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1 - “You’ve Told Us Astoundingly Little”

The inside of the board meeting room was as wonderfully stale as anything in this building was. Gray walls, deep black chairs that reeked of that new out of box smell, some cheap air freshener had been poured into the ventilation to make this place smell sterile and the table was an expansive, not to mention expensive, slab of gray and white marble that somehow failed to catch any of the light in the room. Even the massive back window didn’t bounce off the surface. It made the room feel smaller than it should, almost emotionally cramped. It was the very essence of dreary and corporate. A reminder of how little power the average person held, and just how much you relied on people above you to make your life somewhat less miserable.

Though if there was anyone on planet earth who was all too familiar with The Agency’s need to elicit that claustrophobic feeling, it was Skylar. She had been in rooms like this countless times in her years since joining the Agency. They would stick you in one every time there’s a brief, a debrief or some new training seminar for you to attend. They loved this building way more than they loved being at their own homes it seemed. Not a sentiment that she shared, even on the worst of days.

She was the first one in the room, as she often was. Nothing to be done about it, her dad instilled an intense drive for professionalism and punctuality. She was determined to be the first one in and the last one out of a meeting when it was possible. Still, he hadn’t been able to instill in her a drastic increase in her patience. That was still a commonplace issue, and she found herself humming lightly as she waited for the inevitable sound of shuffling pants, footsteps clacking on the hard floor and the diligent ‘hi’s and ‘how are you’s that sounded out between barely perceptible falsities and intentionally calculated professional mannerisms that all Agents seemed to excel at.

If there was one thing that could always be said for the Agency, you could count on them never being entirely honest. Even when they were just asking you to explain your morning,

always some minor, or major, ulterior motive to every single question. Yet they train you to assume that Agents do nothing but tell each other the truth.

Apparently there still had to be someone with more truth than you in a position of power. Subordinates could never know the whole truth. That hadn't changed over the years.

What song was she even humming? Seemed to just be random melodies from various songs, strung together with a haphazard regard for their collective powers. She couldn't help it, her mind would wander sometimes when waiting, supposed that everyone's did in some way.

She found her fingernails tapping along to whatever incongruent rhythm was stuck in her head. A steady *clack clack* against the marble table.

There was a soft *hiss* from behind her and she slightly turned her head to acknowledge whoever was walking in at that moment, a tiny movement but still a professional courtesy, significantly lower than standing up immediately; Skylar knew her limitations and what she could get away with at her current rank.

The various Directors and superiors that attended each hand every brief began to file into the room. They were always different, but there were always three of them. If there were more, or less, then you knew that something bad was happening. A tall woman in her late fifties with stark white hair and a sharp jawline that looked like it could cut glass. Behind her was a shorter man, biceps fairly threatening to tear through the expensive suit he had on, his bald head seemed just as non-reflective as the tabletop, maybe the windows were tinted in some way? Behind that man was another man, a shock of curly brown hair shook with each step, he was the youngest of them and looked remarkably out of place among the other two. Still, she knew that becoming a Director or an Overseer was more about luck these days than it was about accomplishing anything all that meaningful.

The beauty of corporate oversight was that it was remarkably easy to move up. All you had to do was make them more money or give them access to more power.

Sell your soul, reap the benefits, I guess.

There was probably thirty years between the woman and the curly haired man, and she had to stifle a smile, thankfully it was also a familiar practice these days. No doubt the youngest man felt immensely proud to call himself a Director.

There were no exchanged polite smiles or scowls, Skylar stood from her chair and adjusted her jacket as the other three put themselves across from her and took their time settling

into chairs of their own. There was some squeaking of leather, shuffling of pants and mild grunts of satisfaction as her superiors finished seating themselves, she stayed standing.

Posture and posturing. Such a small difference makes ALL the difference.

All three of the people across the table simultaneously pulled out their respective PITs and set them on the hard tabletop. The curly haired one looked at her a few times, clearly trying to not become distracted, occasionally having to scratch his cheek to hide a flushed skin.

Skylar was used to it; she knew that her Nordic blood and genetics did her all of the physical favors that anyone could want. Plus, it was remarkably effective in interrogations.

But, effective or not, this wasn't an interrogation, and it wasn't some wildly odd blind date. It was meant to be a professional meeting. A place that had no room for pleasantries and personal problems like being aroused by the mere sight of an attractive member of a different sex. Still, it was undeniably flattering, but she had learned to keep her ego in check long ago.

More like the Agency tortured it out of me, but beggars can't be-

"Please, take a seat Agent." The sharp jawed woman was the first to speak, matching her jawline; her voice sounded like it bordered on violence with how pronounced her syllables were.

"Thank you, Director." She replied calmly, sitting down evenly and making sure to make much less of a fuss about it than they had. She quietly crossed her legs under the table and settled her hands on her lap, and she waited. "I'm honored to have been chosen for this assignment."

Whatever the fuck it is.

"Have you read the preliminary briefing, Agent?" The bald man had spoken next, his voice the tonal opposite of the woman's. It was soft, assertive, and full of gravitas. "I know that a lot of this feels very last minute."

"For what little there is." The curly haired man said with a hint of a smile, as though it was hilarious that they were sending her on an assignment with next to no information as to what she was supposed to do about it.

A hilarity that she found lacking in every facet of the assignment, and a lack that she was keen to share with all three of them. "I did." She clucked her tongue, "but truth be told, you've told us astoundingly little about this assignment." She had to refer to her partner without a name; they had yet to be introduced. Which wasn't entirely uncommon, but in her experience; it was still odd.

“Yes, well unfortunately there isn’t much information to share.” The bald man said, a claim that she found utterly unbelievable. “Frankly it’s unorthodox from the very beginning, no denial of that here. Of course, we would... Well, normally we assign you a partner, but the man you’ll be meeting at the airport made a point to volunteer for this one.”

“He volunteered?” Skylar tried to stop her eyebrow from going up, but it was too late. “So, somebody saw this investigation, thought ‘yeah why not’ and actually *volunteered* to come with me and investigate... Something. Why?”

“Yes, rather odd if you ask us.” The sharp lady replied, rolling her s’s as though it was a lost artform that only she could perform. “Yet, however odd or lacking in tactfulness, the Agency has never frowned on Agents taking initiative and volunteering. He’s hardly the first.”

She’d be shocked if he wasn’t the second. She would’ve passed this one by if she felt like she had been given the option. But the wording in her messages didn’t leave much room for escape, and it’s not like the Agency wouldn’t just drag her kicking and screaming if they wanted to.

“Nonetheless, barring your partner’s inability to be here at this precise time,” the curly haired one spoke again, clearly the only one unperturbed by the lack of two Agents being in the room. “We still need to brief you on what we expect and how you’ll bring it to fruition. As you said, we’ve told you astoundingly little. That is true, but there is a little more to it, as per usual.”

“A few days ago, an unknown object crashed into the salt desert in South America. The Salar De Uyeni.” The bald man projected a hologram from his PIT, that familiar ‘G’ logo in the upper corner, forever reminding the peons like her of her corporate overlords. “First order of issue, we are unclear as to what this object was; plane, satellite, experimental or commercial, we just have no idea. All efforts to coordinate with the UNM have been unsuccessful, which should tell you a lot, though they have since set up a temporary base there to stave off wannabe viewers and conspiracy theorists.”

“Yeah, cause nothing says ‘no cover up here’ by literally covering it up, right?” The curly haired one gave her a small wink, he was used to women falling under his spell with his good looks and wit.

She gave him a detached stare, explaining without saying anything that she had understood his joke, and she didn’t find it all that funny. His dejected glance downward and

pitiful sigh gave her a small internal satisfaction. Maybe it was a little petty, but his joke wasn't appreciated.

"Second order of business," the woman continued where the bald man had left off. "Is to interview a few potential witnesses, their names and what we know on them will be sent to your PIT after you leave."

That was odd. Why afterwards? How was she supposed to get reliable answers on these witnesses if she had to wait a few hours after leaving to even know their names? That made no sense, she should be given the information right now.

Apparently, her face said it for her. "There is a problem with that?" Curly said, his mirth still threatening to break through the cracks and annoy her again.

Skylar shook the daze off with a small smile that she threw his way. "No, not at all. Just that... Well... It's rare... Or rather, I've never had an assignment begin this way. There used to always be something at the very beginning, some dossier or anything really." She gestured an open palm at the empty table in front of her. "I'm quite literally about to be flying blind."

The man shook his curly hair and a sharp barking laugh sounded out of his throat. "Flying blind, I love it." He said in a throaty under breath, she felt her patience wearing dangerously thin with this one.

God he was annoying.

"Truth be told, Agent." The woman spoke back up and Skylar was glad to rid her attention from the annoying curly haired one. "We want to tell you more, but even the dossiers on the witnesses are scarce on personal information."

That was even more odd. These days, with how integrated cellphones were, everyone's desire to garner social media clout and the uptick in mandated BCI's in order to have a cellphone plan sort of made privacy all but impossible. She couldn't completely judge the average populace though; the Agency gave her a free pass to not have a BCI. And she'd shared more than a few risqué pictures on her social media once or twice. Sometimes admiration was good, but there is such a thing as overdoing it.

Still though, to have little information on anyone was almost an accomplishment. Which told her that these witnesses were not going to be pushovers.

"What else do I need to know?" She finally gave voice to her doubts, struggling to keep her voice under control.

“Well, frankly Agent, there’s just not much else that we really can tell you.” The woman was still speaking for the group apparently. “We know the names of the witnesses; we know that the UNM has set up a temporary facility there and we know that we have precious little time to figure it all out before the public starts to get wind of it all.”

She still wasn’t answering Skylar’s question at all, a fact that was not lost on her.

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand what I’m being sent there to *do*.” Skylar kept her voice level, her hands never left her lap, it was all a show to make them assume she was still in control of her emotions and posture. “Am I to assume that there is no real game plan until there’s boots on the ground? Am I supposed to uncover a plot or a conspiracy there? Am I just supposed to make a sheet of the amount of money needed to compensate families? Am I even supposed to interrogate these people or just talk to them?”

The bald man and the woman shared a sideways glance, a glance that spoke volumes to Skylar’s perceptive eyes and mind. It told her that they did have an expectation, but that she shouldn’t expect to get one from them. Not yet anyways.

“Unfortunately, Agent...” The bald man paused, these three sure did like to use that word. “We don’t have an execution plan for you now, we need more information from the witnesses before we really know what we’re dealing with here. No doubt the UNM has some findings that they’ll be able to corroborate with you when you touch down there.”

Skylar just smiled grimly and stared down slightly; her eyes traced a path along the table’s marble surface. Following its creamy rivers and imperfections as her mind wandered through the possibilities of what this assignment could be about. What was the Agency sending her into? Was it a trap, some sort of advanced training for her? A way to keep her skills sharp? Was it a bumbled UNM operation? Was it a downed experimental spacecraft? She knew that interplanetary relations were tight right now, which would make sense in the context of what she’d been told so far.

She could get lost staring at this table and its annoyingly non-reflective personality. The silent beauty of its flowing surface reminded her of seeing photos that NASA had taken of Exoplanets a few years back. Remarkably high-definition photos of things so far away they seemed to exist in impossibilities.

There was a sharp clearing of someone's throat and Skylar jolted her eyes upward to find its source. The woman was lowering her hand, confirming Skylar's suspicions and the other two were looking at her with a mix of professional courtesy and lust, respectively from left to right.

"Sorry, I lost my train of thought." She admitted, faking her embarrassment.

"Was there anything else you'd like to know, Agent Skylar?" The woman's tone told her that no matter what questions she chose to ask, the answer was just going to be a variation of what she had already been told. There was no point, in other words.

"No. No I don't think so." She lied with a professional smile.

"Good." The woman stowed away her PIT and moved to stand up, Skylar followed suit.

"Your partner will meet you at the airport in Venezuela." The curly-haired one said. "I'm jealous, who wouldn't want to go to South America with a Nordic Godd-"

"Thank you, Director." She cut him off, a move that rarely sparked good reactions from even the most veteran of Directors. "I assume it's all in the files you sent me."

"Yes, it is." The bald man said as he buttoned his jacket across his bulging chest and shoulders, he was a tank of a man, built to smash heads not to talk them off. "Have a safe flight, Agent."

"Of course, thank you Director." She responded with that feigned politeness that the Agency had taught her so well. She gave the woman a brief nod, one that was returned with elegance and all she gave the curly man was a tight grin, one that he returned as though it was an indication that she liked him. "I will update you as soon as I am able."

As Skylar walked towards the door, the woman's voice stopped her. "There's no need to report anything, Agent. Director Yusef will be on the ground with you, he will report your findings to us."

She hadn't turned around at the woman's sharply chosen words, but the inflection still sounded a little off to her ears. If she hadn't known better, she'd say that it almost sounded threatening. Like the woman knew something that Skylar didn't despite the trio's insistence that they knew precious little about this assignment.

It did nothing to seal her old confidence or give her a fresh influx of new confidence. Instead, she simply nodded back towards them and set her shoulders, walking out the door which closed behind her with that same satisfying *hiss* that had welcomed the Director's in.

She walked down the long cold hallway, past other Agents being sent on assignments and other trios of Directors walking to and from rooms and elevators. She tried to quiet her racing mind as she typed out the destination to the airport on her phone. Tried to ignore the warning signs and alarms in her head as she planted one confident foot after the other.

The faces and bodies around her turned to a blur, a muddy painting of things that she was already familiar with. Something told her that it would be a long time before she was back in this building.

2 - White Rooms, Dark Suits

“There is a sort of rustic beauty to this place,” the man next to her continued saying, he certainly had a lot to say when he put his mind to it. “Or maybe not so rustic, but there is some kind of beauty to it. Maybe more... I’m not sure.”

Skylar looked up from her PIT to see the other agent staring out the window of their transport. The Salar De Uyuni stretched out before them. Salt glistened and stretched out in cracked and rugged formation. Like some great war that nature was intent on waging against itself.

“Defeated?” She ventured, knowing that he’d probably end up agreeing with her. She had a good sense for people agreeing with her and so far, this other Agent seemed pretty bent on agreeing with her. Normally it would annoy her, but he seemed to be doing so without any ulterior motives, which was a first.

A sad but smirky smile split the other agent's face, which wasn't an entirely unflattering look for the man, “yeah, that’s a good word for it.”

She folded the cover over the PIT that had been resting on her lap and placed it in her bag, before looking back at the other agent. “So, it’s Agent Exigent. Interesting enough name to select for an assignment. Can’t tell if it’s a little on the nose, or if you just felt really proud of finally owning a thesaurus.”

She had met him out at the airfield, and they exchanged glances behind sunglasses and a courteous nod. Since then, it had been complete silence in the bay of the plane. She would’ve felt uncomfortable, but she could appreciate a man with the fortitude to be silent. Precious few understood that quality.

She couldn’t help but think of the curly haired director and fought down a curl of her lip as Exigent replied across from her.

“The one and only. Hard to find others with as enigmatic a last name as ‘Exigent’ these days. So I figure that if the old thesaurus, which I bought years ago I’ll have you know, could do anything for me; it could be at least that.” Exigent’s voice had a warmth to it, helped by the deep slight baritone that vibrated through his vocal ranges.

Great, so he’s sarcastic, that’s not even his real name. Though to be fair-

“Well,” She was in no mood to play humorously, the briefing had sucked the adrenaline out of her body as it always did, “if that’s what aliases are considered these days. Can’t say I have issues finding people with the last name Skylar.”

Exigent folded his legs and clasped his hands in front of them, looking like some standard portrait for a men’s health magazine. “It’s a bold move using your real name on an assignment like this. Considering if you’re being honest and Skylar is your last name, I’m going to guess... Hmm. Well, tall, dominantly blonde, sharp facial features, slight clipped accent and a predilection towards stoicism so I’m going to go with... German is too easy, Norwegian? I mean, you definitely look Norwegian, there’s Nordic blood in you for sure whether that’s where you’re from or not.”

She couldn’t help but smile at his breakdown of her, who didn’t like subtle compliments? “That was comprehensive.”

“Is it all that comprehensive when that’s what I’m paid to do.” Exigent had a tendency, so far, to illustrate his points with humor.

It wasn’t a question however, she figured that he was accustomed to being taken for granted due to taking a more cavalier approach. That was something that she could work with, it made him approachable, amicable, dangerous.

At the very least, approachable was never a truly bad thing as long as it was backed up with confidence, and it seems like Exigent lacked nothing in the confidence department.

All good things so far, I suppose.

“I suppose that depends on your point of view.” She could play his game if that’s what he wanted to do. Maybe he was just hoping to find out if she had a sense of humor as well, she wasn’t willing to let him know that just yet.

Another smile, “well, rustic or defeated, right?”

“That’s right.” She said with an air of finality, wanting to go back to the silence from before.

And it did, silence stretched out between the two agents, the only distraction was the low road noise of the transport. Skylar wished sometimes that technology wasn’t so good at improving, she missed the distant noise of air rushing by a vehicle. There was something vaguely comforting about hearing the passage of distances that somehow made it easier to fall asleep on long trips, but that was a thing of the past these days.

Nostalgia was a feeling only afforded to the affluent or the elderly. A bracket that she was excluded from on both counts.

The interior of the craft was entirely minimalistic. Sharp edges, large glass windows and a muddled gray interior. It was the epitome of what one would imagine when describing the fashion of the government. Angry, aggressive, beautiful, and entirely over the top while being very basic.

Exigent was staring back out the window again, never once opening his bag or checking his tablet. Sarcastic, contemplative and annoyingly good looking. If there was any poster child for a Hollywood secret agent, it would be Exigent. So far she didn't have much reason to dislike him, though that was going to depend on how often he made those dumb witty jokes. It could become grating very quickly.

She turned her attention to the view outside, unclear of how much further there was to go. When you're flying three hundred feet above salt flats and rainforests, it looks the same after hour three that it did at minute one.

This assignment was odd, that she could admit. The lack of transparency from the Agency, the odd briefing she received from the Board, the strangeness of Exigent being a volunteer, all of it pointed to something that she didn't understand. But whether she understood what she was getting into was beside the point. Even with all the technological and scientific advancements she'd witnessed in her lifetime, she was not expecting this to happen. Though the parameters of what exactly *this* is, were still a mystery. Which is why they were sent here.

Really wish I brought headache medication with me.

"Can you believe it?" Skyler snapped her head up slightly, both breaking from her reverie and finding Exigent staring at her face. "Your brow got all furrowed, I can only imagine that it was either personal or your just as lost about this assignment as I am." He leaned back and adjusted his jacket with a sort of sigh, "briefing or not, I'll admit I'm pretty damn confused about this whole thing."

"That might be the understatement of the year." She sighed with an annoyed conviction.

"Year's barely half over." He reminded her. "We got plenty of time to make it get a lot more confusing."

"How about we do our best to keep the bar at 'strange object crash lands in Brazilian salt flats'. I can only do so much mental gymnastics to even land at that reality."

It wasn't strange for downed satellites or planes to crash into South America, but it was entirely strange for not even a single government to claim it.

"So, they did brief you on this assignment?" She spoke back up.

He frowned but followed it with a sort of half grin, like it was an amusing memory that he knew would make her uncomfortable. "Sort of. I got sat in a room with two Directors, they gave me a brief overview and told me I'd be meeting my partner at the airport." He shrugged, "all things considered I would have liked a lot more to go on but if they were being honest, which they probably weren't, then this is pretty uncharted territory for them."

She frowned at his choice of words; the memory of her own briefing sparked in her mind.

"What's the matter?" He must have noticed her frown; she had a tendency to forget her facial mannerisms when not surrounded by authority figures or targets.

"No, it's nothing, it's just..." She tried to find the right words to describe her thoughts for a few seconds before sighing and continuing. "It's just that when I was briefed, one of the Director's used that exact same phrase. Said that this was 'uncharted territory' for them. Or the Agency."

He shrugged again, apparently unperturbed by the similarities. "It's not really that uncommon of a phrase. Plus, I would imagine that our respective briefing Director's coordinated to ensure that our information was on track and similar enough to cause as little confusion as possible."

She scoffed at the last bit, "if their intention was to cause minimal confusion then I am willing to be the first to say that they failed spectacularly."

Another shrug. "Well, I haven't even read the dossiers that they gave us yet. So maybe we're jumping the gun a tad."

She frowned again at his admittance; the first thing she did was read the dossier on their potential witnesses. "Why are you waiting to read them?"

"I have my reasons. All part of the process."

"The process?"

"Well..." He smiled a little, "MY process, I suppose."

She sighed and shook her head at the window. She knew that everyone had their own ways of completing investigations. She had even worked with one lady who was insistent on

getting laid by every witness available. Claimed that it made them easier to put against each other, sure enough it had worked like a charm. But it was still an odd choice to come to.

“I would just like to have an idea what we’re even getting into.” She sighed again, her breath fogging a small section of the window, she frowned again and rubbed it off with her sleeve.

“What a time to be alive.” Exigent grinned again across from her.

“What a time to be alive,” She agreed without returning his enthusiasm.

She knew that they needed to talk, but she had been enjoying the quiet. Now more than ever really.

“What do you think it is?” Exigent said, continuing the conversation despite her internal protests. “Downed experimental aircraft? A missed opportunity or...” He looked around the space in mock suspicion, “do you think it’s aliens?”

She snorted in mocking laughter, “I think it’s a little early to speculate.”

The inner speaker chimed as their pilot’s voice broke the conversation. “*Agents Skylar and Exigent, we’ll be approaching Rally Point Alpha in approximately twenty minutes.*”

“Copy that captain.” Exigent buttoned his jacket up and picked out his PIT from his bag. Flipping open the cover and jumping to something that Skylar couldn’t make out. That is, until he expanded it into a hologram, and she saw the 3D profile of a Military Corporal materialize.

“Who’s this?” Skyleer leaned forward and studied the Corporal’s face.

Exigent straightened up and pulled up information on the Corporal for Skylar to follow along. Already it felt strange that this Corporal was completely alien to her. Usually, Agency briefings were remarkably well informed and comprehensive, though admittedly this was the first time that it seemed like the Agency was sending them into something completely unknown to even them. Not very confidence inspiring right off the bat.

“That is Corporal Grant.” Exigent was saying, “He was out here running a training simulation with local authorities. Claims to have seen the event firsthand before officials started coming in and telling people to professionally fuck off.”

She knew that this corporal wasn’t in the information packet that she had been given. She wasn’t sure what was stranger, that there was a possibility they had been given different packets or that neither of them was told about whoever this Corporal Grant was.

“Wait,” this assignment barely started and she was already behind, her head was threatening to ache again, “why was he not in the briefing?”

Exigent snapped his fingers, “An excellent question, why indeed? Because by all accounts, he should have been.” He managed a slight scoff without sounding petty. “One of the few witnesses who had actionable information, but he was notably excepted from my briefing, can’t really speak to yours but your confusion kind of speaks for itself.”

“What are you saying?” His tone was lost on her.

“Saying? Nothing. Not trying to start a controversy.” Though from his mild tone of voice, it seemed like he wasn’t far off from starting one. “He may very well be pulling something out of his ass or know nothing at all. What I do know is that this transport left with enough fuel in the tanks for four round trips to the crash site. For some reason we’re stopping at Rally Point Alpha, approximately halfway between takeoff and endzone. Why? And on top of that, we don’t appear to be in any rush to really get there.”

“So, there’s someone there that they want us to talk to?” She didn’t need to ask it as a question, she already knew the answer.

“A Boeing 801 Government transport can take anywhere from eight minutes to twenty minutes to refuel depending on the parameters that take place. So in the span of, let’s round up and say 10 minutes, we’re supposed to leave this transport, conduct an interview and be back on board before suspicion is raised that we took time to interview outside of our mandated timeline. And in this day and age of technology it is impossible, so whoever slipped us this bit of info is probably legit or it’s an attempt to get us into trouble with Director Yusef.”

“Someone doesn’t want a lot of information to be shared?” She guessed out loud. “Or someone higher up just wants to make it clear that we are at their mercy.” She pursed her lips in a sort of pout. “Not sure I know which of those options is more frustrating to me.”

Exigent shrugged slightly. “Or someone thinks it’ll only take five minutes to know what we need to know.” He started scrolling through something else. “Maybe we have our own guardian angel looking out for us.”

Skylar sat back, trying to find some way to wedge a piece of cushion between her shoulder blades. The seats were not padded all that deeply on these transports and it was starting to eat into your comfort as well as her patience, “and what does that have to do with Grant?”

Exigent shrugged again, though noticeably more pronounced than the last one, “Well of that I’m not entirely clear. Only thing I know is what I’ve been told. Supposedly he’s stationed here running guard duty.”

Barely into day one and there was already a conspiracy in the works despite Exigent’s attempt to claim that it wasn’t one just yet. Skylar rubbed her temple and tried to piece together what Exigent was trying to say. She hated people that beat around the bush. Or rather just people that wouldn’t flat out admit what they were thinking. Straightforwardness was a character trait that she wished everybody in the world shared.

Maybe it just needed to be coaxed out of him. She could try that, usually she was good at getting men to open up to her.

“Let me see if I’m hearing you correctly.” She crossed her arms and stared ahead, focusing on his stony smile. “Corporal Grant is at RPA, he claims to have seen the object firsthand but we’re unclear on whether that was pre or post-crash. Somebody, either higher up or unaware, is sectioning us here for ten minutes, give or take, assuming that within that timeframe we can meet this Grant. During that time, we need to ascertain if he knows anything, assuming he does, then we need to determine why he was not included in the briefing. If he *doesn’t* know anything, then we add him to the footnotes and guesstimate that he was a ripple in the pond. Am I following correctly?”

Exigent smiled, another annoyingly good look on him, “Norwegian and smart.”

So much for that, he was smarter and seemingly immune to most of her usual tactics. She really wished she was back at home.

She could barely hear Exigent over the whining of the turbines as she stepped down off of the stairwell of the aircraft. He was standing off to the side speaking with one of the pilots, the Captain standing over his shoulder.

Whatever they were discussing, she was only hearing snippets of it. Occasional dialogues that didn’t really seem to betray anything important, judging that neither she nor Exigent were technically supposed to break from the interview timeline, seemed like a smart move on his part.

“How long will refueling take?” She could just hear Exigent say over the dying roar of the engines.

“Give or take 10 minutes.” Came the pilot’s dry response.

“Is there any way I could persuade you to extend that by a little while? We have a lead to follow up with here.”

“I wasn’t made aware of anything here, Agent. Moving off schedule isn’t a good idea with these people.” The Captain chimed in, shouting over the turbines.

“I can deal with the Director.” Exigent added a small flourish to that sentence with an exaggerated shrug of his arms.

“Well that makes one of us, Agent. It’s a no from me. We can always leave you behind but that’s your cross to bear.”

Whatever came out of Exigent’s mouth next was completely drowned out as the engines gave one final protest. She wondered to herself if these new planes were designed to make conversations difficult to hear. Considering that they were created specifically per Agency contract, she wouldn’t be too surprised. Make the engines just loud enough, ignore the fact that they could just manufacture a Hydrogen Cell or Electric one. Rarely did the Agency ever build something without an ulterior motive.

Rarer still is when they admit to it.

She caught up with Exigent as he walked away from the transport towards one of the temporary buildings set up along the perimeter of the airfield. Or at least they were supposed to be temporary, though the rough gray exterior of hard materials seemed much more permanent. Far more permanent than they should be. Far more permanent than her briefing would have suggested.

She looked around, already starting to feel slightly paranoid about this whole thing. Half expecting the Director that they were supposed to meet to come walking around one of the buildings with a handful of soldiers. Or possibly something worse.

She was getting in her own head.

Long rows of those stark gray buildings formed a half box around the perimeter of the airfield. The harsh grays melded into the skyline while the salt flats formed a stark contrast at the bottom. It made the whole thing look artificial. Like some child with building blocks that had no idea how to color coordinate. She could swear that it almost seemed like they were trying to camouflage the whole place from distant onlookers.

After finally matching Exigent's long and confident stride, she brushed her stray hairs back as the wind whipped them around her face, causing her skin to itch slightly. She forced down the impulse to scratch at her face.

"Grant?" She asked Exigent as they walked.

"Supposed to be in this temp facility right up here. Conveniently on break from what I understand." Exigent shook his head and pulled out his PIT. "Never a good sign when it's convenient. Or when they don't tell you the task that he's on a break from."

She sighed quietly and tried to get her head straight, Grant was important. Of that, she was sure. As the thoughts tumbled around in her mind, she started focusing on the bits that would make sense. Isolating what few elements that she could, forcing down the tiny nub of anxiety that interviews always managed to give her. Some strange primordial feeling that she could never suppress fully, just ignore it for a little while longer.

Or just not pay attention to. The nub was familiar for a reason.

They reached the end of the airfield and pushed the door in after scanning Exigent's thumbprint. Nowadays, basically everything was controlled with prints. And if you thought that any company on Earth and beyond didn't have access to them, you were lying to yourself. As the door slid open, she immediately noticed the smell of stale air. Recycling that air in the middle of salt flats was bound to do that. Next thing that stood out to her was that nothing stood out to her. No vending machines, no pictures, no windows. More of a warehouse than a holding facility for a witness to a strange event.

Despite the dark exterior of the building, the inside was near flawless white. Floor to ceiling, alabaster white. Lacking the cracks of the flats that surrounded it. She couldn't believe that she didn't notice it at first. It was odd, almost too perfect looking. There wasn't even a visible seam where different tiles met each other, the whole interior looked to be one solid piece.

She looked over at Exigent whose attention was focused on the middle of the building. He had never stopped walking; she had forgotten that they were on a strict timetable so she looked forward again and only then noticed that there was a man in the middle of the room. Seated in a chair behind a relatively large table. Both constructed from the same dark gray metal, almost having an industrial kind of appearance to them.

As they drew closer, she noticed that he was stark naked and paler than anyone she had ever seen. Not albino, but pale enough that it was clear he had not left the building for some time. A scraggly beard stretched across his face

“Corporal Grant?” Exigent wasted no time, at least he had that figured out.

The man started and looked up at them. Blinking a few times, staring intently at them. His vision seemed to be fine, there wasn’t any sign of massive pupil dilation, and he seemed to be mostly coherent, but he was clearly very malnourished and confused.

“Sorry but, you are really here, right?” His voice croaked out. Dehydrated, Skylar assumed.

They shared a quick glance at each other, more instinct than planned. “Assuming you mean ‘are we flesh and blood’ then I can assure you, we are.”

Grant rubbed his hands on his thighs and looked around. “They all dress in white when they come in here, you know. Can’t even tell sometimes if I’m looking at them right. Fucks with my head.” He swirled a finger around his temple to illustrate the point of confusion.

She cleared her throat and stepped forward, hoping to get them on track as soon as possible, “corporal, we’re here because someone wanted us to be here. Are you that someone who gave us the lead?”

Grant looked around again. Turning all the way around and even looking up at the ceiling. Twisted and turned and then looked back at them, confused but also venomously sarcastic looking. “What part about being stuck in this room for fuck knows how long didn’t register with you? There’s no phone in here, I don’t have any tech, I hardly even see people unless they want to ask me questions. How could it have been me?”

A sudden beeping caused all three of them to jump slightly, even the stoic Exigent. Exigent raised his arm and tapped his watch, ending the sudden noise. As he lowered his arm, Exigent heaved a massive sigh and leaned forward on the table.

“Is there anything that you can tell us in the next three minutes that we need to know?” Exigent’s voice was quiet, but nowadays; that wouldn’t stop microphones from picking it up.

“Tell you about what?” Grant mocked Exigent’s tone and volume. “Why I’m in here? I have no fucking idea. Why I’m not being told why I’m in here, I don’t know that either. I don’t even know how long I’ve been in this room. They don’t tell me anything.”

“Why would they just stick you in a room with no explanation?” She didn’t hide the disbelief in her voice, Grant was making no sense. “You saw, did, talked or wrote about something that you shouldn’t, and you’ve clearly been here longer than whatever event we’re investigating, so why even mention you at all?”

“I really don’t know what I can tell you, Agents.” Grant sucked at his teeth. “Maybe come back sometime when you have a little more to go on. Because right now, your questions are far too vague for me to be of any assistance.”

As the three of them stood there regarding each other, it became clearer that Grant wasn’t crazy or some secondary distraction. He was important, but Grant knew that he was important, and he knew that answering any preemptive questions would hurt his chances at being an asset later on. Grant was far more intelligent than she had originally given him credit for, he was playing their game well before they had asked him anything.

Exigent’s watch started beeping again. “We have to go. Corporal.” He turned on his heel and started walking back out of the building.

She took one last look at the man before she too turned around and walked after Exigent. That familiar nub of anxiety began worming its way back in her head. Telling her to just get on the first transport back out of South America and homeward. The Agency would be willing to replace her this early in the investigation. She could still-

There was a sudden squeal as Grant stood up from the chair, throwing it back. He shouted after them as they got to the door. “I don’t know who sent you here or who you were here to see, but I can tell you one thing: If you have to talk to it, remember what it tells you!”

Neither of them turned around, but Exigent shared a quick glance with her as he pressed his thumb into the reader and opened the door back out to the airfield.

She wanted to look back, to see if Grant had sat back down or moved any closer. Some part of her needed to know, but she decided to force it back down again, sectioning it off with that familiar little nub.

She strode out the door, shutting it behind her and walked after Exigent. She really wished she was back home, really wished she listened to that little nub more often.

That familiar road noise was back. Or was it air noise? It didn't matter, at the end of the day nothing really mattered that was inconsequential. Exigent looked out the window for what felt like the millionth time that day. How far away from Bravo were they? An hour? Two hours?

He spared a glance back at Skylar; she had her head back against the rest. How the hell she managed to fall asleep was beyond him. Ever since manufacturers started going hard at the industrial minimalist style, he felt like he could never fall asleep in a vehicle. It was frustrating to say the least.

He'd been mulling over this assignment for days since the initial briefing. Trying to determine what the validity of everything was. Granted, trying to figure out anything with the barebones of info that the Agency gave them was next to impossible. It was also extremely odd that they gave them so little to go on. Just a bunch of names, redacted profiles and barely legible medical dossiers. On top of that, he had never known about an investigation where he was ordered to only meet his partner as the investigation began. Usually, they'd be introduced straight away and given days to prepare for this.

Adding on top of all of that was that it sounded like Skylar had been given different instructions. Either that or the Board was just extremely inconsistent with using the same languages and syntax to explain this assignment. He didn't really know why he told Skylar that he hadn't read the dossier yet. Maybe he just wanted to play his cards close to his chest.

That won't change any time soon.

He picked out his tablet from his bag and started trying to piece it together again. He considered that he may have missed something. Some small little piece of info that was given to them that he had managed to miss. What was that corporal talking about? Who the hell, or what the hell, was the 'it'.

Perhaps it didn't matter, he'd learn soon enough.

3 - Rally Point Bravo

The captain's voice broke the silence and startled Skylar out of her relatively deep sleep. She blinked the sleep out of her eyes and listened as intently as she could while the grogginess wore off. Gradually, the captain's voice became clearer as the blood rushed in her ears.

“Agents Skylar and Exigent, we are approaching Rally Point Bravo. ETA is twelve minutes. Recommend you make yourselves presentable. Director Yusef will be meeting you on the tarmac.”

Exigent looked up from his tablet, a confused look scrawled along his face. He tapped the communications panel and selected the cockpit. “Captain, did I hear you correctly; Director Yusef is at RPB?”

“Affirmative Agent. Received a communique a short while ago, said that he wanted to be heard in person.”

That same look crawled across his face again like an impatient marquee sign, “did he give you any details that we should know about prior to meeting?”

“Negative Agent, just thought that you should be aware of his presence.” There was a soft click as the captain turned off the intercom.

“Thank you, Captain.” He buttoned up his jacket and ran his hand through his hair. Skylar looked at him and tried to recall the name of Yusef. Tried to remember if he was a part of the briefing and introductions.

“Have you ever met Director Yusef?” Exigent asked as if on cue.

She looked up from buttoning her own jacket, he was looking out the window again. She cleared her throat and rubbed her eyes to make sure there was no sleep left in them. “Uh, no. Not that I can recall anyway.”

“Shame, neither have I. I was hoping for a little insight. I wasn't even aware that there was an Agency presence out here. From that briefing, I assumed that we were the first.” Exigent looked away from the window towards her. “Kinda thought that whomever was the Director would be joining us after a few days.”

“Always the bridesmaid, right?” She quipped, deciding to finally reveal that she could joke as well.

He cracked a slight smile, “assumed that you didn’t possess a sense of humor.”

She cracked a smile of her own, finding herself surprised that she even said that. “I get anxious when talking to people I’ve never met. Character flaw I suppose.”

His face contorted to a series of mirthful and confused lines. “How the hell are you working this job with something like that rattling around inside your head? Never mind the professional implications, how do you personally cope?”

She had figured he’d ask that, most everyone did. “Learned a while back that it never quite goes away. It’s a primal instinct that stuck with me for years. No matter how hard I’ve tried, I’ve never been able to get rid of it.” That little nub pricked at her subconscious again.

“Yet you took on a job that requires that exact troubling circumstance every single day. So are you masochistic or just remarkably good at your job?” Exigent’s voice was full of humor. She realized that he was prodding her, trying to find her limits.

“Are you saying that you don’t believe I’m up to the task?” She knew he was joking but it still stung slightly.

“I’m saying that your decision confuses me. Your dossier and available information paint you as... Ruthless. Even if only by interrogation. You have a success rating of damn near one hundred percent. In this field that’s pretty impressive.” He blew air out his nose as though that was praise of the highest honor, “I mean, in any profession that’s impressive. Unless your profession is mathematics or making the graphs that determine a success rate.”

She never could find the words to explain her logic, more often than not they just sort of tumbled out of her mouth in a rambling line. “In a world that is dominated by people who suppress emotion in order to be more apathetic, objective or logical, I find it important to remind myself. To remind myself that it’s okay to have some partial flaw that forces me to adopt a different perspective.” She finished straightening her jacket and looked Exigent in the eye, holding it as sternly as she could. “People in this profession often told me, and others, that objectivity is the foundation for activities that we engage in. That emotion cannot figure into it. If it does, you either end up giving away personal information, or you end up making a mistake. However, I’ve found that by having some little part of me that still has anxiety inside of me

somewhere, helps keep me focused. It may sound strange, contradictory even. But, it reminds me that I'm human and that even though I've adopted the persona and costume of an Agent, I can still relate to people on a human level."

There was quiet for a moment. Neither one of them turned their eyes from each other, but Exigent was clearly drinking in what she had said. And he hadn't struck her so far as someone who's all that willing to concede a point that he believed to be true. A good quality in an Agent.

A good quality in anyone.

"I don't personally believe that those two things have to be compartmentalized from each other", Exigent said, breaking the somewhat tense silence. "I believe that by having to suppress that anxiety in the moment, or beforehand, just shows that you've bought into the idea that apathy is the way forward."

She dropped the smile, smelling the brewing debate as he finished speaking. "I like to know that it's still there. If it doesn't happen during the interview or interrogation, the fact that I still get that anxious feeling is enough to remind me how to move forward. It helps me make decisions based on the emotional response that someone can give me. It puts me in their shoes."

"Being in someone's shoes can also be called a bias. Whether emotional, personal, or other."

"It can also help people open up. Make them say or admit to something that they weren't immediately ready to say." She countered.

"Okay, because you have yet to experience much failure with the concept, you're prepared to provide it to a relative stranger as some proven experience that guarantees a result."

"Or I recognize that there is a kernel of understanding that can only come from putting oneself on the same playing field as your opponent."

"Opponent is just another word for aggressor." Exigent said solemnly.

"Aggressor is just the person that you find yourself on the opposite side of the table from." She said, matching his tone.

"Sounds like a form of Stockholm Syndrome."

"Sounds like a character flaw of stubbornness."

"Stubbornness can lead to a lot of success if it's molded into perseverance." Exigent grinned smally.

“It can also lead to emotional *or* logical blindness that makes you unable to see both sides of the issue, which in turn can render you less than useful to a partner or an objective.”

He cracked another smile. “Then perhaps we are destined to disagree on this.”

She did not return the smile. “Then, perhaps, we will be an effective team. Interrogations rarely work when the conversation is one sided and blank.”

“Variety is the spice of life.” He sighed and sat back.

She glimpsed the shapes of temporary buildings and tents outside of the window and leaned closer, assuming from the relative familiarity that they were nearing their destination.

Rows of buildings surrounded a white spherical building. Hastily, yet professionally constructed. Disguising whatever laid underneath it, hiding it away from prying eyes.

The window blinked and the shade slid over the opening, preventing her from seeing any more detail. She sat back and double checked her bag for the third time, still slightly worried at leaving something important behind. Be it clothing or anything.

Exigent stood and straightened his jacket once again, clearly enthusiastic to get off of the plane. Pausing only for a moment to turn his head to her and ever so slightly, she swore that she saw him wink.

“*Agents, welcome to Rally Point Bravo.*” The Captain said, and a gentle bump told her that they had touched down.

The door slid open to reveal the same salt flats that she had seen all day. Still glaring at them from under the intense sunlight, blinding her for a moment and causing her to blink and hold up a hand to shade herself. She reached into her satchel and removed a pair of sunglasses. She stepped down the steps, followed closely by Exigent. Once she had cleared the ramp, she saw three rows of armed soldiers. Dressed in white and holding assault rifles, not pointed at anything, but definitely ready to shoot anything.

It wasn't common to be welcomed by such a parade of authority, this was just meant to scare them. Or just give them enough apprehension at the start. It was showing a winning hand at poker because you didn't want anyone to have the impression that they could bluff their way to a win.

She swallowed and stepped forward, waiting for Exigent to join her. He didn't wait and walked right past her, confident and brusque. One lone figure stood out like a sore thumb.

Dressed head to toe in dark gray, a mat of wild and graying hair, but the undeniable posture of a soldier and the physique of a once very strong man.

She could only assume it was Yusef.

The gray man extended his hand first to him and then to Skylar who had taken a few seconds to catch up. Hardly his fault

“Welcome to RPB Agents. Pleasant flight?” The man said. His voice sounded somehow drier than the surrounding desert.

“Pleasant enough, sir.” Exigent spoke up, awkwardly having to change his volume as the engines died down. “Though however pleasant, I must admit I wasn’t made aware of an Agency presence already being here. Or rather we weren’t really instructed by the Board that you were already here, had to learn it from the pilots.”

Director Yusef simply waved the concern away with a flick of his hand. “Don’t get too upset about it. I only just got here a day or two ago myself, it was a very last minute decision. I convinced the board that a handler might be necessary, we are in uncharted territory right now.”

There’s that phrase again.

He scowled ever so slightly. “Handler? Implying that we can’t get the job done.” Ignoring the territory comment was probably best for the time being.

“Handler. Implying that oversight can sometimes yield different results than two unchecked agents.”

Next to him, he heard Skylar speak up, “unchecked, sir?”

Yusef put his arm out, and waited, “walk with me, Agents.”

As they began walking down the tarmac, Exigent noticed that every one of the soldiers had no identifying marks. No patches, no nametags, no insignias, nothing. Not that it was entirely unusual for private militaries to work Agency assignments. Hell, these days even the United Nations military could be argued as private with all of the corporate funding they received. He started to wonder at the anxiety that Skylar mentioned and almost missed the first couple of words out of Yusef’s mouth.

“Outside of myself, and a very select few, nobody has any idea that you’re here or what you’re here to do. As far as the board is concerned, you do not exist, should anything here go

awry, they will deny all associations and you will most likely not even make it out of the flats. Are you following my drift?"

Exigent found his mouth drying up, before he could answer Skylar spoke up, saving him yet another vocal embarrassment.

"Understood, sir. But what exactly are we here to do? Our briefing was gloriously brief, but in retrospect we both could have done with a little more detail on why we're here. So far all we know is each other's names, that we both specialize in interrogation and that some unknown object crash landed here in the flats." They reached the door to a building and waited while the guards scanned them. "Much as I love a good puzzle, I don't even know what image I'm trying to piece together here."

Two tones went off and the door opened, a long hallway stretched out in front of them. A white hallway lit by LEDs. Almost immaculately white. No blemishes, seams of imperfections to be found.

No dirty light in here, it'd ruin the whole atmosphere after all.

"In good time Agent Skylar." Yusef continued speaking as he motioned down the hallway, "last door on the left. Get comfy if you can. I'll be by presently to give you a more in depth briefing on what to expect while you're here. Think of whatever questions you can, I'll do my best to answer them." Yusef strode away down the hall before turning to the right and disappearing from view.

Exigent turned to Skylar, finding that she was already looking at him. Already searching his face for something. She slowly took her eyes away and started walking down the hallway. Her footsteps echoing off the hard surface, lending an air of loneliness to the whole interior.

He began walking after her shortly afterwards, extending his stride to catch up with her. Neither of them said a word, they reached the door, turned left and went inside the room.

"What a surprise, it's white." He groaned.

Skylar pulled out a chair and sat down, folding her legs and pulling out her tablet. She clearly didn't want to waste any more time, and that was probably the best idea, but he still found himself drawn to looking at their surroundings. Trying to find the cracks in the facade.

He walked around the perimeter of the room. No small feat when everything's the same color. He could barely find the creases in the walls to figure out which end was up. If it wasn't

for the chairs and tables, this room would be impossible to guesstimate short of walking into a wall on accident.

“Should we go over questions? Or do you want to wing it?” He heard Skylar say from across the room. Her voice echoed off the tables and walls.

He looked over at her. She hadn't even looked up from her notes. Her face illuminated by the screen on the table and her fingers moving dexterously through notes and documents.

“Uh, truth be told I'm not entirely sure what to ask. More so just looking for names, what can he tell us about our interviews. So on and so forth.” He sat down, pulling out his own tablet. “Did you have some questions in mind?”

Skylar kept looking at her notes. Conveniently with the tablet's reflectors on, he couldn't see a thing from this angle. Privacy was all the rage these days, something that made him laugh internally everytime. As if any tech company cared about your privacy.

“Most of my questions are reserved for the interviewees.” She looked up at him, “I'm not too concerned with what Yusef can tell us after one day on the ground.”

Exigent nodded and took to his own tablet. There they sat, waiting and studying.

A slight hiss was the only noise to alert them to the door opening. Yusef walked in, looking no different than before. Whatever he had to do was clearly not all that physically taxing on the man. He walked around the table but didn't sit down.

As He stood over them, Exigent couldn't help but feel like it was some intentional power move. A subtle move made by every authority figure ever, reminding both himself and Skylar of the hierarchy of the place.

“As I said before,” Yusef wasted no time talking, sticking his hands in his pockets. “My primary role here will be to provide managerial oversight and ensure that everything is done according to Agency guidelines. Since your initial briefing was, as Agent Skylar put it, ‘gloriously brief’ I will hopefully present some more structure to what is expected of you here.”

Yusef pulled out his own PIT and tapped it. A 3D hologram popped to life, showing unfamiliar faces and even less familiar lines of text. He highlighted sections and pulled them up to make them clearer. “As you are aware, per the initial briefing, about a week ago an unknown object seemingly crashed out here in the Salt Flats.” Yusef stated.

Skylar looked up from her tablet and cleared her throat. “I'm sorry sir, seemingly?”

“That’s right. Agency presence as per our own military has been here a little over a week, me only a day, and we’ve learned just about nothing in that time. I have not even seen the object in question, in that regard I’m afraid I can provide absolutely zero insight. And, considering that we’re here to interrogate and interview, I’d argue that none of us need to see it.” He directed their attention back to the hologram, “now, as I was saying before: Your primary duty is to interview these three subjects, over the course of however long the Agency deems it necessary for you to be here. Which we expect to only be around two to three weeks. Hope you packed accordingly but your rooms are fitted with enough gadgets to cover you if you didn’t.” Yusef spun the hologram around so that the face of a man was clearly visible to the Agents. “This is subject one. A PFC, Kyle Williams, was in the area at the time of the event. Unfortunately, due to having an extreme emotional and physiological breakdown, he hasn’t been entirely helpful to ascertaining what we need to know.”

Exigent leaned forward, his eyes searched the hologram for any signs that he could use to their advantage. Any immediate flaws in Williams that they could expose. Yusef turned his eyes toward him and awaited the inevitable question. “So, you’re saying this particular man,” Exigent leaned back again as he spoke. “Actually, saw the impact event? Why was this not in the briefing?”

Yusef heaved a sigh and crossed his arms, if this was a sign of distress, annoyance or frustration, he was completely unsure. “From what little I know,” Yusef said carefully. “PFC Williams was on a detail out here in the Salt Flats. He was running a patrol for part of their survival training, an unfortunate case of wrong place and wrong time it appears.”

“Wrong place, wrong time? That sounds a lot more like coincidence to me.” Skylar said off to his side.

“Perhaps, and if he was more cooperative, I’m sure I’d have a much better pitch to sell you on. For now, this is what you have to work with.” Yusef moved his hand before looking to both the Agents, “can I move on?”

Skylar nodded and he followed suit. Exigent made a mental note that Yusef had conveniently sidestepped the question about why Williams wasn’t in the briefing.

Not losing a beat, Yusef looked back to his hologram and started sending files to the Agents. “From what little I’ve gathered, Kyle Williams had no previous history of medical issues. Scored well on his entry battery to the UNM, attended college beforehand, held a steady

relationship with his family and had no previous records of breakdowns. Emotional or otherwise.”

Skylar started picking through the information popping into her feed. “How long had he been out here for?”

“According to his service file and records, this survival training was only set to last a few months. Long enough to acclimate to the environment to see if they could tough it out.”

Exigent jumped in before Skylar could say anything. “When did his training start, specifically. When did he arrive at the Flats.” Not a question.

“His Battalion commander said they had been out here roughly a month beforehand. Maybe a month and a couple spare change of days.”

“Both plenty of time to notice a change in emotional state, mannerisms, habits and also not a lot of time for somebody to have a complete breakdown.” He offered to both of them.

“Well, nobody can really determine an appropriate amount of time to have a mental or emotional breakdown.” Skylar ventured, giving everyone in the room a slight pause.

He turned his head towards her, his eyes searched her own piercing blue ones, “psychologically speaking, yes. But we’re talking about someone who underwent some pretty rigorous training in order to even get where he is. Granted being in the middle of nowhere can really fuck with your head, but he’s not exactly a poster child for emotional distress.”

She set her tablet down slowly, the metal casing making a slight *clack* as it rested on the table, “I disagree, Agent.” She brushed a rogue strand of hair out of her eye. “Military members, particularly men, are the highest demographic at risk for PTSD. Which can manifest in several different ways including emotional and mental breakdowns at seemingly random intervals. Mix in the fact that this PFC is new, young and never really had to face anything like this, which I remind you none of us in this room have either, and suddenly your entire perception of the world is shattered. Something potentially extra-terrestrial or secret crashes in the middle of your routine patrol, and you just have to accept that and keep doing your job?” She shook her head, “maybe it’s just me, but I’m not entirely sure how I’d sleep at night either in those circumstances.”

He looked downward and took a second, trying to take Skylar’s placating tone for what it was and not get frustrated at her, “I’m well aware of the risks that his demographic faces in military service. What I mean is that typically you do not see signs of PTSD in military men until after deployments, years of service or advanced age. From what I’m reading,” he scrolled down a

way on his tablet, “Kyle Williams hasn’t even had his first year outside of Boot Camp. He’s not even decorated for anything; he hasn’t been deployed or lost anyone close to him. Statistically speaking, since we’re using your metric now, Williams should be at the bottom of that demographic.” He spun the tablet towards her and pointed at the picture of Williams. “This man,” he stated. “Is either in an extremely unlucky situation, or there’s something more to his breakdown. Granted, it’s not a black and white conclusion, but unless there’s something we’re not being told...” Exigent let the sentence trail off as he looked over at Yusef.

Yusef shook his head and raised his hands, “you know what I know. You’re both here because no one is being told everything.”

Skylar turned her attention away from the tablet and looked to Yusef, “what do you think caused his breakdown?”

Yusef sighed and looked at the hologram for what seemed like an eternity. He rubbed his chin and seemed to be lost in thought for a while. Mulling something over before risking the thought out loud, or so it seemed.

“Maybe it wasn’t really any one particular thing.” Yusef said finally. “You’re talking about something that could have multiple factors, as both of you have brought up. But maybe it wasn’t brought on by his experience of the event, but rather by the potential consequences of his report.”

Skylar answered first, “you’re talking about fear of ridicule or humiliation?”

“Yes, but not on his part. On the part of his commanders or peers. I’ve seen more decorated men do a lot more for a lot less.”

“You’re saying that he was coerced or forced to acknowledge a certain outlook and couldn’t handle it?” He said, taking Skylar’s words. A heavy implication in the world of privatized forces.

“I’m saying, very carefully, that maybe it was nothing.” Yusef motioned with a hand dismissively. “Maybe Williams made up an outcome in his head and couldn’t bear the thought of barely making it a year before his career got ruined.”

He nodded and looked over at Skylar, “not a bad theory.”

“No, it isn’t.” Skylar tapped down a few notes before turning her attention away from him and back at Yusef. “Who’s our second and third subject?”

Jacqueline Webb and Jennifer Janis.

He had expected them all to be men that they were interviewing. Maybe due to the military stigma for training exercises, but then again, this was a different time.

He scrolled through what little bit of information that they had on Jennifer. Scientist, attractive, intelligent. Studied with an emphasis in radiation technology, contracted out to a Brazilian non-profit studying interstellar radio signals. Something that sounded very glamorous and interesting, but he knew that it basically meant staring through a microscope and a waveform for what felt like weeks.

Jacqueline, he found significantly more interesting. According to the info that was supplied, she had firsthand knowledge of what exactly the Event was. Recruited to study whatever this thing is before being pulled from the project. Reasons given were a strange amalgamation of blacked out lines, personal vendettas and half assed information. All the marks of a cover up, something that the Agency taught all too well.

He looked over at Skylar who was already asking Yusef another question. She was quick, he couldn't deny it. He'd be spending a lot of time playing verbal catch up if he kept getting distracted like this.

“What significance did Mrs. Janis have on this project?” She asked Yusef as it seemed that Exigent was getting lost in a daze next to her.

“Unsure.” The Director replied shortly. “She’s a microbiology technician who studied with an emphasis in radiation technologies. But we haven’t had any rad spikes since the crash, and whatever it was doesn’t appear to be off putting any radiation. Maybe that’s why she was canned, not exactly useful information to have on hand.”

“Wait,” Exigent said suddenly. “you’re saying that maybe she was taken off the project due to an unneeded opinion? Once they determined there were no lethal levels of radiation, they just let her go?”

“Not non-lethal, zero. There have been no radiation spikes at all. Maybe the backup microbiology PhD just wasn’t enough to warrant the budget she demanded or something.”

She jumped in when she looked at Janis’ profile again. Something that she knew was about to come out of Exigent’s mouth. “If that was the case, why is her information profile so heavily censored?” She looked at both of them in turn. “I mean, it’s extremely rare that we’re given profiles that have this much censorship, so why the secrecy? And furthermore, if she was

an unnecessary opinion as you've both postulated, then why even keep her here? Why not just record a statement or something and leave it at that? Make her files available to us and not keep her in a room for weeks on end? Unless there's something more to her than we've been led to believe."

"You haven't been led to believe anything." Yusef said simply, clearly trying to steer her away from making any more provocative claims than she already had. "You're getting the same information as I am."

"Okay, maybe not led." She flipped the tablet towards Yusef to emphasize her point. "But clearly given a straight line with very little options for deviation."

Exigent straightened up and offered a clarification, "Professionally led to believe."

She nodded, "exactly."

"Alright, you could be right. There is most likely more to every one of these witnesses, or subjects. That's why you're here after all." Yusef rolled his shoulders. "And if I had more information on Mrs Janis and what she was doing, I'd supply it to you. I'll do some digging and see what I can uncover, as soon as I determine if it's actionable intel, I will supply it to you two."

He swiped the hologram of Janis off to the side before pulling up the hologram of Jacqueline Webb. Yusef seemed very eager to move on past Janis, and she saw off to the side that Exigent's eyes were glued to his tablet, Janis' profile still on his screen. Skylar tapped her screen to do the same as Yusef was doing and saw Exigent follow suit out of the corner of her eye.

"What do you two make of Miss Webb here, anything of note that you'd like to share or ask?" Yusef pointed at the floating hologram of the woman. She had very pronounced features, a poster child for natural beauty at first glance.

"How long was she out here working this nonprofit contract?" Exigent asked.

"Around five years." Yusef replied quickly. "Plenty of time to get familiar with the people, technology, customs. All that fun stuff."

She read off her tablet, "according to this she was practically treated as a native. Speaks roughly six languages fluently, a handful of others she's conversationally fluent. She's had several interested men, a few interested women and gives all of her money away to charities."

"Money?" Exigent scoffed. "From what? She's running a contract for a nonprofit radar and radio operations company. Where is she getting that kind of capital?"

“She’s been offered several different endorsements from notable media companies and interested academic partners,” Yusef clarified. “She often accepts them, seems to hold onto just enough for herself and then tends to give it away to people that need it more.”

Skylar shook her head, “a regular Mother Teresa. She’s not going to be easy to get answers out of.”

Yusef furrowed his brow, crossing his arms as he looked over at her.

“What makes you say that?” Exigent asked.

“Well, she’s popular, but she reserves the details of her personal life to herself. Normally I’d say that’s because her work is so publicized that she’s uncomfortable being in the limelight, socially. However, after some cursory reading and researching, I have found all of one article on her work. That’s not exactly a consistent body of work for someone who’s receiving potential thousands of dollars in endorsements and educational backing.”

As she trailed off, Exigent jumped back in and continued her train of thought.

“Meaning that she enjoys her privacy, or that her endorsements are because the quality of her work is not the only thing in question. Also in question is the validity of whoever is backing it, and what exactly she’s researching out here.” Exigent shifted in his seat and tapped on his screen, “she could very well be another agent. Wrong place, wrong time. At the very least she’s not one hundred percent honest based on that dossier. With the way that her info is so hard to get a hold of, that tells us that she has either gone to great lengths to keep her work and life private. Or, someone with a lot more power and control has done it for her.”

There was a sudden and hard silence after Exigent finished speaking. Suddenly the reality of everything came crashing in on the group in one depressing and crushing moment. She couldn’t help but realize that there is so much more under the surface, and they hadn’t even interviewed anyone yet.

What if these people were all agents?

Maybe that’s why there’s been so much information missing. Is this a set up? Is this where the Agency had finally overextended themselves and now, they needed patsies to dig themselves out of a PR nightmare?

Somewhere back in the distant corner of the table, all of two feet that felt more like two miles, Yusef was explaining the schedule of the first two days. She didn’t even realize that she had no idea what he had even said.

“- so that’s going to be day one here. After day two you’ll be given free rein of the subjects and you’ll be able to ascertain by whatever means you believe are necessary.” Yusef finished his explanation and looked at the two Agents. “Questions? Concerns? Complaints?”

Exigent looked over at her and shook his head meekly.

“No, none from me,” he said.

Skylar shook her head slightly, snapping herself out of whatever she was trying to figure out.

“No sir, none from me either.”

“Good.” Yusef gathered his tablet and ran a hand through his hair before turning out of the room. “IF you have any questions, send me a message or come find me. I won’t be hard to find.”

That same hiss was the only noise that indicated to Skylar that Yusef had left. She couldn’t shake the thoughts from her head that something terrible was going to happen. Be it her career, her life or her mental health.

Once again she found herself stuffing that nub of doubt back down into a place where it wouldn’t bother her. And something told her that she was going to have to get used to that.

Skylar stirred next to him and he turned his attention to her as he slid his tablet into his bag. He waited for the explanation but as he saw her eyes turn glassy and distant, he didn’t really know what else to say. So he said nothing, and snapped his fingers under her eyes. She started and gave him a look that was something between anger, frustration and confusion.

“You okay there Agent?” He said quietly.

Skylar attempted something between a halfhearted smile and a mischievous glare, “Yeah, no problem! Shall we?”

Exigent stood and motioned to the door, “after you, ma’am.”

Skylar walked around the table and pressed her thumb into the reader on the doorframe. That same hiss broke a tense silence as the door slid open and the two Agents walked out and turned down that long white hallway.

Exigent ran the details over in his head as he and Skylar walked silently down the hallway. Everything that Yusef had said wasn’t tremendously helpful. If anything, all he had done was parrot the briefing that the Agency had already given them, despite delivering it under

different promises and pretenses. He turned and walked towards his quarters, as Skylar entered a room on his left. Presumably her temporary living quarters as well. Not one word was exchanged between them as they parted ways and began preparing for the first interview.

He pressed his thumb into the reader and heard a soft click as his door unlocked and then that same *hiss* as it slid open. And of course, it was more white. Perfectly square in shape, not even an indentation for the toilet and shower that stood off in the back right corner. Immediately to his left was a massive customization and information screen embedded into the wall. On the other immediate side of the room was a small twin bed. White sheets, white pillow and white mattress.

“Fucking white everywhere.” He muttered to himself as he walked over to the customization screen.

He tapped a few lines and selected different options as the room’s tone shifted to his commands. The walls turned a vibrant red, the floor remained white, and the ceiling shifted to a deep commanding black.

He looked around the room and shrugged to himself, “could look worse.” He stripped off his suit and threw it into the washer on the other side of the room, at least modern technology would ensure that he always had clean clothes. As he took in the room once more, he eventually entered the shower, surrendering whatever turmoil of emotions he had about the job to the embracing high temperatures and soft trickle of water against his skin. For the briefest few minutes he had, he felt peaceful and serene.

Skylar leaned back against the door and took in her surroundings. A square shaped room with the necessities that she needed to survive a few weeks in an arid desert. Although being indoors probably ninety percent of the time meant these were nearly luxury commodities. And she was already sweating, either from nerves or from being in a dark suit for hours on end.

She glanced around the room, taking stock of the simplicity of the room, the bed and shower looked extremely expensive. Clearly the Agency wanted them comfortable, so maybe that was a good sign. Or possibly it was a move to make the two Agents reliant and complacent in their downtime. It is what she would do after all. Give someone enough comfort, and they’ll acquiesce to just about anything.

She shook her head, ridding her mind of the nagging doubts that had been rattling around in her head since she first got the assignment. She let go of it all, focused on one single task, stopped trying to remember names and moved forward with purpose.

Stripping off her suit, she folded it neatly and draped it across the bed. She turned towards the shower before stopping and turning back to her suit. She picked her shirt up and sniffed it, grimaced and tossed it across the room into the cleaner, followed by the rest of her outfit.

Finally free and clear, she turned the water a scalding hot and just stood in the running water. Waited, tried to forget and enjoyed the brief moments she had before she needed to focus.

Skylar's door hissed open, and he straightened up and stood away from the wall where he had been leaning for the last few minutes. Clearly Skylar had the same idea as him and a fresh smell of peppermint and vanilla lingered out from her, it was an intoxicating mix... If you weren't aware that she was an Agent.

“Ready to get started?” He asked her.

Skylar didn't reply, just managed a curt nod and fell into step next to him as they walked towards Williams' room. The beginning of the whole thing.

4 - Kyle Williams

The walk to Kyle Williams' cell, or room, was incredibly annoying to ascertain. The direction seemed meandering because of how uniform the hallways were. Even though Exigent's PIT told him that this was the right direction, it still felt wrong. Despite that he had no reason to feel that way.

His footsteps echoed in unison with Skylar's, heavy and confident footfalls that seemed to echo more than they should. Disappearing down the eternal hallways like a fading memory.

When the door was finally in view, he found himself internally grateful. So much so that he almost heaved a heavy sigh of satisfaction but decided that it would send the wrong message to Skylar. They didn't know each other well enough to show any sort of weakness yet.

So instead of sighing, he just silently pressed his thumb into the reader next to the door, it opened with a soft *hiss* and he found himself staring into a pure white room with only a single chair on side with a quiet and disheveled looking man, a single table in front of him and two chairs on the opposing sides.

Without looking to Skylar for support or agreement, he stepped across the threshold and prepared his mind for what had to come next.

KYLE WILLIAMS, PFC US ARMY TRANSCRIPT. INTERVIEW 1 - 08/01/2042

CAM 1 FACING FRONT OF ROOM. Door opens, Agent Skylar walks into the interrogation room. Agent Exigent walks into the interrogation room. Agent Skylar looks around the room. Agent Exigent walks towards PFC Kyle Williams. Kyle Williams is seated at the single table in the center of the room. Agent Skylar remains standing.

CAM 2 FACING PROFILE OF TABLE. Agent Exigent remains seated. Staring at PFC Kyle Williams.

AGENT EXIGENT - Kyle Williams? Can you hear me?

(SILENCE)

AGENT EXIGENT - Kyle Williams my name is Agent Exigent. I've been assigned to study and ascertain the potential effects of the event that took place here a week or so ago. While our working knowledge on it is very limited, both due to Agency discretion and personal limitations of technology, we're hoping that you can clarify some of the holes in our info and help us make conclusions about all of this.

(SILENCE)

AGENT EXIGENT - I understand that you may have witnessed the event firsthand. Is this accurate?

(SILENCE)

AGENT EXIGENT - Mr. Williams, I cannot help you if you don't say anything. You won't get out of here any sooner, and you won't be reinstated or possibly even employable if you refuse to cooperate. Do you understand me?

(SILENCE)

PFC Kyle Williams nods. Agent Skylar remains standing at the back of the room.

AGENT EXIGENT - Well, that's a start I suppose. (SILENCE) Are you ever going to say anything? Visual confirmation can only be taken so far, Private.

PFC Kyle Williams - (SILENCE) Your timeline is wrong.

AGENT EXIGENT - What do you mean?

PFC KYLE WILLIAMS - Your timeline is wrong. This happened months ago-

SYSTEM ERROR

FEED LOST

END TRANSCRIPT 08/01/2042

Exigent turned and looked at Skylar with a puzzled look. She continued staring straight ahead at Williams, with a look that seemed both concerned and matriarchal. She was really playing this strong silent guardian angel role pretty damn well.

He turned back to Williams and tried to see his eyes. Williams continued hanging his head, thin locks of hair stringing around his forehead. He didn't look physically unfit, just a little hungry and tired. He wasn't breathing heavy, he didn't seem to have any issues at all if they were physical. Realistically, Exigent knew that PTSD could display different traits, but Williams did seem to be mistreated or anything.

He had to admit to himself, he wasn't sure he would believe that Williams was being kept in this room for months. Hard to really take a borderline schizophrenic at his word. But for someone who had an emotional meltdown only a few months ago, he's remarkably calm. Suppose everyone reacts differently to emotional stimulus.

"How long has it been since the initial event?" He ventured, trying to probe but taking it slowly.

"I don't know. I've been here since I can remember. Only reference point is my watch and the assumption that the people who bring me food are telling me the truth." Williams shrugged ever so slightly, "which isn't saying much, all things considered."

"How do you mean?" He prodded again.

Williams shrugged again, "it's the military. Lying and deception is all part of the same trick."

There was an uncomfortable but short silence as Exigent filled in the gaps and tried to read between the lines of William's statement. He knew what Williams was saying, but it was

more important to Williams than it was to Exigent, he just needed to convince him they were on the same side.

“I’m not military, Mr. Williams.” He said softly.

“You’re all cut from the same cloth, sir. We all are.” Williams leaned slightly back, keeping his head down and staring straight downwards.

He leaned forward, not willing to give Williams the benefit of the doubt. He tried to find his eyes again, but Williams kept his downcast stare. He risked a look backwards towards Skylar who was still staring at Williams, she didn’t even move an inch. He turned back to Williams who was still sitting back against the chair.

He cleared his throat and tapped on his PIT a couple of times then slid the tablet across the table where a small hologram displayed a medical record. Lines of black redactions made it difficult to know exactly what it was saying about the man.

“If this is accurate, Williams, it’s difficult to take you at your word too.” He leaned back a bit and let the hologram scroll through.

Williams' head bobbed up slightly as he looked at the scrolling hologram through his hair, still not revealing his eyes. The hologram continued, eventually the word schizophrenia cropped up a few times in the file and Williams leaned forward a little bit more. Very faintly, Exigent makes out wet and bright eyes behind the hair, trying to guess at his frame of mind.

“I am not,” Williams nearly snarled, “fucking crazy.”

Exigent had struck a nerve. Perhaps a little too deeply. But, he needed to know more, and Williams’ mental state could be exploited. His emotions gave him away. Williams pushed the tablet slowly back towards Exigent, before hanging his head again and leaning back. “Williams, I’m not saying you’re crazy.” He placated the man softly.

“Same cloth, agent.” Williams groaned back.

“What does that mean, Williams? Why don’t you trust me?”

Williams pauses, “because I wouldn’t trust me either.”

He stared at William for a few moments, letting the silence stretch out like a rubber band.

“Williams, I can’t help you if you don’t let me help you.” He tried sounding more patriarchal.

Williams just sat in silence and kept his head hanging and the metaphorical rubber band kept stretching... And stretching.

“Williams?”

Nothing.

“Williams.”

Nothing again. Exigent sighed and turned to look at Skylar who looked back at him for the first time. She shrugged ever so slightly, and he scowled at her. He stood up, buttoning his jacket and putting the TIP back into his satchel.

It hadn't been a complete waste of time, but it was still barely an answer. All that Williams managed to do was plant a little kernel of doubt in their mind.

“We'll see you later, Williams.” The tone was gone, he didn't try to hide his disappointment.

Skylar waited until Exigent walked past her before she turned to leave the room. He briefly saw Williams staring at them in the reflection of the door window, or more specifically, staring at Skylar. The door hissed behind them and closed with a loud *click*.

Skylar released her pent-up breath and looked over at Exigent who seemed to be staring at Williams, even though the glass was one way. She waited for him to move or say something, but the seconds ticked by and she found herself getting slowly more impatient.

“Why did you show him the medical records?” She tried to hide the frantic tone that had been building up in her head, but it still squeaked out a little.

Exigent turned and looked at her, “I was hoping it'd scare him into revealing something.”

“All it did was piss him off.” She said quietly, even though Williams couldn't hear them.

“That could be a reveal. Shows that his emotions can be fragile.” Exigent ventured back.

She tried to keep her tone calm, “do you really think giving him an excuse to build a wall around himself is a good idea?”

Exigent shrugged, “depends on if you have a battering ram.”

She blinked at him, “what does that even mean?”

“Oh, come on,” he intoned. “You really mean to tell me that you didn't notice him staring at you as we left?”

It was her turn to shrug, “sure, he's potentially been in here for months, hasn't seen people in too long.”

Exigent smiled, not the worst look on him in her own opinion, “that is adorably naive but, you know why he stared.”

She went silent and looked in the window where Williams was sitting. His head still hung over, his hair drooping over his face. She mulled over the thought in her head, considering the potential fallout as well as the potential successes of a new plan in case things continued at this snail’s pace.. Far as methods went, taking sexual advantage of someone in a fragile emotional state usually worked like a charm. Certainly wouldn’t be the first time for her.

She looked back at Exigent who was searching her face for an answer. “I want to give him a day to get his mind in order. Whether he’s sane or not,” She shrugged slightly, “doesn’t really matter. Like you said, emotion can be a reveal. Besides, maybe I have a more effective battering ram of my own in mind.”

She was still staring in the window until she noticed Exigent nod out of the corner of her eye. She turned her attention back to him, seeing that he’d turned his attention to Williams through that same small window.

“One thing’s for sure,” Exigent almost sounded distant, “he did see something.”

“Or” she had to be very careful with this, “this isn’t so much PTSD from the event, as it is what happened afterwards like Yusef said.”

Exigent scowled in mild confusion, “how do you mean?”

She turned and started walking slowly down the hallway, forcing Exigent to pick up his satchel and start walking after her. Eventually he matched her pace, and she turned her head slightly to him. “Suppose that you’re a commander, and some of your men who have no high security clearance witness something that either defies explanation or could be a security concern. Or they witness something that is extremely classified. How do you go about explaining that to those men, and convincing them to keep it to themselves under a certain penalty?” She didn’t really mean it as a question, but she wanted to get his mind rolling down the same hill as hers.

Next to her, she could feel Exigent’s pensive scowl as he thought it through. The shifting sands of perception drifted between them. “Have them sit in on a panel and reassure them of their safety but that they need to understand the implications of what this could mean for them.” He ventured.

They turned around a corner, another long hallway in front of them, appearing much the same as any other numbers of hallways that they had seen before.

She stopped walking, standing at the junction of the hallways, and looked directly at him. “Now suppose,” she kept her tone flat, “that one of those men reacts emotionally. Or that he has medical records and history that corroborates an emotional response to upsetting news.”

She searched Exigent’s face as he stared blankly at her. He kept his tone flat as well, “I suppose, I’d react a little differently towards him than the others.”

“And how would you react knowing that information, being in authority over him and being concerned with the security and wellbeing of the remaining men and women who could be affected by somebody like that?”

“If he kept being a problem, I’d interrogate him.” There was no hesitation in his response.

“Interrogate?” She repeated doubtfully.

His blank stare turned into hard concentration, “implying that they tortured him?”

She shrugged at him, “the military has done a lot worse for a lot less.” She used a variation of what Yusef said to drive her point even further home.

“Torturing an emotionally fragile person?”

“Not out of their realm of expertise.” She shrugged again, “not like neither of us have done that same thing either.”

“And you think that’s what happened here?”

“Won’t know until that wall gets broken down.” She turned and looked back down the hallway.

She didn’t know what she was looking for, but this whole situation felt so completely off to her. She knew what they were supposed to do, but she wasn’t sure why they were doing it and why they needed to. If it had been a massive security breach, she might have understood a little bit more.

But right now, it seemed more like a glorified psychotherapy session rather than a deeper seated issue of security concerns. And it wasn’t like Yusef or the Board, or frankly anyone, had given them much of a springboard to go off of. This was just as much about determining the issues as it was coming to a conclusion.

Exigent cleared his throat, prompting her to snap her head back only to see that he was also looking down the hallway. “Let’s go sit down somewhere to discuss this.”

She nodded and started walking down the hallway without another thought with Exigent close by on her right. They turned the corner to the cafeteria. They went through the usual movements and the door opened and closed with a soft *click*.

Exigent sat down at the long white table, he looked around the room to ensure no one was in there.

More white, always more fucking white.

He had seen the cafeteria before, but it was so irksome to just see all this alabaster pure white. As though someone was afraid of being dirty and wanted to rub it in your face.

Skylar sat down across from him and pulled out her tablet, tapping a few times and pulling up a backlog of what seemed to be security footage. She opened a video that looked to be dated around a week ago. Supposedly, if Williams was honest, this would clear a lot up.

I'm probably hoping for too much.

Exigent leaned forward and looked at the footage, it was simply a static shot of William's door. Seeming to show nothing special.

About two minutes of nothing went by.

"This is William's cell footage." Skylar said calmly across from him, "nothing overly special. It's just the door, so all you really see is... Well, the door." She tapped the screen again, pulling up a different video. The footage adjusts to show a different angle of the hallway; He could see the opposing wall from William's door. "In this angle, you can see nothing, it's literally just a slight angle of the same hallway." Skylar tapped again, pulling up a different angle from the other side of the hallway. "Here's where it gets interesting. Now from this angle you can actually see the door, you can see the window. And right around the two-minute mark, you can see this."

She pinched the screen, zooming the hologram in on the window. He squinted and saw someone's boot, facing towards where Williams would be sitting. Looked military, or at least very rugged. Though trying to guess an identity from a rugged unisex boot was more than a little problematic.

"So, there's a foot in the shot." He glanced up from the hologram towards Skylar. "What's to say that isn't Williams? Just stretching his legs."

“Did he really seem like the active type to you in there? Or the kind to own different styles of footwear?”

“I’m not sure what type he is if I’m being honest with you.” He chuckled lowly.

“This is only from a week ago.” Skylar’s voice had a slightly exasperated tone to it.

He shrugged, unconvinced despite her exasperation, “could be the person who brings him his food.”

She rolled her eyes at him, “this person doesn’t leave for five hours.”

“Could be that whoever brings him food has to wait until he’s done or until it’s deemed that he’s not hungry. Maybe he’s tried to kill himself in the past or something.”

“Of course, that’s possible. But I think we should ask Yusef about this. See if there’s any other footage, transcripts, or anything available from this date and time.”

He smiled slightly at Skylar as he sat up straight, “sure, it couldn’t hurt, right?”

She smiled slightly back, he didn’t know why, but it helped lift his spirits a little bit. He looked back towards the footage. Wondering if this was something worth bugging Yusef over.

“So, any idea how to get to Yusef’s office?”

Skylar blew air out through her lips, making a slight flatulence sound, “odds are, it’s white and we have to walk down a few confusing hallways to get there.”

His smile grew a little wider, he stared around the room. He had been hoping to find a map but instead they had given them a digital map on their PIT. A digital map that didn’t really show much in the way of detail and he had hoped it would be updated after speaking with Williams, but apparently that went the way of anything that wasn’t white in color. Anything that could give him any sense of direction was lost in the endless sea of confusing white. Hiding all the angles, and somehow not even giving away shadows. It was all extremely disorienting.

He pulled out his tablet and tapped out a few times, pulling out Yusef’s contact card. He tapped it and waited for Yusef to answer.

“*Agent.*” Yusef said calmly a few seconds later.

“Director Yusef, we have a request for you.” Exigent replied calmly.

“*Ask and ye shall receive.*” The older man sighed through the speaker.

“Where’s your office?” He asked with a small grin.

“*That’s the favor that you need?*”

“No, just figured you’d want to hear it in person.” He grimaced a little, “and because the digital map they gave us is incredibly frustrating to use.”

“*Why? Is it controversial?*” Yusef’s voice turned sour, Exigent noted that he completely ignored the other sentence.

“No, not to the best of my knowledge.”

“*Then just ask.*”

Skylar leaned forward a little bit to answer instead, “we need access to transcripts and audio from a week ago for William’s hallway and interrogation room.”

There was a short silence from Yusef. Exigent looked at Skylar and she looked back at him.

“*Alright, I have a transcript, but I’m afraid that the audio is unavailable to you agents.*” Came the eventual response.

Exigent narrowed his eyes in confusion, “I thought we had access to anything that we needed?”

“*Well, apparently you don’t need this one.*”

He leaned back away from the tablet, shrugging in defeat but Skylar remained leaning forward.

“Director Yusef, I would argue that we do need that audio.” She almost pleaded.

“*Maybe I wasn’t clear, Agent. You don’t need the audio.*” Yusef’s tone indicated that this was a fight they weren’t going to win. But something in Yusef’s tone told Exigent that the opposite was true as far as the need went. But he wasn’t willing to burn any bridges just yet.

Skylar looked like she was about to say something before he held up his hand to her. “Okay, Director. Thank you for the transcript.” Exigent didn’t wait for a formal dismissal, he tapped the screen and ended the call with Yusef.

Shortly afterwards, a file popped up on his screen and he tapped on it. A rather mundane looking and lengthy transcript materialized out of the screen, and he sighed heavily, leaning back and rubbing his eyes. The transcript was heavily redacted, to the point of being useless.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Skylar almost sounded angry at the sight.

“We’re less than a day into this investigation,” Exigent was staring at the ceiling, “and we already seem to have stumbled onto something problematic.”

“At this point, the only one who seems to be telling us the truth, is Williams.” Skylar snorted.

He lowered his head and stared levelly at Skylar, “You really think that we’ve been given a lot of false information.”

“Well... I’m not saying that,” Skylar looked back at him with a halfhearted roll of her eyes, “I’m just leaving my opinions open to be changed. And noting out loud how odd it is that it feels like the most dishonest people in the compound are the ones that are supposed to be helping us.”

He couldn’t argue with her there. But now wasn’t the time to go down that rabbit hole, not just yet anyway. “What we need right now, ignoring the dishonesty from Yusef, is another witness to corroborate his story about this having happened months ago as opposed to a week. If we can gather enough evidence to support that, we can at least have a more consistent timeline. Right now, we’re working two ends of a very large gap without anything to bridge it.”

Skylar nodded along as he spoke, “I agree. But what’s our next step, *right now*?”

He stared ahead and thought. Mulling over the potential answers to that question. “I think,” he worked it out carefully, “we need to talk to Webb. She might be able to corroborate that timeline. She was out here for five years, or just in the country at the very least according to what we know. She wasn’t directly connected to the military operations, at least that we really know of, which means that we can play things a little more nicely and hopefully coerce some information out of her due to a lack of UNM loyalty. And we’re operating on about the same amount of information which means we don’t have to concoct much of a backstory to throw her off. And as much as I’d like to interview Janis, she is much more of a *potential* round out, we know that she can corroborate some things that we are professionally suspicious of, but to the best of our knowledge she doesn’t know either of the other two subjects.”

“I agree.” Skylar agreed, short and sweet.

“Good. Let’s get working on Webb, go over what we can tackle as far as she’s concerned.”

Skylar tapped out a few lines on her tablet and pulled up the redacted notes on Webb. Her profile popped up, including a photo and bullet points about her life. Exigent looked at her photo, taking in the details of her stare and facial features.

“Attractive.” He turned his attention to her details, “accomplished and experienced. She’s studied just about everything from just about everywhere.”

“Single, so maybe you’ll be best if you go in by yourself.” Skylar said.

“Possibly. But she could very well be bisexual. Or even gay.”

“One thing at a time. Besides, nothing in here mentions her sexuality, so she very well may not even be interested in anything like that.” Skylar pointed at him briefly.

“But, at the very least,” Exigent gave her his best charming smile, “an attractive single guy like myself can put her off kilter long enough to make a mistake.”

Skylar smiled slightly, almost sadly. Exigent didn’t let his smile falter and stared straight at her. “I don’t think she’s that dumb.” She said finally.

He blew out air and slouched back, “Ouch, my pride.”

“I didn’t mean you aren’t attractive.” Skylar said solemnly.

“I’m not really that hurt, but I’m glad you find me attractive.” He chuckled slightly.

“Alright, calm down there cowboy.”

“Cowboy?” He exclaimed, “man, now my pride is really hurt. Can’t stand country people.”

She laughed at that, and he felt himself smiling honestly at it, of course she had a good laugh. Light and lilting but somehow full of warmth. It was a calming sound. Skylar finished laughing and shrunk down the hologram on her tablet.

He stood up from the table, his cramped legs yelling in relief and Skylar followed suit. She tucked away her tablet and looked over at Exigent who was doing the same thing. He shifted his satchel and buttoned his suit jacket back up, motioning for Skylar to lead the way.

They walked out the cafeteria, the door closed behind them with a soft *click*.

Skylar struggled her pants on and looked around her sparse room. Her bed was still unmade, the towel from the shower was somehow still damp and laying on the floor. Her underwear and old suit were tossed haphazardly onto the bed, despite having been cleaned and pressed.

As she finished getting dressed, she turned and looked at herself in the mirror. Her blue formal shirt frumpy around her curves, deceiving and betraying the athletic body underneath. She checked her pants, which followed a similar theme. She made herself look entirely unremarkable.

They had agreed earlier to pretend to be UNM officers. Since Webb didn't have any official affiliation, they figured she may respond more emphatically to someone partial like the UNM. The Agency was far from partial.

Might as well give it a shot. Who doesn't like dressup?

She didn't. Always hated it. Halloween, Christmas, anything that required her to get dolled up or put on a costume was abhorrent.

She sighed and grabbed her hair, twisting it into a ponytail, letting a strand of hair droop in front of her face. She turned and grabbed her satchel from where it sat by the shower stall, opening the door to the hallway where Exigent was already standing, busying himself with looking nonchalant.

Of course he looks good out of a suit, Skyler thought to herself.

He was wearing a polo shirt that hugged his developed biceps and his chest, with formal pants hugging his thighs and tapering down towards a pair of well-worn shoes. He smiled at her and stretched his arms out to his sides.

“How do I look?” Exigent asked, innocently.

“You look...” She eyed him, up and down, “acceptable.”

He rolled his eyes and smiled at her, “it's okay, I know that you want to jump my bones, you can admit it.”

“Inappropriate, Exigent.” She made sure that her tone didn't suggest playfulness. She dealt with hormonal Agents often enough to be tired of those jokes.

He looked down and away, without losing his smile. “Sorry, Agent. My mistake.”

She started walking away down the hallway, He picked up his satchel over his shoulder and walked away towards her down the hallway. As they walked, she couldn't stop her mind from trying to piece things together before they got there.

Webb is an enigma. Who decides that the salt flats in South America are a good place for radio communications and radar? There's not even any equipment out here that would imply that she had a solid foundation to build on. What the hell was her real purpose out here?

On top of that, who redacts close to seventy percent of a civilian sector telecommunications specialist?

She shook her head free from the doubts around Webb and the mystery of her personage. There were clearly some issues that stood between the logic of her being here, and the actual activities that she engaged in.

Some alternative truth was about to be unveiled; she could only hope that Exigent was up to the task and that Webb wasn't already prepared to have a conversation with them.