

Alex pulled into the parking lot in front of the small building that housed his office and looked around. Three company trucks sat to the side, only one was out today, as he had figured, doing routine rounds only he hoped. The only one scheduled for today was Matt who hadn't stayed at the party long. He rarely did. Alex was glad that most of his crew stayed out of the social scene, kept to themselves if they did go out at all. Sometimes they went out with some of the lift boys but that was it. Alex rubbed his jaw, vaguely recalling Glenn slapping him on the back and winking when he had left the party at some point the night before. Was it before all the chaos? He turned off his truck and then remembered it had been while he had been eating the food Ellie brought. He grabbed his pack from the passenger side floor and headed inside. He had a lot to do quickly before heading down the mountain for a bit.

He strode into the building through the snow, apparently Matt had not felt it worthwhile shoveling and no one from grounds maintenance had made it here to do anything. Alex barely noticed it except to think they were so far down the priority list for those things until someone was without power, then they were important. He unlocked the door and then relocked it behind him, not wanting any surprise visitors. He unlocked his office, turned the lights on and after unzipping his jacket, turned the heat on. It was cold, but he had the thermostats set in the building to do that on weekends, when he wasn't supposed to be in except for emergencies. He flipped the coffee maker on and sorted through the k-cups, someone had been taking his favorites again. Glenn unfortunately liked the same blends he did. He made his coffee and went to the big desk, letting the bag slump to the floor next to him.

He put down his coffee and started flipping through his keys. So much of his life locked up. *Not for much longer now*, he told himself. He unlocked the main drawers and opened the large drawer on the bottom, pulled a metal box out and sat it on the desk. He rubbed at his jaw again, thinking he should have shaved while they showered, or let Ellie do that. *Oh no, that would have been trouble I'm sure*. He laughed at himself then and shook his head remembering the shower, then pulled himself back to the box as he noticed a white envelope propped against his lamp.

Now why am I not surprised about that? Why leave it here? Why not have just made it complete last night? He sighed and then took several deep breaths before reluctantly reaching for the envelope, wondering at Arnie's motivations for having it delivered here. He looked at the "staff ID" photo of himself on the front, wondered if he always looked that sullen. He pulled the letter opener out of the coffee mug of pens on the corner of the desk and opened the envelope carefully, pulled out four pages. He skimmed the information and threw the pages on the desk, at least Wendy had stayed away from his department. He drank some of the coffee and then neatened the papers back up, put them back in the envelope. Nothing new really, names, dates, times, circumstances. He had noticed that in the last few months it had been only three names, not that it made a difference to him. It would prove helpful if she wanted to fight him and that was all. He should probably thank the old man or whoever else had been responsible for all the information, it saved him hiring someone. He was surprised by the tone of the letter, like some avenging angel had written it. It was pious and yet condescending to him, like he was a dithering idiot who didn't know his wife was a slut.

He finally unlocked the big gray box on his desk and flipped it open. The front folder had a few papers in it, things his lawyer had provided to him to consider. He slipped the envelope into it. It was his divorce folder. The heat had come up so he slipped his coat off and over the back of his chair. He pulled the next folder out, the one with all the schematics and notes he had made for the electrical systems. And the letters from the patent office. He smiled at those. They were his freedom, granting his patent applications for all the systems he had developed. Arnie and Gabe had thought they were manipulating him into a corner with their contract before these came back, that it would take so much longer for them to be approved, but he wasn't the grunt electrician they had estimated him to be. They also underestimated Ellie. She had set him up with a patent lawyer and explained intellectual property ideas to him. Even before they had been "involved" she would send papers to him from Arnie with little side notes attached, with "just my thoughts" scribbled on the bottom. He had a folder with all of those in the box as well. He carefully placed his letters back in their folder and put them back in the box, spied the other box behind all the folders.

It had arrived in inter-office mail, in the normal green pouch a few days after they had sat talking one long night at Custer's and then in the parking lot in her car. It was a dark blue gift box with constellations on it, tied with a blue ribbon, which he still had on it. He carefully untied the ribbon and opened the box. They had talked about favorite penny candies from when they were children and how hard they were to find anymore. The box was full of small baggies of each kind he had mentioned as a favorite. All these months he had only eaten a few, times when he needed to think of her and feel her close to him again. He took out the bag with the little caramels, took one out and unwrapped it, thinking of what they would both be facing this afternoon and the next few days. Feeling it melting on his tongue he felt her warmth, the reassurance of her with him. He took another caramel out and put it in his pocket, for later, before putting it in the box and carefully tying the ribbon again. He put the box in his pack, no need to keep it locked away anymore.

How could she have ever doubted how they felt about one another? Questioned why they were together? He knew the situation was a tangled mess in ways but the basics weren't. Two people met and fell in love. There was always something there and when given a chance it grew. The circumstances around them were unfortunate but that just needed time to work out. Like she had said, their timing was bad but what in life happened when it was the perfect time? Life and love happen when they happen, they could either accept it and move forward or wind up bitter old people. He had always felt that sooner or later they would be together for the rest of their lives, it was just meant to be.

He routed through the box, made sure everything else was in place in it, discs, invoices, memos, meeting notes and then went to his filing cabinet and unlocked it. He had papers there that needed to be in his box. He pulled files on alterations to systems, computer hook ups, usage charts. He placed them all into the box in their own files. Back in his own desk he went through all the drawers, checking carefully. In the top drawer was the little box he had bought to keep all the personal notes from her, the printed emails. He almost put that into the bigger box but then opened his pack to put it in there. His pack was always with him, or it would be with Ellie from now on.

He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, pulled out the envelope with her picture on it, the one with all the information about Gabriel. He considered reading it all but had seen enough last night. He pulled a blank folder from his desk and put that in the box and put the envelope in it. She'd ask him to keep it safe for her. He worked in the office for awhile more, making sure that anything that had to do with the patents or with his personal life was either in the box or in his pack. Anything do with Ellie, other than her letter about her husband, was in his pack in fairly short order. He kept out the insulated mug she had gotten him, he used it every day.

He turned on the desk top and waited for it to load up. Most of his work had been done on his personal laptop, something Ellie had told him early on was a good thing, it helped prove his ideas belonged to him. All he had on this computer were communications from within the company about the actual implementation of his systems and that he did need to back up, for proof that the company was using his systems. He smiled thinking about what Charlie had been telling him of the ads in all the magazines. That reminded him to pull the copies of newspapers and press releases from his drawer as well. They were all in sheet protectors, which he flipped through, still waiting for his ancient computer system to load up. There was the picture of he and Arnie, standing in front of one of the turbines on the southern end of the range, smiling, an arm around each other, the caption declaring that ski areas could be green. He laughed at the picture, the old man wasn't going to feel so chummy with him soon.

As soon as the computer was ready he opened files and started printing, one after another. And then emails, enough to have to feed more paper into the printer several times. Almost a ream of paper. He sorted them and filled the files in the box, made new ones. When he was finally done he went through the email again to be sure he had cleaned it out as well as he thought he had of the emails from Ellie. There was nothing personal from her. There was one from Wendy, curtly telling him when the kids had things going on and when she wasn't going to be available to pick them up, that he should change his schedule. He printed that and slid it into the folder in front.

He turned the computer off and started re-locking everything. Finally he looked around the office and felt more of the freedom, the breaking that had been taking him over for so many months. He stretched, put on his jacket and turned the heat back down, locked his box, picked it and his pack up and flipped the lights off. He felt stronger with each step out.

Bg: Chae McCabe
Diamond

Finally, after talking amongst ourselves for a little while, several people in uniform came into the room. There were two big, burly men that came in and stood on either side of the white board. They stood with their hands held behind their back and didn't move after they'd gotten situated. With these two men was a woman, whom I recognized to be Olivine and a man that I had yet to learn the name of. On his uniform I spotted the name "Argon". Olivine stood with her hands at her sides while the man was holding a clip board. He lifted a few papers and looked them over until he finally looked back at our group of nine.

"So." Argon began. "This is the lowly group of conscripts that they told me to take care of." He slammed his clip board on the desk in front of him. "How pathetic. You're all filthy and smell like you live in a sewer, oh wait, you all do!"

Buck and a few others were showing signs of getting angry at this, I tried to give them a subtle signal to calm the hell down and that this was part of it. Eric and Jordan got my message, Buck may have understood it, but didn't seem to care. "Now you listen here!" He began, partially standing up. "I don't know who you are, but who are you to say this to us?!"

The man glared at Buck and I could feel a lot of tension coming from him, and the two men near the white board. "I am Senior Chief Petty Officer Argon. Who are you?"

"I'm-"

"A conscript." Argon said, cutting Buck off and moving closer to his desk. "A lowly, miserable, pathetic, stupid, untrained conscript." He said, sort of towering over Buck and forcing him to sink down into his seat. "And it's my job to turn you into the best possible person. Now whether or not you make this job easy for me, and for you, is up to you, trainee."

Buck slumped into his seat, Argon's glare must have really cut through him and scared the hell out of him. I'm glad I wasn't Buck, no offense to him however. Though, I would rather it him than me.

Argon looked at the rest of our group. "Anyone else have issues with the way that they're being addressed? Come on, speak up!" There was no response, we all stayed silent and still. "Good then. Now, I wonder, why is it that you're all sitting in the middle of the room, huh?"

I was too nervous to say anything, but I figured that saying nothing in this case wouldn't get any of us very far, and would probably make our situation far worse. "I did."

"What was that?" Argon said. "I thought I heard someone mumble something."

For some reason I immediately knew what he meant. "I did, sir."

"Ah, there we go." He wandered over to my desk. "And you told everyone else to sit around you, because....why?"

"Because, sir, I knew that if they were to sit too close to the back or front that they would be subject to harassment."

"Did you now?" Argon said with a raised eyebrow. God was I scared for my life. "What made you think that? Or....did someone tell you?"

I couldn't tell him that Feldspar had told me where to sit, otherwise he'd would get in some sort of trouble. Even though Feldspar had been the reason that I was here, he was at least kind to me. "No one told me sir. Was the way it was in high school, sir?"

Argon cracked a slight, and yet menacing smile. "No one told you?"

I shook my head. "No sir."

"No one that would happen to know how this all works?"

I shook my head again. "No sir." I said with all the sincerity that I could muster.

Argon pounded my desk. "Ha! Ha! Very good!" He said. "You've passed test number one."

"Test one?" I asked.

"Basics of fortitude." He said, and then he went back to the front of the room. He then turned his head to Olivine. "Would you continue, Warrant Officer?"

She nodded and took a few steps forward. "As many of you already know, you are now among a secret organization called Diamond. This organization was commissioned in secret about twenty five years

ago. We gather intelligence on hostile groups within the country and do our best to eliminate them.”

“What kind of hostile groups?” Jordan asked.

“Any group that would threaten the well being of this country's citizens and or its government, these groups are usually unknown to local authorities or they refuse to admit that these groups are actually any sort of threat.”

“So, we're all going to be fighting against these people? Do you guys kill them?” Sheila asked.

“Not all of you will be fighting. However, you all will have combat training. Your job will be based upon what skills seem to show through during your training. If you seem to have many skills, then, like me will have many different jobs depending on what is needed at the time.”

“So you'll train us in the area that you've decided is best for us?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes, you will become the best that we can make of you, whether you are strong in one field or others, you will become the best that is physically possible.”

“So why us?” Buck asked, sitting back up in his chair with folded arms; he was going to have a fun time with Argon in training, I could see it now.

“Your selection was mostly random. However, judgments of how your physical status is currently was taken into account. You're all here because you are in adequate shape. If you're not in perfect shape, then by the end of your three week training, you will be.” She paused, taking a look at us. “Like it or not, you work for us now. If you ever want to go back to your former life, then I suggest that you all cooperate.”

“So, how long will we be here?” Eric asked.

“Good question, I've been waiting for one of you to ask that.” Eric cringed, seeming to think that he was in some sort of trouble. “No, you're not in trouble.” Olivine told him, as though she had read his mind, this must have scared him quite a bit. “How long you will be here is classified. If we were to tell you, then that would risk you not performing to your maximum capacity while you're preparing to leave this place.” Damn, these people were good, I'm sure that this had happened before in this organization's existence. “But, at the end of your time here, you will given the option to stay here permanently. We will make all of the arrangements with your former work and living place. You will be given a place to live and will lead a life similar to how you had been while working here.”

“Do a lot of people do this?” I asked, suddenly the idea of living with this group didn't seem like a bad idea. But, then again, I'd probably miss being in Manhattan by the time I was done here and would be eager to go back. I guess that I'd have to see what living here and working for these people was like before making a decision. I'll admit though, I was starting to miss home a little bit already.

“Close to 90% of the people that we conscript end up staying here permanently, evidence of this is how many people you've seen since you've entered this building, and how big this building is.”

Wow. That was higher than I thought that it would be, a lot higher. “Oh, and just to help start the process of deciding whether or not you want to work here for the rest of your life, you will be paid, and never have to pay any sort of tax ever again; even after you retire from here.” That was a very nice bonus.