

SILVER FIRE

by Victoria Paige

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The Guardians Series

Artemis Guardian Services (AGS) - “The Guardians”, as they are known by most of their clients, specialize in small team surgical incursions: Organized crime takedowns, K and R (kidnap and ransom), DoD covert ops that are too politically high-risk, corporate security enforcement (usually involving questionable and deadly force), and recently (and seemingly with increasing frequency) protective custody detail outsourced by the US Marshals Service. Work frequently with CIA, DoD, NSA, FBI, DEA, ATF and Interpol.

Principal owner: Viktor Baran, ex-Special Forces

Guardians:

Maia Pierce

Nathan Stark

Manning

Edmunds

Braden Connelly, ex Army Ranger

Thalia Guererro

Data Analyst: Tim Burns

McCord Defense Industries (MDI) - company that designs and manufactures advanced small arms weapons that are efficient in urban warfare. Specializes in advanced carbine weapons, explosives and untraceable tracking devices. Well known for its MD-Bandit drones—a small reconnaissance aircraft capable of firing air-to-surface missiles. Top military contractor for the DoD.

Principal owner: Jack McCord, ex-Navy SEAL

VP of Operations and Design: Derek Lockwood, ex-Special Forces

CHAPTER ONE

Sophie had just finished her kendo class and was lowering the liftgate of her SUV after depositing her gear in the cargo area when she saw the masked man's reflection in the vehicle's window. She heard the pop of a gun and the plinking of shattering glass and vaguely registered a muzzle flash as she ducked. She grabbed her shinai, spun around, and charged, swinging the kendo stick at her assailant's wrist as he squeezed the trigger again. The weapon discharged into the air and then flew out of the gunman's hand, landing on the concrete with a clatter.

Shouting from the garage entrance drowned out the masked man's howl of pain. For a brief moment, Sophie stared into her attacker's eyes which were oozing hatred so pure they pinned her where she stood. He shouted angry words in a foreign language before spitting on the ground and taking off.

"Sophie-san!" her kendo instructor yelled as he rushed to her side. "Are you all right?"

Sophie nodded even as her hands shook. Her heart was galloping and she could barely catch her next breath.

"I'm...I'm fine...Sensei Jiro," she stammered, but her legs suddenly felt like Jell-O. She took a deep breath and leaned on the open tailgate of her Honda Pilot. "I think."

“Call 9-1-1!” one of her classmates shouted.

Sophie had developed a fascination for this Japanese martial art a year ago and had become a regular student of Sensei Jiro. The dojo was located in a questionable area of Washington DC, and leaving the kendo sessions by herself just to avoid mingling with other students was imprudent.

Someone offered her a newly opened bottle of water. She graciously accepted and took a hearty gulp.

“I saw him jump on a bike and race off,” another classmate said to the growing huddle around her.

“Sophie-san are you in trouble, dear?” her sensei asked, his hand gently clasping her shoulder.

She shook her head. “No. I think he just wanted to mug me.”

The hand on her shoulder tightened.

Sophie glanced up at her sensei, his wise eyes telling her he did not believe her. The truth was, she had been receiving anonymous death threats, and it had everything to do with her work.

“Maybe a little,” she murmured.

Her sensei nodded and took his hand from her shoulder. He called one of his assistants to stay with her and disappeared into the dojo.

Sophie looked around. Her assailant’s gun lay where he had dropped it and her SUV had a bullet hole through the rear window. She still had a death grip on her kendo stick. Sophie released a shaky breath, realizing how close she’d come to having her head blown off. Whoever had grievances against her and her work were done with mere

threats.

Her sensei reappeared holding a scrap of paper with a name and phone number. He jerked his chin at his assistant, signaling that he wanted some privacy. “Sophie-san, I know your work puts you at risk.”

“How...?”

“I just know,” he replied. “My friend can protect you. Remember Sophie-san, if you are fully prepared, you need not worry.”

A police cruiser squealed to a stop beside her SUV. As the cops emerged from their vehicles, Sensei Jiro clasped her hands in his and smiled before backing away.

Sophie looked at the name written on the paper: Viktor Baran.

McCord Defense Industries was located on the eighteenth floor of the Trident Building in downtown New Park. Derek Lockwood stepped out of the elevators just as the clock hit 9:00 a.m. Good, he wasn't exactly late. His best friend and business partner Jack McCord had a thing about tardiness and for the most part, Derek was on time except the nights when the women in his life kept him up until dawn. He was getting tired of his bachelor life. Seeing Jack happily married to Maia had begun evoking some envious sentiments inside him.

He heard raised voices drifting from Jack's office. *Or not.*

Laurie Stone, Jack's personal assistant, briskly walked toward him and said, “You're on time, but I think the meeting will be delayed.”

Derek's brows shot up as he heard Maia's angry voice clearly through the shut doors. “You're dreaming, Jack, if you think I'm going to let this go. You're an autocratic

asshole, and I'll be damned if this discussion is over.”

There was a low, calm baritone response. The door was wrenched open, and Maia Pierce McCord stormed out while muttering, “Manipulative bastard.” The angry flare in her eyes made Derek wince. “Derek, Laurie,” Maia said curtly before striding to the elevator, punching the down button impatiently.

Derek poked his head into Jack's office and saw his friend perched on the side of his desk, his head slightly bowed, expression contemplative. “Ready for the meeting, my man?”

Jack glanced up and sighed. “Yes, might as well.” He returned to his chair behind the desk as Derek walked into the office, Laurie following behind him and shut the door.

“I take it the honeymoon's over?” Derek drawled.

“Not now, Derek,” Jack warned, a spark of impatience flashing across his face. His friend looked relatively composed after having had a blowup with his wife. “Laurie, do you have all the files on Silver Fire Research?”

Silver Fire Research was owned by Dr. Sophie Marie Leroux, a brilliant nuclear physicist with a double major in material science and electrical engineering, and a Ph.D. in nuclear physics. Her research facility had been on MDI's radar for two years. When Jack had found out about a patent application for her isotopic enrichment process on the zefinium element, which could be used as an infinite power source for a laser weapon MDI had been developing, he had sent a formal request for a partnership; Silver Fire Research would process zefinium in exchange for a large contribution to their research lab, which would include building an extension specifically for this purpose.

“Yes, I have it all here,” Laurie said. “The contract has been reviewed by our legal

department and I've sent a copy to Dr. Leroux's assistant, Stephen Parker. He has assured us that she would be present at the meeting."

"That's a first," Derek muttered. Sophie Leroux was an enigma. Derek had seen her at a charity ball a few weeks ago—the first time he had seen her out of a lab coat. She rarely attended the meetings between Silver Fire and MDI, preferring to have Parker handle the negotiations. At the ball, she had taken Derek's breath away—standing before him in a shimmering satin gown that clung to her slim curves. Her blonde hair cascaded on one side of her shoulder like a silk curtain, her gray eyes were lighter than he'd seen before, and the light shimmer of gloss on her lips made him wonder what it would be like to kiss her.

Derek shook his head in self-annoyance. "She was at that charity ball a few weeks ago. Remember that, Jack? You had a few words with Christopher Blackstone."

"Yeah. Blackstone wants Silver Fire's research on weaponized zefinium," Jack stated grimly.

"I enjoyed the part where you called him a rat bastard."

"He deserved it. I heard his company is developing an explosive device with the equivalent thermal blast of a nuclear bomb. Using zefinium in place of plutonium would eliminate the fallout effects of radiation."

"Why invest in building one? As if our country didn't have enough nuclear warheads in silos everywhere," Laurie asked.

"Think about it Laurie. A renegade state wants to take over a city or a small country, wipe it out with a zefinium bomb so you can move in and rebuild on your own terms," Derek said. "Don't have to deal with radiation, everything is burned to ashes—"

blank slate.”

“Why would Silver Fire develop such a device?” Laurie asked angrily.

“They didn’t. Dr. Leroux inherited the research from her father when she turned twenty-four,” Derek replied. “Nobody knows what she has done with it. From what we’ve heard, there’s a specialized electronic trigger that only she has the schematics to.”

“Viktor is keeping an eye on Blackstone,” Jack said. Viktor Baran was the head of Artemis Guardian Services (AGS), the company that employed Maia and was as close to a brother-in-law Jack could have. The AGS worked closely with federal and international agencies. They frequently fielded politically sensitive assignments as they specialized in small-team surgical incursions that operated frequently off the grid. “All right. Let’s get back on point here. Derek. What’s the word from our design engineers on the spec sheet of the zee?” Zee was their slang for zefinium.

“It looks good on paper,” Derek replied and saw the gravity lighten from his friend’s face. MDI had gone into this deal with everything to lose. There were no trial runs. The technical data sheet was the sole basis for drawing up the contract. But if the processed zefinium worked as they theorized, this would mean one of the first infinite-power source laser weapons prototype ever created.

Jack glanced at Laurie. “Do we have our gate clearance for Divergent Research Zone?”

Silver Fire Research was housed in a heavily guarded compound that contained research facilities with highly sensitive projects.

“Yes, Parker emailed it to me yesterday.”

“Then we’re good to go. Meet us back here at 10:30 a.m., Laurie. We can take

the Escalade.”

His personal assistant nodded and left.

Derek stared at his friend in silence. Jack quirked a lop-sided grin. “You’re dying to find out what the drama was this morning?”

Derek shrugged.

“My wife is pissed that she was left out of the German assignment against the arms dealer,” Jack shared.

“The Hamburg account?” Derek’s eyes widened. “She was looking forward to that.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” Jack retorted.

“Jack, you know you can’t make decisions for her regarding her job.”

“I know,” his friend admitted and then exhaled deeply. “But I’ve convinced Viktor that the Leroux account was more important.”

Derek straightened in his chair. “Leroux? As in Sophie Marie?”

“Is there anyone else?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Leroux put in a request to AGS for protection. AGS does not do bodyguard work in the real sense but only short-term protective custody.”

“Why would Dr. Leroux need protection?”

“She was assaulted in a parking lot last week.”

“*Jesus Christ!* I assume since she’s in our meeting today, she’s okay?”

“Apparently her assailant has shit-for-brains, attacking her after her kendo class; she had her kendo stick with her and somehow she disarmed the guy. He’s lucky it

wasn't her katana, otherwise he'd be missing a hand."

Derek leaned back thoughtfully. He had done his research on Dr. Sophie Marie Leroux and knew she was an avid fan of the art of Japanese sword fighting. She had been on his mind for a few months now but given his way with women, he decided she was off-limits or he was just a fucking coward to do anything about his attraction to her. But this attempt on her life had roused a protective instinct in him that was spurring him to quit being on the sidelines.

"So I told Maia it would promote goodwill between Silver Fire and MDI if she personally assessed Dr. Leroux's security requirements. Even if AGS can't do the job, she can act as a consultant and outsource it to their contractors."

Derek shook his head and grinned. "You really are a manipulative bastard."

Sophie thumbed through the results of her isotope enrichment experiment on a small sample of zefinium. The isotope levels were stable and the concentration of zefinium isotopes were optimal to produce the power required for a laser application.

"This is fantastic, Polly," she told one of her two lab assistants. Polly Smith was a fresh grad out of MIT's nuclear physics masters program; she was in the process of obtaining her Ph.D. "When Jan shows up later, please brief her on the latest results." Jan Rivers, her other assistant, had been with her since the inception of Silver Fire Research three years before.

Polly nodded and turned her attention back to the lab computer to enter the results. Sophie sighed and walked back to her office, which was adjacent to the lab.

She hadn't thought it possible to meet someone more introverted than herself. She glanced at the safe on the far side of the office. Within its walls was her father's research—ten years of work cut short by a lab explosion that had ended the life of Dr. Jean-Pierre Leroux and burdened his daughter with the blueprint for mass destruction.

Her phone buzzed.

"Hey, Beth."

"So what's up?" Beth Turner was to the point. She had to be, as a hard-nosed investigative reporter.

"What? No; how are you?"

"Baby girl, you left me a weird voice message, like you were crying. So. What. Is. Up?"

"I dreamt of Adam again. About the night they took him."

Silence.

"Beth?"

"Oh Sophie." Her friend's voice lost its edge. "You haven't dreamt about him for almost a year. You think it's because of the attack on you last week?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But I don't see why."

"Have you called Dr. Hunter?"

"What's the point? I won't let him hypnotize me to forget."

"But you have to move on. First you retreated into your studies. Now it's your research. Enough is enough, Sophie. You and David seemed to be making progress. He really likes you, but he said you stopped returning his calls."

"I—"

“He told me,” Beth cut in. “He told me you freaked out when he, um, you guys got serious fooling around.”

“I keep seeing Adam—”

“Hell!” Beth swore. “If the man weren’t dead, I’d probably want to meet him just to see if he could turn me straight. Well, you definitely don’t want pussy. We tried.

Remember?”

“Beth!” Sophie exclaimed, aghast. Her friend could be crude sometimes, and she did not need a reminder of that awkward moment in their friendship. She and Beth had been friends since her freshman year at MIT. Beth was a journalism major at Boston University and they had met at an off-campus house party. Beth got curious about the introverted geek from MIT and decided to make it her mission to pull Sophie out of her shell, starting by dragging her out to bars and other college functions. One day, when they were both slightly tipsy, Beth had kissed her. Although Sophie was curious and tried to respond, the experience left them more than embarrassed. Beth disappeared for several weeks, leaving Sophie despondent with the loss of their friendship. But her friend couldn’t stay away, and when she returned, the friends had a talk and agreed that nothing romantic could come out of their relationship. They had, however, forged a lasting bond.

“So are we going to beat around this dead bush?” Beth asked. “You need a man. By the way, Parker told me that the MDI boys are dropping by later.”

“Why would Stephen even mention our meeting? To you of all people. You know, you better not print any of that. The contract has not been signed yet.”

“Well you know how Parker is crushing on Lockwood and McCord. If I were

straight, I would do them.”

Sophie couldn't help giggling. “You're hopeless. And I understand McCord is happily married.”

That reminded her of her meeting with Maia Pierce later this afternoon. She was shocked to find out that Jack McCord's wife was not a marketing executive but a Guardian. Sophie had to sign a non-disclosure agreement necessary to protect Maia's identity, which must be difficult to conceal considering that she had married a high-profile power player in Washington DC.

“Hey, where did you go?” Beth broke through her thoughts.

“What?”

“I was saying Derek Lockwood is quite a catch.”

“You mean I might catch something from him.”

Her friend burst out laughing. “Oh, Sophie. You need to live a little. If any of the rumors are true, he might just make you forget Adam.”

“Great, you just planted a disturbing picture of a naked Derek Lockwood in my head,” Sophie quipped. “Hey, I gotta go. I see Parker gesturing outside my office, I think they're here.”

Sophie shook her head as she gathered her binder and stood up. Her steps faltered at the door, and she cursed Beth for suddenly making her self-conscious. She dropped her things back on her table, grabbed her vanity bag, and headed into the bathroom in her office. Her hair was already up, so no point in fixing that. She took out her compact and began to powder her face just enough to remove the shine from her nose and forehead. She dabbed some lipstick on and finished off with a spray of

jasmine and sandalwood.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Wide silver-gray eyes stared back at her. They looked haunted. Haunted by the memory of a man who was dead. Who according to everyone had taken advantage of an innocent girl. She fingered the scars on her wrist. People didn't know the real Adam, and no one ever would. He had been murdered while serving his prison sentence, and he was never coming back.

Derek was squirming in his chair, trying very hard not to stare at Dr. Leroux and failing miserably to concentrate on what Stephen Parker was saying about the latest results from an enrichment experiment. She had been a few minutes late to the meeting and as she swept through the room, her scent made his nostrils flare with some kind of primitive longing. She had the fantasy librarian look down pat; her hair, which was swept up in a messy knot, was the color of pale corn silk and her amazing gray eyes were seductively framed behind cat-eye shaped reading glasses. He could not help himself from picturing her on a desk, her long lean legs crossed while stretching the limits of a tight pencil skirt. He imagined himself walking up to her, ruthlessly uncrossing her legs, shoving her skirt up, spreading her thighs and—

Laurie kicked him under the table, and he glanced briefly at her scowling face. She was clearly telling him to pay attention; after all, he was the main liaison with their design engineers.

“—so based on MDI's required application, we are very confident that you would be quite satisfied with our process for enriching zefinium,” Stephen Parker finished.

“Yes, the emission levels are more than sufficient to amplify and generate spurts of concentrated beams that can penetrate a half-foot depth of lead,” Jack replied. “I’m a bit concerned about the triggering device, how small we can make it?”

“I have tweaked my design considerably,” Sophie spoke up for the first time. “I’ve sent out my schematic to be cut-out by my manufacturer. I should have it in a few days. It should fit a typical rifle trigger housing.”

“Excellent,” Jack said as he shot Derek a pleased look.

Derek chanced a glance at Sophie and saw her openly observing him. *Interesting.* Could she be aware of him after all? She quickly averted her eyes as a blush stole up her cheeks.

Very interesting indeed.

“I must say, you are quite brilliant, Dr. Leroux.” Derek tested his theory while flashing her his most charming smile when she returned her gaze to him. “A rare find. Beauty and brains. Your boyfriend is a lucky man.”

Sophie turned from pink to red.

Stephen Parker almost swooned but caught himself before he behaved unprofessionally. Instead he spoke rapidly: “Shedoesn’thaveaboyfriend.” And coughed behind a folder.

Jack leaned into his friend and whispered, “What the hell are you up to?”

Derek did not answer. Fortunately, Laurie, being the perfect assistant she was, distracted everyone by handing out copies of the contract. “Mr. Parker, Dr. Leroux, I believe you all have read the contract. There were no additions or deletions, but you are welcome to peruse it again.”

“We’re satisfied with the agreement,” Sophie replied and flipped through the pages of the original contract that bore the signature sticker and quickly signed and dated the documents. She stood up and looked at her watch. “Gentlemen, Miss Stone. On behalf of Silver Fire Research, we welcome the opportunity to work with your company.” Sophie bowed her head courteously and walked out the door.

Stephen Parker was smiling as he leveled his stare at Derek. “You flustered poor Sophie.” He signed his part of the document before handing it back to Laurie who passed it over to Derek.

“That wasn’t my intention,” Derek replied with a frown. He felt a tad guilty when it appeared that Sophie couldn’t get out of the room fast enough. Either he affected her the same way he was by her, or she was just socially awkward in handling non-business-related interactions. And he couldn’t reconcile the glorious blonde hair, beautiful face, and willowy body with a mind that could calculate half-lives and radioactive decay.

“My ass,” Jack muttered.

“Gentlemen,” Laurie admonished. Derek chuckled at Laurie’s attempt to curb Jack’s cursing. Cursing and the military way of life went together. Jack and Derek had that habit in spades, particularly when they were riled or dealing with the DoD and when there were no suits from Washington DC around.

“You need to show her a good time,” Stephen told Derek. Obviously, the formal part of the meeting was over.

“You do realize you’re pimping out your boss,” Derek said, his brow arching.

Stephen grinned and then shrugged. “I’m just having fun teasing both of you.

She'd never agree to go out with you. Otherwise I wouldn't have suggested it."

Was Parker daring him? He, Derek Lockwood, who had no problem getting any woman in his bed? Jack noticed the gleam in his friend's eyes and shook his head. Too late. The gauntlet had been cast.

"Don't do it, Lockwood," Jack said sternly. They had dropped Laurie off at the MDI headquarters before driving out to their manufacturing plant located on the outskirts of New Park City.

"That's unfair, don't you think," Derek fired back irritably. "You didn't let anybody naysay you when you pursued Maia."

"Silver Fire Research is our business partner. The last thing we want is you screwing around with their CEO."

"That's harsh. What if I told you this time it was different."

Jack snickered. "Are you serious?"

Derek bristled inwardly. He didn't know why Jack's response annoyed the hell out of him because it was not unusual for them to rib each other about their sexual activities. It was probably because Derek knew his friend was right, that it smacked of unprofessionalism and intrigue and that was the last thing MDI needed when they had just sunk a 250 million dollar investment in the research lab.

"You're right," Derek conceded. "Dr. Leroux looks too uptight for the relationships I'm used to."

"Or the non-relationships," Jack added.

"Look, you've made your point," Derek said through grit teeth. "So get the fuck off

my case. Not everyone can have what you and Maia have. So stop rubbing my nose in it—OK?”

Derek stiffened when his friend flicked him a worried glance. They rode in tense silence for a while; Derek started tapping his fingers on the side of the car door. He was happy for his friends, but he definitely doubted the choices he had made. What if he had taken a chance with Maia, would he be in Jack’s sickeningly blissful place right now? He quickly banished the thought. Jack would beat the shit out of him if he knew what he was thinking. Besides, he stopped looking at Maia lasciviously the moment he realized how much he valued her friendship. Now Sophie Leroux though, was a different experience—different but not enough for him to give up his harem, as Maia called them.

Derek kept three women in rotation each week (or month if they were good)—all non-exclusive. One or two would show up at his place when he called them, they fucked and then they left. No sleepovers, no dates. He’d not had a girlfriend since high school; he had women.

“Look, I’m all for you hooking up with Sophie Leroux,” Jack began cautiously. “All I’m saying is don’t lump her with your other women. Maybe you could put...uh...the others on hold while you explore whatever with her.”

“Oh, there will be exploring, but I don’t think we’re on the same page,” Derek laughed.

Jack chuckled. “You’re hopeless, Lockwood. Take it from me, you never know when you meet the One.”

“Marriage has turned you into a sap,” Derek said mockingly.

His friend just grinned, that stupid grin he wore whenever he thought about his

wife. *Jesus.*

The phone on the Escalade's dashboard vibrated. Speak of the devil. Jack punched the speaker phone.

"Hey, babe."

"I had to push back my meeting with Sophie Leroux, something came up at AGS. I don't think I can make it back at the apartment by 6:00 p.m. So we'll have a late start heading down to see your parents."

"I hate getting a late start, Maia, 95 traffic can be horrendous," Jack said. "Why don't we—"

"It was your idea that I take on the Leroux account," Maia cut in.

"I was going to say," Jack stated calmly, "That I can swing back at our apartment, pick up our suitcases, and we can pick you up at Leroux's place. We, meaning Derek and I. Derek can take your car with him and we can drive from there. That OK, Derek?"

Derek shrugged. He was looking forward to seeing Sophie again, but he would be damned before he made himself too obvious.

"Fine. I should be at her place by 4:00 p.m., I don't think I'll take more than an hour."

Maia ended the call before Jack could reply.

"She's still pissed at you."

"Thanks for stating the obvious," Jack responded wryly.

"I'm impressed by your patience though."

"I'm feeling guilty for manipulating the situation. She has every right to be pissed at me, so I'm taking whatever she can dish out."

“Sounds like a marriage.”

“No shit.”

CHAPTER TWO

Sophie pulled up her Honda Pilot beside a silver Mercedes convertible parked in front of her sprawling Mediterranean style home in the exclusive Rosewood Heights neighborhood. The house belonged to her grandmother on her mother's side. Sophie was the only daughter of American socialite Theresa Cassidy who had divorced her father when she was eight. She barely acknowledged her mother in thirteen years. She stayed with her grandmother when she was home from MIT, which was rare. The last time she had seen her mother was at her grandmother's funeral where they hardly exchanged two sentences. Sophie's inheritance from both sides of her family would have kept her comfortable for life, but what she was making out of Silver Fire Research was her pride and joy. And apparently some people were not happy about it.

A red-haired woman stepped out of the Mercedes and Sophie had to keep her jaw from dropping. She had heard enough gushing from Beth to know that McCord's wife was beautiful, but meeting Maia Pierce McCord in person could effectively squeeze the air out of your lungs because she—was—breathtaking. No wonder Beth had her panties in a twist whenever she talked about Maia.

"Miss Pierce or is it Mrs. McCord?" Sophie asked and laughed when Maia winced at the word 'Mrs.' "Still not used to it, I take it?"

Maia shook her head and grinned.

“How long have you been married?”

“Six weeks.”

“Ah, still on honeymoon?”

“Oh, believe me that phase is over.”

“Uh-oh, trouble in paradise?”

Maia grimaced and said, “I’d rather talk about your troubles than mine.”

Sophie chuckled. She liked Maia Pierce. Despite looking as gorgeous as she did, she appeared to be well-grounded and a very warm person. She had a rich and swoon-worthy husband, why would she choose a dangerous profession? She led the female Guardian through her front door, turning off her alarm and proceeding to the kitchen.

“Care for some wine?”

“I really shouldn’t, but I could use a glass.”

Sophie walked around the center island and checked the wine rack above the butler’s pantry. “What kind of wine do you drink?”

“Cabernet is fine.”

“Shame on you, I’m half-French you know,” Sophie clucked.

Maia smiled broadly but did not reply.

“We’ll have to settle on a Bordeaux then. I don’t have one up here, but I’ll go get it from the cellar.”

“Oh, please don’t do it on my account. I’ll drink whatever you have.”

“Nonsense, it’s right here,” Sophie said as she walked into a huge pantry and hefted a clay-tile-covered trapdoor, revealing a short flight of steps. Maia followed her

down the stairs without being invited, which disconcerted Sophie a little.

“Is this just being kept as underground storage?” Maia asked curiously.

“Yes,” Sophie replied as understanding dawned on her.

“You should keep a cell phone and a weapon down here,” Maia said, turning around and ascending the stairs back to the kitchen. She was busy entering notes on a tablet when Sophie returned with the wine.

Maia asked her some standard questions such as when the death threats started. Sophie informed her that receiving death threats were a part of her life as a daughter of a prominent nuclear physicist. However, threats in the last year had intensified before culminating in the attack last week when she was leaving her Kendo class.

“Your attacker had a mask, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“The police report said you were able to disarm him.”

“I caught his reflection when I was closing my Pilot’s liftgate. I was barely able to duck before he took a shot. Fortunately, he missed. I think I startled him when I went after him with my Kendo stick.”

Maia smiled approvingly before asking, “Who would want to kill you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he say anything? Any accent?”

Sophie’s eyes widened. “He did! Come to think of it...hmm...I couldn’t place it. Why didn’t the Metropolitan police ask me about his accent?”

“I need to know who would stand to benefit or lose from your research.”

“I think my current research is not a big player here,” Sophie admitted. “But my father’s research is more controversial. It’s a bomb that can flatten a small town like a nuclear bomb without the after-effects of radiation.”

Maia’s eyes narrowed as she typed ceaselessly into her tablet. “Has anyone approached you about developing it?”

“A couple actually. But Blackstone International seems to be the most aggressive in sending proposals.”

“Christopher Blackstone?”

“Yes. Have you met him?”

Maia nodded. “Blackstone International is rumored to be secretly manipulating African conflicts. I’ll find out what I can.”

Sophie took a sip of her wine. She needed to pay more attention to world news rather than hide away in her laboratory. Blackstone International was her main supplier of raw zefinium and she had known Christopher almost all her life. All Sophie knew was the highest-grade came from a little section of land between South Africa and Mozambique. There were other sources around the African continent, of course.

Just as when she was about to relay this tidbit to Maia, the windows of her kitchen exploded.

“Get down!” Maia shouted as she shoved Sophie onto the red-clay tiled floor and drew her 9mm. Assault rifle fire drowned the once pristine designer kitchen in chaos and that simply infuriated her. She saw her decimated cellphone on the floor. It had

sustained a direct hit where she had left it on the kitchen counter. AGS would immediately receive notification that she had gone off the grid. The frenetic din of gunfire persisted before a couple of firebombs sailed through the shattered windows.

The assailants were smoking them out!

“Sophie, where’s the phone?” Maia yelled through the noise. The blonde woman had her arms securely crossed behind her head in a protective posture. She unfolded one arm and pointed to the console right at the entrance of the kitchen. “Let’s go.” She shielded Sophie’s body as they ran full tilt out of the kitchen. “Is there another exit?”

“Balcony,” Sophie whispered, starting to choke on the smoke as she grabbed her purse to get to her cellphone. Maia snatched the cordless phone off the small table and started dialing 911. More firebombs hit the living room. “They cut the phone line,” Maia said as she threw the cordless phone away. She pulled Sophie to a crouch behind an imposing marble half-column.

“Yes, 911, we’re at...hello? Hello?” Sophie looked at Maia. “I think they’re jamming cell phone reception.”

“Son of a bitch,” Maia muttered. She glanced at Sophie, who appeared to be holding it together, but for how long? “We’re gonna have to make a run toward the balcony. I want you to duck behind the sofa while I check out that exit. They may be waiting for us.”

The two women crouch-walked to the other side of the house. Sophie dove behind the couch as instructed while Maia leaned against the wall and started to push the sliding door. As soon as the door moved, gunfire cracked through the glass. Maia spied a couple of gunmen and squeezed off a shot, taking one down. She could

probably barrel through them, but she couldn't risk Sophie getting hit. She glanced back at the interior of the house. It was going to go up in flames soon, burning them alive.

The gunmen had no intention of coming in. They were making sure no one got out.

"Jack," Maia whispered. *Damn it.* She was not going down like this and not when her husband thought she was pissed at him. Well she was, but that seemed inconsequential compared to suffocating to death by fire. She scrambled back to Sophie.

"We need to use the cellar."

"What? The kitchen is on fire!"

"Hopefully, not all of it. When we run back, get as many kitchen towels as you can gather. I'll get the water running."

They dashed back to the kitchen. The gunfire had ceased; their assailants were going to let the fire do its work. Maia turned the tap on while Sophie dumped towels into the sink. The fire had ravaged the wall on the opposite side of the huge pantry. It was rapidly licking its way across the kitchen. Maia heaved the trapdoor open as Sophie got in. She followed behind her, letting the trap door fall shut as she began lining the seam with wet towels, keeping some for themselves to cover their faces. She led Sophie to the far end of the underground space and as the inferno blazed upstairs, Maia prayed they could wait it out until help arrived.

It was twenty minutes before 5:00 p.m. when Jack loaded the suitcases into the trunk of the Escalade. His phone buzzed and he frowned when he recognized Viktor's number.

“McCord.”

“Maia’s phone went off the grid, have you talked to her recently?”

“Four hours ago. She should be at Leroux’s residence. I’m heading there right now,” Jack replied as he tried to quell the panic in his gut. There was a simple explanation for this. He glanced at Derek, who understood what he wanted, getting immediately into the passenger side. Jack sat in the driver’s seat and started the car; his friend started messing around with the police band. “Could it be poor reception?”

“It doesn’t work that way, Jack,” Victor replied.

“Of course,” Jack muttered. “Well, let me know if you hear anything. I should be at Leroux’s in twenty minutes.”

“I’m not getting anything from the police scanners,” Derek informed him.

When the SUV left the underground parking, he immediately punched Maia’s number. Sure enough, it went straight to the standard message of a subscriber not in service. The last time this had happened, Maia’s smartphone had plunged into the Atlantic Ocean. Tension crept up the back of his neck like setting concrete. Everything was fine. He was just overreacting.

Regardless of what he had concluded, Jack’s foot felt like lead on the gas pedal. They flew past an intersection before getting on the ramp leading to the main highway. Unfortunately, rush hour had started. Jack cursed as he weaved the car through the infernal DC traffic.

Derek was quiet beside him, which meant his friend was just as worried as he was. Damn it. He hit the speed dial again. Same message.

“Fuck!” Jack cursed. “Why is everyone driving so slow!” He slammed his palm on

the steering wheel. His phone buzzed. It was Tim Burns from the AGS datacenter.

“McCord.”

“There’s a fire in the Rosewood Heights neighborhood. It’s been identified as the residence belonging to Dr. Sophie Marie Leroux.”

“Thanks, Tim,” Jack said, his voice surprisingly calm. He maneuvered the Escalade through a sea of honking vehicles, taking short cuts from the shoulder and cutting in sharply into other cars. If a cop decided to stop him, he would just have to follow him all the way Rosewood Heights, because he had no intention of pulling over.

Emergency response vehicles were flying past Jack’s SUV at an alarming rate. He could see the smoke from a distance. If Maia was okay why hadn’t she called him? As soon as Jack turned into Rosewood Heights, he could see the bedlam of flashing lights, police cars, ambulances and fire trucks. The fire in the house was under control, but what made Jack’s gut seize was the sight of Maia’s car—burned and charred. Whatever doubt remained that the fire had been an accident vanished. The Escalade screeched to a halt behind an ambulance and he ignored Derek’s yell as he bolted from the SUV, charging into the gathering of emergency responders.

“Sir, you cannot be here!” A police officer intercepted him, a second cop appearing as backup, ready to take Jack on if he became uncontrollable.

“That’s my wife’s car,” Jack said furiously, pointing to the remnants of the Mercedes Benz. He was struggling to keep his panic in check. “She was with the owner of the house. Where are they?”

Jack hated the look of sympathy crossing the officer’s eyes. *Maia is not dead,*

damn it.

“Steve,” the officer barked through his shoulder radio. “There’s a gentleman here who’s asking for survivors in that house. Any news?”

“Negative. The house was empty when we got here. But we found hundreds of casings from assault rifle rounds.” A voice crackled over the radio.

“Shit.” The officer’s eyes widened, looking warily at Jack, who was getting ready to go ballistic. The police officer addressed Derek. “Is your friend going to keep it together?”

Jack knew his face was a picture of frustration and anguish, so he turned away from the police officers and took a couple of steps away from the fiery scene. He bent over, resting his hands on his thighs and taking deep calming breaths. His insides were churning and a roar was threatening to tear out from his throat.

He felt Derek’s hand on his back.

“She’s okay. She’s okay,” Jack whispered over and over.

Derek stared at his friend, who was leaning against the hood of the Escalade. Waiting for news was torture. Viktor had called twice in eight minutes. The AGS top man couldn’t get away because he was running point on a mission from headquarters. How he could concentrate on leading a mission, while calling every freaking minute, was lost on him. Besides, Viktor was just causing more tension and Jack was a hair trigger away from losing it.

“Derek!” a voice called out. It was Stephen Parker. He was with another woman

who Derek recognized as a well-known reporter. "Where's Sophie?"

"We haven't heard anything yet," Derek replied blandly.

"Why are you guys here?"

"Maia was with Sophie."

All pairs of eyes swung to Jack, who continued to stare stonily at the razed house without acknowledging the newcomers. The rage and fear in him was palpable, rippling close to his skin. No one wanted to speculate on the fate of the two women. It was a one story house. Even if it were expansive, the firemen should have found them by now.

A commotion caught everyone's attention. Paramedics rushed to the front of the house when a fireman emerged, carrying a limp body. A second fireman followed, hoisting a similar load.

All four of them charged forward, but a line of police officers prevented them from getting close to the fire victims.

"That's my wife!" Jack snarled.

"Sir, the paramedics are doing all they can," an officer said firmly, then looked at the rest of the group. "You all need to back off."

Jesus Christ, Derek thought. He wasn't sure he could hold it together either. If it were not for the color of their hair, telling the women apart would be impossible because Maia and Sophie were covered in soot.

Everyone fell silent as the paramedics frantically administered CPR.

One of the women started coughing.

"Oh, baby girl. Thank god!" the reporter cried, collapsing beside her friend.

Oxygen was quickly administered to Sophie.

All the medical personnel shifted their attention to Maia, who was still unresponsive.

“Come on, babe. Please,” Jack pleaded and then more forcefully said, “You are not dying on me, damn you!”

Tense moments passed until finally, Maia heaved as violent coughing racked her body. “Fuck!” she croaked. The paramedic started chuckling, partly in relief, partly in amusement. The red-haired Guardian didn’t even wait for the paramedic to fit the oxygen mask over her. She simply grabbed it from his hands, fitting it over her face, and inhaled deeply.

Derek watched his friend sink to the ground in relief beside his wife. The medical personnel did not have the heart to turn him away and instead worked around the couple to check on Maia’s vitals. Jack gently cradled his wife’s head on his lap and threaded his fingers repeatedly through her hair, murmuring soothing words. There was extreme emotion emanating from the scene before him. Derek was drawn to Sophie, who was presently being fussed over by her two friends. He wanted it to be him fussing over her. This was getting complicated.

“No way are we taking that trip tonight,” Jack told his wife firmly. “I’m taking you back to the apartment, and you are sleeping this off.”

Maia, as usual, was treating this incident as just another day in the office, and it was pissing her husband off. Derek left the two to argue and walked over to Sophie who was sitting on the bumper of the ambulance and receiving a final once over from the

paramedic. He had made a decision tonight; she was coming home with him. Surely one night couldn't get complicated, but he'd be damned before he let her stay with Stephen Parker, who probably wouldn't know to handle a gun. Nor would he leave Sophie with her friend Beth Turner, who probably had her own enemies being the nosy reporter she was. Derek was right, sleeping arrangements were being argued over this very second.

"Sophie is staying with me," Stephen told Beth firmly.

"Nope, she's coming with me, I know tae-kwon-do," Beth retorted. Derek rolled his eyes—as if tae-kwon-do could stop an attacker with an assault rifle. Time to throw down.

"She's coming with me," Derek said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"I am?" Sophie whispered.

"No, she isn't," Beth cut in, scowling at Derek.

"Yes, she is."

"Um, shouldn't that be my decision?" Sophie asked, eyeing the two of them cautiously. Stephen was chuckling, obviously enjoying the exchange.

"No," Derek and Beth said simultaneously, glaring at each other.

"You think Lockwood, I'll let you get your grubby little fingers on my friend?"

"I've don't have grubby little fingers, they're hard and long and I know how to use them," Derek shot back. He grinned at Sophie and would bet the good physicist was blushing adorably under all that soot.

"I bet you do," Beth answered derisively. "You'll ruin her reputation."

"Good god, woman, you make me sound like I'm a man of gross moral turpitude,"

Derek said in mock indignation. He probably was morally depraved, but Sophie couldn't possibly know all the sordid details.

"Um, newsflash, Lockwood. You've got three women on alternating days on any given week," Beth declared, a gleam of triumph in her voice.

Derek clenched his jaw. *How the hell did she know that?*

"I do my research on whoever does business with my friend," Beth answered the question in his eyes.

"You promised you would stop doing that." Sophie scowled at her friend before spearing Derek with a disdainful look. "Seriously. Three women, Mr. Lockwood? It's surprising that nothing has, er, fallen off."

Derek's brow shot up in amusement at the first sexual barb the usually serious Sophie Leroux had made. "You can call me, Derek," he told Sophie softly, then looking at Beth Turner. "If you've done your research thoroughly, Miss Turner, then you should know that I could effectively keep Sophie safe, for tonight at least."

"He's right," Maia agreed, walking up to the group, Jack at her heels, clearly not willing to let his wife out of his sight.

"Derek is ex-Special Forces," Maia continued. "You could stay with him tonight while I send in my recommendations to Viktor. I've also informed the Falls Church police department that AGS is taking the lead on this, so we don't need to give them our statements regarding this incident. Our attackers had masks, but they were definitely dark-skinned. Whether they were African Americans or imports, we do not know. Their weapons were old-style AK-47s, and they attacked with Molotov cocktails. Not a well-funded group. Bottom line, they want you dead. You are a threat to them, we need to

work on that angle.”

Sophie was coming home with him tonight, Derek thought with satisfaction, but her next words hacked through his ego like a machete hacking through a coconut.

“I’ll stay with Mr. Lockwood but only if Beth goes with me,” Sophie declared, looking at the reporter beseechingly.

Maia smiled, Jack and Stephen were chuckling and Beth was smirking.

Derek had never regretted his sexual exploits as much as he did tonight. And, damn him, he could not resist saying, “Sure, could get interesting.”

“Sorry Lockwood, you’re not my type,” Beth retorted, then looking suggestively at Maia. “I’d do Miss Pierce though.”

Turner: 1, Lockwood: 0.

“Beth!” Sophie admonished, but couldn’t repress the grin forming on her lips.

“There’ll be no one doing my wife,” Jack informed Beth blandly. “Except me.”

“All right, so now that we’ve confirmed sleeping arrangements, who’s riding with who?” Derek asked. He was quitting before he dug himself a deeper hole.

“I have two extra rooms, linens are in the closet,” Derek informed them when they got to his condominium. Sophie and Derek rode in Beth’s beat-up sedan and went to the reporter’s apartment so Sophie could take a shower as Beth packed their bags. While the women got ready, Derek went to the convenience store to buy a few essentials Sophie said she needed to get through the night. Most of her possessions were burned and what survived the fire sustained water damage. They picked up some

Chinese take-out and made it to Derek's condo by 9:00 p.m.

"Nice place," Sophie remarked as she observed a surprisingly uncluttered space. The first thing she noticed was the wide expanse of windows that overlooked the New Park City skyline. The interior was decorated with modern masculine flair: sleek leather sofa, contemporary wood tables and diffused lighting. There were a couple of expensive metal sculptures and abstract blown glass figurines displayed strategically throughout the condo. "Fix it up, yourself?"

"Hell no," Derek laughed. "I was helping out a friend of mine who was breaking into interior design work. I have a lady who comes in to keep the place tidy." He started taking the containers out of the paper bag. "Why don't you ladies get yourself settled while I unpack our dinner?"

Sophie and Beth carried their overnight bags down the hallway. An open kitchen separated the bedrooms. The master bedroom was to the right of the kitchen, up two steps through a short hallway that flared wide and ended diagonally with Mahogany wood double-doors. A longer hallway started on the left of the kitchen that led to the two guest bedrooms.

"Hmm, I wonder which of the three ladies does his housework," Beth whispered to Sophie.

"Beth, I really wish you'd stop baiting him," Sophie sighed. "I always end up in the crossfire."

"He's interested in you."

"He is not." Sophie opened the first door on the left. The room had a queen-sized bed, and was decorated in the same minimalist style as the rest of the condo. "We can

share this room.”

“Stop changing the subject,” Beth said. “You’re definitely on his radar. I see the way he watches you.”

“Stop making me feel self-conscious!” Sophie hissed. Her friend was beginning to annoy her. It had not escaped her attention how Derek’s melty chocolate eyes burned through her whenever he addressed her. She felt like she was getting unscrambled, like a puzzle he was trying to piece together and that unnerved her.

“All I’m saying is you need some fun,” Beth remarked. “And, I’m not really baiting him. I’m just cutting through the crap, and he shouldn’t even pretend he’s anything else than a quick lay.”

Sophie tipped her eyes at her friend. “Really Beth, I think there’s more to Derek. He didn’t have to offer me protection tonight.”

“You’re right,” the reporter conceded reluctantly. “Then again these MDI guys have a reputation for loving trouble, and we’re talking the getting dead kind. Which reminds me!” The last sentence was loudly spoken. “Maia Pierce is a Guardian? Holy fucking hell!”

“Keep your voice down,” Sophie shushed. “I signed a non-disclosure agreement. But I can hardly lie to you now, can I? Please Beth, if word gets out that Jack McCord’s wife is an AGS agent, can you imagine who would come after her?”

Beth shuddered. “Don’t worry, Sophie. Not even gonna touch it. I do not want Jack McCord for an enemy, or Maia Pierce’s hell on my hands.”

Sophie woke with a start, her throat was feeling parched and raw. The smoke

trauma had scraped her pharynx real good. Her friend snored softly beside her. She was tempted to wake her up but decided this latest dream of Adam shouldn't be shared just yet. It wasn't about the night he was taken, it was one of their hazy interludes, except his eyes weren't green any more, they were chocolate like Derek's. Melty brown eyes that pinned her down as his body repeatedly thrust inside her. *Oh god*, Sophie thought, as she sat up. She glanced at her friend again; she should wake her up. It was Beth's fault after all for making her all too aware of their sexy, charming host.

God, *her subconscious just said sexy*, Sophie groaned inwardly as she threw the blanket back and got out of the bed. She was wearing one of her friend's babydoll slippers. For all her brashness, Beth loved sexy lingerie and that included sleepwear. Sophie was tall, so the hem which was already short, came indecently just below the V of her legs. And she wasn't wearing panties either. She didn't have any, and she wasn't about to wear Beth's. Sophie peeked through the darkened hallway. It was 2:00 a.m., Derek had watched some sports after dinner while she and Beth retired early. Actually she and her friend chatted in bed until one of them fell asleep, Sophie didn't remember who dozed off first. The condo was quiet. It was a full moon, the lunar light shining through the wide panes illuminated the living room and kitchen enough for Sophie to make her way around without bumping into furniture. Derek had a high-tech water filtration system, and the water tasted so good without the chlorine aftertaste of tap water.

As she filled her glass, she heard a moan come from the direction of the master bedroom. Thinking she had imagined it, Sophie shook her head and took a sip of water before hearing the unmistakable sound of a longer moan. She froze. Then came grunting, then a loud moan which was quickly muffled and then some light squeaking.

She slammed her glass on the kitchen counter. *Oh god, Derek was having sex with someone in his bedroom!*

She shouldn't, she really shouldn't, but Sophie found herself walking toward the sounds of sex. The double doors were wide open. Right in the center in full view was the biggest bed Sophie had ever seen. And right in the middle of that bed was a woman writhing beneath the shadowed body of Derek, who had the woman's legs under his arms baring her wide open for his forceful thrusting. Their heads were at the foot of the bed, the action facing the door.

"Oh god, I'm close," the woman whimpered and moaned. "Derek, fuck me, fuck me harder, sooo good, so good, honey."

Sophie's mouth parted, her right hand skimmed down the length of her body and fingered the neat curls under the hem of her sleepwear. They were drenched; she was painfully aroused by her voyeurism.

Derek grunted and shifted the woman's legs higher, her knees almost up to her shoulders and that was when he looked up. His face was obscured in the shadows, but he held his face steady. Sophie had no idea if he was watching her or his eyes were closed but his pumping increased and he emitted a tortured guttural sound. The woman had reached her orgasm and only when Derek's face shifted again did the moonlight reveal the blackness of his eyes, which snapped Sophie right out of her trance.

She turned and quickly made her way back to the kitchen, grabbed the glass of water off the counter, scrambled to her bedroom and shut the door. But not before her ears burned with Derek's groan of release.

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