

The Hidden Souls

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Cézanne de Heus

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*To Noms, thank you for being the best sister I
could've ever asked for. I love you.*

Prologue

Headquarters, confidential location

The hallway is empty as he enters it. It seems different somehow, but he can't put his finger on what exactly makes it feel different. Perhaps they did a new paintjob on the walls? He enters Chief's office right on the agreed time. Like always. Never too early, never too late. Always right on time. Chief continues typing on his laptop and doesn't acknowledge the presence of the other guy. Chief presses enter and moves his hand over his desk to grab a file before he hands it over.

'It's time.' Chief states before turning back to his laptop. That's all there is said and the guy leaves the office again, file in hand. When he's in the hallway he opens it and just eight lines are typed out. Eight lines that make him stop in his track and run a hand through his hair. Eight lines he hadn't expected to read. Eight lines that make a small smile appear on his face. It certainly is time.

Operation #J2198-102
Identification code: Agent 2309
Name: Celia Carter
Age: 22
Fake Identity: Unknown
Location: Unknown

Your Fake Identity: N.A.
Objective: Find Agent Carter and bring her to HQ. Alive. Use force if necessary.

1 Hide and seek

London, United Kingdom, Europe

The clicking of my heels echoes through the empty building. The building is an old factory that was used for manufacturing wool. It stands tall in a ghost town in the middle of nowhere. Old weaving machines are lined on either side of me as I walk around the chair in the middle of the path. The factory was closed after protesters set fire to the storage of the finished wool and soon after the authorities discovered the factory had been making use of children. Since the people that worked in the factory lived in the houses of the small town surrounding it, the town quickly turned into a ghost town. Everyone moved away because nothing kept them there any longer. Which happened to make this place the perfect spot for an interrogation.

Once I've stopped in front of the guy, whom I had tied down to the chair, I press my lips together. I slightly lean forward and press my finger underneath his chin to force him to look up at me.

'You're still not going to tell me the location where they're holding the asset?' I ask.

He doesn't respond and keeps quiet. A sigh rolls over my lips and I let go of his chin, resting a hand on my hip as I stare at him.

'Why are you making it so hard on yourself, huh?' I slowly shake my head as I scan his face. One of his eyes has already swollen up and is completely bloodshot. A line of blood starts at the cut right below his hairline and currently ends underneath his jaw. I tut as I take a step back and observe him. 'You don't look so good.'

He doesn't move, nor speak and keeps his eyes sternly and determined on mine. 'Alright then, if you don't want to cooperate we'll go over onto the second phase.' I sigh, reaching down and removing my knife from the holster around my ankle. 'I'd like to tell you this isn't going to hurt, but I wouldn't want to lie to you.' I wink as I lean forward again, knife ready in my hand. 'What shall we do first?' I ask, my eyes gliding down his body. 'Ah, the inner thighs.' I smile sweetly as I slash my knife over his skin. He tries to keep silent, but a slight whimper manages to escape his lips.

'You could be on your feet again in a matter of seconds if you'd just tell me what I want to know.' I tell him. 'What is the location?'

The cold air of the outside world feels like a slap in the face and I quickly pull my zipper further up to my neck. I start with a slow jog, keeping my breathing in check and soon speed up. I cross the road and run into the nearest park. Barely anyone is awake at this hour. The rain has turned into a slight drizzle. I'll probably be soaking wet when I return back to my flat.

I never needed a lot of hours of sleep. Not when I was a little girl, not when I lived in the orphanage, not when I lived and trained at the Headquarters Academy and certainly not when I was out on assignments. It wasn't hard to get out of bed early in the morning for training, but now with the nightmares scaring me awake every night, waking up at five in the morning to go for a run has turned into a harder task to deal with. The nightmares are exhausting. Not because they scare me, I've passed that point a while ago. But the constant reliving of everything that happened during the Ananas assignment in Peru requires a lot of energy. Coping with

all that has happened has been hard and I'm not sure how to do it properly.

Chief had proposed to arrange therapy sessions for me. I declined. But apparently it had not really been a suggestion and within a week I was sitting face to face with someone I had never met before. The therapy sessions didn't take long, I quit as soon as possible. Chief then told me to try meditation, but I'm not the meditating type of person. I tried it a handful of times, but my mind is too busy to focus on the meditation. Strangely enough I don't have this problem when I'm working, but when I have to clear my mind on my own time, it appears to be a harder task at hand. After a few seconds something pops up in my head and I'd continue thinking about it until the next thing pops up or I catch myself thinking instead of clearing my head. Like a busy bee flying from one flower to the next. Meditation is clearly not for everyone. I know he means well and he tries to help me, but he isn't. I think part of the cause comes from the fact that my credibility has been damaged when it comes to Chief. The small change in character made that clear in the beginning, but soon it turned into something more prominent.

I quickly shake my head and try to focus on the running again instead of my thoughts. There is no use thinking about it anyway, it won't help the situation.

It takes a long time to build up a reputation for yourself, but your whole reputation is gone with the slightest of errors. It can take a blink of the eye for you to be completely down the ranks or out of the job completely, especially when you work within such a secretive organisation. The Global Secret Service Organisation, G.S.S.O. in short, isn't something you can apply for, it's something you fall into and you have to proof yourself over and over again. Not only during your

training period as a cadet, but also after when you've received the Agent title. You're not just working for a secret service, it's THE secret service. Only the highest of the highest level of the government knows about our existence. We help and therefore make sure the world keeps turning the way it should be turning. It's by far one of the most demanding jobs and the only way you can fall into this job is if you're completely and utterly left alone on this planet. All cadets are orphans with no family left to take care of them. The perfect candidate; someone without any emotional attachments. Someone who won't be held back. Someone like me.

The rain hits my face hard as I push myself a little harder and speed up even more. My breath is visible every time I puff air out. I have to push more, always more. Never slack. Never lose your focus. Never let your guard down.

The library is quiet, like a sanctuary. Some students are whispering to each other, others are staring concentrated into a book and another few at the display of their phones. I offer one of the librarians a smile as I pass her in the aisle between two bookshelves. My eyes glide over the titles on the books before I find what I'm looking for and pick it out of the bookshelf. It's quite crowded in here and almost all of the tables are already occupied by other students. Exams are coming up so everyone is studying as if their lives depend on it. I make my way to the back of the library and find myself an empty seat there. I'd rather sit in the back anyway, there's less people coming and going, which means I don't have to constantly have to check the room. My eyes search my surroundings for anything that is out of place, observing whether there are any possible dangers nearby. When I've checked everyone's body language,

which is for most quite tense, I open the book in front of me. I have to write a paper for my psychology class about the different behavioural patterns people with PTSD go through, ironically enough.

My eyes shoot up from the page in front of me and in a swift motion I catch the book that falls from a guy's pile while he passes me.

'Great reflexes.' he comments as I offer the book to him.

'Oh yeah, thanks.' I mutter, turning back to my own pages as soon as he has taken the book from my hand. He chooses to sit a few chairs down from me and spreads his books widely across the table, clearly making himself ready for a long and thorough study session. I scan the pages, trying to find useful information for my paper, without spending too much time on information that doesn't correspond with my subject. Unnoticed I check the room once more, ready to jump in when there's anything unusual, but yet again there's nothing but stress for the upcoming exams around me.

That's something that has certainly stayed with me in my time away from the G.S.S.O. I'm always on guard, ready to move when needed, either to or from danger. The current danger would be possible assassins sent after me. The question however is whether these assassins were sent by the G.S.S.O. and how many there would be. I've thought about the possibility of an agent put in the field to collect me or kill me. Asking myself whether I would escape or kill them. If I'd escape, I would have to keep running for the rest of my life. If I'd kill them that would mean I would have to kill one of my comrades. That's something I've been trained to do if the circumstances asked for it, but is it also something I am willing to do?

Back when I was still training and even most of my years spent as Agent I wouldn't have thought twice about it. If I received the order to kill, even if it was one of my fellow cadets or agents, it had to be done. It didn't matter what the reason was behind it, not that we received that kind of information anyway. We weren't taught to ask questions, we were taught to carry out assignment. Right before I was sent out on the Ananas assignment, to find and bring back the missing Colombian congress man, I started questioning myself whether what I was doing was actually the right thing. What followed was too much to even give my brain the time to reconsider those questions.

Two agents had been given the assignment before me but disappeared on the job. Agent Avery first and then Agent Richardson. In the end I found Agent Richardson along with several other missing people in one of the pits in an underground temple where the dark creatures kept their hostages. They used them as sacrifices to the Gods in hope that they would be allowed to pass onto the other side instead of this in-between-purgatory that they were stuck in. They had been part of the Cápac tribe. A nomad tribe that eventually settled just outside of Cusco. Once the Spanish conquest invaded the Inca Empire a small group of Spanish soldiers went rogue. They went off on their own and murdered the tribe, burning them both death and alive. The Incas believed that dying due to being burned or burning a dead body would prevent you from passing onto the other side, heaven of some sort, to eventually reincarnate. Every religion gives another meaning or scenery to this and so did the Incas. A meadow surrounded by mountains. The death would be guided by a black dog with light within its eyes to their

heaven. All the disappeared people had ancestors that were part of the rogue Spanish group of men.

It was a sad story and for some reason, unknown to myself since my ancestors don't even come from Spain, I was followed by both a black dog as well as a dark creature. The dog had been trying to protect me, which only became clear near the end of the assignment. The dark creature had been trying to take me, make me disappear like it had done to the vanished people I had been trying to find, and in the end it would've probably resulted in my own dead.

As for Agent Avery. I found some information in Agent Richardson's notebook that pointed at Agent Avery having been a double agent. We never heard of him again since he disappeared. I made sure Chief received this information and he said he'd put an agent on the assignment of finding him. I never followed up on it.

I squeeze my eyes shut and rub my temple before focusing all my attention back on the book in front of me. I have to finish this essay and stop my thoughts from wandering off. I'm not an agent anymore, I'm a student now with student problems.

An upcoming streetlight flickers in the dark. I had been at the library for the whole afternoon. Researching, writing down the information and slowly but surely turning my paper into something presentable. There's a few more topics I'd like to look further into and highlight in my paper. I think it'll only take one more day of intensive work to completely finish it and one more to check everything and make sure there's no grammar or spelling mistakes in there anymore. It was nine o'clock when the librarian of the campus library told the last

few remaining students to pack up, including myself. If it weren't for her I'd still be sitting there.

At the Academy they would keep us awake and test our endurance, reflexes, knowledge and so on until we were close to death. *"We're preparing you for the world out there. The people you will be dealing with will have no mercy and will kill you when they get the chance."* they would repeat over and over again until you could still hear the same sentences on replayed in your dreams weeks after that. Sometimes they still haunt me.

The cold wind picks up and sweeps my hair in my face. It's a chilly night and as I close the distance to my flat a feeling settles in my gut that something's off. I look around me, scanning my surroundings, but nothing is out of the ordinary. Ever since the Ananas assignment I have started to mistrust my gut. My gut was something I could always depend upon, but lately I'm not sure if I can. Just like now...

Five minutes later I'm standing in front of my building letting myself in. A shiver runs down my spine just as I close the door behind me, therefore locking the cold outside.

I check to see if I've received any mail before I walk up the stairs to my flat. As I press my key into the keyhole something feels off again, but this time more intense. I furrow my eyebrows and softly turn the keys to let myself in. Something is definitely off. The doormat has slightly moved. Someone is here. I place my keys on the kitchen counter and quietly pull my knife out of its holster around my ankle before I continue into the hallway towards my bedroom. My heartbeat raises with every step I take. It's been a while since I've needed a weapon.

My bedroom door is slightly open, instead of completely open as I had left it. I carefully peer inside

and immediately lower my weapon as my heartbeat returns to its normal rhythm. Why the hell is he here? I push the door open, switch the lights on and place my bag on the bed.

'What are you doing here?' I ask with the knife still in my hand.

'How did you even know I was here?' he asks.

'I'm called one of the best for a reason.' I answer, turning to him. He's seated in the chair in the corner of my room. His brown hair tousled from the weather outside, his green eyes staring at me and in his hand the necklace with the Chakana symbol pendant that had been lying in a box in my closet. The necklace the dog had given me in the hidden tunnels in Cápac. Dark circles line his eyes which make it clear, especially with the horrible lighting in my room, that he's tired.

'You have been hiding very well.'

I narrow my eyes. 'Apparently not well enough.'

'We need you.'

'Oh, is that right?' I huff, throwing the knife up in the air and catching it again. 'Last time Chief put me on a low rank security detail job. We both know those are the assignments for the cadets that are just getting out of their classes. That clearly didn't show a lot of trust in what I can do. Get someone else and bugger off.'

'Chief specifically gave me the assignment to bring you back to Headquarters.' Jackson tells me.

'Did he also give you the assignment to go snooping around my room?' I ask as I stop playing with the knife and point the blade at the charm in his hand.

'Is this the remainder of the Ananas assignment?'

I nod as he holds it up and inspects it. *Unfortunately that's not the only remainder.* The charm slowly turns around in the air, reflecting the light of the lamp. He pushes himself up and steps over to me before handing

me the necklace back. He has changed a lot since the last time I saw him. Both older and taller. The only thing that hasn't changed are his eyes.

'How have you been?' he asks.

'None of your business.' I tell him as I wrap my fingers around the Chakana symbol.

He lets out a chuckle and shakes his head. 'You haven't changed a bit, I'll be back tomorrow to pick you up for the journey back to HQ. So be ready.' He tells me as he passes me. 'Oh,' he starts as he throws something at me. 'and belated happy birthday.' He finishes.

I catch it and shake my head. 'That was two months ago.'

'Like I said, you have been hiding well.' Jackson states before leaving my room, pulling the door closed behind him and leaving me alone again.

2 Decisions, decisions

London, United Kingdom, Europe

Rain starts to softly tick against my window as I turn onto my other side. I've been tossing and turning for the past three hours, trying to fall asleep. Jackson's visit keeps replaying in my head. His words on a constant repeat, stuck in a loop.

Jackson. Why him? Someone I certainly did not expect to see. Someone that has sometimes crossed my mind. Mostly wondering whether I'd still recognize him. A lot has happened, events change you. I know they changed me and I'm sure they have changed him. But did I really want to know the answer to my questions? No, not at all. I was good with not seeing him. It were mostly the first few years that he was constantly on my mind, but with time passing by the memories faded and the wounds healed. Eventually Jackson was wiped from my mind completely. I was doing fine on my own. Especially the past four months, away from the life I had tried to escape. A life that I had been living for the past fourteen years. And for what? Had I really made so much of a difference? Plus, how do I know for certain that what I did was for the greater good?

The taste of blood fills my mouth when my teeth dig a little too hard into my bottom lip. Stop thinking. Just stop thinking and fall asleep. A sigh rolls over my lips as I turn around once again. The moonlight has found its way through the small gap of my curtains and as I stare at it, I know that falling asleep won't be happening anytime soon. My body might be tired, but my brain is too awake. It's racing, trying to figure out what to do.

Should I stay and go with Jackson in the morning? Or should I just pack up my things, run and hide again before he can take me back to Headquarters? If I'd run away again, they'd just keep coming after me until they catch up with me and force me to come back. The question, however, is in what state they'd bring me in. Would I still be alive? Or would they have killed me? And what is waiting for me back at Headquarters? One thing is certain, my credibility has been damaged since Peru. The change in Chief's behaviour made that clear. I can't help but wonder what he wants from me.

I press two fingers to my temple and try to push the headache away. So many questions and no answers. Sleeping has been a tough enough on its own without anyone from my past making an appearance back into my life. Nightmares have been tormenting my nights. I can't sleep, but being awake is just as much an agony. I thought university would be a good alternative. Something to keep my mind busy, but I was wrong. Being away from the job for four months has proven that it's hard to live without the thrill of the lifestyle I had been living. The job has been my life for about fourteen years. It's all I know and have ever known. Even though I've gone through traumatic experiences over the years, especially in Peru, I can't seem to completely step away from it. And I've got a feeling I will never be able to do this fully. I might have to physically step away at some point, but mentally is the hardest part.

I throw my duvet off my body and push myself up. Seated on the edge of my mattress I stare at my backpack with one question on my mind; Should I run or should I stay?

Run or stay. Run. I lift my mug up to my lips. Or stay. The coffee passes my lips as I take a sip. My eyes

wander off to my bag that's standing ready on the floor next to the table. Run or stay. It's half past four in the morning. It's still dark outside. I figured I'd just get out of bed, since I wouldn't be falling asleep anyway. I've been awake the whole night and I can say with all honesty that I hate Jackson with every fibre of my being. The love I had once felt for him has been gone for a long time and has since last night turned into newfound hatred, or perhaps it's long forgotten hatred I had hidden away in the back of my head. If it weren't for him I'd still be here, living my life without having to either run or go back to Headquarters. Would someone else have found me? Perhaps Matthew or Chief himself. But the other agents? I'd like to think not, but I'm not sure. We all received the same training, yet it still depends on the person how well they adapt to, and process, all of it. My thoughts are paused for a moment as I think the last part over.

Why am I even wasting my time thinking about all of this? What is the use of "what if"? It's a fact that Jackson was sent after me and it might've taken him a very long time to find me, he eventually *did* find me. Another fact is that I can run away and hide somewhere else, build up a new life there. I've always had a back-up plan and even a back-up for my back-up, all planned out in detail, and this time is no different. But then I'd also have to ask myself whether I'd want to run for the rest of my life? And I'm not certain the answer is yes. Perhaps that's why I've stayed in one place for so long. Perhaps I unconsciously wanted to be found?

Rain is still ticking against my windows and has gone from heavy rainfall to a light drizzle and back to a heavy rainfall throughout the night. Around three in the morning it had even started to storm, the lightning lighting up my room even further for a second or two.

The weather had seemed to be connected to my brain. The storm resembling the storm that was going on inside my head. However, the storm outside stopped eventually and the storm in my head seemed to be getting worse and worse with every passing hour.

My gaze switches from my backpack to the gun that's lying next to my mug. A weapon that's always in a close proximity to me. Another sign I can't step away from the life I've known for years on end. A gun close by and a knife hidden in its holster around my ankle or thigh. "*Always be prepared.*" echoes through my head. A sentence Chief has told me many times during my Academy years. A sentence that has repeated itself over and over wherever I was. It has helped me, kept me safe as far as that is possible with the job that had been thrown onto me when I was only eight.

Next to the gun lies the gift Jackson had thrown at me last night. I had tried to throw it away last night, but while I had held it over the bin, I couldn't uncurl my fingers from around it. Why haven't I just unwrapped it? I move my hand over and pick the package up. It's small and feels like there's not even anything in it. I push myself off my seat to pull my backpack towards me before sitting back down, hoisting the bag onto my lap. I open the front zipper and push the gift into it before closing it again and placing the bag back on the floor next to my leg.

It's time.

A drop of water falls onto the top of my head the moment I step out of the building. I look up at the place I had called home for the past four months. The lights are switched off behind all the windows, including my own. I sigh and pull the door closed behind me before turning around, only to immediately spot Jackson leaning

nonchalantly against the car. He looks up at me and a broad smile appears on his face.

‘All ready to go?’

Why is he so chipper? Perhaps he’s just glad that I didn’t pick up my stuff and disappear again before he could take me back to Headquarters. He’s lucky I don’t feel like running the rest of my life. I narrow my eyes at him and don’t answer his question as I get into the driver’s seat. ‘Uhm, I’m driving.’ Jackson protests.

‘No, you’re not, get in the car. We’re going.’ I tell him, starting the engine.

His shoulders tense up and he pushes himself away from the car, only to lean against it next to my door, slightly leaning down to look me in the eyes. ‘You look like shit. Don’t be stubborn and let me drive.’ Jackson states.

‘You don’t look very well rested yourself. Were you nervous I would slip away from under your nose?’ I mock.

Jackson pulls a face at me, which I answer with a roll of the eyes. I’ve met more mature five year olds in comparison to him. He stands up straight and walks around the car, opening the car door and moving himself into the passenger’s seat. Once he has closed his door, I push my foot down on the peddle and drive away from the parking spot. My eyes lock on the building one last time as we pass it before I take the next corner and it disappears from view.

In all honesty, I don’t want to leave this place and return to Headquarters. Even though the life I had been leading for most of my life had been quietly calling me the past few months, more often than I’d like to admit, it doesn’t mean I’d immediately want to jump back into the lifestyle I had left behind. Perhaps not because of the lifestyle, but more because of the fact I’d have to face

Chief again, after running away without a word. He had been the one to give me a chance in the Global Secret Service Organisation, the one who got me out of that horrible orphanage. The biggest part of me didn't really care, but a very small part did want to make Chief proud. It had always been my way of saying thanks to him.

'How long did you expect to be gone from the G.S.S.O.?' Jackson asks after about ten minutes of silence while we're making our way out of the city.

'Much longer than the time I've been given.'

'Are you sure? Because you didn't move out of your old flat and kept paying rent the past months.'

'A direct debit. Wouldn't want to give up such a great place, now would I?' I state. 'So that's the first place you went to look.'

'I had to check all the possibilities.' He shrugs. 'You never know with agents, they do the total opposite of what you think they'd do, but other times they do the exact thing you'd think they do, just because you think they wouldn't do the thing you think they would do. Are you still following?' he asks.

A trait he has unfortunately not lost in the time we have spent apart; trying to overcomplicate a sentence by doing what he just did. Adding as many words as he can, without it really having any meaning and therefore trying to teasingly confuse the person he's talking to. He's probably trying to ease the tension, but the only thing it's doing is annoying me.

'Yeh.' I huff annoyed.

'So I gather you weren't planning on staying away forever. You would come back eventually? Since you didn't want to give up your flat.'

'Where have you gone to look for me?' I ask, ignoring his question and changing the subject. Both because I don't know how to answer this question and

because I don't want to answer it. I'm not going to share anything with this guy, but I also don't know what I wanted. When I ran away I didn't know how long I'd be gone for and whether I'd ever want to return. I figured it would be something I'd figure out along the way. The Academy, and after that my flat, had been the only places I had called home since I became an orphan. As a secret agent you're not supposed to get attached to things, but it's hard not to when you've lost everything else in your life.

Jackson is quiet for a moment before he answers. 'Half of Europe, Peru and Singapore, you left traces everywhere but here. At some point I figured to stop going after the traces and start looking at the last place I should be looking,' he tells me, running his fingers through his hair. 'Good strategy. Do the absolute last thing we'd expect you to do. Hide right under our noses.'

'A strategy you can only use once.' I nod as I turn onto the highway.

'How did you manage to make it look like you used a fake identity to leave the country?' Jackson asks.

'That's confidential.' I tell him.

'I've been running after a ghost. How did you do it without ever leaving the country?' he insists. 'Even your face showed up on the security cameras, even though you covered it very well.'

'I'm done talking.'

'Come on-'

'I said, I'm done talking.' I snap.

Jackson shuts his mouth and turns his eyes back to the road in front of us. Does he really think I would give away my tricks. I'm not giving a masterclass in how to be a proper spy. It was really not that difficult. I hacked into the systems of necessary airports to check my fake identities in as a passenger. This way I made sure that

once they found out I was using old, fake identities, they would think I was moving around Europe, Malaysia and even going back to Peru. I'm actually quite surprised they fell for it. And the security footage was obviously tampered with. A simple adjustment, covering a woman's face with my own.

From the corner of my eye I can see Jackson opening his mouth, but soon it closes again. I turn the volume on and search for a good radio station that doesn't have static noise before turning the music slightly up to a level that it's annoying to talk.

The building and its halls are exactly the same as I had left it four months ago, unsurprisingly so. But for some reason I had been having the feeling that Headquarters would look different. Yet it does feel different being back here. Chief's office hasn't gone through any changes. Different papers are piled on his desk, but the same cup of coffee stands next to his keyboards, with once again a cookie on the saucer. Jackson eyes me and quickly looks away when I turn to face him. 'Stop staring.' I tell him.

'I wasn't.' He lies.

I roll my eyes and cross one leg over the other. Nerves are slightly numbing my fingertips, so I tap them one after the other on my leg, hoping it might help get rid of the feeling. The only times I have been nervous to meet with Chief was in my early years at the Academy and during the debriefing of my first assignment. Since then, never again. I knew what to expect and I knew I always finished the job he asked me to do. There was nothing to be nervous about. Now, however, I've done something he definitely doesn't approve of. But the feeling that I didn't really do anything wrong, and he's in the wrong right now, also moves through my body. He

gave me one month before he sent someone after me. Was it the lack of trust? Or something else?

The door behind us opens and Chief walks in. 'Celia, it's good to have you back.' he says as he walks around his desk and sits down opposite us.

'I'd like to say I feel the same, but I don't.' I state.

Chief eyes me and slowly shakes his head. 'You can't blame me for bringing you back in after you disappear without a word.'

'Disappearing without a word must've been a clear sign that I wanted to be left alone for a while.'

'We left you alone.' Chief states.

Annoyance starts to build up in the pit of my stomach as I shake my head. The nerves I had been feeling before, have completely disappeared at this point. 'For a month. You gave me one month before you sent someone after me. And best of all you sent him! Why him? You were so keen to keep us apart. Why not keep doing that now? I was perfectly fine being far away from this guy.' I say, jerking my head in Jackson's direction. 'I understand you only have a limited amount of agents at the top ranks, but come on.'

'Are you done?' Chief asks.

'I'm not sure if I am.' I state, folding my arms in front of my chest.

Chief stares at me and even though he knows I'm angry, I can see in his eyes he's glad to see me. Most of the time he's a hard man to read, but not at this moment. He isn't concealing his facial expression very well. I don't know whether he lets a bit of his guard down on purpose, in an attempt to calm me down, or whether he doesn't even notice he's playing open book. A small part of me is happy to see him too, but the anger is clouding most of that part at the moment. I'm not angry about

him needing me to come back, but about the fact that he sent, out of all the agents, Jackson after me.

'The most important part is that you're back and that we need you.' Chief eventually starts. 'We both know that if you really didn't want to return you would've run before Jackson could take you.' he continues.

A soft protest grumbles in Jackson's throat, but he wisely keeps his mouth shut and lets the comment pass. He knows better.

'Something has been happening and I need you to get on top of it.' Chief states. 'You're the best skilled agent for the task at hand.'

I press my lips into a thin line and keep quiet, waiting for him to explain what the assignment is.

'It concerns the Framboos assignment.' Chief states, handing me one of the folders on his desk before he hands the other one to Jackson. I stare at the exchange and slowly shake my head.

'Why is he getting information?' I ask, not sure whether I'll like the answer.

'Because he's going with you.' Chief informs me.

I quickly shake my head. 'Oh no, no, no, no. I'm not going on a mission with him. I do *not* need a bloody babysitter. Chief, you know I only work alone!'

'I also know that we almost lost you the previous time I sent you out on this kind of assignment. I know you're very capable of finishing an assignment on your own. Your success rate is a perfect 100 percent, but that doesn't mean it can't go wrong at some point. Since this assignment might be very dangerous, I'd rather have someone go with you.'

'You don't trust me and that's the problem. You didn't think twice about sending me out alone on the Ananas assignment even though two of our top agents