid it on the table so casually, so flippantly. A promise of intimacy, a chance to magic away years of hunger, of isolation, of exile. On both their parts. And suddenly all the voices in her head had gone quiet. No Ophelia, no Tanya, no Yashida. Just Anna. Anna, and the sudden hollow, aching drive to touch him.

Lord knew she wanted it, more than anything else she’d wanted in a long time.

“Let’s go back to my place,” she said.

He said nothing but gave that smile that wasn’t a smile – a jerk of the mouth, prepossessed and knowing. He ground the cigarette out on the railing, before sidling up to her and offering her his arm.

She looked up at him, thinking that she’d slept with men she’d liked less; that she wanted him a thousand times more than any of them, and yet a part of her was still hesitating.

Was it really a question of trust, or of something more?

In the end it didn’t really matter.

She took his arm and, for better or for worse, she let him lead the way.

-oOo-
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Remy and Anna finally give into their passions....

Chapter Notes

***Just an FYI... I discovered that a whole section of Chapter 8 was completely missing. It doesn't affect the story majorly, but it does link two scenes together and properly addresses Remy meeting Anna again for the first time since he came back from France. If you're so inclined, give it a read. And apologies for missing out this huge chunk of the fic! :/

The taxi ride back to her apartment was achingly slow, time seeming to dilate to the lonely drumbeat of her passions.

Ironically – or perhaps not – she thought of Cody. Cody, whose existence Remy had so effortlessly guessed at. Cody, who had died a noble but worthless death for her sake. A man she had genuinely loved and yet resented for the stubborn sense of righteousness that had got him killed. His normality had seemed like an antidote to all the suffering she had endured, and yet it had failed to save him from her. His death had only compounded her suffering, reinforced the necessity of her exile. Meaningless liaisons with uninteresting men had seemed safe in comparison.

Was Remy safe, she wondered?

The lights of the city winked back at her through the taxi window, offering no answer. All that was left was the gnawing hunger she’d managed to suppress for so long. Cody’s presence felt far away – light years distant from that of the man who now sat beside her, a man as closed as Cody had been open, as dangerous as Cody had been safe.

She chanced a look at his reflection, their gazes meeting in the glass.

How long had he been looking at her, sizing her up, caressing her with his eyes?

She looked away, her heartbeat thundering, her belly on fire.

She grasped for someone’s memories to anchor her… wished she’d ‘faced with Cody’s… and there was nothing. Just the persistent drive of her own selfish lust.

The next few minutes seemed to pass in pulses of existence, her consciousness jumping from stepping stone to stepping stone towards the inevitable.

The cab juddering to a halt.
Him paying for it.

The click of her heels on the pavement.

The elevator ride up, backs to the walls, eyes on one another, silence… desire…

*Change your mind, chere, if you want. Now’s the time t’ say no…*

The chime of the elevator sounded and the doors glided open. His gaze broke first, and the walk to her apartment almost seemed to pass in a haze – for some reason she seemed only to be aware of the shape of the keycard in her hand, of the light, shallow rhythm of her breathing. His palm slid in round her waist with barely-disguised impatience as the door swung open.

They were kissing before it had even closed behind them.

-oOo-

This was all unnecessary really, he thought.

A pointless little detour on what was supposed to be a very important job.

Mark or client or partner-in-crime – he wanted her. Like he even cared about the rules of engagement anyway.

This wasn’t personal, and it wasn’t business.

It was just an itch that needed scratching, an itch he’d been suffering from the past 6 months and more, ever since he’d first laid eyes on her.

Remy pressed her up against the door as it closed behind them, the automatic lights flickering on above, his mouth finding hers with no guidance but instinct. Her body was soft and warm and somehow familiar, every dip and curve fitting effortlessly against every ridge and angle of his own.

He kissed her until he couldn’t breathe, until he was forced to draw back, panting hard. He had waited what seemed an age for her, and here it was – delayed gratification. Nothing could be sweeter.

“I want you,” he breathed, and she said nothing, just looked at his mouth with those wild green eyes; and he wondered, fleetingly: *are you Anna? Or are you Ophelia?*

He wasn’t sure, even when her hands slipped in under his lapels and swept the jacket right off his shoulders and onto the floor. She paused, her gaze rising to his again before her hands moved to his collarbone, her fingers working the buttons of his shirt one after another after another… slow enough to tease, swift enough to appease the mounting pressure of his lust. When the last button was undone she yanked the shirt out from the waistband of his pants, and, without breaking eye contact, slid her hands under the parted fabric and round his waist, climbing his bare back before coming back round again and running her fingers down his torso.

He breathed in sharply, audibly, stifling a moan.

Her teeth caught her bottom lip and she half-smiled. She ducked out from under his arm gracefully and backed her way across the room, daring or inviting him with her eyes to follow – he wasn’t sure which.
He stood in the doorway to catch his breath, allowing himself to admire her the way he’d done the first night he’d met her. She shrugged off her jacket with unconscious grace, stepped out of her heels, never once breaking eye contact. Her back hit the length of her bedroom door and she stopped.

For a long drawn out moment they stared at one another across the room.

She wasn’t Ophelia. He was certain of that now.

It was there in the way she breathed, in the way her eyes held his. It was in a hundred little things that had no name.

He moved first, coming to her like a wolf stalking a lamb. She didn’t flinch at his approach, didn’t back away into the bedroom. He halted when he got to her, stood as close as he dared, braced an arm against the door and leaned in towards her. There was this look on her face, one that seemed to say *I’m giving this to you, but I’m not going to give it up easy.* As with everything he’d experienced so far with her, she was going to make him work for it – which was more than fine by his estimation.

He lifted his free hand, grazing the backs of his fingertips gently along the curve of her cheek, up behind her ear and into her hair. He found the first bobby pin, then the second and third and fourth… He teased them all out one by one slowly and threw them aside, letting her chignon uncoil free and spill out over her shoulders in a coppery cascade.

*Beautiful,* he thought.

He ran his fingers through her hair, right down to the tips, where the locks bounced free and he was touching nothing but the bare skin of her collarbone.

Up till now he hadn’t once broken eye contact with her, but he did now. He looked at his hand on her skin and pretended to think about what to do next.

He glanced back up at her as if to ask *what now?* She gave nothing away; but her lips were parted slightly, and the rise and fall of her chest was deep.

Again he half-smiled and he slipped his hand round her back. He unzipped her dress in one long, slow movement.

Her lids were half-closed, as if considering him and every choice he was making. He wasn’t intimidated by it. He reached back upward and pushed the strap leisurely off of her left shoulder. She made no resistance, and he pushed himself away from the door, shifted his position so that he was standing almost flush against her, their hips pressed up intimately against one another, close enough to let her feel exactly what she did to him. He pressed his tongue against his teeth and smiled wolfishly. Slowly he teased the other strap over her right shoulder, sliding them both down and free of her arms. The dress fell to her waist and her gaze finally flickered. He backed up a little to push the fabric down over her hips – the dress finally fell to the floor in a crimson puddle.

He deliberately forced himself not to look at her half-naked body, to maintain the finely-tuned balance of control they’d managed to sustain so far. It was her move now. Such was his uncertainty of her true intentions that he found himself genuinely intrigued to know how she would play her hand next.

She hadn’t touched him yet, her hands pressed up against the door, and he half-suspected that she would finally give into temptation. She didn’t. Instead she slid her left hand against the door...
and found the handle. She pressed on it and the door opened up behind her. She simply stepped back into the bedroom, away from him, the lights flickering on above her, one by one.

“Dim,” was all she said, with this conspiratorial little smile on her face, and the lights darkened at her command.

She turned away, towards the bed – and that was the moment he finally felt a flush of frustration. All this parrying back and forth, all this teasing, this coy foreplay… and she was the one to turn her back on him first. His body was on fire – he was rock hard already. He expelled an angry, pent-up breath and stepped over the threshold and into the room. He snapped the door shut behind him and covered the distance between them without any further attempt at playfulness, coming up behind her, twisting aside her cinnamon hair and dipping his head into the crook of her neck, no tenderness, tasting her with his lips, then his tongue and then his teeth. He tasted her with all the savageness that he’d held at bay till this moment, trailing an angry path all the way up to her jawline. A sound left her mouth that he couldn’t describe, one that was almost animal, that was sexier than all hell.

No more games.

She swivelled in his arms and finally – finally – they were kissing again, with joyous abandon. He shrugged off his shirt impatiently whilst her hands worked at his belt feverishly. She broke their kiss only to jerk the belt out of his pants and toss it aside, before tugging him impatiently towards the bed like it was a matter of life and death.

She sat on the edge of the mattress, and he watched with bated breath as she undid his pants with a slowness that he could only assume was meant to torture. Her gaze locked onto his once more, her breath coming hard and fast as she pulled down his pants and his boxers in one, not even wavering as his erection sprang free. Finally divested of all his clothing, she lifted a hand and touched him. He sucked in a breath, letting it out again in a long, soft moan as she leaned forward, running her tongue up the entire length of him before taking him into her mouth.

Fuck.

For a few blank moments he could do nothing but fall into the rough cadence of her tongue as she pleased him, caught on a tidal wave of sensation that was as familiar and comforting as it was electric. It was only when he felt his orgasm fast approaching that he forced himself to come back to his senses. He was better than this, better than letting her win this delicate power play by default. He wanted to come inside her. He wanted her to be his; he wanted to tame her.

His fingers ran through her hair and he tilted her head gently aside, finally getting what he wanted. She stopped. When she gazed up at him with those wildcat eyes of hers, there was no fear, no hesitation. Her eyes bore all the fierceness of lust, tempting him to every sort of recklessness imaginable.

God, she was gorgeous. His stomach roiled with desire.

He put his knee on the bed and edged her back slowly until she was lying there, staring up at him with her hands on his thighs as if to say, well, what next?

She was consciously being passive. He sensed that. Giving him a moment, or waiting to see what card he’d play, or planning her next move – he didn’t know what. He reached down and touched the waistband of her panties, teasing her with the suggestion of something else before letting his hands drift upwards towards her navel. Her stomach tensed instinctively at his touch and he ran his fingers upward slowly, climbing up her ribs, just trying to feel her, to map out the planes of her
He paused when he reached the top of her ribcage and she read the moment effortlessly, shifting slightly to reach behind her and unhook her bra. He helped her slip the straps down her arms, removing the flimsy garment with a deliciousness slowness, only to toss it aside impatiently as soon as it was free. Only then did he continue his unhurried journey, grazing his fingertips right up and over the curve of her breasts, the peaks of her nipples, and she whimpered as he teased at their sharpness before moving up towards her collarbone and fuck, he couldn’t wait, he leaned in as he did so; he covered her body with his own and kissed her mouth like she alone gave him sustenance.

Almost immediately her arms came up around him and then her legs, and her kisses were hard, greedy and insistent. She ignored every move of his to slow this down to a more laidback pace, meeting his slow, deep kisses with hard ones, ignoring his gentle caresses and tender touches completely. In fact she became so wild, so desperate, that he seriously began to wonder when she’d last been with a man. Before he could come to a conclusion she had tackled him unceremoniously over and onto his back, straddling him and levelling him a glance that he could only describe as predatory.

It was almost exactly as it had been the night he’d first met her, that night in the hotel room when she’d pistol whipped him onto his back and left him seeing stars. There was something no less aggressive in this moment; and when he tried to prop himself up on his elbows she pushed him back down again roughly, kissing him before he had a chance to catch his breath.

As much as he appreciated her sexual aggression, as much as he would have played this game any other time, he wasn’t about to let her call the shots. Not this time around anyways. He wrapped an arm tightly around her back and pressed his feet into the mattress, giving him enough clearance to flip her right back over. She struggled against him and he could see confusion and stubbornness in her expression. He grappled for her wrists and forced her hands into the comforter, one on either side of her head. She was panting but it was the wrong kind. He could feel the tension in her body, ready to fight… but this wasn’t a fight. It seemed only logical that someone as damaged as she would not be able to give up control. He knew this and at the moment it seemed so obvious that he wondered why he hadn’t taken it into account already, why he hadn’t considered this fact as he had planned his seduction of her. He smiled down at her and waited for her to calm herself. At last he felt the muscles in her wrists relax and he lowered himself to kiss her mouth again – slowly this time, setting his pace. She kissed him back uncertainly at first… as though she didn’t know how to follow, only to lead.

He pulled back and pressed his weight into her, saying stay with his body, before shifting back into a kneeling position and scooting his way down her body.

He knelt between her knees and hooked the waist of her panties with his thumbs. Before she had time to change her mind he tugged them downwards and she let him, bringing her legs up so he could strip them away and fling them aside. He looked down and ran his tongue across dry lips. Every calculation till now had brought him to this point, and he was painfully aware that he was treading on a knife edge. He smoothed his palms round the inside of her thighs, prising her legs open and flicking his gaze back up to hers.

Her teeth were firmly caught against her lower lip and he thought he read encouragement in her glance.

It was a kind of permission and he moved forward; he put his tongue on her.

She moaned no sooner had he touched her, her fingers twining in his hair and her legs coming up to cradle his head and shoulders. He felt her left foot slide up the length of his spine to
rest against his shoulder blade, heard her murmur something that was soft and unintelligible in that soft magnolias accent she usually kept hidden. It was the first time he’d heard her use it naturally, unconsciously, and under the circumstances it was a painful turn-on.

It was a matter of a few short minutes before she came.

He let her ride out the sensation for a while before he backed away. Her breathing was coming hard, her cheeks were flushed and her body relaxed, all the pent-up tension oozed out of her. She wet her lips and brushed back a sweat-drenched lock of white hair, the shadow of a smile flickering over her mouth. He was struck then by just how genuinely beautiful she was, and it hit him in a place that hadn’t been touched in an age. He ignored it with an effort, kissing his way back up her body, slow and unhurried, distracting himself with all the little parts of her that fascinated him, leading him onto pleasant detours that he traced fervently with his lips and his tongue. When they finally kissed again it was like he’d never kissed anyone before. Lust overtook him. He couldn’t wait any longer.

He shifted between her legs, hooked her knee with his hand, lifted it up against his waist. He flexed his hips and almost immediately he was sliding inside her.

She gasped, a moan catching in her throat, her foot pressing up against the small of his back and into a deeper connection.

He gave into her only because he wanted to, more than anything.

These were the moments he yearned for, the little oblivions of pleasure that sucked him in and made him forget, even if only for a while. There was no past, no future, only the blissful present, and no responsibility for anything but the moment.

He raced towards it like a man with nothing else to live for. He knew she understood. Perhaps she was racing towards the same thing – that moment of sublime intimacy that was paradoxically the loneliest in the world. It hit him like a tidal wave, the pulse of his orgasm drowning out everything he was and had been – for a few blissful seconds he was a blank, a nothing.

He blinked back into existence an instant later, and there she was with her eyes on him – she’d never left. She murmured his name – Remy – and reminded him who he was. Somehow – it wasn’t so unbearable.

He kissed her and she kissed him; and neither of them stopped for a long time after that.

-oOo-
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Raven turns up; Betsy gives Anna a check-up; Remy wrestles with his conscience; he and Anna get ready to head to Muir Island.

Anna awoke from a deep and untroubled sleep to sunlight and the aroma of fresh coffee.

It was a pointed source of irony to her that her head felt clearer now than it had in weeks. She felt… good. Light. Unburdened.

*Huh. I musta really needed to get laid,* she thought humorously to herself.

The space beside her was empty but still warm, and the scent of him – them – lingered on the sheets. It made her hungry for more – much more.

She breathed deep and stretched languidly, a complacent little smile on her face. For a good long moment she allowed herself to bask in this unfamiliar feeling of complete satisfaction. For so long she’d been a coiled wire wound up tight, and now she felt unravelled, unwound, smoothed out straight.

She closed her eyes and let out a low, soft, contented purr.

There wasn’t a single man she’d met who hadn’t surrendered to her in the bedroom, who hadn’t ceded dominance to her when she’d played for it. But he had refused to back down, and for the first time since Cody she’d been with a man on equal terms. It was the kind of lovemaking she’d cordoned herself off from for years… but it had felt good. She still wasn’t sure exactly where they stood on anything else at the moment, but that seemed unimportant right now, superfluous. As a compromise sex made perfect sense.

*Sure, but that boy is the worst mess you’re ever gonna wade into, gal,* she told herself sternly.

He had, after all, left his grieving wife for entirely selfish reasons, had killed her brother in a moment of violent despair that had landed him in prison. Murder and seduction was just a way of life to him. And worst of all, he worked for Essex. Essex, whom she knew would pay a pretty penny to have him steal her back.

But my God. Just the thought of what he did to her… it made her stupid and reckless enough not to care.

She bit her lip. Her body ached with the tender bruises he’d inflicted upon her, memories of a different kind, ones that would fade with time, just as real memories did. There was an odd dichotomy in the fact that she both admired and resented the effect that he had on her. As a man she liked him. As a partner-in-crime, she barely trusted him. As a lover, she didn’t think she would ever get enough of him. And navigating all three strands of that relationship… it was treacherous. A potentially fatal liability even.

Still… it felt nice, pleasant, to wake up to someone else’s presence in your home, someone
that you felt comfortable with. It was a long time since she had had that pleasure, and she realised now how much she missed it.

Her thoughts were only interrupted by Remy entering the room, dressed only in his boxers, a cup of steaming coffee in his hand. He paused at the door when he saw she was awake.

“Hey,” he greeted her with only a hint of something more than ‘we’re-just-casual-acquaintances’.

“Hey,” she replied.

He gave a flicker of a smile and finally walked on over.

“Was gonna come in and wake you,” he said as he placed the drink on the nightstand. “It’s gettin’ late. We’ve got a flight to catch.”

So they were back to being accomplices. It wasn’t exactly where she was ready to be right now, but at least she knew where they stood. She shifted up against the pillows and into a sitting position.

“Thanks,” she said.

“And I printed out some more research I did on Dr. MacTaggert and her institute,” he added matter-of-factly. “Figured we could do with some light reading on the plane.”

“Right,” she agreed. He nodded towards the coffee on the nightstand.

“You should drink up, chere. B’fore it gets cold.”

He turned to walk away, but before he could she put a hand out, slid it round the inside of his thigh.

He stopped short.

“I want more,” she told him seductively. “Don’t you?”

For an aching moment she wasn’t sure what he would do.

And just as he had pivoted back round to face her, the doorbell buzzed.

They shared a look.

“Ignore it,” she murmured.

The smile he gave her in reply was wry, almost apologetic.

“That’ll be Raven, chere. It’s her shift.”

“Oh.”

She didn’t much care. Her hand wandered higher, distracting him momentarily – at least until the buzzer sounded again. He pulled away slightly, frowning.

“She is gonna fuckin’ kill me. Was s’posed to call her when you woke up… But for some reason, it completely slipped my mind.”
“Hmmm. Shocking,” she mused wryly. He grinned; and the buzzer went again.

“I’d better go answer it b’fore she kicks the door down,” he quipped humorously. “She already thinks I have less than noble intentions where you’re concerned.”

She laughed sexily, stroking him sensuously with her thumb before finally letting her hand fall.

“Well, she would be right. You don’t.”

“No,” he agreed, letting his gaze wander over her shamelessly. “I don’t.”

He let the words hang there for a moment before heading to the door.

“Ya better get ready, p’tit,” he told her flippantly. “We got a coupl’a hours b’fore we need t’ be at the airport. There’re people expectin’ us.”

“Sure,” she replied, and he left the room, shutting the door behind him to give her some privacy.

Anna sighed and threw back the covers.

*No more fun and games, gal. It’s back to business.*

She slid out of bed and began to get dressed.

-oOo-

Remy headed for the front door, pausing momentarily as he got there.

He glanced back over his shoulder at Anna’s room, overtaken by the sudden urge to head right back in there and have his wicked way with her again.

The urge was only dispelled by the buzzer going off again.

“A’right, a’right, I’m comin’.”

He undid the lock and threw open the door to a scowling Raven. He didn’t think it possible, but the moment she laid eyes on him her scowl grew even deeper.

“Ugh, LeBeau,” she complained, sweeping past him and into the lounge area like he wasn’t there. “Can’t you get some clothes on? I have enough to deal with on a Tuesday morning.”

“Sorry,” he apologised without making the effort of sounding apologetic at all. “You woke me up.”

“Never mind that,” she ploughed on brusquely. “How’s Anna doing?”

The words had hardly left her mouth when she suddenly noticed the trail of clothes leading to the bedroom.

“I take it she’s okay,” she concluded, deadpanning the sentence admirably. He was about to make some off-colour comment when she held her hand up, saying, “That didn’t require an answer, LeBeau. Even if I’d wanted to hear one.” She glared at him. “You were supposed to call me when she came out of the coma.”
“Yeah, well.” He shrugged helplessly. “I kinda forgot. Sorry.”

She crossed her arms and regarded him like he was something contagious.

“Would it be too much to hope,” she wondered out loud, “that now that you’ve got what you wanted, you might just pack up and leave this place for good?”

He wasn’t sure whether that required an answer either, but he didn’t have time to give one, as Anna chose that moment to appear, dressed in jeans and a sweater, her hair caught up in a messy ponytail.

“Raven,” she greeted the other woman neutrally. “Hey.”

“Anna.” Raven’s tone was dry. “Nice to see you’re back in the land of the living. You should’ve called. But then I guess you had other things on your mind.” She looked aside at Remy with a pointed expression that said a whole wealth of things – get gone being one of the primary ones. He stirred, reading between the lines effortlessly, and glanced over at Anna.

“Anna, can you toss me my pants, chere?” he asked her. “I need t’ go out, have a smoke.”

She gave him a look, a little quirk of the lips and the eyebrows that said, smooth, before heading back to her bedroom and returning shortly with the pants he’d worn the previous night.

“Just don’tcha litter my hallway,” she warned him.

He gave her a mock salute, pulled on his pants, made a grab for his cigs, and went out the front door to leave them to it.

There was a chill outside, and he wished he’d asked for his shirt as well as his pants. Still, pessimism wasn’t his thing, especially not after last night. He leaned against the wall outside her front door and lit up a cigarette, checking his phone absently. There was a single message on there – Milbury was wanting a progress update.

Shit.

He fired off a non-committal text that he knew wasn’t going to fly, not in the long-run. His pursuit of Anna had been a costly distraction from the task at hand, one that had he’d allowed to foolishly get the better of him. It had made him sloppy.

Well, ya got what ya wanted, he thought sternly to himself. Now that that’s outta your system it’s time to get t’ work.

Remy let the smoke spill from his mouth slowly.

The truth was, he still had two chips to get his hands on – three, depending on which way the wind was blowing – and he didn’t trust himself not to get distracted by her again. He didn’t trust himself to spend the next few days or weeks in her company without wanting to touch her again.

Merde.

He scrubbed his face with his hand and breathed deep.

This was fucked.

Sleeping with a client was a bad idea, and whilst he hadn’t been particularly bothered about that in the past, she just happened to be a little something else closer to home. Something a
little more high risk.

Not that it was the first time he’d slept with a mark either.

_Ugh._

He wasn’t going to stop thinking about it, so why should he bother trying? She wanted more – so did he. And truth be told, more than just a little part of him wanted to know what sex with her would be like if he handed back all the control he’d wrested from her the night before. He felt pretty sure he would be in for a wild ride.

Hell, he wasn’t done with her. Not by a long shot.

He straightened slightly when he heard the elevator pull up to his left, his senses suddenly alert – but when the doors parted he saw that it was only Dr. Braddock.

“Remy,” she greeted him with a small smile. “How’re you doing?”

He pushed himself off of the wall.

“Pretty good actually, Betts. You?”

“I’m great. And how’s the patient?”

“Wake.” She looked surprised at that and he saw she was about to make some remark when he interrupted her. “Yeah, I know. I forgot to let you know. Raven’s already chewed me out about it. She’s in there already,” he threw a thumb in the direction of the doorway. “Havin’ a private chat.”

“I see,” Dr. Braddock replied. “And how is she doing otherwise?”

He pulled on his cigarette and considered his reply.

“Hm. Lemme see. ‘Feisty’ comes to mind.”

“No adverse effects?”

“Well,” he blew smoke. “She was pretty grumpy yesterday. Had some bitch of a headache apparently, which she tells me is normal after… y’know, these ‘episodes’. Nothin’ a decent meal couldn’t fix though. She, um, seemed pretty relaxed this mornin’.”

“Good to hear it. She’ll still need a check-up though. Physically she might be fine, but a neural scan might still show up some anomalies.”

He nearly made a remark about her _definitely_ being physically fine, but he restrained himself.

“Yeah, you should head on in,” he agreed. “Door’s unlocked. Might wanna knock and announce yourself though, first. If Raven thinks you’re me there ain’t no way in hell she’s gonna let you in.”

Betsy raised an eyebrow at him.

“Sounds intriguing. Have you been a bad boy?”

He gave a lopsided smile, shrugged.
“Can’t remember a time I wasn’t, if that answers your question.”

She looked him over again none too subtly, before remarking in her usual dry tone, “Hm. Maybe one day I’ll get the chance to experience just how bad you really are first hand,” before turning, knocking on the door, and entering the apartment with the air of having made no remark at all.

Remy gave a self-deprecating little grin and took a final puff of his cigarette, filing away the comment for future possible action. The past few days he and the British mem-therapist had pursued a lazy flirtation that, as yet, had only gone in harmless circles, seeing as his attention had been firmly placed elsewhere. He felt pretty certain, however, that Betsy Braddock would be up for some light entertainment at some future unspecified date.

Remy sighed and walked over to the nearest window, twisting his cigarette out on the sill thoughtfully.

Right now Anna knew far too much about him than he was comfortable with, but she didn’t know the most important things, and he was going to have to be careful if he wanted it to stay that way. It didn’t help that Raven was what she was, and that she was suspicious of him. He was going to have to tread lightly round that particular woman.

*All in a day’s work.*

He grinned tightly to himself and headed back inside.

-oOo-

As soon as Remy had left the room, Raven turned back to Anna with a grave expression on her face.

“How are you?” she asked.

Anna shrugged, moving about the room to pick up last night’s incriminating clothing from the floor as she did so.

“Good, actually. Better than I’ve felt in a long time.” She threw the clothes into the laundry basket just inside her bedroom door, before re-emerging into the lounge and adding; “Remy told me about the coma Dr. Braddock put me in. Looks like it did the trick. Was it your idea, or hers?”

“Hers,” Raven replied, almost frostily. “And by the way – don’t get any ideas that this is some catch-all solution you can use anytime you get caught in a stutter. There was no guarantee it would work, for one thing.”

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Anna had expected Raven’s disapproval, but not on this point. She felt thoroughly chastened. “I know,” she said quietly, so much so that Raven was almost pacified.

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“Just what were you thinking of, Anna?” she questioned her earnestly. “Interfacing twice in four hours? What did you expect to happen to you?”

She hesitated, briefly considering telling her mentor – the only friend she had – everything. But she couldn’t. She knew she wouldn't understand.

“I don’t think I was thinking,” she answered in a low voice. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”
“Won’t it?” Raven looked unconvinced. “Dr. Braddock is right – you’re addicted to the mem-tech. What you need is more therapy.”

“No.”

Her reply was forceful – memories of the pain the therapy entailed made the word jump out more harshly than she’d intended. She checked herself quickly. “Look,” she continued in a more pacifying tone, “the therapy isn’t working. We can both see that. And the amount of pain I have to go through…” she paused, swallowed, “sometimes it’s hard to take.”

Raven’s expression softened a little.

“So what do you suggest?”

Anna lifted her shoulders wearily.

“I don’t know…”

There was silence. Raven seemed to sense she would get nowhere with this line of conversation. She took in an agitated breath and walked over to the desk, sitting on the edge and eyeing Anna critically.

“Did you get my texts?”

Anna glanced over at her.

“Yeah. I did.”

“And you read the files?”

Anna nodded.

“And did you find what you were expecting?” Raven asked her.

Anna looked aside with a small laugh.

“About the only thing I didn’t expect to find on there was the fact that he had a wife. All the other shit,” and she waved a hand vaguely, “didn’t surprise me much. What I would’ve really liked to know, was why exactly he ended up working for Essex.”

Raven grimaced.

“Believe me,” she spoke dourly. “I’m working on it.”

Anna cocked her head to one side, curious.

“You still think he could be working for Essex?”

“Why? Don’t you?”

Anna frowned and blew a white lock of hair out of her face.

“I believe it’s possible…” she returned in a murmur.

“Which obviously didn’t stop you from sleeping with him,” Raven observed sourly, to which Anna merely smirked.
“That was just sex.”

“Was it?”

Anna glanced over at her with surprise.

“What are you so worried about? You did exactly the same thing – in case you’ve forgotten.”

It was a pointed jibe that had the opposite effect of the one intended.

“Yes. Exactly,” Raven said.

There was a momentary silence before Anna spoke again.

“That was your mistake. Not mine, Raven. Sure. Remy LeBeau is a thief, a liar and a murderer. But he ain’t so different from you or I in that respect.”

“I know that,” Raven answered shrewdly. “And it isn’t what he’s capable of that makes him dangerous. It’s your attraction to him, Anna. It makes you vulnerable.”

“Oh,” Anna replied softly. “And are you speaking from experience again? Is that what Essex did to you – make you vulnerable?”

She’d only half meant to goad Raven with these questions – there was a part of her that would have liked to have known the story behind Raven’s relationship with the genius neuroscientist, even if she knew, instinctively, from the arctic expression on Raven’s face, that no explanation would be forthcoming.

As it was, the tension in the room was cut short by a curt knock at the door, quickly followed by Dr. Braddock entering.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she greeted them. “But I heard the patient was awake.” She smiled in Anna’s direction. “How’re you feeling?”

Anna was more than just a little glad for the interruption – Raven had a particular knack for making her regret her decisions, and right now her decision to trust the Cajun wasn’t one she wanted to re-evaluate.

“I’m fine,” she answered, “and thankful for what you did to keep my mind intact.” She had learned that it always paid to be diplomatic, especially with the one who held the keys to your meds. “I take it you’re here to give me a check-up?”

“If you don’t mind.” If anything Dr. Braddock looked relieved to have a willing patient for once; and Anna had no inclination to keep either her or Raven here any longer than was necessary.

_I have places to be_, she thought with a growing sense of urgency, fully aware that the plane to Edinburgh would be leaving in a few short hours. So she made no protestations but sat down willingly on the sofa and rolled up her sleeve, wondering as she did so just where Remy had stashed all the gear she’d bought for their trip yesterday. Just as the thought had passed her mind he walked back in, flashing her a knowing smile which she did her best to ignore.

She wished he’d put a shirt on.

The sight of him walking around topless was doing all sorts of things to her blood
“Remy, where’s that stuff I got yesterday?” she asked him with careful nonchalance as Dr. Braddock attached the sensors to her temples. “I don’t see it. Did you move it all?”

“Oh, I put it in the closet,” he said with pitch-perfect disinterest as he headed to his room and came out again with a towel. “I’m gonna grab a shower. Mind if I use your bathroom, Anna?”

She mumbled a “no”, on the one hand glad that he could play things so calmly, and on the other relieved that he’d hidden away their gear somewhere. She knew Raven would get suspicious if she saw it.

The test turned out to be less conclusive than Dr. Braddock would’ve liked.

“Your brainwaves are still showing some significant fluctuations,” she said as she shut down the machine and unplugged the sensors. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Fine.” Anna shrugged. “I had a bad headache when I first woke up… you know… the usual… But it went after a few hours.”

“Hm.” The doctor opened her case again and took out the familiar orange and white bottles. “Best take it easy over the next few days. No running around, no stressful activities, and definitely no interfacing. Your mind’s in a precarious state, Anna. I know you don’t like to hear me say it but…”

“Yeah, I know. I keep this up and I lose my mind. That’s what they’ve been saying since I was fourteen.”

Dr. Braddock’s smile was faint.

“The effects of interfacing weren’t so well understood back then. Now we know much better. You’ve certainly pushed the boundaries, Anna, but I think even you’re approaching your limits.” She looked up at Raven. “Keep an eye on her.”

“Of course,” the older woman nodded gravely.

Dr. Braddock handed over the meds.

“Don’t take more than you’re supposed to,” she warned her patient. “Please.”

“I won’t,” Anna lied. She thought the doctor knew it was lie, because she stood up, sighed and left with a curt goodbye. Raven looked down on her disapprovingly.

“You’d better not OD on those fucking tablets,” she chastised her.

“Please. Don’t start.” She leaned back into the sofa and massaged the bridge of her nose. “I’m tired. I need to rest.”

“Oh, so now you’re tired.” Raven rolled her eyes and crossed her arms with flagrant sarcasm. “Don’t worry – I know you want me gone so you can play some more with that thief.”

“Hm.” She thought it best not to disabuse her of the assumption. “Figure I should make the most of my new toy before you go and find out he’s some serial killer or somethin’.”

A shadow of a smile crossed Raven’s lips.
“Lucky for you, that happens to be unlikely. But if I do find anything of interest…”

“You’ll keep me informed,” Anna finished for her blithely. “Thank you.”

“You can thank me when I figure out what he’s really up to,” Raven replied breezily, heading for the door. When she got there she turned back, passing her young protégé one of her rare looks of genuine affection. “Take care of yourself, Anna. And call me tomorrow, when you get the chance. Keep me informed of your condition.”

There was such sincere feeling in her voice that Anna almost felt guilty for her deception. She gave a watery smile that was as reassuring as she could make it.

“Don’t worry, Raven,” she said. “I will.”

It seemed to be assurance enough. A few seconds later and she had left.

As soon as she heard the door click Anna got to her feet and checked the time. It had just gone eight. That left four hours before their flight.

She went into her room and began to pack.

A few minutes passed before Remy emerged from the shower.

“I think there’s some hot water left for you,” he told her.

“Oh, thanks,” she replied sardonically. It was hard to ignore the fact that he was only wearing a towel. Her only way of dealing with it was to level the playing field, and she openly began to strip off down to her underwear, right there in front of him.

He merely leaned against the doorframe and admired the view, an inscrutable little smile on his face.

“Did you tell Raven about the fact that you hired me?” he questioned her as she threw off her sweater and unzipped her jeans, obviously refusing to make any comment about her impromptu striptease.

“No,” she replied, pushing the jeans over her hips and down her legs. “Should I have?”

He shrugged.

“Just wonderin’ whether this thing here is jus’ between you and me, is all. Best to have our stories straight in case it comes up in casual conversation, neh?”

She stepped out of her jeans and undid her ponytail.

“Right.”

He still hadn’t moved from the doorway. In the end she was forced to walk right by him and into the bathroom – and even then he still didn’t move, turning towards her as if expecting her to invite him in.

A part of her was still sorely tempted. Unfortunately, time was running dangerously short.

“I wanna be outta here in thirty,” she told him silkily instead. “So you’d best be ready by the time I’m done, or I’m gonna leave without you.”
And she shut the door in his face before she had the chance to change her mind.

-oOo-
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Remy and Anna head to Muir, and both learn a little bit more about one another.

They arrived at Newark Liberty in good time, and even Anna was forced to be impressed when their dubious amount of gear got through the baggage check without even raising so much as an eyebrow. Considering the suspicious amount of weaponry they’d packed, this was no small feat.

“You must have some friends in high places,” Anna mused in a murmur as the man at the check-in desk glanced disinterestedly at their fake passports and let through their luggage without even asking a single question.

“Yeah, well,” he answered in a low voice. “I still got some contacts back home willin’ to scratch my back if I scratch theirs now and then.”

It was a half-truth. None of his remaining associates back home were able to pull this kind of clout. This was all Essex’s doing – but she didn’t need to know that.

They were whisked into a fancy departure lounge, and after a smooth and early boarding they were soon settled into first class with a choice of champagnes and luxury candies and chocolates to share. Anna chose the bottle of Dom Pérignon, which made him wonder, yet again, whether she was channelling any vestiges of Lady Sarkissian’s finer traits. He watched her closely as they were each poured a glass, not entirely sure why it should bother him, except that he needed to be reassured that her mind was in as a good place as it was going to be for the task ahead.

It didn’t help that the in-flight entertainment was mostly a bunch of high-end sims, and if she decided to ‘face he wasn’t quite sure how he would tackle it. He was almost relieved when she took out the file he’d put together on Moira MacTaggert and started to read.

Since she seemed to have defaulted into business mode, and since champagne wasn’t his thing, he got up and headed to the bar for a whiskey. He spent most of his time there flirting casually and half-heartedly with a bored trophy wife before wandering back to his seat. Dinner was being served, the stewardess politely interrupting the other interfacing passengers.

Anna, he was relieved to see, was the only one who wasn’t ‘facing.

He slid into his seat just as she was placing aside his print-outs.

“Finished?” he asked her.

“Just about.”

“Thoughts?”

She was silent a moment, mulling over her research.

“I think,” she replied at last, “that it wasn’t just our brains that were tampered with. I think it was our genes too.”
He grunted his acknowledgement and she looked over at him.

“You?”

The stewardess was serving the row in front, and he lowered his voice a notch, answered, “I think you might be right.”

Anna’s reaction was stoic. He watched as she unfolded her napkin mechanically and placed it neatly in her lap, almost as if it was a coping mechanism. Yet again he was hit by this strange contradiction in her, the thing he had seen yesterday evening as she had slept like a child on her bed. On the surface she was all-woman, reclining in her seat in her heels and her fancy silk blouse, her hair coiled up in that intricate bun – she was one of the only women he knew who still dressed up to fly, and she carried off the affectation to perfection. But underneath the effortless sophistication and self-assuredness there was something else that was uncertain and fragile and bird-like. A sadness.

It was something he knew she didn’t want him to see and so he looked away, pretending he hadn’t seen it at all.

Dinner was excellent, although Anna did nothing but pick at it. By this point he’d genuinely begun to get worried about her – she had been in a coma not that long ago after all. So he leaned over and asked her, “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered back in a low tone. “Just tired.”

He saw then that there was the slightest tremor in her left hand and on instinct he reached out, put his own hand over it, tried to steady it. Almost immediately she pulled it back, obviously shamed that he had noticed.

“I’m fine,” she repeated firmly, and he let her have the pretence, taking his hand back slowly. She turned aside and downed two of her ever-present pills, adding, “I need to sleep.”

He kicked himself inwardly for making her so self-conscious of something that was a source of humiliation to her. His intent had only been to comfort her – but he knew how she felt. There was a time he’d been the same, unwilling to accept that he needed help.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said when he saw her setting up the alarm on her phone. “You get some rest. I’ll wake you when we start to land.”

It was a peace-making gesture – they both knew it. She gave him a small, grateful smile.

“Thanks,” she said, before setting aside her tray, reclining her chair, dimming the light, and closing off the sliding partition between them.

-oOo-

They touched down in Edinburgh at about 2 a.m. local time, after a 9 hour flight during which Anna mostly slept and read her papers quietly.

At least the rest seemed to have done her good – her spirits appeared to have temporarily picked up, especially when they managed to bypass customs due, once again, to Essex’s manipulations. He actually suspected half the reason for her improved mood was the fact that she no longer had a planeful of interfacers to tempt her.

Their short local connecting flight didn’t arrive till the following morning. Although Anna
was adamant they continue towards their destination by car, she was so obviously exhausted that he insisted they head for the airport hotel. She finally acceded after putting up a lacklustre resistance that told him she really did still need the rest.

The hotel turned out to be just as pleasantly bland and non-descript as every other airport hotel the world over. He booked a double room, more for the necessity of looking like a regular, run-of-the-mill, vacationing couple than any other ulterior motive he might have had. Anna made no comment on it – she’d been through enough undercover shenanigans to get the need to appear ‘normal’ to outsiders.

As soon as they got in the room Anna dumped her bags and headed for the shower. In the meantime he checked out the minibar, pleasantly surprised to find that the hotel’s only concession to luxury was a bottle of vintage Scotch whiskey. He poured a glass before heading to the chocolate box-sized balcony to smoke.

He’d never been to Scotland before, in his entire whirlwind life of jet-setting and so-called business trips. There wasn’t much to see of it now, not at this time, and definitely not from this vantage point. The airport complex spread out before him in a dark mess of concrete buildings and garish lights. If he’d come here for fun and games he would’ve been sorely disappointed.

He fished out his phone from his back pocket and checked-in briefly with Milbury via text.

*Why th’ hell is it, Belle had asked him the last time he’d seen her, that you find it so fuckin’ hard to be honest, Rem? Why is it that everythin’ has to be some huge fuckin’ lie t’you?*

And he hadn’t been able to answer her back then – he’d been too damn wasted to even think a coherent thought.

But he knew the answer now, clearly – it was because the truth was horrible and painful and it sucked. All he was was a failure – a failure of a husband, a father, a man. Everything he’d done up till now had been to escape that shameful fact. To free himself from his past. To throw away all responsibility for the things he had done and could no longer change.

He stood out in the frigid air until his cigarette had long burned-out and his glass was empty.

When he went back into the room Anna was sitting on the bed in shorts and a nightshirt, loading a fresh magazine into her pistol.

“You’re gonna take dat wit’ you?” he asked, eyebrow raised.

“I’d feel naked without it,” she answered.

She extended her arm, aiming at some imaginary target. There was no suggestion of tremors in her hand this time, her aim holding straight and true. It was such a pose of self-assured power that he was reminded of just how intimidating he sometimes found her. If she turned that gun on him right now, he didn’t think he’d stand much of a chance.

Only when she lowered the gun did he feel able to turn his back on her. In a heartbeat she’d turned from callous soldier back to woman. He heard her lay the firearm on the nightstand as he poured himself another drink.

“Tell me somethin’, Anna,” he spoke on an impulse. “What did you do when Weapon X folded? What did you become out in the big, wide, ‘real world’?”
He looked round. Her back was to him, the line of her shoulders tense.

“An identity thief,” she replied in a low voice.

“That was five years ago. I’m talkin’ about five years before that.”

She was still as a statue, and for a good long moment he didn’t think she’d speak until she did.

“I… I went to college.”

He gave a small laugh at that, surprised at the normalcy of the idea. She swung her legs up on the bed and swivelled to face him.

“What did you do?” she quizzed him pointedly. “After you got married?”

It was an unexpected question that wiped the smile from his face. He took a long sip of his drink, buying himself time, before opting for the truth in the end anyhow.

“I went into art dealing.” He paused, smirked. “It was borin’.”

A smile creased her lips, a rare gesture of natural and unaffected humour.

“And what would you do,” she queried, “if you had to go back to a ‘normal life’?”

He lifted his shoulders. He hadn’t really thought about it.

“Prob’ly shoot m’self.”

It was a half-truth that was meant to be humorous, but it made the smile drop completely from her lips, and he was reminded, obliquely, of those thin, faded scars on her wrists. He wanted to bring levity back to the conversation but found he couldn’t. In the end she spoke first.

“I hear you,” was all she said.

There was a silence during which she didn’t move or turn away from him, no indication from her that there was to be an end to their conversation. It seemed to be a signal of her willingness to open up to him, a hard-won victory that suddenly felt very cold. It prompted him to set aside his drink and join her on the bed, and he sat there, mirroring her pose almost exactly. The position was intimidating in itself, an implication of frankness in it that he still wasn’t entirely comfortable giving.

“Tell me what happened,” he said, “to this guy you were with.”

She almost lowered her gaze then. Almost.

“His name was Cody,” she replied. She paused; and that was when her eyes dropped. Almost as soon as they did though, they were right back up on his. “When Essex got outta jail, the first thing he did was come looking for me. I was his property. He wanted me back. After that… well, it was kinda hard to keep up the pretence of being your normal, average, run-of-the-mill girlfriend.”

She looked aside, frowning as if suddenly perplexed.

“Cody didn’t care though. He had this… stupid idea that he could protect me.” Her smile was both sad and wry. “Like we were in some goddamn movie or something. It didn’t matter to him who I was. It should have. It didn’t get him nothing but killed.”
Her voice had gone hard and she fell suddenly silent.

“You sound angry at him,” he observed. She gave him a look.

“I am. At least, I was. If he hadn’t been so fucking naïve…” She trailed off. Her teeth tugged at her lower lip absently and her expression softened. “He was a good man,” she murmured at last, decidedly. “He didn’t deserve the end he got.”

Her countenance was one of mingled love and anger. He could read it only because the self-same emotions were so familiar to himself. He’d spent a good chunk of his life now being in-love with and angry at the same person. The realisation disturbed him and he decided to shift the conversation away from it.

“So lemme guess. You went underground. Switched identities. Became the Rogue. It was never about the thrill, about the material gain. It was necessity.”

She tilted her head to one side, regarding him dispassionately.

“It was the only thing I was good at,” she stated quietly. “Being somebody else. All I had to do was convince Essex that Anna Raven was dead,” she almost paused, her eyes flickering, “and then take on someone else’s identity. And keep doing it, until the trail was so deep and so complex, no one would ever be able to navigate it right down to the truth at the end – that Anna Raven was still alive.”

He only really got it 100% at that very moment.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Her eyebrows jerked upwards.

“Why?”

“Why else? For leadin’ Essex all the way down your rabbit hole.”

“Ha. I think we can call it quits, Cajun. I think I levelled the playing field some when I stole Trask’s mem-chip offa you.” Her hand moved slightly, touching his knee with just the tips of her fingers. Her expression was suddenly pensive. “Sometimes you do things to people… you hurt them without meaning to… because you don’t know the first thing about them, when it comes down to it.” She looked down at her hand, adding softly; “We both walked into each other’s lives. And we both ruined them.”

She shifted forwards a little, looked into his eyes.

“We should both hate each other,” she stated, with an assumption that neither actually did.

“I guess we should,” he agreed on a murmur. He wasn’t sure that hate was the right word. He’d certainly been angry at her, and for a lot longer than he’d first thought. At some point he’d stopped being angry at her, but he couldn’t quite pinpoint when. He realised now that she’d been angry at him too, although he wasn’t entirely sure whether she still was at this point.

He got his answer when she scooted a little closer and put her hands on his chest. When she leaned in towards him they rose to his shoulders – there was a slowness, a tentativeness in her that was uncharacteristic of her and that he didn’t know how to read. She tilted her head sideways and pressed her lips against his.
He responded instinctively, even if he still wasn’t sure where this was coming from or whether it was wise to do so. Her kiss was slow, unhurried, completely different to every other kiss they’d shared till now, and it quickened his heartbeat, sharpened his senses, honed his perception to a white hot pinpoint. He lifted his hands to cradle her face in his palms, to draw her in deeper. This had nothing to do with sex, with what they had shared the night before. This was an equaliser of a different kind – an emotional one, perhaps.

Did he really have her trust now? Or was this all just some other trick?

When she finally broke away it was only very slightly, and he made no move to pull her back. Her expression was apologetic, which confused him. He half suspected she would say sorry, but she didn’t. She leaned back and fixed him with an enigmatic smile.

“I should get some sleep,” she said.

Her hands slipped down his chest and as she drew them away he caught her fingers in his, ever so lightly, ever so briefly, before letting go.

“Yeah. Get some sleep, p’tit. Tomorrow you’re gonna need t’ be at the top o’ your game. We both will.”

He got off the bed and went to retrieve his drink. When he looked back Anna had already got in under the covers and was turning off her side light.

He downed the rest of his drink and set aside the glass.

Later, when he finally lay down beside her, he stared up at the ceiling and tried not to think of her smell and her taste and the feel of her body. He tried not to think about Belle. He tried to do what he’d spent the past five, long, fucked up years doing. He tried to kill his memories.

The sun was already climbing the lonely horizon by the time he finally fell asleep.

-oOo-
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Anna and Remy head to see Dr. Moira MacTaggert, and both get a little more than they bargained for.

She sits under the Machine and hums a broken tune to herself.

It’s a song her mommy used to sing to her under the apple tree, back home. It’s been a long time since she was last home – sometimes she can barely remember it. Most of her time she lives here, so daddy can do his work and run his tests.

She diligently adds the finishing touches to her drawing, adding big shiny red blobs to the solid green tree in the centre of her paper.

“That’s good.”

She stops humming and looks up to see the girl called Anna standing there. Despite the praise her expression is incurious and world-weary, just like daddy’s used to be.

“Thanks,” she says.

Anna stands there what seems a long time, watching her finish colouring in the apples one by one.

“You’re a good drawer,” Anna finally pronounces in that same matter-of-fact tone. “I wish I was good at drawin’.”

“What are you good at?” she asks, not looking up from the page.

“I dunno,” Anna replies in her thick, funny accent. “I used t’play guitar…”

“Why don’t you play guitar anymore?”

There’s a pause, like she doesn’t really know the answer.

“I came here,” she says at last, as if that should explain everything. It doesn’t.

“Oh.”

She’s finally finished. She sits up straight and admires her handiwork. The apple tree actually only takes up a small part of the page. Underneath it, on a green strip of green grass, sit three smiling people, holding hands – her, her mommy and her daddy, all together again.

“Do you like it?” she asks the girl standing next to her. “This is me, here. That’s daddy. And that’s mommy.”

Anna looks at the picture for a long time, and at first she doesn’t say anything.

“Are you Tanya?” she finally asks.
“Yes,” she replies, frowning. She wants Anna to praise her again.

“They said I have to fix you,” Anna states instead.

The words are unexpected. She glares up at her.

“Who said that? Daddy?”

“Everyone says it. They don’t say it to me. They say it to each other. I just listen.”

She pouts angrily, sticking out her bottom lip.

“They’re the ones who need to be fixed. They told me mommy went to heaven, but she didn’t. She’s still here. Sometimes she sings to me at night.” She pauses, adds in a softer tone, “I wish she was here now, so I can show her my picture.”

“I wish my momma was here too,” Anna replies quietly; and this time she glances up at her with the full force of her attention.

“Did your momma die?” she asks.

“Yeah. I saw her die. They say you saw your momma die too.”

She pauses. She thinks about it. For a split second she is confused.

“No, I didn’t,” she finally says, stubbornly. She doesn’t like this conversation anymore. She doesn’t want to stay. She gets to her feet and holds the drawing to her chest.

“They keep sayin’ your memories are wrong,” Anna insists dispassionately. “They keep sayin’ I haveta fix you, that I haveta fix your mem’ries.”

“My memories don’t need fixing!” she yells angrily. “Go away! I don’t like you!”

She glares over at her fiercely, and Anna stares back, her face like stone.

“I wish I could forget,” she says almost absently. “I wish I could forget my momma too.”

And just like that she turns and leaves.

-oOo-

Anna awoke to the soft chiming of the alarm on her phone and she silenced it slowly, sluggishly. She wasn’t sure she’d fully recovered from the neural stutter yet – Tanya Trask’s memories were still very much present, despite the reset Dr. Braddock had given her mind. They swam in and out of her consciousness for a few brief moments before she pushed them aside. She would have to dissect them later. Right now there was work to be done.

She breathed deep, yawned, and rolled onto her side.

The Cajun wasn’t there, and she allowed herself to be disappointed by that fact. For a long time she had resented the power he held over her, this attraction that had always been in the background of their mutual arrangement, distracting her with its irritating intensity. But now that they’d both given into it… his presence felt like something of a comfort. A reassurance. Right now she simply wanted to hold him. To not feel so alone.

She stretched and after a long few moments she finally got out of bed.
On an impulse she went over to her purse and felt inside the hidden inner pocket. The three mem-chips – which they’d both agreed she should take custody of during their trip – were still in there. It was a stupid relief, because she knew he didn’t have a clue where she’d hidden them and everything he’d done till now spoke of his sincerity, but... there was still a part of her that didn’t trust the thief in him, the man who’d broken into her hotel room and planted that tracker on her. That man was still in there, somewhere.

She turned aside, blowing a white lock of hair out of her face, and saw that he’d laid out all his equipment on the small couch by the windows. Rope, harness, carabiners. On the whole she preferred to work by herself, her previous experiences of working with others having been invariably frustrating, messy affairs. But working with him seemed smooth, effortless – ever since that first heist they’d pulled at Trask Technologies.

She went over to her luggage and took out her clothes.

Maybe it was time, she thought absently, that she took on a partner. Especially, she mused mischievously to herself, if certain extra benefits were involved.

She’d just finished getting dressed when he appeared.

“Mornin’, chere,” he greeted her with that same easy demeanour he nearly always wore. “Sleep well?”

“Pretty good. You?”

He shrugged. “Not bad.”

He’d been out for a smoke. She could smell it on him as he breezed past. It was an idiotic comfort to know he hadn’t been out doing something nefarious.

She watched on silently as he went to the bed and unpacked the same transceivers they’d worn to the Trask gala half a year ago. The previous night she felt that they’d both turned some sort of corner in their relationship, but now she was dimly aware that she was the one who’d opened up, whilst he’d given her virtually nothing. Granted, she’d read enough in his files to know some deeply personal things about him, but that was different. Everything she knew about him came from lies and subversion, and she wanted something that came from him. It was amazing how much she actually knew about him, she thought, when she felt like she knew nothing about him at all.

Her own desire to know him better unnerved her, and she walked over to stand beside him, asking with a levity she didn’t feel, “So you got a plan for getting in?”

“Yeah.” He nodded over to the rope on the couch. “There’s a blindspot in one of the corners of the institute. It’s built into the rock face.” He grimaced. “The rest of the building has insane amounts of security. Seems like the good doctor really is tryin’ t’ keep Essex out.”

“Yeah,” she sniffed.

“And you? You just gonna walk right on in?”

“Yeah. I guess I am.”

He let out a breath and looked aside at her.

“Take my advice, chere. You go in packin’ heat, they ain’t gonna treat you nice. There are armed patrols crawling all over the place.”
“If this Dr. MacTaggert was on the Weapon X project, she’ll know who I am.”

“And what makes you so sure of that?”

She gave him a look.

“Come on, Cajun. Raven told you everything about me. You know what I was to Weapon X. Their fucked up golden standard.”

“If you say so. Raven only told me what she thought I needed to know. I doubt it’s half the story.” He picked up the transceivers. “Anyway,” he began again, “we’ll wanna be in contact if we’re gonna make this work. I don’t wanna haveta be skulkin’ round her rooms if she decides to play nice. You’re gonna haveta give me a heads up if you figure I’m gonna haveta make myself scarce.”

He threw her the box with the transceiver in it and she caught it in one hand.

“Something tells me you have something else in mind,” she commented wryly.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “Figure it can’t hurt to do a bit of snoopin’. Find out what she knows about our friend Essex. Any leverage we have against him has t’ be a good thing, neh?”

She shrugged.

“If it floats your boat. Either way, when I next see Essex… he’s gonna be a dead man.”

He was silent at that and she turned aside.

“Anyway, we should get ready to head. I really don’t want to miss our flight.”

-oOo-

It was another hour’s flight on a cramped, local plane to the main island. The entire journey was atrocious and the only thing Anna had to thank for it was the fact that the security was lax and the staff disinterested enough for her and Remy to pass through without any hitches at all.

Once they’d landed they dumped their luggage off at the nearest hotel and headed with their kit down to the marina. There was only a single company that allowed for bareboat rental, and once they’d taken possession of their vessel – Anna having very firmly decided that she was going to be the one at the helm – they were off.

The waters were slightly choppy, but the weather at least was calm though fresh. There was something uplifting about guiding their speedboat through the gambolling waves, something comforting in the sting of the breeze on her face and the monotonous rumbling of the engine that took her out of herself and the current situation and into some place where none of it mattered. For a while she was back in a reconstructed memory, one she had made in an especial effort to recreate her non-existent past. Suddenly she was boating on the Mississippi with her momma and her pop, and everything was okay. The sun was shining, the fish were biting, and the world was uncomplicated. She’d looked down into the water and seen the sunshine sparkling off of its surface; and deeper, beyond, something dark, something murky, something all-consuming.

She’d often got this feeling. This feeling that something could consume her, could eat her whole. Like the sunflower back on the farm. Like the sky at night. Like the water…

There was a fish right there under the surface and she’d reached out to touch it, but what
The next thing she was aware of was Remy yanking the steering wheel to the left. The boat jerked convulsively, narrowly missing some rocks she’d been heading straight towards. She was tossed backwards, stunned more at the insidious creep of this latest spell of the bleed effect than the near escape.

“Fuckin’ hell, you tryin’ to get us killed?!” he shouted at her over the roar of the engine as the boat slowly righted itself. She couldn’t say a word. She was having trouble enough herself trying to figure out what had happened. When he saw her expression he could tell something bad had happened.

“Damn, femme,” he shot at her in a slightly more controlled tone. “I don’t care what you say. I’m takin’ over.”

She let him, but only because she was truly shaken.

The rest of the boat journey was quiet and uneventful. He navigated through the network of islands expertly and she let herself give over control to him for these few short minutes, grateful that she had someone to give it up to at all. She concentrated instead on trying to set her mind back in order.

It wasn’t long before Muir Island came into sight. There were enough islets and rocky ridges in the area to confuse most people, but there was no mistaking Muir, with its imposing research complex built right into a cliff. It was this side of the island that Remy coasted around, the area of the so-called blindspot, which, due to the ruggedness of the terrain, was virtually impossible and, indeed, unnecessary to patrol or surveil. The rock-face was a near vertical drop, and there was nothing on the shore except for numerous unfriendly looking rocky outcrops. There was only a single sliver of beach that looked even vaguely accessible, and he headed straight for it.

She’d just about got her wits together again as he pulled in and set the boat to idle. When he turned she’d already gathered all his stuff together and he smiled.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the rope and slinging it over his shoulder.

“Don’t mention it,” she murmured.

There was a silence that threatened intimacy, and, self-conscious, she went over to the portside and let down the ladder for him. He took her cue and lowered himself down onto the tiny strip of rocky beach, grabbing the rest of the gear as she passed it down to him. Before she could bring the ladder back up he’d climbed halfway up it again, putting his hand over hers and squeezing it briefly.

“Don’t crash the boat,” he said with a smile that told her he was only half-serious.

“Don’t kill yourself on those rocks,” she parlayed back.

He grinned, and she would’ve kissed him right then. She didn’t know why.

He let go of her hand and jumped down.
“Keep in touch,” he called to her.

“Yeah. I will.”

She lingered a moment, her heart in her mouth, watching as he began to get his equipment on. Then, shaking herself, she raised the ladder, headed back to the steering wheel, and set off.

There was a small jetty round the other side of the island and she docked there. There were no other boats around, and she guessed that there was a regular service that brought the employees to and from the island. She could see no other buildings apart from the research centre, no sign of residential compounds.

She jumped out of the boat and slipped the transceiver into her ear.

“Tell me you’re not dead yet,” she murmured. His voice kicked in almost immediately.

“I’m not dead yet,” he parroted. The words were strained, breathless, but they still held that familiar old twist of humour.

“How’re you doing?”

“Swell. About halfway up.”

“Already?”

“Hey. When I got work t’do, I don’t do things by halves.”

“Yeah.” She smiled wryly to herself. “That’s for sure.”

For some reason she couldn’t help thinking of all the talented things his mouth could do.

“So, whaddya see?” he asked her.

“Hm.” She glanced around her, reluctantly pushing away the lewd thoughts currently dancing round her head. “Nothing much so far. I just got off at the jetty. But there’s a couple of hidden gun turrets on the rocks either side of me. Pretty well camouflaged to most, but—”

“But not to you,” he cut in, and she nodded.

“Right. I’m pretty sure there’re more ahead, but as long as I don’t cause any waves I should be okay.”

“Then don’t make any waves,” he suggested wryly, grunting as he navigated what she guessed was an extra laborious stretch of the rock-face.

“Har har. Look, I won’t distract you anymore. Just let me know when you’re up there.”

“Likewise,” he said, and the line cut out.

She trudged up the incline from the jetty towards the compound, seeing more gun turrets come into view on either side. As she neared the crest of the hill she saw one watch tower, then another. There were guards in there, watching her approach. A four-by-four was sat by the roadside, idling. There was probably more security hiding somewhere, watching her from afar. She knew this formation. They’d been put on standby, were scoping her out, waiting to see what she would do.
She walked up to the entrance without a single soul halting her advance.

It was an equilibrium she felt certain couldn’t last, and when she walked through the neural scanner that veiled the doorway, she wore Tanya Trask’s brainwaves, thinking that it was the only possible one she possessed that might not set off the scanners.

It was a useless gambit – the ambient green field went red and she tripped the alarms.

Almost immediately there were guards coming at her from right, left and centre, and she raised her arms, trying to plead no contest – but they were violent, slamming her up against the glass doors, patting her down roughly. They found her gun almost straight away.

“She has a gun,” one of them barked, snatching it out of her thigh pocket and throwing it to his comrade.

She stared through the glass doors and saw the receptionist staring at her with a deer-caught-in-headlights look. There were a couple of men in lab coats busily discussing the commotion, a technician at a vending machine, staring over his shoulder at her… and a huge security guard in what amounted to a tactical suit, advancing on her like a thundercloud.

Someone grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and pulled her away from the doors just as they slid open.

“Any ID?” the big guy asked without any other greeting.

“Negative,” the man right behind her replied.

“I come in peace,” she declared, not without a certain sarcasm; what she got for her insolence was a backhand in the face by the big guy, an exercise of power that was the worst thing he could have done. On instinct she lashed out with her leg and kicked him in the groin; the next moment she was being tackled to the ground by a horde of angry men, and then dragged into the lobby of the building pretty much by the hair.

This time she held back the urge to resist, seeing as she had caused enough damage and really didn’t want to tear up Dr. MacTaggert’s hallway. When they pulled her up into a kneeling position she locked her hands behind her head in an attitude of overt submission. It didn’t stop them from ringing her, from pointing their guns at her. She was aware of someone standing behind her slightly to her right – he was holding a shock prod; she could virtually smell the tang of ozone coming off it. It was at that point that she decided that discretion was definitely the better part of valour.

“I don’t wanna cause a ruckus,” she explained as neutrally as she could. “I’m just here to talk to Dr. MacTaggert.”

“Really.” The big guy – who she presumed was head of security – sneered at her. “Receptionist says you ain’t on the appointment books.”

He laughed, and there were low guffaws from the others. She bit back on the horrible impulse to wreak havoc on them.

“Look,” she spoke up as calmly as she could. “If you could just ask her politely to come down and see me, I swear to you, she’ll know who I am. And she won’t take kindly to you lovely young gentleman manhandling me.”

The big guy scowled at her derisively, showing canines in the process.
“If she knew you, you’d be on the database, darlin’. Unfortunately for you, I happen to know you ain’t on the database ‘cos you set off the alarms when you came in. That nice piece you had on you will earn you a night in a cell. That kick in the family jewels is gonna earn you somethin’ a lot nastier.” And glanced over her shoulder to the guy with the prod. “Tase her.”

She saw the upward movement of the prod out of the corner of her eye, and steeled herself for the inevitable shock when—

“Stop!” a woman’s voice called in only the slightest trace of what had once been a Scottish brogue. “Stop it!”

At the sharp order the guards obediently pulled back, and when Anna looked up she saw the woman from Ophelia Sarkissian’s memories striding across the room towards her.

She was fifteen years older with streaks of grey in her brown, bobbed hair, but almost everything about her looked the same.

“Oh my God, oh my God,” she exclaimed in a thin voice as she approached Anna with her arms outstretched. She halted and dropped to her knees in front of her, taking her head between both hands. Her mouth was open in an expression that appeared to communicate both wonder and horror. “Sweet Jesus in heaven,” she murmured, running her fingers over Anna’s face like the past was engraved on her flesh itself. “It really is you.”

It wasn’t affection on the doctor’s face. It wasn’t love. But it was something pretty darn close to it, and it confused her.

“Doctor MacTaggert,” she said softly, and the woman’s face broke. There was the sheen of tears in her eyes, the curve of an honest smile.

“Anna Marie,” she answered. “Anna Marie Raven. Subject Zero. The first. The last.”

She stood and held out a trembling hand. Anna took it and slowly got to her feet.

“How did you find me?” the older woman asked. “How did you know?”

“It’s a long story,” Anna replied in a low tone. “Too long to tell you here. But we need to talk. I need to tell you why I’m here. And I need to ask you some questions.”

Something crossed the doctor’s face. Her mouth grew tighter, more determined.

“Yes,” she nodded slowly. “Yes, there’s a lot to talk about. A lot to tell. God. I hardly think I’d know where to begin.” She turned and walked a few steps, and when she beckoned to Anna she said, “Come. Follow me.”

-oOo-

It didn’t take long for Remy to gain entry to the uppermost level of the institute’s compound.

The rest of the building was so heavily fortified that little attention had been paid to the top storey, which was, of course, pretty much just normal living quarters. Gaining access through a window turned out to be the most straightforward method of entrance. The room he actually ended up breaking into was Dr. MacTaggert’s bedroom.

It was light and airy, sparsely furnished, with a pretty spectacular view of the sea. He
stood for a moment in the middle of the room, admiring the modern décor and the wild surroundings. He figured he could get used to the idea of making his next piece of real estate some rugged island in the middle of nowhere.

He grinned to himself and left the room quietly.

There were several rooms to go through, but he knew what he was looking for, and he only stopped when he found it. What most people might have called a study actually looked a lot like Raven’s comms room back in New York.

It was here that the good doctor showed her true colours. Gone was the simple refinement of the rest of her apartments. Instead there was the clutter and whirr of machinery, monitors, computers and surveillance equipment. One wall was a complete mess of monitors, and when he looked at them he realised that he had a complete view of virtually the entire island, the entire institute. Lucky for him the only part of the island left uncovered by the surveillance was the virtually inaccessible one that he’d used to gain entry to the building. Paranoia literally oozed from every corner of this room.

“Yeah,” he murmured to himself. “Thought so.”

His attention was drawn to one of the bottom-most rows of the monitors.

Anna was on her knees in the hallway, ringed by a group of hostile-looking guards. He saw one raise his cattleprod to strike her, and he grit his teeth in anticipation of the inevitable blow when he saw Dr. MacTaggert herself run into frame. The cattleprod was dropped and the guards hung back.

Remy let out a slow breath.

It looked, for now, like Anna’s direct approach was working.

He turned away from the monitors. At the other end of the room was an interfacer and he walked over to it.

There were boxes and boxes of mem-chips stacked beside it, large, customised ones like the ones Anna had in her apartment. Everything appeared to have been neatly labelled and catalogued. He went back over 15 years’ worth of boxes until he finally got to the one marked ‘2016’.

*Hm. Easy. Almost too easy.*

He slid the box out of the stack and opened it.

The unique smell of mem-chips filled his nostrils – metal and silicone and plastic. He flipped through the carefully dated slides, first a few at a time, then one by one when he got to August.

There was no chip marked August 15, 2016.

There wasn’t even an empty slide where it should’ve been.

He grimaced.

*Yeah. Knew it was too easy.*
He shut the box and slid it back into the stack. When he raised his eyes back to the monitors he saw Anna and Dr. MacTaggert sitting on what looked like a small terrace overlooking the ocean. Drinking tea.

Cute.

His eyes were drawn involuntarily to Anna.

She was leaning forward in her chair, talking, her attitude tense. He wanted to know what she was saying, what she was thinking. What she thought about him.

He wet his lips, his mind lingering momentarily on her kiss, before focusing back on the conversation she was having with Dr. MacTaggert.

Looks like maybe she don’t need my help t’ get dis chip after all…

He still wanted to know where it was anyway. Just in case.

He walked along the walls, surveying every angle of the room from every point he could.

It was only when he walked past one of the computer screens that something caught his eye.

There was an email inbox opened up on screen, and it wasn’t Dr. MacTaggert’s. The name in the upper left hand corner said ‘Emma Frost’.

Huh. Looks like dis Dr. MacTaggert’s hackin’ into her old colleague’s email accounts. Interestin’.

He looked through the list of emails, his eyes narrowing when he saw that there were more than just a few from Nathan Milbury.

Well, shit. Looks like those two are still in contact. Hmm.

The emails were old though. The most recent was coming up to four years old, so maybe they weren’t still in contact after all.

He scrolled down till one particular subject heading caught his eye.

New test subject, it read.

He clicked on it curiously.

Dear Ms. Frost, the email began with the characteristic politeness he’d come to expect of Dr. Milbury, thank you for your thoughts on our meeting last week. They were indeed enlightening, and I am now inclined to agree with you. There are certain aspects of the human mind that cannot be replicated in our test subjects no matter how malleable their neural pathways are made by the mem-tech, or indeed, by the implants themselves. With this in mind…

Remy frowned and skimmed the next few sentences impatiently, picking up again only on the next paragraph.

I’d like to inform you, however, that I believe I have found a new test subject with all the capabilities we once found in Subject Zero. Subject Zero is, of course, off radar, and, judging by all known reports, most likely dead. That is unfortunate, but there is hope yet. Not too long ago, a young man came into my employ who has extremely similar characteristics to Subject Zero, and,
having tested him personally, I believe he may be the key to restarting the Weapon X project. It is possible, indeed, that he may actually exceed what we achieved in the limited time we had with Subject Zero, but, until the project is reopened, it is, of course, impossible to tell.

As such, it is perhaps a useless endeavour of mine to tell you of all this, seeing as a restart of the project is virtually nil considering the fact that certain of our colleagues are resistant to seeing any such thing come to fruition. However, I thought I should inform you, Ms. Frost, as you and I were often in agreement on many points concerning the Weapon X project in the past. If I were to convince you of the very real potential this new test subject has to revalidate the premise of the project, there might then be a chance that you will reconsider your position on its renewal.

But I cannot convince you here. I have instead attached the test results of this new subject. Do not take my word for it; read them, judge for yourself.

Yours faithfully,

Nathaniel Essex.

He held his breath, opened up the email attachment.

He knew what he’d see on it even before it came up on screen; and when it did, it was right there, at the top of the page, in 24 pt, bolded Helvetica font.

Remy LeBeau.

-oOo-
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Moira decides to hand over the chip; Anna reveals more about what the codes on the chips actually do; and leaving Muir turns out to be harder than anticipated.

“They told me you were dead.”

Moira MacTaggert was sitting at the round, metal table, looking out to sea with one hand curled around her teacup. The way she said the words made it sound like she was speaking of a friend, a sister, a daughter.

It was strange and surreal, when Anna had never laid eyes on this woman in her life – not that she could remember, anyhow.

“I didn’t die,” she murmured.

Moira looked at her with a faint, tired smile on her face.

“No. I can see that. But you have to understand… Essex himself told me that you had been shot and killed. That they never found your body. That the place was totally obliterated.”

Anna smiled that same old smile, the one that never reached her eyes.

“Someone else took a bullet for me. Torching the building was a cover. A cover to get Essex off my back.” She paused. “For a long while, it worked.”

There was a silence punctuated only by the sound of the seagulls and the waves crashing against the rocks. It was cold out here. Cold and damp but somehow beautiful and wild. Anna shivered a little and pulled her jacket tighter.

“I’m glad,” Moira said softly. “I mean, that he didn’t get you. I never liked Essex. Never trusted him. But he was so brilliant. So charismatic. He made you believe things that shouldn’t have existed – and then he went and brought them into being. That blinded me, for a very long time. And when I woke up… He didn’t want to let me go.”

She put her cup to her lips and drank, as if to stop herself from saying anymore. Anna stared at her.

“So,” she began. “I guess that’s why you built this fortress here. To protect yourself from him.”

Moira placed the teacup back into its saucer. She didn’t look at Anna. She stared into the depths of milky brown liquid as if staring into her own past.

“Yes. I’m not like you, dear. I can’t fight. I have to get others to do it for me. But it is lonely. And frightening. To know that he needs you so badly. To know that he’s on the other side of every wall and lurking round every corner. Waiting for you to make a mistake. Waiting for you to slip up.”
Her expression was blank. From the bags under eyes and the tired line of her mouth, Anna could guess she hadn’t slept a proper night in months… probably years.

“How well did you know me?” she asked at last.

Only then did Moira raise her eyes back to hers.

“I watched you. From afar. We all watched you from the other side of one-way windows, from your bedside while you slept.” Her expression was one of nostalgia, longing and bittersweet. “I knew you enough. I knew what you could do. What you were capable of.” She paused, blinked, added, “I knew every inch of your genetic makeup. But I didn’t know a thing about where you came from, about the person you were. I could’ve said a hundred things about where your genetic pathway would lead you but… I could never say what your thoughts and feelings and hopes and dreams were.”

She looked away suddenly, as if that shamed her. Again Anna felt that oddness, the feeling of a distant yet intimate connection to this woman, what she imagined it must feel like for an adopted child to meet its biological mother for the first time.

“I came here for a reason,” she finally said stiffly, awkwardly.

“I don’t doubt that you did, luv.”

“It’s about Essex. He wants to start up the Weapon X project again.”

“I know.”

Anna was surprised at that.

“You know?”

“Yes. I was the first person he contacted when he decided he wanted to revive the project. My insights were invaluable.” She glanced back up at her over the teacup. “I wanted nothing to do with it though.”

“Why not?”

Her eyes dropped again.

“What he did to people was wrong. Of course he could do amazing things – with the 1%, like you. But all those others… they either went mad, or died… And that wasn’t right. Even what he did to you,” and her lips went thin, “that was wrong too. He made you into something else. Something that wasn’t quite…”

“Human?” Anna filled in the gap quietly, and the geneticist shook her head thoughtfully.

“No. No, that’s not it. You were more than human. Are more than human.”

She wasn’t sure what the difference was. Her smile was sad.

“He wants the mem-chips,” she told the doctor, changing the subject.

“Yes,” Moira sighed. “I know.”

“I’m trying to collect them. Before he does.”
Moira looked at her then, full on. Her lips went flat.

“So you’re here to ask me for mine?”

“Yes. If you still have it. If you don’t…”

“Don’t worry. I still have it.”

Anna looked at her quizzically. After everything the doctor had just said, that somehow surprised her. Moira saw the look and gave her another of those weary smiles.

“This might sound strange, even horrible to you, but… the work I did on the Weapon X project meant something to me. Whatever I may now think of the ethics of it… it was some of the best work I ever did. I thought that maybe…” she paused, not knowing how to proceed, and Anna concluded for her, saying in a hard voice:

“You thought it might come in useful again someday?”

Moira grimaced, shook her head.

“I don’t know what I thought really. Maybe you’re right. Maybe a part of me did think that…” She trailed off a moment, before looking back up at Anna inquisitively. “How did you find out Essex wants those chips?”

Anna stirred. She reached out for her cup but found she didn’t want to drink any of it.

“He sent this man to steal them,” she murmured, swirling the contents of her cup around. “He asked me to help him get Trask’s. I did, and then… oh, it’s complicated. I figured out he was working for Essex. We dug a little bit, learned what those mem-chips were for. When I found out… I knew I had to stop him.”

Moira looked at her narrowly.

“This man Essex sent to steal the chips,” she said in a different tone of voice. “Is he the man that you came here with?”

Anna dropped the cup back into the saucer with a sharp click and stared at her. After a couple of moments Moira’s mouth jerked into a wry smile.

“I have cameras dotted all over the island. I saw the two of you on the boat. You dropped him off round the blindspot.” She looked up, towards the balcony overhead. “I’m guessing he’s in my rooms right now. Looking for the mem-chip, in case I don’t give it to you.”

Anna did what she did best when cornered in this way. She sat as still as a stone and said nothing.

“Don’t worry,” Moira reassured her softly, her smile fading. “I’m not angry. I recognised you both when I saw you on the surveillance camera. When I saw who you were I knew you weren’t my enemy.”

Well, this was unexpected.

“You know Remy?” she murmured.

“Yes. When Essex contacted me again, asking me to help him revive Weapon X, he sent me his files. This… Remy, is that his name?... was to have been the first test subject of the new
project. I was… impressed with his test results. But they couldn’t convince me to work with Essex again.” She let out a heavy breath and leaned back in her chair. She seemed to be considering something. Anna merely sat and waited.

“Look,” Moira spoke up again decidedly. “I’ll give you the chip, if it will help. If anything it will be a weight off my shoulders. The secret I’ve kept all these years has been a burden and I don’t want it anymore. But you have to promise me. You have to promise me you won’t let Essex start up Weapon X again.”

Anna nodded gravely.

“I can’t promise much,” she replied, “but I can promise you that.”

Again there was that thin, worn smile on the older woman’s face.

“Yes. I know.” She sighed, stood. “You should call your friend off. I really don’t like people rifling through my stuff.”

Anna nodded and got to her feet. She shook her head slightly to the right, said, “Remy?”

“Chere.”

His tone was soft, neutral. She thought vaguely how good it was to hear his voice again.

“You can stand down, Cajun. Dr. MacTaggert’s going to give us the mem-chip.”

“Huh.” He sounded slightly amused. “Interestin’.”

“How so?”

“I’m lookin’ at you right now. Over a surveillance monitor. You’re standin’ right in front of her. I’m guessin’ she already knows I’m here?”

“Yeah.” She looked over to Moira, who was standing impassively to one side. “She’s cool. Just don’t touch anythin’ else of hers, ‘kay?”

“Sure, whatever. Where shall I meet you?”

She glanced back over at Moira.

“Where shall we meet him?” she asked.

“Is he in the surveillance room?”

“Sounds like it. You wanna meet him there?”

“Yes.” The doctor nodded. “Tell him to wait there. We’ll come up.”

-oOo-

Remy was standing in the middle of the room with his hands clasped behind his back when they finally arrived in the surveillance room. It was an oddly communicative pose, one that subconsciously told Anna that he’d kept his hands to himself since their conversation, and it was something she felt somehow grateful for.

“Dr. MacTaggert,” she introduced her companion in a low voice, “this is Remy. Remy
LeBeau.”

This was obviously not a hand-shaking greeting. Both inclined their heads to one another, nothing more.

“I know you,” was all the doctor said.

“Do you now?” he rejoined with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes. You’re Essex’s new toy.” She moved away, to a computer screen on the other side of the room – she tapped it, and it blinked off. Remy followed her with his gaze, his arms now poised neutrally at his sides. Anna could tell that the doctor’s comment hadn’t sat well with him.

“Essex’s new toy,” he repeated the words with a mirthless smile. “Kinda insultin’ considerin’ the current situation.”

Moira had moved to a dusty bookshelf which held a couple dozen or so frayed and worn-looking computer science texts.

“Forgive me. What I should’ve said was, he wanted you to be his new toy. I’m glad you’re not.” She pulled out a certain volume, looked at the front cover, put it back again. “Although,” she added dourly, “I suspect he managed to play with you quite a bit, before you decided it wasn’t worth it. He managed to get the neural implant in you after all.”

Anna cast him a glance, curious as to Moira’s apparent knowledge; but he didn’t return it.

“Seems y’know a lot ‘bout me, doctor,” he said in a voice that was almost hostile. “Things I was under the impression no one else knew.”

There was a dangerous lilt to his voice that Anna read all too well; when she heard it she reached out and touched his arm, said, “Hey, it’s okay.”

“No, no,” Moira cut in distractedly. “He has a right to know.” She looked over at him. “Essex sent me your test results, you see. He wanted to start up the Weapon X project, and you were going to be his new number one subject.” She’d pulled down another thick tome and opened it up. There was a hollow carved into the pages, and there, inside, was the mem-chip. “I read all your stats, Mr. LeBeau,” she added quietly. “They were quite impressive.”

“Ha.” The word literally dripped with sarcasm. “I’m really good at impressin’. Obviously I didn’t impress you enough though, otherwise you woulda gone runnin’ over to Essex.”

Moira regarded him soberly over the book as she took out the chip in its small case and snapped the tome shut.

“No,” she corrected him quietly. “My days of working with Dr. Essex are long over.”

She slid the book back into its place and walked over to Anna. When she handed her the chip it felt like the hardest won victory, even if it had almost been the easiest.

“Thank you,” she said, and slipped the small case into the inner pocket of her jacket. She turned to Remy. “We should go.”

It was only when she’d got to the door that she realised that he hadn’t followed her. When she looked back she saw he was still standing there, staring down Dr. MacTaggert.
“Wait,” he spoke with quiet control. “There’s somethin’ I wanna ask her, chere. These mem-chips each hold a code, right? One part each of a secret share.”

Moira looked up at him. Her expression didn’t flicker. For a couple of seconds she was silent, as if scrutinising every inch of him.

“That’s right,” she answered at last.

“Right,” he echoed, nodding impatiently. “But what I want to know is what the code is for. What it actually does. What we’re actually tryin’ to stop Essex from startin’. What restartin’ Weapon X really means.”

Moira glanced over at Anna.

“You haven’t told him,” she stated quietly. Anna made no reply, and the doctor continued musingly, “That means you don’t trust him.”

Again, Anna said nothing – but her gaze flickered briefly.

“Dis ain’t Anna’s prerogative,” Remy broke into the silence, his tone low and almost preternaturally controlled. “Whatever Essex did to her he plans to do to me. You were on the project when it started. You know what the code controls. You know what it is Essex brought me on for. If he’s usin’ me, I wanna know to what end.”

Moira was silent, her gaze going back to Anna. There was a look there, Remy thought, that seemed to be a request for permission, and it angered him.

“It’s probably best if you don’t know,” she finally murmured. “The thing the code is hiding shouldn’t exist. Trask knew that. That’s why he sabotaged his own project, his own invention. In a matter of minutes it ruined countless peoples’ lives. If anyone knew it was even possible, if they ever tried to replicate it, then…” She took in a deep breath. “God help us all.”

“Ha!” Remy’s tone was cold. “And yet Trask left a chance – however small – that his own sabotaged project could be resurrected. At least a little part of him still had faith in it. You obviously must’a done, otherwise you wouldn’t still have kept the chip.”

“That was a mistake,” Moira rejoined, sounding certain for the first time. “And if what you and Anna are planning goes right, you won’t ever have to know the wrong he created.”

“And you get to make that call, huh?” Remy retorted. “Look – Anna was a kid when Essex put her through whatever it was he put her through. I ain’t. I want answers and I want them now.” Moira looked unmoved and he was prompted to continue disdainfully: “Whassa matter, doctor? Is your guilty conscience talkin’ to you now? Is it the fact that you had a hand in what happened during this ‘Crisis’ that bothers you so much? Is it your own reputation you’re concerned about? The idea that if Weapon X restarts your ugly li’l can o’ worms opens up for all the world to see? Admit it – you were proud of the work you did on Weapon X. You thought you could make use of it again one day. That’s why you never threw that mem-chip away. Because a part of you wanted Weapon X to be resurrected again. Am I right?”

She still said nothing, but her eyes flashed, and it was admission enough. Seeing his advantage, Remy stepped in closer to her, pushing his point with vehemence.

“Ya wanna know the truth, doctor? Weapon X – it’s already pretty much restarted. Essex already has hundreds of test subjects lined up and waitin’ for whatever sick experiment those codes are supposed to be hidin’. You know what else? Some of those subjects are already dead and dyin’.
“So don’t give me no bullshit about me bein’ better off not knowin’.”

“I have nothing to hide,” the doctor murmured, but Remy gave an icy laugh.

“Right. And you ain’t got nothin’ t’ protect ‘cept the illustrious career you’ve built these past sixteen years.”

“And five years stuck on this rock waiting for Essex to send someone to steal from me?” Moira fired back. “Don’t insult me, Mr. LeBeau! The only thing I have to hide is myself! The sooner that man’s precious codes are destroyed, the better! At least then I’ll get back my life!”

Anna stood by the door, feeling the swell of their back-and-forth wash in and out of her consciousness. She was suddenly tired, more tired than she’d been in a long, long time. She needed her meds. She needed to lie down and rest.

“The codes are part of a password,” she broke in when she couldn’t bear the heated sound of their argument any longer.

They both paused, stared at her. Remy’s expression was still flush with anger; Moira’s was suddenly watchful.

“A password for what?” he shot at her.

“For a machine. It starts a machine.”

She leaned against the door frame with one hand, massaged the bridge of her nose with another. A headache was forming, like a storm looming slowly overhead.

“A machine…?” he began, and she cut him off quickly, explaining matter-of-factly:

“An interfacer. A big one. For more than just one person. You don’t need a sim-chip or a mem-chip when you use it. You just interface directly with another person’s brain.”

He stared at her. He stared at her as if expecting more, but she couldn’t explain, she couldn’t tell him anymore. Her head hurt, and it hurt even more to think about it.

“The Machine malfunctioned,” Moira continued for her when the expectant silence had dragged out for too long. “It malfunctioned and caused the Crisis – that’s why Trask sabotaged his own invention. But you’re right – he still loved that machine, still hoped for what it could achieve. So he set a failsafe into it. A kind of guarantee to make sure no one but us could ever restart the thing again. Each piece of the code had to be entered in a certain sequence – Trask, Frost, MacTaggert, Sarkissian, Yashida, Essex.” She recited the names like a mantra. “If any part of it was missing… the machine would self-destruct. He made sure Essex could never restart it by himself. But if he has all the codes…”

“Then he can restart the Machine,” Remy finished.

“Yes.”

He looked back over at Anna like he wanted, needed her to say something more, but she didn’t. She couldn’t.

“So this ‘Machine’… was the basis of the Weapon X project…” he half-stated, half-questioned of no one in particular… And somehow she had the strength to answer him anyway.
“No,” she told him quietly, wearily. “Weapon X was the Machine.”

-oOo-

They walked back down to the boat, her heading towards the jetty with a purposeful stride, him following close behind.

“Anna,” he said.

She kept walking.

“Anna!”

This time his voice was hard and urgent and she stopped, swung round.

“What?”

“He hooked you up to that machine, didn’t he?” he spat out in a heated rush. “He made you interface with other people’s minds directly. That’s how you do it, isn’t it? That’s how you can remake other peoples’ memories, how you can completely destroy them.”

She spun on her heel and began to walk again.

“Anna!” he called, and the next moment he’d put his hand on her shoulder, jerked her back round to face him. “Goddammit, woman, talk t’me!”

He was close, breathing so hard she could feel it on her face. Feelings swirled up from the pit of her, a combustive mixture of anger and tenderness that stripped her breath away.

“You know so much about me,” she told him, surprised at how broken the words, her voice, sounded. “I can’t deal with that right now. Okay? I can’t.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat, one she couldn’t read or didn’t get; and his hand was so damn warm and heavy on her shoulder that she snapped round again and headed for the boat.

There was another vessel docked next to their own, a small speedboat bobbing gently in the water. She marched past it, jumped up into their boat, and went straight for the controls.

Almost immediately he was right there beside her again, standing so close it was like an opening to a confrontation.

“The Machine malfunctioned while you were in it, didn’t it,” he stated in a more controlled pitch – but one that nevertheless gave away the intensity running beneath. “That’s how you lost your memories. That’s how they were destroyed. Isn’t it.”

She stood and stared at the controls, her eyes burning. She was almost surprised when she felt his hand slip through her hair, when he tilted her head to make her look at him with a tenderness that was almost sensual.

“I’m like you,” he told her in the same, intimate tone of voice he’d used when he’d spoken to her that night in her apartment; it made her toes curl. “I’m just another experiment. We need to help each other. You need to let me in.”

His hand was still in her hair, and she met his gaze forcefully, almost aggressively, a counterpoint to the gentleness of his grip.
“You’re not like me,” she retorted with a scornful softness. “You had a life once. You know what it’s like to be normal, to be human. And Essex cured you. You had everything and you can have it again.”

He looked almost angry to hear her say it.

“And there’s nothin’ to say that you can’t have those things too, chere. Nothin’ to say you can’t live a normal life, settle down, marry, have children—”

“I can’t have children,” she blurted out in a flat, hard monotone.

He stopped. He blinked. He dropped his hand and she stared back down at the control panel with her jaw clenching and unclenching. She felt something radiating from him then that she read as pity. The force of it brought an overpowering sourness to her mouth.

“Remy, Essex made me to be his in every way,” she explained to him bitterly. “Everything he could do to ruin any chance I could have of a life outside of Weapon X, he did do. He made me into a soldier. He stopped me from being a real human being.” She chanced a sideways glance at him then, saw him still staring at her with this closed-off expression she couldn’t quite decode. “Oh God,” she muttered wearily. “You don’t get it, do you?”

His eyes never left hers.

“I didn’t,” he murmured softly. “But I think I’m beginnin’ to.”

She didn’t know how to read that statement, so she made no reply. She half expected him to probe her some more, but what he actually did was reach out and touch her shoulder. It was brief, it was neutral… but it was comforting. A token of comradeship, which she could deal with right now.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

She didn’t know what that meant either, so she opted to read it as a prompt to get going. She started up the boat, feeling almost relieved when his hand left her shoulder and he walked away.

Her headache was growing.

Anna took the pills out of her jacket pocket and thumbed open the lid, shaking a couple into her mouth.

She knew it was bad, but she needed to focus whilst sailing back to the Mainland. Dr. Braddock had taken great pains to instil the proper protocol for taking her medication, but she’d long since abandoned them.

Anna, the eye drops are preventive, the pills are reactive. You need to take more of the eye drops. Stop using the pills as a crutch.

Fuck. She didn’t know when she needed to take what anymore. Her ‘condition’ seemed to have melded into one big mess and she hadn’t got a clue when preventive medication was appropriate when all she ever seemed to be doing was reacting anyway.

She thought of her conversation with Dr. MacTaggert, back at the compound. Of the truths she had learned after so damn long living in the dark.
“You do know,” she states quietly to the doctor, “what happened to me, don’t you? That nearly all my memories were wiped the day the Crisis happened?”

Moira looks down, shifting uneasily. It’s the first token of guilt Anna has ever seen from anyone who was involved in what was done to her, and it should feel like a victory but instead it feels hollow.

“Yes,” she answers softly. “That’s what they told me.” For a moment she looks like she’ll say more, but her lips close over, thin and bitter, and she makes no more comment. It isn’t enough. She wants more. She wants a reason for why this happened. She wants to hear someone say sorry.

“What happened?” she prompts her. Moira looks up at her quickly, then back down again.

“We were so sure it’d be safe…”

She seems flustered, confused – but Anna has no time for this. Excuses are an affront.

“What happened?” she echoes slowly. Dr. MacTaggert still can’t look at her.

“They hooked you both up to the Machine,” she explains almost in a rush. “You and Tanya. You were supposed to interface directly with her brain and—”

“Why?”

The word is hard, uncompromising. Moira looks up at her then, her expression earnest.

“Y’see, luv, Trask’s daughter was damaged. Her mam had died, but she refused to believe it. Trask told us she had these visions, tactile hallucinations, of her dead mother… Poor lass.” Her gaze drops again, her mouth twisted in anguish. “Trask wanted you to cure her… If you could take away those memories, replace them with ones where her mam had never died, had never existed at all… then she would be a normal child again. She would be happy.”

She picks up the teacup and takes a quick, perfunctory sip with a shaky hand.

“And something went wrong…” Anna murmurs.

“Yes.” Moira places the cup back in its saucer with a rattle. “Something went wrong. I never quite understood… Everything seemed to be fine at first. I remember… you were interfacing with her brain, you could see it on the monitors. And then—”

“And then what?”

Moira chews on her lip. She looks perplexed.

“The Machine, luv. It was like it was eating up your neural pathways, one by one. They just started to blink out. Like stars in the sky, being extinguished. I remember… I remember Trask trying to stop the Machine… He couldn’t understand what was going on… None of us could… It should’ve worked… We’d tested it on you countless times before… But… Oh, I don’t know what went wrong!” She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose momentarily. “By the time Trask pulled the plug on the Machine, almost all your memories were gone. I remember seeing your neural patterns on the screen… almost all the stars gone out… And Tanya was catatonic… her neural pathways were all over the place… Poor lass never recovered…”

She doesn’t care about Tanya. She cares about herself.
“The Machine… it malfunctioned… it deleted everything…” she murmurs.

Moira drops her hand, opens her eyes. Her face seems more lined than ever.

“Look, luv. I know you probably won’t listen to me, but… Don’t rest your hopes on finding your past in those mem-chips. You won’t find it there. Trust me.”

Wouldn’t she?

Anna chewed on her lip thoughtfully.

Dr. MacTaggert was probably right. The mem-chips may be a waste of time. But they were the only things she had left to tie her to her past. If there was some clue… Any clue at all… …

Her train of thought was broken by the phone suddenly vibrating at her thigh, and when she looked at it she saw there were 5 missed calls from Raven. A surge of guilt rose in her when she thought of how her mentor would be beside herself with worry right now. Either that or she was going to be seriously, explosively, pissed off.

She opened up a text message and fired it off one-handed.

Am in Scotland playing w/new toy. Don’t worry, am fine. Will spk later.

She thought maybe the text would piss Raven off even more, but she figured it was better to let her cantankerous guardian know that she was actually alive and all in one piece.

It was when she’d slipped the phone back into her pocket that she noticed the sound of another vessel approaching behind them. When she glanced over her shoulder she saw that it was the boat that had been docked next to them at the jetty. She didn’t think anything of it until a few seconds later when she heard Remy swear, and then—

SHUNK.

The boat lurched to one side and Anna almost went with it, only just managing to regain her balance as she heard an exclamation from Remy which was promptly drowned out by the high pitched grating sound of the smaller, speedier vessel grinding against the portside.

She tossed another glance over her shoulder, and saw someone standing up in the encroaching boat, a tall Asian man in a wetsuit and a utility belt. From his posture he looked exactly like he was going to board them.

What the actual fuck?!

Instinct took hold of her and she spun the steering wheel to the left, ploughing back into the smaller speedboat, knocking its occupant off balance and back against the controls. Almost immediately she threw forward the throttles – the boat heaved and raced onward, leaving the other vessel to rapidly drop behind.

“Remy!” she shouted back over her shoulder at him, “What the fuck—??!!”

“Issa Yashida assassin!” he hollered back at her. “Keep fuckin’ steerin’!”

She grit her teeth and ploughed onward at full tilt, and only half a second seemed to pass before she heard the high-pitched whine of the little boat’s motor gaining on them again. She knew it was impossible to out-run it. Their craft was just way too big and slow and bulky in comparison.
Dammit!

She glanced in the wakeboard mirror and saw the speedboat catching up fast on their portside. Again she swerved the boat as Remy threw on some sort of harness that held a shitload of knives. A few choice oaths burst from her mouth as the two vessels played an impromptu and high-stakes game of dodgems. There was simply no throwing the assassin off. He dodged and weaved with all the alacrity of an insect, and even when she managed to clip his starboard he just kept coming right back in like the worst kind of fly.

“Remy!” she screamed back at him. “This swamp rat ain’t gonna play nice! I hope you plan to use those fuckin’ knives!”

“Fuck yeah!” he yelled back. “Just keep this baby flyin’!” He sounded hyped for this, totally wired. A wicked little grin crossed her face. There was a part of her that really wanted to see him in action.

The assassin’s boat came in again, and this time she heard a short, sharp, metallic thunk penetrate the portside hull. She recognised the sound, and when she glanced into the mirror her worst fears were confirmed. The assassin had fired a grapple gun at their vessel, and was balancing effortlessly on the side of his boat, steering it with his left foot. She swerved the boat again; but he only wobbled momentarily, and she knew it was a futile endeavour to try and knock him off again. Almost as soon as the momentum had drawn them apart again, he retracted the rope and she heard him whizzing through the air towards them, quickly followed by the thud of him finally landing on deck.

The small speedboat veered off and crashed against the rocks.

In a matter of seconds they’d been boarded and she swerved again, hoping that she could at least give Remy a headstart and make the attacker’s landing as uncomfortable as possible.

Clouds gathered, thunder rumbled overhead…the skies split open, and suddenly there was rain. Torrential rain.

Shit.

Almost immediately the seas were squally, the winds whipping up the waves into a frenzy, impelling her angrily towards the rocks. In a matter of seconds Anna was drenched, her hands slick and cold; but she held onto the wheel like a mad thing, desperately steering the recalcitrant boat on the friendliest course possible.

Behind her all she could hear was the dull, wet thuds of bodies striking one another, the angry grunts of two men locked in combat, the clang of blade sliding against blade.

She didn’t dare look back in the mirror lest a second’s distraction drive her against a rocky outcrop. The boat was heavy, sluggish, protesting against her control, but she forced it with all the might she possessed to stay on track as the fight behind her grew louder, more desperate.

She chanced a look in the wakeboard mirror and saw the two of them, thief and assassin, locked in a furious grapple which neither seemed capable of breaking out of.

And the goddamn weather was intent on smashing their boat against the rocks.

There was the crack of lightning and the drumroll of thunder, punctuated only by an unfamiliar cry that she only knew was not Remy’s. When she darted a look at the mirror again she saw the two of them wrestling one another near the portside edge, a knife wedged in the assassin’s
thigh. Injured he may have been, but she could tell he had no intention of letting up.

The rain intensified, the wind became a gale.

The boat was tossed to-and-fro and she was helpless as a ragdoll.

*God fuckin’ damn it!*

Instinctively she went for the pocket in her cargo pants and flipped it open, feeling the boat jolt and weave as her single steering hand fought to keep the wheel in check. Her wet fingers closed over the pistol and she yanked it out, twisting as she did so, poking the barrel out under her left arm and taking aim.

She glanced sideways slightly, saw she was still set on a relatively safe course, her left hand grasping the wheel tightly, and she prayed that it was strong enough to keep them away from danger. When she looked back over her shoulder Remy and Yashida’s crony were still having at it on the portside edge and she set her jaw so fiercely it hurt, her fingers numb with the wet and the cold, the two struggling bodies swinging wildly in and out of her aim.

*C’mon, she thought intently. C’mon, just an inch more. God, please don’t rock the boat. Please don’t let me hit Remy…*

And there was a sudden lull, a sudden stillness that maybe was in her own self, but almost seemed heaven-sent. Her aim was suddenly steady. Enough to take the shot.

She pulled the trigger.

The bullet whizzed through the air and hit somewhere in its intended target; the assassin flipped over the edge of the boat and into the water with a resounding splash.

*Ha!*

*Ha ha ha!*

The hit was so stunning, so perfectly-timed that she started to laugh; and then suddenly Remy was coming towards her with this horror-stricken look on his face and—

“Anna—!” was the only word he got out.

The boat careened at full speed into the rocks and then all there was was the rushing sound and sight and taste of water.

-oOo-
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Anna and Remy arrive back home to a not-so-good surprise, and Remy reveals a secret.

Cody is dead.

She can’t change that now.

She staggers round a corner, dragging her bloody leg behind her. Essex's flunkies can’t be far behind.

She’s crying. Tears are pouring down her face – she can’t remember the last time she cried, but she’s doing it now, and it’s a horrible distraction.

He’s dead, girl. Can’t change that now.

Can’t outrun Essex either.

She comes to a halt and catches her breath. She could give in, let them take her. Go back to the life she once knew. A life of murder and espionage and cold regimen, where memories are inconsequential and aren’t needed. Perhaps that’s why Essex always wanted her so much, when it came down to it. Because she had no baggage. No childhood hang-ups to be saddled with, no moral centre to be grounded in. She had been a blank slate, and he could’ve written whatever he wanted on her.

She’s not a blank slate anymore. Cody’s written all over her, he’s made her into a person.

But he’s dead now. And she has to save herself.

She takes the detonator out of her pocket and looks up at the pretty little trap she’s set around the room, a failsafe just in case…. … There are no ‘in cases’ now. She pulls this trigger and the whole place will be obliterated, Cody’s body along with it. That makes her… sad. But she wants to live now. She wants to live for his sake.

She stumbles over to the grille in the floor and heaves at it.

Will Essex believe she’s dead? This place will be destroyed so thoroughly they probably wouldn’t find a body anyway, but… He knows the kinds of subterfuge she can stage. They’re exactly the kind of thing he made her for, after all.

She doesn’t care. This is her last chance. Her last chance to lead a real life. She can hide from Essex. Steal so many identities he’ll never find her, even if he believes she’s still alive. It’s a small price to pay. She’s done with Anna Raven. She can be whoever she wants to be, anyone.

She jumps down into the drain and pulls the grille laboriously back over her. Her body is pulsing with pain but she ignores it. She splashes through the grime and filth and counts to five.

She hits the button.
The world explodes behind her and she’s lifted to her feet on a blast of super-heated air. She wakes perhaps thirty seconds later, face-down in the water, and it feels like she’s been reborn.

She gets to her feet and runs.

Goodbye, Cody Robbins.

Rest in peace, Anna Raven.

-oOo-

She surfaced from the water and onto a craggy, pebbly beach that made her back hurt like hell.

She was dimly aware that Remy had dragged her there, and she was grateful that he had, otherwise she wasn’t sure she would have had the drive to actually save herself. He was nearby, somewhere. She could hear him panting like he’d run a marathon, coughing and spluttering and swearing a few choice oaths to himself.

She rolled slightly onto her side and began to vomit water violently.

When she’d hacked it all up she saw him staggering up beside her, felt his hand on her back.

“You okay?” he rasped. She couldn’t speak. She nodded.

“You wanna know somethin’?” he asked, completely unsolicited. “This,” and he held out the knife he’d been fighting with only a few moments before, “has to be one o’ de best presents I ever got.”

He let out a bark of a laugh and collapsed onto his back beside her.

“Jesus, Cajun,” she managed to croak at him accusatorily between coughs, “you must’ve really fuckin’ pissed Yashida off when you stole his mem-chip.”

He was still laughing like he couldn’t believe either of them were still alive.

“Yeah, well… I may’ve stolen some other stuff from him besides that mem-chip,” he confessed unapologetically. “I may also have seduced his daughter.”

She threw him a look that said really?, and he laughed again.

“And here I was,” she muttered belligerently, “thinking I was the one with the death wish.”

She spat out more grit and sea water before falling onto her back beside him.

For a long time there was nothing but the rain and the waves and the sound of them breathing.

“I should actually be dead,” she murmured.

But for some reason she felt so alive. So, so alive. It wasn’t just the rain and the waves and the sound of them breathing. But they were definitely a part of it.

“Naw,” he bantered back with a smile in his voice. “Not after taking the world’s most
accurate pot-shot.”

She rolled over then, braced her arms either side of him, and pressed her lips against his.

About a split second in and something that had started out wet and damp and cold had turned into something warm and fiery and passionate.

It was only when his hand slid in under the back of her jacket and tugged at the hem of her shirt that she pulled away slightly, breaking the kiss.

He was looking up at her with this small, inscrutable little smile on his face, the same cocksure smirk that wasn’t supposed to impress her. She realised that his hand was right there under her shirt, his thumb absently caressing the small of her back.

“Convinced y’ not dead yet, chere?” he murmured.

She bit her lip and smiled mischievously.

“We should go on dates like this more often.”

His grin was sly.

“What, you didn’t like dinner at the Princesse?”

“I liked it enough. I liked what came after a whole lot better.”

She pulled back more fully but didn’t quite have the heart to back away from him completely. His hand was still there on her bare skin and it felt good.

“You’re pretty damn good with a knife,” she told him decidedly, after a moment. “I like watchin’ you in action.”

He raised an eyebrow, wondering whether to turn this into innuendo or not.

“I was gonna say th’ same ‘bout you,” he quipped back. “Until you crashed the fuckin’ boat.”

She laughed.

“I just saved your sorry ass.”

“And I just saved yours.”

She eyed up his mouth like she wanted to kiss it again.

Fuck it, she was sorely tempted.

“We make a good team,” she finally replied, as if she’d only just realised it. “Don’t we, Cajun.”

He was silent, but there was a tacit agreement in his eyes that she thought both of them weren’t quite ready to admit to – an insinuation of partnership that was a little too overwhelming for them to safely contemplate.

She backed away then, got to her feet. She checked her breast pocket for the mem-chip, made sure there’d been no seepage into its case. What she was really doing was trying to distract
herself from the fact that the heat of his handprint was still there on her back as if he was still right there touching her.

“Remy,” she said, as he staggered to his feet beside her.

“Yeah?”

“I really… really… wanna go home.”

-oOo-

Even if he’d had plans for the flight back to the US, he was too exhausted to act on them and so was she. Besides, things had changed during the trip to Muir, and his mood was in an entirely different place. While Anna slept he opened up his phone and stared down at the emails there.

He’d managed to forward most of them to his burner account before Moira and Anna had made their entrance. He’d spent the entire plane trip reading them over, glad that Anna hadn’t been awake to ask any difficult questions.

He frowned down at the one that was currently open on his screen. He must’ve read it about five times already.

Dear Ms. Frost,

I understand your misgivings. The subject is indeed an adult, which does not give us the advantage of malleability that our previous non-adult subjects afforded us. However – let me be blunt. Subject Omega came to me in a severely deteriorated state. His experiences with the bleed effect were an almost constant affliction that he could get little relief from. However, within two weeks of the implant having been made, he was almost fully recovered – quite unprecedented, I think you’ll agree. His neuroplasticity is almost on a par with the levels we encountered with Subject Zero, which, as I’m sure you’re aware, is no mean feat. He displays great potential. If Weapon X could be restarted, we would stand our best chance of succeeding with him.

As to the other concerns you mention – I hardly think you need to worry. His loyalty can be bought. I have taken the liberty of securing a deal with him, the fulfilment of which, however, requires that the project be restarted. He will get what he wants – but only if the codes are retrieved and Trask’s mistakes righted.

I would ask you again whether you are amenable to rejoining the project. If I remember correctly, our goals were very much in concert throughout the length of the original project. Due to unfortunate circumstance, we failed then. We should not let petty differences allow us to fail now.

Yours faithfully,

Nathaniel Essex.

He blanked his phone and stared out the window. The sun was setting – the silvery clouds were alive with rich hues of pink and orange and purple. He thought about all the things he knew now without knowing what any of it meant. He stared into the clouds and after a while he slept.

He awoke just as the plane was beginning to descend over Newark, and he gently nudged his still sleeping companion into wakefulness.

“Anna,” he murmured softly. “Time t’ wake up.”
She breathed in deeply, sharply, before giving a languid stretch.

“There already?” She looked mildly surprised. “I thought I just closed my eyes…”

“Yeah, you did,” he grinned. “For several hours.”

She looked a little perturbed at that, but said nothing.

It wouldn’t have mattered so much if she hadn’t promptly fallen back asleep as soon as they’d got into the taxi back to her apartment. At that point he’d had to wonder whether her brain wasn’t just catching up on all the rest it should’ve been getting once she’d woken up from her coma, and he felt guilty for dragging her out to Scotland. Things hadn’t exactly been easy on her during their ‘trip’, and he seriously hoped that the run-in with Moira’s security and Yashida’s assassin – not to mention a near-drowning – hadn’t done any lasting damage to her.

He glanced over at her, fast asleep with her cheek propped up against the doorframe.

He felt… sad. Unsettled. Full to the brim – unbearably so. There were so many things about her he knew now that changed everything, in ways he couldn’t even begin to pinpoint. He’d known she’d been damaged by her time in Weapon X, but only now had he come to comprehend the level of abuse she had suffered at the hands of Essex, at the hands of the programme. To him, Essex had been a saviour, an unlikely guardian angel who’d given him back his life. To her… what had he been to her? A jailor, a torturer… and yet the only father she’d ever known.

He propped his left elbow against the window ledge and watched the world go past.

He’d lived his life. It hadn’t always been bad – in fact there were times when it had been really damn good. He’d had his family, his childhood. He’d had Belle. And what had she had? Lost memories and 5 years as someone else’s property, being trained to be a weapon. The only humanity she’d ever managed to find since had been taken away from her. He’d always thought her so strong, so invulnerable, that he’d never appreciated what her inner life must be – a hell.

All the shit he’d gone through paled in comparison to it.

He’d spent one night with her. A single night that he’d classified under ‘awesome sex’, an experience he would’ve been more than happy to repeat. But now… now that he knew what he knew… he wished he’d done things differently somehow. Said things differently. Approached her differently. He couldn’t say how or why it felt important, but it did. He felt like just another man who’d taken advantage of her.

Outside the roads were becoming familiar and he realised they were nearing her apartment. He glanced back over at her. She was still fast asleep.

“Anna,” he called lightly – she didn’t stir. “Anna,” he said again.

She was silent, her chest rising and falling softly. A white lock of hair had fallen across her cheek, and he couldn’t help himself. He leaned over and gently brushed it aside, tucking it back behind her ear. She looked so peaceful, so completely at rest that he almost didn’t want to wake her.

“Hey Anna,” he said softly, stroking behind her ear with his thumb. “Wake up, chere.”

She still didn’t wake immediately, although her eyelids began to flicker, and after a moment or so she opened her eyes sleepily.
“Hey,” he greeted her, still not quite able to move his hand away. Her gaze fixed on his and she gave him a smile that was totally spontaneous.

“Hi,” she murmured. “We back yet?”

“Pretty much just arrivin’. You just slept through virtually the whole trip.”

“Hmmm.”

Anything more she would’ve said was curtailed by the taxi juddering to a halt, and he took the moment to finally back away from her.

“Glad to see you’re okay,” he continued neutrally as he got out his wallet and paid the cabbie. “I was gettin’ kinda worried you were gonna slip into a coma again or somethin’.” He got out the car and began to unload their luggage. A moment later she was there, lending him a hand. “You sure you’re okay?” he asked. He decided it couldn’t be a bad thing to double check.

“I’m fine,” she said, and she sounded like it so he didn’t push her any further. Together they headed up the path to the elevators.

“So,” she asked him quietly as she called one down, “did you find what you were looking for? Did Moira have any intel on you?”

He hesitated briefly. He wasn’t sure he was ready to divulge any secrets just yet, although he was beginning to think – disconcertingly so – that he might trust her with them.

“No. Not really.” He glanced over at her as the elevator came down. “What about you? She give you any clues?”

She didn’t look at him – just stared at the doors as they slid open.

“She gave me the truth,” she began slowly, “about what happened that day. But probably not all of it.”

She didn’t elaborate but walked into the lift, and he followed close behind. As soon as the doors had closed she turned to face him, standing so close he could feel her body heat, her eyes fixing his with an earnest stare.

“Remy,” she murmured, pausing only to reach up and curl her fingers into the lapels of his jacket. “I hope you’re not thinking of sleeping in the guest room tonight.”

It was the first time she’d really, unequivocally, come out and said she wanted him, and for about half a second he was surprised.

“Not if you don’t want me to, chere,” he answered softly, and just as seriously.

Her gaze dropped for a second; her right hand absently slipped under the opening of his jacket and over his breast.

“No. I don’t want you to,” she spoke after a moment. Her eyes wandered back to his and she almost whispered, “I think you know where I want you.”

His heart was beating painfully fast – he knew she could feel it, that it was giving him away. Slowly he removed her hand from his chest, raised it to his lips and kissed the inside of her wrist, right where the faded scars were, never taking his eyes from hers. He was pretty sure sleeping
with her a second time would constitute some cardinal sin in all the rule books their business possessed, but… screw it. He’d make a hundred exceptions for her if she wanted it. As far as he was concerned, rule books were made to be broken, and particularly for a woman like her.

His response made her happy; she took her hand back with a smile, and the elevator doors swished open over her shoulder. He followed her out of the lift, chancing himself the intimacy of coming in close behind her and pressing a kiss behind her ear. And no sooner had he done that than she had gone rigid, coming to a halt like she’d been shot.

He straightened, confused to see her just standing there like a hunted, cornered rabbit, staring at her own front door. He only had to follow her gaze to see almost immediately what she’d seen.

The lock on her door was busted, hanging slightly off-kilter.

He heard her swear, and in a trice she was moving again, pushing open the door with a shove of her hand – it swung open at her touch and hit the wall with a bang.

“No no no no!” he heard her groan aloud, and the next moment she’d run in. He stood a second, dumbfounded, before finally following her as the lights flickered on above. He halted at the threshold when he saw what lay within.

“Shit.”

The entire place had been trashed, was in complete disarray. There wasn’t a single piece of furniture that hadn’t been overturned, a single glass that hadn’t been smashed, a single drawer that hadn’t been emptied of its contents and flung haphazardly on the floor.

Anna was in the middle of it all, her hands moving agitatedly at her sides, like she didn’t know what to do with them.

“No no no, this isn’t happening, this isn’t real, this isn’t happening!” she cried in a barely articulate screech.

He shut the front door slowly behind him, said “Anna…”, but she barely appeared to hear him. A look of abject horror slowly crossed her face and in a whirl of movement she’d swung round and was marching into her bedroom; he could only follow with his heart caught in his throat.

The bedroom was in an even worse mess, but she ignored it all; she went straight for the wardrobe, flung open the doors and kicked open the hidden panel.

She sank to her knees and that was when he heard a low wail of a moan emanate from her mouth.

He’d heard the sound only once before, and he recognised it immediately in her. It was the sound Belle had made when they’d told her that she’d lost their baby.

“Anna…” he breathed, his heart in his mouth, hardly able to bear the horrible moan she was making. He crossed the room and stopped to look over her shoulder. He saw what she had seen. The secret compartment in her wardrobe was empty.

“They took them,” she howled disconsolately. “They took them all. All my chips. All my records. All my memories. My entire life. *Everything*. They’ve taken it all…”
Her body crumpled and suddenly she was a shuddering, whimpering, sobbing heap on the floor.

He sucked in a shaky breath. He’d never seen her like this. He’d never seen anyone like this, not since Belle. It was horrible, terrible to witness – to realise that he was seeing the near-complete destruction of another human being.

That was when he knelt down and put his arms round her, held her close, rocking her gently. Her arms went round him and she clung to him as if he was her final lifeline.

“They’ve taken them,” she wept plaintively into his shoulder. “They’ve taken all my memories… All my past… They’ll ‘face with them… They’ll know everything about me… All my thoughts… All my feelings… All the things that scare me… All the things I kept safe just in case I needed to be reminded of who I really am…”

She broke down into pitiful sobs and he held her closer, putting his face in her hair, whispering, “Shhhh…”

“They’ll know me now,” she continued as if reciting a lament. “They’ll know everything about me. More than anyone, ever. Why didn’t I move them someplace else? Why didn’t I get Raven to protect them? Why did I go to Muir, why didn’t I think this would happen?!”

He swallowed on a sour surge of guilt. Somehow he felt exactly what she was trying to work out in her own head, what she as trying to imply. That it was his fault. That he’d helped lead her into something foolhardy and reckless, distracted her, drawn her away from the safety net she’d so assiduously woven for herself.

“Shhhh, Anna,” he murmured again.

She said nothing, just sobbed quietly, quieter and quieter until everything had gone out of her.

He stroked her hair, her tearstained cheeks, feeling his stomach churn with a hideous beauty. He could only compute one thing. That it hurt to see her like this. That all the feelings he possessed made it torture for him to see her in such pain.

Gently he lifted her into his arms and she didn’t protest. He laid her out on her bed and sat down beside her. Almost immediately she rolled onto her side and curled up into a foetal position. She was shaking slightly and he put his hand on her back, rubbing it soothingly.

He didn’t know what he was doing. Everything was a blur, a pinpoint vortex of feeling.

“We’ll sort it out, chere,” he heard himself say. “We’ll get it all back. I promise.”

She made no reply, and he thought she was completely out of it, which he was glad of because it was a better place for her to be in than the mess she’d been in a few short minutes ago.

Silence slowly enveloped the room and he lay flat on his back beside her.

He stared up at the ceiling and tried to switch off, and for some reason the only thing he kept hearing was the sound of Belle screaming.

-oOo-

He awoke later to darkness, to the silver shadow of moonlight casting its eerie glow
through the window.

When he turned to look at Anna she was still on her side, in exactly the same position she’d been in when he’d laid her there. It was only from the soft, deep, evenness of her breathing that he could tell she was asleep.

He got up slowly, soundlessly, and pulled the curtains shut. Then he left the room and closed the door softly behind him.

The lounge looked worse under electric light, and he busied himself for a few aimless minutes putting her things back in order. He finally found her laptop under the overturned sofa. He was pretty certain Creed and his old unit had done a thorough job of scraping it for everything they could get; when he opened it up it was still on the lock screen, which told him there was still some juice in it, which also told him that they hadn’t broken into her apartment that long ago.

He chewed on his lip and went over to the desk. He set the laptop on the charging pad, righted the upturned chair, and sat down. He hacked into her account within a minute of running his lockpick. A few more minutes of digging and he’d found the crawler programme on the log files. It had already finished scraping her hard drive hours ago.

Remy frowned. The damage had already been done, and there was zero point in worrying about it.

Instead he opened up a browser and typed in ‘Emma Frost’. Then he got up and made himself a coffee.

Hours passed in silence, but for the sound of the keyboard clacking. For an hour or so he fell asleep in his chair and when he awoke it was still dark. He yawned, stretched, and rubbed his eyes. When he drank the rest of his coffee it was cold.

Remy sat for a long moment and considered his options.

When he crept back into the bedroom he found Anna exactly as he had left her, and for a moment he wondered whether she’d gone into some sort of fugue state, or back into a coma.

Slowly, stealthily, he tiptoed over to the bed and knelt down on it beside her, lowering his body weight onto the mattress carefully so as not to wake her. He put his hand on her shoulder and nudged her gently onto her back.

She was asleep.

He could tell from the slight parting of her lips, the gentle flickering of her eyelids. She was dreaming, and he wondered what lay on the other side of those eyelids, what her mind unravelled in the lonely, questing hours of sleep.

His gaze traced her face intently for what felt like a long time. There was something about her, and he still couldn’t put his finger on it. Softness and strength in hidden places. Vulnerability and mettle. Ugliness and beauty.

He wanted to touch her so fucking bad it hurt.

He broke his gaze unwillingly, letting it wander from her face down to her breast. Softly he reached out and peeled back the front of her jacket. Her chest rose and fell with the gentle rhythm of her breathing and just as he was about to make his move she shifted ever so slightly, making a small, soft sound in the back of her throat.
Remy froze, his eyes fixed on her face again.

In a trice she was deeply asleep again and he paused a moment to remember to breathe, to gather himself. When he reached out once more she was perfectly still and silent. He slipped his fingers into the inner pocket of her jacket and carefully teased out the small, plastic case in there. When it was in his hand he backed away just as slowly and methodically as he’d approached her, inch by painful inch until he was standing at the bedside beside her.

He opened up the box and took out Moira MacTaggert’s mem-chip.

When he walked over to the interfacer and started it up, it seemed so noisy in the quiet that he was afraid it would wake her, but it didn’t. He sat in the recliner, took the visor, and inserted the chip. He remembered what she’d said to him not so long ago.

*You have no idea what interfacing with a mem-chip will do to you. I know I have a problem, and I was made to deal with it. You weren’t. Bottom line. I can handle it. You can’t.*

The corner of his mouth jerked into a wry, sad smile.

*Sorry, chere. Truth is, dis ain’t my first time. And it prob’ly ain’t gon’ be my last.*

He lowered the visor over his head and what welcomed him was her custom loading screen. For a few blissful seconds he was back by the Mississippi on a summer’s day, his feet in the water and the sun on his face. It was such a visceral and accurate mirage of his past that for a moment he was swept up in the simple joy of reliving the memory of it, memories of his childhood, of his family, of Belle… …

And then it was over.

He regained himself with an effort, surprised that she had chosen such an obviously personal standby programme, when the importance of switching off completely from one’s own thoughts, memories and experiences had been impressed upon him so strongly during all his training.

*What is this, chere?* he wondered to himself as the sunlit waters faded and the menu screen finally loaded. *Is it to remind you who you are before you go in?*

There was only one option open to him and that was the mnemonic replay function – the only memory recorded there was the one he was looking for and so he selected it, and then he thought no longer as the darkness swallowed him up and dragged him under.

-oOo-
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Remy ‘faces with Moira’s memory, and goes to visit Emma Frost.

Ophelia is gone.

It’s only her and Emma, standing out on the balcony.

For a long while nothing is said, and all they hear is the sound of the city below them. It is near and yet so very far away.

“I can’t believe this is happening…” she mutters. She stares down at the slip of paper in her hand. The code swims before her eyes, but she is in too much turmoil, too much distress, to commit it to memory just yet.

“Trust me,” Emma speaks up in a level tone. “Nothing went wrong. Everything went as it was supposed to. Trask shouldn’t have overreacted. He was a fool to unplug the Machine. He was a fool to pull this goddamned stunt!”

The final sentence is almost a hiss from between clenched teeth. Moira looks over at her with confusion.

“Emma, what the hell are you going on about?! Those girls’ minds have been irreparably damaged by what happened yesterday! You, of all people, should be the one to understand that!”

Emma is staring down over the balcony. Her jaw is taut, her gaze angry.

“Tanya’s mind was already damaged. Subject Zero… Well, it was damaged to some extent, but not irreparably so. She has… a strong mind. We were only trying to make it stronger.”

It’s almost as if she’s talking to herself – but Moira hears the implication in the words loud and clear, even though she doesn’t completely understand it. She glares over at her colleague.

“Emma, what the bloody hell did you do?” she asks with a growing sense of trepidation.

“Nothing!” Emma snaps back irritably. “Nothing that Essex didn’t approve of first! The experiment worked exactly as it was supposed to! Subject Zero would have all her inhibitions wiped and essentially be a clean slate! The perfect subject for the project! Didn’t you realise, Moira? How else did you think we were going to get to Phase Two, the perfect weapon?”

A cold realisation steals over her. On some level she realises she has been tricked. That Subject Zero has been tricked…

“Oh my God,” she moans, dropping her face into her palm. “Oh my God oh my God oh my God. It wasn’t a mistake…”
“It was only a mistake when that idiot Trask pulled the plug! And he’ll never give up that fucking code to restart the Machine… It’s gone, all gone. All we have left is Subject Zero…”

Subject Zero.

The words are a hollow echo in her ears. She feels nauseous with the knowledge of what has happened here the past few days. This is wrong… should never have happened… Every ethical code goes against it… In joining this project she’s broken more than just a few and it’s bothered her, but this… Destroying another person’s memories… What has she done? What has she been a party to?

For a while the conversation is a disconnected jumble of words, the story of Anna’s lost memories recounted in chopped up sentences and phrases that have no meaning. He strains to catch onto them, to finally understand the events that led up to their destruction, but he can’t. When the memory finally becomes clear again, Moira is pacing the same square metre of balcony, her thoughts a chaotic whirl of anguish and horror.

“Calm down,” Emma is saying, barely able to keep the irritation from her voice.

“Calm down?! Moira stops and shrieks at her. “Calm down?! Do you understand what you’ve done?!”

“Perfectly.” Emma’s expression is stoic. “Moira… This is an experiment. Experiments fail all the time.”

“No like this!”

“I fail to see what the—”

“I have to go. I have to leave… I can’t stay here anymore… Not now…”

She’s pacing the same spot again, clutching at her hair. She can feel Emma’s eyes on her, cold and penetrating.

“What – leave the Weapon X project?” she says. “You can’t do that, not now, Moira. The project still needs you. And there still so many observations to conduct, so many tests to run now that we have our blank slate…”

She halts again, unable to believe that Emma is talking about this.

“My God. Don’t you get it?! Believe it or not, I cared about those girls! Both of them! How on God’s earth am I supposed to look either of them in the face now and tell them the truth?!”

Emma gives a disdainful snort.

“Simple. You don’t tell them the truth. Ever. What purpose would it serve? In Weapon Zero’s case, the whole point was to make her a blank slate. As for the Trask girl… who knows if she’ll ever properly recover enough to even understand what happened?”

Moira shakes her head.

“God, Emma. It’s not that…”

“Then what?”
She says nothing. It’s the guilt, she thinks.

“God,” she murmurs again, mostly to herself. She stares down at the paper Trask wrote for her, the numbers whirling before her eyes. “Maybe I should just destroy this. Maybe I should just stop this all, right now. If I get rid of my piece of the code, we’ll never be able to restart the Machine again…”

She walks to the railing and is about to toss the paper, when Emma snaps a hand roughly over her wrist.

“Don’t!”

“Why not?!”

“Because,” Emma drags in an adrenaline-filled breath, “think about it. All the work you’ve put into this project. The amazing things we’ve done here. This is ground-breaking, Moira. World-changing. And until that Machine starts up again, until all our data is validated, no one will ever know what we’ve achieved here. Our careers… the boundaries we’ve pushed, the knowledge we’ve uncovered… They’ll remain hidden, potentially forever, if you destroy that code.”

Moira lowers her hand slightly, her mind suddenly filled with doubt.

“But—”

“We’re geniuses, Moira,” Emma persists. “Think of the things we could continue to do! This experiment was a failure – at least partially so. But Trask will come round. Soon, he’ll realise what he’s throwing away. And he’ll come crawling back.” She looks at Moira, her eyes wide and beseeching. “Would you throw away your data, Moira? Because if you toss that code, that’s essentially what you’ll be doing. Your work is some of the most important in this world right now – in history even. I’m begging you. Don’t throw it away.”

She drops her hand entirely and Emma lets her. She glances down at the paper in her fist and she feels suddenly hollow. Emma is right. She can’t throw away her data. It’s the only legacy she has. And it was good work. Noble work. At least at the beginning. It might still be used for good yet…

She turns away from the railings and walks slowly towards the French windows. She has a headache right between her eyes and she massages the bridge of her nose wearily.

“I need… I need to get out of here…” she mutters. “This has been too much for the last 48 hours… I need to sleep…”

“A good idea,” Emma replies approvingly. “Get some sleep, put these events behind you. Things usually seem clearer after a good night’s rest.”

Moira half smiles at the platitude. She isn’t sure anything will ever be clear again.

“I think… I think I might take a couple of days off… Just to wind down, y’know…” She opens the door and says: “Do tell Nathaniel for me, would you? I don’t think I’m up to it right now…”

“All right,” Emma says. “I will.”

She leaves, and it’s only when she’s in the elevator down that she looks at the paper in her hand. Now the numbers are clear.
Poor wee lass, she thinks to herself.

Poor wee lass.

-oOo-

Remy removed the visor and set it aside slowly.

For a moment he sat there, riding out the sense of disorientation he always felt after a 'facing session.

It occurred to him that he’d never seen Anna go through the same effect – although it seemed to him that a little disorientation was about a hundred times better than the bleed effect, or a neural stutter.

After a minute had passed his senses had normalised. He glanced over at Anna and saw that she was still asleep, which was a good thing. He wrote her a quick note, and, after a moment of thought, left it on top of the interfacing machine.

Anna, I've gone to get Emma Frost's chip. Stay here. Wait til I come back. I won't be long.

He considered maintaining the charade, and putting Dr. MacTaggert's mem-chip back in her pocket where he'd found it. But it didn’t seem right anymore, and he was tired of pretending to her on that point, so he left it loaded into the machine.

A few moments later, and he had shrugged on his jacket and left.

He marched down to his bike, speed dialling Essex on the way.

There was only one ring before the call was answered.

“LeBeau.” Essex’s voice was its usual cold, calm tenor, his accent less Boston than Oxford, soft and clear and almost unassuming, yet… it was a voice that could as easily command as it could inspire. Beneath its cultured veneer was a disaffect, an aloof remoteness that was as impermeable and menacing as a glacier. Yet despite the known danger of provoking his employer, Remy was far from being in the mood to heed his own better judgement.

“You were s’posed t’ wait,” he fired off with barely-concealed anger. “You were s’posed t’ wait for my say-so.”

Essex was hardly concerned by the accusation.

“Is that so?” he merely stated coldly. “You seem to forget who is in charge here, LeBeau. And let me remind you – it most certainly isn’t you.”

Remy grit his teeth as he jumped onto his bike and fired it up.

“We had a deal,” he seethed. “This wasn’t it.”

“I’m intrigued, LeBeau.” If anything Essex’s tone had become harder, frostier – a sure warning sign. “What could it possibly matter to you when I take possession of my property?”
Remy took in a breath. He tried to force himself into a calmness he didn’t feel.

“Don’tcha get it? After what you pulled, that femme’s gon’ be suspicious of my involvement, and I need her cooperation if I’m gonna get you Ms. Frost’s—”

“There’s no need for that,” Essex cut in sharply. “Ms. Frost has agreed to cooperate. The only thing left to do is to bring me the mem-chips and the girl.”

Remy was silent, his mind working rabidly. It was a silence that spoke volumes.

“Why, Mr. LeBeau,” Essex spoke up with only a faint trace of amusement, “could it be that you’re having second thoughts? Could it be that you’ve developed more than just a professional interest in the girl?”

Remy revved up the bike irritably.

“I ain’t got no second thoughts. Basic truth is, without the femme, there is no deal. I know that. Don’t worry. You’ll get her. And the mem-chips too. But I need her on my side. Otherwise this deal ain’t gonna work.”

“Hmm. You seem very sure in your estimation.”

“I am sure. She ain’t the kid she was fifteen years ago. She’s a woman, and a fuckin’ stubborn one at that. I need her to be invested in our deal. I need her trust.”

“Then I shall not disabuse you of your conviction,” Essex replied with almost overt derision. “Although, when all is said and done… I doubt her trust is something you will keep.”

The line went dead.

Remy sat a long moment on the purring bike. He knew Essex was right.

Not for the first time he was hit with a deep uneasiness. He’d made himself a bed of nails. Now he was lying in it.

No time to think ‘bout that, not now. There was work to do.

He revved up the bike and sped off into the night.

-oOo-

He was at the Plaza Hotel within half an hour.

He parked his bike in his usual favourite spot – not too near and not too far – before sauntering up to the entrance by foot.

On previous occasions he’d come here dressed to the nines and usually with a lady on his arm; but since this was business and not pleasure, the less obvious he made himself the better. He recognised the doorman – they’d spent half an hour once talking about poker and sim-tech during some highfalutin function he’d managed to gate-crash, and he felt almost sure if he was in a tux he’d be recognised. But now, in his ‘work clothes’… he was pretty much anonymous.

He walked inside with the nonchalance of familiarity and confidence, and headed straight for the bar.

She was already there, at a table by the window, sipping a margarita, just as she did
every Thursday evening, regular as clockwork. Platinum blonde hair, dressed in a dazzling white pantsuit and killer heels. There was no mistaking her from the many photos he’d seen of her with her wealthy and influential clients. He sidled over in her direction, silently thanking the tabloids for their endless trolling of z-list celebrities on quiet days.

He slipped casually into the seat opposite her, for all the world as if she’d been expecting him. The way she looked up at him it was obvious she had indeed been waiting for someone – only to be disappointed. She frowned, fixing him with an indignant glare from steely blue eyes.

“Excuse me,” she said in a disdainful tenor. “But I happen to be waiting for a date.”

“Yeah?” He slung his arm over the back of the seat and grinned complacently at her. “Well you jes’ gotta better offer.”

Emma Frost raised a thin, elegantly plucked eyebrow. She was a handsome woman, beautiful in the haughty manner of most successful, intelligent women who had been born into money. She held herself with the same aloof poise as Lady Sarkissian, but there was a coldness, a rapaciousness to her that Ophelia had never possessed, something unsettling and slightly menacing. According to his research she’d managed to carve herself quite a career in the many years since Weapon X had folded. As the world’s most celebrated mem-therapist, she could name the rich and famous amongst her clients. She’d been born into their world and was a part of it still, but she had what most of them didn’t – the acute, driving intellect.

Now she was giving him the once-over, seemingly intrigued at the forthrightness of his statement. He could tell from her expression that there weren’t many men who were bold enough to approach her in this way.

“Who are you?” she asked at last, unable to keep the curiosity out of her voice. It was a promising start – all his research had told him the celebrity therapist had a soft spot for beautiful young men, and he wasn’t above playing that shamelessly to his advantage.

“The name’s Remy LeBeau,” he answered. His reply had the desired effect. She was instantly alert, her body subtly shifting towards his.

“Remy LeBeau,” she repeated musingly. “Essex’s new ‘protégé’.”

“Oui,” he nodded, calmly shaking a cigarette out of its packet and not bothering to ask for her permission.

“And why would you possibly be here to see me?” she queried, crinkling her nose with overt distaste as he lit up.

“Easy enough,” he replied, taking a puff. “I’m sure Essex told you I was collectin’ mem-chips for him. I’m just here to collect yours.”

He paused and let that sink in a bit for effect. He was interested when the waiter came up to serve him, only to be waved off again by Emma at a movement of her hand. The waiter obediently retreated, and when he was out of earshot she said:

“I was supposed to hand the chip to Essex personally. What’s changed?”

Remy leaned back in his seat and took a drag from his cigarette, unconcerned by the question.
“Subject Zero,” he answered in a slow, amused drawl. “She’s changed.”

The name got Emma’s attention. Her eyes narrowed.

“She’s dead,” she stated coolly.

Remy gave a thin smile and leaned forward, tapping his cigarette against the ashtray between them.

“Non,” he rejoined casually, “she’s alive.”

Emma’s glance dropped – she looked at the table, frowning, as if trying to work something out.

“I was under the impression,” she spoke slowly, “that she was dead. At least that’s what Essex told me five years ago.”

She raised her eyes to his as though to ask for confirmation.

“At the time, he thought he was correct, but,” he shrugged, “he was wrong. And it turns out,” he raised the cigarette to his lips with a knowing smile, “that she wants exactly what he wants. The mem-chips.”

Again he fell silent, waiting. He was used to this back-and-forth, this game of strategy. Half the road to winning was simply to wait.

She looked aside slightly, frowning, thoughtful – and he knew without a doubt that he had her hooked. He was rewarded when she stood and looked down on him with an expectant countenance, a sign at last that he had won.

“Come with me,” she said.

-oOo-

He knew she lived at the hotel, but he hadn’t been prepared for just how entrenched she was there. She occupied one of the penthouse suites, and she’d pretty much set up her office there too. Everything was decorated with an impersonal, almost bleak elegance that gave the sheen of luxury to what was really just a therapist’s clinic, one that would obviously appeal to her upmarket clientele. The rooms were done up in chrome and white and silver that glittered in the artificial light. It all seemed as cold and sterile as the woman herself strangely seemed to be.

The first thing she did was move to the opulent bar at the other end of the room, pausing only to enquire over her shoulder: “Can I get you a drink?”

He figured one couldn’t hurt.

“Bourbon. Straight up. Thanks.”

She fixed their drinks in silence, and he stood there, waiting, watching, measuring his surroundings without appearing to. When she finally came out from behind the bar and handed him his glass, her expression was openly suspicious – unyielding in a way that Anna’s was not. This was a woman without any apparent chinks in her armour.

He took his drink and she sat on a nearby couch. Her stare, her prepossessed silence, was an invitation for him to sit, and he did, taking his place in a plush leather armchair across from
“So,” she began once he was settled, “Weapon Zero is alive.”

He gave a brief nod.

“Oh.”

“And she’s trying to get the mem-chips before Essex does.”

He nodded again.

“Yeah. She has this idea that they’ll give her some clues about her lost mem’ries.”

She mulled on that a moment, her blue eyes gazing at some point over his shoulder. Then she leaned forward in her seat slightly, her gaze fixing his once more, this time inquisitive.

“And how exactly do you know this?” she asked.

He didn’t take his eyes from hers. He lifted the glass to his lips but he didn’t drink.

“I’m workin’ with her,” he replied simply.

Her gaze flashed and he took the moment to take a sip of his whiskey. Still, he didn’t take his eyes from hers.

“I’m confused, Mr. LeBeau,” she spoke at last, a begrudging sort of curiosity to her tone. “You say you’re here on behalf of Dr. Essex. Yet you also say you’re working with Subject Zero – and I’m fairly sure that she doesn’t have Essex’s best interests in mind. Which makes me sincerely doubt you’re working for both.”

A small, wry smile touched his lips and he took another sip before saying, pointedly: “She don’t know I’m still workin’ for him.”

Her expression lightened slightly, but not much. She leaned back in her seat a fraction and regarded him, eyebrow raised.

“How disappointing,” she commented laconically. “And we had such high hopes for her.”

Only then did she lift the glass to her lips and drink.

Remy sat silently, the glass in his lap, waiting for her to proceed. He was, after all, just the messenger. Ms. Frost, however, was in no hurry to oblige him. She said nothing for a good long minute, her thoughts seemingly turned elsewhere. When the silence threatened to become too oppressive she stood, and walked a small distance across the room pensively. It was a delaying tactic – he knew it. It was the action of someone who mistrusted everyone and who knew how people ticked – a dangerous combination. As Essex had found, Emma Frost was not an easy person to win over.
“I take it,” she spoke up after he’d waited her out patiently, “that Essex has tasked you with stealing back his prized possession. And all the property she stole from him after Weapon X folded.”

The corner of his mouth jerked into a smile.

“Somethin’ like that…”

She halted and glanced over at him.

“And you’ve managed to gain her trust?”

“I wouldn’t say that…” He gave a vague, pacifying gesture with his left hand. “I dunno if a woman like her has ever trusted anyone in her life. But she’s trusted me enough to get a hold of Trask’s chip for her. And Yashida’s, and Ophelia Sarkissian’s, and Dr. MacTaggert’s. She’s trusted me enough to share bits of her past.”

He paused, fixing her with a prepossessed stare and a furtive curl of a smile that communicated to her far more than words could. Her eyes narrowed, and she grinned with a predatory glee that made even his blood run cold.

“Oh, I’m sure you did far more than simply coax her secrets out of her, LeBeau,” she almost hissed with malicious delight. “After all… how could a man like you resist such a delicious challenge? The seduction of a woman who could just as easily kill you while you slept? How sweet, how gratifying it must have felt, to know that Weapon X’s little killing machine is really just a soft and willing woman deep inside.”

The words were faintly snide, mocking – enough to wipe the smile from his face, to which Emma gave a small, soft laugh.

“Yes, I can see how a silver-tongued young man like you could charm even the most immovable.” She scrutinised him with glittering eyes. “How intriguing.”

He shrugged.

“If you say so.”

She gave a wry grin that didn’t touch her eyes.

“Forgive me. I do find it so very fascinating to see two experiments interact. Essex has high hopes for you – he made that clear, at least. I was sceptical, despite the test results he showed me. But perhaps I was mistaken. I certainly would be, if you had managed to outwit Weapon Zero. But perhaps…” And she paused, only to continue with a sadistic little lilt to her voice, “she is the one who has managed to outwit you.”

She turned away again, as if to leave him with some little nugget to chew on – one she knew he definitely wouldn’t like the taste of.

“I don’t think so,” he answered back calmly. “She thinks Essex tricked me into becomin’ his experiment, that I wanna give him a li’l payback for messin’ wit’ me – at least, that’s what I told her. What she doesn’t realise is that I asked Essex to do what he did t’me. That I knew he wanted to start up the Weapon X project again. And everythin’ I’ve been playin’ for ‘til now – the mem-chips, the code, Subject Zero herself – they’re the things Essex owes me. Not the other way ‘round.”
She stopped like a shot. When her eyes snapped to his again, they were narrowed.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

It was his turn to keep her hanging. He drained the rest of his drink and laid the empty glass on the coffee table with a sharp clink. He leaned back in his chair with a now business-like gravitas.

“I made a deal with Essex. The mem-chips, the code, the birth of a new Weapon X project… All for the one thing that only Weapon X can achieve.”

Her lips were caught in something that almost looked like a scowl.

“And what is that?”

“Simple.” He folded his hands across his stomach and smiled. “A way to really, truly forget. In other words…” he continued lightly, “I want exactly the thing that Essex wants.”

Her answer was to scoff – loudly.

“What Essex wants is a way to rewrite the human mind, human history. What you want, I have no doubt, is nothing more than selfish whimsy.”

He lifted his shoulders, unconcerned.

“Maybe. But for now, there ain’t much difference between the two, s’far as I can tell.”

She nodded slowly.

“No. Perhaps there isn’t.” She fell silent. She seemed to be considering his words, and he let her. When she looked up at him again, the haughty cynicism was almost all gone. “You do realise,” she said, “that you’ll need Subject Zero’s cooperation to make this work.”

“Until I learn to do what she can do – yes.”

“If you can.”

He made a gesture with his hands, conceding the point.

“And,” she carried on pointedly, “if she doesn’t trust you, you’ll never be able to make her agree to what it is you want.”

“Essex has ways of making her do what I want, if it comes to it,” he replied. She sneered.

“Yes. I’m sure he does.”

She downed the rest of her drink and went to pour herself another – this time she didn’t offer him one. When she next spoke her back was still to him.

“The other mem-chips… Trask’s, Yashida’s, Sarkissian’s, MacTaggert’s… did you interface with them?”

There was curiosity in her voice. He shifted in his seat slightly, folded his hands back in his lap.
“Yes.”

“And Weapon Zero let you do that?”

“No. She doesn’t know.” She looked over her shoulder at him questioningly and he was prompted to explain: “She spent three days in a coma. In a neural stutter. I took the time to do a little reconnaissance. To ‘face with the chips. To get the codes.” He paused. “To try and figure out what she thought she could find in them.”

She was firmly fixed on her drink again.

“And what did you find?” she asked.

“That whatever happened during this Crisis wasn’t a mistake,” he replied to her back. “That what happened to Subject Zero was something you and Essex had planned.”

She was still a second; when she finally turned her drink was in her hand, and she laughed, lightly, softly.

“No,” she corrected him, almost as if she enjoyed catching him out. “We didn’t plan it, not exactly. And certainly not the way it happened. But we knew that it was a distinct possibility that the Crisis might occur, at any time.” She grinned complacently to herself. “I may even have… encouraged it.”

Her face was flush with pride. He regarded her quizzically.

“Why?” he asked quietly.

She half-shrugged, looking aside as if it was a silly question.

“Because the project needed a blank slate. How else were we supposed to create the perfect weapon?”

He made no reply. This wasn’t a question he was interested in – it never had been. Emma was right – he’d agreed to become a part of Essex’s super soldier project for entirely selfish reasons, and he’d never been overly concerned with its finer details. When he failed to show the expected level of interest, Emma pouted and suddenly swept across the room, right over to one of the featureless abstract paintings that garnished her walls, artwork that spoke of an expensive if perfunctory taste. He knew what was there. His long career as a thief had allowed him to clock it almost as soon as he’d walked in the room, and when she slid it sideways to reveal a large wall-safe he was hardly surprised.

He watched on as she opened the safe and reached inside. He knew what it was before she even turned and showed it to him.

It was a small, ribbed, metallic box, like the one Trask had stored his mem-chip in.

“This is the thing,” she told him sardonically, “that you’re all looking for. You, Essex – Subject Zero. There’s a truth in here she won’t like. But…” and she grinned slyly at him, “I’ve decided it’s not for sale.”

She paused and levelled him a look, waiting for a reaction. He didn’t give the one she anticipated.

“I’m a thief,” he replied flatly. “Essex asked me t’ do you the courtesy of askin’ you
for it nicely, but if you ain’t willin’ t’ cooperate…”

The threat wasn’t lost on her – but it didn’t faze her either.

“Oh come now, Mr. LeBeau,” she rejoined indulgently. “You don’t need the chip itself. All you need to do is ‘face with it. Then you have the code – you have everything you and Essex want. But the chip itself is not for sale. It’s mine. And I don’t want anyone else to have it.”

He weighed up her statement. She was right, of course – all he’d have to do was ‘face with the chip, and the information he needed would be imprinted in his brain long enough for him to note it down. And Essex… Well, he wouldn’t like it, but what would it really matter to him, as long as he had the code?

And Anna?

Anna would want to face with it herself. He knew that. But he didn’t have anything to bargain with right now; and there would always be the option to steal it, at some future date, if he needed to, even though he knew Emma would be expecting him to do exactly that. At least Anna would know he’d tried.

He opened his hands agreeably.

“A’right,” he said.

She gave a cold, complacent smile.

“Good boy,” she murmured in an undertone, before sweeping back across the room. “Follow me,” she ordered.

He stood slowly, and did as he was told. There was a niche in one corner of the apartment, a cleverly hidden recess where he guessed she did her therapy. Two plush white leather armchairs were set in what he assumed to be an inviting position; there were rows of mem-chips along the walls, catalogued by surname – her patients, he guessed.

“I get my clients to record their worst, most troubling memories,” she explained when she saw his gaze moving curiously down the neatly stacked rows. “I get them to relive them again and again until they learn to come to terms with them. Psychoanalysis, for the mem-tech age.” Again she gave that cold smile, and somewhere deep down he shuddered.

“Sounds like torture,” he remarked deprecatingly, “rather than therapy.”

She tutted almost crossly and went to a desk in the corner, pulling open the top drawer there.

“Life is torture, Mr. LeBeau. Our only way of accepting it is to learn to face it.” She glanced up at him meaningfully. “I half suspect my therapy would do you some good.”

“Thanks for the offer,” he rejoined dryly. “But no thanks.”

She gave a small, disappointed sigh.

“Such a shame. I should imagine it would be very interesting to learn what haunts a man like you. The impulse to forget is a strong one, one so strong that human beings block out traumatic memories all the time. But when a memory is so powerful that it cannot be forgotten… when the urge to forget it becomes all-consuming… that is a rare occurrence. And a self-destructive
Thankfully, any further commentary on her part was brought to close when she found what she was looking for. She slid the drawer shut and he saw that she was holding a small, black headpiece in her hand – something he recognised as a portable interfacer.

“Those are only for sim-chips,” he told her, and she snorted derisively.

“Unlike Essex, I like to keep useful friends.” She held the headpiece out to him. “Trask modified it for me, so that it runs mem-chips too.”

He took the unit, impressed.

“Trask still works on this stuff? I thought he was a recluse who just delegated.”

“Ostensibly, yes,” she answered sourly. “He spends most of his time looking after his mad daughter. But I’ve managed to persuade him to do a bit of tinkering, now and then.”

He turned the headpiece over in his hand, noting the modifications, all executed with an expert hand. The slot for the chip was different, wide enough to accommodate the slightly larger mem-chip.

“Nice,” he commented appreciatively. “Any chance he could custom-make me one o’ these?”

“I doubt it,” she replied. She opened the case and handed him the mem-chip. He inserted it into the slot and slipped on the headpiece.

“You should take a seat,” she prompted him; but he shook his head.

“Ms. Frost,” he answered sarcastically, “I could ‘face hangin’ upside down. In my sleep. Dis ain’t nothin’.”

And he lowered the visor and hit the power button.

-oOo-
Remy gets Emma’s chip, but also gets a little more than he bargained for.

Emma Frost lowered herself elegantly onto a white leather couch, watching the man named Remy LeBeau with an intrigued little smile on her face.

He was interesting to her – a challenge she had rarely encountered in her professional career.

Intelligence, insolence, waywardness, a penchant for hedonism; an accomplished liar – though hardly pathological in that he only ever lied out of what he believed was necessity. Certainly he was ruthless and capable of the sort of cold calculation Essex would approve of. But… beneath the smooth, slippery veneer here was a fundamentally moral man. A sensitive, caring man. A career criminal brought up by a loving, Catholic family. What a delicious dichotomy! It was easy to tell that behind the suave exterior lay a delectably tantalising trauma that she itched to unpick. She wondered what his worst nightmare might be – what it would look like added to the collection of mem-chips that now lined these walls like a fortress.

Click.

The sound of the door shutting jarred her amused train of thought. She frowned and got to her feet quickly, stepping out of the niche and into the main room.

A woman was standing in the doorway, dressed all in black, pointing a gun at her. If it wasn’t for the white streak in her hair and the green, wildcat eyes, she might have wondered who this stranger was.

“Subject Zero,” Emma greeted her without the slightest hint of fear. “Well. It has been a while. How on earth did you get in?”

The woman stared at her, with an expression that held a quiet, contained fierceness, the look of every well-worn soldier the whole world round. The only thing that gave her away was the slight tremor of the hand that held the gun.

“Subject Zero,” Emma greeted her without the slightest hint of fear. “Well. It has been a while. How on earth did you get in?”

The woman stared at her, with an expression that held a quiet, contained fierceness, the look of every well-worn soldier the whole world round. The only thing that gave her away was the slight tremor of the hand that held the gun.

“I have ways of getting into places,” she said in a hard undertone. Emma smiled glibly.

“No doubt you do. It’s exactly the kind of thing you were created for, after all. So silly of me to forget!” She glanced calmly at the gun. “Are you here to shoot me?”

The woman didn’t move, didn’t even blink.

“I might,” she simply stated in that same hard tone. “After what you helped to do to me.”

“Oh.” Emma smirked. “So it’s revenge you’re here for. And here I was thinking you were only after the mem-chip, just like Mr. LeBeau.”

The woman’s mouth tightened.
“Shut up,” she hissed through clenched teeth. It was the first indication of overt anger she had displayed – gun excepted – and at that point even Emma had to admit that she was slightly relieved when Remy chose that moment to emerge from within the niche.

“Anna,” was the only thing he said.

Her eyes darted to him, briefly, then back to Emma.

“Tell me,” she demanded in a low, flat voice, completely ignoring Remy. “I want to know. Tell me what you did to me.”

Emma met her gaze, unflinching, seemingly unafraid.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said; and that was all it took for the cool containment on Anna’s face to erupt, a super-heated explosion of rage and anguish that even a seasoned psychologist such as Emma rarely witnessed.

“Tell me what you did to me!” she screamed.

Her right hand was visibly shaking now, a symptom of mem-intoxication that Emma had seen only too often. LeBeau hadn’t been lying – Weapon Zero was a junkie, that was visibly obvious. Despite the doctor’s outward poise, her anxiety inwardly increased. This woman was a loose cannon just waiting to burst. Beside her, she saw Remy take a step forward, the measured advance of a man whose main objective was pacification.

“Anna—”

“You can shut up!” Anna snapped at him, her eyes and the gun still trained on Emma. “You lied to me! You told me you’d never touched a mem-chip… Pretended you wouldn’t even know how to use one… And like a fucking fool I believed you!” The words were said with such ferocity and disgust that he was silenced. It was an exchange that would have amused Emma, if she wasn’t in imminent danger of death. Despite her outburst, Anna’s focus was still firmly on her. Her anger at Remy was a secondary one that she was obviously planning on dealing with later.

“You and Essex did something to me,” she said to Emma in a voice that was trying so hard to be calm that it wavered violently. “I saw that much in Dr. MacTaggert’s memories. You wanted the Crisis to happen. So don’t lie to me. Tell me the truth. What did you do? What did you do to me?”

Emma glanced warily over at Remy, as if expecting him to tell her everything that he now knew. But he remained silent, and so she looked back to Anna and replied:

“What does the truth matter to you now, Subject Zero? It isn’t the thing you’ve been really looking for, is it? What you’ve been looking for is your past. And that’s gone, my dear. Gone forever.”

The laugh that fell from Anna’s lips was almost wild, and her hand shook so violently that Emma was almost afraid she would set the gun off.

“Yes,” she spoke bitterly. “I bet you made damn sure I forgot everything I’d known up to that point.” Her voice was wavering, her pitch all over the place, her Southern accent creeping into every word. “And if I can’t get any of it back, all I have left is the truth of what happened.”

She advanced towards Emma with a soldier’s tactical gait, the gun still trained on her prey, a thinly veiled pretence at control. She wasn’t in control. Her movements were jerky, ataxic. They
were the movements of someone on the verge of breaking down.

“So tell me, Ms. Frost,” Anna continued breathlessly. “I don’t have much else to lose. Tell me the truth.” She was now within a few feet of the mem-therapist, the barrel of the gun only a few inches from her breast, her eyes glittering with a dark, mad pain – and still Emma refused to say a thing. “Tell me!” she shrieked.

“Anna,” Remy finally deigned to speak – his tone was soft, controlled, yet almost… sad. “The truth is here.” He held up a portable interfacing unit. “It’s in her chip. I have it. Don’t waste your time with her. It’s better if we walk, chere. It’s better if we leave now.”

She darted another look at him, and Emma saw, for the first time, a flicker of doubt – and something else.

“No,” she decided fiercely. “She has to pay.”

She took another step forward and pressed the barrel of the gun against Emma’s chest.

“She has a panic button,” Remy spoke up softly – and much to Emma’s chagrin at his perceptiveness. “It’s on her bracelet. She’s probably already pressed it. We need to go.”

Anna blinked. Was it just the light, or were her eyes moist?

“No,” she decided fiercely. “She has to pay.”

She took another step forward and pressed the barrel of the gun against Emma’s chest.

“Tell me!” she shrieked.

“So do it,” Emma urged her with an icy smile, seeing that first chink of real weakness. “Do it, Subject Zero. Be exactly what you were made to be, what Essex wanted you to be. Weapon Zero, the perfect soldier, the perfect spy, the perfect killer. A robot, not a human. Kill me, and be what you were always meant to be – Weapon Zero.”

Anna’s only reply was to lash out with the pistol, smashing Emma on the face and sending her slamming back against the wall and onto the floor, her nose a bloody mess.

“My name is Anna!” she screamed down at her – the gun was shaking so hard in her hand that it was a wonder it hadn’t fired. “It’s Anna, you fucked up bitch!”

Emma raised a manicured hand and wiped the blood from her nose, a sneer twisting her face.

“Yes, that’s right,” she hissed venomously. “Hit me, kick me to the ground, make me suffer. Look at you, Subject Zero. A mem-junkie, an addict who can’t even walk straight. If you were worth anything you would’ve killed me by now. The fact that you can’t tells me all I need to know. You’re worse than an experiment. You’re a failed experiment, a wasted opportunity. You’re a nothing.”

This time it was Anna’s boot that struck her across the face, silencing her with brutal efficiency.

“I am what you made!” she spat back. “Do you know what it’s like to be me?! To have never been a child, to have woken up an adult with nothing to anchor me to anything that’s tender in this life, to all the shame and violence and death this world has to offer?! To live a hundred sordid lives that I’ll never forget, that I’ll never be able to erase?! I learned about life from other peoples’ memories, I learned about love and humanity and kindness secondhand, from the bits and pieces of other peoples’ lives that could never be my own!”
She gasped in a breath, almost choking on it, continuing in a low, bitter tone: “I’d lie in bed at night and stitch together the things you denied me from the castoffs of others. I’d make believe their memories were mine, reconstruct the life you took away from me from the puzzle pieces I’d robbed from your marks. I’m your child. A patchwork puppet you and Essex put together and gave life. Aren’t you proud of me, Dr. Frost? Aren’t you proud of your daughter?”

Emma made no reply – but Anna had not been expecting one. She raised the gun again, calmly this time, as calmly as the tremors in her hand would allow, and aimed it at Emma’s forehead.

“Maybe you’re right,” she spoke in a voice that was suddenly tired, empty. “Maybe I should just give into it. Stop fighting. Be what you made me to be. A killer. Your experiment, come to kill you. The last thing you’ll see.”

Her finger stroked the trigger, a breath away from Emma Frost’s death.

“Anna,” Remy said.

Her trigger finger paused almost instinctively at the sound of her name.

“You ain’t a killer, Anna,” he murmured. “Not anymore. You don’t need to do this. You don’t need to kill her.”

He raised his hand slowly and touched her wrist, his fingers curling round it in a firm, reassuring grasp.

“It’s okay, Anna,” he murmured gently, touching the inside of her wrist, stroking the flesh there tenderly, meaningfully. “It’s okay.”

His touch, the soothing timbre of his voice as he said her name… they almost seemed to awake her from a trance. She blinked, swallowing hard.

“You don’t know…” she told him in a small, child-like voice, the sentence trailing off and remaining unfinished.

“No,” he answered quietly. “I don’t. But I know you don’t want to do this. The person you learned to be after Weapon X… She doesn’t want this.”

The words were like an incantation that broke her from a spell, and suddenly she’s back in the past, in a memory… Cody’s dead face staring up at her… splashing through the sewers, the detonator clutched tight in her fist, her thumb hitting the button… The explosion, the apartment building collapsing above her… And all those people caught in the crossfire, the innocent bystanders that died so she could live, the hundred bloodstains on her conscience… …

He was right.

She didn’t want this.

She didn’t.

She expelled a long, shuddering breath and looked down at her outstretched arm. For the first time she realised – with genuine surprise – that she was shaking. Badly. She swallowed.

And she lowered her arm.

Silence settled, except for her own ragged breathing. Even as she lowered the gun,
Remy’s grip did not leave her wrist. He held on, as if for dear life. As if to anchor her to herself.

“We should leave,” he murmured to her. It was a suggestion, not an order. He was giving her choice.

Emma’s watchful gaze was on her, emotionless as a lizard observing its prey. And for the first time Anna realised – *I’m more human than she is.*

She chanced a glance at Remy and nodded. She didn’t wait for him to show relief. She whipped away and marched for the door before security could arrive.

Remy shot a final, silent, eloquent glance at Emma, before he too turned and followed.

-oOo-

He caught up with Anna at a bend in the corridor.

“You were s’pposed t’ stay back at the apartment,” he couldn’t help but level at her, to which she swung round on him, the gun still clutched in her fist, her expression like a thundercloud.

“And what’d you expect me to do, huh?! To just do what you say, after ‘facing with Dr. MacTaggert’s mem-chip, after hearing what Dr. Frost had to say in it?! After you so obviously lied to me all this time?!” She scoffed at him loudly, almost spitting in her outrage. “You know what, Cajun? Fuck you! *Fuck you!*

She whipped round and stormed off wonkily, her ataxia still evident. In a trice he was right behind her again.

“You risked another neural stutter,” he admonished her quietly, “‘facing with Dr. MacTaggert’s chip so soon. If that had happened—”

“It woulda put me outta my goddamned misery!” she snapped back at him angrily.

“You don’t mean that,” he retorted evenly. “Not anymore.”

She stopped and spun back round to face him.

“Don’t you dare fuckin’ pretend to know what I mean or feel about anythin’!”

“Anna,” he countered calmly, “you’re here. You’re still fightin’. You *want* to live. You haven’t felt this alive in a long time.”

His words pacified her. She shook her head in disbelief.

“You’ve invaded my life, Cajun,” she murmured with something like regret. “You’ve stolen my secrets and you’ve stolen my body. For God’s sake, don’t steal my thoughts too. Don’t pretend you *know* me. You don’t. You never *will.*”

She whirled away and had only got a step away from him when he caught her arm and jerked her right back around and into his space.

“I’m doin’ this for you,” he levelled at her quietly. There was a charge in his voice that seemed to catch her off guard – she sensed it and it quieted her. Whatever her current levels of mistrust – completely warranted though they were – there was still electricity between them. Neither
could deny it.

“Then stop,” she finally ordered from between clenched teeth. She didn’t wait for him to reply, but spun on her heel and marched away.

“Huh,” he said after her bitterly. “And this is the thanks I get for puttin’ my ass on the line for you.”

She halted and turned right back around, covering the distance between them and getting right in his face.

“And why the hell,” she seethed, “should I believe that any of this is for me?”

He opened his mouth. Logically he knew that he should think hard before answering this question, and instead he said the first thing that popped into his head.

“Because it is.”

He guessed her response would be scathing, but he never got the chance to find out. Whatever reply she would’ve made was unceremoniously interrupted by a laser sight wandering into view over her shoulder.

He didn’t think.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her round the corner – the bullet caught the tail of his coat as he followed right behind her – he heard it ricochet off the wall with a sharp report.

“Security!” he announced breathlessly.

“No shit!” she snapped back, and the next second she’d ducked out from under his arm and let off a few snap rounds round the corner. He heard an agonised yelp and a body hit the ground – but she was already running off down the corridor, not waiting to count her wins or her losses – he followed her instinctively, catching up to her again as they reached another intersection. She was headed left; he grabbed her by the hood of her jacket and yanked her to the right.

“Get the fuck offa me, you thieving shit!” she yelled at him, which actually made him smile more than anything – the fact that she was this mad at him was a good sign.

“If we’re gonna get outta here, chere,” he panted at her breathlessly, fumbling for the spikes in his utility belt, “you’re gonna follow me.”

He whipped out the spikes, stepped out from their hiding place, and, with an elegant flip of the hand sent them careening into the small unit of advancing security guards. He hit one of the four – he didn’t wait to see whether any of the others had taken damage.

“And why the fuck,” she inquired of him indignantly, as he raced off again with her close behind, “should I do that?!”

He didn’t bother pointing out that she was following anyway.

“Because, chere,” he called back, “I did my homework before I came t’ dis place. And I’m willin’ t’ bet you didn’t.”

He ducked and weaved down the labyrinthine passageways with a swiftness that told her he’d already committed their schematics to memory. His efficiency in navigating them was enough,
at any rate, to get her to shut up about the pros or cons of following his lead.

“How many left?” she asked him instead, as they rounded another corner.

“Three, I think.”

She swore to herself – just as he came to a sudden and abrupt halt.

“Get in,” he said.

She looked down and saw he was pointing at an industrial sized garbage chute. He snapped open the lid and repeated himself when she made no move.

“Get in.”

She sighed, rolled her eyes and took a step inside. Then she straightened, looked up at him and asked outright: “Why did you lie to me?”

The question didn’t surprise him, but the timing of it did. He pressed back his irritation with an effort.

“This ain’t the fuckin’ time, Anna,” he told her as calmly as he could. “Get in.”

She wasn’t budging.

“Why?” she asked again – but there wasn’t any confrontation in her voice, not the way he’d first thought. The question was earnest.

He opened his mouth to answer – and was promptly interrupted by a bullet pinging off the metal chute door.

He didn’t waste any more time. She was still stuck halfway in the chute opening and he grabbed the gun off her, to which she protested vociferously – and so help him God – he lifted his boot and kicked her right up the ass and down into the hole.

Her outraged protests echoed behind her as she disappeared down the chute, but he didn’t give a damn. He lifted the gun and took aim. A volley of gunfire crackled through the corridor, and when it was over he wasn’t sure how he hadn’t managed to take a hit.

The guys at the other end of the hallway weren’t so fortunate.

He didn’t waste a moment on self-congratulation. He jumped right on into the chute after her.

He landed on his feet in the dumpster at the other end, the adrenaline still pumping through his veins. Anna was standing there beside him in the filth, shaking trash out of her jacket.

“You’re an unbelievable prick, you know that?!” she shot at him; he swung down and out of the dumpster gracefully.

“Yeah. I know.”

There was a row of motorbikes parked just down the alleyway, and he jogged straight towards them with a weave in his step that at the time only slightly disconcerted him.

“I’m also the prick,” he informed her pointedly over his shoulder, “who just saved your
fuckin’ life.”

He marched down the line of bikes, assessing them with a glance before going straight for the one with the best specs. He heard her jump out of the dumpster clumsily and come up beside him.

“Yeah,” she admitted sarcastically. “We seem to be pretty good at doing that for each other.”

The words were begrudgingly delivered, but they were conciliatory enough that he felt comfortable flashing her a brief smile.

“Here – make y’self useful.” He slapped the gun back into her hands. “Cover me while I hotwire this thing.”

Luckily she didn’t need to. Within ten seconds or so he already had the thing purring.

“You sure work fast,” she grudgingly complimented him, impressed despite herself.

“Yeah,” he gave a grim smile. “Tha’s what all the ladies say.”

He jumped into the hot seat, wincing when he felt a twinge in his right side. The mask of the adrenaline was quickly receding and he was beginning to realise that he’d probably taken a bit of a beating coming down the chute.

“C’mon, chere,” he called to her, wondering why she hadn’t jumped up behind him already.

“Uh… Remy…”

“What?”

“I think I dislocated my shoulder on the way down…”

He glanced back at her and he immediately saw what should have been obvious. She was standing behind him, her arm hanging stiffly at her side, the angle clearly not right.

“Merde,” he heaved. Time was of the essence – but she surprised him when she slipped as nimbly as she could onto the seat behind him, her left arm snaking round his waist, holding him tight. Again, he felt that twinge in his side.

“That wasn’t a sympathy call, Cajun,” she breathed against his neck with a twist of humour. “That was just an FYI. So’s you don’t go drivin’ like a maniac through town and knock me off.”

The words brought a tight grin to his face. Sometimes it was easy to forget that she was a damn sight tougher than him.

He hit the ignition and revved up the bike. A split second later and they were on the road.

He wasn’t sure whether Emma Frost would be sending anyone out after them, although he was pretty sure she was pissed that he’d taken her mem-chip with him, not to mention the custom interfacing unit that Trask had made for her.
Remy absently patted the inner pocket of his coat to make sure it was still there, and he was reassured when he felt its unique shape through the leather. He hoped against hope it hadn’t been damaged in the trip down the chute. He thought of Anna’s injury and he felt kind of guilty for having kicked her down the damn thing, but… desperate times and all that.

“You okay, chere?” he shouted back to her over the wind and screech of the engine.

“I’m fine,” he heard her say, but her voice was strained and he knew she was in pain.

He zipped round a corner, trying to take it as gently as he could. He felt almost certain that Dr. Frost didn’t hold the kind of clout Yashida or Moira MacTaggert did, and that no one was following them – but he preferred to take precautions, and their slower than anticipated speed was making their journey to safety just a little bit too painstaking for his liking.

“We’ll be there soon,” he said, mostly to himself – he wasn’t sure whether she’d even heard him.

For a good minute there was silence, filled only with the disconcerting tumult of his thoughts. He didn’t want her angry at him. What he wanted – needed – was her trust. That thought alone prompted him to speak.

“You asked me why I lied to you,” he said abruptly, figuring now was a good time to address the issue. “And the simple truth is, chere, I needed your help. Y’think you woulda trusted me if you’d’a known Essex never lied to me? That I knew exactly what he did t’ me and even wanted it? That he’d already trained me for years to use the mem-tech? That I was trained to do exactly what you and Raven and St. John were trained to do?”

She stirred at his words, her hand grasping tighter at his waist, which sent an unexpected jolt of pain through his side.

“I get that,” she answered, so quietly he almost didn’t catch what she said over the roar of the engine. “What I don’t get is why you needed my help in the first place. You came back from Europe because you wanted me to help you find a way to take down Essex before he got his dirty claws back into you – at least that’s what I assumed at the time. But then you know what I realised?”

She let the question hang and he gritted his teeth, both with the pain and the suspense, replied: “What?”

“I realised… What if those dirty claws had never been out of you? What if this is all just another game like the ones I used to play when I was in Weapon X? What if this is just your mission, and I hired my enemy?”

He held his breath, said nothing. He expected to feel her gun pressed into his side, but he didn’t.

“If you believed that,” he rejoined in a low voice, “I would be dead right now.”

“Yes,” she admitted. There was a red light fast approaching and he squealed to a stop. He began to realise how much he’d pushed his body that night when the motion sent ripples of pain juddering through his body.

“So why ain’t I dead yet, chere?” he asked her softly.

“Because,” she replied, “whenever it is you’re really working for, I believe one thing. I
believe you care about my welfare. Genuinely. And I believe you when you say you want to help me.”

There was a note to her voice that suggested she would like some confirmation of that fact, but he wasn’t sure he could give one. The lights turning amber made the decision for him, and he hit the gas, saying nothing more.

“Remy,” she spoke a few moments later, and this time there was an anxious timbre to her voice.

“What?”

“You’re bleeding.”

He chanced a look down at his waist and saw that her hand was covered in his blood.

Well, that would account for the pain. He grit his teeth and sped up the bike.

“It’s nothin’,” he assured her flippantly. “Just a flesh wound. I’ll patch it up when we get back to Raven’s place.”

It was a foregone conclusion that they weren’t going back to Anna’s apartment – Essex knew where she lived now, and it wouldn’t be safe. He knew that the only thing important to her back there had been her mem-chip collection, and that, of course, was now in Essex’s hands.

A few minutes later and they were back in familiar territory. Remy guided the bike the few streets over to Raven’s hideout, and when he was finally parked round the back he killed the engine and hopped off as lightly as his injury would allow him. He was almost surprised when Anna allowed him to help her off the bike without biting.

“You okay?” he asked her – the pain was affecting his voice, making it hoarse.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

Together they headed towards Raven’s base, both the worse for wear and a sight for sore eyes. Anna was the one to knock on the door this time, and when the panel shot back and St. John’s familiar blue gaze appeared, no passwords were traded.

“St. John,” she breathed painfully. “Open the door.”

The panel snapped shut and the door swung open. Remy was amused and not too surprised to see Anna march on in as if she owned the place, despite her wound.

“Anna,” St. John began as she walked past, “your arm…”

“Yeah. I know,” she threw back at him and headed straight for Raven’s room.

Remy followed her in at a slower pace – his whole body hurt now that he was back on his feet. He saw St. John staring at his blood-soaked shirt and he grinned at him with lacklustre humour.

“Wild date. Don’t tell Raven.”

He didn’t bother shutting the door behind him. He figured that was the kid’s job.

Anna was already in Raven’s office – he could hear raised voices as he approached, Raven’s familiar, caustic tenor rising and falling in its usual angry tune.
“…you take off to Scotland for 48 hours doing God knows what, and now this?!”

He stepped inside and as soon as he made his appearance her eyes were on his, narrow and accusing.

“And I suppose we have you to thank for all this!” she spat at him.

Remy said nothing – his side was starting to give him more trouble that he’d anticipated. Stupidly, it was only at that moment that he realised he must’ve taken a bullet.

“Essex found out where I live,” Anna was saying calmly in the background. “He ransacked my place while we were in Scotland.” She paused before adding in a muted tone. “He took all my mem-chips.”

Raven looked shocked at that. The first thing she did was look in Remy’s direction, but strangely, or so he thought, she didn’t say anything.

“There’s something you’ve been keeping from me,” she stated, her gaze now firmly fixed back on Anna. “What have you been doing, and why is that thief still here?”

Anna hesitated. She had always intended to keep this her business, but things were different now. The stakes had been upped, Essex held all the cards, and she needed Raven’s help.

“I hired him,” she explained quietly. Raven’s eyes went wide.

“To do what?”

“To steal mem-chips for me,” she replied. “To steal them before Essex got them.”

Raven’s expression changed, closed off in a moment, fury and disgust replaced with unease and… fear?

“What do you mean?” she asked in a dead tone, and Anna was just about to reply when—

Shhhhhlp.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Remy slumped against the nearest wall, barely managing to hold himself upright, a bloody handprint streaked across the wall beside him. His face was pale and gaunt.

“Shit.”

She moved over to him swiftly, her anxiety spiking – she knew instinctively that the injury he’d sustained was far, far worse than just a flesh wound.

“You took a bullet didn’t you,” she said, trying not to make it sound like an accusation as she hurriedly pulled back his jacket to inspect the wound. His shirt was black, and she couldn’t see the bloodstain directly, but she could see its sheen in the light, and it was large and growing.

“Ha,” he laughed softly, propping himself up against the wall with his back. “If you hadn’t taken your goddamn sweet time gettin’ down dat garbage chute earlier…”

Anna pursed up her lips into a tight frown, taking the well-earned criticism.

“You shoulda said something,” she admonished him as softly as she could, trying not to let the worry show in her voice. He looked bad. Real bad. Gently she manoeuvred him into a
comfortable position supported against her good shoulder; her own frayed and tattered senses seared with pain, but she did what she always did in these situations – she switched them off. Despite the roughness of his breathing, he laughed again.

“Yeah, well, was havin’ so much fun on our date dat I didn’t even realise I was hit ‘til literally like two seconds ago…”

She tutted, amazed that he was still making flirty jokes in this condition.

“We need to get you to Dr. Reyes,” she pronounced, helping him towards the door as best she could.

“Thursday is Dr. Reyes’ night off,” Raven reminded her coldly, and that was when she actually decided to lose it.

“Then fucking call her, Raven!” she yelled. “And make yourself fucking useful!”

She didn’t wait to see to it that Raven did as she was told. She was fairly sure her uncharacteristic outburst was more than enough incentive. As they left the room she heard Remy chuckling to himself – and whilst it grated against her mounting sense of urgency, she was never so glad to hear evidence that he was okay – as okay as he was going to be at this point, anyway.

“St. John!” she called out to Raven’s ever-present protégé. “A little help please!”

She was battered and bruised and beaten to within an inch, both physically and emotionally, but one thing was certain – the Cajun wasn’t going to die. Not yet, and certainly not before she’d finished with him first.

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Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Remy gets some medical attention; Anna and Raven have a heart-to-heart; and Anna finds out another truth about Remy.

Anna and St. John practically dragged Remy into the prep room, the automatic lights buzzing on overhead as they entered.

Together they helped him onto the gurney.

“St. John,” she spoke from between gritted teeth, trying to keep her voice as level as possible despite the pain she was in. “Up in my room… in my dresser… the top drawer… you know the one? There’s a first aid kit in there. I need you to bring it to me. As fast as you can.”

St. John didn’t even waste time nodding his head. He turned quickly and left.

“There about a dozen first aid kits in dis room alone…” Remy drawled in a weak voice beside her.

She turned back to him, her breathing laboured from the pain.

“Yeah, but none o’ those have the magic potion I got in mine,” she explained obtusely. Her first instinct was to get him out of that shirt and clean up the wound, only to realise that she couldn’t do much for him in this state. “Shit.”

“What, chere?”

“Shoulda asked St. John to sort out my arm before I sent him off…”

He exhaled a shallow, heavy breath. She could tell from the sound of it that he wasn’t in good shape.

“Get on the bed,” he said.

“It’ll be safer to wait…” she told him, but he shifted off the bed slowly, unevenly, insisted, “Jes’ lemme do it. I don’t trust dat couyon pup not to fuck it up…”

She did so, getting onto the mattress and onto her knees. Only when she felt the weight of him settle in next to her did she lean over and rest her cheek on the sheets – the crisp scent of the cotton couldn’t quite mask the metallic stench of his blood.

“Dis gon’ hurt,” he warned her in a low monotone.

“Yeah,” she murmured.

He took her right arm, gently, almost wearily, and she prayed he was up to this. She didn’t have to worry for long. Despite his wound he was nothing but efficient and professional, manipulating her arm with all the care and attentiveness she’d received from the all the best
He didn’t say anything and she concentrated instead on dealing with the pain. It was the perfect distraction from the silence, from the unexpected intimacy of the moment. It reminded her of the strange place their relationship seemed to be in right now. Until now she had allowed herself to open up to him, to trust him – only to learn that he had lied to her. That he still might be lying to her. The turmoil of her emotions were only now being held in check by the maelstrom of her pain, by Raven’s disapproval… by the memory of his words back in Emma’s apartment. The person you learned to be after Weapon X… she doesn’t want this.

The person Cody had taught her to be no longer wanted to kill.

The grinding unease of her thoughts, of their silence, was abruptly cut short by the ball of her arm clicking heavily back into place; she let out a low cry of pain that she only managed to curb by biting down into the sheets. For a few seconds her vision went white and her ears rang, and then she felt the pressure of his hand between her shoulders blades, heard him say, “Anna.”

There was a soft urgency to his voice and she forced herself to blink back the stars she was seeing. She got up off the bed slowly, just as St. John made a breathless return.

“ Took me a while,” he said apologetically, “but I found it.”

He handed her a small, green medi-kit that she unzipped quickly.

“Thanks,” she said. “Now do me a favour and get the theatre ready. With any luck Dr. Reyes will be here any sec.”

He did as he was told, and she sat on the edge of the gurney, next to Remy. The first thing she did was inject herself with a painkiller-stimulant cocktail. What she needed right now was to focus.

“Tha’s your magic potion, huh, chere?” he slurred with a laugh in his voice.

“Yeah.” She smiled grimly. “About ten times more potent than anythin’ you’ll find in Cece’s stash.”

When she turned back to him he had already stripped off his shirt and was pressing both hands down over his wound; she twisted in her seat, moved his hands aside gently, feeling the drugs kick in as she did so. Her head cleared, her senses sharpened. As soon as she removed the pressure of his hands the blood began to flow freely and she saw the bullet hole in his side, about an inch deep. She placed his hands back over the wound and went to wash her hands. When she got back he was lying on his back; he looked pretty bad, but it was the stertorous sound of his breathing that worried her most.

“Hey.” She put a hand on his thigh. “Y’still with me?”

“Yeah,” he answered in a slur, though he still managed a smile. “I’m still wit’ y’, chere.”

She figured the best thing she could do for him right now was give him some painkillers, and she injected the highest dosage she felt comfortable giving him. There wasn’t much else she could do at this point except damage control, and so she slipped on some gloves from the first aid kit and applied pressure to the wound. He made no sound, despite the fact that she knew he must be in pain – her gaze flicked to his and she was almost surprised to find him looking right back at her, almost as if he was considering her. She met the look without flinching, just as she always did, but there was something about it that unsettled her in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant.
She glanced down at her hands, seeing the blood working between her fingers – she frowned and pressed down harder, pretty sure the painkillers must be kicking in by now.

“Damn, dat feels good,” he murmured a moment or so later, confirming her estimation. “You got anymore?” he said to the ceiling.

She almost smiled to hear him back to his regular self, even if his voice was weaker than usual.

“I gave you a huge fuckin’ dose, Cajun,” she told him primly, though not without a suggestion of a smile on her lips. “Any more of that and your heart will stop.”

“Hmmmm,” he murmured happily. His eyes closed and he seemed pretty much blissed out, which was a very good thing. For a several minutes she let the silence fall as she pressed her hands against his wound, only the effort of concentration blocking out the churn of her anger, her thoughts, her lonely sense of betrayal. It was only when she realised her hands were shaking that she stopped. She felt in her utility belt for her meds and popped two of the pills into her mouth.

The silence grew and lengthened. After a few minutes the tremors subsided. Beside her, Remy’s breathing became so deep and regular that she figured he was asleep.

She closed her eyes and let the rhythm of his breathing carry her. For a blissful slice of time her mind was a blank, filled only with the warm fuzz of the drugs and the absence of Moira MacTaggert’s guilt-ridden memories. All the many lies she had been told faded into an insignificant pinpoint and for once… Anna Raven was at peace.

She started into alertness an indeterminable amount of time later, when Cecelia Reyes suddenly swept into the room and headed straight over to put on her scrubs.

“How’s he doing?” she asked without any other preliminaries, and Anna figured that St. John had already given her the lowdown on Remy’s basic status.

“Stable,” she answered quietly. “I hit him up with some of that special stuff you made up for me, so you might wanna lay off the anaesthetic some.”

Cecelia stared over at her pointedly as she pulled her dreadlocks up into her cap.

“Anna, that stuff is not for civs…”

“He’s Weapon X. Just like we were. He can handle it.”

Cecelia paused halfway through doing up her hair, her eyes going wide.

“What’s his designation?” she asked quietly.

Anna shrugged – suddenly she was wondering the same thing.

“Omega,” Remy unexpectedly answered for her, his voice a drug-induced slur. “Subject Omega. Not a Weapon yet. Not until the project starts up again.”

Anna and the doctor shared a look.

“It’s a long story,” Anna finally volunteered when Cecelia’s look became too questioning. “I’ll tell you later.”

Cecelia flung her hands up and turned to the sink to scrub up, leaving Anna to glance back
at Remy, who was definitely awake despite his eyes being closed.

“I thought you were asleep,” she murmured.

“Non.” He opened up an eye and regarded her stoically. “I’m jes’ as high as a fuckin’ kite. What de fuck was in dat shot you gave me?”

A thin smile touched her lips.

“Christ, your tolerance for that stuff must be low. I hit myself up with it every time I get injured. Must be why this shoulder’s still so darn painful.” She stood, wincing slightly at the pain, and gingerly stripped the bloody gloves off, throwing them in the nearest bio waste can. “I should go. Raven’s gonna be foaming at the mouth right about now.”

There was more she wanted to say, a *take care*, a *good luck*, something… But she found she couldn’t. She was still angry enough at him, at Emma Frost, at everyone – including herself – that she couldn’t stomach the words. So instead she headed for the door.

“Anna,” he said, when she’d barely taken a step forward. She turned and saw that he was looking at her with both eyes open now, his expression serious.

“Emma Frost’s chip…” he told her, “it’s in my coat…”

She glanced over at it, lying neglected over the back of a chair, and just as she was about to retrieve it he gripped her hand, stopping her.

“You should wait for me to be there with you when you ‘face with it… But I know you won’t…”

He trailed off; but he didn’t need to say anymore. The implication of his words was enough. He’d ‘faced with it; and whatever was on that chip was bad. She was caught between resentment that he knew what she didn’t, dread at what exactly that knowledge was… and a faint, flickering warmth that he cared enough to be concerned about her when she *did* find out. It was an effort, but she allowed the latter emotion to win out.

“I’ll be okay,” she whispered, adding almost as an afterthought: “You’d best be too.”

His smile was more akin to a grimace of pain than anything else.

“Jes’ don’t do nothin’ stupid, chere. Not ‘til I’m there to getcha back, leastways.”

She squeezed his hand and let it go. She wasn’t ready to interrogate his real loyalties just yet.

The portable ‘facing unit was in his inner coat pocket and she took it out. Dr. Frost’s chip was still inserted. She slipped the unit into her own coat pocket, just as Dr. Reyes bustled on over.

“Oh, let’s get this show on the road,” she announced with a firm professionalism that told Anna it was time to go.

“Make sure he doesn’t die, please,” she said, and he smiled at her.

“Why, chere. You *do* care.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” she retorted dryly. “You and I still need to have words.”
His smile dropped; luckily Dr. Reyes took the moment to interrupt.

“Words will have to wait, I’m afraid. And don’t worry, Anna. He’s in good hands.”

“Probably better than he deserves,” Anna quipped, retreating obediently to the door. “Thanks, Cece.”

But the doctor was already busy attending to her patient, and so Anna took the opportunity to slip quietly out.

Raven was waiting in the corridor for her.

“We need to talk,” she said. Anna merely nodded. She’d expected it, and she figured the sooner she got this conversation out of the way the better.

“I got St. John to leave us some coffee in my room,” Raven told her. “Let’s go there.”

She turned and Anna could do nothing but follow.

-oOo-

Raven’s room was a cosy little annex off of her office, as open and inviting as the office was impersonal and faintly intimidating.

Raven poured them coffee while Anna walked over to the nearest couch and all but collapsed into it. She was shattered, and her entire shoulder was radiating a burning ache.

“You must care for that man,” Raven noted in an even, almost conversational tone. Anna paused midway through massaging her shoulder.

“Do I?” she wondered aloud, not without a little hint of incredulity. Raven didn’t answer. She had finished pouring the coffee; she walked over and placed a cup on the table in front of Anna.

“Here,” she said.

Anna gratefully took a sip of the hot beverage and let its warmth take the edge off of her pain and exhaustion. When Raven took up the seat opposite her, she said nothing, waiting instead for Anna to take however long she needed to gather herself. It was a minute or so before she felt composed enough to engage in conversation. She raised her eyes to Raven’s, signalling that she was ready.

“Where do you want me to start?” she asked in a low voice. Raven opened her hands, giving a slight shrug of the shoulders.

“You said there were chips,” she prompted her, to which Anna gave a weary laugh and rubbed her face with her palms.

“Yes. The chips.” She could feel them in her coat pocket, light as a feather yet heavy as a ball and chain. All of a sudden she felt too drained again to talk – but she soldiered on anyway. “Do you remember,” she murmured softly, “the Crisis? The Machine?”

Raven’s face went as hard as a stone.

“Yes, but…”

“Did they ever tell you what happened?”
Raven made no reply for a good ten seconds.

“It was never my job to know.”

Anna laughed coldly.

“No. It was never our ‘job’ to know anything.” She paused, wrapped her hands even tighter round her coffee mug. “I was the thing that broke the Machine. I was the thing that caused the Crisis.”

Her voice was hard and yet could barely conceal the current of emotion running underneath. Raven’s brow creased.

“How?” she asked. A simple question; and one that Anna could not answer.

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly. “But whatever happened, it destroyed all my memories up to that point.” She drew in a sigh and rubbed her face again – the ache in her shoulder was growing more and more insistent. “You know what the Machine does, right?”

“Yes,” Raven rejoined almost falteringly. “It allows a person to interface directly with the brain – or brains – of whoever else is hooked up to it.” She leaned forward a little. “Who did they make you interface with Anna?”

So she had already guessed. It was a blessing of sorts.

“Tanya Trask,” Anna answered softly. “They wanted me to cure her…”

Raven leaned back in her seat without a sound. Her lips were pursed tight, her brow furrowed.

“Go on,” she said quietly.

“After the Crisis,” Anna continued slowly, “Trask wanted to shut down the Machine, the Weapon X project… But he couldn’t destroy his own work, not entirely… There’s a code, a password, that can restart the Machine… He split it into six parts, gave each of them to the six founders of the original Weapon X project, told them to record each of their parts onto a mem-chip…”

“A secret share,” Raven finished for her flatly. “No one person has the entire key. If the project was ever to restart again, it would have to be done by consensus.” She paused, her eyes narrowing. “But knowing Essex, he wasn’t going to waste time trying to convince his old colleagues. Hence the thief.”

Anna nodded tiredly. It was getting increasingly difficult to push anymore words out of her mouth.

“So,” Raven broke in after a moment. “You decided to hire the thief yourself. Steal the chips before Essex could, make sure they were destroyed so that the Machine and Weapon X itself could never be restarted again, so that whatever happened to you couldn’t happen to others.”

“No,” she cut in with as much force as she could muster. “No. Those chips… the memories on them… they were the only way I could begin to reconstruct my past. The only way I could find out what the hell they did to me… I’ve kept them… They were the only clues I had… Are the only clues… … And now…”
“And now what?”

Raven’s tone was as unforgiving as the edge of an obsidian blade, and Anna hung her head, looked at her feet, and finished: “And now I keep thinking… what if there’s nothing else to find out? What if the only clues I’ll ever have are in those chips… …?”

There was a silence that was so dense it almost left Anna’s ears ringing.

“How many do you have?” Raven asked at last. Anna heaved in a sigh and raised her eyes.

“All of them,” she said, “apart from Essex’s.”

Raven looked aside with a dark frown.

“This is a fool’s game, Anna,” she spoke in a low voice. “In more ways than one. You have no guarantee there’ll be any more information about your past on Essex’s chip, and even if there is, then what? You’d have to go right into the heart of Essex’s den to get it and—”

“Yes,” Anna cut in with enough firmness that Raven sucked in a sharp breath. She stood and crossed over to her young ward – her friend – kneeling down before her and placing her hands on her cheeks so that they were finally eye-to-eye.

“Listen to me, Anna. I can’t help you. Not with this one. I can’t. Risking my – our – exposure… it’s too great a risk to take. We walked away from that life, you and I. I did that for you, Anna. Do you understand? I walked away and did what I did to protect you.”

Tears unexpectedly welled in Anna’s eyes. It was the first time ever she had felt touched in this way – as a daughter would be touched by her mother.

“I’ve already been exposed, Raven,” she said in a small voice. “You haven’t. You don’t need to help me. And much as I appreciate everything you’ve done for me… I don’t need you to. This is my thing, Raven. Not yours. It never has been.”

Raven’s mouth tightened.

“And this is something you trust the thief with instead?”

Anna blinked, amazed to suddenly realise that Raven was – at least a little – jealous.

“He’s just some guy,” she answered softly. “I can risk him. I can’t risk you, Raven. Not after everything we’ve been through.”

The words were spoken in earnest, but Raven’s grip became firmer, and she probed in a curious, driving tone: “Can you? Can you risk him, Anna?”

She was confused. Too tired to analyse what this all meant. Everything was tunnelling. She could barely breathe.

“He’s lied to me… Pretended he was something he isn’t… Is probably still working for Essex… I can risk all those things… I can’t risk the one person who’s been loyal to me throughout.”

Raven stood then and turned aside. She lifted a fist to her lips as if trying not to make a sound.

“And yet,” she said at last in a muffled voice, “you still trust him enough to help you with
this asinine venture of yours? Despite all his lies, all his deception?"

She hung her head again, feeling the last vestiges of her strength begin to crumble.

“Yes. Yes. I have something he needs… he’ll help me till he gets it… And…”

“And what?”

“I don’t believe he really wants to hurt me…”

Raven turned back to her. There were a thousand things she could’ve said, a dozen admonishments and rebukes that Anna was expecting and had steeled herself for. But she said not one of them. There was something in her hand now, a small printout that she held out to Anna with a grim expression on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised. “This probably isn’t the right time to show you, but… You should see it anyway. You asked me to dig up everything I could on him. I found this yesterday.”

Anna took the paper. It was an obituary.

At first she didn’t understand what it meant, and the words danced before her eyes, before slowly coalescing into something more meaningful.

_Belladonna Boudreaux._

The name of his wife.

She was dead. Had been dead, for over 5 years.

She stared up at Raven wordlessly.

“I was looking in the file dumps for Belladonna LeBeau,” the older woman explained. “I found this obit when I used her maiden name. They were still married when she died. But her family buried her as a Boudreaux. Make of that what you will.”

Anna looked back down at the beautiful, happy, smiling face of the blonde-haired woman on the page in front of her. She blinked uncomprehendingly.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured.

“Don’t you?” Raven regarded her shrewdly, her head cocked to one side. “Loss is a powerful motivator, Anna. Everything you’ve just told me tonight proves that.”

Anna was silent, mutely folding up the paper and putting it into her pocket.

“You’re exhausted,” Raven observed, a little sympathy edging back into her voice. “You should get some sleep. Shall I get St. John to help you to your room?”

“No. No.” Anna stood, feeling the world whirl slightly around her. She stood still for a long moment, trying to regain her sense of balance. “I’ll be okay.”

She lifted one foot forward and then another. Was she swaying? She couldn’t tell.

“Are you sure?” she heard Raven say from somewhere in the distance.

She didn’t have the strength to answer. She lifted a hand, a weak gesture that nevertheless
managed to signal *back off*. The floor felt so soft, so welcoming, but she fought it – she found the door and let the world carry her heavy legs down the circuitous route to the room she rarely occupied.

She closed the door behind her mechanically and flipped the lock. She staggered to the bed as the lights popped on above her one by one.

“Dim,” she said, and they dimmed; and somehow she managed to reach the bed.

She collapsed onto the mattress, and what seemed like moments or hours later she was hugging herself tight, sobbing uncontrollably. Somehow, somewhere, Anna was dead. Anna was already ended.

She wept until she had nothing left to cry, and then she sat up and pulled the portable interfac er out of her breast pocket. Emma Frost’s chip was still in there, and she ran her thumb over the slot, realising only then that her body was shaking violently. Words swirled around in her mind, inarticulate and disjointed, buffeted around like ships on a stormy sea.

*Poor wee lass.*

*Poor wee lass.*

*A patchwork puppet. Second-hand puzzle pieces.*

*Weapon Zero, the perfect soldier, the perfect spy, the perfect killer. A robot, not a human.*

*The truth…*

*You should wait for me to be there with you when you ‘face with it…*

But I won’t Remy, she thought. You know I won’t.

I can’t… …

She closed her eyes and tried to push the urge away. She was on a knife edge… Had been in a stutter only a couple of days ago… Had ‘faced with Dr. MacTaggert’s chip only a couple of hours ago… She could ‘face with the truth now and finally she’d know… But there might not be anything left of her to save if she did…

*I don’t care anymore, I don’t care… …*

But he had been right, of course. She *wanted* to live. The woman Cody had taught her to be *wanted* to live.

The willpower required to put aside Emma Frost’s chip was almost gargantuan, and it took all the final reserves of strength left in her beaten, fragile body to lean over and throw the entire ‘facing unit under her bed. When she’d done so the urge to ‘face still hadn’t gone and for the first time the pull of it was truly frightening.

She reached once more into her pocket and drew out the syringe she’d secreted there back in the prep room. For a while she stared at it dumbly, at the viscose yellowish liquid inside.

*Make it stop,* she silently begged the fates. *Please, make it stop.*

She rolled up her left sleeve and found her vein. She was shaking so badly that she screwed up the injection several times and she just knew her arm would be a huge mass of bruising
in the morning but... *fuck it*. At last she got the needle in and she drained the entire syringe into it. Almost immediately the hit was threading through her, and she pulled out the needle and let it drop onto the bed next to her.

The irresistible compulsion to 'face slowly receded into a lonely little voice in the background of her existence. She sank back against the sheets and took in a breath that she seemed to suck in for hours. When she exhaled, it was like it went on forever.

She closed her eyes and let the drug take her, sail her away into and beyond the eye of a needle. Somewhere she felt safe. In control.

*The person you learned to be after Weapon X... She doesn’t want this.*

*You want to live, Anna.*

*You want to live.*

-0O0-
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Anna finally 'faces with Emma Frost's mem-chip.

He awoke to the scent of her, that perfume he couldn’t place, that had no name except hers.

Anna.

He opened his eyes and there she was, sitting there by his bedside, her head in her hands.

It was the last thing he’d expected from her, this pose of abject defeat, the hunched form of someone who seemed on the edge of despair. The cold truth dawned on him. He remembered Emma Frost’s chip, how she’d taken it from him the last time he’d been conscious.

“Anna,” he muttered. He’d meant it to be soft, but in his disused voice it came out sounding like a broken rasp.

She looked up.

Her expression was one of exhaustion, as worn as he felt, her green eyes dull, underscored by dark circles. She expressed no relief to see that he was okay – yet there was none of the hostility he’d seen back in Dr. Frost’s apartment. Her face was caught behind a mask that he could only read as utter weariness.

For a few seconds they simply looked at each other, to the point that he began to feel unsettled.

“Got any water?” he finally asked her hoarsely.

She still said nothing, silently pushing herself up into a sitting position and slowly getting to her feet. He watched her as she stepped over to the nearby trolley, noting the sluggishness of her movements, the way her hand poured water from a jug into a plastic cup with an unsteady grasp. The lack of coordination made him worry she’d suffered another neural stutter, but he sensed that now was not the time to ask her about it.

She turned back round and handed him the water; he chugged it down gratefully, and she simply stood there, still and silent as a statue, giving him nothing. He was painfully aware of her gaze, one that was becoming increasingly charged with something less than friendly, and something else that paradoxically seemed more than friendly. It was like static, prickling his skin, firing his belly. The force of her emotions was so visceral it was literally radiating from her in waves. Through the mask of her exhaustion there was anger, hurt, betrayal… and a dark warmth he couldn’t place.

Remembering how they’d left things when he’d last seen her, confrontation seemed like an inevitability; and so he set aside his empty cup and simply looked at her. It was an opening she took without pause.

“How long?” she asked him.
Both her voice and her glance were stony cold. Whatever warmth he’d sensed from her was gone.

“Since Paris,” he replied. He knew instinctively that his usual lies would no longer fool her. She was quiet, weighing up his admission, giving only a brief nod.

“Right,” she spoke in a dead tone. “When Essex approached you with that deal back in Paris, you didn’t say no at all. You said yes.”

She already had it figured. It was useless to either confirm or deny it. He simply held her gaze, prepared to meet any punishment she chose to mete out to him. He was surprised when all she did was look aside at the ground and declare bitterly:

“I suppose it makes sense, after what I did to you, stealing Trask’s chip from you, sending you away to somewhere you didn’t want to be.” Her voice was hard, her accent so damn fine, it communicated her ire to him more than anything else she could’ve said. She darted a look back at him, and this time her glance was fierce. “I guess I was asking for it.”

Her fists were working at her sides, another sure sign of barely suppressed rage. She was expecting something from him and if he didn’t give it, he knew it would provoke her even more.

“So maybe a part of me did think that,” he admitted quietly. “But that ain’t the reason I did what I did, and it ain’t what I think now.”

“Ha!” Her tone was scathing, her eyes blazing with a cold fire. “You make it sound so fucking incidental. But do you have any idea what you’ve done to me?!” Her fists were still clenching and unclenching, almost unconsciously. “My past was stolen once and you wanna steal all I have left?!”

The accusation cut him deeper than he’d been expecting. The idea that she could even believe that was what he wanted was offensive to him.

“Y’think I set dis up? That I let Milbury just waltz in and take your mem’ries?” He felt his own indignation rising despite himself. “Sure, those chips he took were part of a plan, a contingency plan in case I got inta a tight spot… Collateral, a delaying tactic, if I ever needed t’ keep his focus off you – and the chips he really wants. But I never planned this.”

He soon learned that even though she showed every evidence of mem-intoxication, she was still about ten times faster than he’d anticipated. She lunged at him without any preamble or warning, her fist slamming into the side of his face and sending him sprawling back against the sheets. In a trice she was upon him, her fingers clawing at his throat. She was under the influence, and he had just awoken from a surgical coma, which should have left them evenly matched – but he had one advantage over her. His rage ran icy cold. Cold enough to keep his wits.

Their scuffle was short – in a few seconds he’d overpowered her, forcing her wrists into the mattress and pinning her into submission with his body. She struggled against him fiercely, forcing him to literally slam her back into the mattress with all his strength and weight, winding his legs round hers so that she had no hope of even moving a muscle without tangling them even further together.

“Let me go, you prick!” she screamed at him impotently, but for once he had her where he wanted her – backed up against a wall with nowhere to go and nothing to do but hear him out.

“You’re right,” he ground out in a low rasp. “I guess a part of me did wanna hurt ya, at
least back then. But you’re wrong if you think I wanted this. Milbury was never s’posed to have gotten this far. Him takin’ those chips was never s’posed t’happen!”

“Oh really?” She was breathless, her glare like fire, searing him to the bone. “Woulda been nice if you’d actually let me in on your shitty plan, you bastard!”

She made a movement with her right leg that he thought was her trying to lay him with a knee to the groin, but that actually came out as something far more sensual than intended.

“Yah think?” he replied, the pitch of his voice dropping a notch. Whatever he was feeling right now was apparently the last thing on her mind; she scowled up at him derisively.

“Yah know what I think? I don’t think you even had a fuckin’ plan. That you were just makin’ this all up as you went along.”

Well, yeah, that was technically kinda true…

“What I can say? Things changed. I improvised.”

She almost spat with disgust at the statement.

“Changed? What changed? You found out just how fucked up I really am? Took a nose round my life while I was stuck in that neural stutter, huh? Or did finding out what Weapon X was really all about make you think twice about bein’ a part of it” She sneered, her gaze darkening. “Or was it the night we fucked that changed your mind? ‘Cos you played that one real smooth, Cajun, makin’ out it was only ‘services rendered’, a sweetener thrown into the deal because you felt fucking sorry for me!”

Her blatant repulsion and self-recrimination was another kick in the gut he wasn’t expecting.

“There were ‘bout a hundred reasons why I slept wit’ you, p’tite,” he practically growled. “And feelin’ sorry for you weren’t one of ‘em.”

“Yeah, I’m sure ‘easy and desperate lay’ just about covered it.”

“Chere,” he answered sincerely, “there ain’t nothin’ ‘easy’ or ‘desperate’ about you. The simple truth is I slept wit’ you ‘cos you wanted it like I did. You can tell y’self it was just ‘services rendered’ if ya want, nothin’ but a dirty, cynical transaction… but you know deep down dat it was what you wanted, what we both wanted.” His voice dropped to a husky drawl, his eyes running over her face with an almost unbearable intensity as he added, “I gave you what we both still want.”

Her eyes narrowed and the tension in her slackened, her rigid body softening under his, enough for him to loosen his grip on her slightly. He should’ve known it was a feint – no sooner had he eased up on her than she’d headbutted him right in the face.

The unanticipated blow had him reeling, and quick as lightning she was out of his grasp and back on her feet.

“Fuckin’— Shit, woman!” he yelled, cupping a hand to his bloody nose – not that she cared at that point.

“You’d best be fuckin’ thankful I didn’t break your pretty face, you shit!” she raged instead. “Y’think I woulda slept with you if I’d known you were working for that sick fuck, Essex?!”
He said nothing, wiping the blood from his nostril with the back of his hand as she whipped away and paced the same square metre of floor, her footwork a fitful mess.

“I should’ve known from the beginning you were still working for that bastard!” she railed at no one in particular. “I should’ve known as soon as Raven told me you were back in NY and wanting to see me! But like the fool I was I fell for your silver tongue and your two-bit charm, for your… your too-smooth lines and your too-sweet kisses! I was stupid enough to think you cared!”

He watched her, the jerkiness of her movements stoking a growing concern in him that gave the lie to her words.

“I do care,” he murmured, for once being entirely honest. “Anna… the things that Weapon X did to you… they ain’t want anyone should haveta go through.”

The words far from pacified her; but she halted and stared at him, the fire in her eyes dimming a little as she spoke coldly:

“Pfft. I’m pretty sure you only started to care when you realised what happened to me was exactly what Essex had planned for you. Before that – you couldn’t have given a shit.”

“That ain’t true,” he muttered with conviction.

“Really?” Her tone was disbelieving. “You’ve made it pretty darn clear the only person you care about is yourself.” Her mouth creased into an angry sneer. “You lost your kid and you ran away. Your wife was grieving and you ran away. Her brother humbled himself to get you back together, and instead you took his life and still you ran. Then Belle died and you didn’t even look back. How is now any different?”

He glanced up at her sharply, stunned at just how much she knew about Belle. Her death was a truth he’d been trying so hard to escape from, a cruel reminder of the guilt and the shame and the endless what-ifs that haunted him every moment of every day.

“Raven told you ‘bout Belle, did she?” he spoke up icily. He didn’t need an answer, and she didn’t give one. He grit his teeth, an effort to suppress a sudden surge of anger. “She had no right,” he stated bitterly, to which she merely snorted disdainfully.

“Don’t talk to me about right, Remy. Don’t you fucking dare.”

He looked aside, his jaw tensing, his eyes smarting. This wasn’t supposed to hurt – but it did. His senses were burning.

“You know what the crazy thing is?” she finally broke the unforgiving silence in a quieter tone. “When Raven told me what happened to your wife, I’d never felt so damn close to you. That night at La Princesse you said to me that neither of us was made to be alone. And you were right. We’re both so fucking alone, Remy. Unable to get past the people that we loved so bad and then lost.”

Her voice cracked, and she stopped. The words had touched him, and he chanced a look up at her. What he saw in her face was sadness, mingled with bitterness.

“I was learning to trust you,” she murmured helplessly. “And now I find you’re just another enemy. That you always have been.”

It was another knife to the gut. His mouth tightened and he shook his head slowly.
“I ain’t your enemy, Anna.”

“Really?” She looked weary, deflated, like all the stuffing had been knocked out of her. “Prove it.”

Several beats of silence widened the gap between them. He didn’t know how to bridge it, and he didn’t know how to prove the fact that he was being honest with her now. All he knew was that this was fucking painful and he wanted it to end. Apparently his silence was what she had been expecting, because a deprecating smile tugged tightly at her lips.

“And all that ain’t even the least of it, Remy,” she continued with a jaded softness. “You know what really adds insult to injury? You ‘faced with Emma Frost’s chip. You know exactly what they did to me. And I don’t.”

He shot a glance at her, confused. Her words were the last things he’d been expecting. Her entire demeanour – the tiredness, the unfocused gaze, the slight ataxia – they were the hallmarks of mem-intoxication, and he’d assumed that Dr. Frost’s memories were the culprit.

“You mean you ain’t ‘faced with it yet?” he spoke with surprise. It was the worst thing he could’ve said. She turned on him again abruptly.

“I can’t!” she snapped, with something between contempt and despair. “My mind is so fucking broken right now, just one more ‘facing session could end it! Do you even know how I’m stopping myself from hooking myself up right now?!”

She jerked her left sleeve up violently, revealing her bare arm to him. He stared, his mouth going hard when he saw mass of bruises all the way up her arm, the track marks dotted all over her skin. Suddenly it was obvious – all the symptoms he’d thought had been of mem-intoxication were actually the signs of an entirely different kind of intoxication. He looked back up at her, his expression grim.

“Non,” he spoke in a flat, stern tone. “Don’t, chere. Don’t start on that fuckin’ poison.”

“Then tell me how not to!” she begged him in a tone of pure anguish. “Tell me how not to!”

It was a horrible admission that she seemed to regret as soon as it had left her lips. She turned abruptly, her hand clutching hard at her mouth, the slope of her shoulders spelling shame, defeat. She was shaking, trembling hard, and he wanted to comfort her in some way but he couldn’t. He didn’t know how.

“Anna,” he said sadly instead. He touched her arm, all bruised and battered… and it occurred to him that the touch was probably too personal for her to handle, and so he tugged her sleeve back down over the marks slowly, covering them up. It was a small, instinctive thing – but it changed something. When he met her gaze again, there was a softness there for the first time since he’d woken up, a spontaneous warmth that he didn’t think she’d meant to give him, that she understood the meaning of as little as he did.

“You still wanna help me, Remy?” she asked him quietly, when their shared gaze had become too meaningful. “You still wanna prove to me you’re on my side?”

That little nugget of warmth, of vulnerability, was all he needed.

“Tell me what you want,” he murmured. His hand was still on her sleeve – for some reason he couldn’t let go. She sat down slowly on the bed beside him, levelled him with a
penetrating stare.

“You have to have a place,” she said. “One nobody knows about. Where you hid out when you knew Yashida was after you. A place you’ve proofed against Essex.” She paused, her eyes hardening as she added: “I want you to tell me where it is. I want to stay there.”

Her expression was fierce, as if daring him to deny her now.

“Anna…” he began doubtfully, but she ignored him, lifting her chin and letting her gaze scale the walls, the ceiling.

“This place… It’s like a cage. No windows… Just walls… No day, no night… It’s like a cell… Like the places they used to keep me in when I was a kid. And Raven’s always here… Like this goddamned ghost from my past…” She shuddered involuntarily, only gradually composing herself. “I need somewhere to ‘face with Emma Frost’s chip. Somewhere where I’m not gonna be disturbed. Somewhere I’ll be safe.”

“Safe?” He looked dubious. “Chere, you wanna be safe, you stay here, where there’ll be people who can get your back if anythin’ goes wrong…”

“No,” she interrupted firmly. “This is my thing. I need to be alone.” Her mouth went hard. “I have no place left to go. Nothing left to my name. You and Essex made sure of that. You owe me this, Remy, at the very least. If you really care, if you’re really on my side.”

“And if I say no?”

She raised an eyebrow, the corner of her lip lifting in a cynical smirk.

“Then I tell Raven who you’re really working for. And you can try to outrun her and her minions for the rest of your days, or have her murder you here in this bed. Either way, I don’t care.”

It was a lie. He knew she did care, that she didn’t want him hurt. But he also knew she would out him to Raven, if push came to shove.

Still, he hesitated. Even if he knew he owed her, he also knew she was probably better off with people she could trust nearby. The idea of her going through another neural stutter, alone and defenceless, wasn’t pretty… and yet he understood the need for her to escape, to be alone. He was the same breed of lonewolf. Pleasure in numbers, to be sure – business in private.

“You get my phone, chere,” he finally decided quietly, nodding toward his coat, which still slung over a chair in the corner, “and I’ll send you the coordinates. And the keycode to get in.”

She stood up to go get it, but his hand was still on her sleeve and he stopped her.

“One thing, Anna. You go there, you ain’t takin’ any of those fuckin’ drugs with you. You start on that shit, you don’t get off that ride easy, believe me. And that’s a something I probably won’t be able to help you with.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah.” He gave a thin smile. “You keep in contact wit’ me. Before and after you ‘face wit’ that chip. I wanna know you’re okay. That you ain’t gon’ try anythin’ stupid.”
She looked at him with such scepticism that he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“Look,” he said. “I know you don’t owe me anythin’. But this is the deal I’m gonna make wit’ you. You want my safe house, you gonna play by my rules. Those are the only two I’m layin’ down. You let me know you’re okay. You don’t need to say nothin’. Just send me a blank text or somethin’. Anythin’ to let me know you ain’t stuck in one of those fuckin’ neural stutters again. Deal?”

She pursed her lips and stared down at his hand, still clutching her sleeve.

“All right,” she finally agreed. “Deal.”

Only then did he let go of her. He wasn’t an idiot – he knew there was no way for him to enforce any of these things, but there was one thing he did know – that she would keep her word on this. He didn’t know how he knew, but he did.

She retrieved the phone for him, and he punched in the entry code and the coordinates.

“I’ll join you when doc says I can leave,” he said.

“Do I get a choice?” she murmured with a hint of danger in her voice.

“What?” He paused and looked up at her wryly. “You don’t need my help to get those chips no more, chere?”

Her eyes were narrowed, her expression plainly showing she didn’t buy it.

“I’m guessing it’s more a case of you needing me, Cajun. I might even have an idea of what exactly it is you need me for.”

“And you think this is still about need, chere?”

She gave him a scathing look.

“Absolutely. Why else would you still be sticking with me now?”

“I dunno.” He answered, a playful lilt edging into the seriousness of his tone. “You tell me. You were the one who invited me back into your bed before this whole thing went tits up. Maybe I’m still holdin’ out for a piece of what I know I’m missin’.”

He’d really wanted to know what she would’ve replied to that comment, but unfortunately Dr. Reyes chose that moment to make her impromptu entrance. She halted when she saw him sitting up, seemingly surprised that he was already awake.

“Up already?” was all she could manage to say.

“Yeah. For the last ten minutes or so,” Anna replied. Dr. Reyes almost looked approving, until she clocked his still-bloody nose.

“Do you think,” she began, casting Anna a pained glare, “that you can refrain from attacking my patients any time soon?”

The plea would’ve been humorous, if it hadn’t been given with deadly seriousness. Anna, however, merely shrugged.

“He was asking for it.”
“Yeah, well,” Remy couldn’t help but bite back sardonically. “You were askin’ t’be pinned to this bed.”

She levelled him a slow, cold stare.

“Next time I will break your face, you dick.”

“Next time?” He couldn’t help but take the opening to flirt, buoyed as he was by the thin protection Dr. Reyes’ presence afforded him. “Chere, if there’s gonna be a next time, I can’t fuckin’ wait. Let me know when and I’ll make sure t’ pencil you in.”

Dr. Reyes cleared her throat, a sure sign that while she didn’t get what was going on she’d certainly caught the gist of it.

“Bloody nose aside,” she cut in pointedly, “how are you feeling?”

“I’d say he’s pretty much back to his normal self,” Anna quipped sourly before he could get a word in edgeways.

“You make it sound like that’s a bad thing,” he noted, smiling sweetly at her. He still hadn’t sent through the keycode to the safe house and he knew she was aware that he could hold it back from her indefinitely if he wanted to. She shrugged.

“Depends on how you like your thieving Cajun con artists.”

“And how do you like yours?”

“Straight up. No twists.” She glanced at the phone in his hand briefly. “You better start learning what that means, if you wanna have even an outside chance of fitting me into your busy schedule.”

He laughed softly, added Touché to the end of the text message, and hit the send button. The phone in the back pocket of her jeans pinged.

As soon as it had, she began to back away to the door.

“I should leave you to it,” she addressed Dr. Reyes, before glancing briefly at Remy and adding: “I’ll text you, Remy.”

He gave a flippant gesture with his hand, but inwardly her words only signalled to him that she was committed to her plan. She was going to ‘face with that chip, and she was going to do it alone. It wasn’t his place to stop her, but he still wanted to. He wanted to tell her to wait, even if he knew she wouldn’t.

She left, the doors swinging shut behind her.

Dr. Reyes was looking down on him with a studiously blank stare that couldn’t quite hide her disapproval.

“Here,” she said, holding out a paper towel. He stared at it suspiciously a moment before snatching it out of her hand and dabbing at the blood on his nose. For a second he thought she might comment on the obvious story behind his injury, but she didn’t.

“So,” she began again. “How are you actually feeling?”

“Great,” he answered. “When can I leave?”
She gave him a withering smile.

“A couple of days at least. Your cells are repairing themselves at an accelerated rate… which means you’re healing faster than most people do. But I’d still like to keep you in and make sure you’re okay before you get out of this bed and into somewhere more interesting.”

He looked over at her curiously, but she was busy preparing a syringe and there wasn’t any expression for him to read.

“So you were with Weapon X too?” he asked after a moment.

“Yes.”

“How long for?”

“Long enough.” She obviously didn’t want to elaborate, and so he didn’t question her any further. “I’m going to take a blood sample from you, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

She found his vein and it reminded him of the bruises on Anna’s arm. He hoped to God she wasn’t taking any of that shit with her.

“You want my advice?” she asked him lightly, as the needle sank into his flesh.

“Non,” he replied. “But I’m pretty sure you’re gonna give it to me anyway.”

She looked at him and smiled grimly.

“Whatever it is the two of you are planning, don’t underestimate Essex. Ever.”

-oOo-

Anna had stood in the doorway of Raven’s office, the duffel bag of essentials slung over her shoulder, yet another life cobbled together from the ruins of the last.

“I’m going,” she’d told Raven flatly.

Raven had looked up at her from her tablet with an incredulous look on her face.

“Where?”

She’d shrugged.

“Somewhere close by… It’s better if I don’t say. Considering how close Essex just got to me, it’s better nobody knows. This is for my safety.”

Raven had blanked the tablet and leaned back in her seat, regarding Anna from narrowed eyes.

“But the thief – LeBeau… He knows, doesn’t he.”

She’d made no reply; and Raven’s mouth had gone flat.

“Why do you trust him?”

“Because,” she’d answered tiredly, “I already told you. He’ll keep me safe ‘til he has what
he needs from me…”

But that hadn’t only been it. There had been a lot more bubbling away under the surface that she hadn’t had the headspace or inclination to understand – or even articulate – at that point in time. She’d known Raven sensed it, but she’d made no allusions to it, and so, thankfully, Anna had left.

Only half an hour had passed since then, and now she was standing here. On the threshold of an apartment that may or may not have belonged to Remy LeBeau.

It was a static, lonely place, more showroom than home, impeccably decorated yet totally unlived in, perfectly finished yet sparsely furnished. Everything was white or black or beige, streamlined and modern. She stood inside the vestibule for a long time and listened to the silence.

No responsibilities, no distractions except her own self.

She slipped off her shoes and walked into the lounge.

There was a skylight in the middle of the room that looked right up to the moon, and she stood under its milky light, letting herself soak in the atmosphere.

This place was perfect, its unspoilt desolation the ideal counterpoint to Raven’s impregnable fortress. She could be herself here – or as close to herself as was possible, at the very least.

The next couple of hours she spent going through the entire apartment from top to bottom, checking every possible nook, cranny and seam for any hidden surveillance devices or traps. After a thorough and painstaking search she was finally satisfied the apartment was clean, and she then moved to setting up her defence, rigging the entrances and hallways with a number of booby traps – enough to buy her a little time to escape, at any rate. It was, after all, best to be prepared; and she still didn’t fully trust the Cajun not to have betrayed her in some way.

When this was done she took a moment to step back and admire her handiwork. If Essex’s cronies were going to show up she’d give them a run for their money and then some. She wasn’t going to go down without the fight of her life, that was for sure.

She glanced over at the clock on the granite mantelpiece.

It was 11 p.m. – she’d been at it for nearly 3 hours.

She headed for the master bedroom and slid open the door.

There was an interfacer in the corner, by the window. It was a design she hadn’t seen before, something lightweight and probably custom-made – perhaps by Empharma. She frowned, and stepped inside the room, sliding the door softly shut behind her. The lights were automatically set to dim, and she sat on the edge of the sleek, designer bed and took in a breath.

It was only then, by herself, in the lonely half-light, that she began to feel the weight of her existence creep on her. The ache of her endless quest, the hollowness of her tattered past, the pull of her bottomless addictions. She was a woman on a knife edge, the blade slowly scoring into the raw flesh of her being, and it hurt. It hurt to simply breathe, to contemplate each moment.

She sank back onto the bed and was surprised to suddenly smell him on the sheets. The
scent was faint, barely there even, a ghost of his infrequent presence, but it was unmistakably him and she found it oddly comforting. An unlikely anchor to something stronger than herself.

She held onto it, as hard as she dared to something so visceral and forbidden. When she felt steady enough she slipped the eyedrops out of her pocket, followed by the collection of mem-chips – Trask’s, Yashida’s, Lady Sarkissian’s, Dr. MacTaggert’s – and finally the portable interfaucer, with Emma Frost’s chip still inside. She administered the drops first, and arranged the mem-chips carefully on the nightstand beside her. It was silly, perhaps, but they felt like talismans, like good luck charms. The final relics of her past.

Finally she took the portable ‘facer and put it on her head. Was she ready? Too late or too soon to tell. She was committed at least, that much was certain.

She lay back on the bed and made herself comfortable.

Again there was the scent of him and it reminded her. Her phone was in her jeans pocket and she slid it out, opening up the text messenger. There was nothing really to say to him, and so she did as he’d suggested and sent him a blank message. In a way, it was an insurance policy against chickening out. So much of her life had rested on this moment and yet now – for the first time perhaps – she was scared. Even though backing out was hardly an option.

She set the phone aside and lowered the visor. She prayed her mind would hold on long enough for this. She prayed he would send someone to find her if she didn’t come out the other end at all.

Her hand trembled as she lifted it to her temple, but she found the switch – she turned it on and the ‘facer ran, and like a whale rising with the tide, Emma Frost’s memories descended and devoured her whole.

-oOo-

Three-nine-nine-nine-zero-four-zero-eight-six-one.

She’d committed it to memory virtually the moment she saw it, and it is an inconvenience that she merely wants to get out of the way. Silly numbers. Idiot Trask. All that is left now is the salvage operation.

She walks briskly into the small anteroom leading off from the main infirmary, and lets the doors swing shut behind her. Essex is there, standing beside a small figure lying on a bed. She walks up to join him, and for a while they stand there, silent, side by side.

“Moira’s gone,” she finally speaks in a low tone. “She said she’s taking a day or two off. Nathaniel, we need to watch her. I have a feeling she might not come back… …”

He lifts a hand, seemingly distracted. There is a tablet in his hand, the brainwaves of the girl on the bed scrolling across the screen.

“How is she?” she asks.

“Stable,” he replies. “Physically, at least. Her brainwaves, however…”

He needs say no more. The girl with the white streak in her hair is still and quiet as a mouse, this ugly, gangly child – pale as death itself, her life marked only by the steady beep of the heart monitors. She feels… distaste. That one such as this – so small, so fragile – can possibly be so gifted, so exceptional, so important.
“So this is Weapon X’s last hope,” she can’t help but murmur to herself. She frowns. “This isn’t what we planned, Nathaniel.”

“No,” he agrees. “I admit, it is not. Due to Trask’s idiocy, we have fallen far short of the army we had originally planned. And yet…”

She glances over at him.

“And yet what?”

“And yet our plans have succeeded in other ways. The army was but one facet of Weapon X’s remit. What this child represents is something far more important. A way to change the course of history, a way to do away with the suffering of this world.” He pauses, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “No… We haven’t failed yet, not by any means. You did well, Dr. Frost.”

“Maybe a little too well,” she notes disapprovingly. “I hadn’t expected her to respond to my suggestions so soon – or so thoroughly. Certainly not during the session with the Trask girl.” Her frown deepens as she broods, continuing: “At any other time her response to the treatment would have been perfect! But while interfacing with Trask’s daughter – it couldn’t have happened at a worst time! Of course Trask pulled the plug!”

“Calm yourself, Dr. Frost,” Essex rejoins, unperturbed. “The circumstances are unfortunate, that cannot be denied. But Subject Zero herself is a success. Finally we have the clean slate we always wanted. With a little training, a little… manipulation… we can finally make our Weapon Zero.”

She looks over at him curiously.

“What do her test results show? Is the erasure complete?”

“Completely and utterly.”

He is holding a tablet and he hands it to her. She looks at it, seeing a familiar constellation of patterns pictured there – Subject Zero’s neural pathways, a complex network of memories, experiences and habits formed over her short 12 years of life. She scrolls to the next page and sees what she can only assume are the most recent test results. Half of the neural pathways shown in the previous picture have been completely obliterated from existence. A thousand memories, once forged so strongly, have now been torn asunder, ripped apart, irrevocably destroyed.

She lets out a long, pent up breath at the evidence of all the damage she has helped bring about. Even her own dubious sensibilities are shocked.

“One almost wonders,” Essex says, with just a little begrudging admiration, “just how you persuaded her to do it.”

She hands him back the tablet with a frosty smile.

“I was simply honest with her, Nathaniel,” she replies in a hard voice. “I told her exactly what she wanted to hear. That if the Machine allowed her to destroy the memories of others…”

“Then it allowed her to destroy her own memories too,” he finishes.

She nods, smiling tightly.
“Believe it or not, subterfuge isn’t always the quickest way to influence someone, doctor. Sometimes, the brutal, direct approach is far more effective. In this case I simply forced her to confront the memories that most haunt her. Made her relive those traumas without resolution, over and over, until they became an unbearable torture to her. Then I simply offered her the possibility of relief. A Machine that could take away all her pain.”

“And so the seed was planted.” He gives an approving little smile. “You are quite deliciously immoral, Dr. Frost.”

She is unmoved by the observation.

“You wanted a blank slate, Nathaniel. I simply made sure you got one.”

She looks down at the catatonic girl lying on the bed, a sneer on her face.

“I gave her exactly what she wanted – a way to end her suffering. We didn’t even have to lift a finger. She did it all herself. She destroyed her own memories.”

“Yes,” Essex agrees, coldly stating the terrifying truth. “She killed her own past.”

-oOo-
Raven Darkholme sat at her desk reading the *New York Times* when there was a short, sharp knock on her door. She recognised it as Dr. Reyes’ knock and let out a brief “Come in!” as she laid aside her tablet.

Cecelia opened the door and stepped in, saying, “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Oh no,” Raven replied congenially. “I’ve been expecting you. Take a seat.”

The doctor did so, sliding into the chair opposite Raven as she’d done many times before. There was a mutual trust and respect between these two women, born from years of having worked together, both on and off the battlefield.

“I take it Dr. McCoy’s test results are through?” Raven asked expectantly.

“Yes,” Cecelia nodded, passing a small tablet across the table. Raven took it, and read it briefly. Most of the words and phrases were unfamiliar to her, but she trusted Dr. Reyes to translate.

“Hm. It looks here like the results came back as expected, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Right.” Cecelia nodded again. “Mr. LeBeau’s blood tests tested positive for Empharma nanomachines, which would explain his accelerated rate of healing. He’s also had gene therapy.”

“In order to reduce the chance of his body rejecting the neural implant Essex had put in?”

“Right.”

“Standard operating procedure then,” Raven concluded, handing back the tablet.

“Not entirely,” Cecelia replied. “We compared his results to Anna’s.”

“And?”

“The nanomachine tech is far more advanced, but that’s to be expected. The gene therapy is interesting.” She paused. “Have you heard of a Dr. Roderick Campbell?”

Raven squinted in thought.

“The name seems familiar… …”

“He was a protégé of Dr. Moira MacTaggert. She supervised his doctorate in the therapeutic effects of gene therapy when given in conjunction with mem-therapy. I took the liberty of getting St. John to run a search on him. It seems he’s now working for Empharma.”

Raven lips went tight. She understood all too well what Dr. Reyes was implying.
“So he’s taken over MacTaggert’s role on the soon-to-be restarted Weapon X project…”

“Yes. And it seems he’s surpassed his mentor’s abilities in that particular area. LeBeau’s neural patterns showed evidence of considerable degeneration and subsequent repair. In the past he appears to have suffered from levels of neural damage which are similar to that which Anna currently suffers from.”

Raven darted her a sharp look.

“Similar damage to Anna?” she repeated in a harsh tone. “And yet he was somehow cured?”

“Yes. If I had to guess… I’d say it’s down to the gene therapy.”

Raven frowned.

“So Anna can be cured…”

“In theory, yes.”

This was news, both exciting yet troubling. For the first time she felt a ray of hope for the woman she loved like a daughter… yet in reality it was no hope at all. Only through Essex could Anna be cured, and such a notion was insupportable. She picked up a nearby pen and tapped it thoughtfully against her lips.

“I take it LeBeau is now fully recovered?”

Cecelia shrugged.

“Yes. To all intents and purposes. I was going to discharge him – not that he needs anyone’s permission to leave here anyway.”

“Interesting.” Raven placed the pen down with a grimace. “Five days to heal from a life-threatening injury. Essex has made a perfect little soldier, hasn’t he.” She stood. “I think I’ll go and have a friendly chat with him.” She paused. “Does he know about these test results?”

“No,” Dr. Reyes answered, standing also. “Do you want me to tell him now?”

Raven thought about it.

“No,” she decided at last. “I’m pretty sure he knows already.” She headed for the door, halting and turning slightly as she got to it. “Oh. And thank you, Dr. Reyes. As always, you do magnificent work.”

-oOo-

The night that Anna had left had seemed to go on forever.

There were so many times he’d gone through this feeling – that familiar churning of the guts, that dangling helplessness of being on tenterhooks. Those times had always been for himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt that way for someone else, and this time he’d felt it for her. He’d found himself in that weird space between hoping and praying that she would get through the other side okay; that she’d chicken out and wouldn’t ‘face with Dr. Frost’s chip at all.

That meagre hope had proved futile – at about 11 p.m. her first text had come through – blank, just as he’d suggested – the signal that she was going for it.
It was about half an hour later, when he was lying sleepless in bed and staring up at the ceiling, that the next text had come.

He’d reached for his phone and seen that this message, too, was blank.

She was out the other side. She was okay – at least as okay as he knew she could be.

He’d expelled a slow breath. The ensuing silence had been as stark and gaping as her empty texts. It had invited thoughts, fears, that would have otherwise been absent.

So she had been coherent enough to send him a text, but that had told him nothing about what state she was in. Whether there were tears, or anger, or pain… Or whether she had been on the verge of losing it. Whether she had been ready to maim, or kill… or worse.

He’d conjured up every tortured scenario he could think of before he’d finally fallen into a fitful sleep. The only thing that had stopped him from going out and finding her was the knowledge that she didn’t want him.

*She didn’t want him.*

Morning had brought no respite from the treacherous whirl of his thoughts.

Remy sat on the bed and smoked discontentedly at a cigarette, an attempt to calm his frayed and battered nerves.

His phone was still silent, and he wasn’t supposed to want to hear from her this bad, but he did. The way she had been yesterday – so cold and angry and wounded… like a woman scrabbling at a cliff edge, trying desperately to gain some purchase… It had bothered him. Hell, *everything* about her bothered him, in ways he wasn’t ready to articulate.

What he *was* ready to acknowledge was that he was tired of playing this game. It wasn’t fun anymore. The thrill of the con had faded into a nameless, gnawing feeling that prickled his conscience and left his stomach in knots. And when the game stopped being fun… well, then it was time to fold, to move on. To seek out the next promising opportunity.

Ironically the only opportunity worth taking was the one that wasn’t a game, that wasn’t a con, one that left him wide open and vulnerable as hell.

The realisation was interrupted by the sound of footsteps outside his room, and whilst he knew Dr. Reyes would lay into him for smoking here, he made no move to stub the cigarette out. He needed this small guilty pleasure, and he needed it bad.

He was surprised, however, when it was actually Raven Darkholme who came through the door.

“Well, well, well. Ms. Darkholme.” He took in a drag and let it out again with a disdainful little smirk on his face. “Come t’ tell me t’ pack up an’ leave, huh? Lucky for you doc says I’m all set to go whenever I want. Gimme a half hour and I’ll be outta your hair.”

She didn’t give him the reaction he’d been expecting – or perhaps she had, when he’d thought about it later. She merely crossed her arms and gave him a sceptical look, saying: “Are you done yet?”
He quirked an eyebrow and lifted the cigarette to his lips slowly.

“I dunno. Woulda said no, ’cept you look like you ain’t here for the usual shits an’
giggles.”

“Mr. LeBeau,” she began dryly, dropping her arms and stepping further into the room, “I’m never here for ’shits and giggles’, as you so amusingly put it.”

He threw his phone aside.

“Then what are you here for?”

“Oh, merely to have a friendly chat.”

She walked round the bed with a light step, and he followed her with his eyes, openly
suspicious.

“Friendly? Ha. Don’t make me laugh, Raven. You’ve made it pretty clear since day one
that friendship wasn’t on your mind.” He gave a lop-sided grin. “Usually with the ladies dat works in
my favour. Pretty sure it doesn’t with you though.”

At the words she stopped at the foot of the bed and leaned in towards him. The movement
was one of domination; the pose was of someone who knew that her very presence could cow most
people – but not him. Nevertheless, as uncompromising as her stance appeared to be, her expression
was flat, and dead serious. She knew already that he wasn’t easily intimidated.

“I know you know where she is,” she told him in a low voice. “I know that when you
leave this place, you’re probably going straight to go see her.”

He flicked ash into the ashtray at his feet.

“And what makes you think that?”

Her eyes narrowed. She looked aside, and when she looked back at him she looked like
she was struggling to say something.

“Have you heard from her?” she finally spat it out like it was some dirty word. He was
surprised.

“You mean you haven’t?”

“Don’t fuck with me, LeBeau,” she retorted through gritted teeth, her temper flaring.
“How is she? Don’t make me beat the answer out of you.”

The suggestion would’ve made him laugh, if he hadn’t been so genuinely astonished that
Raven didn’t know a thing.

“I don’t know how she is,” he replied after a moment. Raven looked as if she would
pounce at that, so he lifted his phone and showed her the blank messages. “She sent them last night.”

Raven stared, first at the screen, then up at him.

“What do they mean?” she asked.

He shrugged.
“They mean she’s still alive and okay.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You seem pretty sure about that.”

“C’mon, Raven. Anna ain’t the most emotive person. Plus, she can take care of herself. If she was in real trouble, you’d hear about it. She’d be screamin’ down the phone to you.”

“Or you,” she stated point-blank.

He wasn’t sure whether this was something he was supposed to comment on, so he said nothing. After a long, tense moment, she pushed herself off the bed and walked over to the wall, feigning interest in the plaster.

“Look,” she began again in a business-like tone. “Let’s be honest with one another. Do you know what it is that I do?”

“Sure. You’re an information broker. You make it your business to know things, and you sell what you know on to the highest bidder.”

“Then you should know that I know a lot about you, Mr. LeBeau.”

He gave a short laugh and chose the moment to raise the cigarette to his lips once more.

“Yah. Anna seemed pretty well-informed about my past. Gotta hand it t’ya, Ms. Darkholme. You do good fuckin’ work. Essex swore to me that all stuff was scrubbed.”

She looked back at him over her shoulder.

“I have ways of finding things that can no longer be found. The point is,” she continued, turning back to him fully, “I know you’re still working for Essex. I know that he wants Anna, and I know that he wants the codes to restart the Machine. I know he’s tasked you to get all these things.” She walked back towards him again, her grey eyes steely, unforgiving. “I also know,” she said, halting at the foot of the bed, “that you have a very vested interest in making sure Anna is in one piece. For what, I don’t know exactly. But…” and she searched his face closely, “I’m pretty sure I can make a good guess.”

He stared her out. But she didn’t back down and he gave a small, self-deprecating smile and said: “Can you now?”

“Yes.”

“Hm.” He leaned back a little and regarded her through the cigarette smoke. “And how d’ya figure you know what y’know?”

The corner of her mouth hitched in an almost wry little smile.

“Intuition.”

He did laugh at that. Softly, sarcastically. She watched him, still with that little smile on her face, completely unfazed.

“Do you know what else it’s telling me?” she began again, ignoring him. “It’s also telling me that you don’t want to see her get hurt.”
He stopped laughing. He stared at her. She let the words sink in for two, three, four, five seconds before starting again.

“Mr. LeBeau, I’m going to give you an offer. I want you to consider it very carefully. Whatever Essex is paying you, I will double it, I will triple it. All you have to do is convince Anna to give up this foolish quest of hers. She won’t be able to recover her memories; and if she did, she’d probably break her mind completely in the process. Her neural condition is in a precarious state. You and I both know that all it would probably take is one more ‘facing session for her mind to be completely obliterated. We’ve both seen what the bleed effect can do once it takes over 24/7. Those gibbering zombies shuffling around, past overlaying present overlaying past. She will die a slow, painful death. I’m fairly sure neither of us wants that.”

The ash at the tip of his cigarette fell into the bowl at his feet. He frowned.

“Fuck money,” he murmured. “You can’t give me what Essex can. You can’t give me the thing that really matters, what I really want.”

“And what is it you really want, LeBeau?” she hissed at him, anger rearing unexpectedly in her. “To forget? Don’t be stupid! What will it solve? Nothing! If it was what you really wanted, you would’ve learned to do it yourself! You’re capable, after all! With the gene therapy Essex gave you, perhaps you could surpass even Anna! If it’s what you really want, do it yourself! Leave Anna out of this! Convince her she has a life away from her lost memories, her lost past! Convince her she can walk away and start a new life that has meaning! She found it once, with that stupid boy she met at college! She can have it again!”

She heaved out a furious breath, her eyes blazing. He didn’t have a word to say in the face of her impassioned speech.

“I care about that girl,” she uttered in a voice that was all at once furious and yet tender. “I’ve treated her like my own for all these years, and to see her like this fucking kills me! I just want her to be happy. She was for a while, and then that bastard Essex had to come and ruin it all!” Her tone changed as she said the words, wavered in a way he hadn’t thought possible with her. “And now all she is is this machine, this thing without a heart and a soul. I’d do anything to have the old her back, do you understand? Anything!”

She looked away abruptly, her jaw working tensely. If he hadn’t seen it before then, he saw it now. Raven loved Anna. This was a mother pleading for her daughter. And… it touched him. Genuinely, honestly touched him. He stubbed out the cigarette slowly, asked quietly: “What makes you think she’ll even listen t’ a word I say?”

She fired a heated look at him.

“What makes you think she won’t?”

He stifled a dry laugh.

“She’s stubborn as fuckin’ mule, for one thing.”

“And yet she told you about her past. About all the things she never told me. Me, her closest friend! What does that tell you?!”

She was jealous. He got that at least, loud and clear.

“It tells me we’ve been through the same shit together, and she knows I know where she’s comin’ from.”
Raven looked away again, letting out a sharp, sardonic laugh, like he’d just told her some private, inside joke that wasn’t funny at all.

“Mr. LeBeau,” she spoke again irritably. “I’m asking you nicely. And I never ask nicely. All I want you to do is try. Will you try, at least?”

He pretended to consider it. After a moment he set the ashtray back on the nightstand and shrugged.

“Sure. I’ll try an’ convince her to drop this thing. But I can tell you now she won’t buy it.”

“She might listen to you,” Raven insisted obstinately. “She won’t listen to me.”

“If you say so.”

She wasn’t going to give him any thanks – just as she had given no pleases – and so he was expecting it when she walked straight for the door as if their business had been concluded. But she stopped when she got there, turning and adding:

“LeBeau? Just one more thing. Ask her to call me when she gets a moment. Please?”

So there was a please. He was almost astonished, but he nodded anyway.

There was still no thank you, just a slight movement of the lips that looked like it could’ve been a smile – and then she was gone.

-oOo-

The Westchester Psychiatric Hospital was a flat, modern building nestled protectively at the base of a hill and bordered by pleasantly bland landscaped grounds that gave a picture-perfect scene of serenity and wellbeing.

Anna stood in the driveway and stared at the welcoming façade, the white pillared portico giving way to a glassy entrance flanked by pretty potted minimalist ferns. Her reflection gazed back at her, silent, impassive. It was what she was – all she was. Empty. Unreal. A pale shade of a person. It was what she had been her entire life, and she had somehow, foolishly, thought that the closer she got to the truth the more real she would become. But the more distance she covered the more the person she was began to fade. Why was she still here? Why was she still searching, striving? What if, at the end of this journey, there would be nothing of her left?

A car slithered past her and off to the parking lot to her left, breaking through her lonely reverie. She dug her hands in her pockets and walked the ten or so yards up the walkway and through the automatic doors.

It was a fancy lobby, for what was essentially an asylum. The receptionist was a too-beautiful young woman in a floral dress who definitely wasn’t a nurse. Anna walked up to her, and the woman smiled up at her expectantly with blood red lips.

“I’m here to see Tanya Trask?” Anna asked.

“And would you be one of the family? Or a friend?” the receptionist asked in a soothing, confidential voice.

“Oh… I’m a friend. An old friend actually. From when we were kids.”
She looked aside distractedly. Everything was soft and light and mellow. As calming as a shot from a tranquiliser dart.

“Oh, that is nice of you to come and see her,” the receptionist cooed. “She doesn’t get any visitors. Apart from her father, of course.” She indicated to a tablet on the desk. “Could you sign in, please?”

Anna took the stylus and scribbled her name; the time was logged automatically.

“She’s in Room 7A,” the woman said. “Down the hall, to your right.”

“Thanks,” Anna replied, and left.

It was nice here. Light, airy. Everything that the Weapon X compound was not. So much of her own life had been spent in windowless corridors and artificial light. Whereas Tanya… her madness had bequeathed her a world of scented hallways and sunshine. She tried not to resent it – not too much, anyway.

The corridor was long and straight and carpeted in a soft honey gold. She got to the end and there it was – Room 7A. The door was slightly ajar and she hesitated. Her stomach stirred disconcertingly and she realised that she was nervous. For the first time in years.

It was an unsettling emotion, but it made her feel that thing that she had only recently come to feel again – alive.

She pushed the door open a little wider and walked in quietly.

It was a big room, flooded with sunlight from the open French windows, done up in dusty rose and cream – the very best that money could buy for a broken princess. Tanya was sitting there, in a streamlined pink armchair; and, in a seat drawn up to face her, was a man.

Bolivar Trask.

Anna halted in the doorway.

Her heart almost failed her at that moment; but no sooner had she made the resolution to turn and walk away than he looked up and straight at her – and just like that she was frozen, rooted to the spot. Almost at once there was recognition in his eyes, and suddenly she was exactly what she had never expected to be when faced with one of the people who had ruined her – frightened.

“I-I’m sorry,” she muttered, turning to leave; but she heard his chair scraping back as he got to his feet and—

“Subject Zero,” he said in a voice that was filled with emotion – horror, surprise, fear. Everything that mirrored what she felt. It made her realise – she wasn’t alone. She wasn’t alone.

“Anna,” she corrected him, turning back round in the doorway. “It’s Anna, sir. Please.”

She was stunned at how small and thin her voice seemed. Like a child’s. For a long moment he stared at her as if she wasn’t quite real.

“Anna. Yes, sorry.” He sounded breathless, as confused as he was apologetic. “I’d forgotten.” She didn’t dare move now, locked as she seemed to be under his scrutiny. She could find no words to speak, nothing to say to voice the thoughts in her head, the emotions wrangling through her heart. Somewhere there was anger, bitterness, perhaps even hate… But something had stifled it.
She was stunted, voiceless. Again, she was as a child. One who knew nothing.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised again in a lower voice. “I… They told me you were dead. But it is you, isn’t it. I… I wouldn’t forget those eyes…”

She opened her mouth and found she could speak.

“I don’t remember you, sir,” she said quietly – and it was the truth. All she remembered was what she had seen in the memories of others. Her words bewildered him for a moment, before he shook himself and replied: “Of course. You’d have no memories of that day…”

“Or anything before that,” she returned softly.

The statement unnerved him. He looked aside and quickly gathered himself, pulling up a seat from the nearby desk and indicating towards it.

“Please… Anna. Will you sit?”

Again she hesitated, and he tried a smile, saying once more: “Please?”

She struggled with herself, with the expectation of the furious and righteous indignation that she knew she should feel but did not come. Somehow he looked too small, too contrite. Too broken a thing to be angry at. The hurt she saw in his eyes was a pain she knew all too well.

She took in a slow, shaky breath and stepped forward. Once the first step was taken, the rest weren’t so bad. When she sank down into the seat he’d offered her she clasped her hands together nervously. This was an alien, foreign feeling… but it wasn’t bad. She glanced over at Tanya curiously. She was sitting in her chair, staring out the French windows onto the landscaped gardens with an apathetic stare. There was still something about the child in her features – the big blue eyes, the innocent, forlorn gaze. But her cheeks were hollow, emaciated, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Yet – despite everything, despite the years and the circumstances that had separated them, she felt a strange kinship with this woman who she perhaps should have hated.

“Her condition’s deteriorated the past year or so,” Trask explained in a low voice when he saw Anna’s expression. “Her catatonic episodes have increased. Some days she’s like this – she won’t talk, won’t even look at you.” He paused. “Do you come here to see her often?”

She was startled at his question.

“No… No… I… This is the first time I’ve seen her, actually…” She wanted to explain more, but found she couldn’t. The memories she had stolen from Tanya were the memories of a madwoman, true – but not someone like this. A silent, static waif of a creature. This was not what she had expected. It made her feel somehow ashamed. She looked at her a long time, unable to break her gaze from this shattered thing she saw before her. For the first time she comprehended fully that she had not been the only victim of the Crisis. That perhaps Tanya faced an existence far worse than she herself had experienced.

“What… what happened to her mind that day?” she found herself asking quietly. Trask didn’t reply readily. He leaned back in his seat, placed his hands on his knees, and inhaled deeply. He was a smaller man than the memories she had of him suggested, with the weary, unkempt face of one who was too preoccupied to take care of his appearance. His face was a mass of lines, his cheeks and jowls had dropped, and he didn’t look as if he’d had a shave in a couple of days. His hair was mostly grey and barely combed.

“You were editing her memories,” he finally replied. “You were still in the process of
doing that when… well, when you began to destroy your own memories. What Tanya was left with was an unstructured mess.” He gave her an appraising look. “Much the same as yourself.”

She swallowed and looked back over at Tanya, who still showed no sign of acknowledging Anna’s presence.

“But because she wasn’t one of the one percent… her mind couldn’t cope with it…”

He nodded.

“It’s almost a miracle she’s still alive.”

Anna looked down, into her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“No, no,” he murmured softly. “It wasn’t your fault.” He sighed. “They told me afterwards what they did to you. Ironically, they thought that if they told me the truth about what happened – that it wasn’t the Machine that had malfunctioned, that it was your actions alone that had caused the Crisis – I would restart the Machine. I can tell you now that it had the opposite effect.” He reached out towards his daughter, wiping the spittle trailing from the side of her mouth with a tender touch from his handkerchief. “For what it’s worth… I’m sorry for what they made you do.”

It was a cold form of comfort… but it touched her nevertheless. She watched on silently as he tended to his daughter, feeling a kind of emptiness at the fact that she could not connect to this moment with her own memories – of a father taking care of his little girl.

“I was told you’d died,” he continued. “This would’ve been about five years ago. I was… upset, when they told me the news. For a long time before that I’d considered trying to look for you myself.”

She was shocked.

“Why?” she asked.

“I had this stupid idea… Well, it was nothing. Just that. A stupid idea.” He slipped his handkerchief back into his pocket and held his daughter’s hands, smiling sadly at her. She made no move to return his grip, nor his gaze. “Can I ask you a question?” he asked, not looking at her.

“What made you come here today? Why here, why now?”

It was only then that she realised that she was clasping her hands so tight they were white. She loosened her fingers slightly, said, “Believe it or not, a few days ago I only first found out about what really happened to me during the Crisis. That I destroyed my own memories. Honestly…” and she looked down at her hands once more, “I don’t really know why I came here. I guess I thought… if I saw Tanya again… she might be able to tell me something… give me some clues as to why I did what I did…” She looked over at Tanya, who was still staring absently out the window. “But seeing how she is now… It’s obvious she can’t tell me anything.”

Trask let go of his daughter’s hands and turned to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said with genuine sympathy. “That must’ve been… hard, for you to learn. The truth, I mean. That you erased all your own memories. I wish I could help you. But we were never told anything of your past.” He paused, frowned. “It pains me to say it, but I don’t think any of us really cared.” He lowered his eyes shamefully. “You were just a test subject… that was wrong of us. I regret what we did now. It took me the destruction of my daughter’s mind to realise it. This is
the price I pay for my hubris.”

He smiled faintly, with the weight of all those years of shame and sadness. Perhaps she should have felt he deserved it, but… instead she felt pity.

“I’ve been collecting them,” she admitted softly. “The mem-chips that you recorded the codes on, that will start the Machine again. I’ve ‘faced with them all – apart from Essex’s. It’s how I learned the truth.” His eyes went wide and she hastened to explain: “I thought that if I ‘faced with them I’ll get some clues about my past, but…” she inhaled, exhaled, continued, “it was a stupid thing for me to hope. I didn’t really learn anything.”

He was silent when she finished, digesting her words slowly.

“That stupid idea I told you about,” he told her after a few seconds. “The reason why I wanted to find you again. Well… I had this idea that maybe I could restore my daughter’s mind – by restarting the Machine. I would’ve needed you, of course, to reconstruct Tanya’s memories… you were the only one who could use the Machine…”

“I don’t understand…” she cut in, confused. He grimaced, heaved in a breath, saying as he exhaled:

“Well, I’d thought it possible that her neural data – and yours too – would still be in the Machine’s core dump.” She still looked confused and so he hastened to explain: “That when I pulled the plug on the Machine, its last recorded state would have been saved somewhere on the hard disc, before the program was abnormally terminated.”

Her heart was suddenly beating fast. She searched his face eagerly, expecting to find traces of deception. She found none.

“Is it really possible?” she queried earnestly. “Is there really a chance that my memories are still stored on the Machine?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “To a fashion. It’s unlikely that whatever’s in the core dump would be an exact representation of what you had lost. There’s no telling when or what the system last saved. But the great majority of what you lost may well still be on there.”

She glanced over at Tanya, for the first time in years feeling real, unadulterated hope. Its taste was unfamiliar but sweet, the power of it so overwhelming it was almost unbearable.

“You should’ve looked for me,” she half-whispered. “Why didn’t you? You could’ve helped Tanya…”

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “After much thought… after they told me you were dead, I came to the long overdue conclusion I should have long before. That Tanya’s mind couldn’t be restored.” He gave her a flat, morose smile. “My daughter is dying, Anna. Her mind is so badly deteriorated that there is nothing but scraps that have no hope of ever being stitched together. Even if her memories could be recovered, her mind as it stands now is far too fragile to even host those memories anymore. It would end her. You, on the other hand…” His smile grew, but only a little. “You are like no one I’ve ever met before. Able to withstand so many foreign memories at once without even any serious effect on your own. Perfect recall of those memories months, years, after the fact. I’d never met anyone whose mind was as resilient as yours.”

There was almost an admiring tone to his voice, and she laughed wryly, softly.

“You may want to reassess your judgement, sir. The past couple of years my mind’s been
on the verge of breaking down. I’ve been in my fair share of neural stutters.” She sighed. “I wish I
could help her.”

“Well,” he replied thoughtfully, “there is something you could do to help her.”

“Anything.”

“You could visit her. Every now and then. No one else does but me. True, I’ve bought
her the best surroundings that money can buy, but… good company – that I can’t buy her.”

“Sir,” she began sincerely, “if I’m still alive in the next few days… It’ll be my pleasure.”

He inclined his head with a grateful though still sad smile. There wasn’t much more to be
said. She stood.

“I should be going,” she murmured. “Thank you.”

“No,” he rejoined gravely. “Please. Don’t thank me. None of us deserve thanks for what
we did to you, or the others. It won’t ease your mind to know that we thought we would change
things for the better – relieve humanity of its pain and its suffering by removing all the sad memories
of this world. It was only afterwards – much afterwards – that I realised what I should’ve known all
along.”

“And what was that?” she asked him.

Trask gave a faint smile with that weary, lined face of his, and answered:

“How can we ever know what happiness is, Anna, unless we experience suffering?”

-oOo-
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Remy meets up with Anna and they spend the night together.

Remy left Raven’s compound with nothing more than a single bag of belongings and a single lacklustre farewell from Dr. Reyes. He neither saw nor said anything more to Raven. By the time he got to his apartment it was raining, and the bleak winter sun had just about set.

He rode the elevator to the top floor, and once he got to his apartment he hit the buzzer. He could just as easily have gone in without extending her the courtesy, but he respected her enough to announce himself before barging in first.

It was a few moments before he heard her on the other side of the door; he gave a wave to the hidden camera he’d installed in the frame, and a second later he heard her say:

“Gimme a minute.”

He stood there for about twenty seconds before he finally heard the bolts rolling back and the door swung open.

For some reason he’d expected her to look different, but she didn’t. She still wore that unyielding, obdurate look she so often wore, her hair loose and untamed around her shoulders, her eyes as uncompromising and defiant as the night he’d first met her. If anything, she looked like she was hardly happy to see him at all.

“You sure took your sweet time,” he commented wryly.

“I had to deactivate the traps,” she informed him coolly, and promptly stood aside for him to enter.

He stepped inside, intrigued though not surprised by this development; and she closed the door behind him with a sharp report. He walked into the lounge area, throwing down his duffel bag as he heard her reactivating the traps in the hallway. The apartment itself looked about as spotless and unlived in as the way he had left it, from what he could see so far. Apart from her shoes left neatly in the vestibule, and the coat slung haphazardly over the back of the sofa, he could see very little evidence of her even having spent the last few days here.

“So,” he called back to her conversationally, “how’s the apartment?”

“Pretty good,” she called back. Her tone was neutral, her reply short enough to tell him she wasn’t really in the mood for conversation. There was a standoffishness to her that stung, loath as he was to admit it. Ever since the night they’d come back from Muir all the ground they’d covered had been lost. Here they were, back to square one, their relationship once again one of suspicion and mistrust. He didn’t like it. It wasn’t what he wanted. There had been a brief point in time – a few, short days – when he actually enjoyed being in her company. When there had been the tantalising promise of something more… he wasn’t actually sure what – but he knew he missed it. That was what he wanted back.
He peered into his bedroom and saw that that was where she appeared to have set up her base of operations. Her sleep clothes were neatly folded on the end of his bed; her laptop was sitting, open, on his desk. He was interested to note that his interfacer was nowhere to be seen.

“I put it in the closet,” she said behind him – he turned and saw her standing in the entrance to the lounge. She didn’t qualify the statement, but she didn’t need to. He knew what she was implying – that she’d put it there so that its presence wouldn’t tempt her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she answered.

“If you wanna talk—”

“No,” she cut him off. “Not right now.” She nodded towards the kitchen as if he hadn’t said a thing. “You want anything? I filled up the fridge. Bought an extra bottle of whiskey too. The one in the cabinet was almost out.”

He was a little puzzled, and a little hurt, at the coldness of her demeanour; even though, rationally, he understood that her aloofness was nothing more than a defence mechanism, a way for her to cope with a deep emotional hurt.

“I ate before I came,” he replied quietly. There was a tense silence. She broke it first.

“Suit yourself,” she shrugged.

He watched on as she walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water with her back to him. After all her plaintive, wordless texts, he felt confused.

“Talk to me, Anna,” he said.

Her shoulders slumped.

“Not now, Remy.”

“You need to. I want to help.”

“If you want to help,” she answered after a moment, “then nothing’s changed. Our arrangement still stands. There’s nothing to talk about.”

He was still on track to becoming even more rapidly confused.

“Our arrangement?”

“Yeah. You know the one. Where you steal all those mem-chips for me ‘for free’, except not for free. There’s still one left. Essex’s. In case you’d forgotten.”

There was an undercurrent to her voice that was like a thundercloud looming overhead, but considering his present bewilderment – and the promise-not-promise he’d made to Raven – he decided to ignore it.

“Oh right. That. Are you sure that’s still what you want, chere?”

She came out from the kitchen, glass in hand, glaring at him.

“Are you sure that isn’t still what you want, Remy?” she turned the question right round on
him, and he must’ve looked stunned because she added sarcastically: “Because this isn’t about me, is it. It’s about you. It’s about what you want.”

His expression dropped. He got it now. This was just a continuation of the argument they’d been having back in Dr. Reyes’ infirmary.

*Well, shit.*

“Oh. And what exactly do I want?”

She was angry. He could tell by the way she bristled at his change in tone, the way her eyes were flashing dangerously. She turned abruptly and walked over to the sofa, saying: “All right. Let’s talk about this. Let’s talk about the way you were gonna use me.” She dropped down into the sofa in a movement he could only call graceful, despite the obviously mounting pressure of her anger. “Let’s talk about that payment you’ve been oh-so-coy about. Hm?”

He stood and stared at her, silent. It was probably the worst response he could’ve given her.

“Oh, so now you don’t wanna talk?” she ploughed onward in an indignant rush. “Come on, Remy. Let’s just be up-front about prices, shall we? I’m willing to pay. What exactly is it you want me to destroy when we get that Machine up and running again, hm? Your wife’s death? The way you cheated on her? Those blazing rows you had where you said those unforgivable things you could never take back? The way you accidentally killed her brother, and the fact a part of you wanted it? The loss of your baby? Belle’s resentment? The fact that you loved each other at all?”

She reeled off the words like an angry, runaway train, every memory an old wound she had torn open and left bleeding. That fact alone should have enraged him. But it didn’t. What he felt instead was deflated. Sad.

“You’re right,” he admitted quietly, seriously. “I wanted you to destroy all those memories for me.” He paused a beat, then added: “But that ain’t what I want, Anna. Not anymore.”

Her mouth dropped, her eyes went wide. She put the glass of water on the coffee table with a sharp *clink*.

“But—”

“No buts. I thought about it. Long and hard. And I don’t want your payment anymore. Deal’s off. I’m sorry, chere.”

He turned to go grab his bag and in a trice she was up off the seat and following him.

“No, no, no, no,” she uttered, not even attempting to hide her desperation. “No, you can’t leave now! I need you!”

He swung round to face her, surprised at how close she’d actually been behind him.

“No, Anna. You don’t. You don’t need my help. You can get Essex’s fuckin’ chip yourself. I am done with this, chere. I’m done.”

He made to turn away, but was actually surprised when she grasped his sleeve, stopping him.

“No, wait! You have leverage with Essex… You’re still working for him… All you have
to do is get his chip and then I won’t ever bother you again… It’s just a small thing… Please…”

She was actually begging him now. A part of that realisation felt so sweet, but most of the feeling was nine parts cold.

“No, Anna. I’m done with Essex too. I got m’self a ticket to London and it leaves in three days’ time.” Her expression was so distressed, so wounded by the news, that it allowed him, for a wild, foolish moment, to hope. “I got another ticket too, Anna,” he added in a softer tone, “so you can come wit’ me.”

She let out an explosive breath as if he’d sucker punched her in the gut. The next moment she’d turned away completely, unable to look him in the eye, her hand clutching at her mouth.

“Why?” she spoke in a muffled voice. “Why are you doing this to me? I can’t. I can’t.”

He was truly nonplussed.

“Why?”

“Because I have a chance. I have a chance, Remy.” She turned back to him, breathing hard, like she’d never breathed before. “I spoke to Trask… He told me my memories were probably in a backup state on the Machine… It just needs to be restarted again… I just need to hook myself up to it again… restore the backup… reintegrate my memories…”

As he heard the words, as he saw the wild, heartfelt look on her face, the hope he’d allowed to foster for those few short seconds were quietly dashed. He was surprised at his own disappointment.

“There’s no guarantee there’d be anythin’ on that Machine,” he told her slowly, uselessly.

“I know that, but I have to try,” she answered. “Remy, I have nothing left. Nothing left but this. This is the only chance I have left. I have to take it.”

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “You don’t have to. Listen to yourself, chere. Do you know how you sound? All those years you’ve spent runnin’ round in circles lookin’ for somethin’ that possibly, maybe, might never even exist? Unable to move on, unable to live b’cause every time you tried to the past held you back?”

She gazed up at him as if in a daze, shaking her head almost imperceptibly.

“You don’t get it…” she murmured – but here he knew she was wrong.

“No. I do. Everything you’ve ever had dat made you happy was taken away, and all you have left are those fuckin’ chips, this… dream, that your past can make things better again. And look, I’m sorry about what happened wit’ Cody, but I’m guessin’ you didn’t think much about your lost past when you were with him. Because for once you were happy, and you had a whole future ahead of you. And you know what? Newsflash. You still have a whole future ahead of you. All you have to do is want it, and walk away from all this shit that’s holding you back now. The past isn’t important anymore. It only became important the moment your obsession with it stopped you from livin’. These,” and he lifted her left palm in his own, exposed the scars on her wrists, laying them wide open for all the world to see, “these are what you’ve made yourself, Anna. A walking wound, something you refuse to let heal. It’s time to let go of it, chere. It’s time to just be.”

He paused, realising that he was hardly breathing. He thought she’d take her hand back, but she didn’t. Instead she just stared at him and said:
“So what are you saying? That I should just go with you to London and forget about it all?”

He let out a breath, trying not to sound frustrated. Yes. It was so damn simple.

“I’m sayin’ you should do whatever the fuck you want, chere,” he answered. “Anythin’ that’ll take you in any direction that isn’t backwards.”

Something seemed to go out of her eyes. She looked suddenly very tired, and he thought, vainly, that perhaps he had won. She took back her hand and he let her.

“I can’t,” she spoke softly.

“You can.”

She shook her head gently, yet with all the stubbornness he’d come to expect from her.

“I can’t. Not now. I’ve come so far. I need to know the truth, if it’s there.”

“Really? You need to know memories that were so painful that you, yourself, willingly destroyed them?” He gave a disbelieving laugh. “You need to know that pain again, that trauma? Because that’s what Emma Frost called those mem’ries, Anna. Trauma. A trauma she made you relive again and again and again. Is that really what you need in your life again, chere?”

She drew her arms about her elbows, gave him a sidelong glance.

“I had a mom and a dad, once,” she murmured plaintively. “Is it too much to want to remember what they looked like?”

He couldn’t argue with that one, and he didn’t want to. He turned to pick up his bag.

“Don’t leave,” she said.

“I’m not.” He slung the bag over his shoulder and headed for the extra bedroom down the hall.

“Remy,” she spoke.

“Anna, don’t. I understand why you want what you want. I’m not angry with you. I just need some time out, okay?”

“I still need you,” she insisted quietly, halfway following him down the hall.

“No. You don’t.”

“Yes. I do. I can’t do this without you, Remy. I’m scared.”

He stopped and swivelled on the spot, ready with a sarcastic comeback to what he thought was obviously a lie; but when he saw her face, he knew that it was anything but.

“You’re never scared,” he said.

His heart twisted. He wanted to help her. But he was still angry. Still angry that it was so
simple for her to walk away, that his offer hadn’t been enough. It smarted. It smarted in a way he
hadn’t been expecting, that he hadn’t been prepared for. His emotions were a mess and he couldn’t
deal with them anymore. He was done.

“There’s nothin’ I want from you, Anna,” he answered wearily, running his hand through
his hair and heaving out a frustrated sigh. “Nothin’ I’d take as payment anyways,” he added as an
honest afterthought.

And he turned and went into the room, shutting the door as neutrally as he could behind
him.

-oOo-

Hours passed.

Anna showered, dried her hair, got ready for bed – the mechanical routine that had always
been her refuge from the tumult of her life, the only moments she truly felt herself, that belonged to
her.

Dull, boring, pedestrian, distracting.

They couldn’t distract her now.

She got into bed and pulled the covers over her.

And there it was again. The scent of him. The thing that she’d been wrapping herself in
every time for the past few nights. That she woke up to in the morning. That had somehow kept her
feeling connected to something warm and tangible and human in all the lonely hours she’d spent
here.

She lay on her back and stared at the ceiling.

She knew his scent. She knew it intimately, and lying here like this was a powerful
reminder of that fact, of the shape of his body and the taste of his sweat. The texture of his hands on
her skin and his mouth on her flesh.

She closed her eyes and breathed.

Every time she’d lain here she’d thought herself back to that night with him. She’d
tormented herself with the memory, until she was breathless and slick and shaking. His betrayal had
hurt precisely because he was right there, under her skin, his memory a ghost haunting every inch of
her body, coaxing pleasures from her she’d never thought possible.

There’s nothin’ I want from you, Anna. Nothin’ I’d take as payment anyways.

She did have a thing he wanted.

It was her.

She didn’t trust him, not fully, and she didn’t believe, even now, that he was telling her the
whole truth, or that he even really understood what it was she wanted. Of course he would never
understand. He had wanted to erase his own memories, after all. It was a compulsion she couldn’t
comprehend, just as he couldn’t comprehend her desire to recapture her own. But that was a
separate issue. This was something else.
It was all the emotions that were left when all the betrayal and the guilt and recrimination were gone. It was everything that left her breathless.

He wanted her.

Just like she wanted him.

She threw aside the covers and slipped out of bed, crossing over to the door quietly, her heart beating painfully fast. She stood outside the bedroom and hesitated, without even knowing why. If she turned back now she knew instinctively she would regret it.

A cold draft caught her from the left, the faint aroma of tobacco on the breeze. She glanced down the corridor. There was a door there, slightly ajar, opening onto a small balcony that led to the fire stairs. She didn’t second guess herself. She walked on over and pushed it open – and he was there, leaning against the wall in sweatpants and a tee, smoking.

It was raining, hard. He glanced over at her as she came up to stand next to him without saying a word. The look was neutral enough, though charged with a frisson she found impossible to ignore and that almost floored her with its blatancy. This thing between them, this unspoken charge, was something she’d never really encountered before, and now that she was here she wasn’t sure what to say or how to approach this. She searched in vain through all the stolen memories she possessed, but there was nothing, no template for this, her own reality. No guide for the things she felt inside her when she stood next to him.

“You should put some proper clothes on, chere,” he noted dryly at her vest and shorts. “It’s cold out here.”

His words broke the awkwardness, the numbing silence. She shrugged.

“I don’t feel the cold.”

He gave a disinterested grunt in reply. Judging by his response she wasn’t sure whether her presence was unwelcome or not, but she felt the need to continue the small talk anyway.

“You know,” she began as casually as she could, “you’re always pretty darn considerate about not smoking while I’m around. Even if this is your apartment, and you can do whatever the hell you want.”

“I’m always considerate around ladies I like,” he answered simply, flatly, like she was nothing special. And why should she even think that she was?

He pulled on his cigarette and for a while they stood side by side and stared at the rain. It was at this point that she began to feel a horrible impulsion pushing at her mouth, and she curled her toes into the concrete, took in a breath and said:

“Look. I’m sorry for the way I came at you earlier. I was a bitch. I apologise.”

He was silent a moment, tapping ash onto the ground beside him.

“Apology accepted. Although for what it’s worth, you were right. That was exactly the price I wanted from you. All those mem’ries… All the shitty things I did, or that I couldn’t prevent… I wanted you to edit them, erase them… do whatever it is that you do. All so’s I didn’t haveta face ‘em anymore.” He looked at the ground and gave a wry laugh. “Your past, for mine. I made some crazy deals in my time, but this…” He shook his head slightly and grimaced. “Funny how things work out, ain’t it?”
She made no comment on that.

“What made you change your mind?” she asked him instead.

“You did, chere.”

“Me?”

She was incredulous.

“Oui.” He took a puff, exhaled it, continued: “After ‘facin’ with Dr. Frost’s mem-chip and figurin’ out what really happened to you that day… After seein’ everything you’ve been through since then… All that pain and sufferin’ and wishin’ and hopin’ that you’ve been through without those mem’ries… Everythin’ you’ve done, the depths you’ve gone to to cope with the loss and to get those mem’ries back…” He trailed off, flicking ash aside again. “I got to wonderin’ whether I wouldn’t actually end up the same as you. Whether all I’d end up doin’ was wantin’ t’ remember all the things I’d asked you to scrub away.”

She looked at him, but he didn’t look back. He lifted the cigarette to his mouth and simply continued.

“And then I got to thinkin’… well, what would life be like if I couldn’t remember what Belle looked like? If I couldn’t remember what it was like t’ be in love with her, to make love to her, to learn you’re goin’ t’ be a father. ‘Cos if I was gonna get rid of all’a the shit in my life, I was gonna haveta get rid of all’a the good stuff too, right? And some of it was really good stuff. And I don’t wanna forget all’a that.” He sighed, shifting his balance and scratching his right arm absently. “And then I got t’ wonderin’ whether I really wanted to forget Belladonna at all. Because I couldn’t have the good without the bad, and I couldn’t have the bad without the good, and then it all became this house of cards that you couldn’t keep standin’ if you took the shitty cards away, and I didn’t want the whole thing to collapse anymore. ‘Cos if it did, I didn’t want to run the risk of wantin’ to just go right on ahead and rebuild it again. Like you’re tryin’ t’do right now.”

He stopped. For a long time there was only the sound of the rain, and she looked down at her bare feet, feeling hollow. Empty.

“I loved my wife,” he concluded at last. “That was a good feelin’. I don’t wanna let it go. Not really. Even if you’d altered my mem’ries and made them into only happy ones… I wouldn’t want that now. Happiness is meaningless when it’s the only thing you feel.”

She said nothing. Trask’s parting words to her were echoing in her head.

“You were right, you know,” he began again in a more thoughtful tone. “Our pasts mould us – they’re the scars that stay with us, that make us who we are. But your past, Anna, the fact that you lost it… That’s your pain, that’s your scar. That’s what makes you who you are. I’m not sayin’ you have to accept it. I’m just tellin’ you what you already know.”

She took in a shuddering, shaking breath. Her heart was racing. The whole world seemed to stir inside her belly.

Beside her he took a final pull on his cigarette and ground it out on the wall. He shifted round to face her and told her in a low, charged voice:

“You’re a beautiful woman, Anna. In all sorts of ways. You could have any sorta life you wanted, with any sorta man you chose. But I can’t blame you for wantin’ what you do. If you’d taken all my mem’ries away from me, I couldn’t honestly say I wouldn’t want exactly the same thing
as you. You are who you are and I can’t change your mind. But if you do change your mind… my offer still stands. I will take you away from here and you can start again wherever you want with whoever you want, be whoever you want to be. I’ll do that for you, if that’s what you want.”

He pushed himself away from the wall and just as he’d got to the door, she reached out and grasped his hand.

“Remy,” she said; and he stopped.

He looked back at her.

“Don’t go back to that room,” she whispered. “Stay with me tonight. Forget about everything else. I just want to be with you. None of the other stuff matters.”

She couldn’t look at him, only at his hand. Slowly he turned his palm over so that her hand was in his. He held it tight, and, without another word, he pulled her back into the apartment behind him.

-oOo-

There were so many people whose lives she’d stolen, deeply personal moments of intimacy that haunted her, day in, day out.

The last time she’d made love to someone she’d had genuine feelings for was with Cody, and somehow he’d always managed to dispel the memories that ghosted her, the ones that weren’t even her own.

She hadn’t been a virgin when she’d met him, but she’d felt like one. “I’m not very good at this,” she’d told him, and he’d smiled and squeezed her hand and said, “Neither am I,” like it didn’t matter; and it hadn’t, not really, not with him. His lovemaking had been sweet and gentle and attentive, and had made her feel, for the first time, like a real human being, someone worthy of all the things that made a person a person. That was the most important thing he’d given her, that she had ever learned – that she was a human, a woman who was capable of love and being loved.

She was Anna Raven, not some nameless thing.

And then he’d died; and somehow it had been safer to become someone else, anyone else. Sex had become something that other people did and that she mimicked. A choreography of bodies that satisfied the constant press of her baser urges, but which was as impersonal to her as all the memories she had thieved, and which had always ended up feeling like someone else’s life after the fact.

Sure, there were people whose company she’d enjoyed more than others, but she’d never wanted anything more from them once she’d given up one identity and moved onto the next. There were no regrets involved. Everything she did was nothing more than an act after all.

This wasn’t an act.

Despite all the lies, all the subterfuge, there was one thing she’d always been with Remy LeBeau, and that was herself. She had never been someone else with him, and he’d never been someone else with her. He’d stripped away the shield of Tanya Trask’s identity as if it wasn’t even there, and even when she’d held up the flimsy mask that had been ‘Marie’… even that had been a paltry defence against his subtle encroachment into her life.

At first she had hated him for it. And now… now it offered a chance at closeness that she
had shunned so assiduously and for so long, and that she now realised it was impossible for her to do without.

He didn’t glance back.

Only when the bedroom door snapped shut behind them did he pull her up against him and kiss her with such hungry violence that she would have found it intimidating, had it not been exactly what she wanted herself. His hands danced across her body, under her clothes, seeking out skin. There was an impatience in him she hadn’t seen before, something animal that intimated to her just how long and hard he’d wanted this. It was contagious, a feverish igniter of her own deeply buried passions – she no longer cared to analyse the equation that had brought them together like this. What she desired now was obscenely simple, brash and impartial – all the messy details in between be damned.

She was greedy for it in a way that was unashamedly physical – for him to be inside her, deep inside her. She slid her leg up his thigh and higher, trying to find it, trying to pinpoint this connection she so badly needed.

He knew what she wanted without having to second guess. His response was seamless, instinctive, hooking her leg with one hand, cupping her backside with the other, scooping her up with the plane of his pelvis and hoisting her into his arms, breaking their needful kisses only when she was perched up on his hips with her legs hugging his waist.

She finally had what she wanted, or a promise of it at least – he was naked beneath the sweatpants, and she could feel him, hot and hard already, pressing right up against her. It was gloriously intimate – and yet nowhere near to being close enough. A little whimper of mingled lust and frustration sounded in her throat – a sound she’d never heard herself make before. He heard it, read it. His tongue wet his lips and for a few seconds they simply locked gazes. He was a thing like no other she’d witnessed, beautiful and dangerous, heady and intoxicating, a reminder of the fact that she was playing with fire in more ways than one. He’d betrayed her… lied to her more than once… and she never slept with dangerous men, but… He was an exception to the rule. He always had been, from the second she’d laid eyes on him. Only then, at that very moment, did she realise it.

No sooner had the thought passed her mind than he was moving, balancing her body with ease as he took the few short steps back towards the door. Her back hit the wall and she let out an involuntary gasp; he readjusted his stance, letting the wall hold her while he slid his palms under her backside, helping her settle in more comfortably against his hips. When he’d finally found his balance he braced his right forearm against the wall and sank the fullness of his weight into her.

For a painfully lingering moment there was nothing but the laboured sound of their breathing as their bodies were finally as close as they could be with both their clothes on.

He inhaled, soft and wavering – a measure, she guessed, to regain control of himself. His gaze flicked to hers; he placed his palms against the wall and began to move his pelvis against hers, grinding into her deep and slow. The rhythm was maddeningly primeval, one she couldn’t help but respond to, that she knew the drumbeat to simply on instinct. She gyrated back against him, her hands sliding round his back and under the waistband of his pants, her fingernails digging into his backside, pulling him closer, closer than he could go. The press of his erection was so damn visceral that it left nothing to the imagination except the tantalising memory of what it was like to have inside her.

The unabashed thought would’ve made her blush in another life. Instead she was panting,
her breaths coming hard and clipped and literally quivering with unfulfilled passion. As for Remy, he was off in some little place of his own, his eyes glazed and faraway, fixed though they were on her mouth like a predator just waiting for the right moment to pounce and devour her whole. His lower lip was jutting out slightly, an invitation if ever there was one. She lowered her head and nipped it gently, sucked it teasingly into her mouth; and then they were kissing and moaning and rocking against one another until it had become nothing short of a delirious form of torture.

She was the one to give in first, grasping a fistful of his hair and jerking his head backwards, a little more violently than she had intended – she faced him down like she was squaring up for a fight, exclaiming with undisguised lust: “God, I want you like nothing else… Just fuck me, Remy… I don’t care how… Just do it…”

He said nothing, but his eyes blazed; he whisked away from the wall, taking her with him, carrying her over to the bed in a few short, impatient strides as if she weighed nothing. The movement was sudden enough to take her breath away, the way he rubbed up against her with every step a reminder of how tantalisingly close they both were to the mind-numbing spiral of shared ecstasy. Its promise alone was enough to drive him into some sort of controlled frenzy, a furious single-mindedness that she’d only seen him show out on the field. He practically threw her onto the bed – she caught an exhalation as her back slapped the mattress – pausing only to strip the shirt from his body and the sweatpants from his legs, stepping out of them and kicking them aside without once taking his eyes off of her. He exuded such unconsciously irreverent masculine power that any other woman would probably have been cowed into submission; but what it inspired in her was both admiration and lust. Not for the first time she found herself wondering why such a beautiful, clever, glorious man would want a broken thing like her.

The force of his gaze held her for a breathless moment, gorgeous dark eyes holding hers from under long, long eyelashes she’d barely noticed before. He pressed his knee into the edge of the bed and leaned in slightly, slipping his forefingers into the waistband of her shorts, of her underwear. Slowly, deliberately, he teased them down her thighs; she lifted her legs to accommodate him, and when they were off she brought both feet down either side of him, legs spread, knees resting against his hips, a vulnerable position that left her wide open to him. She didn’t care. Her body was already pulsing with unrepentant need.

“Touch me,” she whispered.

He leaned forward; he obeyed.

His fingers were like silk on her senses, soft and sensuous and insinuating, making her gasp, making her body buckle with pleasure. For a little while she was nothing but a blank slate of pure sensation, a melting husk of humanity that he could take and mould into anything he damn well wanted and—

The point of climax was almost upon her before she realised it, a delicious horizon of no return that made her gasp out, “Stop.”

He stopped – and for some reason it was only at that juncture that she realised how passive he had been, letting her take the lead, letting her guide this. The epiphany forced her to consider what his real desires might be. The thought of handing him control was a titillating one – and a part of her wanted to experience the brutality of his lust, to give herself over to him without any pretence at tenderness. When he reached out and traced his thumb slowly over her bottom lip she met his gaze with smouldering passion, intending to communicate to him that she knew exactly what he was thinking. Something flickered in his eyes that made her think he understood her – he pushed his thumb gently between her lips and she let him, licking it, sucking it, tasting herself on his flesh.
Something like a smile, or a shadow of one, touched his face, there one moment, gone the next. It was a flash of triumph, of self-congratulation, that gave him away. Irked, she gave him what he thought she wanted, sliding her calves seductively up his thighs and over his hips, locking her ankles around his back and drawing him in inch by painful inch. He let himself be guided by her, taking back his hand and bracing his arms either side of her, lowering his body slowly. She didn’t stop till he was flush with her, his erection pressing against her pelvic bone, stubbornly demanding her attention.

Anna set her teeth into her lower lip and readjusted herself slightly, clasping her legs round his waist in a grip that was almost vice-like, shimmying up against him wantonly. It was a feint, a ruse to distract him from her real intentions. Before he had the chance to foil her, she used all her weight to flip them both over and onto his back, a move so unexpected it actually took the wind out of him.

This time the triumph was all hers, and she made no attempt to hide it. With an elegant flourish worthy of any accomplished striptease, she’d whipped the vest right off of her and tossed it unceremoniously back over her shoulder. If her surprise stunt had piqued him, it didn’t show. His expression was one of smouldering fascination as she leaned in over him, letting her hair spill out over her shoulders and all around him.

“Say something,” she commanded him, and he didn’t pause, didn’t blink, saying without having to even think about it, “You’re so damn beautiful.”

His palms climbed her back and into her hair, twisting it into his fist and over her left shoulder, pulling her down still closer to him.

“Mmmm, I want you inside me,” she purred helplessly as he put his face into her neck and ran his tongue up her jugular.

“Chere,” her murmured, putting his mouth into the dip below her ear and kissing her voluptuously, making her gasp with pleasure, “I wanted inside you the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“So long…?” she couldn’t help but wonder out loud.

“What? Didn’t I make it obvious enough for ya?”

“I had other things on my mind back then…”

“You don’t now,” he whispered in her ear. “You gon’ carry on keepin’ me waitin’, chere?”

She’d known he’d wanted her for a long time, but hearing him say it was an admission of need that was more than gratifying to hear. In answer she reached behind her and found him, rubbed him intimately against her, against the place they both needed him to be. He ignored the torture, taking her face between his hands and kissing her greedily. Neither could resist a moment longer. His body moved with the precision of instinct, sliding inside her slow and deep, as far as he could go.

And there it was, the sublime alchemy of pleasure, the thing that for so long had belonged to others and not to her, a thing for her to steal and try on only for a day. Suddenly it was theirs, the property of two lonely exiles in a lonely land who’d found an unexpected source of solace in the only thing they had left – one another.

She let him in, she grasped him tight, she gasped his name.
Remy.

Her partner, her enemy, her foil.

Her lover.

-oOo-

There would be times, later, when she would wish that she had recorded her memories of this night.

It wasn’t merely for the thrill, but for the fact that it was the first time in an age that she had felt like herself and not a shade of somebody else.

There were countless memories she’d interfaced with that she remembered later with perfect clarity, the minutiae of other peoples’ lives, the endless hubbub of their thoughts, the tumult of their desires. And yet her own memory of this night was only something she would recall in its sounds, its tastes, its textures. The sweep of his gaze and the smell of his sweat. The cool of the smooth wooden floorboards against her feet, the movement of their mouths as they’d kissed.

The way his hands had felt as they’d glided over her body, the flavour of him on her tongue.

She would remember the press of her knees into the mattress as she’d straddled him; the shape of him inside her; the creaking of the bed and the pattern of his hands on her hips, the rhythm of their moans as they had ground and thrust greedily against one another.

The angry starburst of her climax, and the warm liquid pulse of his.

Afterwards, they lay together on their backs, side by side, her head propped against his shoulder and his arm cushioning her neck, his fingers combing idly through her hair. There was no other sound except that of the rain pounding against the window.

Anna stared up at the ceiling and remembered.

What’s the thing, Cody had asked her, that scares you the most?

They’d been together for a year at that point, and they’d taken a trip down to Mississippi under some misguided assumption that being ‘home’ would bring her memories back. Most nights they’d spent in dingy motel rooms and two-star hotels – even in their car – but one night, that night, they’d spent out under the stars, under open skies.

I’m not scared of anything, she’d answered honestly, because Weapon X had taught her never to fear anything, not even death.

He’d laughed, thinking her words were a joke; to him, everything was simple, and everything was sacred. It was the thing she’d liked about him most.

Why, she’d asked him back, piqued. What’re you most afraid of? Dying?

The smile had fallen from his face and he’d considered her question a moment.

No, not dying, he’d finally replied. Just dying before my time. Before I’ve had a chance to see the world.

They’d made love; and only afterwards, cradled in his arms, did she realise that there was
something she was afraid of – that he’d taught her to love, and he’d taught her to care, and that it only seemed fitting that he’d taught her to fear too.

There is something I’m afraid of, she’d told him. I’m afraid I’ll lose you. I’m afraid I’ll lose this.

And then she had.

Everyone loses someone they love, Raven had told her afterwards, with all the coldness that came with brutal experience. And so Anna Raven had been laid to rest and buried along with Weapon Zero, and the Rogue had been born. The Rogue, who lived other peoples’ emotions, who fed on them like a vampire because she couldn’t bear to feel her own.

So why was she suddenly hurting so damn much?

“You’ll stay ‘til morning,” she asked Remy, tilting her head to look up at him. “Won’t you?”

He stirred slightly, putting his face in her hair and breathing her scent.

“I’ll do whatever you want, chere,” he murmured in reply, his fingers stroking her temple in tiny figures of eight. “I’m all yours for tonight.”

The words were sweet and sexy and somehow bittersweet. Tonight didn’t seem long enough. It wasn’t long enough to stave off all the silly, unimportant things that existed outside this room. For so long now she’d plotted this lonely course, year after year of exile, of crippling self-denial. And now she was close, so painfully close, to finding all the missing pieces that made up her. There was so much she’d sacrificed for it. So much she’d lost. This would just be another thing.

In a day or two he would be gone, and once again she’d be what she’d always been – alone.

-oOo-
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Remy rethinks his deal with Anna, and they both come to an understanding.

It was almost five in the morning – darkness still consumed the rain-swept, lamp-lit streets.

Remy opened the window quietly and leant on the sill to smoke.

In a few days he’d be in England and this world would be far behind him. It would be the second exile in a year, and this time all he had to run away from was a shitty job and a woman who said she needed him but didn’t.

There was no real reason to go, and no real reason to stay, and the only reason he was going at all was because he wanted to be free, and because he wanted to emotionally blackmail her into coming with him.

He glanced over at her.

They hadn’t slept much the past few hours, resting only between lazy bouts of lovemaking – but she was sleeping now, or he thought she was – lying with her back to him and her hair caressing the pillow.

He had a ticket to get her right out of this shitty mess she called a life, and he resented the fact that she was choosing that life over him. He resented even more that she was headed back in Essex’s direction despite everything he’d done to pull her the opposite way.

She stirred slightly, tugging the comforter higher over her body.

“Shut the window, darlin’,” she drawled in a wonderfully somnolent Southern accent. “It’s gettin’ cold.”

He gave a lop-sided smile and took a final deep drag of his cigarette before putting it out, closing the windows and snapping the blinds shut. When he joined her on the bed again he spooned up against her, putting his arms round her waist and his face in her hair.

“Thought you were fast asleep, chere,” he murmured, pressing his lips behind her ear.

“I was,” she mumbled back. “Till you let all that cold air in.”

He chuckled and kissed his way lightly down her neck.

“’M sorry.”

“Hm.” Her voice was soft and sleepy and barely coherent. “You’re forgiven.”

Half a minute later, and she was back asleep.

He held her close, trying to cancel out the tireless churn of his mind. The spell of his detested past was broken, the bleak, self-loathing drive to destroy it dispelled, only to be replaced by
a slavery of a different kind – the desire to possess her. The irony of his predicament wasn’t lost on him. He had started out wanting her only to wipe out his past; and now that that urge was gone, it should have been the easiest thing for him to now walk away… But he still wanted her. Just for herself.

He didn’t think he could walk away from her now. Going to England was a thing he wanted – a clean break, a way to leave behind Essex, Belle, all his old life, and begin again. Despite everything he knew about her, he’d still bought that second ticket, thinking, or rather hoping, that it would’ve been enough to tempt her away from her past.

He knew it wasn’t. She had a right to her past – it was wrong of him to try to guilt trip her into making a decision between him and it.

Still… he wished he could help her. Wished he could give her all the things he knew could make her happy. To leave behind her lonely life… To give up on this self-destructive quest to restore what couldn’t be repaired… To stop letting Essex continue to hurt her years after the hurt had begun. He wanted to help her find those things… But she didn’t want them, and she didn’t want him, except as a useful tool to get what she wanted.

Now he knew how much it sucked to be used.

But he still wanted to help her… …

He let the thought dangle tantalisingly over his head, as his eyes slowly closed and sleep finally took over.

-oOo-

It was almost eleven by the time Anna woke up, and when she realised the time she groaned and slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position.

Almost immediately the previous night came flooding back and she pressed her teeth into her bottom lip – an attempt to suppress a giddy little smile. Remy was nowhere to be seen, so she got up and headed to the bathroom, her body aching deliciously in all sorts of unmentionable places.

When she came out again Remy was still out of sight, and so she went into the kitchen, opened up the fridge, and thought about breakfast. It was at that point that he decided to appear, coming through the front door and kicking his shoes off in the hallway.

“Hey.”

He was standing in the entranceway to the lounge, a brown paper bag in his hand.

“Hey,” she replied. So far there were so many emotions she’d experienced in his presence that it disconcerted her that she didn’t exactly know how to feel now. She turned back to the fridge and her hopeless quest for breakfast.

Maybe he was used to awkward mornings after. He sidled on over, pausing only when he was right behind her, standing close enough to send tingles down her spine.

“If it’s breakfast you’re lookin’ for, chere,” he began humorously, “don’t bother lookin’ in there. I gotcha some pastries.”

He rustled the bag tantalisingly over her shoulder before throwing it on the counter beside her. She shut the fridge and turned to him with a withering smile.
“You think of everything.”

He grinned.

“You’re welcome.”

He hooked her chin with a forefinger and tilted her face towards his, bestowing her with a brief but passionate kiss that left her pleasantly bemused.

“We need ta talk,” he said when they were done. “But I’ll letcha eat first. I’m gonna take a shower, ‘kay?”

“Last night is over, Cajun,” she reminded him softly. “You don’t need my permission to do anything.”

A small smile creased his lips.

“Hm.” He rubbed her chin lightly with his thumb before turning aside. “Jus’ make sure you save me some, chere,” he said, darting a meaningful glance at the paper bag, before disappearing into the bedroom.

She stared after him, a perplexed expression on her face. She’d rationalised last night as just sex, a cordoned off slice of space-time where they could get to be selfish, something set totally apart from the complications of their current business relationship. She’d expected standoffishness, maybe, or an attempt on the part of each to address what they had discussed the night before, to try to change one another’s minds. But here he was, as easy and flippant as always… happy, even. And yes, he was a man who’d just got spectacularly laid, but even so… …

She busied herself making a cup of coffee whilst she heard him go into the shower. She sat on the sofa and ate breakfast, trying not to think about what exactly he wanted to talk about. Her meal was nearly finished when he finally reappeared. He didn’t say anything, just came straight into the lounge and sat down in the armchair next to the sofa. The position spoke volumes – not too close, not too far. Whatever was coming next was going to be business; and yet his demeanour was casual, his body tilted back in the chair as if about to engage in some light-hearted chat. Only the soberness of his expression suggested otherwise.

“So,” she asked him neutrally, laying aside her plate. “What’s on your mind?”

He was serious, composed in a way she didn’t think she’d seen him before.

“We talked about a lot last night,” he opened the conversation after a moment of silence. This was an understatement, she thought – but she made no remark, letting him finish the thought. “I been thinkin’ about it,” he continued, then stopped as if it was a conclusion. He shifted a little in his seat, his fingers absently picking at the chenille throw lying over the arm of the sofa, in lieu of something else to fidget with. He seemed a little lost for words, so she ventured to help him, despite her better judgement.

“You broke off our deal.”

The reminder wasn’t without some bitterness, and he quirked a wry smile at her.

“You didn’t have anythin’ left to offer me.”

“Except last night.”
His smile dropped.

“Told you,” he murmured. “I wouldn’t take dat as payment for nothin’.”

He looked down as if grasping for the next words – she thought she had offended him, but when he looked up at her again he had on his same old poker face.

“How about,” he asked her quietly, “we make another deal instead?”

She stared at him. Old feelings of mistrust stirred inside her, whipped up by memories of all the lies and betrayal he had made her suffer. The sensation made her feel vulnerable – more so than she had ever been in his presence, and for reasons she wasn’t entirely able to dissect. There was a time she could have walked away from him, easily. That time had passed, somewhere along the line. If she’d tried to walk away from him now, she knew that their present entanglement would only draw them back together again. That sense of entanglement unnerved her, and she could barely keep the suspicion from her voice when she replied:

“Well, I’d have to know what kind of deal you had in mind before I came to a decision.”

There was that smile again, as if he knew exactly why she was back to driving hard bargains with him. He leaned forward in his seat and said seriously: “I’ll help you get what you want got.”

He paused – and while some part of her felt relief, the greater part of her responded with all the measured caution appropriate to her current levels of distrust.

“In exchange for what, exactly?”

She thought he would smile again, but he didn’t.

“Two things, chere.” He lifted a finger, signalling number one. “First, I get t’do this mission on my own terms. I’m gonna set up the con with Essex, and you’re gonna take a back seat. In other words – this is my thing, and you stay the hell out of it.”

She thought about it. This was something she was going to have to negotiate with him, but for now she thought it was a stipulation she could deal with till further notice.

“And the second?”

“And the second…” He leaned back in his seat again and regarded her closely. “When all dis bullshit is over, you come with me to London.”

It was the last thing she’d been expecting. If she’d thought it was a joke, the seriousness of his expression quickly dispelled that notion. She searched his face for a few moments, seeing no signs of deception; and at last she dropped her eyes to her hands and said, sincerely: “If you help me to do this… I will go anywhere in the world with you that you want me to.”

She raised her eyes to his again. She had expected to see triumph in his expression, a smile – even that half-smile that wasn’t a smile – some sort of pleasure at the fact that he had, in some way, finally won. But he showed her none of those things – his countenance was completely enigmatic. After a few seconds he broke the glance, scooting forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees, leaning towards her with a pose that was now entirely business-like.

“Here’s how it’s gon’ work,” he told her. “I call Essex. Tell him I’ve got what he wants. Arrange a meet. Give him the chips.”
He raised his eyebrows, holding her gaze, letting her know he was doing her the courtesy of giving her a moment to have her say. That at least was easy.

“No,” she said.

He dropped his gaze and then his head. For a moment he rubbed his forehead and then he looked up at her and asked: “Why no, chere?”

“After all we’ve been through getting those chips, you think I’m gonna just give them up to Essex?”

Her stare was hard and level, and he pulled at his mouth, trying to stop himself from saying something he might later regret.

“Those chips are our in, chere… …”

“We don’t need an in, Remy. We just steal Essex’s chip from him.”

At the words a sardonic smile lifted his lips; he shook his head.

“And then what? We’ll have the codes, but we’ll still need to get into Empharma HQ to hook you up to that fuckin’ Machine. And I’m guessin’ that ain’t somethin’ I can jes’ steal away for you, chere.”

Her mouth twisted into a frown.

“It’s just… it’s dangerous, Remy. Giving Essex everything he needs…”

“Not everything,” he murmured. “What he wants most is you.”

She gave him a sharp look, and he sighed, pushing at his knees and into a more upright position.

“Sometimes, Anna, you need to give a person what they want to get in close enough to strike. I got an automatic in with Essex. If I give him what he’s expectin’, it’ll give me enough time to locate his chip.”

“But you won’t be giving him everything he’s expecting,” she pointed out. “You won’t’ve brought him me.”

He shrugged.

“I’ll think o’ somethin’ on that score. Let’s jes’ say I got a way wit’ words.”

She couldn’t help but respond acerbically to that.

“Yeah. That’s for sure.”

He wisely let that comment lie.

“Anyway… Once I get Essex’s chip, I’ll ‘face with it, get the code. Then I’ll call you in and we can see what we can do about startin’ up that machine.”

“Infiltration?”

He shrugged again.
“Well… I can let you in through the back door if you’re feelin’ lazy…”

She tried not to smile at that – unsuccessfully as it turned out. She looked away and breathed in deep to suppress it.

“So… what exactly do you want me to do while you’re off conning Essex?”

His reply was sombre, like he knew she wasn’t going to like it.

“You stay put here and wait for me to call.”

He was right. She didn’t like it.

“So you expect me to let you hand over those chips and pull off this mission without any input? At all?”

He rolled his eyes, pushing himself off of the chair and walking a few paces round the coffee table, pausing only to glare down at her forcefully.

“You have a stake in this, Anna. I get that. But I need you to trust me. Your involvement puts me at risk. If Essex thought I was helpin’ you…”

“If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it together.”

“No.”

His voice was firm, unwavering.

“Why not?”

“Because the further away you are, the safer you are.”

“This isn’t about me being safe—”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

She shut her mouth. His look was penetrating.

“If this deal is gon’ work, Anna,” he told her in a low tone, “I need you t’ be safe an’ in one piece when all this is over.”

He meant it. She could tell by the look in his eyes. This wasn’t about helping her. It wasn’t about what she wanted. It was still all about what he wanted. Her.

“There’s no guarantee I’ll be in one piece if hooking back up to that machine doesn’t work,” she informed him slowly, quietly. “You know that, right? The state my mind is in right now… There’s every chance that trying to reintegrate those memories into my brain will just break it. And then… whatever’s left of me…” She trailed off, looking down, swallowing painfully.

“We’ve both seen what happens when a person’s mind breaks. You’d best put me down, Remy. Quickly. Painlessly.”

She heard him let out a heavy, violent breath; the next moment he was on the sofa next to her, reaching out, touching her cheek, her chin, tilting her face round to look at him.

“Anna… if I thought you were gonna change your mind and walk away from all’a this, you think I’d be here, talkin’ about this right now?” His voice was low, charged with emotion. “I
can’t have this any other way. I know what I’m riskin’. I’m doin’ it only ‘cos there’s a chance that you will be okay when all is said and done and you can finally let go of all’a this shit.”

His words, and the way that he said them, frightened her. There was so much more to them than they implied in themselves. She gazed at his mouth, her heartbeat quickening, her mind unable to comprehend what this all meant.

“Will you end it for me, Remy…? If the worst happens?” she questioned him in a whisper.

He inhaled visibly. His thumb caressed the dip beneath her mouth tenderly.

“Yes,” he answered.

The moment was becoming too visceral, too intimate. She looked away uneasily, breaking his grasp.

“The Machine… once we’re done with it, it’ll be up and running.” She chanced a sidelong glance at him. “That won’t be a good thing.”

He finally backed off a little, easing back into the seat with only a small look of disappointment.

“Relax. I already thought about that. Once we’re done wit’ the Machine, we destroy it. For good.”

Despite the fact that he had given her some space, now that she had it she wasn’t sure how much she actually wanted it. She swivelled round to him, putting a hand on his knee – it was a light touch, almost non-committal, but it was a connection she felt comfortable with giving right now.

“All right,” she agreed at last. “We’ve got a deal. If this is the way we do it, this is the way we do it. But I have just one tiny little request to make if we’re gonna shake on this.”

“Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“I’m not going to let you just go in there alone. We stay in touch, okay? I wanna be informed, every step of the way.”

That was when a smile almost lit his mouth.

“Sure, l’il Miss Control Freak. We do things your way.”

It was said playfully, but it still irked her.

“I think I have a bigger stake in this than you do, Remy.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, Anna,” he smirked. “I got a pretty big stake in this too.”

He got to his feet, ready to leave; but she took his hand in both of hers and held him back.

“Remy…” She took in a deep breath and went for the plunge. “Thank you.”

And he reached out with his other hand, stroked her cheek gently with just the backs of his fingers.

“Don’t thank me, Anna. Not yet. Not until we’re out the other side.’”
His tone was sober, and for a moment she thought he would lean in and kiss her, but instead he let go of her hand and headed straight over for his jacket.

“Where’re you going?” she asked as she watched him put it on.

“Out. Got some shoppin’ t’do before I start arrangin’ things with Essex.” He patted his pocket for his cigarettes.

“So when are you planning to make the handover?”

“Tomorrow.”

“And why not tonight?”

“Tonight?” He walked over towards the hallway and out of sight. “T’night I got other things on my schedule.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

He was suddenly behind the sofa, surprising her with his closeness. He ran a hand through her hair and teased her head back gently so that she was looking straight up into his face, upside down.

“Like, I dunno, maybe makin’ out wit’ you some more. Although if you don’t like the idea o’that, I’m happy to go get my kicks elsewhere.”

She reached up, running her fingers over his cheeks and down over his neck.

“You have such a one track mind…”

“You better believe it. I haven’t even nearly had my fill of you yet…”

“Christ, you are gonna be so bored of me by the time we get to England…”

“Here’s hopin’ we have the chance to find out…”

Was it a vain hope? Maybe it was. And if it was… she didn’t want to deny herself anymore. She slipped her palms round the back of his head and pulled him down towards her, capturing first his lips and then his mouth in a slow kiss that was intended to make sure he could never leave this place without coming back.

When they both surfaced he was smiling.

“I’ll be back by four.”

“Okay.”

“Make sure you rig all those traps again when I leave… don’t want Creed or the rest of those assholes stealin’ you out from under my nose…”

“Two or three of them I can probably take. Any more than that and I may need some backup.”

He laughed.

“Then keep me on speed dial. Just in case.”
He laid his forehead lightly on hers, before levering himself away from the sofa. She heard him head into the hallway.

“Oh… by the way,” he called from the vestibule.

“Hmm?”

“Raven asked me to ask you to call her when I saw you.”

And she heard the door open up and click shut behind him.

-oOo-

Anna sat on the bed and stared at the chips laid out in front of her.

Trask, Frost, MacTaggert, Sarkissian, Yashida. Only Essex’s was left.

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She’d committed the code to memory, each section in perfect order, ready to be input into the Machine. It was almost frightening how close she had come, and she reached out, running her fingers over the small squares spread out on the comforter, trying to assimilate the fact that she was so close. The thought of sending them away into Essex’s hands pained her like nothing else, but Remy was right. His way of doing things made more sense, even if it went against the grain.

She sighed and gathered the chips together, slid them into their plastic cases. Then she slotted them into the slim-line multi-storage box she’d had custom-made, ready for a smooth transit. She steeled herself mentally to give them away. She steeled herself for the idea that, in the next 36 hours, she might have all her memories back – or she might be dead. And while she didn’t want death, she found that she could accept the idea of oblivion. It was what might happen if she lived that she found difficult to process.

It was only then, with the threat of her own thoughts heavy on her mind, that she decided to call Raven.

She got up from the bed and padded into the lounge with her phone, feeling distinctly uneasy. It wasn’t fear. It was more a reluctance to engage in what she knew was going to be a messy conversation. For years now she’d lived her life independently of Raven, but her recent predicament had changed things in ways she didn’t like. She couldn’t remember the last time her private life had been this exposed.

Still, she figured she’d best get this over and done with, and so she transferred her phone’s signal to the big screen and set up the video call. There was only a single ring before it was answered – Raven’s face popped onto the screen with larger-than-life clarity.

“Anna.” Her smile was tight, almost grim. “I was beginning to think you weren’t going to call.”

“Raven.” Anna’s reply was neutral; she found herself hugging herself tight, as if in self-defence. “What’s this about? Remy told me you wanted me to call… …”

“Does there have to be some ulterior motive?” Raven answered sardonically. “Can’t a friend call a friend because she cares about her welfare?”

Anna scoffed.
“Raven, you always have an ulterior motive. For everything.”

Raven made no effort to deny this. She merely gave a knowing little smile and leaned back in her seat, a plush leather swing chair that Anna recognised from her private quarters.

“You must have a very low opinion of me, my dear,” she commented with a sigh that sounded more theatrical than sincere. “But seriously, Anna. My concern is genuine. You did leave suspiciously suddenly after all…”

“I needed to be alone,” she insisted quietly.

“Let me guess,” Raven rejoined, her expression deadly serious now. “To ‘face with those chips, right?” Her lips tightened disapprovingly. “You would’ve been better off doing that here. Where you would’ve been safe.”

Anna resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“Let’s not get into that, Raven,” she said wearily. “The point is, I’m fine now. And I don’t really wanna argue with you about it.”

“Fine.” Raven’s tone was dangerously agreeable. “If you want to be coy about this, then by all means, be coy.” Her eyes scoured the screen briefly, as if she could physically see inside the apartment. “I take it that thief is there,” she noted almost sourly.

It wasn’t the first time Anna had felt like a recalcitrant child in Raven’s presence, and she didn’t think it would be the last.

“He was,” she replied neutrally. “He’s out right now. Why? You gonna lecture me on the men I sleep with now?”

Raven raised an eyebrow.

“No. Although I do find your attraction to that man rather… inexplicable.”

“It’s just sex, okay?” Anna answered flatly. “There’s nothing inexplicable about it.” She expelled an agitated breath, deciding that this topic of conversation definitely needed to be over. “Listen – Raven. There’s something I need to tell you. Remember that night? When we talked about the Machine?” She realised she was pacing the same spot, and she paused, looking up at Raven expectantly. The older woman’s face was suddenly still and self-contained, her lips pursed tight.

“Yes,” she replied at last, “I remember. Why?”

Why. A simple question that needed a big answer. She breathed deep.

“I talked to Trask. Don’t ask me how – it isn’t important. What is important is that he thinks my memories are probably still on the system in a backup state, and if I can start the thing I might be able reintegrate them into my mind. And before you say anything – yes, I know replugging all that neural data back into my mind could completely fuck me over, but this is what I’ve wanted my entire life, and if I don’t try I’ll always regret it… …”

She trailed off, seeing Raven’s reaction. Her face was still cold, still hard – but for a split second it seemed as if her skin had gone almost deathly pale.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Anna told her quietly. “And don’t pretend you didn’t know I
wouldn’t go ahead with this. You know me… …”

“Yes,” Raven cut in acidly. “I do. But for some reason I thought LeBeau might be able to
convince you otherwise.” Her smile was frosty. “I guess my faith in his powers of persuasion was
 misplaced.”

The look Anna shot her was the kind of look that could kill.

“What?”

Raven was seemingly unperturbed.

“I offered to pay him a very great deal of money to convince you that going ahead with
this asinine plan to recover your memories wasn’t in your best interests. He assured me it would be a
waste of time. It appears he was right.”

“You mean,” Anna began indignantly, “that all that stuff about London was just some plan
the two of you cooked up?”

wonder he screwed up. He could’ve tried Bermuda… Or the Seychelles…”

But Anna was barely listening. The idea that Remy and Raven – two people who
obviously hated each other – had been conspiring against her was almost too much.

“It’s my life,” she seethed through gritted teeth. “Why don’t you let me decide how I get to
live it?”

Raven was unimpressed.

“Live it? You think this is living it, Anna?” She openly scoffed at the idea. “What have
you been doing the past five years? Wandering around the world stealing other people’s lives, living
out their memories and never making any of your own. Is that living your life, Anna? Really?
Because from where I’m standing, it sure as hell doesn’t look like it.”

“What I do is none of your fucking business!” she couldn’t help but shoot back irately.

“No. You’re right. It isn’t. But you know why I still make it my business? Because I care
about you. I care about you and I want you to be happy. Like you were with that idiot boy.” Raven
paused, visibly calming herself with an effort. She rubbed the bridge of her nose a moment and
when she looked up again her expression was conciliatory. “Look – I’m sorry. I don’t want to argue
with you, Anna. I just… I care, okay? After everything I let Weapon X put you through for all
those years, standing by and doing nothing… …” She looked like she wanted to say more, and for a
second Anna thought she would, but instead she changed the subject. “So. You’re going to try to
restart the Machine. I’m assuming Essex’s chip is the only one you have to get left, right?” She
didn’t wait for confirmation. “That’ll mean going to Empharma. When do you plan to head in?”

“Tomorrow,” Anna replied. “Look, Raven, if you’re thinking of stopping me—”

“Please,” Raven interrupted witheringly. “I know a lost cause when I see one.”

“Don’t be like that.”

She must’ve looked wounded, because Raven closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and – with
an effort – gave her a pale smile.
“Anna – I’m sorry. It’s your life, your decision, and it’s not my place to change that. I just want you to know that everything I do, that I have done… it’s for your benefit, okay. Do you understand that?”

“I know, Raven, I just—”

“Do you understand that?” Raven’s tone was weightier this time, layered with emotion. It was so uncharacteristic that Anna was momentarily speechless.

“Yes,” she answered at last. “Of course I do.”

And there was nothing left but for Raven to give her a rueful smile.

“Then I suppose there’s nothing more to be said,” she remarked. “Except to wish you good luck.” The words were softly, seriously spoken; and again Anna could think of nothing to say. “And take care of yourself, Anna. Be strong. Always.”

The sentiment was unusual. Over the years Anna had come to realise that she was like the daughter Raven had never had, but the times that she had ever shown any overt affection was rare in the extreme. She understood what it meant now. It meant that Raven was afraid she’d never come back.

“You know me, Raven,” she murmured. “I always am.”

There was something surprisingly mournful about the words. For the first time she began to sense the weight of her own mortality.

“Then I’ll say goodbye, Anna,” Raven rejoined with a slight, sad smile. “In the meantime… be safe.”

And the screen went blank.

-oOo-

It was nearly five by the time Remy returned.

Yet again she went through the rigmarole of deactivating the traps before letting him in.

“Everythin’ quiet?” he asked her as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

“Yeah. Apart from the call I had with Raven.”

“Oh.”

He looked thoroughly disinterested, and so she leaned against the wall and glared at him.

“What?” he asked, slipping off his shoes.

“Nothing,” she answered drily. “Just didn’t think you were the type to go making deals with Raven.”

He almost paused midway through shrugging off his jacket.

“Oh. She told you ‘bout that, huh?”

His tone was casual enough to irritate.
“If all you wanted was to get a paycheck outta this…” she began heatedly, ignoring his question – only for him to interrupt her disdainfully.

“Please. Yah think I give a shit what Raven wants?” He slung his jacket aside. “The only reason I made any sorta deal wit’ her was ‘cos we both wanted the same thing. You, in one piece. My needs right now are kinda specific, chere. Money don’t come into it.”

She eyed him sceptically, despite the fact that he was plainly being honest with her. The meaning of his words wasn’t lost on her either.

“Specific, huh?” she echoed disbelievingly.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Specific. As in, I’m only interested in one thing.”

“Oh. I see.”

She pushed herself off the wall and slowly covered the distance between them. There was anticipation in his eyes as she advanced, and when she was standing right there in front of him she grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him down to her eye level.

“This is the last fucking time,” she seethed at him through grit teeth, “that you hide the truth from me. Okay?”

It was a stupid threat, one that was as pointless as it was futile. The world they lived in was paved with lies and half-truths, and they both knew it. What mattered was that he was still here, when it would’ve been so easy for him to run away.

She didn’t think. Her fist tightened into the fabric of his shirt, and she pulled him helplessly, greedily, into her kiss.

-oOo-

It was later, the night lit by the city, the airplanes circling lazily overhead.

Anna sat on the windowsill and looked up at the inkspill sky. Somewhere out there there were stars, but she couldn’t see them, not here. There were places she’d been to, that she’d seen in other peoples’ memories, where every night there were stars in the sky. Out in the countryside, on a mountaintop… on a beach on Mahe island. On that stretch of the Mississippi she’d once visited with Cody.

She peered out into the darkness and tried to do what she always did – remember.

“There’s only one actual memory I have from my childhood,” she said quietly into the silence. “Only one thing left that I didn’t destroy. I don’t even know if you could call it a memory. It’s just an impression really. Of standing out on this field, and staring up at this big, huge sunflower. And someone’s there, talking to me. I dunno. I think it might’ve been my mom.”

And that was it. Nothing more, no context, no qualifier. The only memory she had left.

“You wanna talk about it?” Remy asked from the bed.

“I dunno.” She shrugged heavily. “I guess I don’t really know what to say. Where to begin.” She tugged the silk kimono tighter round her, trying to dispel the cold winter air. “When I first found out what Essex and Dr. Frost had done to me, I guess I felt… angry. Used. Helpless. And I still feel all those things, but…” She dropped her face into the crook of her elbow, struggling
with her thoughts, with how to formulate the words. “Now I feel so empty. So cold.” She lifted her head again, leaned against the glass and added, “I was just a kid. And they took all the things that made me sad and twisted them, made me into this.”

She opened her hands and looked down into her palms as if she could find the answers there.

“D’you know how I even learned what my name was? From my personnel file. When I was eighteen. Before that I was just a thing called Weapon Zero. And then, suddenly, I was a person called Anna Marie Raven. ‘Cos a piece of paper told me so. I had no memories of ever being called that. Of my mom and dad calling me that. Of my friends and my family saying my name. Maybe it wasn’t my name. Maybe I’d never know for sure.” She sighed. “I just want to own my life again. I want to be more than a bunch of records on a system, an unanchored name. Records can tell me everything, but they don’t mean anything. Not until I remember. Not until they’re memories, and more than just words on a page.”

She was quiet a long time, brooding. It was a long time before he spoke again.

“You erased your own mem’ries for a reason, chere,” he said. “You sure you really wanna find out what those reasons are?”

Was she? Yes and no. She slipped off her perch and turned to face him, lying there on the bed rolling an unlit cigarette between his thumb and forefinger.

“What I want,” she told him quietly, “is to be like you. Like everyone else. To have a history.”

She went back over to the bed and knelt down beside him, put her hands lightly on his stomach, as if she could absorb him simply through a touch. A part of her wanted his thoughts. A part of her wanted to face with him in ways that weren’t even possible.

“Y’know what I really want?” she murmured almost wistfully. “What I really want is to know about you. About who you really are.”

He raised his eyebrows, gave a little smile, the cigarette going still in his hand.

“You know lots about me, chere,” he said.

“I know facts, that I got from less than legit means,” she corrected him. “But I know nothing about you. Not as a person.” She sighed, running a finger over a scar that neatly followed the curve of his rib. “For the longest time the only way I got to learn about other people was through interfacing with their memories. When I first started to get to know others the way normal people do… That was weird.”

“And was Cody the first person you got to know like ‘normal people’ do?” he asked curiously.

She darted a look at him, unable to help a wry smile from lighting her face.

“You sure have a knack for turning a conversation away from yourself.”

The corner of his mouth dimpled.

“Years o’ practice, chere.”
She pressed her lips together in an attempt to keep the disbelieving smile from her face, a ploy that didn’t work when she saw that his attention was still firmly fixed on her, that enigmatic half-grin still on his face. The tenseness abated and she actually found herself laughing. It was a strange sound, soft and a little unsure – but it was a genuine laugh nonetheless.

“Y’know somethin’,” he pointed out, amused. “You don’t laugh enough.”

He leaned over and put the cigarette up on the nightstand. When he lay back down again his eyes were on the ceiling.

“The truth ain’t all that,” he murmured. “Belle deserved better’n me, is about the long and short of it. It woulda been better for her if we’d never met.”

He swallowed deeply. Whatever he was thinking was painful, but she’d spent so long yearning for her own memories that listening to the memories of others was like gold dust to her.

“How did she—?”

“Die?” he finished for her when she caught herself. He frowned. “They said it was an accidental overdose. But… …”

“But you always thought it was suicide.”

He chanced a look at her, just as quickly averting his gaze.

“Yeah.” His voice was gruff. “They didn’t know what she’d gone through. What I did to her. The lies, the cheatin’… We lost our kid, for fuck’s sake, and all I could do was run away.”

He fell silent, ruminating on this past he’d rather not have.

“And her brother?” she prompted him.

“That was an accident,” he answered ruefully. “He tried t’ talk some sense inta me. Said Belle missed me, wanted me back. I was too wasted t’ appreciate the fact that he was bein’ sincere. We fought. I hit him. He landed bad. And then…” He took in a weary breath, “he was dead, and I was in jail, and that’s when the divorce papers started comin’.”

The sentences were choppy, coming from his mouth as if unwilling. For a long while he was silent.

“You were the one who found her, weren’t you,” she stated quietly. Somehow, she knew it was a fact. He didn’t look at her; but his jaw tensed, and he said nothing – not that he needed to.

“She left behind loadsa mem’ries,” he spoke after a long moment, his tone hoarse. “In a box, under the bed. I took ‘em, before her parents could. But then I couldn’t bring myself t’ face with them… I wanted to burn ‘em… But then I couldn’t even do that… I ended up puttin’ them in a safety deposit box… Guess that’s where they’ll stay.”

There was emotion in his voice, more than she’d ever heard – enough to make her feel guilty that she’d pushed him so hard. She wanted to say sorry, but somehow it felt trite to do so; instead she put her hand on his and stroked it lightly. He looked up at her sharply, as if surprised that she would touch him in this way. The look made her self-conscious, and she quickly took her hand back, unable to meet his gaze.

“What about Cody?” he asked her curiously, changing the subject, probably to take the
heat off of him as well as save her from the awkwardness of the moment. “Didja ever ‘face wit’ any of his mem’ries?”

She lay down on her side next to him.

“He never recorded any,” she answered softly. “I guess he was too busy living his life.” She dared to touch him again, running her palm over his bicep. “The memories he left were the ones we made together. I s’ppose I interfaced with his body… with his heart. That seemed enough at the time.”

Her tone must’ve been despondent because he shifted onto his side to face her, asking in a tone of voice she couldn’t place: “Did you love him?”

She was surprised to feel genuine emotion welling from somewhere deep inside her.

“I don’t know. Yes.” She bit her lip, continued quietly: “I liked him because he was so damn normal. But in some ways he was anything but. What kind of normal guy tries to protect his fucked up girlfriend from a gang of black ops super soldiers packing heat? Cody was that kind of guy. Most guys would’ve run a mile. But he… He just… Everything he did was to make me happy. I’ve never met another man like him. Whatever he was, he wasn’t normal, not the way most guys are. He gave up his life for me. I wish he hadn’t.”

“Don’t you?” His voice was soft. “He died to give you a second chance at life.”

Her expression was hard, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

“And what did I do with that second chance, Remy? I did nothing but squander it. I killed an entire apartment block of people just to make Essex believe I was dead, so I could live my life again. That’s the price I paid to become the Rogue, to become a hundred different people so I could bury Anna Raven six feet under. Life became so meaningless that sometimes I forgot who I really was. Sometimes I didn’t care about anything anymore. Sometimes I wanted to die.”

Her voice was shaking, actually shaking. She’d hardly admitted it to herself, let alone anybody else.

“And now?” he questioned her softly, seriously.

She took in a sharp breath, hardly realising that she’d been holding it.

“And now…” she murmured. “I don’t want to die. I want to live. But I don’t know how to anymore. I’m more afraid of that than I am of Essex. But I want to live.”

Somehow it was both torture and a relief to say the words. The feeling was so overwhelming that she was trembling with it – and suddenly the tremors were eating her up, coursing through her body in cascades and right into her fingertips. She began to sit up, to turn away from him in shame; but he took her hand in his, the hand that was resting on the pillow, threaded his fingers through hers and held on tight. He held on until the tremors had passed, and even then he didn’t let go.

“It’s okay, Anna,” he told her quietly. “I gotcha back. You’ll live.”

The words were tender, reassuring. After so many years of being alone, after all the tumult of the past few weeks… hearing those words had never felt so comforting.

She smiled by way of thanks and sat up, letting go of his hand reluctantly.
“I should take my meds,” she whispered. “I won’t be a sec.”

She went into the bathroom, opened up the medicine cabinet and grabbed her pills. When she snapped the doors shut again her face flashed in the mirror. She paused a moment to look at it, surprised to see a warmth there she hadn’t seen in a long time. She felt alive. That was for sure.

When she headed back into the bedroom, Remy was just placing his phone up on the nightstand.

“All set for tomorrow?” she asked him.

“Yeah. All set.”

She nodded absently, shrugging the kimono off her shoulders before slipping in under the covers. He spooned up against her like it was the most natural thing in the world; and perhaps it was, and she was overthinking it. Here she was, a woman who’d learned to shoot to kill by the time she was fourteen, and she knew nothing. Nothing about life, about living, except that she wanted to live and he made her feel alive.

It seemed dangerous and frivolous, but for once she allowed herself to think about the day after tomorrow.

She dreamed that it would be with him, on a plane, sipping champagne and kissing, on a first-class flight to London.

-oOo-
Remy heads back to Empharma and puts his and Anna's plan into action.

She awoke later to hear him moving about the room, the light pad of his bare feet on the wooden floorboards.

It was still dark outside and she shifted onto her back, rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, still caught in the vestiges of a recurring dream she could never remember.

“Remy?” she mumbled sleepily.

She heard his footsteps approach and suddenly he was there, kneeling beside her.

“Anna.” He kissed her temple gently. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Hmmm.” She was too tired to talk much. “What time is it?”

“Six.” He brushed the hair from her face tenderly, continued: “Couldn’t sleep. Figured I’d just get everythin’ ready for t’morrow… Today…”

“Mmmm.” She was already falling back asleep. He knelt beside her for a few seconds and watched her with a small smile on his face.

“Go back to sleep, chere,” he murmured. “I’ll be right back wit’ you in a sec.”

And sleep she did.

When she next awoke it was to daylight.

He was on his side next to her, one arm slung across her waist. She rolled over and looked at him.

God, he was beautiful. He could have any woman he wanted… She was pretty sure he had had any woman he wanted. It seemed to her a foregone conclusion that nothing between them could last… but it was nice to dream. It was nice to hope that they could last as long as London… maybe a day or two. There was the Astor Suite in the Waldorf… that four poster bed and that sumptuous bath and that minibar full of champagne… And the countless bars and clubs and museums and galleries and gardens and parks that she’d walked through herself, alone, on a whirlwind tour through someone else’s stolen identity… …

What would it be like to walk down Charing Cross Road with him? To sample the culinary delights of China Town? To splash in the fountain in Trafalgar Square? To lie in the grass in Green Park?

*That was summer,* she reminded herself with a smile. *This is winter. Definitely no*
She put a hand on his abdomen and fingered the scar on his side. Almost as soon as she had touched him he was waking up, breathing in sharply, his eyelids flickering in the light.

“Hello,” she greeted him almost shyly. She felt giddy and opened wide.

“Hi,” he murmured back in a thick voice. “Did I sleep?”

“Yeah.”

She laughed at the ridiculous question and pulled his arm tighter around her waist. For a long time they stayed in one another’s embrace, neither feeling the need to disentangle themselves from the other. Presently he stirred and propped his chin on her head.

“I should get ready. Got a meetin’ to keep wit’ Essex.”

“What time?”

“Mmmm… three…”

“Oh my God, that’s ages away… Stay a while, you have plenty of time.”

“You really want me t’do dis thing for you or not, chere?” he asked her, sounding amused.

“I’m payin’ you, aren’t I?” she reminded him testily.

“Sure.” He disengaged himself a bit so that he could look her in the face. “Although… If ya figure London ain’t your thing… Feel free to split anytime you want when we get there.”

“Hmm.” She rubbed her lips against the stubble on his chin. “Y’figure I’d want to leave you as soon as we land or somethin’?”

“We made a deal, chere. All we agreed on was the fact that you’d be takin’ that flight wit’ me to London. Didn’t say nothin’ about what would happen after the fact…”

“You must have a pretty poor opinion of your ability t’keep a woman satisfied then, Remy LeBeau…” she joked, nipping his lower lip playfully.

“Jes’ don’t wantcha t’think you owe me anythin’ more than we agreed on, chere,” he bantered back in a thick drawl. “Don’t wantcha t’ feel like I’m keepin’ you somewhere you don’t wanna be…”

“Remy LeBeau… You must’ve been confident in your ability to charm me into sticking with you once we land in England. Otherwise you wouldn’t have made the deal in the first place.”

A laugh rumbled in his chest.

“Chere, wit’ you I never know what’s gonna happen next.”

“I like to keep men like you on their toes.”

“Tha’ssa lie. You’ve never met a man like me before.”

She laughed.
"No. I haven’t."

The morning lengthened into a haze of tangled limbs and touches.

By midday they were up, showered, dressed and fed. By one Remy was all set and ready to go. Anna stood in the doorway of the bedroom, dressed only in one of his button-up shirts, and watched as he picked up his bag of gear.

“Ain’tcha forgetting somethin’?” she asked him pointedly with a little smirk on her face.

He looked blank for about a split second before his expression lightened and he crossed the lounge to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “What? This?”

He lowered his head and gave her a toe-curling kiss, which she playfully batted off after indulging him for a few pleasurable seconds.

“Amazing though that was,” she purred, “I was actually talking about how we’re gonna keep in touch while you’re away…”

He pretended to look nonplussed for a few seconds, which told her he hadn’t actually forgotten at all. She was a little irked that he’d tried to pull a fast-one on her, but since that appeared to be the default state of their working relationship, it didn’t surprise her. He dropped his bag, got to his knees and opened it up, revealing all sorts of shit inside. After rummaging around a stupid amount of time he apparently found what he was looking for.

“You don’t miss a trick,” he noted wryly, holding out the small box to her. She took it and opened it, just to make sure the transceiver was actually in there. It was.

“Darlin’,” she bantered back voluptuously, “neither do you. It’s almost becoming annoying.”

He chuckled, zipping up the bag again; and before he’d got back to his feet he’d planted a slow kiss inside her thigh.

“You love it,” he accused her sexily. “Don’t pretend you don’t.”

She gave him a look that managed to be half testy and half come-hither. He licked the same spot on her thigh, kissed it again, and stood.

“Be good while I’m away,” he said, getting in close again, his hands snaking in under the shirt and over her backside, pressing her up against him. “If you decide to be bad, make sure I get t’listen in.”

“Oh my God.” The horrible truth was beginning to dawn on her. “I think I may actually have spoiled you with all that sex.”

“Hmmmm, I am so primed for London, you have no idea.”

They kissed again, and at this point she was forced to slap his ass and push him away.

“Go on, Cajun,” she harried him with mock ferocity. “Get.”

He backed away obediently, a smug grin plastered on his face. She smacked his shoulder, just for good measure, when his grin became contagious. He put up his hands in self-defence,
picked up the bag, and headed for the door. When he opened it he turned and called back:

“Just for the record… You’re the hottest fuckin’ woman I’ve ever met.”

And before she could think of a comeback he’d left.

-oOo-

Empharma Headquarters was a monumental building of emerald green glass that seemed to cast a shadow over half of East 42nd Street. Remy twitched the collar of his coat higher against the cold and skipped up the steps to the rotating doors, just as he’d done a thousand times before.

He walked past the neural scanners in the lobby, grinned at the guards as he sauntered through the security checks, and winked at the row of pretty receptionists seated behind the front desk. The redhead wore Chanel No.5, he remembered, and the coffee-skinned one liked to sing Motown in the shower.

He took the well-worn path to the elevators and up to the topmost floor. Deep pile-carpeted corridors in celadon green with reconstituted marble walls led the way to Milbury’s office. He’d walked this route so many times before that it had become boring, that he knew every inch of every crevice; but today he paused momentarily at one of the pillars that flanked the wall-to-ceiling length windows, taking in one the best views New York had to offer.

He felt fucking great. Everything did. He wasn’t going to analyse it at this point.

He carried on walking.

Milbury’s door was closed and he knocked on it briefly before he heard the buzz admitting him entrance. He slid the door open quietly and walked in, letting it snap shut behind him.

Milbury was standing looking out the window, obviously taking a hands-free call. His PA was arranging a tray of coffee and treats on his desk with a fastidious touch. She looked up and smiled at him as he came in – wide mouth, long nose, big blue eyes – a potential conquest he’d never got round to and had absolutely no more interest in. He smiled back and let her get on with her business, just as Milbury looked over his shoulder mid-sentence and gave him a curt nod. Remy took it as a cue to sit down at the desk and help himself to a passionfruit and white chocolate cookie.

Right on cue his PA leaned over and poured two cups of coffee, topping his up with just the right amount of cream and sugar.

“Thanks, Regan,” he smiled up at her. “Y’always know just how I like it.”

“Oh, I always pay attention, Mr. LeBeau,” she murmured sultrily. “And you’re very welcome.”

Any other day he would’ve chosen this moment for a proposition, but he was more than happy for her to back away, just as Milbury had ended his call and was turning back round to face him.

“Oh, LeBeau.” He readjusted the transceiver in his ear, sighed irritably – probably at the phone call he’d just ended – and took his seat. “So good of you to finally make an appearance.” He seemed to study Remy a moment, and Remy studied him right back. Milbury was one of those men whose age was hard to place. Remy knew for a fact he was in his late fifties, yet the man had the trained physique of a man half his age, and the rugged good looks of someone at least ten years younger. The lines on his face enhanced rather than marred the chiselled features, the stony blue
eyes, the well-proportioned mouth. There was only the slightest hint of grey in his slicked-back, jet black hair. He was a handsome man, but there was no warmth in that face. His eyes were heavy-lidded and gave the impression of a panther about to pounce. When he smiled, it never touched those icy, soulless eyes.

At last his glance shifted from Remy as he looked over at Regan. “You may go now,” he said quietly though peremptorily. “Thank you, Ms. Wyngarde.”

There was silence but for the click of her heels on the polished wooden floor and the slide of the door. When it had snapped shut Milbury said:

“Well? Did you bring them?”

Remy wordlessly leaned to one side and unzipped the bag, removing the transparent slim-line case with the mem-chips inside. He slid it across the desk towards Milbury just like he did with every other transaction. Anna’s only links to her lost memories passed into the hands of the enemy so smooth, so easy. Milbury opened up the box, ran a clinical gaze over their contents. After a moment or two he closed it up again, stood and went to a small safe in the wall – one that he never hid or had hidden, that Remy knew well. He watched as Milbury deposited the box and all its chips inside the safe.

“I must admit,” he was saying as he made the deposit, in a voice completely devoid of sarcasm, “I was beginning to worry that you weren’t going to show up at all.” He closed the door and turned back to Remy with a faint smile. “How’s the wound?”

Remy shrugged good-naturedly.

“Healed nicely. Took about 5 days to.” He itched his side absently, remembering the texture of Anna’s fingertips running over the scar. “Those nanomachines sure do good work.”

There was a faint smile on Milbury’s face.

“Yes. Quite.” He sat back at the desk and sipped his coffee, regarding Remy dispassionately over the rim of his cup. “You know, Dr. Frost was quite upset about last week’s little mishap.”

There was a note to Milbury’s voice, something that was at an intersection between mildly amused and imperceptibly menacing. It was a tone Remy had heard many times before and wasn’t unduly concerned with.

“Yeah. I hadn’t figured on Weapon Zero showin’ up when she did.” He gave a wry smile. “That woman has a talent for bein’ a fuckin’ pain in the ass. She complicated things some. In ways I didn’t like. But I handled it.”

“You very nearly didn’t,” Milbury responded icily.

“No. Lucky for me she managed to get me some first class ER treatment.”

Milbury’s expression was almost impassive. He held the coffee cup delicately between both hands for one, two, three seconds. Then, in a quiet voice: “Where is she, LeBeau?”

Remy didn’t even bat an eyelid.

“At a place I got across town.”
“And why,” Milbury persisted, almost conversationally, “isn’t she here?”

Remy smiled. He lifted the coffee cup to his lips and took a long sip, before saying:

“Don’t worry, boss. You’ll get what you’re wantin’. I just ain’t finished with her yet.”

That’s when Milbury’s countenance finally became readable – overt disdain and barely disguised irritation.

“You… obsession with this woman is becoming rather tiresome, LeBeau,” he observed witheringly – yet still not without that faintly menacing lilt. He leaned back in his plush leather swing chair and observed him from insect-like eyes. “I’m beginning to think you’re enjoying her company far too much for your own good.”

There was a definite threat in there – but Remy wasn’t cowed by it.

“Can you blame me? That woman is red fuckin’ hot.”

“What that woman is,” Milbury retorted contemptuously, “is a very important asset. I want her back. And I don’t appreciate her being played with.”

Remy chewed on the inside of his mouth. He picked up the spoon from his saucer and toyed with it idly.

“She’s damaged goods.”

“She’s a one-of-a-kind.”

“Only until I can learn to do what she can.”

“And until then, she is unique and therefore priceless.”

They stared at one another across the table.

“One more night,” Remy finally spoke softly, seriously, his finger running the curve of the spoon handle. “One more night. You’ll get her tomorrow. I promise.”

Milbury stood abruptly, turning and walking over to the window, his hands clasped behind his back, the fingers working agitatedly.

“She is not a toy for your pleasure, LeBeau,” he said. “She is, one might say, the key to the entire Weapon X project.”

Remy dropped the spoon and leaned back in his seat.

“Hmph. And ya think you can make her do whatever it is you want her to? After what happened to her the last time she was workin’ wit’ you?”

Milbury laughed softly, humourlessly, at the window.

“Ah, but you see,” he said, “I have something that she wants. That she needs. A cure. For all her pain. A clean mind. No more bleed effect, no more neural stutters. She will be like new. She will be Weapon Zero once more. As she was always intended to be.” He looked back over his shoulder with a thin smile. “What you fail to appreciate, LeBeau, is that Weapon X, the project, is inside her. The dead, the missing, the irretrievable. All those experiences, all those memories. All that test data. She is, to all intents and purposes, Weapon X. A lifetime’s
accumulation of my work.”

The smile dropped from his face, and suddenly he looked old. Tired.

“And,” he continued quietly, “there are so very many things she can fix. All the mistakes of this world. The suffering, the endless war.”

Remy frowned. He extended the ashtray slot in the desk and lit up a cigarette. He placed his expensive antique Cartier lighter on the arm rest and toyed with it nonchalantly.

“You talk about her like she’s still a test subject,” he commented flatly, breathing in smoke.

“Aren’t you a test subject, LeBeau?”

“A willin’ one. I doubt she’d be.”

Milbury eyed him curiously.

“Just whose side are you really on, LeBeau?”

Remy sucked in a drag, lifted his chin and blew it out again slowly.

“Mine.” He tapped ash aside. “I need her here. I need her to fix me.”

“Ah, yes.” Milbury turned aside with a smile. “There are so many things that hold us back, aren’t there? Even Subject Zero recognised that fact. Once all the little things that haunted her had been erased, she was at last able to reach her full potential. And the same will go for you, once you’ve been ‘fixed’, as you so concisely put it.”

Remy said nothing. For a split second his eyes went back to the safe in the wall.

“You know,” Milbury began, sitting back down at his seat, “I do envy you people. The genetics that make you so special. The things you can do… People like me wither and die under the mem-tech, but you… you are all so resilient. If I could do the things you do… …” He trailed off, steeping his hands on the desk in front of him. “But no,” he concluded with a tired smile. “If I had what you have, I would never have gotten this far. Humanity always craves what it cannot have. It must study what is other. It must make sense of it, because it does not understand it. Only then can the requisite distance be achieved, be maintained, and progress made.”

He dropped his hands and gave a sigh.

“Very well,” he said, “one more night. Bring her here tomorrow. But fail me in this, LeBeau, and you will have failed me for the last time.”

“Don’t worry,” Remy answered. “I won’t. You’ll get what you want. We both will.”

He stubbed out the cigarette, stood, and grabbed his bag.

“So,” he said, “when do we start up th’ Machine?”

Milbury raised an eyebrow at him.

“My, my. Subject Zero did tell you a lot, didn’t she.”

It wasn’t a question. Remy grinned.
“I just wanna know when my services are gonna be needed gettin’ the codes to restart the thing, is all. I’ll need t’be pacin’ myself if I’m gonna have t’ face with six mem’ries in a row…”

“Five,” Milbury corrected him blandly. “I already know mine off by heart.” He stirred and lifted his coffee cup again. “Bring the girl first. Then we’ll talk about it.”

“A’right.” Remy shrugged. Without another word he turned and left.

-oOo-

He headed across to the living quarters. It was months since he had been here, though everything still looked the same. High ceilings, viridian carpets, tawny lighting like out of some smoky New Orleans jazz bar. He rounded the corner to his room and there, coming up towards him from the other end of the corridor, was a woman he remembered only too well – the young, lithe body, the shock of boyishly-cute green hair, the insolent mouth.

“Hey Veronique,” he greeted her with his usual good-natured charm. “Lookin’ good.”

She almost stopped when she saw him; but when she recognised his face her expression went cold, her eyes hard. She said nothing and walked on.

“Nice t’ see the nano-tech healed up your shoulder nicely,” he commented, unable to let it lie. The fact that she had almost bested him that day in Paris still smarted. She’d just come up level with him and that was the moment she chose to engage.

“Get fucked, LeBeau,” she threw at him with no trace of a French accent, not even slowing down.

“Sure – if you’re still up for some fun, chere.” She had brushed past him and he swivelled round with her, continuing, “I-hate-you sex is s’pposed to be real hot, I hear.”

She halted then, stopped, and spat on the floor between them. No sooner had she done so than she’d spun away and stalked off out of sight round the corner.

Remy hitched a lazy smile and covered the few short steps to his own room. The neural scanner pulsed into life and the next moment the door was sliding open to darkness and the stale air of an uninhabited room.

He stepped inside, the lights flickering on and the central heating kicking in as he did so. He dropped his bag, shrugged off his coat, flung it aside, and hit a button by the door. The screens on the windows slowly lifted, opening up the panoramic view of the city that was the thing he missed most about living here.

He went to the bar, fixed himself a drink, and then stood at the window for a few seconds. Dusk was unfurling over New York like ink in oil. He’d missed this. He wished Anna was here to see it.

Gently, he shook his head slightly to the right.

“Anna,” he murmured.

“Remy,” she answered softly.

“I’m in,” he told her. “Dropped off the chips.” He paused, hearing the sound of cars, the faint burbling of voices in the background. “Thought you were stayin’ put,” he said.
“I needed to get out of there,” she replied, almost distractedly. “I felt… too alone.” She took in a breath and it was almost like she was there with him. “What’re you doing?”

He sipped some of his drink with a small smile.

“Thinkin’ of you.”

Her laugh was barely there.

“Such a one-track mind you have…”

He grinned. There was a plane traversing the sky slowly, off on its lonely journey to destination unknown.

“Ever join the mile-high club, chere?” he couldn’t help but ask. There was a moment’s worth of silence and the whoosh of traffic before she replied with a twist of humour:

“That would be telling.”

“Ha. I’ll take that as a yes.” He took another sip of his drink. “We are so fuckin’ in the restroom on the plane, chere,” he murmured.

“Well,” she returned playfully, “I guess that’s the best you can hope for, isn’t it, Cajun. You know, since I’m gonna be abandoning you once we touch down in Heathrow and all.”

She sounded like she was joking, but there was a part of him that wondered whether that wasn’t exactly what would happen.

“You are a cruel, cruel woman, Anna Marie Raven,” he bantered, as the plane finally disappeared from sight.

“Hm.” Yet again she sounded distracted. He heard the purr of a motorbike, women laughing, music from what he guessed was a radio. “So,” she continued, “what are you doing? As in, actually doing.”

“Bidin’ my time.” He drained the rest of his glass and set it aside on a nearby side table. “There’s always a right time for somethin’. This ain’t it.” He checked his watch. “Two hours, chere. Two hours and I go in.”

“All right,” she replied. “You’re the expert. Just… keep me informed, okay?”

“Sure. Speak to you later.”

“Later.”

The transceiver went quiet. He imagined her sitting in the window seat of a chic café sipping a latte, and he sighed.

He got out his backup lighter and had another smoke.

-oOo-

Regan Wyngarde glanced at the clock on her desk as she cleared away the last of her in-tray. It read 18:14 and she was already 15 minutes late.

“Shit,” she whispered to herself.
Dr. Milbury had already left an hour ago for some important dinner date with some wealthy investors, having left her some last minute paperwork to attend to. It was hardly fair, considering he was rarely in the office these days, that she was still working overtime at his behest. Most of this stuff she could do from home, but he always insisted that she be around in case he decided to drop in… … Sometimes he did. Most often he didn’t.

She sighed and took her heels out of the closet, slipping them on before grabbing her coat.

“Dammit, Sebastian is gonna kill me,” she hissed to herself. There was nothing for it. She was going to have to retouch her makeup in the cab.

She had just about to finally head out when there was a light knock at the door, and before she could call out a reply it had slid open.

On the other side was Remy LeBeau.

“Oh, Mr. LeBeau!” She paused mid-stride, momentarily flustered. “You caught me as I was just about to leave.”

He gave her this look, a sensuous stare that made her cheeks flush and the pit of her stomach roil. She was no stranger to the glances of men, most of them leery and unwanted. The way he looked at her was completely different. It was a something that instantly took her breath away.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Wyngarde,” he said in that soft, clipped accent she still couldn’t place. “I was jes’ lookin’ for somethin’… figured I left it in Mibury’s office earlier… was wonderin’ whether you’d picked it up for me…”

His smile was apologetic, yet still betrayed a certain level of intimacy that was as inappropriate as it was thrilling.

“Erm… no… I didn’t see anything… What exactly is it you’re missing?”


“No, I would’ve noticed something like that…” She frowned.

“S’j’es that the last time I used it I was down here.” He shifted, looked at her, began again: “But it looks like you’re about t’head out, chere. Don’t worry. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

She glanced down at her watch. She really needed to leave. He was already turning in the doorway when she stopped him.

“Oh… wait… I suppose it can’t hurt for you to take a look.” She rummaged in her bag for the keycard to Milbury’s office.

“Y’ sure?” he asked, turning back towards her.

“Well, you won’t be in there for long, will you?” She went over to the door and tapped the keycard on the pad there, overriding the security. The door quietly slid open. “There you go.”

“Chere,” he declared sincerely. “You are an angel.”

He walked on over, briefly touching the small of her back as he entered the office, the lights buzzing into life. It was a small, insignificant gesture that sent warm shivers down her spine.
She watched an absent moment as he checked first the desk, then the shag rug underneath, apparently finding nothing.

The phone in her coat pocket started to ring.

It was Sebastian.

_Shit._

“Look,” she said to Remy breathlessly, “I’ve really got to go. I’m late for a date. Can you lock up here when you’re done? There’s a spare key in a niche carved into the underside of my desk. Just put it under the door when you’re done with it.”

He glanced up at her from the floor.

“Sure? I’ll probably be done here in a sec…”

“It’s fine. I have to go.” She was already retreating from the doorway. “And don’t worry. I’ll hide the key somewhere else tomorrow, so you won’t be able to find it again.”

She gave him a wry smile and he laughed in that soft, molasses voice of his.

“Smart girl. All right. I’ll lock up for ya. You go on and get. Have fun on your date. Don’t do anythin’ I wouldn’t.”

“Is there anything you wouldn’t?” she found herself asking, kicking herself almost immediately after the words had left her mouth. His eyes flickered mischievously.

“I always try everythin’ once.” Again he gave her that look, one that told her she was a something that he was well past due trying. Her cheeks were hot – her phone had long stopped ringing. There was a pause before it started up again, breaking the spell. She shook herself.

“Um. Okay. I’d better go now. Goodbye, Mr. LeBeau.”

“Bye, Regan.”

She turned to leave, hitting the Answer button on her phone as she did so.

“Yes, Seb, I will be there in fifteen minutes!”

-oOo-
Chapter 34
Chapter Summary

Remy locates the Machine, but not everything goes according to plan.

As soon as Regan had left, Remy stood and ran his hand along the inside of the seat cushion. And there was his lighter, still wedged there right as he’d left it.

“Looks like I didn’t need you much after all,” he murmured, slipping it back into his pocket.

He looked up, his eyes scouring the room carefully for any unwanted surveillance, any traps.

“Still,” he muttered to himself, “can’t hurt t’be prepared.”

The door was still open, and so he slid it silently shut. Then he took in a breath and headed for the safe.

It was as he had suspected – an elaborate security system protected the thing, consisting of multiple code entry levels each with multiple layers of encryption. A tracker had been hardwired into the program, set to run whenever an attempt to enter a passcode was made. It was not a system that he could just set his lockpick to break and have it run on auto while he smoked a cigarette. It was something that required manual input as well, and so he made himself comfortable and got to work.

Ten minutes later, and he had managed to hack all the codes before the tracker program had managed to get a handle on him. The safe door clicked and swung slightly open. Remy stood and pocketed the device. It was the most adrenaline he’d had in while picking locks, and there was sweat actually standing on his brow. He wiped it way with the back of his sleeve and pushed the safe door open wider.

All the mem-chips were in there – all the ones that Creed and his old team had taken from Anna’s apartment. The slim-line case with the five chips he’d come for was at the forefront and he picked it up, slipped it into the breast-pocket of his jacket. He pushed aside the cases that had belonged to Anna, and there, right at the back, he found it. That small ribbed metal box, similar to the ones that had housed Trask and Emma Frost’s chips. He picked it up and looked at the underside. Essex, Nathaniel, it read. August 15, 2016.

He slipped it into his pocket too, shut the safe door, and quickly left.

-oOo-

He went back to his room.

The chips went straight inside his mattress, which was a risky place to hide them, but then, everywhere in this building was, and he was kind of making this up as he went along, which wasn’t smart either, but… …
He chewed on his lip.

Was this a mistake?

He considered ‘facing with Essex’s chip and jotting down the code, putting the stolen goods back where they’d come from, but that wasn’t part of the deal and so he held back.

He shook his head slightly to the right.

“Anna?”

“Remy,” she replied. Wherever she was, it was quieter now. She was probably back in the apartment.

“I’ve got the chips. Next part is to figure out where the Machine actually is. But judging by my past experience of this place, I gotta pretty good idea of where it is.”

“You figure?” she asked. Her voice was hushed, like maybe she was in bed or something. He figured it was pretty early for her to be asleep, and he wondered whether she hadn’t been ‘facing again or something.

“Yah. All the labs are down in the basement and lower basement levels. There’re some rooms down the bottom that were never accessible. Figure the Machine has to be in one of them.”

“Sounds like a pretty reasonable assumption,” she agreed.

“Yeah.” He hesitated. “Listen… Anna. We’re workin’ on borrowed time here. Milbury… Essex wants you tomorrow. I’m gon’ haveta work quick here, chere. You’re gonna haveta come in sooner than I thought.”

“Hmph.” Her tone was sarcastic. “I guess the old charm didn’t work on Essex like you’d expected…”

“Chere,” he rejoined, “my sorta charm don’t work on Essex. Anyways… I’m gonna go head for a shower. Then take a nap. Then mosey on down to the basement. So I’ll prob’ly be outta contact for the next couple o’hours…”

“Okay, Cajun.” There was a smile in her voice. “Talk to you later.”

“Yup. Later.”

He took out the transceiver and headed for the shower. When he came out again 15 minutes later, she was standing there, looking out the window. When she heard him enter she turned and passed him an enigmatic smile that almost immediately turned into something more sensual.

“Hello, Remy,” she said.

“Anna! What the f—”

At this point he realised he was stark naked, and his first instinct was to grab for a towel, although in hindsight he wasn’t sure why he bothered.

“How the hell did you—?”

He stopped mid-sentence, suddenly realising exactly how she’d managed to pinpoint his location. He pursed his lips and crossed the room, securing the towel as he did so, going straight for
his coat.

The transmitter had been wedged into the seam of his breast-pocket.

He dug it out and glared over at her.

“Sorry,” she apologised with a smile and a shrug. “I know it’s probably bad manners to steal from a thief, but you left it lying around in that bag of yours and I couldn’t resist.”

He straightened and threw the transmitter onto the dresser with a clatter.

“This was not a part of the deal,” he said quietly, seriously, which immediately wiped the smile from her face.

“I know,” she replied. “Listen – Remy. Let’s be honest. What you *really* want from this deal is to have me on that plane with you to England.”

“And the likelihood of *that* happenin’ gets higher the safer and further away from Essex you are,” he reminded her. She visibly tried not to roll her eyes at that.

“Remy… Cute as that is, it is also insanely fucking patronising, and you know it.” He said nothing and her glance softened slightly. “You’re not my knight in shining armour. Don’t play that card with me. I know you’re kinda used to playing it with other women, but I’m not them. You said we were in this together. And crazy as it seems, that’s how we work best. Together. As equals.”

She was right. He knew she was. What she didn’t get was that Belle had been as strong and indomitable as she was – and yet he’d been unable to protect her when it mattered most. *But Anna ain’t Belle*, he told himself. All the things that had broken Anna had tempered her into something stronger than steel, tougher than anything Belle had been. So he grit his teeth and conceded to her.

“Okay,” he forced himself to say with an effort. “Together it is. Not that I have a choice right now.” He frowned. “What exactly are you here for?”

“Essex’s chip,” she answered, though her tone was more muted. “I want to ‘face with it myself. Not for the code.”

“But for the memory.” He nodded slowly. “Just in case it’s the last chance at the truth you’ll get, if hooking yourself up to the Machine doesn’t work.”

She shrugged helplessly.

“Something like that…”

His frown deepened. Again he got that feeling, the feeling that he was just a means to an end. That she didn’t want him; that she never had. That all he was was a tool, something useful to her. Nevertheless, for some reason, he still went over to the mattress and retrieved Essex’s mem-chip. When he threw it to her, she caught it deftly.

“There’s an interfacerr in the study,” he told her gruffly, turning aside to retrieve his clothes.

“Don’t be like that,” she murmured.

“Like what?”

“You’re angry at me.”
He stared down at the clothing in his hands. The truth was slowly beginning to dawn on him – this feeling that could not be named, a feeling that had been creeping over him steadily in the days, weeks and months that he had known her. Its weight was light yet hard as stone and it took his breath away. He pushed it aside, even though a part of him knew it was now impossible to ignore.

“I’m not angry at you, Anna,” he finally said quietly, his heart in his mouth. “I just… … Look. This ain’t how I usually operate. Runnin’ into a job like this – it’s sloppy. And gettin’ that chip… It was too damn easy.”

“What?” she questioned with a frown. “You’re saying we’re being set up?”

“What I’m sayin’ is,” he began slowly, “is that you should’a stayed back at the apartment. If this is a set-up, then you would’a been outta the firing line.”

She was silent, and he thought he’d convinced her to turn around and go back; but instead she was suddenly right behind him, her hand smoothing up his back and over his shoulder.

“Remy,” she said softly, “you ever thought that maybe this was easy ‘cos you’re just so damned good?”

The idea wasn’t far-fetched. He was good. He was confident enough in his own abilities to know he was. The real issue was something else, and the way things stood right now, it was easier for him to just dance around it than face it.

“Ha,” he muttered sardonically. “You sure gotta lotta faith in my capabilities, chere.”

She was standing so close now that he could feel her breath on his back.

“Don’t sell yourself short, darlin’,” she murmured. “We’re the one percent. Essex isn’t. We’re better, stronger and cleverer than him, and we always will be.”

“And Creed, and the rest of my old unit?”

“They’re good.” He could almost hear the smile in her voice. “We’re better.”

He dropped his hands, laid aside his clothes. He struggled to express the thing that was really bothering him.

“Anna.” He put his hand over hers, turning to face her and holding it tight. “You’re a distraction. An extra variable I ain’t accounted for.”

“So improvise,” she answered simply. He wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, and it must’ve showed because she spoke again. “Remy. I trust you. I didn’t for a long time, but I do now. Trust me back. You need me as much as I need you. We’ve got to have each other’s backs.”

He struggled. Yet again she was right, but there was something horrible in him – a selfishness, a covetousness – that fuelled an irrational need to prove her wrong somehow. It was yet another thing he had to consciously push away, a pale yet honest smile slanting across his lips.

“Trustin’ you ain’t the issue, chere. You think I’m good? You’re better. I don’t think I’d trust anyone else more to have my back on the field.” He put his hands on her shoulders, sweeping them down over her upper arms, his expression turning serious. “You ever thought about takin’ on a partner, chere? A business partner, I mean?”

Her eyebrow lifted.
“You mean a partner-in-crime?” He shrugged in answer and she continued ruefully: “I tried it on for size, once or twice. Wasn’t ever convinced though.” She studied his face right back. “Why? This another one of your ‘business propositions’?”

He gave a small smile, his hands sliding back up her arms.

“Just thinkin’ out loud. You were the one who said it first, chere. Back on Muir, remember? We make a good team.” His smile grew warmer. “Think of all the fun we could have in London… All the crazy heists we could pull… All the wild sex we can have… …”

He’d half meant it as a joke, but inside he felt morose, unsettled. He knew instinctively that when she got her memories back – if she did – she would be different, and the person he saw before him now would probably be gone forever.

“Hmmm.” She smirked, running her fingers lightly down his torso whilst pretending to think about his proposition. “Tempting. But you’d best have a backup plan, Cajun. I give us a week before it starts to get real old. We’ll both have so much money we won’t know what to do with it all; and I can guarantee that before we’ve even stolen our first billion, the novelty of the sex will have worn off.”

He made a doubtful noise, to which she responded by tickling his navel before tweaking the towel at his waist; it slipped to the floor between their feet.

“In which case,” she half-whispered, “we should have as much fun as we can now, before you get bored of me.”

“If you don’t get bored of me first,” he murmured, powerfully aroused by the fact that she was completely clothed and he was completely naked.

“Right now,” she answered sincerely, “I am so into you, I don’t even think that’s possible.” She kissed him, soft and lingering, on the lips. “Don’t’cha even try to convince me otherwise.”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. Instead she kissed her way slowly down his body, and when she was on her knees she looked straight up at him and sucked him gently into her mouth.

He leaned back against the dresser and willingly fell into it, switching off from everything but the sweet and mindless sensation of pleasure. All he was was a body intersecting with hers, and for a little while he could pretend he had no mind, no heart, no thought, no emotion, no future, no past.

-oOo-

There was something comforting about the night, its stillness, the cradle-like comfort of his room, embraced by the dimly-lit shadows and the scent of their bodies.

Remy stood by the side of the bed and silently slipped on his pants.

“You heading down to the basement?” she asked him.

He glanced at her sideways, lying voluptuously naked in his bed. What he wanted at that current moment, more than anything, was to stay. To while away yet more meaningless hours with her. But there was work to do, and for her sake at least he had to see it through.

“Yup.”
He pulled on his shirt and tucked it into his pants.

“Do you need me to help?” she questioned softly.

“Nope. Too risky. You ain’t on the security database, you’ll set off the alarms.” He sat on the edge of the bed and put on his boxer boots. “I won’t be gone long anyways. This is pretty much basic recon. Unless we know where that Machine is, there ain’t a lot we can do.” He finished up lacing one boot, started on the other. “Best thing you can do is wait here till I find it.”

“Okay,” she murmured. He thought maybe he’d offended her, but then he felt her hand on his back, caressing him longingly, a sigh escaping her lips. “I’ll miss you,” she said, almost absently.

“Will you?”

“Yeah.”

He shifted round to face her. She was lying there with her hair all tousled and her cheeks still flushed, and he couldn’t help but admire her, this beautiful wildcat he wasn’t quite sure he’d ever be able to tame.

“I’ll be back soon,” he assured her, brushing the hair back from her cheek tenderly. “Then we can go ‘bout figurin’ out how to start up this Machine and get your mem’ries back.”

He leaned in and kissed her, and she kissed him back. Her fingers were clutching into his shirt and he thought perhaps that she didn’t want him to leave; but when they drew apart she let him go, and the impression was gone.

He stood up and picked up his bag from the chair in the corner.

“You’re taking gear with you?” she noted wryly. “Just for some recon?”

“Yeah, well.” He hoisted the bag over his shoulder and went for the door. “I may not just be goin’ t’do some recon.” He shot her a meaningful look. “I won’t be more than an hour. Stay put, chere. Please.”

She half-smiled, sliding up into a sitting position and rearranging the pillows behind her back.

“Sure. Since you asked so nicely.”

“I’ll keep in contact while I’m gone.”

“Okay.”

“See ya.”

“See ya.”

He hesitated; then he felt awkward for hesitating, so he quickly turned and left.

-oOo-

He didn’t have complete free range of the building, despite the extensive access he’d been given, he was to learn its limits as soon as he reached the lower basement.

Back when he’d first arrived in Empharma, this floor had been his home. The bottommost
level of the tower housed all the dirty little secrets of this now world-renowned pharmaceutical corporation – all the human test subjects that fed its research into the mem-tech and that no one had the faintest idea about. He’d been one of them once, a member of this zombie-like horde that lived on the crumbling borders between fantasy and reality, between the past and the present, a waking dream without the relief of sleep. The only difference was, he’d lived, and he’d been cured.

Now he avoided the living quarter like the plague, those wards of endless white and anguished wails and shuffling feet. There was nothing to find there that he needed now. What he wanted was the doors he’d never been able to get past, the long and echoing corridors that nobody ever seemed to walk down.

There were several spaces on this floor that he’d never been able to account for, that must have belonged to rooms that were either off limits or hidden. He explored the adjoining corridors carefully, but none of the locked doors there seemed to be the right kind. From the way Anna had described the Machine, it was huge, something big enough to seat multiple people. Getting something like that into a room would require space… double doors… wide passageways… industrial sized elevators…

He backed up, went right back to where he’d begun. He mentally tried to reconstruct what he knew of the space. For a few moments he stood there, building his internal map. Then he began to walk again, this time with purpose.

This time it didn’t take him long to find it.

It was at the end of a short, wide corridor, huge double titanium doors flanked by the usual neural scanners. Two levels of protection – a password-protected door, and a scan. He knelt down on one knee and rummaged through his bag, retrieving his lockpick. The lock on the door was pretty much identical to the one he’d encountered on the safe earlier that evening, and this time he was prepared. The door was unlocked within 8 minutes – a new record.

He put away the lockpick, stood, and cocked a sideways glance at the neural scanners. He flipped open the pocket at his thigh and brought out a small black, cylindrical device. There was a button on the side and he hit it, releasing an electromagnetic pulse that was small enough to disrupt any electronic equipment within a short radius for a minimal amount of time. It was enough time, at any rate, to get him through the already unlocked doors without setting off the alarms. The scintillating green mesh in front of the doors fizzed, sputtered, and died out. He shouldered his bag once more and stepped past the scanners and through the doors. Once he was inside he shut off the EMP emitter and closed the doors behind him.

There was the thunk and drone of electric lights coming on, and at first it was so bright his eyes were dazzled. When his vision normalised he looked up and stared.

He’d been right.

There was no way he would’ve been able to steal this thing away for her.

The Machine was a gargantuan piece of machinery, scrappy and unrefined, yet not without a certain beauty. A central column, veined with a network of countless wires, scaled almost up to the ceiling; it was encircled by a ring of seats, each with its own extendable headset. A computer console, connected to the main column by a bundle of thick wires, stood to one side. The lack of casing and other exterior embellishments suggested that this was a prototype, and he wondered at its importance. So far everyone who’d spoken of it – Anna, Milbury, Doctor Frost and MacTaggert – had made it sound like something fantastic, something other. And while there was certainly an overpowering grandiosity in what he saw in front of him, it was a hideous kind of splendour – a
monumental ugly duckling.

“Anna,” he murmured breathlessly. “I’m here. It’s here.”

She was silent a long while.

“You found it?” she finally asked.

“Yeah. It’s huge.”

He walked up to it slowly. The recliner closest to him was obviously the one that had seen the most use. It had also been adjusted for someone who was of a shorter height. He put his hand on the black leather seat and imagined her sitting there, the last one ever to use it.

“You never told me it was so… …” he trailed off, unable to find the word.

“So what?”

“…Unfinished.”

Again she was quiet.

“I don’t remember,” she replied at last. “I just remember the size of it. It always towered over me.”

He looked up at the column, spiralling up towards the ceiling.

“Right,” he murmured mostly to himself. He took in a breath and shook himself. He dropped the bag on the seat and took out the pack of explosives.

“Have you ‘faced with Essex’s chip yet?” he asked her as he opened up the pack. Inside was a deck of explosives, thin, rectangular devices the size and shape of an ID card, greyish gunmetal in colour and flexible beneath his fingers.

“No,” Anna answered. “Not yet. Why?”

“Jes’ wonderin’.” He wandered over to the computer console. It was slightly dated – there was a physical keyboard on the dash which amused him. “Once you do, we’ll have the codes and be ready to start this baby up. You remember the order Dr. MacTaggert told us the password was s’posed t’be entered in?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Good.”

He slotted one of the cards inside the console, then moved back over to the column and busied himself riddling the thing with explosives.

“Remy?” her voice kicked in after a couple of minutes.

“Yah?”

“What’re you doing?”

“Nothin’.” He’d just about finished, and he slipped the now-empty pack back into his bag. “Just riggin’ this shit so that it’ll be ready to blow as soon as we’re done with it.”
“Oh.” There was a pause as he took out his phone, opened up one of his apps, and started to sync the explosives with his device. “You think of everything,” she mused appreciatively.

“I try.” The app had synced with 4 out of 20, and he decided to let it run in the background. He slipped it back into his pocket.

“Shall I come down?” she asked him.

“No. Just… stay up there in my room, okay? You need to ‘face with Essex’s chip and get the code. I’ll come up and join you, make sure you’re okay. Then you’ll need to rest, chere. Your brain’s gonna need to be as primed as it can be for this.”

She sighed.

“Okay, okay. You’re right. It’s just… I’m so close…”

“I know, chere,” he answered soothingly. “Don’t worry. This’ll all be over soon.”

He picked up the bag, turned, and came to an abrupt halt.

Raven Darkholme was standing there, only a few feet away from him.

“What the hell are you doin’ here?” he exclaimed in surprise, his mind working too fast yet too damn slow to compute the fact that this wasn’t good. She took a step towards him, her face as hard and cold as a glacier and said matter-of-factly:

“Doing what I always do. Helping Anna.”

She extended her arm – and there was a taser pointed at him.

“Wait, wha—”

He never got the chance to finish the sentence. She hit the trigger and a single split second of hideous pain engulfed him, more pain than he’d ever experienced from a taser hit. He heard himself scream as if from outside his own body; and the next millisecond the lights had gone out.

-oOo-
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Anna goes on a rampage to rescue Remy from Nathaniel Essex’s clutches...

Remy’s scream was like a jolt through Anna’s body, a cry of agony that had her sitting up in bed like a shot.

“Remy?!?” she cried out breathlessly. “Remy!”

There was no answer – just the thunderous beating of her heart and the clipped rhythm of her breathing.

Something was wrong. Something was bad.

“Shit.”

In a trice she was up out the bed and snatching at her clothes. Her mind was only able to process one thing – that Remy was in danger, that his cover had somehow been blown and that she was probably next in the firing line.

She scrambled into her underwear, her mind working rabidly, trying to join the dots, to connect what couldn’t be seen. Either Essex had seen through Remy’s ruse, or they had been betrayed. But by whom… …?

Anna halted midway through doing up her pants.

There was only one other person who’d known that all this was going down.

Raven.

“Shit,” she hissed to herself. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

Everything was against her; her emotions were a seething maelstrom of anger and anxiety. There was no time to consider whether her intuition was correct or not, whether she even had a plan left. There was only one thing on her mind.

Remy. Remy. I haveta get him out…

His name was like a battle cry, a call to arms, a reminder of what was at stake – his life.

She shoved her arms through the sleeves of her jacket, hardly able to think a rational thought. If he was harmed… If he was dead… And it was her fault… All her doing… ….

The thought was so unexpectedly painful that it took her breath away.

No time to think about it. Just get the hell out of here.

She grappled up the way she’d come in – through the drop ceiling and up into the crawlspace. No sooner had she slid the ceiling tile back into place behind her than she realised – the
“Shit,” she whispered, and she was just about to turn back and get them when she heard the door to Remy’s room burst open down below, the thud of boot steps on floorboards and the crash of furniture being overturned.

Her stomach sank and the bile rose in her throat. A litany of curses trembled on her breath. It was too late now. Too late to go back for them, to keep them from falling into Essex’s hands.

She set her teeth together so hard it hurt. She pressed a hand to her chest and there it was – Essex’s chip, still inside the breast pocket of her jacket. It was a small sliver of comfort, but it was there nevertheless. She held a card, a bargaining chip. As long as she had it, not all was lost.

“I’ve found ‘em!” she heard Graycrow’s unmistakable baritone bellow down below her. “In the mattress. Fuckin’ amateur.”

There was a slight pause, the sound of footsteps crossing the room; then an unfamiliar female voice spoke, this time in the space right down below her.

“There was someone else here. The bed’s still warm.”

Another pause; Graycrow grunted begrudgingly.

“Hmph. Looks like the intel was on point. The Cajun fuck brought his bitch girlfriend with him.”

The woman laughed, soft and sarcastic.

“Well, if that’s the case, she can’t’ve gotten very far. We’ll track her down and give her a personal demonstration of what’s in store for her thief lover. Y’hear that, bitch?!” she shouted. “LeBeau’s a dead man walking, and you’re gonna get a ringside seat while Creed tears him apart, limb from pretty boy limb!”

But Anna was already gone, moving like a panther through the crawlspace, brutal determination etched on her face. There was a horrible pressure behind her eyes, white hot and oppressive, a tidal wave of righteous fury pulsing through her with an almost volcanic force. A murderous intent, ten years dormant, was now heaving to the surface of her consciousness. Anna was gone, and Weapon Zero had replaced her, a hellcat on a deadly mission.

And she was going to need guns. Lots and lots of guns.

-oOo-

The first thing Remy was aware of was voices – murmurings at first, words he could hardly pick out in tones that were barely familiar.

There was still pain, cascades of it, rippling through his body like water. He groaned and tried to move, but nothing would respond. The muscles in his legs merely twitched and jerked uselessly.

“He’s comin’ round,” a voice finally said somewhere close by, low and gruff.

“Good,” he heard Essex’s sonorous tenor reply to his right. “Live bait is so much more effective.”
“Merde,” his brain said. It felt like someone else was thinking it, and he half laughed, half coughed. When he opened an eye everything was blurred; so he opened his mouth and instead he tried to speak.

“That weren’t… no ordinary… fuckin’ taser,” he stuttered round the syllables awkwardly, his lips barely able to form the words. There was a silence, and then suddenly a shadow encroached upon his hazy sense of vision – a face, looming in and peering at him, punctuated by the smell of rotting breath and body odour. Creed.

“That’s ‘cos it weren’t no ordinary fuckin’ taser,” he growled. “We amped up the voltage to ‘super soldier’ setting. ‘Cos you’re Weapon X, ain’tcha LeBeau.”

Well that would explain it.

Creed’s silhouette disappeared with a guttural laugh, and Remy sensed more shadows – there were about four in his periphery. His vision was beginning to normalise, and he blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the light. Shapes began to coalesce, details began to draw themselves out on his retinas; he squinted and suddenly he knew where he was.

It was the auditorium. Rows and rows of empty gilt and red velvet chairs were standing, looking up at him expectantly. He was sprawled inelegantly on a similar chair, elevated above them all. He was up on stage, performing to a grand audience of none.

Fuckin’ Essex and his theatrics, he thought wryly to himself.

There were people around him – more than the four he’d first sensed. His old team were dotted around the stage, AK-47’s in hand – Creed, whom he’d already accounted for, Kodiak, Philippa, Janos. Essex was standing off slightly to his right, looking thoughtful. Raven was a metre or so further, looking over at Essex with an intense expression he couldn’t quite read.

Raven… …

He tried to analyse her betrayal, but his mind was slow, sluggish, as if with the worst effects of the mem-tech; and the numbness in his unresponsive body was too distracting for him to focus on much else. Once again he attempted to move his leg, and all he got was some pitiful flip-flopping.

Shit… …

“Boss!”

He recognised the Graycrow’s growl, followed by the creak of boots ascending the stage. A moment later and Remy saw both him and Veronique walk in from his left and cross the boards towards Essex.

“We found the chips,” Graycrow said. He threw the slim-line case at Essex, who caught it effortlessly. With inestimable calm he opened up the box and looked inside; then he glanced up at Graycrow and Veronique with raised eyebrows.

“There’s one missing,” he said to them.

A look passed between the two that Remy was amused to read as nervous. Veronique opened her mouth to answer – a bad idea under most circumstances – but luckily for her, Essex forestalled her.
“No doubt the girl has it,” he commented. “I take it she wasn’t in LeBeau’s room?”

Again a short look passed between Graycrow and Veronique, before she deigned to reply: “No. She wasn’t.”

Essex grimaced.

“How disappointing,” he murmured.

“She was there,” Raven spoke up confidently from the sidelines. “He was talking to her when I found him.” She held up a finger and he saw his transceiver stuck to the tip. “They were in contact through this. You could probably get him to try and communicate with her on it, but knowing Weapon Zero, she’s already turned it off.”

Remy couldn’t help it. He laughed, a broken, self-recriminatory sound that pierced the silence and drew everyone’s eyes to him. Only Raven refused to look his way.

“You are some fuckin’ bitch, Raven,” he ground out hoarsely as, slowly, piece by piece, the jigsaw puzzle of this grand betrayal began to fall into place. “When I’m outta this chair, I’m gonna break your fuckin’ neck. If Anna ain’t done it first, that is.”

She did look at him then, shooting him a glance that should’ve turned him to stone. “I think not, LeBeau,” she said.

“Really?” He was disdainfully incredulous. “C’mon, Raven. She is Weapon fuckin’ Zero after all – runnin’ round this buildin’ right now, free as a bird. And you don’t know where the hell she is. On top o’ that, she’s prob’ly seriously fuckin’ pissed, and when she finds out the hand you’ve had to play in all this, all that rage is gonna be directed squarely at you.”

Raven’s face turned blank, her eyes empty. She walked over to him like a predator advancing on its prey, leaning over him, bracing her weight on either arm of his chair.

“You’re right, LeBeau,” she hissed. “But,” and she gave a tight, humourless smile, “I have a secret weapon.”

She pushed herself away from him, walking back over towards Essex. Remy followed her with his eyes, his jaw taut, feeling his muscles slowly begin to work again. But he didn’t try them – not yet.

“What’re you gettin’ outta this, Raven?” he asked her quietly yet firmly. “Whatever it is, Anna will never forgive you, and you know it.”

Her body went rigid – she raised her head and gave a weary sigh before turning back to him, her expression one of unconcealed disgust.

“LeBeau,” she levelled with him frostily, “you assume too much. I get nothing from this. I’ve been Weapon X a lot longer than you have. I never stopped. Unlike you.” She sneered. “Your loyalties were quite clear. From the beginning, in fact. I waited and waited for you to play your hand. But you never quite could, could you? It gave you away, LeBeau. It gave away your true intentions. You never intended to hand her in at all.” Her voice lowered to a barely audible hiss. “You think you can play the game, LeBeau. But you have no idea.”

She whipped away from him again, obviously done talking. It was too late to muse on the irony of it all – that he hadn’t been the only one who’d playing Essex’s mole. Obviously Raven had
been under much deeper cover, and for a much longer time. But he wasn’t about to waste any more time on her. Instead, now that his eyesight was pretty much back to normal, he scoured the room carefully. If he was bait, he was in the right place to act as one. A wide open space, hardly any cover, perfect for a confrontation – Anna would have the low-ground, and Essex’s cronies would have a pretty easy mark. But then there were other points of attack she could choose – the control booth at the back, the boxes way up high, to the sides. All these locations would give her the high ground, and pretty damn good cover. Essex had realised this – each member of Remy’s old team had one of those locations covered by a firearm.

“And what,” Essex was saying to his right, “if this doesn’t work, Raven? How can you be so sure that Weapon Zero will make an appearance?”

“Believe me,” Raven replied, casting Remy a sidelong glance, “she’ll come.”

Remy ignored the observation, mostly because he knew that she was right – Anna would come, and that realisation was both a fear and a comfort. He concentrated instead on trying to move his body, which finally appeared to be loosening up. Focusing on his feet managed to elicit little more than a toe waggle… but it was something.

“She’s just some freakin’ mem-junkie,” Janos muttered sullenly behind him. “Like hell she could pick us all off.”

“You’re a fool if that’s what you believe,” Essex spoke coldly. “She can do what all of you can do put together, about a hundred times better any of you – and she’s been doing it since she was thirteen.”

There was admiration in his voice, undisguised – Remy heard it loud and clear. His muscles were slowly beginning to unlock; a ripple of sensation surged through his right leg, then his left. Despite this he dared not move an inch – not yet.

“Butshit,” Graycrow said gruffly behind him, to his left – his body was tingling all over with sensation now, his limbs freeing up silently, one by one. Finally, he could move – but he was still outnumbered. It was far better to bide his time, to wait for his chance. “It don’t matter how much fuckin’ trainin’ you have,” Graycrow continued. “If you’re a mem-junkie you can have 50 years of trainin’ and it don’t mean jack shit.”

Remy listened, only to measure the distance between the two of them. It could have been two or three feet, tops.

“That’s what I’m sayin’,” Janos rejoined irritably. “I mean, how dangerous can she be? How’s a mem-junkie s’posed to even hold a fuckin’ gun straight?”

BLAM!

The gunshot rang out loud as thunder in a tin can; Janos hit the floor behind Remy, spraying blood and brain matter onto his back – and it was exactly the cue that he needed. He sprang to his feet, swinging round and grabbing the chair – the only weapon he had – with both hands in one graceful movement, slamming it into Graycrow with as much strength as he could muster. The chair hit its target and shattered into a dozen pieces; Graycrow hit the floor with his stomach, stunned but little else. For a few wild heartbeats there was nothing but chaos – boots on the boards, the stench of blood, bullets ricocheting, shouts ringing, a confused medley of movement. It was the perfect distraction, and Remy brought his boot down onto Graycrow’s hand, snatched his gun, took aim… And then there was Creed, smashing his fist into his jaw and taking him off guard… They wrestled for the gun like all hell depended on it, and any other day he would’ve had him, any
other day it would’ve been easy, but his limbs were still shot and he was at a palpable disadvantage… …

Another fist to the jaw and he was on the floor with his ears ringing and blood in his mouth and everything had turned white; he tried to lever himself up with both hands, shaking away the fuzz in his head slowly… And suddenly he was being lifted up by the scruff of his neck and clean off the floor. He felt his back slam against a wall, taking the wind out of him, and he coughed and spluttered a bit as he tried to regain his bearings.

When he finally came round again an eerie calm had fallen, and everyone appeared to be behind some sort of cover. The only exceptions to that were himself and Creed, who had him pinned up against the wall with a gun against his head. Janos’ body was lying in a smeared pool of blood, a little off to his right.

“She’s up in the control booth,” he heard Philippa say.

“Yeah, well,” Creed snarled, pressing the gun against his temple, “the next time she shoots I’m gonna blow this fuckin’ Cajun’s brains o—”

**BLAM!**

Creed’s hand exploded into a shower of blood and bone and he roared an impotent howl of pain and rage, dropping Remy to the floor and clutching onto his mangled hand as the gun skidded across the polished floor and off the edge of the stage. There was another confused stir as aims and sights were readjusted – Remy couldn’t work out where the shot had come from, but it definitely hadn’t come from the control booth.

“Really now, Weapon Zero!” Essex called out from behind Graycrow’s hulking fame, his voice echoing out into the auditorium, implacably calm in the face of this one-person assault. “This is becoming exceedingly tiresome! These pathetic targets are beneath you! Come, show yourself! I’m the one you want!”

There was a silence, filled only by the whimpering wheezes of Creed, who was on his knees, nursing his broken stump. It was ended by a flicker of movement at the back of the auditorium, behind an ornate pillar – a volley of gunfire crackled as Essex’s remaining gunners traded bullets with their target, only for Vertigo to go down with a shot to the shin.

Three of Remy’s old unit were down; three more to go.

And his legs had seized up again, and he could hardly get to his feet… …

He looked across the stage and saw Essex, and then Raven, her face white, hunkering down behind a large stage prop, staring at him with a fierce intensity he couldn’t decode… …

And he needed a weapon, something…

**Creed’s gun… …**

Another shot rang out as he got to his feet, and this time it was Kodiak who was sprawled out on the floor with his chest gushing blood, and Remy finally began to sprint towards the edge of the stage and—

**BLAM!**

His left leg gave out from under him, bringing him spinning to the floor, and at first he
thought it was just the lingering side effects of the taser hit spazzing out his tendons… He got back to his feet, and as he did so he realised that he was feeling a different kind of pain, burning and familiar, and he looked down, seeing blood on his shin; and suddenly Essex was right there next to him with a pistol in his hand, and for some reason he *still* didn’t understand… …

“What da fuck you—”

And Essex smashed him across the face with the pistol and onto his back.

Silence.

An ominous lull descended, the absence of gunfire a sinister lullaby in and of itself.

“It’s time for you to stop this nonsense now, Weapon Zero!” Essex called out with a threadbare, though confident, calm. “I think I’m talking to you in terms you understand. I want that chip. You will give it to me. *Now.*”

More silence.

Remy’s senses were burning, enough that it was painful to turn his head and glance down the length of the auditorium. There was still no sign of Anna, nothing. He took in a breath that seared like ice through his throat. How far to the edge of the stage? Only a few feet, he guessed. Over the edge was a meagre form of cover – and, more importantly, Creed’s gun. He glanced back up at Essex, the barrel of the pistol pointed straight at him.

There was no way he could get to the edge of the stage without Essex clocking what he was doing. He was an open target.

And Anna…?

He looked back down the auditorium and prayed she’d stay hidden.


-oOo-

A thunderous silence descended, the sound of blood rushing in her ears, of her heart pounding in her chest.

Anna took in a shallow breath, her finger paused on the trigger, all her rage and violence pulled out from under her like a carpet from under her feet.

The world was reeling, all her sensations heightened to a free-falling pinpoint, a potent cocktail of adrenaline and cortisol.

She lowered the rifle in her hand slightly and swallowed hard.

All her training was screaming at her to back up, to slink away, to re-evaluate… But it wasn’t her training that had brought her here, and it wasn’t her training that was speaking to her now. Everything she’d ever learned about herself was a soundtrack of static in her mind, something formless and impossible to grip onto. She was as lost at sea as a stowaway. A little girl standing in a field, staring up into a sunflower, overwhelmed by one thing – emotion.

*Fear.*
Essex raised the gun again, pointed it at Remy, who was stirring slowly from his crumpled position on the floor, his left leg bleeding freely.

“You’ve impressed me, Weapon Zero,” he declared flatly. “You have proven yourself to me where I doubted you before. But do not try my patience. It is already extremely thin. You would not, I think, want to test me.”

His voice echoed into the agonising quiet, words falling like dust inside it; and then there was the crunch of footsteps in plaster and masonry, the world crackling sluggishly back to life.

Anna emerged from behind the pillar slowly, arms raised, a rifle in one hand, a pistol in the other. She tossed them either side of her with a clatter.

“All right,” she announced in a low, thick voice that nevertheless carried the full length of the room with effortless aplomb. “I’m here. I’m unarmed. You have me.”

She crossed the room slowly, hands raised, her senses frayed almost to the point of collapse. Her vision was tunnelling, her extremities prickling. This wasn’t just fear. This was something else. Something that was familiar and yet more frightening to her than fear itself. It was messy and beautiful and distracting, and she shoved it away violently, her eyes flickering almost involuntarily towards Remy. He was on his back, inching his way imperceptibly towards the edge of the stage.

*That’s right Remy, get low, get behind the stage so I can cover you… …*

*With what?*

*With my bare hands if I haveta… …*

Her eyes were back on the stage – Essex standing there with the pistol in his hands; Graycrow and Philippa with their long guns pointed at her; Raven looking unarmed but probably not. *Raven*. Her eyes burned.

She heard the patter of footsteps coming in behind her from all directions and she knew she was surrounded. Backup had finally arrived, against a grand army of one – bent and broken Anna Marie Raven. With a gesture from Essex they fell back to the sidelines, and it gave her some hope. What kind of hope, she wasn’t sure. Essex’s mem-chip was still in her jacket pocket, and she wasn’t about to give it up, not without a fight.

“You made your point,” she called out to Essex, advancing past the rows of chairs slowly. “You got my attention. Leave him alone now. This is between you and me, not him. Leave him out of this.”

Essex’s only answer was to raise the gun and shoot.

Remy collapsed back to the floor without a sound, clutching instinctively at his right leg.

Anna came to an abrupt halt, her arms dropping to her sides, her ears ringing, her vision whitening. This wasn’t happening again. It wasn’t. This trap she had allowed herself to fall into, to *care*, to become a *person* once more… … All it ever did was drag her right back to him. To Essex, to Weapon X. To Cody’s pale, pale ghost.

“We don’t play by your rules, Weapon Zero,” Essex announced coldly. “We play by mine.”
She couldn’t move. Her eyes were fixed on Remy’s crumpled form, his pain swimming through her like some tortured kind of symbiosis. Her whole being was flaring with it – it stung at her nerves and churned in her gut and clawed at her breath and stabbed at her eyes.

“Don’t hurt him,” she heard herself gasp. “Please. I’ll do anything you want, just—”

“You know what I want,” Essex cut her off coolly. “Give it to me. *Now.*”

She hesitated. Her mind whirled, the white hot buzz tightening to a crescendo. She could almost feel the chip in her pocket, a talisman, her past and everything in it encapsulated into one tiny nugget so precious it hurt to even contemplate giving it away. She couldn’t. She couldn’t.

Remy stirred. He lifted his head and looked right at her, his face white, his features locked in a horrible grimace of pain.

“Anna,” he said her name. “He doesn’t need the fuckin’ chip… He already knows the code on it off by heart… Turn around, walk away… Remember what you are, chere… You’re Weapon X… There ain’t nothin’ left t’gain… No cards left t’play… So walk… …”

Essex lifted the gun again. This time the shot was like a spear in her senses, and she heard Remy cry out this time, a long, low, stifled moan that made her visibly start as he curled in on himself, choking against the agony.

It had been a shot to the stomach – the slowest and most painful of deaths.

Anna’s fists clenched and unclenched at her sides, her eyes suddenly swimming.

“Please…” was the only word she could get out, a thin, wavering plea that sounded ghostly and impotent even to her own ears.

“Don’t think this is a game I play out of mere greed, Weapon Zero,” Essex informed her icily. “I merely wish to teach you a lesson. What you have is my property – I want it back. LeBeau is very important to me. But you, and that chip, are far more so. It will pain me to dispose of him, but I will do it.”

He lifted the pistol again, this time aiming at Remy’s head. Anna took a step forward, then another. Her eyes were strangely blurred and she blinked. Something hot and wet fell down her face and, ridiculously, she didn’t understand what it was.


She took another step forward; and Remy’s voice was suddenly there between the laboured rasps of breath that were escaping noisily from his lips.

“Anna… Fuck, woman… Don’t…”

“The Empharma nano-machines are very efficient at repairing dead and dying cells,” Essex intoned dispassionately above him. “But I’m fairly sure they can’t fix a bullet in the brain. Perhaps I should test this theory.”

His finger touched the trigger.

“*Stop it!*” Anna shrieked.

He paused, lowered the gun slightly. He looked down on her. She was visibly shaking,
trembling so hard it was difficult to tell whether it was with emotion or mem-intoxication. The world danced a solitary pavane before her eyes, everything moving in slow motion. Her face was wet.

“I’ll give you the chip,” she said as calmly as she could, although her voice wavered, giving her away. “Just… Don’t hurt him anymore. Please.”

Essex dropped his arm to his side, but didn’t put away the gun.

“Put it down here,” he ordered her after a short pause, indicating to his feet. “No sudden movements.”

She obeyed, climbing the steps to the stage, slow and measured, two dozen guns trained on every inch of her. She walked past Raven, the only friend she’d ever had, the only mother she could remember, unable to meet her gaze. She walked past the barrels of Graycrow and Philippa’s AK-47’s, towards the man she’d tried to outrun for years. Essex.

She halted.

Remy was on the floor, and their eyes met. His gaze was wide, intense, trying to impart something to her she didn’t understand, chocolate brown eyes bright with pain and—

And for the first time she realised. She knew exactly what it was. It skewered her heart and she choked on it. It gushed up from the depths of her as warm as blood and sweeter, this long-buried feeling breaking to the surface from under years’ worth of mire, death and decay. She was crying. She could acknowledge that fact now. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and dripping off her chin and so many things were dying, so many things were being born anew. All too late.

She tore her gaze from his with an effort and made up her mind.

Her hand trembled as she opened up her jacket and took out the chip.

She tossed it on the floor between her and Essex, and she didn’t care anymore, she didn’t care, it was all ended, all gone – he was the only thing that remained, that she had left.

She stared at Essex and the tears wouldn’t stop falling.

“Take him to the med bay,” Essex ordered.

There was no triumph in his voice as he said it, no scorn. Feet scuffled onto the stage, two security guards arriving to do their master’s bidding, taking Remy under each armpit and dragging him away. The warmth inside her extended towards him like an extra limb, the compulsion to touch him, to hold him, to keep him safe – she held it down lest her body follow.

“Emotion is a powerful motivator, Weapon Zero,” Essex commented with a thin smile. “I see you’ve been spoiled in that regard. We shall have to do something about that.”

He raised his hand in a commanding gesture and—

THUNK.

The dart slammed into the side of her neck.

Whatever was in it began to take effect almost immediately; her neck was burning and she reached for the dart, yanked it out with a wild cry of rage and despair. No sooner had she done so than her limbs were seizing and she felt her hand constrict. The dart fell uselessly to the floor.
“No,” she rasped impotently. “No no no. Goddammit no…”

She dropped to her knees but didn’t even feel them hit the floor.

This couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t.

The dart was on the floor beside her and her fist curled round it, lifting it in a quivering haze of movement. She’d just managed to stumble to her feet again when the second dart hit. For a split second she wavered, almost losing her balance. One foot shot out sluggishly, then another – slowly she regained her balance. Her legs were barely supporting her, her gait weaving as if drunk… and she glared up at Essex with the dart in her hand, this one precious weapon clutched in her fingers like an avenging angel.

“I’m gonna kill you,” she said in a furious whisper. “I’m gonna kill you.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Are you now?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

She thought she could. Her muscles were still spasming, but she was holding the tremors down enough to figure she could throw that dart between his eyes if she concentrated hard.

She raised her arm and the third dart struck. She wobbled, straightened. Everything was tunnelling down into some existential whirlpool. She couldn’t raise her arm. She struggled, and it was as leaden as a deadweight. Her knees crashed back to the floor, and she felt the pressure of the tranquilisers slowly pressing in on her, an inevitable rush of gloriously delicious somnolence.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, she was aware of Essex stepping towards her, of his face looking down on her from a million miles away. She stared back up at him, hate radiating from her. No more fear. That was gone.

“Anna Marie Raven,” he spoke in a voice that swirled round her like water. “Raven – from the Anglo Saxon ‘hraefn’. Meaning a thief, a scoundrel. A rogue.” A cold smile expanded across his face, wider and wider and wider until it seemed to her addled mind that it was engulfing her. “You know, Moira always did tell me it was in your genes. Sometimes I wondered about your ancestors. About the sort of people they were, to make someone like you.”

She toppled over onto her side with a dull smack – and that’s when they started. The tremors. The memories crashing in over one another.

Screaming in her ears and Tanya’s tears and Cody’s dead, unseeing eyes… Yashida reading the Asahi Shinbun and Ophelia Sarkissian inhaling smoke into her lungs and Emma Frost looking down at the ugly, gangly, forlorn little girl lying in the bed… … The girl staring up into the bottomless, black heart of the sunflower… …

And there they are, all the dead and the disappeared and the missing—

“Don’t touch her!” Essex snapped somewhere above her. “Let the drugs take effect!”

The hideous memories were ripped down into a whirlpool and she followed them helplessly into—

Oh. This is okay. This is okay. I can take this...

His voice. His face. His touch.

The waste of the last five years given meaning by his presence. By the comfort of his embrace. By the passion of his kiss. By the fact that he cared.

He made her feel alive. He made her feel alive.

“I didn’t know…” she murmured to the light. “I didn’t realise… …”

And the darkness yanked her under.

-oOo-
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Anna and Remy both deal with captivity in Empharma Headquarters...

He was dreaming of her.

Belladonna Boudreaux, her voice, the last message he’d got from her.

_I still love ya, _she’d said, the words soft and slurred like she was drunk, or half asleep. _Y’think I made a mistake, Rem? Lord knows I didn’t wanna send ya those divorce papers, but I was so angry an’ hurt an’ grievin’ and… … … But everythin’s so cold now… so empty… so dark… I’m so alone… Everyone’s gone… You’re the only thing I have left, and… …_

She’d never hung up the phone. The message had gone on and on into silence.

Later, when he’d finally arrived at her place, as soon as he’d stepped through the door, he’d known she was dead. Even now he wasn’t able to say how or why he’d known, but he’d known. Perhaps it had been the silence – the same silence he’d heard on her message, on his phone – honest and impartial and devastatingly final.

And then _she_ was there.

_Anna._

Leaning her head against the window in his apartment, huddled up so small and insignificant on his windowsill in her green silk kimono with her back to him, saying: _Now I feel so empty. So cold._

The words had hit him. Belle’s last words, haunting him from the grave.

At the time the thought had entered his mind – a troubling, peripheral thought that he’d barely acknowledged then, but that now seemed all-consuming.

_ _I don’t want you to die._

_ _I don’t want you to die, Anna._

The thought swirled round him like smoke, softly insistent, dragging him up from the depths of sleep and slowly into consciousness. There was no pain, he realised. Perhaps _he_ was the one who was dead.

“My apologies, LeBeau,” Essex’s voice said somewhere close by, accompanied by the steady beat of a heart monitor. “But I think even you can appreciate the rather tiresome predicament I was in.”

The words were like ice on his senses, and in a nanosecond he was wide awake and in attack mode, ready to lunge from his prone position straight at the enemy. All he succeeded in doing was jolting the bed he was lying on violently. It was only then that he realised that he had been
strapped down by his wrists and ankles; he fought them uselessly, his flesh grating against the bonds.

“I wouldn’t do that, LeBeau,” Essex commented without a trace of sarcasm, looking over Remy incuriously from his bedside. “You are still in quite a fragile state. I would take no pleasure in seeing you further injured.”

Remy gave up, sinking back down onto the mattress and glaring back up at his captor.

“Bite me,” he growled through gritted teeth. Essex’s mouth jerked into a humourless little smile that disappeared just as quickly.

“You are a thoroughly foolish young man,” he observed as if talking about an inanimate specimen. “Too much baggage, too much self-indulgence, too quick to anger and too quick to love. If only we had been able to erase those pesky memories of yours sooner.”

He turned away, to a computer console that Remy knew held his vitals. He took Essex’s momentary distraction to study his prison. It was a standard enclosed hospital room, one of the ones on the basement floors, just like the one he’d spent the first few months of his life at Empharma in. That at least gave him an advantage – he knew virtually every nook and cranny of these rooms already.

“If you’ve hurt Anna… …” he began, giving Essex exactly the kind of sentiment he knew he was expecting; and right on cue the scientist tutted.

“And why should I hurt Weapon Zero?” he queried, this time with a touch of sarcasm. “See – now your emotions speak. She’s safe. Forget about her.”

“Heh? So’s I can be exactly the sorta zombie you once turned her into?” Remy scoffed, slipping a finger up into one of the straps and testing it gingerly. “No thanks.”

Pain was slowly beginning to leak into his consciousness, and he bit back on it, his finger continuing to feel inside the strap’s fastening and not getting very far.

“You didn’t mind the idea so much when you first came here,” Essex noted dryly. “In fact, I seem to remember that that was the driving force behind most of the good work you accomplished here.”

“Yeah, well… I may’ve changed my mind ‘bout dat bullshit… Didn’t know then that you basically planned t’have me turn into your new Weapon Zero… train me up to interface with all those peoples’ mem’ries, their identities… You did a good job of makin’ it seem like all I’d have t’do is carry out your dirty work for the parts of my past I wanted erased… Guess you conveniently forgot t’ tell me I was gonna take Anna’s place…”

He gave up on the fastening – for now, at least. The increasing pain in his body was too much of a distraction.

“Somehow, I doubt such a thing would’ve bothered you,” Essex remarked. “Until you chose to become enamoured with my property, that is.” He paused, staring at the computer console closely. “Your pain levels appear to be spiking. I would urge you to calm yourself, LeBeau. You are already on quite an inordinately high level of painkillers.”

“She ain’t your property,” Remy seethed, ignoring him. “She’s a fuckin’ human bein’. She deserves to live a goddamn life like the rest of us.”

Essex passed him a pointed look.
“Rich, coming from you,” he commented.

Remy watched as he turned away, picking up a syringe and a vial of something from a nearby tray.

“The truth is,” Essex continued flatly, “that Weapon Zero is not a human being like the rest of us. She has no memory of her childhood, no concept of what it is to be a child. If I hadn’t lost sight of her, she would have had no concept of what it is to be an adult either.” He stabbed the needle into the vial, slowly drawing its transparent contents into the syringe. “You’ve seen the image, LeBeau. Lady Justice, above nearly every courthouse in America. Sword in one hand, scale in the other. Blind and impartial. That was what Weapon Zero was supposed to be. Justice. Rewriting the wrongs of this world.”

“Wrongs, what wrongs?” Remy muttered belligerently. There was a blazing pain in his abdomen that was hurting like hellfire.

“Oh, so many wrongs,” Essex replied unsmilingly, turning back towards him, the syringe now full in his hand. “This world is in a tumult LeBeau, a chaos. Everyday humanity destroys itself, willingly. It marches towards an inevitable precipice of destruction as inexorably as our planet circles the sun. We know we are killing our world, killing our species, killing our resources, killing all life that inhabits this world along with us. Yet we refuse to stop. Why do you think that is, LeBeau? Why, in God’s name, do you think we might wilfully want to destroy ourselves?”

The pain was snaking upwards, engulfing him. He could barely breathe.

“Maybe ’cos this world is fuckin’ shit,” he hissed. “And we all wanna die anyway, and take each other wit’ us on the way out t’hell.”

And Essex looked down on him with a smile that was almost sad.

“Yes. Exactly.”

He lifted the syringe and began to inject it into Remy’s saline drip.

“But what the hell has Anna gotta do wit’ any o’dat…?” he wondered out loud; and again Essex looked at him as if studying a test subject.

“Try to think of a world,” he murmured, “where all the hideous little details of life have been erased. Where all the traumas of this world have been destroyed. Where hate and jealousy and greed have become footnotes on the story of humanity. Where it becomes a senseless endeavour to destroy all the precious things one has.”

The pain was slowly thinning, and Remy slowly began to relax as the painkiller threaded through his veins.

“Sounds like some fantasy to me…” he muttered.

“Far from it.” Essex laid aside the syringe quietly. “Humans are a walking bundle of neuroses brought about by all the trauma they’ve suffered throughout their lives. Erase that trauma, and you make a perfectly happy, docile, pliable human being, who has no interest in violence, aggression and hate. Weapon Zero has that power. She has the power to completely rewrite the course of a person’s life, to make all their pain go away. Imagine what that could do, to a scientist, a philosopher, a banker, a politician, a world leader. We can only save ourselves by wanting to. We can only save this world because it is what we really, truly desire. There is still time for that. There is still time to reverse the horrors we have inflicted upon this world. Weapon Zero can make that
possibility a reality.”

The pain was almost entirely gone again. He gazed over at Essex with a sorrowful grimace.

“And she’ll be the only one who will ever remember it all – the whole world’s sufferin’, never forgotten, a burden carried by one. Anna Marie Raven, the trashcan of humankind. No fuckin’ way am I gonna let that happen to her.”

But Essex merely gave an irritable sigh.

“There are always sacrifices to be paid for the greater good, LeBeau.”

“But she’ll be the only one payin’ that price. For an eternity. Hardly seems fair, does it?”

“There will be others.”

“Ha. Like me?” He laughed derisively. “Sure, maybe the idea mighta been intriguin’ once. But now, after seein’ what that shit’s done to Anna, I’m pretty sure I’m givin’ you the appropriate response when I say this: Fuck. Off.”

He would’ve given him the finger too if his hands hadn’t been pinned down. As it was all he could do was stare Essex out with an insolent glare that was supposed to communicate the fact that trying to convince him otherwise was a complete and utter waste of time. The message wasn’t lost on Essex. He pressed his lips together and gave a harassed sigh.

“You disappoint me, LeBeau,” he said helplessly. “But don’t worry. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to change your mind. In the meantime,” and he went to the door, opening it up and looking back at Remy pointedly, “I suggest you recover. And think about all the things we’ve discussed. You hold great potential, LeBeau. There is much you can achieve in this world – if you cooperate.”

He left, shutting the door firmly behind him. It was no surprise to Remy when he heard the electronic locks and bolts turning, and he swore under his breath. He yanked at his arm restraints, finding no give in the fastenings. An angry, pent-up breath surged out of his chest as he gave up on that and looked around the room again.

What’s the fuckin’ use if I’m tied down t’this bed?

He needed to get out. He needed to finish what he’d started. He needed his phone.

An’ b’fore you get t’do any of that, LeBeau, he told himself sternly, ya gotta get outta these damn restraints.

He flopped back against the sheets, closed his eyes, and inhaled a deep, relaxing breath. He concentrated on the straps at his wrists and switched everything else off. And then, just like always, he silently got to work.

-oOo-

Time had merged into one huge, static, monolithic mass, and somewhere within it Anna sank and surfaced, a minnow against a colossal tide with no hope of escape.

Pinpoints of consciousness pierced the canvas of her existence, brief moments of clarity where she would be wracked with an unspeakable agony… Needles sinking into her skin,
penetrating deep inside her body, deeper and deeper and deeper, right down into her bones, into her marrow… …

Screams would permeate her, reverberate inside her skull over and over; it wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t end, and somehow at some point she would realise… … The screams were her own, inarticulate cries of unbearable torment that brought a flurry of movement around her, of fevered whisperings… And then there would be the drugs coursing through her veins again, the blissful anaesthetic, and she would sink back inside the place where there was no time and there was no pain, and Anna Raven was finally a nothing.

She awakened right back where she had begun, 16 years ago – in a cell, no windows, no shade, no colour, nothing but lights and whiteness and a faint electrical hum that had been the soundtrack to her teenage years.

She lay on the bed, motionless, and imagined the sun rising, the sun falling, the moon shining its milky light on her, the things she had seen on the outside filling her up from the inside, laughter and tears and anger and hate and sorrow; the taste of crab salad and the cool of the rain on her skin; the searing heat of a wound and the pounding drumbeat of her footsteps as she ran.

Sex with a man who meant nothing, and sex with a man who meant the world.

The difference.

The difference between the two.

She closed her eyes and slept, or imagined she did; and then the virtually seamless door in her prison snapped open, jarring her into wakefulness… She sat up, shielding her eyes against the light, but they were already on top of her, and she struggled briefly until she felt the needle in her neck and they dropped her back against her cot like dropping a sack of potatoes, and she stared at the ceiling, the white white ceiling with the world spinning lazily above her.

And then suddenly she was moving, rough hands pulling her upward and arranging her in a seat, her arms being bound behind her back, and she looked down at her feet and the ground felt so close, so close… …

“Weapon Zero,” said a hazy voice.

She made a noise in reply, a grunt or a moan or something. It was okay. It was okay. Everything felt so easy. So inoffensive. So open wide. No resistance.

“Weapon Zero,” the voice said again, this time closer. “Can you hear me?”

She didn’t answer. A part of her knew there were drugs in her, stealing away her inhibitions, her sense and reason, but… it didn’t matter… it felt so good not to care… to just shut off… …

Fingers touched her chin and lifted her head up. There was someone sitting in front of her, a fuzzy shadow that was so familiar… Essex… … Her head lolled to one side slightly, her eyes rolling back in her head.

“Perhaps a touch too much sodium pentothal,” the voice mused. “It is so hard to calibrate for you, my dear.”
He dropped his hand and she slumped back against the chair, no fight left in her.

“You have something I need, Weapon Zero,” he said. “I need to start the Machine, you see. But I need the codes, and I need them in the correct order. Usually LeBeau would be the one to do all the memory retrieval for me, but he is… rather indisposed at the moment. You, however… You’ve ‘faced with all the mem-chips, or so Raven tells me. Give the codes to me, and the Machine will start again.”

The Machine… start the Machine again. Yes. Yes, she wanted that. Or she had, once. She wasn’t sure any more. Wasn’t there something in the Machine she was supposed to want? That Remy was supposed to be helping her to get…?

She opened her mouth and a sound came out.

“Yes?” Essex said.

The word pushed at her mouth and she stammered it out slowly.

“Remy… …”

It was a few seconds before Essex answered.

“Ah yes.” His tone was soft, serious. “I’d quite forgotten. You needn’t worry yourself about that, Weapon Zero. He’s alive and well. I admit, for a few moments I thought you would force me to dispose of one of my most prized possessions. Raven swore to me you wouldn’t see him harmed. I’m glad to say she was right. Now,” and he stood, his shadow towering over her. “The codes, Weapon Zero. I want to know the codes.”

She stared up at him, almost uncomprehending, and he bent over her suddenly, taking her cheeks in his hands, getting right up in her face and hissing: “The codes, Weapon Zero. What. Are. They?”

The numbers welled up in her head, effortless memories that barely needed a prompt to recall, but there was something inside of her screaming that this was wrong, that she shouldn’t give him what he wanted… …

But that was the plan, wasn’t it? To restart the Machine?

Yes…

And she was so tired of fighting. So tired. She just wanted to lie down and sleep… …

One by one the numbers began to fall out of her mouth, drip, drip, drip, all her secrets bleeding free.

His hands pushed away her face, and she sagged forward over the irresistible weight of her own body. Essex said nothing more – he’d got what he’d come for. Almost immediately there were hands under her arms, and she was being dragged to her cot once more.

-oOo-

It was impossible for her to tell how many days had passed before the drugs finally wore off. There was still no way to tell the time, and so she sat in the silence and whiled it away like she’d always done as a kid – distracting herself with all the memories she’d interfaced with, the stories that she’d never lived but that were now irrevocably her own.
It didn’t work, not anymore.

Her own mind kept distracting her, her own memories and experiences.

Thoughts of him plucked at her mind until she was almost driven to madness.

On the one hand he was a comfort, a thing to hold tight and give her sustenance through the lonely monotony of her captivity. On the other hand he was a torture, the idea that he might be dead or dying or maimed or locked up too a source of horrible pain. She had led him into a lion’s den, but it wasn’t the fact that she had done so willingly that hurt the most. It was that there were so many things she wanted to say to him, but that were now too late. Would she ever see him again? Would he still feel the same way about her when all this was done…?

After a while she began to measure time by the meals that they left her. The regular rhythm of these unseen deliveries would ebb and flow like the tides. A tray would be passed through the slot in the seamless door; she would leave it and wait for it to be taken away and replaced with her next meal. Her meds would never accompany them. At first she thought that was a good thing – the endless oblivion of a neural stutter somehow seemed like a blissfully convenient form of escape… Until she realised that something had changed. There were no more tremors, there was no more bleed effect. No more hallucinations and no more random memories resurfacing. Suddenly she found herself inflicted with a clarity of mind that was as unsettling as it was miraculous.

She sat on her cot and for the first time in years she was able to examine her thoughts, her feelings, without the confusion, the endless rush of distraction. She thought about starlight and gunpowder and the view from La Princesse… but most of all she thought of him. She held him close enough to comfort, but not to burn. Whatever she felt was quickly masked by the gnawing bite of hunger and soon she fell into a fevered sleep.

When she woke again there was breakfast by her door.

It was morning, but which morning she didn’t know.

She sat up on her cot and tried to meditate, to switch herself off from everything. Yet again there were none of the usual symptoms of mem-intoxication, nor of withdrawal, which should have helped, but… still, there was hunger.

She turned her back on the food and waited for it to be taken away.

Perhaps two hours passed before she heard footsteps outside her cell – not that of the usual single person that usually brought her meals, but three different sets.

She swivelled round to face them just as the door opened.

In walked two men in tactical gear, armed enough to make her almost feel flattered.

The last person to walk in was Raven.

“Hello, Anna,” she said.

Anna said nothing. She merely levelled her old mentor with a blank stare. Apparently it was what Raven had been expecting, as she drew up a small metal stool that one of her chaperones had brought for her, and sat down on it with an equally impassive stare. The only movement was
from the guards, who took up their positions silently – one by the door, the other by the wall opposite. Between the three of them they had her fairly well fenced in, though not insurmountably so.

For several long seconds neither said a thing, Anna making it plain that she was not going to be the first to break. If Raven was here it had to be to parlay. There could be no other reason.

“You need to eat,” she said at last.

Silence.

“We need you to be strong.”

More silence.

“So that you can use the Machine.”

Still Anna said nothing, sitting as still as statue, her hands in her lap. A small, wry smile finally touched Raven’s lips.

“Is this how it’s going to be, Anna? You’re going to starve yourself to death? Rather petulant, don’t you think?”

Anna blinked, slowly.

“I trusted you,” she said. A visible breath surged through Raven’s body. She stood abruptly and turned away, to the wall, pacing tensely. It was a sign of guilt that Anna grasped onto. “How long has it been, Raven?” she asked in a harder voice. “How long?”

That was when Raven stopped. She swivelled on the spot, turning to face Anna with that contemptuous smile on her face, saying:

“How long, Anna? I never stopped. I’m very much afraid to say that it’s as simple as that.” The smile slipped abruptly from her face, leaving her expression cold. “How else do you think Essex became Milbury? Went underground after he got out of jail? Got the capital to start up Empharma? Me, Anna. His person on the outside. The one person who never walked away, who stayed when everyone else had gone.”

There was no pride in her voice. It was as if she were merely reeling off a list of impersonal facts.

“You were the one,” Anna murmured slowly, suddenly realising. “You were the reason Essex came to find me the first time round. After he got out of prison…”

Raven was impassive.

“Yes. He wanted you. I knew how to find you.” She paused, her eyes dropping briefly. “It… pained me, when he told me later of your death.”

“I’m sure it did,” Anna rejoined coldly. It was a coolness of tone that brought Raven’s eyes back to hers, that coaxed a small, self-deprecating smile to her lips.

“Do you remember, Anna, when you turned up on my doorstep eight months later? A pale, underfed, half-dead little creature, covered in blood? Your own blood? You’d tried to kill yourself, and it was the first time you came to me for help. The first time you came to me for
protection. The first time that you cried, that you let yourself be vulnerable. And I… I pitied you. I pitied you, Anna.”

It was not the first time in recent memory that Anna had been made aware of her own weakness, of the scars on her wrist. She grimaced.

“Never wanted your pity,” she whispered fiercely.

“Nevertheless, you had it,” Raven returned unsmilingly. “Despite myself I learned to care for you. Enough, at least, to let this charade you were playing, this pretence at your death, continue.”

She halted, shifted, bitterness touching her lips. It was only then that Anna noticed it – the pen in the breast pocket of her shirt, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. She fixed her gaze on it, the way its iridescent sheen shimmered in the light; an exercise, perhaps, in distraction, to stave off the anguish of this one cherished friendship that she had now lost forever.

“You should’ve let it continue,” she half-whispered; and there it was again, Raven’s glacial smile.

“Unfortunately,” she replied, “Remy LeBeau made that impossible.”

The words made Anna raise her eyes right back to Raven, with enough ferocity that the smile was wiped cleanly from the older woman’s face.

“He exposed your existence to Essex,” she explained darkly. “And once that had happened there was no turning back. I knew who he was, of course. What he was doing and who he was working for. Nathaniel’s business was my business, after all. I knew it was only a matter of time before he handed you over.”

“But he didn’t,” Anna murmured; and Raven nodded.

“No. He didn’t. He did everything in his power not to. Which told me a great many things.” She leaned in a little, her gaze penetrating. “He’d grown to care for you. Had become invested in you. And more to the point,” she finished, “you’d grown to care for him.”

So there it was. The stinging irony of it all. Raven had known her true feelings even before she had. Bitterness welled in her like something physical.

“You knew,” she said, unravelling the story of this betrayal, putting together all the jigsaw pieces with each word she spoke. “You used him as bait to draw me out… You knew I’d try to extract him… Knew I couldn’t just abandon him… You knew… Even before I did… …”

She stared down into her hands as if disbelieving.

“Of course I did,” Raven replied disparagingly. “What amazes me is that the two of you never realised it yourselves. You both know what it is to fall in-love after all. Him, with that dead wife of his; and you, with that stupid boy who made you believe you were ‘normal’ when you were anything but and never will b—”

She didn’t get the chance to finish the sentence – Anna had already launched herself off the cot and right at her, fists bared. The first punch connected with a crack to the jaw that toppled them both to the floor, metal chair and all. Almost immediately the guards were on them, tearing Anna away – but not before she’d managed to land a few more satisfying blows, blows that were almost worth the punishment meted out to her. The taser hit her with such force that she was almost rendered insensate by the shock. When she came back round again seconds or minutes later, it was
to find herself lying face down on the bed, one guard holding her arms behind her back, the other grasping her ankles.

Raven was standing above her with a bloody lip, her eyes almost wild with exhilaration.

“I guess I was wrong,” she mused almost with delight. “You still have it in you after all.”

Anna struggled, only to have her captors slam her against the metal cot so violently it hurt.

“Go to hell, Raven!” was all she could rasp instead, which only earned her a strike on the head with a baton.

“I was consigned to hell a long time ago, my dear,” Raven answered contemptuously. “So were you. So were all of us who were Weapon X. You feel that rage, that energy coursing through you right now? That’s what we need more of, Anna. Eat. Get strong. Be Weapon Zero again. Then you can use the Machine.”

“I can’t,” she spat out fiercely. “The process will kill me! My neural pathways are barely being held together by a thread, one more ‘facing session and they could break…”

And Raven gazed down upon her, a mirthless smile on her lips.

“It won’t kill you. Not anymore. Haven’t you noticed, Weapon Zero? You’ve been free of the tremors, the neural stutters, all the symptoms of mem-intoxication, for days now. Nathaniel gave you the new gene therapy he’s been developing, the therapy that cured LeBeau.” She cocked her head to one side, regarding Anna intently, almost relishing the expression of enlightenment that crossed her face. “So you see,” she continued when she saw the news had finally sunk in, “this pathetic rebellion of yours is quite pointless. You’re cured. You have something to live for again. Don’t waste away in this cell like a weak fool. You’re better than that.”

“Good enough to be Essex’s pawn again?” she spluttered in a low voice. “I don’t think so.”

Raven sighed, as if bored of what amounted to nothing more than a tiresome game.

“A pawn, Anna? Is that how you see yourself?” Her expression was now entirely serious. “You’re the only one who can use the Machine. You are its master. Think of all you could achieve using it. And you know what your first order of business will be? – removing all those nasty memories from Mr. LeBeau’s brain. Why don’t you replace them with something nice? With a past where the two of you have always been together? It would be fitting, don’t you think? You’ll both get exactly what you want – each other.”

She turned to the doorway, obviously finished with the interview.

“Now I suggest you eat, Weapon Zero. I’d really hate for us to have to force feed you.”

She opened the door slightly and turned back, nodding to the two guards.

The one holding her arms tasered her again, just to make sure she didn’t try to effect an escape while they were on the way out. She slumped back onto the mattress with a guttural cry, and when she opened her eyes again she was alone.

It hurt to move, and it took an age of painstaking manoeuvring to push herself up and into a sitting position. She winced slightly at the burning twinges in her tendons and propped her back up against the wall. It was only when she’d regained control of her breathing that she slipped Raven’s
pen out of her right sleeve.

The muscles in her fingers were slowly beginning to work again, and she quickly unscrewed the cap and looked inside. There was a thin strip of paper rolled neatly in there, and she teased it out carefully with the tip of her fingernail.

The message was short.

*LB025 96552 106 B088.*

It took only a few moments to commit the numbers and letters to memory. When she had she stuffed the paper into her mouth and swallowed it down whole.

Her breakfast was still sitting on its tray by the door and she got up and retrieved it. She ate hungrily, consuming every single scrap that had been left for her.

Raven was right.

She was going to need her strength for this. Every last ounce of it.

-oOo-
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Anna and Remy are finally reunited, but will they escape?

Chapter Notes

***Just a small trigger warning that there is a small amount of blood-letting at the beginning of this chapter, so if that bothers you, please read with caution***

Her meals became a measure of a different kind, no longer a device through which to measure time, but her own strength.

She ate and drank whatever they gave her, and slowly she began to recover herself. There was purpose in her now, a sense of imminent escape, of blessed resolution. She was Weapon Zero, but she was also Anna Marie Raven, a woman on a mission for herself and no other. She was resolved to follow it through to the bitter end.

At last the day came when she felt strong enough to put her plan into action. She sat on her cot and waited for the right time. When it arrived she slipped Raven’s pen from out of her sleeve and pressed the button on the side. The spike snapped out the end.

Anna paused and took a measured breath.

There were ways to slit one’s wrists to maximise the chances and speed of death – she knew that, intimately. These were methods she was careful to avoid now. She scored the blade carefully across her wrist. Blood began to flow almost immediately, bringing with it an oddly familiar sense of catharsis. She ignored it with an effort. When she was done she retracted the blade, screwed the cap back on the pen, and secreted it back in her clothing. She squeezed the blood out of her wrist and onto her fingers, smeared it across the wall and the bedsheets. Then she lay flat on her stomach and prayed someone would come soon.

_Drip, drip, drip._

She could feel the blood trickling down her hand and onto the floor, all the precious strength she’d conserved the past few days slowly ebbing away.

_Please someone come. Please._

Dinner was soon, she knew it. Someone would deliver. Someone _had_ to.

The next five minutes passed like an agonising lifetime, and then suddenly there were footsteps – she held her breath and waited. She heard the window panel in the door clunk open, then shut. She knew her ruse had worked when, instead of the usual porthole opening up and her next meal being pushed through, she heard the sounds of the door unlocking, and – finally – opening up.
She didn’t dare move, hardly dared breathe.

“Shit,” a female voice muttered. “Shit, shit shit.”

The footfalls approached, closer and closer, right up to the bed and—

Anna sprang up like a jack-in-the-box, tackling the woman to the bed and finding the pressure points in her neck with ease. A mere few seconds had passed before the woman was unconscious, lying slack and unmoving on the bed.

Anna got to her feet and panted.

There was a time she would have taken this woman’s life without a second thought, but now… …

No time to second guess it.

The first thing she did was rip a strip of bedsheets up and bandage the wound on her wrist. Then she got to work undressing her quarry and switching up their clothing. Three minutes later and the guard was safely under the covers of the cot, looking for all the world as if she was asleep.

Anna stood back and observed the little tableau she’d created. She regarded the blood smears on the wall and the sheets with dissatisfaction—these would alert the next guard who came along, and cut short her ruse pretty quick. But—desperate times and all that. She twisted her hair up on her head and slipped the guard’s cap on, pulled it as low over her face as practicable. Then she slipped out the cell, shutting the door quietly behind her. Her dinner tray was on the floor in the hallway, and she slipped it innocuously through the porthole. Better not to leave it outside and raise anymore alarm bells than necessary.

She paused and closed her eyes briefly, effortlessly recalling Raven’s hidden code.  

96552 106 B088.

Right, she thought. LB25.

First thing was first. She had to find an elevator.

-oOo-

It wasn’t long before she was one level down on the lower basement floor, and as soon as she had exited the elevator the communicator pinned to her breast kicked in.


Anna touched the device at her chest.


“Roger,” the voice replied without pause, and the line cut out.

She walked casually down the hallway, observing the door numbers as she went, stopping when she finally reached her target.

Room 25.

She ignored the closed-circuit cameras she knew were watching, and punched the code into the control panel. 96552.
Anna breathed and stepped inside, wondering, fleetingly, whether she was just walking into another trap.

It was a locker room.

Rows of white closets lined the walls, and she walked alongside them, remembering the next part of Raven’s code.

106.

She located it easily, and when she tried the door she found, unsurprisingly, that it was unlocked. The first thing she saw inside was a small, white keycard; and beside this, neatly packed and folded, was all the gear she’d come here with. There was a black Empharma backpack in there too, and she looked inside it. Remy’s gear was there.

She exhaled noisily.

It was clear, at this point, that Raven was helping her, or appeared to be helping her, and feelings of mistrust and betrayal swam to the forefront of her consciousness. There was every chance that this was another deception – but what did she have left to lose? Either she escaped here or she died here – everything else in-between was academic.

Remy’s situation was a little less so, but she was trying her damnest not to let that get the better of her right now.

It was at that very moment that her communicator kicked in.

“All operatives on levels LB and 1 to level B, immediately. Subject escape from cell B5, presumed armed and dangerous, in operative uniform. Repeat – all operatives on levels LB and 1 to level B.”

Anna swore silently to herself. From here on in the heat was on and then some.

She pocketed the keycard, shoved her stuff into the backpack and slipped it on quickly. Then she slammed the locker door shut and marched out without once looking back.

-oOo-

She did what everyone else was doing – headed to the basement.

Of course everyone knew to look out for someone dressed as a guard, but as long as she swam with the shoal and didn’t do anything out of place, she figured she’d be pretty safe – for now. She joined up with a unit that seemed to be patrolling sectors 7 and 8 of the basement level. The last part of Raven’s code was pretty clear – B088.

She allowed herself to fall behind the group by degrees, and as she neared room 88 she lagged sufficiently behind that they didn’t even notice when she failed to turn the corner with them. She stopped outside the room, looked down both ends of the corridor to check the coast was clear, and took out the keycard.

As soon as she lifted it to the control panel, the door swept open.

Anna took a step inside and stopped.
It was a med room, made up for a single occupant. It’d obviously been in use until very recently – the bed covers were still rumpled, the heart monitor still running, the wires from the drip and sensor pads lying haphazard on the mattress. Exactly as if someone had just upped and left – without permission.

All her senses told her this was a trap, and she was just about to turn and leave when the door snapped shut behind her… and before she even had time to react someone had locked her in a choke hold and was squeezing the breath out of her.

In a microsecond all her training came welling to the surface – she didn’t even have to think. She took a swift, left step back behind her aggressor, changing up the centre of gravity between them, and pushed back against his chest with her left elbow, knocking him off balance and onto his back. Just as she was about to put him down for good with a swift kick to the head, he’d already pre-empted her, rolling aside and leaping nimbly to his feet, dancing on his toes like he was ready for a fight.

It was Remy.

His name had barely risen to her lips and he was already charging at her, her astonishment a temporary advantage that he was using to full effect. Only a fist to the jaw brought her to her senses, and she took the hit, spinning chest-first into the wall, the cutting edge of her reflexes bringing her hand to her holster, whipping out the guard’s gun faster than thought.

She aimed the gun right at his chest and he came to an abrupt halt, surprised at her dexterity.

“Remy,” she said between dragged-out breaths, “it’s me. Anna.”

Her voice alone was enough.

He blinked, his eyes widening with recognition, his stance slowly relaxing.

“Anna?”

She nodded wordlessly, breathing hard, suddenly unable to speak.

His only answer was to reach for the gun, working it slowly out of her grasp. She let him, and he threw it aside with a clatter, took a step forward, inching into her space like he couldn’t quite believe his own eyes. She turned away from the wall, facing him, her breath catching in her throat to see that he was alive, he was fighting, he was okay. His fingers touched the visor of her cap and gently lifted it aside, letting her hair uncoil round her shoulders; he dropped the cap to the floor and suddenly his palms were on her face, cupping her cheeks, touching her as if he’d never hoped to see her again… And she closed her eyes, surprised to find tears of relief welling inside her.

“Remy,” she whispered. “Remy, you’re okay.”

She threw her arms round him and buried her face in his neck, never realising before how good it was to feel his skin on her lips and his warmth on her cheek, to smell the scent of his body. The fear of loss had emboldened her – she held him tighter than she would ever have dared before this moment.

“God, after what happened back there I thought I wasn’t ever gonna see you again…” she found herself admitting, more to herself than to him. There was so much more that she felt the need to say, but he didn’t wait to hear it, simply pulling her into an impatient kiss that communicated just as clearly what his own fears had been.
For a few moments they held one another close, only breaking apart when the precariousness of their situation began to sink back in. He grasped her by the upper arms and pushed her slightly away from him, running his eyes over her as though to make sure he really wasn’t dreaming. His gaze caught the bandage on her wrist, and almost immediately his expression turned dark.

“You’re bleeding,” he said.

She took in a breath, then another, momentarily confused, until she looked down and saw her blood staining the bandage.

“I’m okay,” she told him in a low voice. “It was… necessary.”

His mouth went flat.

“You managed to escape,” he stated rather than asked. “Is dat what all the excitement outside is?”

She nodded.

“Yeah… …”

He stifled an oath and let go of her, striding over to the door and making sure the blind over the window was drawn.

“Dis room ain’t safe,” he muttered to himself. “We’re sittin’ ducks in here – any number of Empharma employees could have a keycard to the door. Not to mention Essex hisself.” He paused and looked over his shoulder at her curiously. “How th’ hell did you find me?”

She hesitated, not entirely sure she could explain the entire story.

“Raven,” she answered. His eyes narrowed and he sniffed incredulously.

“Raven? Dat bitch is dead next time I see her.”

His voice was flat with unrepentant loathing, prompting her to shake her head slowly.

“She pretty much helped me to escape, Remy. I’m pretty sure she’s on our side.”

He turned away from the door to face her.

“If she’s on our side,” he began coldly, “then why th’ hell did she betray us in the first place?”

Anna made no reply for a few moments. Since her last encounter with Raven she’d barely had a chance to evaluate any of this, but now, all things considered, she felt she might have an idea of what her former mentor’s motivations might have been. She hoped, at least, that her hunch was correct, and that this all wasn’t just another grand betrayal.

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” she admitted at last. “But trusting her has brought me this far, and I don’t have much else to work with. We don’t have much else to work with. If you trust me, you’re gonna haveta trust her, Rem.”

She’d expected some push back on this point, and so she was surprised when all he did was cock her a slow, wide smile.
“What?” she asked, nonplussed.

“Rem,” he replied after a moment. “You called me Rem.” He laughed and she must’ve looked offended because he hastened to add: “Don’t worry. I like it.”

He turned aside and began to pace the room thoughtfully.

“Fine. Raven got you this far. She give you any clue ‘bout what t’do next?”

She shrugged.

“I guess she reckoned the two of us could figure that out between ourselves…”

He stopped short and laughed.

“Ha! Woulda been nice if she could’a given us a hint.” His eyes roamed the room ruefully. “Spent the last few days tryin’ to figure out how t’escape this place. Once I got outta those fuckin’ bindings, gettin’ out woulda been a piece o’ cake. What t’do once I was on the other side o’ that door was gonna be the real problem.” He gave her a penetrating stare, and she gave him a lop-sided smile.

“Lemme guess – you thought I was a guard, and that I was gonna be your ticket outta here.”

He grinned, appreciative of the fact that she could keep up with him.

“Ha. Yeah. The guards visit every couple o’ hours – it’s the only time this damn door opens – ‘part from Essex’s evenin’ visits, o’ course. Figured I could steal a uniform and sneak out, get m’self a headstart. Never figured you’d come waltzin’ in. Shoulda known somethin’ was up when you showed up completely off schedule.” He laughed lightly. “Don’t get me wrong, chere. It’s good to have you here instead. Hope I didn’t hurt you too much.”

She tried a grin and touched her jaw.

“No. Nothin’ busted. You sure pack a punch though.”

“Heh.” His smile grew wider. “You better believe it.” He paused, the smile slowly fading from his face. “You’ve kinda thrown my plans off though, chere. In that uniform you can walk around this place pretty easy, but me… …”

“So we wait for the next security guard t’ check on you.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head.

“Next scheduled visit is Essex. If we’re gonna get outta here, we’re gon’ haveta do it now. Was still plannin’ to blow up that frikkin’ Machine too, but I ain’t got none of my gear no more… …”

He faltered off when she suddenly began to march towards the bed with purpose, slipping the backpack off her shoulders as she did so. When she got there she up-ended the bag and spilled all its contents onto the mattress. It was almost worth it just to see the look of amazement cross his face.

“Yah trust Raven now?” she asked.

It took him about a split second to recover himself.
“My phone in there?”

She rummaged through the items and found it under his clothes.

“Yup.”

She tossed it to him.

“Thank God,” he murmured after giving it a cursory check. “It still has juice in it.”

“Why? You need to make a call?”

He gave her a look.

“This,” and he lifted up the phone, “is a detonator, chere. It’s synced to the explosives I rigged the Machine with. I hit the button, the whole thing is blown t’hell. The perfect distraction for us to get the fuck outta here.”

Anna made no reply, treating his words with such uncharacteristic silence that his gaze immediately rose to hers. There was no mistaking the flat line of her mouth, the hard glint in her eyes. It brought him to a screeching halt.

“You still wanna restore the backup,” he stated quietly.

She dropped her eyes and he knew it was the truth.

“Why?” he asked her. She said nothing and he threw the phone back onto the bed, pressed his hands into the mattress and leaned towards her, trying to catch her eyes. “Anna. We can’t do this. We can’t start up the Machine again. We don’t have Essex’s part of the code.”

Right then – that was the moment she chose to raise her eyes to his and meet his gaze head on. The stubborn wildcat was back and he knew exactly what it meant.

“Unless we wait for Essex to make his rounds,” he murmured, syncing with her thoughts effortlessly, “and get the code straight from the horse’s mouth.”

She didn’t even waver.

“Exactly.”

He let out a long exhalation.

“You still wanna do this, Anna? Despite what it could do to your mind? Despite what it probably will do?”

She passed him a look that was half sad, half determined.

“I stand more of a chance of this working now than I ever did,” she answered softly. “Essex knew that with the state my mind was in I wouldn’t survive the Machine long. So he gave me the gene therapy, Remy – the same therapy he used to cure you. I don’t have any of the symptoms of mem-intoxication anymore – no more tremors, stutters, random flashbacks… they’re all gone.”

His expression closed off, went blank – exactly the way it had when she’d laid out his past before him, all the secrets he’d thought Essex had scrubbed, that night at La Princesse.
“Look, Remy,” she continued seriously, “I’m not gonna hold you to any of this. This is my thing. You’ve risked enough for me. Let me handle this from here. I’ll take care of the Machine, after I’ve ‘faced with it. You leave. We’ll meet back up on the outside.”

The blankness of his expression broke, but not in the way she thought it would. Where she’d expected anger, indignation, instead he laughed, soft and rueful.

“Y’think I can just leave you here? By yourself?” he asked her.

“And you think I can stand by and watch Essex hurt you all over again?”

Her voice was fierce, shot with emotion – a signal for him to back down, one that had never failed to work in the past. It didn’t work now. The look he gave her was so penetrating, so intense, that it almost took her breath away.

“You know I can’t leave you here, Anna,” he said quietly. “Not with the way I am about you right now.”

There were so many things he had left unspoken in those words – and yet she knew exactly what he meant. She sucked in an inaudible breath and drew her arms about herself tight.

“I know,” she murmured.

“Then don’t insult me by sending me away,” he returned earnestly. “If you don’t come outta that Machine alive and I’m not there for you, you think I could live wit’ myself?”

She couldn’t help it. Her anger flared.

“And you think I could bear to watch on if Essex or anyone else murdered you?!” she countered hotly. “You think I don’t have feelings?! That this is easier for me than it is for you, because I’m Weapon Zero, because I’m only half human?! What Essex did to you—!”

She stopped, choking on the words, unable to say anymore, pressing her lips tight together and turning aside, pulling at her lips in a desperate attempt not to lose it.

“I don’t think that, Anna,” he spoke after a short silence. “You’re good at pretendin’ you’re invulnerable – and hell, there was a time I woulda believed it. But you ain’t, chere. I seen inside you. I seen the person you are. You wear Weapon Zero, you wear the Rogue like a smokescreen to hide what you really are. To fool even yourself into thinkin’ you’re somethin’ you’re not. You keep wantin’ so hard t’be human, and you know what? You are human. More human than anyone else I’ve met. We bleed, we hurt, we die. We can’t erase all that without takin’ away our humanity. If I die, I die. If you die, you die. We shouldn’t hide from that fact. If either of us dies, one of us has to be there for the other. I don’t wanna die alone. I don’t want you to die alone, Anna. I don’t think I could take it.”

She glanced over at him then, eyes shimmering moistly in the light.

“Do you have any idea,” she spoke hoarsely, “what it’s like to watch someone you care about die in your arms?”

He looked at her seriously.

“Do have any idea what it’s like to know someone you cared about died alone, without you there to say goodbye?”
She looked away again quickly, fighting the horrible pressure behind her eyes.

“Anna,” he said when she made no reply, crossing the bed to stand before her. “Lissen t’me. We’re a team. We’re a fuckin’ amazin’ team and you know it. Everythin’ else aside, that’s what we are. We made a deal. I’m gonna help you. You’re gonna come to London wit’ me.”

Despite everything, his words brought a smile to her lips. She dropped her hand from her mouth and shook her head disbelievingly.

“Remy…”

“What?”

“Just… Why the hell London? Of all places?”

He grinned and let out a barely concealed sigh of relief that she was no longer fighting him.

“Was gonna go there,” he explained, “when I was in Paris. Had kinda set my heart on it. Then Creed and Vertigo came along and put an end to those plans pretty sharpish.” She still looked bemused, and he continued humorously, “Lissen. They speak English in London. And I wanna ride the Eye. Okay? Every time I went there before the queue was too damn long.”

The ridiculousness of the statement finally got the tension to abate. Her laugh was soft and helpless as she reached up and clutched onto his shirt with a tentativeness that only thinly disguised her need for something more.

“I can’t say no to you,” she confessed. “Even if I tried.”

He smiled and ran his fingers tenderly over the line of her cheekbone and behind her ear, into her hair.

“Then don’t try,” he answered simply.

She struggled, briefly, with the desire to push back, to regain control – this ingrained instinct, born from years of lonely self-sufficiency, to take the lead, to trust no one but herself. But it was useless now, and she knew it – all this time she’d opened herself up to him without even knowing it, extended her trust without even realising he’d earned it. She gave up trying before she’d even really begun.

“All right,” she whispered. “I guess we did make a deal after all. And business is business.”

His fingers were still in her hair, his palm cradling the nape of her neck.

“You can call it business if y’wanna pretend that’s what it is, chere. Just as long as you don’t forget it’s pleasure as soon as we get on that plane to Heathrow.”

“How could I forget?” she murmured back. “When you won’t let me?”

He smiled at her with all the easy charm that came so naturally to him. Yet as he kissed her she sensed all the things he was holding back, all the things he couldn’t or wouldn’t say. A sadness he would never voice. She was selfish enough not to question it, not to pull away, not to change her mind. She had wanted too long, and through so much adversity. To have him here with her at all felt like a miracle, a gift. And so she allowed herself to savour this moment, caught as she
still was by the fear that this time might be her last; and if it was, she was going to hold onto this moment for as long and as hard as she dared, before it had the chance to be torn from her grasp forever.

-oOo-
Chapter Summary

Anna is finally hooked up to the Machine, but does she finally get what she wants?

Nathaniel Essex stood at his office window, his jaw ticking agitatedly. His eyes roamed over the winter vista through the green-tinted glass without taking any of it in. His entire life had been built upon order and stark precision. Nothing went beneath his notice. For things to have gone this badly awry indicated some fatal flaw in his chain of logic, and it was like fingernails on a chalkboard to him.

“The girl is resourceful,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “More resourceful than I’d given her credit for.”

Raven Darkholme spoke up from her seat on the other side of his desk, as cool and self-assured as ever.

“She is Weapon X, Nathaniel. It is what we taught her to be. To turn even the most innocuous of items into a weapon, to turn every drawback into an advantage. Should we even be surprised?”

He whipped round on her with a scowl.

“You seem mightily unconcerned about this, Raven,” he observed. She shrugged.

“The building is on lockdown. She won’t be able to reach a single exit without a hundred people knowing about it first.”

“And can you be so sure?” he quizzed her incisively. “If she is everything you say she is, everything that we made her to be… … What makes you believe she couldn’t find a way out?”

She was still calm, her countenance one of thinly veiled amusement.

“Do you begin to doubt yourself, Nathaniel?” The question riled him and he was about to deliver a scathing answer; but she spoke first, saying with confidence: “She won’t leave here without LeBeau. If she has one weakness, he is it.”

“But she has no idea where he is,” he pointed out sardonically.

“Precisely. She’ll waste useless minutes, possibly hours, trying to find him. Which leaves us ample time to locate her.”

Essex sat back down at his desk slowly, considering her statement.

“I see,” he spoke presently. “You’re suggesting that you simply let her find LeBeau – and that we lie in wait for her to appear.”

Raven’s smile was thin.
“Exactly.”

Essex regarded her a few moments. It was a long time since they had been partners in any sense of the word – yet Raven was the only one who had remained loyal over the long, gruelling years, who had kept in contact and offered her services, despite their now vastly different business interests. He trusted her in a way he didn’t trust most. She was the only one of his experiments, of the one percent, that had never failed.

“Tell me, Raven,” he asked at last. “What is your honest opinion? Weapon Zero has turned out to be far less… pliable than she once was. What do you propose should be the answer to this little conundrum?”

Raven leaned back in her seat, crossed her legs casually.

“Sometimes I think you forget, Nathaniel, that Weapon Zero has been living in the world for the better part of a decade now. She’s no longer a child. She is a woman who has been allowed to indulge her passions. Moreover,” she added in a silkier tone, “she is a woman who craves them. You see this as a weakness. But what it actually is is a potential form of control.”

Essex scowled distastefully at the words. He had no sympathy for passion – its flavour was completely alien to him.

“Meaning?” he prompted her begrudgingly.

“Simple,” she replied. “Give her what she wants. Give her LeBeau. Bind them together, let her weave them the shared history she so desires. That way, if you control one, you control the other. Control both and you have the kind of ‘army’ you’ve always dreamed of.”

She finished; and Essex stroked his chin, mulling over her words thoughtfully.

“There’s a truth in what you say,” he mused. “Each has their own weaknesses, but together, there is the possibility that one may compensate for the flaws of the other… and of course, any unit is stronger than its constituent parts.” He sighed, finding the puzzle wearisome. “It is a great pity that we lost sight of her. I should have preferred to have her as she once was. Simple perfection, Raven. It is so galling to see it spoiled.”

He pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

“Shall I post guards outside LeBeau’s room?” Raven asked him.

“No,” he replied decidedly. “I’m due to pay him a visit. We will go down together, you and I. If Weapon Zero appears, I should think you would want to deal with her personally.”

“Either that,” Raven remarked wryly, getting to her feet, “or you don’t trust anyone else to deal with her effectively.”

“That too,” he agreed laconically. “Well – shall we go?”

-oOo-

They made the journey down to the basement in silence, and it was only when they had almost reached LeBeau’s room that Raven came to a sudden halt.

Essex turned to face her expectantly. It was obvious from her expression that she had received a communication on her transceiver, and was listening intently to it. When it was over she
lifted her eyes to his.

“What?” he asked her.

“Weapon Zero’s been sighted on the first floor,” she informed him. “And several operatives are down. I should see to this, Nathaniel.”

Essex’s lips tightened. Weapon Zero, it seemed, was rapidly becoming far more trouble than she was worth.

“Go,” he ordered her. “Make sure she isn’t hurt.”

Raven, ever the loyal soldier, nodded, turned, and left at a swift clip.

Essex looked back over at LeBeau’s door and hesitated. For the first time he began to question his investment in Weapon Zero. Was it the case that she was now too damaged to be repaired? Was she an experiment better left abandoned?

But no – perhaps Raven was right. Perhaps there was a way to salvage her. It was unfortunate, and not a little galling to his innate sense of perfectionism, that she was now so flawed, but… there would be others like her. In time.

He walked over to LeBeau’s door, absently felt for the firearm in his pocket, and scanned his keycard.

The door snapped open, and when he’d got over the threshold the first thing he clocked was that LeBeau was nowhere in sight.

The second thing he clocked was a crack to the skull, his face smacking the floor and then – nothing more.

-oOo-

When he next awoke the pain in his head was so acute it was almost blinding.

He groaned, shifted, and he realised, only by degrees, that he had somehow been incapacitated. It was no surprise, under the circumstances, for him to find that he had been shackled to the bed with the exact same bonds that had held down LeBeau not long before.

“S’gotta be a bitch,” he heard LeBeau comment from somewhere nearby, “t’ get a taste of your own shitty med’cine.”

The tone was smug enough that it would’ve raised his ire any other time, but now it was merely a distraction, nothing else. His vision cleared and the first thing he saw was her. Weapon Zero, standing at the end of the bed, looking down on him.

He was, on reflection, hardly surprised.

“Weapon Zero,” he greeted her wryly – he noticed, with a slight, painful turn of the head, that LeBeau was standing off silently in the right-most corner, his pistol in his hand. He turned his gaze back to her, added ruefully: “You are an extremely clever woman.”

She showed no evidence of pleasure at what was obviously supposed to be a compliment, answering in a deadpan: “I don’t think ‘clever’ is the word you’re looking for. And my name is Anna,” she corrected him as a pointed afterthought.
“On the contrary,” he replied, wincing only slightly at the pain in his head, “I would argue that you are exceedingly clever. You have, after all, succeeded in capturing your captor. I am not entirely sure how, as yet… But your continued resourcefulness, cunning and courage… They have consistently impressed me. As to your name… Well, that belonged to the old you. She doesn’t exist anymore.”

She shook her head imperceptibly. Her gaze was almost fierce.


Essex sneered. It was only at that very moment that he realised exactly what it was she really desired.

“Ahhhh. At last I see. I understand what really motivates Weapon Zero. A misguided compulsion to reclaim Anna Marie Raven.” His eyes narrowed disdainfully. “I would advise you to put aside your quest, Weapon Zero. Your compulsion is a foolish one, and ultimately self-destructive.”

“Really?” She was unmoved. “How so?”

He sighed as if the reason was patently self-evident.

“No one has ever tried to reintegrate more than a decade’s worth of memories into a subject wholesale. And formidable though your powers may be, I highly doubt even you would be able to withstand such an onslaught.”

Truth or not, she wasn’t buying it. She leaned in towards him, her eyes like gimlets, stating, “But you gave me the gene therapy. You cured me, made me stronger. My mind isn’t broken like it once was. You gave me the ability to work with the Machine without limits – you knew it would’ve killed me otherwise.”

“Pfft!” he spat angrily. “I cured you so you could work on the Machine on a controlled basis. Not so you could kill yourself by literally downloading millions of yottabytes into your mind in a single session! You’d be far better served letting go of this asinine fantasy of yours! You have the power to make your own history! Do it! Give yourself the past that you deserve!”

He thought he’d made some headway with her when she leaned back on her heels with an audible exhalation, as though it were a possibility she hadn’t even contemplated before.

“But it wouldn’t be mine,” she voiced at last in a small voice. “I wouldn’t be me anymore.”

It never failed to surprise and irritate him, how willing so many people were to hold themselves back, by moral, philosophical, existential arguments that were, to his mind, an utter waste of time and brainpower.

“Past or no past, real or make believe, what does it matter?” he uttered in a harassed tone. “You still are, you still exist, you’re still real. What’s in your head is just neurotransmitters firing. What they tell us isn’t as important as their sum and total – the person they come together to create. A person is judged by their outer actions, not by their inner life.”

He said the words with the confidence of someone who knew he was correct, who had never thought otherwise; yet she looked him in the eye with all the calmness of her own conviction and said: “You’re wrong.”
She turned away and paced the floor thoughtfully. He chanced a look over at LeBeau, but he was watching on with an impassiveness that gave away little. Whatever his intentions were, they were hidden – for now.

“I need you to start the Machine again,” Weapon Zero was saying. “You have the codes; you know how to work it. You can restore the backup and reintegrate my memories back into my mind.”

“And why would I do that?” he asked sardonically.

She halted on the spot and glared at him.

“We both want the same thing. We both want the Machine up and running and functional.”

“Quite right,” he conceded the point. “I do not, however, want my prize subject – the only person who can effectively use the Machine – to be a gibbering mess who’s as good as dead.”

“That won’t happen,” she said, with such self-assuredness that he was almost impressed.

“That is not a fact, nor is it a probability,” he answered stolidly. “And as a scientist, I refuse to work without either.”

It was a robust defence, from a man who’d spent his life either justifying or refuting hypotheses – or so he thought. But Weapon Zero merely crossed her arms, set her jaw, and lifted her shoulders, saying: “Fine.”

She shared a glance with LeBeau – an oddly communicative look, considering he’d said nothing the past few minutes. Still his former protégé said not a word, simply emerging from his corner, walking up to the bed – and stopping only to press the barrel of the gun against his temple.

“Wait,” Essex gasped despite himself. “What are you doing?”

LeBeau’s gaze was impassive.

“Murderin’ you,” was all he said.

“But you need me!” he insisted.

“Non. We’d prefer to have your expertise, o’ course… But we got other options. Like, for example, stealin’ back your mem-chip, facin’ with it and memorisin’ your part of the code… Then restartin’ the Machine ourselves. More time and more work… But doable.”

He almost pressed the trigger.

“You fools!” Essex spluttered desperately, indignantly. “You don’t know how to use the Machine! You’ll destroy it! You’d stand even less of a chance of successfully reintegrating your memories at all…. …”

“I don’t have a lot of choice left,” Weapon Zero replied quietly, seriously.

There was a silence during which he looked wildly between the two of them.

“You’re bluffing,” he finally surmised. “You can’t possibly be willing to risk so much.”

“Can’t I?” A small, solemn smile crossed her lips. “All my life I’ve only ever had two
things to strive for – the truth, or oblivion. I’m not afraid of either. Nothing I have in this life right now has meaning; and the things I did have that I cared about were taken away from me. I have nothing else to live for except this.”

“Not even him?” he asked her; and her eyes glinted, briefly.

“Not even him.”

The timbre of her voice told him it wasn’t a lie. He looked towards LeBeau.

“If she gets out the other side of this,” he warned him, “she’ll be different. She won’t be the same.”

And there it was again – that insufferable, cocksure smile that had never failed to secretly rile him.

“Sure. But that’s the risk I’m willin’ t’take.”

It was something he would never understand – this thing between the two of them, haphazard and irrational and selfish yet utterly altruistic as it was. He resented its power over them, a sway he could never hope to replicate himself.

“All right,” he agreed belligerently. “I’ll start the Machine. I’ll restore the backup, if I can. But you’ll only end up regretting this. There’s absolutely no guarantee it will work.”

She regarded him with a look that was so level and uncompromising that he was instantly reminded of Raven.

“I’ve lived my entire life without guarantees,” she told him. “All I’ve ever done is take risks, flirt with death, barely get away with my life. This’ll be just another thing.”

She turned calmly and picked up the guard’s cap lying on a side table. He watched her put it on with the kind of sinking feeling he imagined Frankenstein must have felt when he’d first understood what he’d done when he’d made his wayward monster.

“I should’ve left you,” he murmured. “I should’ve left you to rot.”

And she looked over at him with this cold, cold smile that almost made him shudder.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “You should’ve.”

-oOo-

The hallways were uncharacteristically quiet, considering the activity they’d recently witnessed in the wake of Anna’s escape.

Remy absentely stroked the trigger of Essex’s pistol as they walked in single file down the lonely corridors towards the Machine. Essex was taking the lead, while Anna took the rear – he, perhaps fittingly, was piggy-in-the-middle. There was an ominous truth echoing stubbornly in his mind – she’ll be different, she won’t be the same. He knew it, of course – had for a while now – but the closer it came, the more real it became, and the more troubled it left him. He’d asked himself more than once why he was doing this, and the answer was always the same – because it was what she wanted. Because he couldn’t abandon her. Because he needed to be there for her. But altruism
had never been a quality of his, and the greater truth haunted him – that this was nothing more than self-preservation. Because he cared about her more than he’d cared about anything in a long time, and if he was going to lose her, it was going to be under his own terms – he’d stick with her to the bitter end. He’d walked away once. He couldn’t face doing that again, whatever the cost he ended up having to pay.

“You’re making a mistake, LeBeau,” Essex spoke up gravely in front of him, “if you think that this will prove to be anything but a disappointment to you.”

Remy remained silent, keeping the gun trained on Essex’s back as they made their sedate journey onward.

“She will be changed,” Essex continued in an undertone. “She will be different. You’ll get nothing out of this.”

“This ain’t about me,” Remy half-lied; and Essex laughed as if he could see right through him.

“Of course not.” He paused, musing on his own thoughts a moment before adding, “We only ever act to serve ourselves. In the small likelihood that she survives this intact, you may be a stranger to her… and her to you. Worse still, you may be nothing more than a thing she no longer wants. A man like you should be running right now.”

Maybe he should have been. Maybe he should have been trying to talk her out of this, this woman he still barely knew and who owed him nothing, much less the weight of her own past. He was here because his back was against an emotional wall.

“Sometimes,” he answered, mostly to himself, “all we want is to be there to say goodbye.”

They were finally there.

They came to a standstill outside the hulking metal doors, and Essex passed an expectant look over at Anna, who was as stony-faced as ever, the barrel of her gun still firmly trained on him.

“Disable the neural scanner,” she ordered him quietly. If she felt any trepidation about what lay within those doors, it didn’t show in her voice. Essex’s expression hardened; but he turned to the control panel and did as he was told. The scintillating green mesh barring the doorway instantly flickered out.

“Open it,” she ordered again in a monotone; but Essex had already anticipated her, and the doors slowly rumbled open.

They stepped inside.

The Machine was still there, huge and hideous, its wire tendrils seeming to drip from the ceiling and round the central column in a sinister embrace. The doors clunked shut behind them, and Essex was already moving towards the free-standing console as if this was a reunion that he had long anticipated. It was a moment before Remy realised that Anna hadn’t joined them, and he looked over his shoulder to see her still standing in the doorway, staring up at this relic from her forgotten past with undisguised wonder. Slowly she began to walk towards the Machine – whatever her thoughts were, he couldn’t begin to guess at them.

He drew his attention back to Essex with an effort, only to find that the gaze of his erstwhile boss had also been firmly fixed on her.
“Quite the reunion, huh?” he commented with thin humour, to which Essex merely shot him a withering glance. Anna had already turned and was coming back towards them, her pokerface once more reinstated.

“Hook me up,” she commanded.

Two guns may have been trained on him, but it seemed to Remy that there was at least a part of Essex that actually wanted this, because he walked over to the Machine without any protest or sign of hesitation. Perhaps it was a sense of nostalgia that drove him, his own grandiose mental picture of this reunion playing out with an unwitting reverence. Remy watched on with an increasing sense that he was merely a spectator in this, a ritual that the two of them had performed many times before and they were now re-enacting with unconscious perfection. As Essex adjusted the seat for her, as Anna took her place, Remy was hit with the horrible sensation that these two shared an unseen bond that was as unmistakable as it was toxic. The ease with which they both fell back into their roles was a testament to that unsettling fact.

When Anna was finally hooked up to the Machine Essex got up and walked back over to the console, passing Remy the blank kind of stare that an actor might give to a member of his audience.

Remy exhaled a silent breath and went on over to Anna. Her visor was raised and her gaze was calm as he approached. He knelt down beside her and looked into her eyes. For a long while neither said a thing.

“Thanks,” she said at last. “For being here. For staying.”

He shook his head slightly.

“No thanks. Bein’ here is what I want.”

Her smile was thin, flickering briefly before dying out.

“Remember what to do,” she told him, “if it doesn’t work.”

He glanced at the floor, nodded vaguely. Neither of them could say it, only think it. A bullet in the brain would be the kindest thing he could do to her if it didn’t work.

“Remy—” she began, but he raised his eyes to hers and cut in over her quickly, saying, “When this is over, Anna, we’ll be even, right? I’ll’ve paid my debt to you and we start over. No more lies, no more betrayals, no more fake names and pistol whippings and dumb heists… Well, maybe we’ll keep the heists… For fun… For old time’s sake…”

And this time her smile was warm.

“Sure,” she agreed. “As long as we keep all the best parts…”

The Machine suddenly whined into life, the LED’s lighting up around her and casting harsh shadows over her face.

“It worked,” Essex announced pointlessly from the console. “The codes worked.”

Whatever it was between them, it was drawing to a close. He wanted to kiss her, but he was afraid that if he did he might not be able to see this through. He put his hand over hers instead, just as he’d done the night he’d sat by her bed and she’d lain in her coma; but this time her fingers curled around his, held them tight. If either of them doubted their chosen paths they said not a word.
It was too late to regret. She was finally getting what she had always wanted, and he…

He was learning what it was to care again, to be human. Empty years spent saying fuck you to the world had imploded in his face.

“The system’s ready to restore backup,” Essex called over peremptorily.

Remy sighed and managed his same old, cocksure smile.

“Bye, Anna,” he said.

“Bye, Remy,” she whispered. He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed his. Somehow they let go and he finally got to his feet. He stood there a moment and then pulled down the visor.

He turned away trying not to think that that was the last time, and walked back over to Essex.

“She’s ready,” he said.

Essex made no reply, simply tapping a few keys before finally hitting Enter.

Anna’s response was as instantaneous as it was visceral. A violent jolt spasmed through her, her body going rigid. The reaction was so sudden and unexpected that Remy couldn’t help but take in a sharp, painful breath.

“Is this normal?” he asked, unable to hide his anxiety.

“I don’t know,” Essex replied. “No one’s ever done this before.”

It was clear from his tone that he shared Remy’s anxiety, and yet there was something more in his voice – the wonder, excitement even, that every scientist must surely experience when embarking on new and uncharted waters. It was so far from Remy’s own sentiments at that moment that he grimaced, fighting back the sudden sourness in his mouth, the overpowering urge to end this here and now.

“What’s happening,” Essex was muttering under his breath, “it’s working.”

Was it?

Remy darted a look at the old style loading bar on the screen, just as it was climbing from 1 to 2%. The processing power of Trask’s prize invention was formidably fast – but not nearly fast enough under the circumstances. Familiar tremors were now coursing through Anna’s body, yet she was otherwise unresponsive. Remy grit his teeth so hard his jaw ached. He had to trust that Essex wanted her hurt as little as he did, that he at least had some idea of what he was doing.

Did he?

He glanced back over at Essex, seeing the tautness around his mouth and realising that what he was seeing was doubt.

“You don’t think this’ll work,” Remy spoke quietly, “do you?”

Essex half looked at him, turning his gaze away just as quickly.

“What gave you the impression I might think otherwise?” he answered harshly.
“The way you hooked her up to that thing. The way you looked at her. You thought it might work. You remembered how she was when she last did this. A little girl who never said a word or shed a tear. Who was always so fucking brave and who always came through the other side.” He took in a breath, his eyes fixed on Anna’s small, shuddering form, unable to tear his eyes from her. “That’s what you were thinkin’,” he finished. But Essex’s poise only stiffened as he replied coldly:

“Sentimentality doesn’t suit you, LeBeau. You’d best stick to the thuggery and the subterfuge.” He sneered. “You admire her for what you perceive is her bravery in the face of adversity. But what you’re actually seeing is the cold strength of loss, of rage.”

“Which you gave to her,” Remy bit back between his teeth; to which Essex simply chuckled mockingly.

“No, LeBeau. You are wrong. That rage was in her from the very beginning. Why else do you think I chose her out of all those potential candidates? Because I sensed that same cold rage burning inside her, the one that still burns inside her now. The one that used to burn inside you.” He cast a shrewd sidelong glance in Remy’s direction. “You lost it when you found something to replace the loss inside you. A pity she didn’t find the same in you – depending on your point of view, that is.”

The insinuation was enough to tighten Remy’s grip on his gun – but he swallowed his anger and instead gave an icy little smile that clearly communicated his contempt.

“You got t’ me a li’l too late, Milbury,” he retorted. “Fuck me over from childhood and then wipe all my memories and turn me into a super soldier… Sure. I’d be fuckin’ pissed too.”

Essex’s reply was to almost spit with disdain.

“What amazes me is that despite all the many opportunities Empharma has given you, you still remain stubbornly small-minded. If only you’d—”

Whatever he would’ve said was left unfinished, interrupted by a sudden sound from Anna’s direction, something that sounded between a gasp and a gurgle, her body convulsing violently. Without so much as a thought Remy was marching across the room, dropping to his knees before her and realising that he didn’t know what the hell to do.

“Anna,” he breathed her name, placing his hands over hers and hoping in vain that it would ease the terrible tremors zigzagging through her. “Anna!”

She gave no answer, her convulsions so fierce that he didn’t think she could do so even if she’d wanted to. He wasn’t even sure if he was supposed to move or touch her at that point, but he was past caring – he placed his hands on her shoulders, pressed his fingers into them, and shook her as hard as he dared.

“C’mon, Anna,” he heard himself mutter urgently. “C’mon, please. You gotta get through this. There’s no way in hell I’m lettin’ you die on me now… …”

No sooner had he said the words than the tremors stopped and she slumped, slack and unmoving, against the chair. A thin runnel of blood began to trickle slowly from her left nostril.

He let go of her and got to his feet.

“Turn the Machine off,” he ordered.
“No,” Essex replied, coolly, calmly.

It was a long, long time since Remy had actually gone and lost it, but he nearly did then. All he could hear was the sound of the blood rushing in his ears as he stormed right back over to Essex, brandishing the pistol in his hand, screaming, “Shut the fuckin’ thing off!”

It was the first time he’d seen real fear on Essex’s face, and frankly at that moment in time he was prepared to kill, and he knew that fact showed on his face. And yet – to his immense surprise – Essex stood his ground.

“No!” he shouted.

There was something in his voice – desperation and conviction – that honed Remy’s anger to a cold, blue flame. The gun was now perfectly still in his fist, the aim straight and true.

“If she dies, I swear t’ God—”

“Shut the thing off and she will!”

He laughed wildly. He didn’t believe it.

“Fine. If you won’t turn it off I’ll put a bullet in this fuckin’ thing and—”

He didn’t bother finishing the sentence. He swung his aim over to the console, and just as he was firing into it Essex lunged for the firearm, only succeeding in knocking off Remy’s aim. The bullet ricocheted noisily off a wall and hit the floor.

“Stop it you fool!” Essex raged blindly, gripping onto Remy’s wrist so tight it almost hurt. “You turn it off mid-process and she doesn’t stand a chance! She’ll end up like the Trask girl!”

Remy stared at him blankly, and Essex continued irately: “Her mind will be an unstructured chaos. Bits of untethered data floating unanchored in her mind. Unformed memories driving her to madness. Let the process finish. It’s the only chance she has left!”

If there was one thing that could communicate the truth to him, it was the fierce sincerity he saw in Essex’s face at that moment. Remy dropped his arm, a numbness sweeping over his senses; Essex, finally satisfied that Remy had been pacified, swept back round to the console.

“It’s at 86%. There’s not much longer left to go.”

Remy was silent. There was nothing left to say, and so he walked back towards Anna because she was the only reason he was here after all. Her body was still, slack – but he could tell from the rise and fall of her chest that she was breathing, and that at least was something to be thankful for. He got on his haunches beside her and wiped the blood from her nose with a touch of his sleeve. He was as helpless as he had been the night of Belle’s death, the same helplessness that he’d tried for so long to mask without success, that had brought him here and into a collision course with her.

“We’re at 90%,” he heard Essex announce behind him; and then, “91%... 92%...”, but the words were like meaningless echoes in his ears, the countdown to what seemed like nothing more than another indefinite stay of execution. All he could do was wait for the trapdoor to fall out from under him.

93... 94... 95...
The countdown continued, time dilating, inevitability drawing inexorably closer…

96… 97… 98…

And he put his hand in hers, held it tight…

99…

Her hand so warm, so still…

100…

He didn’t even wait for the Machine to be turned off – he began to untie the restraints at her wrists and ankles just as Essex declared superfluously: “It’s done.”

She was already freed of her bonds, and Remy lifted the visor – she literally fell into his arms, and he cradled her gently, looking earnestly into her face for any sign of consciousness. Her eyes were only partly opened and unfocused, showing no comprehension that he was there.

Essex’s footsteps were slapping the floor behind him, his voice exclaiming breathlessly: “Is she all right? Is she conscious?”

He didn’t, couldn’t answer. He wasn’t sure. He shifted her into a more comfortable position, resting her against his shoulder, and slowly got to his feet.

“We should get her to the med bay,” Essex was saying. “Her brainwaves need to be monitored… If there’s anything left… …”

Anything left… *This* was what he had left.

He pivoted on his foot; and it was almost worth it to see Essex’s face when he realised Remy was pointing the gun right at his chest – he took an involuntary step back.

“No,” he said softly. “We’re leavin’. She’s spent a lifetime in this place, with you. Even when you were apart. She’s done now. I’m takin’ her away.”

He started to back away towards the door, the gun still pointed at Essex. Anna made no movement, no sound at all, her body like a deadweight against his shoulder.

“You idiot, LeBeau!” he seethed. “Take her away from here and you’re taking her away from the only chance she could have to recover!”

“She’s stronger than you give her credit for,” he said, hoping that he was speaking the truth. “She doesn’t need you. Not anymore.”

He’d got halfway to the doors already, when he was stopped in his tracks by the sound of them clanking open behind him. His heartbeat picked up a notch, and he chanced a brief glance over his shoulder, ready to fight to the death if he had to.

It was Raven.

And her own gun was pointed right at him.

“Ah, at last!” Essex exclaimed explosively. “Where have you been, Raven?”

It was almost as if she hadn’t heard the question. Her full attention was on Remy, her gaze
blazing with a steely flame.

“Is she alive?” she demanded of him. Almost on cue he felt Anna stir against him slightly, a simple movement that he’d never been so thankful for.

“Yeah,” he answered.

Something flashed in Raven’s eyes, a flicker of relief. Slowly, deliberately, she moved the barrel of her pistol from Remy to Essex.

For a split second there was confusion, then surprise, then the discontent of realisation – he had been fooled.

“You planned this,” he murmured. “From the beginning.”

“Not quite,” Raven answered dispassionately. “But then I suppose it depends on when ‘the beginning’ was.” She darted a look at Remy, then back at Essex. “Well? What are you doing standing there, LeBeau? Get her out of here.”

His loyalties had been tested one too many times for more of this type of game. Still, he obeyed – he had no choice. He slipped the gun back into the waist of his pants and carried Anna over towards the door as fast as he could, noticing, with a rush of relief, that she was actually taking some of her own weight. Yet, despite everything he knew about her, he was amazed at her tenacity.

“Why, Raven?” Essex was asking with unexpected softness.

“Because,” she answered just as softly, “I learned to care for her.” She backed up after Remy, her aim holding firm. There was only the tiniest hint of regret on her face. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel. I loved you. But I learned to love her too. And she was the only one of you who loved me back.”

She stepped over the threshold and into the hallway, hitting the control panel on the wall. The last image Remy had of Essex was him standing there, small and alone, by the Machine, before the doors snapped shut, blocking him from view.

Raven fired a round into the control panel, effectively sealing the enemy inside.

“Still here, LeBeau?” she shot at him scornfully when she turned and still saw him standing there. “You know that there are other ways out of that room. Destroying that locking mechanism will only buy us a few minutes. We need to leave. I know a quick way.”

There were so many things he wanted to ask her, questions that neither time nor his remaining distrust of her would allow.

“Raven—” he began as she swept past him; but she didn’t even stop to listen.

“Not now, LeBeau. There’ll be time for your questions later. For now… let’s concentrate on getting Anna out.”

-oOo-
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Remy leaves Anna in Raven's capable hands and heads back to destroy the Machine.

Together they both half-dragged, half-led Anna through they empty hallways, each carrying one of her arms over their shoulders, their journey far too laboured and sluggish to make much headway. Remy knew where they were going. It was a well-hidden escape route he’d managed to suss out a couple of years earlier.

“Raven?” he prompted with a harsh edge to his voice, knowing now was probably not the time for small talk, but unable to help himself.

She replied with a characteristically cantankerous, “What?”.

She must’ve known what he was going to ask. She had to know.

“What the hell was so important that it made it worthwhile puttin’ Anna through this?”

There was accusation in his voice, yet despite the precariousness of their predicament, he felt it was warranted. Almost as soon as the question had left his lips he felt Anna grip his shirt with her left hand, steadying herself. Her feet were taking her weight; and weakened though she seemed, it was recovery enough to keep him hoping.

“You still haven’t worked it out yet?” Raven answered mockingly. “Even though you’re one of the 1%?” She laughed disdainfully. “LeBeau, I worked out exactly the same thing you did – that Anna was never going to give up on her foolish dream of restoring her past. She was hellbent on retrieving those damn memories, even if it killed her. Luckily, you presented me with a way to get her exactly what she wanted – a fighting chance of actually surviving the procedure in one piece.”

He realised it then – the blindingly simple truth.

“The gene therapy,” he muttered to himself. “Get Essex to cure her of the mem-intoxication and—”

“Yes. She just might get through the Machine unscathed.” She passed him a scowl. “And the wonder is you never thought of it yourself. I suppose that’s what love does to you. Makes you stupid and blind.”

She said the last with a bitter self-recrimination that was impossible for her to hide.

“Jesus Christ, woman, you risked a lot,” he accused her, with begrudging admiration as well as disdain. “Anythin’ could’a gone wrong at any point… Hell, it probably has by this point…”

“Essex wanted you both alive,” she interjected irritably. “Of course, I didn’t expect him to put a few bullets in you, but if you ended up as collateral damage, I wasn’t going to cry into my coffee over the loss.”
A grimace touched his lips.

“Heh. Thanks.”

But the sarcasm was wasted on her, and she ploughed on regardless.

“Anna was the one that mattered,” she explained firmly.

“And if she ends up a fucking vegetable like Tanya Trask for the rest of her life?”

“Then at least I’ll know I gave her the best shot she had of succeeding, even if she ultimately didn’t.”

At the present moment, with Anna’s wellbeing still hanging in the balance, he wasn’t sure whether to praise or criticise her – but before he could make up his mind, Anna herself ended the conversation by unceremoniously tripping over her own feet. He caught her easily, and she clung to him, her feet giving out from under her completely.

“We don’t have much time,” Raven complained impatiently, mostly to herself, though loud enough for him to admonish her.

“She’s exhausted. Give her a break.”

Raven said nothing, merely looked at him caustically, and he turned his attention back to Anna. Her eyes were glazed though now fully open. He touched her blood-streaked cheek lightly, saying: “Anna… It’s me… Tell me you know who I am, chere… Tell me you’re still you.”

For a second her eyes wandered his face like she was confused; but then, little by little, they began to focus, and she opened her mouth, whispered thinly, “Remy…”

It felt like a miracle, a simple name call that he seemed to have waited a lifetime just to hear, the answer that Belle had never given him, the nightmare he’d never woken up from.

A smile of relief lit his face, but suddenly Raven was right there, demanding in an abrasive tone: “What do you remember?”

The confusion settled back over Anna’s face like a shroud.

“Everything… Nothing… It’s all a mess… Just flashes…” Her voice was weak, threadbare. “Did it work? I’m not sure…” She touched the side of her head with a familiar gesture, one he’d seen her do often during her bouts of mem-intoxication.

“Her mind’s still processing the data,” Raven declared. “It’ll take some time for the connections to fully rebuild. It could take weeks, months.”

But he didn’t care. All he cared about was the fact that she was still seemed sane, whole. It didn’t matter whether the truth changed her or not. She was alive in every sense.

“Damn, chere,” he breathed helplessly. “You’re amazin’. You know that?”

The statement was both relieved and sincere, and it brought a faint smile to her face that faded as soon as it had come. She staggered to her feet, and he let her. He figured she needed to test her strength, and under her own terms. When she wobbled Raven hastened to steady her, but she shrugged off the assistance, preferring the wall to hold her upright instead.

“How long’ve I been out?” she asked.
“Ten, fifteen minutes,” Raven replied. Her tone was subdued, the voice of a mother concerned about the truth of a child’s welfare.

“Huh.” Anna took the information with dark amusement. “Feels like longer. Feels like forever…”

“What do you remember?” Raven asked again, like she doubted that Anna was fine at all.

“I told you,” came the weary reply. “It’s a blur, a jumble, a mess….” She paused, gagging with a sudden and powerful wave of nausea.

“Rest,” Raven urged her softly. “You need to save your strength, and we don’t have much time. We’ll carry you.”

“Like hell you will,” Anna bit back forcefully. “I’m leaving this place on my own two damn feet, Raven.”

“shit.”

Raven glanced over at Remy, who was now standing off a little way, apparently glued to his phone.

“My phone,” he was muttering. “The battery’s fuckin’ dead.”

“What?” Raven fired at him, almost with exasperation. “What does that mean?”

She looked over at Anna like she could deliver the answer faster, only to find her vomiting noisily in a corner.

“My phone’s a detonator,” Remy explained quietly, “set to destroy the Machine.”

“What?” Raven snapped at him. “And you forgot to bring a fucking charger?”

He swung round on her, literally dripping sarcasm.

“Well, thanks, Raven, but I hadn’t exactly planned on you selling us out, y’know. Anna and I were s’pposed t’ be in fuckin’ London by now!”

Raven swore to herself viciously before composing herself sufficiently to say: “Leave it. We’ll deal with the damn thing later. We don’t have time.”

The words were said with the tone who was used to giving orders and having them obeyed, but he wasn’t about to have any of it.

“No,” he answered firmly, and promptly spun on his heel and began to power walk back the way they’d come.

“Are you fucking mad?” Raven barked after him. “I don’t have control over security anymore, they’ll be right behind us! Our priority is to get Anna out!”

“Then get her out!” Remy yelled back at her over his shoulder. “After today, Essex won’t let anyone near that Machine ever again! This is it, Raven – our only shot at gettin’ rid of that fuckin’ piece of shit thing forever! You get her outta here, and I’ll meet back up with you topside.”

“You’re going to get yourself fucking killed!” Raven railed; but he’d already made his mind up.
“Like you care!”

“She cares!” Raven exploded.

He almost stopped in his tracks. Almost.

“No,” he answered calmly. “Her mem’ries are what’s important to her. Make sure she lives to appreciate them, Raven.”

And he jogged off.

-oOo-

He slunk through the building like a revenant, avoiding security like he didn’t even have to try.

He didn’t entirely believe the parting shot he’d left with Raven, but he was trying not to think about that – he was trying, for one last time at least, to wear the cool, detached mask of professionalism he usually wore. Sure, he could’ve walked. But to do so would’ve left things undone, and he didn’t like that. Essex’s screwed up little operation was going to get what was coming to it, and he was more than happy to play the role of its angel of death. He’d never been poetic enough to believe that true abominations existed in this world, but he believed it now, and he knew that if one existed, the Machine was definitely it.

He marched back towards the Machine, the wheels in his mind spinning. So he was out of a detonator… but it wasn’t anything he didn’t think the old ‘bullet-in-the-charge’ trick couldn’t fix.

*Yup – easy. Always did ace improv class.*

He paused, the thought conjuring up memories of his past that were so painful they took his breath away.

Luckily or otherwise, his maudlin train of thought was derailed by the unexpected roar of an unpractised battle cry and the resounding *thwack* of a metal pipe to the head.

It would’ve almost been amusing if it hadn’t been an experience he’d been treated to one too many times. He turned, his fist snapping over the pipe just as it was descending again, thoroughly unsurprised to see Essex on the other end of it.

“You’re too old t’ play this kinda game and win,” Remy grunted, shoving aside the pipe, his sheer strength causing Essex to stagger back under the force. “Why don’t you just accept the obvious – you’ve lost.”

“I know why you’re here,” Essex seethed, lunging with the pipe again, only for Remy to catch it easily once more. “You’re here to ruin my life’s work. You’re here to destroy the Machine.”

With a twist of the wrist Remy had wrested the pipe out of Essex’s grasp and flung it aside. “Yeah,” he agreed breathlessly. “And you’re gonna stop me how?”

Essex’s answer was to whip a gun out of his pocket – and Remy immediately recognised it as Anna’s. Essex could only have stolen it when he’d been hooking her up to the Machine.

“That’s outta bullets,” Remy stated. “If it wasn’t, you would’a shot me the moment you saw me.”
But Essex was unmoved, lifting his hand and pointing the gun squarely at him.

“Foolish though it may seem, I’d still prefer not to see you dead. Although if you force my hand…”

“We played that game before, Milbury,” Remy scoffed. “And it didn’t end so well. For either of us.”

He was so certain, so positive that he was calling Essex’s bluff, that it was a surprise when he pulled the trigger and Remy felt the bullet slam into his left shoulder. He took a step back, regained it. The wound seared with a familiar burn that almost made him smile.

“That all you got?” he quipped gruffly. “Shoot me like you mean it, Nathaniel. I’m so fuckin’ tired of playin’ right now. You want the Machine to save humanity, but look at you. Willin’ t’ put a bullet in an unarmed man. Who’s gonna save you, huh?”

There was a fire in Essex’s eyes, a stone-cold madness.

“You’re not unarmed,” he rasped. “You still have that gun on you. Attempt to draw it, and I’ll kill you. Don’t you see, I’ve come too far to back out now. Walk away, LeBeau. That way, you’ll live.”

Here it was, the expected ultimatum – and he knew which choice he was going to make. There wasn’t a lot he believed in, that he was willing to die for – but this was one of those things, and the realisation alone was so powerful, so exhilarating, he felt it was enough to even dodge bullets, even as Essex raised the gun and pointed it right at him and—

And suddenly Anna was whipping round the corner, an inlaid pearl pen in her hand that had a familiar-looking spike on the tip – she grabbed a hold of Essex from behind and plunged the blade into his shoulder, slamming him against the wall and pulling out the spike in one fluid motion. Her movements were so fast that it was almost a blur when she thrust the blade into Essex’s wrist, pinning it to the wall. A howl came from his mouth, one that was full of pain and ire; the gun went off before he dropped it uselessly to the floor. The bullet lodged itself in the ceiling.

“*I should kill you!*” she raged at him like a Fury. “But I am so fucking done with killing right now! I am so-fucking-done!”

She wrenched the blade from his wrist, letting him fall to his knees, whimpering in agony as she turned aside and picked up his pistol. For a moment it seemed that she was going to unload it into him, but instead she aimed at the floor and fired every last round into the ground. The clip finally empty, she flung it aside with an angry flourish.

“You’ll regret this, Weapon Zero,” Essex gasped, clutching at his wounded shoulder with his one good hand. “This was never about you, never about me. This was about everyone. You were supposed to be better than this. You were supposed to be our salvation!”

“I’m human!” she shrieked back at him. “Just like you!”

But he hardly seemed to hear her, continuing between ragged breaths, “You were supposed… to take away our pain… You were supposed to take away our suffering… …”

She laughed, low and bitter.

“We’re made to suffer,” she told him softly, sadly. “How else are we supposed to learn? To grow? To strive for anything? How are we supposed to create, to dream, to better ourselves?
The world you want is a dead one. One that has no purpose. If the human race kills itself, who cares? At least we didn’t trade away what makes us human!”

She turned, ready to walk away for good, when his voice, thin and wavering, stopped her.

“If you’re going to take this away from me… the only thing I’ve lived, worked, breathed for… then end it, Weapon Zero. Do what you were meant to do, one last time. Pass judgement, execute without prejudice. Obviously you’ve found me wanting. You’ve found everything I stand for beneath you.”

There was something mocking in his tone that she heard loud and clear.

“No, Essex,” she answered coldly. “I’m not what you think I am. I’m not your weapon, and I’m not your executioner. If it’s justice you want from me, I choose to give you mercy. Live with your choices for once, and let me be. This isn’t worth dying for, Nathaniel.”

She turned her back on him, a final insult too many. With a surge of strength that evidently surprised even her, he leapt to his feet and dove at her, teeth bared, his hands grasping for her throat in a last-ditch attempt, however weak, to claw back the only thing he knew. Remy had seen enough. He picked up the metal pipe still lying at his feet and swung it with an ease that belied the pain of his bullet wound. A swift crack to the head finally rendered Essex down and out for the count, an unmoving heap on the floor.

“That is so fuckin’ satisfyin’,” Remy announced, flinging the pipe aside. He only paused when he saw Anna staring down at Essex with a stunned expression on her face.

“What?” he asked her innocently. “There are some things in this screwed up world that we just can’t let go of. I just made it easier for him to let go of you.”

She raised her eyes to his, seemingly recovering from her surprise as she did so.

“You,” she began heatedly, “are the world’s biggest asshole.”

He blinked.

“Huh?”

“You heard me.” She started to rip up the hem of her shirt into a long, thin strip. “Running off and pulling your machismo bullshit again. After saying we were a team.”

She walked up to him, letting him know she was only half-joking by the wry little smile she bestowed on him. He allowed himself a small smile in return, which instantly tipped back into a grimace as she began to bandage his wound, her ministrations proving to be a little too efficient.

“What can I say?” he winced. “I kinda preferred the idea of seein’ you outta here and in one piece.”

She pulled an unimpressed face at him.

“Assuming you’d get out of here alive to care.”

“Yeah, well… I was gonna worry about that later…”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Says the guy who was talking about wanting to be there to say goodbye.”
He shrugged, which was more painful than she knew.

“Don’t judge me, chere,” he murmured. “I’m makin’ this up as I go along. And by the way…”

“What?”

She’d finished tying the bandage and had stepped back, eyeing him sceptically.

“Thanks for the assist.”

Her expression softened.

“Ditto. Like we’ve both said… we’re an amazing team.”

She turned away abruptly, and it both heartened and worried him to see that she was still so goddamn sharp despite everything she’d been through.

“Anna,” he spoke. “Tell me the truth. How much do you remember?”

She was quiet and for a second he thought she wouldn’t answer.

“I wasn’t lying,” she finally replied in a resigned tone. “The memories are there, but… they’re like a tsunami in my mind… a raging undercurrent beneath a calm surface. Still…” and her voice grew quieter, “there are things… that are starting to become clear…”

She trailed off, shaking her head slightly before continuing: “I remember my mom and dad’s faces now. I remember that they loved me.” She paused. “I guess that’s all I ever really wanted to know.”

He stared. Until that very moment he hadn’t understood – and neither had she – that that was all this had ever been about.

“What happened to them?” he asked quietly.

She didn’t answer, not with words. Instead she hung her head and dropped her shoulders, unable to speak. He knew instinctively what the action implied. Wordlessly he went over to her and enfolded her with his one good arm, pulled her gently against his chest. He remembered how useless words like ‘sorry’ had once seemed, how all his own grief had ever taught him was how lonely the world was, how everything he’d thought he’d known about human warmth was wrong. Human warmth wasn’t sex. It was this.

It was a while before she stepped away from him. When she looked up again there was this hardness in her eyes, but he could tell from the line of her mouth that her emotions were running deep, and her hand lingered a little too long on his chest.

“If we’re going to do this,” she told him. “We’re going to do it together.”

He swallowed; he nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

-oOo-

Their journey back into the bowels of the basement passed in silence, and when at last they returned to the place they’d started, Remy was none too surprised to find the doors to the room wide

Anna grunted her begrudging agreement.

“Or just standard practice.”

Together they stood in the doorway and looked up at the Machine.

“You should know,” Remy felt it was fair to warn her, “that I planted enough explosives here to blast this place pretty much to hell.”

She glanced over at him, eyebrow raised.

“Enough to make this wall shitty cover?”

He didn’t know how to pretty it up for her.

“Uhhh…” he said, and it must’ve been what she was expecting because she brushed over it briskly.

“I’m guessing you’re thinking of putting a gunshot in one of those charges?” she asked, nodding towards the Machine.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Y’shoot one—”

“—You start a chain reaction,” she finished for him.

“Uh huh.”

She looked away and took in a deep breath.

“I dunno,” she stated helplessly. “I’ve been behind worse cover than this wall.”

“There’s still time to walk away,” he observed gently. She passed him a look.

“Listen,” she said seriously. “That thing… there are so many lives it’s screwed up. So many lives it will screw up, if we don’t destroy it. What happened to me… It isn’t going to happen to anyone else. Ever.” She looked back to the Machine, continued thoughtfully; “Memories are the glue that binds us together. For better or for worse. It was never for me to take them away, to make up false ones. It’s not for anyone to decide what any of us gets to remember. That’s a truth I’m okay dying for.”

She looked back over at him.

“I don’t have much else to live for on the outside anyway,” she admitted. He couldn’t quite help grinning.

“Me either.”

She looked a little bit sad, and she reached out and took his left hand in her right.

“We have each other,” she ruminated. “Guess that’s why I’m here.”
“Really?” he bantered back. “When we could both be on the outside, starting our lives over, you’d still rather be here?”

The glance she darted him clearly showed that a part of her was tempted — but there was enough stubbornness in those eyes to tell him she’d gone past the point of budging. He sighed and pulled the pistol out of his pocket.

“Ya know,” he said. “I ain’t never really gone wit’ the moral choice before, chere, over the selfish one. Guess there’s a first time for everythin’.”

He lifted his arm, aimed at the Machine.

“And if mem’ries are the glue that binds us,” he continued, “I’m pretty sure that if I survive this, I ain’t gon’ forget you, Anna Marie Raven. Wherever either of us ends up. Just a fair warnin’.”

He was almost surprised when she spun round to face him and kissed his mouth, long and hard. When she finally pulled away from him it was only by the slightest of fractions.

“Essex is right,” she murmured. “When this is over, when all my memories are back, I’ll be different… But I won’t forget you either. Thanks, Remy, for making this possible. I never dreamed this could be possible, ever. I’m human again; I have a past. You did that.”

There wasn’t a single soul in his entire life that had ever thanked him for anything that had mattered. There were so many things he wanted to thank her for too, but he didn’t have the words to articulate any of them. But maybe words were too much, and it didn’t really matter anyway. Instead he touched his forehead to hers, and for a few blissful seconds it was just him and her and the thing he’d been searching for for so long without even knowing until that very moment.

At last she stepped back, and he was surprised to see her pull a gun out of her jacket.

“Where the hell did you get that?” he asked her.

“Raven.” She flashed him a fleeting grin. “Don’t think you’re gonna get all the glory in this, Cajun. This is our thing. Always has been.” She lifted the pistol in her left arm and took aim.

“Just say when.”

Even at this point, he was still playing catch-up to her. She was his perfect match, his foil. Which he guessed was okay, because, he realised, he was hers too.

He got back into position and lined up his shot. His shoulder had got to the point where it was starting to kill him, but he grit his teeth against it. Again, her fingers curled into his; she took aim with her left hand, and for the very first time he realised, with a jolt, that she was ambidextrous.

It reminded him that there were so many things he still didn’t know about her.

Would he ever know now……?

“Okay,” she began. “Say when.”

He inhaled, long and deep and slow. He didn’t want that breath to end.

“When,” he said.

And they both pulled the trigger.

The explosion was like nothing he’d ever experienced before, the whole world coming at
him as if in slow motion, split seconds that lasted lifetimes. The only thing he’d remember afterwards was grappling her to the ground and covering her with his body… Pain layering pain layering pain… The screeching, crashing cacophony of the blast, tearing metal from metal, splintering plaster and pulverising concrete… …

The rumbling drumroll of cascading debris raining noisily all round him, *thump thump thump*, and then— nothing more.

-oOo-
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Remy learns the bittersweet truth of Anna's past.

It must have been a moment or two later that he opened his eyes to silence and light.

A warm, painless fuzz had descended over him, and he lay there basking in it, not for the first time wondering whether he had died and not particularly caring if he had.

It was only by degrees that he began to realise that he hadn’t; that he was very much alive, and that the fuzz was nothing more than the fuzz of an anaesthetic.

That alone was enough to sharpen his senses. He pushed himself up into a sitting position as fast as his heavy limbs and woolly head would let him. It was hardly a surprise when he found himself back in Dr. Reyes’ medbay.

His limbs were like lead, and it took him a while to slowly, painstakingly, slide out the bed and onto his feet. He’d got a few steps across the room when he noticed that he was dragging an IV stand along with him. There was a canula stuck in his vein, attaching him to the stand, and he stared at it dumbly for a few seconds before prising it out with fingers that felt like jello. When it was out he threw it back onto the bed and stumbled over to the full-length mirror by the wall.

His body was a patchwork of half-healed wounds, scars, stitches and bruises – evidence enough that time had passed, even though he couldn’t be certain just how much. When he turned away he saw that fresh clothes had been laid aside for him on a nearby chair; there was a loose robe slung over the back, and he put it on slowly, wrestling with his heavy limbs. Weakened though he was physically and mentally from both the obvious surgery and the long period of inactivity, he had a purpose in mind, and he knew exactly where to go to find it.

He stumbled out the door and into the corridor, up the stairs and onto the first floor. Everything was empty, quiet, totally deserted, isolated in a way that intimated to him what he dreaded to face, what he already knew to be true. When he got to the comms room Raven was there, standing beside St. John, the two of them leaning over a monitor and quietly discussing its contents.

He stood in the doorway, and she saw him, her conversation slowly trailing off. She said nothing, and so he opened his mouth, saying in a gruff croak:

“She’s gone. Isn’t she.”

Somehow, he hadn’t expected an answer, and he didn’t get one. He already knew what it was anyway, and her expression was confirmation enough, so he turned on his heel and left.

-oOo-

His muscle tone was slowly returning, and so he walked back to the room and got dressed. There was a locker in the corner in which he discovered the few possessions he had left, things that had been salvaged from Empharma. He wondered what was left of the place, but apparently not enough to bother finding out. His phone, battered and cracked, was still out of juice
anyway.

He was just packing the last of his meagre belongings when Raven finally made her appearance. There was nothing he really had to say to her, and so he kept quiet.

“She didn’t want to leave you,” she finally told him.

He paused mid-action and stared down at the contents of his open bag. There still wasn’t a thing he could think of to say, and so he didn’t bother trying.

“She wanted to go back home,” she explained.

He knew that. He knew that she wanted more than just home, but he didn’t have the courage to say it.

“She’s gone to Mississippi,” he surmised quietly.

“Yes.” He felt her nod, and she continued: “She wanted to wait for you. But the waiting was too painful.”

He didn’t understand. He would’ve waited for her if he’d been in the same position, he was certain of that. It felt like a rejection, an excuse, and it stung.

“Okay then,” he replied with a sarcasm that came across more like bitterness, “I’ll jes’ go get outta your hair then.”

He zipped up his bag and swung it over his shoulder. When he turned to leave she was standing there with an envelope in her hand.

“She left this for you,” she told him.

She held out the envelope to him, and he hesitated. A large part of him didn’t want it, but another couldn’t do without it either, and so he took it from her. There was something hard inside it that he immediately recognised, from its shape and size, as a mem-chip.

Whatever was on it, good or bad, for some reason he was softened.

“What did she say?” he asked curiously.

He noticed that she hesitated before she spoke.

“She said not to come looking for her. That she would find us, when she was ready.”

“Right,” he rejoined wryly. “Although you could find her pretty easy if you wanted to, I’m willin’ t’bet.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Are you asking me to track her for you, LeBeau?”

“Non,” he answered shortly. “I know when I’m not wanted. To be honest,” he continued in a more neutral tone, “I kinda figured she’d wanna leave when all this was over. I jes’ expected t’be around t’ say goodbye, is all.”

He shrugged, which didn’t fool either of them. It made him self-conscious, and so he brushed past her and quickly headed for the door.
“Where will you go?” she asked him unexpectedly.

“Like you care,” he retorted frostily as he got to the exit.

“I can set something up for you,” she persisted, and he halted, realising that it was only out of loyalty to Anna that she was offering him anything at all.

“I think I can manage,” he answered stiffly.

“Are you sure?”

Her insistence confused him. Raven wasn’t the type to feel sorry for anyone, and certainly not him. He could only surmise that Anna had asked her to do this before she’d left.

“Look,” he said, “if there’s really something you want t’do for me, then here’s a thing. All that stuff you dug up on me for her… Make sure it’s scrubbed clean, will ya? All of it. Please.”

She said nothing for a long while, and at first he thought she was going to flat out refuse, but she didn’t.

“I didn’t dig up anything on you,” she told him quietly. “I had it all from the start.”

He turned back round to face her, genuinely surprised, and she added: “When you asked Essex to destroy your past, I was the one who did it. I was the only one who could.”

“But you keep a copy of everythin’,” he finished slowly for her. “Just in case. And when Anna came askin’ you for my background, you already had it.”

She nodded, and he looked away, took in a long, measured breath. When he looked back at her, her expression was stoic.

“Wipe it, Raven,” he told her. “I ain’t askin’ you; I’m tellin’ you to. If you’re doin’ this outta some respect for Anna, it’s the only thing I’m gonna ask for. There’s only one place my past belongs, and that’s here.”

He tapped the side of his head. And then he turned and walked away, from a life he’d never asked for, and yet, somehow, that he’d already learned to love.

-oOo-

The first place he went to was the bank; and then he headed to the river, to the place he’d first begun to know her.

It was sunset, and the lonely waters were the colour of ink dusted with the golden sheen of fading sunlight. He leaned over the esplanade railings and remembered the way she’d looked at him, with that expression of such hard-boiled scepticism that was supposed to have warned him off.

Who are you? she’d asked him, and he’d given her his usual lie, tried to trick her when he’d sensed, even then, that she wouldn’t be easily tricked. Those feline eyes had sized him up effortlessly, yet he’d still believed that somehow he’d been able to outwit her. Little had he known then that the finely-choreographed power play between them had been about to commence.

He put aside his thoughts and opened up the box he’d withdrawn from the bank.

The mem-chips inside were old, black and glossy. He’d forgotten what they’d used to look like. He thumbed one out of its slot and studied it.
Why d’ya bother wit’ that crap? he’d asked Belle one evening as she was just finishing up a recording session. She’d lifted the visor from her head and smiled at him.

‘Cos one day we’ll have kids, she’d explained. And I wanna be able to show ‘em everythin’. For the first time ever, the future generations can experience the past first hand. All our thoughts, all our feelin’s… everythin’ that makes us human.

And even then, he hadn’t really known whether he’d liked the idea of it or not.

No offence, chere, he’d replied, but there are some things I definitely don’t want my kids t’find out.

He’d kissed her and she’d laughed, pushed him away and said: Honey, our kids will only ever know the best of ya.

A bittersweet smile touched his face. He wondered, for the first time in years, just what the child he and Belle had never had would look like now.

Remy took in a sharp breath. The winter air was getting colder, crisper. Without thinking he up-ended the box and spilled its contents into the water. After it was done he stood and watched the small plastic rectangles bob gently on the surface. He felt calm, eerily so. He felt unburdened.

Our memories, Anna had once told him, they’re what make us what we are. Our pasts make us.

He saw it now, and the irony was, it was stupidly simple. He’d spent so much of his life trying to hide from it, trying to live only in the present. But there was a difference, between that and this. There was a difference between running from the past, and coming to terms with it, with accepting it for what it is. With owning it for what it is – inescapably a part of oneself.

And he understood now why Anna had gone. She’d just needed to find a way to do what he’d just done. To let go.

“Whenever you’re ready, chere,” he murmured softly to himself, as he watched Belle’s memories drift slowly out to sea.

-00-0-

The night flight to London was a busy one, full of people heading home or away for Christmas.

Remy sat in the relative quiet of first class and stared out the window into the darkness, his phone sitting, blank-screened, on his lap. The news was still full of the apparent terrorist attack on Empharma Headquarters; Milbury was missing presumed dead, and whether he was or not, Remy no longer particularly cared. The States already felt light years away anyhow.

He reached in his breast pocket for the envelope Anna had left him.

With his thumb he ripped it open, and shook the mem-chip into his hand. He was surprised when a note, neatly folded into a square, dropped into his palm as well.

He opened it and for the first time he saw her small, regular handwriting.

I’m sorry, it said. I wanted to go with you, but there were things I needed to sort out first. Don’t look for me. I’ll find you when I’m ready. I don’t know how to say it, so I just will. Thank
you. For everything.

There was a small dot of ink underneath that, as if she’d intended to write something more but had thought better of it. Instead she’d skipped a line and signed her name.

Anna.

He folded up the note and put it back in the envelope. Then he picked up Trask’s portable interfacing unit from the small, folding table beside him, plugged in the mem-chip, settled back in his seat, and switched it on.

It had been automatically set to play all, and almost immediately a runaway train of memories was hitting him, one after another after another, a hurricane plucking him up and sucking him into its eye.

Running through fields of corn under the blazing sunlight…

Laughter and hugs and picnics and bedtime stories and the scent of baking bread…

Planting sunflowers in her very own patch of field…

Running the tractor into a ditch and pops hooting with laughter… Momma shouting, exasperated…

Fishing on the Mississippi in their little motorboat, chug-chug-chugging…

Chasing the sheep and rolling in the grass with Freddie the sheep dog…

“Why you two filthy little mutts!” momma exclaims, half-huffing, half-chuckling as she lays out the cake for tea… …

Momma and poppa hugging each other in the kitchen with sad, sad faces… Sorrowful whispers that they think she can’t hear… Holding momma’s hand on a trip to the store, stopping over at the doctor’s…

“I’m sick, Anna, sugar,” she says. “You gotta be brave, hon. You gotta look after poppa…”

…Momma lying in her bed cold and pale and unnaturally still, daddy sobbing in the corner… She stands next to the bed with her hands on her mom’s, holds on tight, thinking, you gotta look after poppa… …

Silence…

Hours, days, weeks of it.

Reading books in a cheerless, empty room to the soundtrack of daddy’s tears.

Cooking dinner and tending her sunflowers and the animals and the house, and walking out in the fields with nowhere to go and nowhere to be, no one to care.

She comes home one day and daddy is gone. She fixes herself a sandwich and some juice, and then she goes out into the barn to feed the cattle and… …

She finds daddy. Swinging from the rafters.
Days. Never-ending.

The blind old lady next door who would’ve taken her in and cared for her is deemed unfit to adopt a child, and so… …

“You’re a ward of the state now, honey.”

They take her to a home.

The children tease her, the women shout at her, the men slap her.

She screws herself up tight and tries to wish herself out of existence.

And then she comes. The woman with the hair that’s so blonde it’s almost white. She watches her through the windows, talking to the resident nurse.

“You’re a lucky little bitch, ain’tcha kid. Looks like someone’s ‘dopted you after all…”

Here’s another home. A cold, desolate, windowless home. Hospital beds and laboratories and maze-like corridors. The Machine… …

The loneliness is endless. It blankets her like an avalanche. She’s not like the others. They separate her, and even the respite of impersonal conversation is gone. Essex molests her in ways she was never molested at the foster home. He pokes and prods, hums and hahs; she is a puppet to him… They tie her down to beds and drill needles into her bones, into her brain…

She screams…. …

Staring at the wall, and everything’s white… …

It’s nighttime, but the corridors are still bright. She’s found a way to fiddle the lock to her bedroom, and she doesn’t care if there’s nowhere to run or escape to in here, she just wants her own little secret, her own little slice of space-time.

She’s done this every night for a week now and she hasn’t been caught, not until now, when the black-haired woman turns the corner unexpectedly and sees her.

“What’re you doing out here? You’re not supposed to be up here.”

She stares up at her dumbly with something like defiance in her eyes.

“What’s your name?” the woman asks.

“Anna Raven.”

“Oh. My name’s Raven too…”

Raven takes her hand and leads her back to her room. Her grasp is firm yet gentle and it’s the first time someone’s held her hand in such a long time that it’s like the sun bursting out over stormy seas and suddenly she’s crying… …

“You know,” the blonde woman says, leaning forward and smiling that icy smile at her, “there is a way to forget. Remember how you completely erased subject 506A’s memory about having porridge and honey for breakfast? Well, you can do the same to your own memories… You
can delete as many of them as you want… …”

The words echo, fainter and fainter, then disappear. For a few seconds everything fades to darkness.

Then, light begins to bleed through the cracks of her memory.

She’s sitting on a chair in the medbay, her knees up to her chest, her hands wrapped round a Styrofoam cup of coffee, rocking gently. She is in agony. So much pain. He recognises the feeling, the twisting and the turning, the helplessness. The last time he’d felt this was when Belle had died.

He’s lying on the bed beside her, and he’s almost shocked to see the state he’s in. He’d known, from his own calculations, that he’d been in a coma for ten days, but when he sees himself, he’s surprised he wasn’t down for a lot longer. If he was anyone else he would’ve been dead.

She hears the door open and she raises her head slightly. It’s Raven. She stops a moment in the doorway and they share a glance. Then, wordlessly, she crosses the room and stands beside Anna, puts a hand on her shoulder. The touch breaks her long silence.

“He won’t wake up,” Anna whispers fiercely. “When will he wake up?”

“He nearly died,” Raven reminds her gently. “Cece says it will take days, possibly weeks, for him to recover.”

“I can’t wait that long,” she answers feverishly. “I-I can’t wait that long!”

Her voice breaks with despair. There are no words for this. Trauma upon unresolved trauma is crowding in over the edifice of her fragile sense of self. Was this a price worth paying? Yes, yes. But it hurts it hurts it hurts… …

She unfolds herself and sets her cup aside with a shaking hand. She wraps her fingers round his and holds on as if for dear life.

“He’ll want me to go with him to London,” she continues in that same broken tone. “I-I can’t go to London, Raven. I need to go home. I need to see where I come from.”

“If you wait he’ll go with you,” Raven says quietly, but she shakes her head firmly, says, “No. He can’t come with me. This is… It’s about me, Raven. Me, and me alone. Me, under my own terms, on my own time…” She pauses, takes in a shuddering breath, continues, “But I want to say goodbye. I want to hold him and hear his voice. I want to tell him thank you. For being the only one who cared enough to give me what I wanted. For teaching me to hope again. For teaching me to—”

She breaks off; but her mind says the words, and she can’t hide them from him. A surge of emotion takes her that’s so strong it almost burns.

“I want him to know that I don’t want to walk away from him. That I’m not doing this to hurt him. That I just need a little time, to find out who I am again.”

Silence falls. Her eyes are stinging. She squeezes his hand, willing him to wake up, but he doesn’t.

“Even if you go,” Raven says soothingly, “there are still ways to let him know all these things.”
“Words on a page aren’t enough,” she whispers.

“But words in your memories? Thoughts? Feelings? Aren’t they enough?”

She doesn’t answer. She doesn’t know why she didn’t think of it before. Of course, with a
mem-chip, there were things he’d know about her, personal, painful things... but that doesn’t daunt
her. She wants him to know now. She wants him to know what he’s given her – all the pain, all the
joy. Her – pure and unadulterated.

“Anna,” Raven is saying. “Anna, are you still with me?”

She shakes herself. She is tired, mentally exhausted, physically still reeling from her own
injuries.

“I’m tired. My brain hurts,” she mutters.

“Maybe we should call Dr. Braddock, get you some therapy...”

“No,” she says forcefully. “I don’t need any of that.”

“Anna. You’re suffering a life’s worth of trauma right now. You need support.”

“I need to go home.”

Raven sighs, vexed, and it prompts her to add, “There are people who cared about me
back home. People who would’ve taken care of me, if social services had let them. I-I want to see
them again. I want to ask them about mom and dad. I want them to take me to see the farm, the
river. I know they’ll remember me...”

Raven’s hand drops from her shoulder, and she hears her turn away, pace the floor a
little.

“I could kill Nathaniel for what he did to you,” she mutters viciously.

But that is already over for her, it’s already done with. Her mind is elsewhere.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she states. “I’m going.”

Raven stops pacing.

“Anna, my dear, you’d made up your mind long before I even stepped in here. All you
needed was for me to tell you it’s okay to go.”

She thinks about it. Yes and no. There are other things she wants. She wants him to
squeeze her hand back, to say her name. But those are things Raven can’t give her. And
emotionally, she’s not ready for them. She feels like a child again. Lost, bewildered, brittle. Cast
adrift. Longing for home. And now she has a home to go to.

She’s calmer now. She has a plan, a purpose.

“Raven?” she speaks up softly.

“Yes?”

“Can you— Can I have a moment please? I need to be alone for a bit.”
“Of course.” A pause. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

She knows what Raven’s thinking. She’s thinking about the day she’d come to her, bleeding and wretched and half dead, the night she’d tried to take her own life. But what Raven doesn’t realise is that she wants to live now. She wants to live with a ferocity that she hasn’t felt in years.

“Yeah,” she answers at last. “I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

It’s enough to pacify her. Raven heads for the door and a few moments later she’s alone again.

She gets to her feet, but she doesn’t let go of his hand. She looks down on him. Her memory is a cascade of gloriously intimate thoughts and emotions that only he will ever understand the meaning of. Even now, connected so viscerally, so completely, to her own senses, her own perceptions, he feels himself take a sharp intake of breath at the beauty of it. The things she tells him are things that cannot be formulated in words. Human language isn’t adequate to describe it. Until that moment he’s never known the true shades and subtleties of love.

When it’s over he almost feels bereft.

“Wait,” she whispers to him, the only words he hears her say. “Just wait for me. Please.”

She lets go of his hand and touches his face with the backs of her fingers. She remembers how he’d touched her the very same way, and he feels the heat warm her cheeks.

“Goodbye, Remy,” she says, and the memory flickers out.

He pushed back the visor, pulled off the unit, and quietly laid it aside.

He looked out the window into the darkness for a long time, and it was a while before he realised there were tears running down his cheeks.

He wiped them away with the back of his hand and smiled faintly at his reflection. There were things he didn’t believe in, things that he was too world-weary and jaded to put any stock in. He honestly didn’t know if he’d ever see her again, if there would ever be anything left for either of them to wait for.

What he did know, though, what he did believe in, was simple enough.

It was that he loved her and she loved him, and if there was anything in this life that was worth waiting for, it was going to be that.

-oOo-
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Fourteen months later, Remy gets a new assignment that sends him back to the States, and the end of his story.

*Fourteen months later*

Another dreary English winter morning chased him out the Tube and onto the streets of London. He swam with the shoals of commuters towards Russell Square, making his usual stop for a croissant and a coffee at the corner patisserie, before heading through the park and across the road, up the steps to the elegant Georgian building with the gilt-lettered sign that read *Gavin & Lord*.

It never failed to amuse him, how perfectly proper and English the name sounded, and he buzzed his way through the oak and glass doors and scrubbed his shoes on the doormat, seeing as he’d just cut across the grass in the park.

“Late again, huh?”

The long, sculpted face of a man with the features of a noir detective and a sheen of slicked-back raven hair poked its way round a doorframe and out into the corridor.

“Delays on the Tube, Jake,” Remy replied cheerfully. “All damn week now. Has t’be a record.”

Jacob Gavin Junior gave an incoherent grumble in response. He was a lean young man with a dour mouth and a sarcastic sense of humour – not exactly the partner-in-crime Remy had planned having, but he was reliable, had excellent contacts from Gavin Senior’s ‘courier’ business Stateside, and he was actually pretty fun once he had a couple of shots down him.

“By the way,” Jake added as Remy power-walked past him, “there’s a woman in your office.”

Remy stopped short and turned.

“It ain’t Lila, is it?”

“Lila?” Jake screwed up his nose. “Why would your ex be anywhere near here?”

“I dunno.” Remy shrugged. “I left a couple’a vids round hers after we split up. She said she’d come over and drop ‘em off last week.” He paused before asking curiously, “Who is it?”

“Dunno.” His business-partner gave his usual world-weary frown. “She wouldn’t give me her name. Sounds like she’s probably gonna be a ‘special’ case, though. I said I was free to take her on, but she specifically asked for you.” His frown deepened. “Dunno why the cute ones always have to ask for you.”
“Cute, huh?” Remy echoed with a small smile.

“Yeah. I left her in your office, gave her some coffee. Which reminds me. We need to hire a secretary, I end up dealing with everything since you’re late, like, 100% of the time.”

“Sure,” Remy answered breezily, already heading towards his office. “Put an advert out for one. I ain’t got no requirements – as long as they’re competent and easy on the eyes.”

And he opened up his door, grinning to himself as he heard Jake muttering irately under his breath behind him.

He halted when he saw her.

She was standing at the side table, her fingers running curiously over the interfacing unit there. When he came in she looked up as if momentarily startled, though she made no attempt to hide what she had been doing.

“Nice unit,” she commented rather than greeted him – her accent was neutral and generically American. “Chinese, the latest model. Was thinking of getting one of these myself.”

She was, as Jake had described her, ‘cute’. Small, petite and compact, with a pretty, lightly freckled face and chestnut brown hair drawn back into a tight ponytail. She looked to be in her early twenties, but he guessed she was actually older. She wore a charcoal grey pantsuit that spoke to a taste in fashion that was dictated as much by comfort as by style.

He relaxed a little, slipping off his coat and hanging it on the stand by the door.

“I got a friend who does good deals. I can give you his details, if you want, Miss…?”

“Ms,” she corrected him with a self-conscious little smile. “Ms. Pryde. Katherine.” She crossed the room and held out her hand to him. There was something about her that was a little clumsy, a little awkward, though in a way that was endearing rather than off-putting.

“Robert Lord,” he introduced himself in kind. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Pryde.”

They shook hands, and he offered her the seat at his desk where her barely touched coffee cup was still sitting, which she took obligingly.

“So,” Remy said, once he’d taken his own seat behind the desk. “What can Gavin & Lord do for you, Ms. Pryde?”

She wasn’t like most of the ‘special cases’ who came his way, with their parleying and their secrecy. Ms. Katherine Pryde, it seemed, was unschooled in this sort of transaction and completely in earnest. She dug into her purse and brought out her cellphone.

“I need you to get something for me,” she said. “Something my family lost a long time ago.”

She opened up something on her phone and turned the screen to show him.

It was a Faberge egg, a subtly elegant piece of work that, unlike most Faberges was almost entirely bereft of any ostentation. The entire shell was made of a rose-pink guilloche enamel, encased in a delicate trelliswork of tiny, shimmering diamonds. It was standing on a pedestal of crimson red enamel decorated with a band of gold cloisonné hearts. He wasn’t an expert in Faberge eggs, but he knew enough to know that he’d never seen this one before.
“Hmm,” he mused out loud. “S’not every day ya get t’see a lost Faberge egg. You say this is a fam’ly piece?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “My great-great-grandfather gave it to my great-great-grandmother as a wedding gift. It got stolen during the Second World War. By the Nazis.”

“Interestin’,” He took the phone from her and studied the picture in more detail. What intrigued him most was the fact that it was being hosted on an exhibition page – as one of the exhibits. “‘Faberge: A Retrospective,’” he read the title of the page aloud. “The Charles F. Xavier Gallery at the Worthington Hotel, New York.” The exhibition was already underway and he looked up at her. “Your family’s private property is on show at a public exhibition.”

“Yeah.” She nodded again. “On loan from a ‘private collection’.”

He handed her back the phone and leaned back in his chair.

“I see,” he stated.

She looked at him expectantly, and when he said nothing more, she said: “Can you get it back for me?”

She really was an amateur at this. He gave her a slow, easy smile.

“You mean steal it?”

She was confused.

“‘Inventory retrieval’… That’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Logistics, Ms. Pryde. We’re a legit business. You know… like shippin’, from storage to our clients. You sure you ain’t got us mixed up wit’ someone else?”

Ms. Pryde pursed her lips and furrowed her brow. She dipped a hand into her pocket and took out an off-white business card.

“You came recommended to me from someone.”

“Oh?”

She tossed the card on the desk between them. It was worn and dog-eared, but it was definitely one of his.

“I have a… ‘friend’,” she said in a firmer tone. “His name is Peter Rasputin. You did some work for him a few months back. I told him about the egg, about the exhibition. He gave me your card, told me you could help me.”

Peter Rasputin. He remembered him, a newly famous artist whose latest works had been stolen from a Berlin exhibition by a criminal gang who’d been intending to use them as bargaining chips for lesser jail sentences. He’d retrieved them with the minimum of fuss, leaving another grateful customer. When he looked at the card she’d thrown on the table, there was no doubting it was his. There, on the back, in his own handwritten print, was the name, Peter Rasputin. Jake’s Spidey-sense had turned out to be on the money – she was a special case.

Satisfied, he pocketed the card.

“It’ll cost you,” he warned her.
“I know,” she replied, relieved he was now on the level with her. “Money isn’t an issue. That egg is priceless.”

He sat there, regarding her, chewing on his bottom lip.

“There are at least five other outfits back in the States who could help you, Ms. Pryde,” he decided to probe her further. “Why’d you bother comin’ all the way out to London when you could get the same kinda service back home?”

She seemed annoyed, and a little miffed, that he was still questioning her. Her expression was half indignant, half embarrassed.

“Look,” she said. “I don’t know much about this kind of thing, if I’m honest. I’ve never so much as gotten a speeding ticket in my entire life, and I couldn’t tell you what the backseat of a cop car looks like. I don’t know who to ask to get this kind of thing done, and frankly I count myself lucky that Peter could recommend anyone at all.” She sighed. “When I got the recommendation, I did my homework. I work in IT, and I, uh… know a few things about the deep web. I went on some forums. They say you’re one of the best at what you do.”

The compliment, though furtively given, was flattering, and he allowed himself a small grin.

“You must really want this get got,” he observed.

“It has sentimental value,” she explained in a quieter tone. “As a kid I was shown pictures of my great-great-grandparents with it, of my great-grandparents with it… I was told stories about it…” She paused slightly, her voice lowering yet more as she continued, “My mom and dad aren’t alive anymore to see it now, but as soon as I saw it was being exhibited, I just knew I had to have it back. It’s ours Mr. Lord. It was stolen from my grandparents by people who hated them and killed them for it. I never knew them, but if I had that egg back, I feel like I can finally… …”

She trailed off, but he knew exactly the sentiment she was feeling at that moment. She didn’t need to explain. If she got back that piece of her past she felt like she could finally move on.

“A’right,” he said at last; and she looked up at him hopefully.

“You’ll take on my case?”

“Not just yet. I need to do some homework first. In this business, Ms. Pryde, vettin’ comes before fieldwork.”

She looked surprised at the implication of mistrust, and he smiled indulgently at her.

“It’s nothin’ personal, Ms. Pryde. It’s just how we operate. It’s also why I only take ‘special cases’ on recommendation.” He took one of his business cards out the stand at his elbow and wrote his name on the backside. “Here,” he said, passing it to her when he was done. “Save it for the next person you wanna recommend me to.”

-oOo-

It was past six when Jake Gavin looked in round Remy’s office door. He was surprised to find him still there, seemingly engrossed in his tablet.

“Where is Remy LeBeau and what have you done with him?” he demanded loudly. Remy looked up, confused. Jake was the only one in England who knew his real name, and he
wasn’t entirely used to hearing it.

“Huh?”

Jake rolled his eyes and stepped inside.


“Oh.” Remy glanced at the time on his tablet vaguely. “Yeah. Just workin’ on that new case I got.”

“Oh, you mean the one you got this morning? With that Katherine… …”

“Pryde. Yeah.”

He scrolled down the page he was reading as Jake sat himself casually down in the swing chair opposite him.

“Okay, she must’ve really made an impression,” he remarked sardonically. “Cos you’re never this invested in a case. I mean, I know she was cute, but… I thought your type was more…” He appeared unable to find the words, and Remy looked up at him with a raised eyebrow and asked:

“More what?”

Jake shrugged.

“Full-bodied?”

“Full-bodied?”

“Bitey?”

“Bitey?”

“Challenging.”

This time it was a statement and not a question. Remy laid down his tablet and grinned.

“I dunno. I kinda get the feelin’ Ms. Pryde is a lot more challengin’ than she looks.”

Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Okay. Whadja dig up on her?”

He reached for the tablet and Remy let him, amused. He’d met Jake during his first month in London, hustling in the city’s most prestigious casino. A skinful of drinks later and they’d somehow ended up getting into business together. It had made sense under the influence, and, surprisingly, it still made sense thirteen months of sobriety later. Between Jake’s proven ability in the field, the respect they’d built up for each other over the months, and the tall tales they’d told over one too many drinks, they’d actually ended up becoming friends – or as close to being friends as either of them would admit.

“Katherine Anne Pryde,” Jake was reading off the tablet. “IT consultant for GG Incorporated – whoa. Boring. Graduated in computer science from the University of Chicago…
Scholarship to study sim-tech in MIT. Practicing non-Orthodox Jew. Mixed Russian and English ancestry. Family migrated to the US after WWII… yadda yadda yadda…”

He continued to read to himself, scrolling down the rest of the page before finally deciding he’d seen enough.

“So her story checks out,” he stated, passing the tablet back to Remy. “You even managed to pin down the original certificate of sale for that Faberge egg, which earns extra kudos from me. All in all – sounds pretty run-of-the-mill when you read through it. Kinda boring, actually.”

“Yeah,” Remy nodded. “Not the kinda woman who’d hire a professional thief to steal an heirloom for her.”

“Pfft.” Jake waved his hand dismissively. “People get all sorts of crazy about family stuff. Especially stuff that happened during the war, and even more so about expensive works of art. Trust me, I know.”

“Sure ya do.” Remy had heard enough anecdotes about Jake’s time ‘couriering’ (read ‘smuggling’) back in the States. “Her past checks out just fine. When I said she was a challenge, I was referrin’ t’the part that said she’s a black belt in jujitsu and aikido. Don’t tell me ya missed that.”

Jake’s expression was incredulous.

“What, her? She’s gotta be like… only 5 foot or somethin’…”

“Five-six.”

“Seriously? She looks smaller.”

“Nope. You jes’ try an’ hit on too many supermodels.”

He got up and went over to the drinks cabinet, pouring himself a whiskey.

“Want one?” he asked his friend.

“Nah. I’m headin’ out. Got a date.”

“Oh, and here I was thinkin’ you were anglin’ for Ms. Pryde.”

“I still might be, depending on how tonight goes.”

“Anyone I know?” Remy asked curiously, flopping back down into his seat. Jake, whose tragi-comic love life appeared to be an open book, shrugged.

“Just some guy I met down the Marquis last week while you were busy wining and dining a client.”

“Great. I’m happy for you. Have fun.”

“You stayin’ here?”

“Yeah. Just gonna finish this up. Won’t be long.”

“Wow. All work and no play, man. You’re weirdin’ me out. Don’t stay up too late.”

Remy was touched to see that his friend looked genuinely worried. Usually, it was him
pulling the workaholic thing.

“I won’t. Now would you just go? You’re the one with the date here, not me!”

Jake scowled, picked up his briefcase and got to his feet.

“You don’t haveta make it sound so damn miraculous!”

“I’m not. I’m jes’ tryin’ to get rid of you. Now go out, have fun, and if you come in late t’morrow I’ll know it went well.”

But Jake was already at the door.


Remy rolled his eyes as his business partner finally left. While he got along well with Jake most of the time, there were definite moments when his cynical humour and dry wit was a pain in the ass.

He sighed and turned back to his tablet. All else aside, he was pretty sure that stealing Katherine Pryde’s egg would be cakewalk, the kind of thing he’d used to pull as a matter of routine back when he was in New Orleans. It was easy money and his client was invested. He’d be stupid not to take it.

He closed the document he had open and brought up a browser.

It was finally time to book a flight back to the States.

-oOo-

A couple of days later and he was landing in JFK – the first time he’d been back since he’d left for the UK. As soon as his feet touched the ground he realised, with some surprise, just how much he’d missed it.

He hailed a cab from the airport and whilst inside he fired off a quick text to Katherine Pryde, whom he’d promised to keep updated of his progress. When that was done he sat back and watched the familiar hustle and bustle of New York life unfold before him.

It was impossible not to think of Anna.

He remembered the taxi ride they’d taken after their trip to Muir like it was a memory from another lifetime. Since his move to England he’d learned not to think of her too often, not to wonder about what she was doing or where she was now, or whether he’d ever seen her again. He was a practical man who didn’t want to live a life that was dependent on her being ready to find him again; and so he’d moved on after a fashion, carried on because that’s what one did with any life that was worth living. He’d wandered into a job and into a relationship that hadn’t lasted, not because he hadn’t genuinely cared about Lila, but because his heart hadn’t been in it. It was only when it had ended that he had realised that a part of him was still even waiting for Anna at all.

The phone buzzed in his pants – Ms. Pryde’s expected reply – but he ignored it for the moment. He was nearing a familiar neighbourhood, and he toyed idly with the idea that he could stop the cab right now, head on over to that old red door and knock, ask Raven for the thing he’d refrained from asking her the first time round.

_Let’s jes’ end this charade, Raven. Tell me where I can find her. I don’t care if she’s_
different, if she’s changed. I jes’ want t’know if she found home. If she found what she was lookin’ for. If she’s happy now.

If she’s happy I can be happy, I can move on.

He arrived at the Worthington Hotel around noon and checked in at the ornate reception. The Charles F. Xavier Gallery was situated on the first floor, just off the lobby. He didn’t go in, not just yet. Instead he observed the people queueing for the exhibition – Faberge, it turned out, was still a subject of some popularity.

Leaving his quarry aside for the moment, Remy went up to his room and connected to the WiFi. Katherine Pryde’s message was brief and generic, while Jake was complaining about the fact that he had to interview potential secretaries all by his lonesome. Remy was thoroughly unsympathetic. This may have been a business trip, but it was nice to be back Stateside and once work was over he was determined to enjoy himself.

He took a shower and freshened up before heading back down to see the exhibition. Most of the pieces were ones he’d seen before – the star of the show was Ms. Pryde’s egg, which was apparently making its public debut. It was being exhibited in its own dedicated room, which was already bustling with inquisitive people. Remy studied the room carefully. His practised gaze immediately sniffed out the four cameras trained on the prize – two obvious ones for the benefit of the audience, and two hidden ones for the benefit of real security. The room had two doorways – one for entrance and one for exit, so as to control audience flow. On a plinth in the middle of the room, behind a case, was the egg. Its simplicity made it smaller than most Faberge specimens, but it was its very simplicity – as well as its romantic connotations – that lent it its appeal. A couple of old women were already cooing over the pink guilloche enamel and the band of arabesque hearts circling its base.

Remy sidled up and gave it a suitably disinterested look. Photography was prohibited, but he hung around long enough to take a couple of shots with the pinhole camera hidden in his button. Having seen the only thing worth coming for, he left and headed back into the lobby. He sent off the pictures to Katherine, and she replied almost immediately.

YES, her message said. THAT’S IT.

Satisfied, he headed off for coffee and a late lunch.

-oOo-

Just before seven that evening Remy donned a suit and tie and headed down to the Xavier Gallery for a drinks reception being held in honour of the exhibition’s various donors and sponsors. Remy had already faked his way onto the guest list days ago, and so he passed on through without any trouble. He pulled his usual shtick, mingling with the guests and drinking the wine offered, telling all the lies he knew they expected to hear. It took an irritating amount of time for the moment he’d been waiting for to get underway – the private tour, led by the gallery director.

Remy had never been one for tours, and since he knew practically everything there was to know about every exhibit already, he allowed himself to switch off and focus on the task in hand. Only gradually did he begin to lag behind, feigning interest in the exhibits themselves rather than the director’s long-winded and fawning speeches. He knew the egg was to be the piece de resistance, and so he didn’t have much time to make his move. As soon as he was sure he’d been forgotten, he headed back the short distance to the room that held the egg.
The best way to get in would be through the exit door, where the tour would terminate. He was racing against the clock, but that was okay, it was part of what he liked. He took out his lockpick and had the door open within half a minute or so. Then he hit the EMP device to make sure the security cameras were down.

In his experience small galleries and museums always had the worst security and this place was proving to be no exception. He slipped on his gloves and pressed his palm against the control panel. The door swept open. When he stepped inside it slid shut behind him, and he stopped.

The plinth was empty. The egg was gone.

It had been a set-up.

He spun on his heel, and just as he was about to hit the control panel, he heard the other door across the room open behind him and someone step quickly inside.

“Remy,” said a voice.

He stopped.

He turned.

And it was her.

Anna.

She was dressed exactly like one of the guests, in a cocktail dress with her hair twined up in that familiar chignon. Her wildcat green eyes were exactly as he’d always remembered them, as he’d reconstructed them in his memories – but there was something different in her glance, a softness he’d never seen before. She seemed changed in a way he couldn’t identify, that was both exhilarating and painful because in all his secret reveries of a reunion he’d never expected this nameless change he couldn’t categorise now. It threw him, sabotaged every silent plan he’d made for this moment.

“The egg—” he began instead; but she interrupted him before he could finish the thought, explaining:

“It’s in a private viewing room. Don’t worry. No one will bother us here.”

It was only then that he began to appreciate just how finely orchestrated this had been. He moved across the room slowly towards her, and she watched his approach with something he read as apprehension. He knew what she was expecting – his anger, indignation at the song and dance she’d led him on, at the game she’d forced him to play.

He stopped within a few inches of her.

Standing there, this close to her, he saw exactly what he’d sensed before – the change in her. At first it was her fierceness, her stubbornness, that he thought had gone, but that wasn’t exactly it. It was the wildness, the desperation. The rage, the hate that had driven her for so long.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised, reading his silence as displeasure. “I just had to make sure it was you, and when I was, I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to know if you’d changed, and the more I watched you, the more afraid I was you’d be disappointed if you saw me… If you’d even want to see me… And then I didn’t have the guts to call it off anymore…”
She was being more honest than he knew either of them had ever been comfortable with, and, self-conscious, she dropped her eyes and murmured again: “I’m sorry…”

Until that moment words had failed him, but now he found them again. He slipped off his gloves and he raised his hands, slowly bridging the gap between them; he touched her cheeks, cradled her face in his palms, and she glanced up at him with surprise as, for the first time in months, his skin was on hers and she was finally more than just a lonely memory. She was flesh and bone, and, at last, within arm’s reach.

“It’s okay,” he murmured softly. “I knew it was you. I knew it was you, Anna.”

She held her breath at the words, and if she was wondering how he’d known she didn’t ask, and he was grateful. Instead her hands curled into his shirt and suddenly they were kissing, kissing like the first time they’d kissed that night in his hotel room, nearly two long years ago.

Afterward, he was amazed to find that while so much time had passed and so many things had changed, this thing between them had not.

And perhaps she was thinking the same thing. The thought was in her smile, in the way she looked at him. She took his hand in hers, pressed it to her chest, held it tight.

“C’mon, Remy,” she whispered, as if to talk too loud would be to ruin everything they’d just found. “Come with me.”

-oOo-

She’d taken him up to her room. It was the best room with the best view, and he was pleased to see that her taste in the finer things didn’t appear to have diminished.

There had been so many things to say, to catch up on, that neither of them had known where to start, nor had they been inclined to try. So many months of enforced denial had honed the impatience of their desire. No words were wasted. Alone at last, in the privacy of her hotel room, they could indulge in one another for as much and as long as they wished. They touched, they kissed, they unclothed one another and made love, wildly, greedily. The imperfection of memory had nothing to offer them in comparison. Words were a distraction. It was only afterwards that they seemed necessary at all.

“Y’know,” he said as they lay side by side together on the red shag rug, the room lit only by the comforting glow from the art deco fireplace beside them. “If I’m gonna die now, I’m gonna die happy. I ain’t even jokin’.”

She laughed softly and rolled over onto her stomach.

“You’re not allowed to die,” she murmured, her finger tracing the outline of the star-shaped bullet wound he’d once taken for her. “I’m not gonna let you.”

Her accent was softer, warmer, tempered by the sunnier climes of the South. It made him smile.

“Don’t worry,” he answered, brushing a lock of hair back from her forehead tenderly. “I ain’t plannin’ on dyin’ any time soon. Not that I’m likely to, in my current line of work.”

She threw him a playful grin.

“Good to know, Mr. ‘Robert Lord’.”
She said the name with a twist of humour that would’ve left him indignant if she was anyone else. She grinned even harder when he didn’t rise to the bait and pushed herself up into a sitting position.

“Drink?” she offered him.

“Sure.”

He propped himself up with the pillows and cushions they’d left scattered around them, watching her as she got up and crossed the room, the firelight playing across the curves of her body. There was an easiness, a relaxed quality to her movements that she’d never had before, like she was finally comfortable in her own skin. She paused only to throw on a light kimono – a green one that he vaguely recognised from their shared past – before heading to the minibar and pouring them each a glass of wine. She raised her eyes only to give him a smile that was as simple and genuine as he’d ever seen from her. She was beautiful in ways he’d remembered, and in others he’d forgotten; and yet still more in ways he was only just discovering.

She came back and handed him his drink. They touched glasses lightly, briefly, without saying a word. Each silently drank to the other, to the moment, to a future neither was sure would reach outside this room.

“I missed you,” he told her honestly.

“I missed you,” she replied.

He was struck once more by the change in her, by the things he had missed. Here, in this room, he’d connected with her body, interfaced with her on a purely physical level; but everything else, all the important things… they were what made her the person she was now, and he couldn’t touch them.

“Did you find what you were lookin’ for?” he asked her, conscious that he still didn’t know. She twisted the glass between her fingers, stared into her wine and said:

“Yeah. I found what I needed to find.”

The words were cryptic, and he gave her a quizzical look that brought a weary smile to her lips.

“I found out that there were people who cared for me. That I was loved. That I was born and raised in a beautiful place, that I belonged somewhere, that I have a past, a history.” She paused and lifted her eyes to his, added: “And I found that sometimes, you can’t go back home. That there’s nothing for you there anymore.”

He was silent. There was a time he’d gone back to New Orleans, once. And once he’d got there he’d discovered the disconcerting truth – that he’d changed, and so had home. There were things he couldn’t go back to, roots he’d cut too long ago to salvage – they’d already withered and died.

“I figured my mom and dad might have left something,” she continued pensively. “Anything that could ground me, that I could hold onto. I prayed they’d left some mem-chips, some letters, a diary. But there was nothing. Everything was auctioned off or destroyed after they died, there was nothing left, even if there was anything to find.” She sighed and ran her forefinger absently round the rim of her glass. “It took me a long time to figure out home wasn’t home anymore. So I left. And I guess I was trying to find a new home. Maybe I was trying to find a new me. Maybe
they’re the same thing.”

She paused, considering the idea and apparently finding no answer. She lifted the wine to her lips and drank.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Are you?”

“I wanted you to be happy.”

Her smile was faint.

“I was happy. Once I’d figured out that you just take home with you, y’know?” She reached out and touched his hand almost tentatively. “That’s when thinking about you stopped hurting,” she admitted quietly. “When I was finally ready.”

She seemed a little embarrassed about it, like she’d wasted too much time.

“You had Raven track me in England?” he asked her; but she shook her head firmly.

“No. I respected you enough not to ask her to do that. But I did ask her to find you, when I was ready. Which wasn’t easy, since you were operating under an alias, and have a habit of scrambling your digital trail.”

She gave him an accusatory look that was only slightly softened by the humorous little pout that accompanied it. He shrugged.

“Goin’ dark is just what I do, chere.”

“You’re a pain in the ass,” she informed him with helpless affection. “But you’re here now. Which makes all the weeks spent trying to locate you worth it.” She trailed off, before quizzing him curiously: “You said you knew it was me. How did you figure it out?”

“Katherine Pryde,” he told her.

“Huh?”

“Katherine Pryde. I remembered the name. It was on some of the mem-chips you stole off Essex, that you were hiding in the panel inside your closet.” He watched the enlightenment cross her face and continued: “She was one of his one percent, on the original Weapon X programme. Which meant only you – or Raven, actin’ on your behalf – could’a sent her.”

Of all the explanations possible, it was one she had never expected. He couldn’t lie – it felt good to outmanoeuvre her.

“You don’t miss a trick!” she exclaimed, prodding him playfully in the ribs. “You figure either of us will ever get to the point where we’re past playing games with each other?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged innocently. “Y’wanna stick around and find out?”

The question quieted her.

“Do you?” she asked him instead.

He thought about it. There were so many things he could’ve said to her, that he wanted to
say, or explain. But he didn’t know where to begin, and so he simply answered: “Yes.”

She took in a visible breath at the reply; and suddenly the old Anna was there again, fixing him with the gaze of a lonely, wounded beast.

“There are some things I won’t ever be able to give you,” she reminded him. He knew what she was referring to – the children Essex had prevented her from ever having. But it didn’t matter to him, not the way he once thought it might. He reached up and touched her shoulder, ran his thumb thoughtfully under the hem of her kimono.

“I don’t care,” he said.

It was the truth, and she believed it. Gone was the wounded beast, replaced instead with sadness.

“You might care,” she told him quietly, “one day.”

“And I might not.” He slid the kimono partway down over her shoulder, studied the play of the firelight on her bare skin, the texture of her on his fingertips. “There are some things you gotta be willin’ to risk, chere, to get anywhere in life. You know that. We both do.”

She swallowed, visibly.

“I lost Cody,” she whispered.

“And I lost Belle,” he replied.

Still, even after these years, it surprised him to realise how much saying her name hurt.

“I don’t want to lose you too,” she admitted.

“Me neither,” he said honestly. “But,” he added thoughtfully, “I think that’s a pretty normal human emotion, not to want to lose the things we care about.”

She smiled, nodded. Even talking about this, about feelings, felt like a risk; but the more they did it, the less daunting it became. There were so many emotions he’d closed himself off from, so many things he’d stopped believing in. But interfacing with her memories had given him back one thing – the hope that there was someone out there who loved him. It was the only thing that had kept him going on without her, through yet another prolonged exile in a strange land.

It reminded him of the thing he’d been meaning to give her.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, suddenly leaning over towards his discarded pants, lying a metre or so away. “There’s somethin’ I wanted t’ give you.”

She watched as he teased the pants towards him, a small smile on her face.

“You know something?” she said in an amused voice.

“What?”

“Your accent. I swear you’re going native.”

“No, I’m not,” he scoffed openly, just as he managed to grab a hold of the garment. He slipped a finger into the pocket and took out a small mem-chip case, tossing it to her. She caught it in both hands.
“What is it?” she asked him curiously.

“Your mem’ries. The ones you gave to me before you left.” She looked up at him with confusion in her eyes and he added: “Thanks for sharin’ them. I know there were things on there that you never would’ve wanted me t’see, and… it meant a lot. It still does. You let me see a part of you no one should have t’share. But those mem’ries… they kept me goin’. They kept me waitin’.”

She opened her mouth slightly, and he saw she was struggling to find the right words. He didn’t need them. He didn’t need any at all.

“You don’t have to explain anythin’ t’ me, Anna,” he told her softly. “Those are your thoughts, your feelin’s. I took all’a your mem’ries from you once, I let Essex steal them from you when he had no right. Lemme give at least one of ‘em back to you. Lemme make at least one little thing right.”

She looked down at the chip in her hand, and slowly, deliberately, closed her fist over it.

“You don’t need to make anything right anymore, Remy,” she rejoined quietly. “You were the only one who cared enough to give me back what I wanted, what was stolen from me, the things that made me who I am.” Her voice dropped a notch as she added: “And I love you for that, Remy LeBeau. I always will.”

They were hard words for her to say – the hardest of all. For him, it felt like he’d waited half a lifetime to hear them. If there was a moment he was finally ready to move forward, it was then.

He reached for her and pressed his lips against her bare shoulder, kissed his way down the slope of her arm with a simple passion he hadn’t felt in years. Her fingers touched his cheek and he obeyed her summons, his lips skimming back the way they’d come to finally find her mouth once more.

Finally, after all their time spent searching, years of lonely exile had finally come to an end.

-oOo-

They were both awoken the next morning by the shrill ring of his phone.

Locating it after the mess they’d made of the room the previous night proved to be an adventure in itself, and by the time it appeared it had long stopped ringing.

Remy was unsurprised to find that Jake was the caller, and so, knowing his partner would be worried, he shot off a text letting him know everything had gone well and that he was staying on for a couple of days’ vacation.

While Anna ordered them breakfast he scanned the exhibition catalogue that he’d picked up the day before. The Pryde egg took up the centrefold, the high-res photo showcasing all its many perfections. They were the kind of perfections that made the thief in him itch.

“Shame I didn’t get t’pull this heist,” he remarked wryly to himself. “Kinda feels like I’ve left a job half-done. You sure it don’t need stealin’, chere?”

Anna laughed, getting out of bed and putting on her underwear.

“It belongs to Katherine. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t want to lose it again.”
“Belongs to her already, huh?” He cocked an eyebrow at her. “She kept that transaction pretty quiet. All the paper and digital trails say it still belongs to the previous owner.”

“Oh, I helped work out a deal between them,” Anna explained mysteriously, hooking her bra. “Katherine owed me one ‘cos of it. Hence her little visit to Gavin & Lord.”

“Hmm.” He watched her openly, as appreciative of her resourcefulness as he was admiring of the little show she was currently putting on for him. “So,” he began after a moment, setting aside the catalogue, “you got any plans? For work, I mean? Apart from brokerin’ mysterious deals, that is?”

She paused for a meaningful split second, midway through slipping on her harem style pants.

“Raven’s been giving me some work,” she finally answered casually. “I have some stuff lined up for the next couple of weeks.”

“Cool,” he returned, feigning disinterest. “Hey – think you can pass me my wallet? It’s in my coat.”

The look she gave him clearly showed she was suspicious, but he gave her a smile that begged her to indulge him, just this once. With a roll of the eyes she went to retrieve the article, slipping on a satin blouse as she did so. As soon as she’d retrieved it she came right back to sit next to him on the bed, his wallet clutched in her hands.

“Open it,” he told her.

Whatever misgivings she had, she opened it, and when she shook out the contents, out fell two plane tickets.

She stared.

“No pressure,” he assured her when she didn’t speak. “I figured you might have stuff goin’ on here, so it’s a return ticket in case you need to head back.”

Her eyes met his.

“Treat it like a vacation, right?”

“Right.”

She thought about it, a conspiratorial little smile playing across her lips.

“I’m guessing you don’t need another business partner… Seeing as you’ve got one already…”

He shrugged.

“I dunno. Gavin, Lord & Raven sounds pretty distinguished, don’tcha think?”

“I think,” she answered silkily, “that three’s a crowd. But hell,” she picked up the return ticket and pocketed it swiftly, “a vacation sounds pretty good. I’m sure Raven won’t mind if I take off for a bit.”

“Hm. I’m sure.” He grinned. “So whaddaya wanna do first? Sightseeing? Partyin’? I know an awesome art deco bar a bus-ride from where I live…”
“Sounds thrilling,” she cut in sarcastically. “But I was actually thinking of all the ‘wild sex and crazy heists’ you once mentioned. Or is that off the menu now?”

She still had endless ways of surprising him. He didn’t think she’d ever stop.

“Definitely not,” he murmured.

“Good.” She leaned forward and kissed him quickly on the lips before getting to her feet. “Now the coffee in this hotel sucks, so I’m gonna go to the café next door and get us some. I won’t be long.”

She headed for the door, grabbing her purse as she went. But when she got there she stopped and said seriously: “You know what I said last night, Remy? About taking home with us? Well… I want mine to be with yours. London, Paris or New York… It doesn’t matter to me. If it’s where you are, it’s where I want to be. It’s home.”

And with that honest conclusion, she turned and left.

Remy smiled to himself.

There was no way to erase the past, not without obliterating the person that you had become. But there were ways to shape it, to give it meaning. What mattered was the future, and the memories you made inside it.

He got out of bed and went to the window, threw the curtains open wide. Sometimes, he thought, salvation found you, in the unlikeliest of places. He’d met his in a hotel bar, nearly two years before. Anna Marie Raven, the woman who would rewrite his past, who would shape it, who would give it meaning.

She wouldn’t do it by erasing it, by changing it, by making him forget.

She’d do it by writing his future, by writing a shared one.

They’d both write it, together.

-END-

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