

Mathilde Cognot

THE MIST WILL
SCREAM

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English translation of the original French edition: *La Brume Crieria*

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*In memory of those whose voices were silenced.
To those who sometimes watch the world pass them by.
And to those who will one day learn to forgive themselves.*

This is a work of fiction.

*Though it draws on fragments of the real, its characters,
situations, and events have been freely reimagined.*

Nothing here is entirely true.

Nothing is entirely invented.

[Cognitive Safety Notice & Risk Assessment]

As a cognitive services clinic, we take great pride in protecting the mental wellbeing of our patients.

This novel contains themes that may be harmful to it, and which you might wish to be informed of.

If, like one of our operators, you'd rather charge in headfirst and regret it later, we wish you a pleasant read. The wiser among you will find the list of relevant subjects below.

With our sincerest regards,
The PCSG

- Non-consensual medical experimentation
- Psychological breakdown
- Suicide (mentioned)
- Torture
- Sex (not depicted)
- Child abuse (psychological)

Author's note

In Thai romanization, an H following a consonant doesn't mark a separate sound and is silent, So PH is a P sound (Phayak: "Pa-yak"); KH is a K sound (Khun: "koon"); LH is closer to a hard L (Lhongkhwan : "Long-kwan,"); etc.

In Thai, certain titles precede a person's first name to signal age, respect, and closeness:

- Phi ("older brother"/"older sister") is used to address someone older. It's a very common term of affection and politeness between friends, colleagues, or loved ones.
- Nong ("younger brother"/"younger sister") is used in return, to address someone younger.
- Khun is a neutral, polite form of address, equivalent to "Mr." or "Ms.", used in more formal settings or with strangers.

Following this same relational logic, it's also customary to address people of an older generation as "uncle" or "aunt", even with no blood relation at all.

Thai people rarely use their official first name in daily life. From birth, parents give their child a very short nickname — a Thai or English word evoking an animal, an object, or a quality. It's by this nickname that a person introduces themselves and is addressed in everyday life.

Beep
The color blue.

Beep

Beep

Doctor

How is he doing?

What's happening?

Beep

Nok, can you hear that?

Beep

Doctor?

My head aches...

Nok?

Beep

The color blue.

Beep

Can he read?

My head is going to explode.

Mom!

Beep

What's wrong?

Nok, blue.

Beep

Stop!

[Prologue]

GOOD EVENING, EVERYONE, WELCOME! Lhongkhwan here, and I am super hyped to have you join me in this forest that, in theory, isn't gonna be our final destination tonight. Well, assuming the little critters you can maybe hear through the mic let me get out of here. Not sure if you can pick them up, but there's honestly a lot of noise around me right now. The wind's probably trying to scare me too. Nice try, but it's got nothing on my manager's voice. Heh! You guys ready? Okay, while I make my way closer: roll the intro!

Those of you following me on Instagram already know this, but for this month's first exploration, I went and got myself lost somewhere up north to dig up a killer new site for you all, and you can already see it right behind me. If I flip the camera around, you can... there we go: you can see it's actually in pretty good shape, and there's a reason for that, which is, I'm trying to breathe carefully so you might not be able to tell, but this visit has to be earned. The air is just... suffocating, the wind's completely useless here, it's ridiculously hot, 31°C: hiking up a mountain in this season was not one of my best ideas. This hospital's been standing for two centuries, but I'm still really hoping we don't get a storm tonight, you never know.

Oh! Didn't even think of this, but if there's a storm, I literally cannot get back: I am not walking back through this whole forest in a thunderstorm.

Well... Heh-heh. Then again, there are probably worse ways to die. Heh-heh! Okay, I stop, I'm genuinely going to rot my own karma at this rate, and I know you guys hate that.

So, tonight's lineup: you all know the tradition by now: first exploration of the month means *horror stories*! I've got three ready for you tonight, all fitting the theme, the vibe of this place. I'll walk you through its history as we go, like always. Also, in a few of the rooms, the production team set up some little surprises during their scouting run this afternoon, and obviously I wasn't with them, otherwise what's the point?

Actually, you can probably already tell, because right now you're looking at what you think is a nice guy giving you the full building tour, when really, you're looking at a lost guy who can't even find the front door. Did I come from the back? They tried to lose me on purpose? Or maybe, five years into urbex, we're finally discovering I have zero sense of direction.

Please, burn a stick of incense for me if I don't make it back... Oh! There we go!

Whoa... I saw this in the photos! Check it out, the tiger carved above the door. It's gorgeous. Okay, a little creepy at night, with my headlamp really bringing out all the little details.

I've kept you waiting long enough, let's finally go find out what's hiding behind this door, and, more importantly, what kind of spirits live here. Oh? Didn't mention that part yet? Heh! You all comfy? Having a nice night? Great! But how much longer?

[Nathasit Worakamthorn – Nox]
 [Heart rate: 75 bpm]
 [Brainwave activity: Teta (θ) prolonged – Unstable]
 [Affective profile: Serotonergic hypoactivity]
 (Depressive episode coming on?)
 [Observation: Is a bird born without wings still a bird?]

SMOKE ALWAYS FADES IN THE END. No matter how big the fire. Its heat, its light, the cause and the fallout... in the end, it disappears. Always. And then it falls to us to deal with what it leaves behind. Rubble to clear, ashes to scatter, a butt to toss.

The tip of the cigarette still glows in the night, a star among the survivors. More visible, easier to reach. It lets out a slow curl, graceful in its curves. A ribbon that spawns tendrils, coiling in on themselves until they vanish. No matter how hard it climbs toward the sky, it always fades away in the end.

I blow on it gently, just to watch it dance, then bring the filter to my lips for another drag. The little orange star flares, releases the ash it had been holding onto for the last few minutes, lets it drop off the balcony. As for me, I wait a beat, then let the smoke drift up toward the sky.

I turn my back to the railing, my elbows settling into their spot again, then tip my head back to watch it dissolve. In these last hours of the night, with the timid glow of a sun that will soon bless us with its rays, the smoke blends into the clouds.

Two hours—if anything, that’s an underestimate. After all, the rainy season is running late this year. It shouldn’t be much longer now, but for the moment the thermometer stubbornly refuses to drop, won’t even flirt with the dreaded number, condemning us to this sticky heat.

Not that it’ll make much difference in a few weeks. The air will still cling to our skin, the humidity will still make bodies glisten, and it’ll grate on our nerves just the same. The boss and the rest of them are hoping this season—running so late—will finally calm us both down. Well. I’d love to see that. That idiot loves the rainy season, so maybe he’ll be in a better mood. And it would’ve stayed my favorite season too, if it hadn’t been his. Still, in their shoes, I wouldn’t count on the clouds to work any miracles.

A smirk tugs at my mouth. Why? There’s no one here to impress. No one to manipulate. Nothing to hide.

Reflex. Muscle memory. We’re talking about work, about the chance of running into other human beings, so I’ll need to put on a good face. My lips are warming up, in a manner of speaking.

What kind of contract will they hand us today? Something tells me it’ll be interesting. I hope so. I need something to take my mind off things, to burn off some steam.

Suddenly, a single knock lands inside my skull, forcing my head down. Paradoxically, my smile widens. And widens further the moment I notice it. I’m a well-oiled machine. For it to go so far as to try to lie to me, to watch this kind of reaction show up without ever having asked my body for it, I think I can safely say it won’t betray me.

That, too, I’m sick of.

I sigh, glancing down at my cigarette. Still smoking, more ash now than anything left to burn. The little star keeps

glowing, the silvery ribbon keeps rising, twisting, fading. I flick it with my index finger over the void to knock off the excess, bring the filter to my mouth, and take another drag—longer this time.

Fuck. All it took was thinking about that idiot for my heart to speed up. I slept like shit. And why is it speeding up, anyway? Fear? Ha! I'll reach Nirvana before he manages to make me so much as flinch. Anxiety? Anxious about what, exactly?

It's still in my head.

It's *always* in my head.

Another knock, a bit softer this time, no less unpleasant. I'm guessing cigarettes alone won't cut it today.

I don't want to...

What if I'm not even working today? If I'm not working today, my head can go ahead and act up all it wants, right? No harm done.

Another sigh. Another drag. The glowing ring creeps down to the filter. I hold this last pull a little longer than the others, savor it, breathe it out carefully as the butt rolls between my fingers before I stub it out against the warm metal of the railing. One last thread of smoke rises, then dies.

Like always.

I pull my hood down to look at the sky one more time. With magnificent bad grace, I peel my back off the railing and head inside. Whether or not they hand me something serious today, I still have to show my face at the office. And I don't even know what I'm hoping for. Real work, something to keep me moving, distract me, clear out the cloud that's been taking up more and more space in my head this week—or something quiet, a couple of administrative odds and ends to knock out before I spend the rest of the day pretending to work. As boring

as it is, the second option would be kinder to the poor brain I'm already putting through enough.

Even though my last dose is starting to wear thin, any doctor would tell me it's still too recent—right before strapping me to a hospital bed to keep an eye on me and, more importantly, protect me from my own recklessness, since I'm still a thirty-year-old kid who won't listen to common sense until karma proves him wrong.

Back in my room, I open the closet, size up the hangers and shelves for a few seconds. In my head, my downstairs neighbor's grating voice cuts the debate short. *Thirty-six degrees again today. A little more breathing room before the monsoon—always nice! This year's a good year!*

I nod, as if she could see me—pure reflex more than actual agreement—as if she were talking to me. No, she's just some old lady thinking too loud, like all old folks, who've stopped caring about anything.

Her point still stands, though. Today calls for a tank top, shorts, and sandals. If they don't like it—and there's at least one person who won't—or if the job demands otherwise, I'll go change. That's exactly what the “decent” outfit sitting in my locker is for.

Shirtless in the middle of the room, a new thought stops me cold. *Coffee*. A masculine feel to it, exhaustion, irritation. A man who has to get to work early, didn't sleep enough, and is running so late he has to choose between showing up on time or giving in to his caffeine craving.

I could almost believe that one was mine. I know for a fact it isn't. It feels older, a voice I don't hear but feel. Deeper, too. Besides, I'm sure that in his head, the thought had been complete. Still, it's not a bad idea.

I throw my shirt on in a hurry, circle around the bed to grab my phone off the nightstand, still tethered to its charger, tap out a quick message asking Sean to grab me a coffee before heading to the office. He'll grumble, but he'll do it. I unplug the phone, shove it in my pocket, and head to the bathroom to grab my EchoVx spray.

Even though I haven't touched it in a while, I find it right where I expect—behind the mirror over the sink. I can afford to lose almost anything except that. I pick up the little cone-topped bottle, roll it in my palm. My eyes skim over the blue and red name, then the small black print detailing the product. They don't really read it. They don't need to. I know it by heart. I could probably recite it. I bring the medication up to my face, rest the plastic cone and its rubber tip against my cheek, a couple of inches from my nose, and just stay like that. The man trapped in the mirror holds my gaze, challenges me, questions me.

Spray it? Not spray it?

Then a more hostile face slides in front of my eyes. Just as hostile as it is familiar. Hair darker than mine, barely shorter but perfectly tamed to clear his forehead. Sharper bones—doesn't matter which ones: jaw, brow, collarbones. Everything about him is too well-drawn, and that's exactly what makes him so insufferable. Nothing to do with jealousy! His face, his body, radiate just as much discipline as his whole presence does. That's the unbearable part. He looks like exactly what he is. And what he is, is detestable. I'm decent at biology, not so much at math, but this equation isn't hard to work out.

And his eyes... right now, they're laughing at me. Too light for someone so grim. And they carry that spark. That spark that belongs to me.

Oh, for fuck's sake! Of course it belongs to me, because I'm the one glaring at myself. I'm still staring at my own reflection. That image that had started grating on my nerves... it's in my head.

It'll always be in my head.

Why don't you just quit your job? ask the two chocolate-brown eyes still boring into me.

Because I can't. And as much as I hate that man from the deepest part of my being, he could never be reason enough. Never.

I've barely felt the rubber tip slide down my cheek when the crash of glass against tile yanks me out of my daydreaming for good. Shit. Thank god those bottles are sturdy. It bounces three times before rolling to a stop against my foot. I sigh and pick it up. No scratches, on inspection. I've got a spare, a third one at the office, and I'm not even planning to use it today anyway, but still.

One last glance at the reflection in the mirror before I turn away. I'm going to make myself late with this bullshit.

In the elevator, I press the button meant to take me down to the ground floor, but the metal box stops one floor short, letting in a man probably not much younger than me. I don't know my neighbors. He checks the buttons ringed in red LEDs, likely notices the ground floor one is already lit, then buries his hands in the pockets of his jean shorts. The doors have barely closed when I hear him think: *Remember to buy more cat food for Sunny*. A flicker of stress, a hazy but recognizable shape of a cat—white or ginger, something light-colored anyway. And it's only when I catch myself trying to focus, trying to get to the bottom of it, that I fully register the problem.

I need to make this stop.

If it's starting like this first thing in the morning, this intrusively, every single time I pass someone—this day is going to be hell.

I fill my lungs with air and push it back out through my nose. Goddammit.

In my pocket, my fist closes around the glass bottle, already warmed by my body heat. I wait for the elevator to reach the ground floor, let my fellow passenger step out first, then head for the glass door marking the building's entrance. Crossing the lobby, I bring the plastic cone to my nose, quickly spray a puff into each nostril, as discreetly as I can. The mint smell is strong but not unpleasant; the product does sting the membranes, though. I sniff, pressing my thumb against each nostril in turn to settle the corrosive tingling.

My eyes blink, snap me back to the present, and the smirk finds its place at the corner of my mouth again.

Here we go.

[Sorawat Dechakorn – Tawin]
 [Heart rate: 61 bpm]
 [Brainwave activity: Alpha (α) – Stable]
 [Affective profile: Synaptic silence]
 (Just the calm.)
 [Observation: My humanity as offering]

SLENDER THREADS OF SILVER already rise from the stone basin standing before the entrance, carrying the sweet incense scent of the sticks that give birth to them, along with the merit and prayers of those who lit them. My thumb spins the wheel of the lighter left out for visitors, sets my own stick alight, and plants it in the sand among the others.

I set my sandals down on the stone slabs, already warm underfoot, slowly, careful to preserve the silence and harmony of the place. This silence I breathe in. The unearthly calm that has wrapped around me since I arrived, as it does nearly every day. The city is not awake enough yet to disturb it. Only the murmur of the river flowing a few meters away, and the monks' chanting drifting out through some window, keep it company.

There are feelings only temples can give us. A moment of serenity in the middle of the chaos. Golden sanctuaries where even thoughts come as whispers. The monks carry a strength I have stopped searching for in myself but still envy in them. They do not seem to carry the smallest trace of hatred,

of anger, of frustration. They have mastered their hearts and their minds. Do they even have to work at it anymore? Is it humanly possible to reach and hold onto that kind of stillness? They must understand something that still escapes me. Something that may escape me forever.

I step through the painted door, set with intricate gold patterns, into the prayer hall. The black marble is smooth beneath my bare feet. It throws my reflection back at me, as if the Buddha's gaze alone were not enough.

It is not.

To reach Enlightenment, Nirvana, we first have to face our own reflection. The Buddha is not here to save us. Only to guide us along a path we have to walk alone. There is nothing we can hand off to someone else—least of all our survival, or our salvation. However venerable he may be, the Buddha is no exception.

I move first toward the young monk, shaven-headed, dressed in his orange robe, sitting on the wooden bench along the wall. I press my palms together and bow my head low to greet him. He smiles back at me. A gentle smile carrying a kindness that feels almost inhuman, the kind only monks seem able to give. More than a silent blessing, he looks genuinely happy to see me so devoted. There are few days when the monks of Wat Yannawa, the ship temple, do not see me come through. It is always a real joy for them to welcome visitors, regulars or not, Thai or tourist. They do not care how strong our faith is, our presence always means something. A longing for knowledge, for peace... The monks will always be glad to walk beside us a few steps of the way.

I move on toward the altar now. Among the bundles of flowers, offerings already sit in place. The candles are lit.

Behind them, five statues keep watch. Covered in gold leaf that catches the light from the bulbs hanging overhead, seated cross-legged in the lotus position, crowned, they watch over the room. The first, the smallest, is barely visible among the flowers. Two others, identical but slightly larger, flank a fourth, larger still. Towering above them all, seated on a mountain of red and blue cushions and a carpet of golden lotus, sits the Buddha in majesty, the embodiment of sovereign wisdom.

I stand before them, press my palms together, then lower my knees to the ground to prostrate myself, arms outstretched, palms open to the sky. I hold the position a few seconds, rise, then start again. Three times. Homage to the Buddha, to the Dharma—his teaching—and to the Sangha—the community of monks. That done, my body draws a deep breath, steps back a few paces, sits down cross-legged, exhales.

My first intentions, my merit, I dedicate to those whose thoughts I have brushed against. Whatever they were.

For a long time, I questioned whether I even had the right to come to this place alone. With the family who raised me, visits to the temple were, and still are, simply a given. The same goes for the Muay Thai teacher who watched me grow up. As if being surrounded by others could shield me, or give me an excuse.

Alone, I am exposed.

So, because that is what I was raised to do, as if to ease a conscience I do not feel suffering, I dedicate what little good energy I have in me to them.

That is probably where the heaviest of my contradictions lies: doing all of this, wishing people well with as much coldness as sincerity, all while filling contracts on the wrong side of the law without a single concern beyond making sure

the job runs smoothly. I could turn it over in my head every morning, see the absurdity of that split clearly, and somehow it still does not ring false to me. Not false enough to break the habit, or to stir up any guilt.

After all, I am built for this. Literally. My brain's biology is so stable, so capable, that I was made aware very early on of what my neural cells could offer as regulatory donors. In other words, my brain naturally produces the signals needed to keep a recipient's mind in balance. Good for a few extra karma points, I suppose. Set against the doctors' explanations, the donation felt less like a moral choice and more like simple logic.

So for nearly a decade now, I have been donating neurobiological derivatives—neural cultures grown from my own cells—meant for producing various treatments. Treatments used to regulate people's minds through periods of weakness. A telepathic reading that is too faint to make sense of, or missing altogether, or, on the other end, one so overwhelming it becomes intrusive.

Every coin has its other side.

In much the same way, my *career path* presented itself as a foregone conclusion. Making the most of this innate quality, the discipline instilled by unyielding parents, and everything martial arts taught me. My place was always going to be there, at one of the two best cognitive services firms in Thailand.

Brain chemistry built to decode other people's with unusual ease, combat skills, a memory that will not let go of scientific theory... all the cards were dealt to me before I even learned the rules of the game.

Still, claiming they added up to some unchangeable destiny would be a lie. This world drew me in, and it still does. Maybe

one day I will understand why, despite being raised so well, fate pushed me down such a shadowed path.

What kind of contract will I get handed today? Not all of them come with the promise of a prison stay if the police happen to catch me at work. I might even end up lending them a hand. Would not be the first time. Maybe I will just be sent to check on yesterday's job? I do not see the point, but it would not be unreasonable to send me to oversee the extraction, keep an eye on the patient's condition, then report back to the boss. Not exactly thrilling, but it has happened before. Either way, I would take that over administrative busywork any day. That kind of thing, I would rather just tear through on my own time and be done with it.

Get a grip. You are not at work yet. Focus.

One of the most valuable things about temples is how completely they cut us off from everything else. From the world and its madness, its fervor, the humans who trample through it. Here, none of that exists. Just the statues, the monks, the flowers, the smell of incense, and us.

Terrifying for some. A relief for others.

I do not fall into either category. It is just that this is the only place I can find real peace. It does not give me much—just a breath of air, permission to set my thoughts down, when they are not clinging on the way they are this morning.

A lump forms in my throat, lodges itself there, sends a wave of prickling up through my sinuses, my nose, my eyes. It happens sometimes. As if to keep it company, a hazy scene surfaces, an ochre wash of color, the impression of a cold, filthy storage shed, right there, behind the main house, in the inner courtyard...

I swallow it all back down, breathe in, open my eyes but keep them fixed on the marble floor and the reflections of the

lamps and candles it throws back. Even though I come to kneel at their feet every day, I cannot bring myself to lift my eyes to the Buddhas. Some kind of shame, though I could not tell exactly where it comes from.

I focus on my breathing, the rise of my ribcage as the sweet incense brushes against my nostrils. I let the scent sink in for a few more seconds, unfold my legs, just long enough to get back on my feet before prostrating myself once more. Once again, I bow to the monk, then leave the hall.

The sky is already brightening, the city stirring awake. Before long, the temple's paths will fill with children playing, the clink of coins dropped for the old women at their rice stalls, the footsteps of tourists.

My sandals find their way back onto my feet, my eyes lingering a second on the incense stick I planted ten or twenty minutes ago.

In the parking lot, I open my car door to find my pack of cigarettes, which I tuck away once the cigarette is between my lips. I close the door and lean back against the car, digging through my pants pocket for my lighter. My thumb spins the wheel, the flame catches, and the tobacco lights.

I hold the smoke for a moment, then release it, my eyes never leaving the small white pebbles scattered across the ground, blurred behind the smoke before it fades away.

More than usual, I find myself longing for a quiet day.

[Nathasit Worakamthorn – Nox]
[Heart rate: 87 bpm]
[Brainwave activity: Mu (μ) – Suppressed]
[Affective profile: Empathic atrophy]
(Stay lucid to compensate.)
[Observation: The ferret and the cobra]

IT WAS DECREED, somewhere in the laws of the universe, that I would never once manage to arrive early. Not by so much as a single minute. An unshakable rule, carved in stone on some other plane of existence, one nobody will ever get a handle on. I can lie there in bed doing absolutely nothing, fully ready, burn hours scrolling through social media just to time my departure early to some appointment: I will still, without fail, arrive—if not late—exactly on the dot. And having someone with me changes nothing. They can drag me by the arm hard enough to yank it out of its socket, and they'll still fall victim to my curse right along with me. Or some force bigger than us mere mortals will find a way to split us up so they show up on time without me. A packed elevator that forces me to wait for the next one, a red light that lets them through but stops me cold...

Can two humans exist on the same spatial plane without being bound by the same rules of time? Nothing has ever disproved that theory, and today is no exception.

“If you’re gonna whine about your coffee being cold, fair warning, I will wash your hair with it!”

“Nice to see you too, Sean!”

He fires off his threat before I’ve even got a foot through the door of the open-plan office.

There’s about ten of us sharing this room, all field agents. So it’s rare to catch the whole team in one place. Even so, we’d never be tripping over each other. The boss didn’t cram his employees into some filthy broom closet, not even the ones who barely show their faces around here. May karma repay him for that. This morning, there are only four empty seats. For now, mine is one of them. So is the cyborg’s.

I give his desk a passing glance as I cross the room toward my own spot, between Sean and the big window already gone monochrome blue, and drop into the leather chair with zero restraint, hard enough that the wheels carry me straight into the wall a few inches behind.

Sean pushes his glasses up with his middle finger and, with a jerk of his chin, points me toward the steaming cup sitting next to my keyboard. He doesn’t take his eyes off me as I take a sip... lukewarm. Or rather, not nearly hot enough. Beggars can’t be choosers, so I take a few gulps anyway.

In the corner of my eye, Sean’s brow furrows the second I turn away to dodge any contact. No need to spell it out, he’s already figured it out. “You’re unbelievable...” he sighs.

“I didn’t say anything!”

“*Nos*, you’re way too loud for a guy who’s supposed to be keeping a low profile,” Meena calls from across the room.

Like most Thais who’ve never left the country, not used to foreign sounds, Meena’s never once managed to say my name right. As long as it comes out mangled like that, I’m not going

to correct her. Busy tapping away at her own keyboard, she doesn't even bother looking up. Already got some urgent little task to knock out this early in the morning?

I raise my voice to answer her. Not that I need to, she certainly didn't. "I've got no reason to keep a low profile, I haven't done anything wrong!" I lose interest in her and go back to my coffee.

"Being late? The way you're dressed?" ventures Gyoza's voice, Meena's deskmate and partner in crime.

I stick my tongue out at her. "You two aren't exactly dressed to impress either. And besides, the rule is: if I get there before that one, I'm not late."

Sean cracks up before I've even finished the sentence. "Ha! You'll beat him there the day he drops dead in his sleep!"

"Don't get my hopes up. Has the boss already handed out assignments?"

I catch Meena's red lips parting to answer, but my deskmate beats her to it. "Nope, hasn't come by yet."

Good, then. The guy I was hoping to avoid isn't here, and the boss won't be giving me one of his quick little lectures either. It's been a long time since he's bothered scolding me properly. We've both figured out it wouldn't do any good. I do my job, deliver great results, to the point that exactly one other agent can claim to match my efficiency; as far as our boss is concerned, that's all that matters.

If nobody's asked us for anything yet, I'll go check the usual administrative odds and ends and wait around, counting flies, until something actually happens.

Just as my finger's about to tap the power button on my computer, Sean's voice stops me cold. "Right, well, we did see him for a second. When he came to grab you and Tawin to

hand out your assignments. Or, well, your assignment. But since you weren't here, Tawin went off without you."

"You've got to be kidding me!" I shoot up so fast my chair rockets backward into the wall.

"Nox! Keep it down, you are in a place of business."

The look I'm giving Sean turns darker. I bite my lip before a nervous laugh manages to drag my smirk back into place, then turn around. Just from the way he spits out my name—with perfect pronunciation, no less—I know exactly who owns the voice that just barked the order, no need to ask.

Tawin stands there, framed in the doorway, between the panes of smoked glass. Shoulders squared to perfection under his shirt, chin raised, disapproval written all over his face. Big as the room is, the distance between us doesn't stop that spark of his from reaching me. Even from here, the clarity of his eyes clashes hard with the cold set of his features and his all-black outfit.

I shove my fists into my pockets and stroll toward him, easy and unbothered. He crosses his arms, broadening his frame. Whenever he does that, it feels like he's digging our height difference in deeper. Cheeky, I run my tongue over the teeth my smile is showing him. "So you were actually expecting we'd work together?"

"After your little scene yesterday, you could have expected the same."

I laugh, mostly to cover how much this is grating on me. Who the hell does he think he is?

Runt. Useless. Liability.

He has no idea he's sending me these fragments of thought. I didn't ask for them either. They tighten my chest, my heart kicks into gear as I try, badly, to hold back the anger

already starting to boil. *My* little scene yesterday. As if he hadn't had a hand in it too.

After one last click of her mouse, Meena spins her chair around to face me. "Seriously? The boss nearly took a punch meant for him" She nods toward Tawin. "And you thought you'd just walk away from that? Count yourself lucky you're not suspended, or fired."

I raise an eyebrow and shoot her a sly grin. "He can't fire me."

"It is nice to have connections in this society," Tawin fires back.

"You little—"

I barely cover the two meters between us to grab him by the collar before, in the blink of an eye, he pulls a silver knife from his pocket, flicks the blade open, and has it pressed under my chin before its click even reaches my ears.

"Do not finish that sentence, and let go of me." His voice, low, articulates every word, giving his threat the full weight of his resolve.

Locked into his stare, I clench my teeth, fist still bunched in the fabric of his shirt. The cold press of metal against my skin sharpens, and so does my smile. I breathe out at him, "Go ahead."

"Guys..." Gyoza's whisper struggles to cut through the thick silence that only the mice and the clatter of keyboards had dared to break until now. Tawin doesn't seem to be paying it any attention, though, so neither do I.

"Nox!"

I shove the cyborg off me. Without losing his footing, he steps back, eyes never leaving mine. I press my palms together in a quick *wai* to greet our boss as his silhouette pulls itself out

of the smoked glass and materializes in the doorway. “Mr. Phayak.”

The other idiot wants to believe I got in here on connections? Then why is it always my name they shout when it’s time to break up a fight?

Because he knows how to control himself. Because he’s manageable. Because he doesn’t lose it like this. Chaos can only come from some hot-headed guy running on instinct, incapable of thinking for even a split second, letting his emotions dictate his every move. That’s my whole problem, right there: having emotions. Not being some goddamn robot.

The boss’s stare sharpens. Yes, I’m late. Yes, I’m at it again with my coworker. No, I won’t be apologizing for it.

I dig through my shorts pocket for my lighter, start spinning it in my palm, thumb toying with the wheel with no intention of ever striking a flame. “You’d need me, Mr. Phayak.”

“Come with me. Both of you.”

The reproach loaded in his eyes isn’t reserved for me alone. He turns to Tawin, takes his time handing him a full share of it too, then turns on his heel and heads back down the hallway. With a sharp jerk of my chin, I order the cyborg to go ahead of me. He holds my gaze in silence for a beat before complying.

We take the elevator up to the tenth floor, one level above ours, cross the hallway, and step through the last door. I close it behind me and take my place next to my colleague, hands in my pockets.

“Today, the two of you will bring me a man.” Mr. Phayak walks around his desk, sits down, opens a drawer, and pulls out a black folder that he drops onto the glass tabletop. “He resigned from his law firm without any clear reason. His

former superiors are worried he might be selling sensitive data. Your job is to get your hands on him and bring him back to the clinic so our doctors can extract the engrams and any other memory imprints that could harm the client.”

I nod vaguely. In the corner of my eye, Tawin dips his head.

“Your target has no idea he’s being looked for, and we have no reason to think he’s left the capital. So I want him in our building before tonight.”

How thoughtful of him. Does he even know how big the capital is? Anyway, if he’s right and the guy’s got no clue, we could easily just grab him at his place. Which brings me to my question: why the two of us? If it’s really that simple, might as well dump it all on the other guy and be done with it. I know I wanted some action today, but if it means having him on my back, I’d rather hand him the whole thing.

“You’re not exactly in a position to negotiate, Nox.”

A joyless smirk twitches at the corner of my mouth, my whole body locking up. I didn’t think that out loud, though. Did I? No, I’m sure I didn’t. And I don’t feel like I let my guard down either. He—

“No, you didn’t leave your mind open: it’s written all over your face.”

It annoys me as much as it reassures me.

“My apologies, boss. But if it’s really that simple, why do we need two of us on it?” I point a finger at my coworker. “And with him, of all people! Who messed with your brain hard enough that you’d even consider this a good idea for one second? Are you testing some new drug and the lab boys are going to have to add ‘dementia’ to the list of side effects?”

His eyes darken and his features harden as his brow furrows. “I’m too soft on you, Nox. I let you get away with a

lot, but just like my patience has its limits, your insubordination should have its own too. Am I clear enough?”

With a cynical little laugh, I look away, then, after a moment, dip my head, mumbling out an apology with no warmth and no conviction behind it.

“Adults call that a punishment,” Tawin answers.

“I heard adults know how to stay in their lane, so why are you still talking?”

“Enough! Put that energy toward actually working. Now.”

Tawin bows his head immediately, steps forward to grab the folder off the desk, and turns on his heel without so much as glancing at it. With another cynical snort, I roll my eyes and follow him out, no longer giving our boss a second thought.

Fuck, what a pain in the ass. So we’re actually going to work together, then? And him? He’s just going to accept that, no questions asked? He’s really that obedient?

Some reflex I can’t explain stops me right before I plow into him. He’s frozen in the middle of the hallway.

“Watch it, damn it!”

He turns and holds up the black folder in his hand. His stare could kill. “Fair warning: I was hoping for a quiet day. I will accept you tagging along, since apparently I have no say in it. I will not even ask you to make yourself useful. Just try not to get in my way and keep quiet.”

I grit my teeth. Oh, you have got to be kidding me.

Breathe. *Calm down.* The boss’s office is only a few feet away, *don’t do anything stupid.*

He’s still watching me, unreadable, frozen solid like a block of ice. Clearly the same block his heart was carved out of. “How do you keep a job with a mind that unstable? Is it as uncontrollable as you are?” That calm, level voice of his. He’s not threatening me, not mocking me: he’s stating facts. More

than facts: truths. The kind everyone in humanity agrees on, the kind only an idiot would have the nerve to question.

And what is he even talking about? What did he hear? I didn't... Could he be right? I didn't feel myself lose control.

No... It's the resonance. I need to grit my teeth. Not respond. My ego is cursing me out, but letting Tawin suspect the truth would be catastrophic.

Did he say *uncontrollable*? I heard *unstable*. Just picturing that word a second time sends an icy line running down my spine, wakes up a shiver crawling across my back. I keep my joints in check, stop my shoulders from rolling to shake it off. He can't see that he's rattled me. Maybe he already knows. Impossible to read it on his face. I'm not going to risk digging through his skull right this second.

I am not unstable.

I lift my chin, a provocative smile on my lips. "If we don't do it together, who's going to know?"

He doesn't answer immediately. Is he actually considering it?

"I would know. And thinking no one out there is keeping an eye on us is pathetically naive. That said, if we decide to split up to cover more ground, feel free to take the initiative and go home. You can go bury yourself in your own stupidity alone."

I cross my arms and spit a disdainful little laugh at him. "Hah! So I let you take all the credit. Once again, you come back with a job well done, one more shine on that already dazzling record of yours."

Speaking of shine, that spark in his eyes just lit up. Why, again? Is he making fun of me? Do I annoy him more than usual today?

At least he will not be holding me back, his voice thinks in my head. I catch my reaction just in time. I wasn't supposed to hear that one. My body flinches, but no comment makes it past my lips.

"Fine. If you think you can outdo me, how about proving it? It is not insubordination if I am challenging you to bring the target back before I do."

He thinks I'm a kid. No need to poke around in his head for this one: that kind of childishness isn't like him. He thinks he's better than everyone else and wouldn't waste his time proving the obvious. He just wants to get rid of me. Wound my ego, find some distraction that'll force me to give him space.

My eyes narrow, daring him, my smile widens, provoking him back. "You want to play? Let's play. And you're going to regret it."

You have no idea how big a mistake it is to underestimate me. I woke up in a foul mood today, my own body forced a dose of medicine on me, I barely slept, my coffee's lukewarm, and you're going to look down on me? Fine.

Tawin takes a step back. With one hand he opens the folder, with the other he pulls his phone from his pocket. Just long enough to snap a photo of the first page before shoving the folder into my arms. "You have held us up enough already."

Nose buried in the documents, I pretend not to watch him as he walks off. The elevator's already there, doors sliding open the moment his finger asks them to. He throws me one last look and steps inside. The doors close. So does the folder.

"Sure. Hurry up and find him."

I pick up the pace, call a second elevator, and hit the button for the ninth floor. Back in the field agents' office, I

cross the room without giving my coworkers a second glance and slam the back door shut behind me. For the sake of efficiency, the locker room's attached right there. I open my locker and swap my tank top for a black shirt, my shorts for pants of the same shade, my sandals for a pair of polished shoes—less comfortable, but they won't hold me back as much.

A glance at the folder: perfect, this is an official assignment. I can strap on my service belt.

With a practiced flick, my thumb releases the safety holding my gun in place while I pull it free from its leather holster. I stand up on my toes to reach the top shelf of my locker, pull down a cardboard box, load up enough rounds to fill the chamber, then put both the rest of the stock and my weapon back where they belong.

"What's going on? Some kind of disaster? Are we finally gonna see what Bangkok looks like under snow?" Sean calls out the moment he sees me reappear.

His comment earns him a smack upside the head.

"Ouch!"

"You busy? Come with me."

He leans back in his chair, arms crossed. "Yeah, I've got stuff to do."

"I'll buy you a meal and the beers that go with it," I offer.

"That can wait." He gets up, kills his monitor, and follows me out of the room.

We head back down the hall to the elevators and wait for one to open its doors. There are cameras inside, but we'll still be safer in there than out in the hallway. Security footage is only useful if someone actually watches it; as far as I know, nobody's getting paid to sit around staring at screens, spying on what goes on inside those metal boxes.

“What do you need from me? So you’re really going to team up with Tawin, huh? Well, I guess it’s not like the boss gave you much choice.”

I press the button that’ll take us down to the ground floor and lean back against the rail running along the wall. “Something like that.”

“I don’t like that smile. You’re gonna let him do all the work without lifting a finger and you think he’s just gonna let you take a cut of the credit without a fight?”

“He won’t get a say in it, the punishment’s his too. And he’s got too much pride to go crying to the boss like some kid. But who said I wasn’t going to do anything?”

“I’ll say it again: I don’t like your smile, and I don’t like your eyes. You genuinely look unhinged right now. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

He drags a laugh out of me, at least half genuine. “I know, feels like I’ve heard you say that more often than a mantra by now. For now, just keep an eye on Dr. Apsara for me. Okay? Nothing too complicated. She just needs to stay put at the clinic, we need to be able to reach her.”

Sean nods, thoughtful. When our little metal cocoon lets us out, we walk side by side down the hall. Once we hit the lobby, right as our paths are about to split, I put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back a second longer. “Oh, and—no, I promise, nothing dangerous is going to happen to her.” I let go, take a step, then my hand finds his shoulder again. “And, yeah, if something does go wrong, it’s on me, and you never heard a word about any of this.”

“Better believe it!”

“I’ll call you.”

He nods. After a friendly pat on the shoulder, I keep

heading toward the automatic doors at the entrance while he veers right, toward the clinic's waiting room.

In my phone's contacts, I find the name I'm looking for, but wait until I'm sitting behind the wheel of my car, door shut, before holding it up to my ear.

He's going to regret not slitting my throat earlier.

"Dr. Way? You remember you owe me a favor?"

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