

# CLASSASSIN VITAE



Prologue | THE LITTLE WOLF

The Seward footlockers of the French Foreign Legion came in two colors: puke green or soul-crushing grey. Genevieve had chosen the former. It was a hand-me-down, well worn. Her last name, Krimson, had been spray painted on top by a dutiful private at the start of her embed assignment eighteen months ago.

"This has a hole in it," Genevieve had observed to the Private, having just arrived. "Trou de balle," she explained fingering the bullet hole's rough edge.

"Vous est trou-ble," he smiled at his own sloppy word play. She didn't. "Ahem. J'ai ça," he'd said and carried it out to his

work bench and when he brought it back 45 minutes later, it was marked with her name and the "i" in "Krimson" was dotted with the bullet hole. She laughed when she saw it.

"Tres approprié," she said.

"Chic militaire!" He added a chef's kiss for perfection, "Muah".

Wherever their unit moved thereafter, this container traveled alongside and held her every possession in a rectangular space no larger than a baby coffin.

Their twelve man squad had been in-country for months all over the middle east and Afghanistan, most recently; they lived out of tents or caves or sometimes open sky when they were forced to cat nap for an hour and move on. Surveillance mostly, a few hits and demolitions, though. Lots of advanced work to help the Americans out during "Operation Enduring Freedom". Like last night they had successfully stormed a Sultan's fortress atop a classified Al Qaeda hideout, neutralized 45 insurgents and taken command. This fortified super-mansion meant gas, electricity, running water and, best of all as far as Genevieve was concerned, her own room and a queen-sized bed for the next 48 hours.

She'd politely offered to arm-wrestle anyone for the master suite. Of course there were no takers. Sure, they'd given her

hell about it but that was to be expected. That's how you truly knew you were part of the team. That had been her hardest-won fight of all was to gain acceptance with these dozen elite badasses. Not only was she the only girl on the team, she was also just shy of 18 years old; youngest by a good eight years. Like a little sister to most of them. Most, that is, except for Capitaine Berger. Things were a lot more complicated between Genevieve and Berg, going on a year now.

"Viv," Berg grunted upon entering her quarters.

"Mon Capitaine, you shouldn't have, come on!" She chided him when he'd lugged her footlocker in and set it gently atop a desk.

"Ah, Princesse, je ne voulais pas que tu te brises un ongle," he laughed, waggling his fingernails at her.

"Oh, I'm gonna break a nail... UP YOUR CANDY ASS!" She said throwing one of the dozen decorative lace-pillows at him which he batted away.

"Peut être, I'll come back after night patrol, Viv, so you can file a, uh, formal report," he said tapping two fingers against his watch.

"Promise?" She asked getting a little flushed as she took a step in his direction.

"Promise," he nodded as he turned fully to meet her. They stood inches apart, he towering over her. He took a strand of her hair in his index finger and pushed it back behind her ears. Her blue eyes held his steady gaze. The 9mm tucked into his chest holster clinked against one of the knives in her bandolier.

"Cheers," she smiled.

"Capitaine, perimeter check," Erwyn's voiced crackled through comms into both their ear pieces.

"On my way," Berg responded. He shrugged apologetically at Genevieve.

She exhaled slowly as he backed away towards the door. A breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. With a casual sigh, he turned and vanished out the door, closing it behind him. Genevieve grabbed the knife handle and absent-mindedly drew it slowly out and then slid it back in place as she stared after Berg, deep in thought.

Those who weren't out on sentry duty were celebrating. The two groups were about even, six on, six off. Cookie was probably whipping them up some grub in the kitchen. Probably making short work of some of the rogue chickens they'd liberated outside. Something other than MRE's would be nice for a change. She could hear the music and revelry echoing off the daub castle walls.

Even though it was a chilly night, some of the men were splashing around in the roof top pool.

*Idiotes*, Viv smiled. But, they deserved to blow off some steam, she knew. She'd have joined them even if the pool had not been heated, but not tonight. Genevieve had her own celebration to tend. One year secret anniversary with Berg. She snapped open the dual trunk locks and opened the case.

She dug to the bottom and lifted out her dopkit filled with toiletries. On the way to the bathroom, she stepped into the walk-in closet. Pushing it open, lights automatically glowed a golden brown and she sucked in a breath at all the beautiful and ornate clothes. Clothes, shoes. This was like a miniature Nordstrom all to herself. A gorgeous, burgundy dress caught her eye. She held it up to the mirror. The front of the dress parted up from the high waist line like a tear drop and revealed the sternum and cleavage and tied in a bow around the neck. *Pretty scandalous for the Middle East*, Genevieve thought. This would be perfectly delicious on her. She couldn't wait to get out of the grungy army fatigues, shower and then slip it on.

Outside, a full moon bathed the entire rocky region in a soft day-glow. Berg lit up a cigarette against a chill breeze

and checked the scopes again. The perimeter was clear, as was the horizon stretched out before him. He clicked his comms.

"All clear, sector 1," he whispered.

"All clear," the other sectors sounded off.

Berg would've preferred the post at the back of the Villa. It had the view. Certainly the view of Genevieve's room where he could keep an eye out, but beyond that, the massive deck hung over a rock cliff with a huge, beautiful lake down below it. Only one sentry back there though, because that rock face was an impossible climb, even for these goat herders. No, any attack would come from the front, or possibly from above.

He checked the night sky again. The stars were brilliantly flickering in the sky. He closed his eyes and just absorbed the sounds around them, acclimating. He smiled at a wolf howl far in the distance. The Arabian Wolf. Une petite louve. The smallest of all the wolves, but one of the most cunning and resilient. It was not native to this area, he'd read during training, but you'd be the fool to argue with one.

Much like his petite louve upstairs. Genevieve also did not belong here, but you'd be an idiot to try and tell her otherwise. He'd been skeptical at first, threatened to quit the team, actually. They all had underestimated her. A teen girl

joining their ranks? Going out on horrendously violent and deadly missions? Just laughable.

Almost two years later, she was one of the boys. She had made some mistakes, sure. Overly reliant on her tech in the beginning. Most Auggies were. But she'd adapted so damn fast. Become indispensable. Her tiny frame and demeanor got her access to places no one else on the team could have dreamt up. And somewhere along the way, before he could even stop himself, he'd fallen in love with this tenacious little wolf. He suspected some of his men knew. A court-martial offense if they'd been caught in the act. But, none of the brothers would ever rat out the young woman who had saved their lives many times over. They were honor bound to her, and she to them.

Two miles away across the lake, the Castle glistened on its hill top. With barely a whisper of a sound, three ghosts floated eerily across the water towards it leaving the moon's reflections rippling across the surface. These Night Raiders were dressed all in tactical black, no markings or logos, including their helmets which allowed them to see clearly into the night. Their arms and legs jutted down and angled behind them; propulsion jets on their hands and feet held them aloft as they leaned into their castle advance, wholly undetected.



In her chambers, Genevieve had showered and slipped into the stunning red dress. She stood at the full length mirror admiring her own reflection. She cleaned up real nice. And when her leg peeked out of the high slit she looked just like that dancer emoji. She also had on white opera gloves that came up past her elbows. Fancy.

Digging back into her travel case she pulled out a portable record player. She laughed because she had taken so much shit from the guys about lugging that thing all over the desert. Until she convinced them it held her tampon stash. It didn't, but they didn't know that so they shut up about it.

She opened the lid. Inside was like a high school locker collage: "Coeur de pirate" and "Civil Wars" band stickers, Les Mís and Phantom ticket stubs, a selfie with her bff Cassie in NYC, cut into the shape of a heart. Like a vision board for a school girl straight out of a John Hughes film. This was the side she'd never dared to show anyone on the team. Not even in boot camp. She was too busy being Team Commander Krimson, the Little Wolf. There was no room on mission to be an adolescent teenager.

She lifted a 45 record from a protected sleeve. Edith Pilaf. With practiced grace, she placed it on the turntable and

set the needle. Pulling on some wireless headsets, "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" swelled loudly in her ears. Viv giggled and grabbed a feather boa she'd found in a closet and some bug-eyed sunglasses and a tiara and voila! The transformation was complete.

As the music played, this froofy little French princess jumped onto the four-poster queen bed and mimicked a perfect karaoke performance into a hairbrush.

On the back patio, the sentry got a glimpse of Genevieve high in her window and stepped a little closer for a better glimpse of her crazy show. A smile spread across his face. He was about to radio to tell the other guys when he caught a bullet to the temple as the three Night Wraiths drew near. His lifeless body crumbled to the ground.

Out front, headlights on the horizon arrested Berg's attention.

"All eyes forward. Bogey incoming," he said into comms and then motioned for the sniper to reposition and lock on.

Berg hustled downstairs and signaled two men - Lieutenants Jake and Erwyn - to tail him and then walked out the front door

to the large courtyard. The car was still a distance away when its headlights began popping off on on.

"Bumpy ass road must be shorting out the lights," said Jake behind him on the front stoop.

"Wait, no, there's a pattern to it," Berg said assessing it again through his rifle scope. "It says 'Friendly'."

"Out here in the middle of nowhere? Haha, friendly my ass," Jake spat.

Berg leaned into his comms, "possible friendly. Stay sharp."

Up in the rooftop pool, the four half-drunk Foreign Legion Soldiers continued wrestling around in the water playing full contact polo dodge ball with a soccer ball they'd found. When it got deflected out of the pool, everyone splashed and booed the offender.

"Time out! Time out!" He said as he hopped out of the shallow end, steam coming off his shoulders in the cool night air. He double timed it to pick up the ball and held it above his head.

"Okay, who wants a ball to the face, Lucas?" he said in his deeply French accent.

But the other three in the water had a confused look on their faces. Something behind him had caught their attention. The ball guy turned around and there was a teenaged boy in black tactical gear removing a helmet.

"Qu'est-ce que...?" Ball guy started to ask.

He didn't even finish as the boy pulled a pistol and the silencer flashed twice and the soldier splashed back into the pool, dead.

As the remaining men scrambled for their gear, the other two Ghost Raiders landed, surrounding them. Removing their helmets revealed two more teenaged super soldiers; a shaggy headed boy and a blonde girl, who could have been twins. They opened fire with grisly efficiency until they were they only ones left standing. Satisfied with their results, they nodded at each other, removed the propulsors from their arms and legs and then headed cautiously inside in Delta formation, tapping each other as they cleared corners and moved forward.

In the courtyard, the beat up Citroën ground to halt. It looked like a cross between a taxi cab and a rally car and had seen better days. A trim Indian man stepped out cautiously, arms raised.

"Ne tire pas, ne tire pas! Do not shoot!"

Berg put a fist in the air, signaling to hold, specifically Walker, his sniper, in the nest who he knew had an itchy trigger finger which had saved their asses on many occasions.

"Who are you," he asked.

"I am Rajeesh Shek. But my American friends call me Roger. I have news for you, Capitaine Berger, of the Classassin program. Ahem." Roger attempted a couple winks when he said "Classassin Program" but it just looked like a face spasm.

"Classassin what? Why's his face stroking out?" Jake asked laughing.

"Get this man inside, immediately," Berg ordered. "He's one of ours."

"Please, Mon Capitaine, time is limited," Roger pulled up an iPad screen and activated it and held it up for Berg. "I know your team has been deep under the covers."

"Exactly, so how did you even find us?" Berg asked.

"Later, please, watch." Roger hit play and a bunch of news items began to pop up.

"Edward Snowden has just taken responsibility," a CBS Announcer was saying, "for one of the biggest Government leaks in U.S. history..."

Roger skipped ahead in the coverage.

"We learned," said ABC's George Stephanopolous, "that the government has the capacity to track virtually every American phone call and scoop up impossibly vast quantities of data across the internet."

"Shit," Berg said.

"Very shit," Roger echoed.

A yell and gunfire from inside the house refocused all of their attentions and, guns readied, they ran back inside. They ducked left and right as the door frame splintered with rifle fire from the balcony. Jake went down, struck, but Berg immediately returned fire and the shooter retreated.

"I would describe this man," Judge Napolitano said on a Fox News segment, "as an American hero. As a person who risked life and limb and liberty in order to expose to the American people one of the most extraordinary violations of American principals, value judgements and the constitution itself in all of our history..."

"Please," Roger yelled, "where is Genevieve? I need to ride her back to base."

"First off, *phrasing!* Okay, secondly, stay here, stay down," Berg said as he realized she was upstairs at the back of the house with the intruders. Berg ran for the stairs, climbing quickly, constantly scanning for enemy movement.

The female Ghost Raider stood outside Genevieve's room, bemused by her singing as she watched through the cracked door. "Avec mes souvenirs j'ai allume le feu, Mes chagrins, mes plaisirs..." Genevieve sang. The hallway predator slowly pushed the door open all the way. Viv's back was still to her, dancing atop the bed, oblivious to her presence. "Non, rien de rien, non, je ne regrette rien." The suppressor of the HK MP7 submachine gun aimed slowly towards Viv, its barrel still smoking from a hallway kill.

Viv's nostrils caught the faintest whiff of gunpowder, but she'd already felt the air shift in the room around her and knew she was not alone. Her eyes flashed open glowing bright blue beneath the sunglasses which she peeled off. They increased in brightness as a power residue of gaseous tendrils danced around her long eyelashes; her adrenaline raced and time slowed. In the space of a single heartbeat's "ka-thunka" she was ready for action.

And then she was a blur; yanking out an elaborate hair pin from her top knot, she dropped and spun, throwing it dead at her intruder's face. Her would-be assassin barely moved out of the way in time and it traced a red line across her cheek and plunged deep into the dried mud wall.

Viv launched herself at the bed post closest to her attacker as the girl fired a short burst and missed. Viv was too quick. She swung around and kicked with a force and precision that, I'm sorry, but no seventeen year old has that kind of power. The blonde Night Raider hit the wall and went partially through it. Recovering quickly, she fired at Viv's head and Viv blocked most of the shots with her forearm.

Clang, clang, clang!

One bullet clipped her shoulder and splattered the wall behind her, the others tore through the opera gloves but were stopped by a military grade carbon fiber that lined her cybernetic ally enhanced prosthetic arms – wholly hidden up until now. Viv practically defied gravity running along the wall, she grabbed the hair pin she'd thrown earlier, landed within a foot of her assailant and struck her at strategic breaks in her armor. The blonde Raider grimaced and yelled. Her grip on the gun loosened just enough and Viv kneed it into the air, caught it and fired it upside-down into her heart. The girl slumped into the wall, done.

Viv took the girl's earpiece as her own, checked cautiously around the door jamb and then padded bare-foot up the hallway, eyes still aglow.



Roger heard less and less fighting upstairs. It wouldn't be long before whomever was left came back around and found him. Worse still, from his position crouched under a table he could still hear the iPad playing. Loudly.

"Some breaking news at CNN," the anchor announced, "Edward Snowden may finally have some options on where to go next. Venezuela is offering asylum.."

He pulled it closer with the toe of his boot and then quickly shut it off and froze. There on the stairs above him he saw the leader of the Night Raiders who smiled and started downstairs.

*Crap, crap, crap!*

Berg checked Viv's room and breathed easier when he saw the dead Raider in the wall. He knew she'd be okay, he couldn't say the same for the rest of his team. Sure enough, he headed out to the pool and found all four of his guys dead. He scanned the area and saw the propulsors off to the side. He was about to go check them out but up the hallway appeared the scruffy headed teen.

"Your move, Capitaine," the cocky kid leered.

There was a second where they sized each other up and then both drew down and fired at the same time. Berg took the brunt of it to the chest and neck. He fell backward. The teen Raider sneered menacingly and went to raise his arm to finish the job, but the arm wouldn't move. It had been shot clean through. Annoyed, he switched the gun to his left hand and walked outside towards Berg.

He stopped when he heard something in the darkness behind him. He turned but nothing was there. He moved once again towards his prey. In the darkness, a pair of glowing blue eyes opened and stepped forward.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhkkkkkkk!"

Downstairs the Lead Night Raider stopped when he heard his teammate cry out over the radio followed by silence. He frowned, forgot all about Roger and headed back upstairs.

Roger breathed an ecstatic sigh of relief.

And then a grenade landed right next to him. He scrambled forward and kicked the explosive device which flew out the front door, clattered down the stairs and up under the Citroën; the car blew sky high, putting the old jalopy out of its misery.

"Ohhhhh, there goes my deposit," Roger whined, snapping a picture with his iPhone for insurance purposes. "Hashtag: Nationwide is on my side."

On the roof top, the final Night Raider stepped over the body of his dead comrade. Although his military training told him emotions were the enemy, he began to get red around the ears, none-the-less. His whole squad was dead. Three Classassins versus twelve French Foreign Legion special ops pukes should have been a no-brainer. What had happened? They'd had everything under control. And then *she* happened.

"Genevieve," he spat the name through clenched teeth.

Following the blood trail on the ground he saw Berg laying in a pool-side lounge chair, breathing shallow breaths, watching him. Berg's hands gripped his own chest where he'd lost a lot of blood already. Night Raider scanned the whole area cautiously and began to walk forward until he was looming over Berg. Well, as much as a pubescent teen who had barely started shaving can loom.

"Where is she," Night Raider asked simply.

Berg smiled back. He knew.

Night Raider's ears burned even redder. Like, his actual gills area behind his ears began to glow red. Never a good sign. Their Flight Surgeon had warned them about redlining.

He slowly raised his pistol, aiming the tip of the silencer at Berg's heart.

"Fine then," he began to quip, "keep your —"

A third hand thrust from beneath Berg with a Glock and — POW! POW! — fired two shots into Night Ranger's head which exploded as if it had been wired with C4. His body fell backward into the pool.

Viv adjusted herself under Berg. Wrapping her arms and legs around him, cradling him as he bled out. She still had her opera gloves on which were now stained with blood. She tried to stop the bleeding in Berg's neck, but it was too little, too late.

"It's not fair!" She whispered, tearing up. "You promised you'd come see me tonight."

"H-here... I a-am," he gasped.

"Idiote," she said squeezing him tighter and kissing the top of his head.

"Were those c-classassins," Berg struggled to say.

"Worse. Wetshop Bois. Something's not — I'll deal with it."

He grabbed her hand and moved it to his breast pocket.

"P-present f-for you."

She reached in and pulled out a small box. She immediately knew what it was and threw her head back wailing even louder.

"Are you freaking kidding me with this right now?"

She opened it and it was a precious, white diamond. Small and simple, but it made the point beautifully.

"Non, je ne regrette rien," he said with a grimace.

"Shhhh," she said hugging him tight. "Shhhhhhh, just rest, mon Capitaine."

"Ma p-petite louve," he said as his breaths got shallower and then stopped all together and the ring box rolled off onto the ground beside them. Viv let it fall. Then she howled in anguish. Hot tears running down her cheeks.

Roger perked up. He knew that wailing sound. He picked up a table leg and held it, trembling, like a baseball bat. Everything else had been quiet for a while now. Too quiet! He walked through the silent house, stepping over dead body after dead body.

"Viv?" He said softly. "Genevieve, where are you?"

Still lying under Berg, Viv grabbed the Lucky Strike cigarettes from his shoulder pouch and spilled some out across his chest. She grabbed one and also the lighter inside and fired

it up. Laying back she stared into the starry night sky, tears streaming down her cheeks. She didn't even realize she still had the pistol in her other hand.

Berg's blood ran down her arm, down the barrel and leaked onto the ground, pooling around the ring.

Roger moved from room to room until he got to the roof top. The light from the pool area cast a strange glow around the whole area, dancing and flickering. He saw Berg, saw the smoke and moved quickly over.

"Genevieve! Viv! Are you hurt?"

Viv took another drag on the cigarette.

"Viv, can you—"

He started to reach for her but she stopped him.

"Don't! Just... dammit I just wanna sit here for one second in silence, Roger. Can you please do that for me?"

"Yes. I, yes," he agreed, sitting on the next chaise over.

They both sat there taking it all in. The still night air, the dead bodies floating in the pool, and then Roger's pocket started ringing. And ringing. And *ringing*. It wasn't going to stop. Viv huffed, annoyed. Roger sheepishly drew it out.

"I am so sorry, I have to—" he flipped the Sat Phone open.

"Hello, Ed's Pizza parlor, this is Ed speaking."

He listened for a moment and then handed the phone out.

"It's for you," he said. "the Colonel."

She took the phone begrudgingly and held it to her ear.

"What?" She asked curtly, cigarette bouncing in her lips.

"Yes, papa! Everything is hunky dory! Cava? Everyone's dead. Okay? Dead. All of them. Uh huh, uh huh. Okay. OKAYYYY! Au revoir, Papa."

She handed the phone back to Roger. He held it up to his ear but the line was already dead. He folded it back into his pocket.

"Let's go home, Roger."

"Okay, very good. Very good. One little problem. Our car is not so very good."

"So, go into the Sultan's garage, pick us out a good one for desert off-road dusty conditions. Meet me out front in 10."

"Okay!" He said, "Do you need—" he started to offer a hand.

"Go, Roger! Go!"

He scurried off, almost slipping on some blood. "Watch out slippery when...guts. Ew."

He gagged and continued on. Viv slid out from under Berg. She took one more drag from the cigarette and then kissed his lips and then tucked the cigarette in his mouth. She laid the gun on his chest, bent down and picked up the ring, closed the

bloody box and placed it in his hand, folding his fingers down around it. From a side pouch on Berg she pulled out a Forget Me Not. That's what the boys in the R&D department called this time delayed explosive. It was the same size as a grenade but it packed a helluva lot more oomph; she set the timer and placed it in Berg's other hand.

She walked back inside peeling off the opera gloves and tossing them into the pool. On her way down the hall she skinned off the dress, too, and left that on the ground.

Back in her room she pulled on her BDUs again, checked all her weapons, looked over the record on the player that still rotated although the needle had dragged to the center. Blood had splattered it. Her blood. She lifted off the needle and set it aside.

From a pouch she pulled out another Forget Me Not, set the timer and tossed it into her trunk. She dropped her iPhone on top of it. She couldn't take any chances with the Wetshop Bois. Walking out she set a few more charges, taking a moment to jam her knife into a conduit along the wall. Gas fumes began to spill out.

Down in the kitchen she turned on the gas range and leaned down, lighting up another cigarette. Then, turning on just the



gas on all four burners she walked away. The air above the coils twisted as the lethal fumes escaped and filled the room.

On her way past the bar, Viv grabbed a bottle of whiskey and three shot glasses. She uncorked it and spilled some into each. She downed all three in succession, then took the rest of the bottle spilling it out along the way to the foyer.

Through the open door she saw Roger's "desert-ready" choice of vehicles: a lime green Lamborghini Huracán. Of course. She shook her head at him but he just waved excitedly like he'd cured cancer.

"Four wheel drive?" She yelled.

"Yes, all wheels are driving. It is 4x4!"

With a last drag, she dropped the cig to the ground, igniting the whiskey trail. She walked down the stairs, past the burning Citroën and quickly sat down into the passenger seat.

"Can I see your Sat Phone?" she asked.

"Sure, here," Roger said handing it to her.

Genevieve tossed it up through the front doors of the house and then slid the fancy scissor door closed.

"What the... not okay," he chastised her.

"Drive," she said, leaning against the headrest, eyes closed.

"You know," Roger said, unbuckling his 5-point harness, "just to be safe I better go pee pee one more time."

"Roger," she sat up, grabbing his arm firmly, "if you don't want barbecued pee pee, I suggest you step on it. Tout de suite."

"What?" He said, recognition dawning. "O-oh okay, you, okay!"

He floored it and the luxury supercar scratched off, fishtailing up the driveway. Behind them a mushroom cloud explosion belched obscenely into the sky as the gas and fire and plastique all fused into one epic fireball chain reaction.

"Helluva viking funeral, Viv," Roger said, impressed.

"Hm," was her only response. Then, she leaned back and closed her eyes to rest. In front of them, over the mountains, the first hint of the new day dawned.

Chapter 1 | HOMECOMING

A line of cars snaked their way somberly through the Mt. Sinai Memorial Park in Burbank, CA. The hearse in the lead pulled off next to a green, sun-faded easy-up tent on a hill beside a fresh grave cut into the earth. A black stretch hummer and a dozen other cars found parking spots nearby and everyone began to exit and find their way to the small staging area. Next to the grave was an easel with a beautiful portrait of Genevieve and her infectious smile.

Funeral processions were welcome to bring their own musical accompaniment. If you didn't have a music option, Sinai appointed one to you and that spectacle of a human being went by

the name Glorida. He sat at a full-sized keyboard under the shade of a nearby tree. A short, one-man band, he wore a gold jumper and bowler hat to add, what he called, some prestige. He looked like the love child between Patton Oswald and the bearded lady from any circus, but with absolutely none of their talents. He was sweetly hammering away at "Hotel California" on the keyboard; the instrumental part was surprisingly nice, but when he opened his mouth to sing, the noise was likened by passers-by to a crow fighting an alley cat for supper; off-key and sloppy but 100% sincere.

"On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair..." he warbled into it passionately.

Behind the hearse, Colonel Vance Krimson stepped out of the Humvee with an air of authority. He looked like a young Clooney with a huge Wyatt Earp mustache that was totally not Army regulation. Behind him followed the rest of his glam Classassin Squad.

Cassie, on his heels, threw one end of her red, bedazzled scarf over her shoulder. It wasn't even *that* cold, but she'd felt that with the black beret Genevieve had sent her from France and the little black dress, well the whole ensemble necessitated a splash of color. But also the scarf was tactical; if necessary she could kill someone five ways to Sunday with it.

If necessary.

Kymber was next in an all black on black pantsuit. She looked straight out of a John Wick movie. Her Jesna platform hiking boots clutched greedily at the curb like a sure-footed tiger's paw. Sweeping the horizon cautiously, she blew a bubblicious bubble and it popped loudly. With Genevieve, the teacher's pet, gone she was officially new squad alpha.

Donovan was the last one out. He was still pulling his tie tight and sliding into a Union Gray Civil War coat all at the same time. His afro had been dreaded and pulled back; it was held in place by some advanced AR goggles in lieu of a hair clip. He ducked quickly back into the backseat and pulled out a drone. The device, smaller than a coffee cup, fired up when he tossed it up into the sky, four blades instantly holding it aloft. He pulled his special goggles down which had a picture-in-picture that allowed him to track the view from above. You could never be too safe, even at a state-side funeral. The Wetshop Bois had them all on edge.

They all walked toward the easy-up tent. Vance's red eyes sought answers in every face he encountered, but they only held grief and pity. Grief for a life taken away too soon. Pity for the inimitable pain of outliving one's own child. Vance pulled on some aviators to shield his eyes from the sun and his

emotions from the well-wishers. They didn't get to pretend to know what he was going through.

His last phone call with his daughter had ended, per usual, in an angry outburst. She'd been on some secret mission overseas. On loan to the French Foreign Legion. He couldn't say where, even with his top security clearance. So much he wanted to tell her, to apologize for, for pushing her so hard. He had never been the best at vocalizing feelings, but fortunately Genevieve didn't seem to require all the usual emotional hand holding. She had been strong from day one at the hospital. The day she had been delivered to him a perfectly healthy baby girl in every aspect except one; she lacked arms from the elbows down. Meromelia, it was called.

The touchy-feely stuff had always been an unspoken thing with Viv. Vance looked down at the crumpled up paper in his hand. Damn, he had hoped to preserve the funeral program and now it was crushed. The picture on the front matched the portrait beside the grave. It was a work photo, but Vance loved how sharp she looked in her ROTC uniform and it was one of the rare photos where she showed teeth.

The photographer had captured a few of the usual "I'm a badass, I don't smile" recruit photos and then he cracked a joke that hit Genevieve square in the funny bone. This photo was

genuine, unfiltered joy. And that's how he wanted to remember his little girl who had risen above a mountain of shitty life setbacks to not only succeed but to dominate in her field.

There had been no open casket, there was nothing to show. That was the hardest part. None of this even felt real. Glorinda continued murdering the Eagle's beloved song piped through a small speaker beside him. The keyboard rocked back and forth because of the uneven ground they'd chosen to set it up on. That was annoying to Vance. Emotions were annoying to Vance. The whole thing was annoying to Vance.

"Viv will be sorely missed, Colonel," one of Genevieve's former Professors said to Vance. He just smiled and nodded. Annoying as hell.

Next up he was supposed to say a few words to the extended family and colleagues gathered around. He just wanted to be back at the office. The way things were before. Before that day. Everything had shattered the same day, the Edward Snowden bombshell, the fallout within the Intelligence Community, the entire Classassin program unravelling. His whole world was spinning around.

"Colonel," Pastor Randy touched Vance's sleeve once Glorinda had wrapped up and then indicated the podium.

Vance nodded, walked over and placed his brochure up on the ledge, smoothing it out, trying to take the wrinkles out of her face. It wasn't really working. He flipped it over to the back and tried to read some of his own chicken scratch words. Things like "vivacious" and "curious" and "stubborn" and "resilient" – it was all the words that reminded him of his Genevieve.

He looked over the small crowd. Memorizing their faces. He wanted to remember every single detail. Donovan's drone footage would help with that. But, then he saw a familiar face at the back of the crowd, up higher on the hill.

"Genevieve," he said in shock.

"Bonjour, Papa." She said sheepishly; Kymber popped another bubble, but otherwise everyone was glued in place, stunned.

"Balls," Kymber cursed under her breath.

Standing there in a head scarf and some ratty tattered clothes Genevieve looked like a thousand miles of rough road. She wore a sleeve wrap with thumb holes, covering her augmentations. Most of the Auggies preferred to do that.

"I am so sorry Colonel," Roger leaned into Vance's field of view, "I feel like my last message was greatly misconstrued."

Vance ignored him and marched right over to Genevieve and scooped her up in his arms. Decorum be damned, by some miracle



he had his daughter back. Viv was less emotional about the whole thing. More embarrassed than anything.

"Papa," she said soothingly.

He wouldn't turn her loose, he wouldn't make that mistake ever again. Genevieve looked past his shoulder to the squad. Donovan was beaming, Cassie was wiping happy tears off her cheeks bouncing with joy; Kymber was glaring.

"Typical Viv drama," Kymber said turning on a heel and returning to the stretch Hummer. "Show's over people. The brat's back. Better luck next time, Preacher man."

She chipped him on the shoulder as she passed, knocking him off balance. She also snapped a couple times in Glorida's face to wrench him from his bleary eyed shock; he clapped happily, laid his fingers to the keyboard and began butchering his next musical victim: Gloria Gaynor.

"At first I was afraid, I was petrified," he began half spoken word, half crooning. And again, 'crooning' paints a very misleading mental picture. His instrumentation was spot on, mind you. He played surprisingly well. But the noises coming out of his throat could barely - by any stretch of the imagination - be labeled singing. Yet, he persisted, "I kept thinking I could never live without you by my side..."

Genevieve pulled away from her father who searched her smudged face. Whatever had taken place over the last two years had dragged her through hell. Or worse, Tijuana.

"Papa," Viv began to explain.

"Not here," the Colonel said quietly. "Let's get back to headquarters."

"Oh no, not I, I will survive, oh as long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive," Glorida sang as the confused crowd dispersed.

Cassie stared out the window silently, stroking Genevieve's dirty hair. Viv lay sleeping with her head in her friend's lap the whole way home. She was bone-weary. She and Roger had been traveling off the grid for six weeks now to avoid any detection. No contact with anyone. No passports. Sneaking into the US through the leaky southern border amidst a caravan of refugees and some sordid deals through Tijuana. Sordid deals that may or may not have ended with some dead Cholos in a dumpster.

Vance watched her closely. This was not the same Genevieve that Roger had dropped at the airfield two years ago. His little girl had indeed been lost overseas and he wasn't sure he even recognized the woman before him. He had seen the same look with the troops that returned with him from Iraq. Some of them were

never able to fully reintegrate into society. Vance hoped that being back home safe with family would help jumpstart her healing process. But it would take time, he knew. He may even have to sideline her for a bit, even though the timing wasn't great. Anyways, being together again with Cassie would help, because those two had been inseparable since kindergarten.

The hummer drove higher and higher into the Hollywood Hills switching back again and again on the twisty roads through the rich and famous neighborhoods. Someone had been murdered in one of these homes in the 60s. Roger opened his mouth to comment on that but then read the room and decided against it. Maybe he'd finally be able to Google things like that again once he got a new mobile phone.

They pulled through a gate and up to a Midcentury stone house that looked normal enough but was in fact a highly impenetrable fortress. The sound of the wheels as they rolled onto the gravelly round-about in front of the mansion was familiar to each of them. In her sleep, Genevieve breathed a huge sigh of relief. Home.

Steam billows from the shower roiled over the tops of the glass doors and were sucked into the ventilation ducts. Beside the fogged doors, on the marble countertop, Genevieve's two

mechanical arms stood side-by-side as if their owner had vanished in the middle of a pushup.

Cassie entered with fresh towels and set them on the counter. She'd changed out of that black dress into some comfy yoga pants and tank top. Tonight was gonna be all about creature comforts. She stooped down and picked up the trail of dusty, dirty clothes Genevieve had peeled off layer by layer.

Cassie almost gagged. They were pretty gnarly. Probably be best just to burn these, she thought. There was no hope for the stains in most of them. Mud? Sweat? Blood? All of the above?

She kicked open the lid on the bathroom garbage and crammed every last piece of clothing into it and something small and shiny fell to the ground. Cassie picked it up delicately. It looked like an engagement ring. *What the hell!* Nothing fancy, but then again Genevieve was not fancy. Not like when they got all dolled up as kids. She looked closer at it. It wasn't traditional, that was for sure. It had some interesting red flecks all around it. She sighed. There was so much she didn't know about the stranger on the other side of that glass wall.

She set the ring carefully inside the pocket of Genevieve's bathrobe on the countertop and then picked up the garbage can and headed for the door. She was about to exit but realized she'd not heard any movement in the shower from the time she had

first entered. Just running water. She closed the door again, set down the trash and stepped closer to the shower.

"Sweetie, I, uh, brought fresh towels and a robe here on the counter. Do you need anything else? A shower beer just like old times?"

She smiled at her own joke, but it faded quickly to concern when Genevieve didn't answer. She strained to hear anything but no movement registered and the steam had fogged up the glass so she couldn't see inside either. She furrowed her brow, her heart rate elevating and stepped an inch from the door.

"Viv? Sweetie?" She paused. Silence.

Growing more panicked, she slid the back shower door open and peered in. It was a beautiful shower, straight out of one of those Kohler commercials; rainfall shower head, stone tiles all around, very spacious - "Enough for three people!" Genevieve had joked with her years ago, making her blush at the time. Now, here was Genevieve curled up in a ball on the floor by the drain, shivering.

"Oh, Genevieve!" Cassie kicked off her shoes and slid through the opening. She sat down, leaned against the shower wall and pulled Genevieve into her lap, to cradle her under the hot, falling raindrops. Genevieve sobbed quietly.

Cassie rubbed her friend's back very conscientious of the host of scars all over her body. Dirt would wash away and reveal a whole new divot or scab. She knew each one told a wicked story that even as her best friend and fellow soldier, she would not have heard mostly because they were all new adventures.

"I've got you, baby. You're safe now, Genevieve."

Viv put the stub of her arm in Cassie's hand. It had been a long time since she'd seen Genevieve without her prosthetic. She rubbed her finger across the nub as though it were the palm of a hand. They stayed that way for several minutes, before Genevieve was finally calmed.

"Cass...?" She said faintly.

"Yes, baby, I'm here," Cassie replied. She fought to control her voice and keep an optimistic, soothing tone. It so pained her to see her friend suffer like this. Genevieve had always been the strong one. She had held Cassie like this many, many times for real problems and even some she'd just imagined along the way.

"Cass, can I b-be a p-princess just for a little while."

Cassie smiled, simultaneously fighting back a tear. That had been their code all these years when one of them needed to be fully and unreservedly pampered, no questions asked. The other would drop everything and be the best masseuse, shopping

buddy, ice cream sundae builder or burrito chef – whatever was necessary.

“Of course, your majesty, what is thy bidding?”

“C-could you wash my damn hair?”

“What...”

That’s when Cassie noticed the shampoo bottle knocked over at her feet. Simple things she took for granted all the time, like opening a bottle. Back in the day they’d had special dispensers for Genevieve and some shower tools but she’d been gone almost two years and hadn’t been expected to return at all at this point. They’d just been caught off guard.

And ordinarily, Genevieve would’ve made it work. Somehow, some way that girl was unstoppable. But today? Today it was just one speed bump too many. Like that one piece of the Jenga puzzle that sets the whole tower toppling over, spilling onto the floor.

“Of course, yes!”

Cassie, with a single finger, popped the lid open. She poured out a line of shampoo onto her friend’s dark hair and then set it off to the side. Then she began to spread it around and slowly knead it into her scalp. She took her time with the whole process, reapplied more shampoo and continued massaging. As she did, the temporary black hair coloring – shoe polish from

the smell of it – washed off and disappeared down the drain. Slowly her blond hair returned to normal; alternately Cassie would run her fingers through her hair, carefully detangling as she went, and then scrub the scalp.

Genevieve had kept short hair for the last five years which helped this process go much faster. Long hair and combat were hard to reconcile. All the girls in ROTC had visions of Wonder Woman at first, long hair flowing into battle, and that was great when you had time to prep for it. But so much of their special ops training had been middle of the night wake up calls and spontaneous missions and you really only had to disentangle an enemy's guts from your hair one time to give up the long-haired warrior fantasy.

Cassie held her cupped hands up to the water fall above them to create a trail, a human roadmap to cascade down to Genevieve's head almost in a stream, washing the soapy residue away. She managed to keep it out of her eyes the whole time, too, which was particularly miraculous.

Cassie was rewarded with the biggest, most contented sigh she'd ever heard from her friend. "Thank you, Cassiopeia," Genevieve whispered earnestly, as if she'd just saved her life. And maybe she had at that.



"Anytime, your Majesty," Cassie giggled. And she might have imagined it, but she thought she saw the corner of her friend's mouth flick into a smile, imperceptibly, and then disappear.

Cassie had an arm around Genevieve guiding her down the hallway. Genevieve leaned into her, peacefully. Both of them were wrapped up in long, fluffy robes and some cozy fleece socks that made your feet feel like they were walking on clouds.

They were almost to Genevieve's room when Kymber walked around the hallway corner, scowling when she saw them both.

"What the hell is this?" She leered at them both.

Kymber approached and was about to say something again when Genevieve spun towards her and caught her off guard. There was a second when Kymber tried to read the expression on Viv's face but before she knew it, Viv stepped forward and hugged her real big.

She didn't have her prosthetics on either so it was just one big, vulnerable bear hug that completely destroyed whatever bile Kymber had been about to spit out. She not only backed down out of respect for her humbled comrade, she didn't shove her away. Now that's not the same as hugging her back, but it was still a major step forward for Kymber who, in bygone days, would have gut punched someone for invading her space like this.

Without a word, Genevieve let her go, turned and headed back into her own room. Cassie closed the door behind them, watching Kymber who was as shocked as she was.

"Okay, whatever," Kymber mumbled and walked off up the hall.

Colonel Vance stood in the kitchen pouring out a couple fingers of Winter Jack into a tumbler of ice. He had saved this bottle for Genevieve's return since she was the cider fan and he was the Jack fan, this seemed like the perfect blend for the both of them. Now it was the first thing he grabbed from the cabinet and he downed one and poured another.

The second one he walked into the living room to look out the huge floor to ceiling windows. The view from atop this refuge was spectacular. He'd paid handsomely to make sure of it. The back of the house overhung a cliff which afforded them a great measure of safety from a hostile ingress.

The infinity pool sparkled in the floodlights. Donovan sat alone at the edge of the jacuzzi section working on his laptop. Most likely going through the drone footage he'd acquired that afternoon at the funeral. Vance had asked him to scan through for any personnel flags. Especially now that Genevieve was back

in play. For some reason she was high on the WetShop Bois hit list.

Vance tapped the window. That was all it took to get Donovan's attention. He looked around like it was the first time he was noticing how dark it was. He packed up quickly and rushed inside. Vance held the door for him.

"Sorry about that, Colonel," he said genuinely. "I lost track of time. Didn't realize it had gotten so dark."

"That's okay. I'm gonna lock everything down earlier tonight. I want no security gaps. Can you check with Sergeant Connors, make sure he's tucked in for the night down in the brat cave."

"Copy that," Donovan nodded. "What's the verdict?" He indicated the Winter Jack.

"Mm. It's like drinking an angry Christmas tree," Vance smiled.

"Haha, that good huh," Donovan laughed. "I'm sure she'll love it, sir."

Without another word, Donovan headed to the hallway and put his wrist against a family portrait and some double doors opened in the wall leading into an elevator. He got in and said "SubOne" and the doors closed behind him.

He had never learned how deep down the brat cave went. He just knew it took exactly 12 seconds to get from top-level down to the labs.

Ding.

The doors opened and instead of the home-y, suburban decor from above, he was now in a world of concrete and stainless steel. None of the nouveau-riche Hollywood hills neighbors would have ever guessed that hidden below this \$9.1 million home overlooking the Canyon, was a \$25million laboratory and Suburban Black Ops (SBO) headquarters; which was kind of the point.

Staff Sergeant Connors sat at the small receiving area guarding the high-tech area known affectionately by the team as the "brat cave."

"Evening, Sergeant Connors," Donovan liked to wave with both hands upon entering the space. He knew, per protocol, Connors would have his hand on the butt of his military issue Sig Sauer and he wanted no mistakes.

"Evening, Sir," Connors replied, relaxing a little.

"The Colonel's locking us down early tonight. You good to go?"

"All clear, Roger that," Connors replied throwing a few switches over to charge the perimeter.

Donovan watched the lights dim to a night time amber. He knew the whole facility would move at that point off the grid and onto back up power. Just a nightly precaution for the last six weeks.

"Mwowlr?" A deep, husky voice emanated from a fluffy white cat. The voice almost sounded like a drunk man trying to imitate a cat voice. That's how ridiculous it was.

"Shut up, Edgar," Donovan said dismissively.

"Mwowlr!" Edgar complained more emphatically.

"Sergeant... is this true? Is this cat starving to death?"

"Negative, sir. That cat was just fed at 2100 hours."

Donovan checked the wall clock. 2112.

"Thought as much," Donovan shook his head at the lying cat.

"Okay, I'm headed back topside. You need anything?"

"Mwowlr!"

"Not you, doofus!"

"No, sir, all good."

"Okay have a good night, Connors."

"Will do, sir."

The elevator doors opened and Donovan stepped inside. He turned and addressed the cat, again.

"Go fall in a hole, cat."

"Mrwowr," the cat retorted with a flick of his tail, as the elevator doors closed.

"Language!" Donovan chided him as the cat disappeared from sight.

Cassie pulled back the covers and Genevieve slid beneath them. It had been a long time since she'd been in real pajamas in a real bed. In fact her only chance to really sleep in something this nice was back at the Sultan's Castle. As quickly as that idea formed, she pushed it back down.

Cassie cracked open a medicine bottle and shook out two pills. Genevieve opened her mouth and Cassie dropped them in and then picked up a glass with a straw and her friend took a swallow, got the pills down, and then took one more swallow for good measure.

She laid back into her pillows and Cassie sat down beside her and pushed her hair from her face.

"Restez avec moi?" Genevieve asked softly.

This made Cassie smile. She had secretly been hoping for an invitation. Genevieve, especially before she left for the French Foreign Legion, had gotten really stand-offish and it had hurt her feelings, but it had had to happen, Cassie realized after.

Her friend had had to pull away and stand alone. It was the only way. And she did. And she kicked ass.

Now, though, she needed Cassie's strength. She needed Cassie's warmth. She needed a guardian angel, an overwatch, and tonight, that honor fell to Cassie.

"Yes, absolutely," Cassie said. "Of course, if your majesty snores, I will not hesitate to squish your majesty with a royal pillow."

Genevieve blinked slowly at her, eyes almost smiling. Almost. Cassie climbed into bed and reached to turn the light out but Genevieve stopped her. They looked at each other for a second and Cassie understood and nodded, "Okay." Genevieve relaxed back into her own satiny white pillow. Cassie settled the covers and laid on her side facing Genevieve, her arm draped protectively over her, as they had a thousand times before.

Cassie began to hum. It wasn't thought out, it just happened automatically before she'd even thought of a song. She actually had to listen to herself to determine the familiar melody which certainly had a lullaby vibe but was a Civil Wars song called "Dance with me til the end of love." As she hummed she watched Genevieve's face relax, but her eyes were still wide open staring at the ceiling. So Cassie ever so gently moved her hand up to Viv's eyes and coaxed them closed. She petted the

skin gently on the bridge of her nose and the eyes stayed closed.

Cassie hummed one song and on to the next. About three songs later, the Xanax had kicked in and Genevieve's breathing had become deep and steady. For the first time in forever, she rested peacefully.