

Chapter One

Justin Foster pounded his fist into the Destroyer's face, relishing the feel of pliant flesh, slippery blood and hard bone against his knuckles. There was a snap of bone breaking, maybe a cheekbone or jaw; the Destroyer's nose was already broken. Justin grunted as each punch landed. He hammered his fist into Raymond Brody's face again and again with the full force of his Terran strength. It felt good.

As a Destroyer, Brody had superior strength of his own, but he was a cringing coward who bent and broke like a twig in the Protector's hands.

For the first time in a long time Justin breathed freely. He felt like a man released from prison as he punched and punched, turning Brody's face into an unrecognizable, pulpy mass.

Suddenly the Destroyer's eyes popped open. They blinked away sheets of blood and gazed at Justin. His mouth stretched in a startling grin, white teeth against scarlet blood, a broken tooth hanging precariously against his swollen lip. "It doesn't matter, you know. You can't change what you've done. It's too late." His face faded away until, like the Cheshire cat, only the grin remained.

Justin gasped and sat up in bed. His chest rose and fell with his rapid breathing. His naked body was drenched with sweat and his heart pounded so hard it felt as if it would jackhammer through his breastbone.

"Fuck!" He blew his breath out and ground the heels of his hands into his eyes, then opened them to stare at the familiar shapes of furniture in the darkness of his room. The images of the dream slowly faded, but the futile feeling stayed with him.

Swinging his legs out from under the tangled sheet, he got up and plodded to the bathroom. The dim glow of the nightlight illuminated the room. He flipped on the tap, filled his hands with tepid water and splashed his face. Gripping the edges of the sink in his hands, he bowed his head and inhaled a long, calming breath.

He looked at his image in the mirror; square jaw and strong, regular features, sandy hair growing out from its short cut and flopping over his forehead in damp spikes. He looked young. Humans would perceive him as a twenty-something man when he was actually much older, the Terran lifespan being longer than humans'. His face also looked honest, wholesome and forthright. Hell, Justin would trust that face himself if he didn't know better.

How the *fuck* had he come to this, colluding with a Destroyer? Raymond Brody was second only to his father Algernon in sheer evil, and now Justin, a Protector of the Keepers of the Environment, was nothing more than his puppet. All he'd fought for during his eighty-some years on the planet he'd thrown away when he helped Brody secure a missing box that held a crucial component to possible global destruction. Did this mean he was a Destroyer now?

Justin heard a faint crunching noise. When he looked down, a web of cracks made by his gripping hands marred the white porcelain surface of the sink.

Hell, even a petty criminal like Ian Black turned out to be a hero, sacrificing his freedom to deliver both the ubiquitous box and two KOTE agents, one of them Justin, to safety. But Justin had betrayed everything he believed in by secretly replacing the box sent to KOTE headquarters with a fake and delivering the real one to Brody. It didn't matter that he did it to protect Trina, his ward, the person he loved most in the world.

He knew perfectly well the good of the planet sometimes had to come before the welfare of a single person and he'd betrayed his very purpose in being--protecting the world.

Worst of all, he didn't know if Brody would ever really release Trina. He would likely dangle her forever as a carrot to keep Justin in line and obedient to his will.

"Damn it!" Ripping the sink from the wall, he sent it crashing across the room. Water spouted like a geyser from the ruptured pipe, drenching him. Shouting a string of curses, he dropped to his knees and turned off the valve, cutting the flow of water.

He sat for a moment on the slippery wet tile floor, his head in his hands. "Should've murdered him when I had the chance." He remembered facing Brody across his glossy desk and handing over the box. One small lunge across the desk and he could've torn the bogus religious leader's throat out. That simple, lethal act might have saved millions of lives.

But it would surely have ended one. Trina's. Sweet, guileless, ethereal Trina. Since she had been a child, Justin's ward had the otherworldly air of someone who saw things others couldn't. When she was three, Justin would look up from reading to see her sitting in her quiet, still way, so unusual for a young child, staring into space as though listening to music only she could hear.

She'd been like a daughter to him for sixteen years. How could he abandon her now? He couldn't, which was why Raymond Brody had the mysterious box and Justin was beating himself up for betraying KOTE and possibly placing the entire world at risk.

Justin pushed himself off the floor, threw a couple of bath towels down to soak up the water, then shuffled back to bed, feeling weak and exhausted as an old man. He flopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Was Trina somewhere now, gazing up at a ceiling, wondering where she was and when he'd come to save her? When he'd first seen the girl she'd been behind bars and he'd vowed she'd never be caged again. It had been 1989 in Romania after the fall of the USSR. At that time, Justin had worked for the CIA and been on a mission when circumstances brought him to question a woman who worked in an orphanage. The rows of rusty metal 'cribs', which were no more than containment cells for the many orphans of the beleaguered country, were horrifying. These hadn't been sweet bassinets holding sleeping infants, but cages containing older children as well as infants.

Justin had considered himself hardened to life from his many war experiences and general operative bullshit. But the children in that orphanage had dark eyes like sharp knives that cut him as he strode through the ward. Why Trina and not one of the others had attracted him, Justin never understood. Maybe it was the huge, liquid, dark eyes in her pinched, little face. She lifted her stick-thin arms up to him, not beseechingly, but as if she firmly expected him to pick her up and take her away from all this.

And so, unbelievably, Justin had picked her up and taken her. He'd held the kid in the crook of his arm as he talked to the woman he'd been sent to interrogate, then left the building. No one had stopped him from taking the little girl. They'd either been intimidated by him or too tired to care.

As both a CIA operative and a Terran, Justin had many resources for fabricating necessary documentation. He'd found a way around the paperwork and taken the child back to the U.S. When he'd gotten Trina home, Justin wondered what in the holy fuck

he'd been thinking. He couldn't raise a child, especially not a human one.

But he had.

He'd left the CIA and began working directly for KOTE. He'd found a trustworthy Romanian *au pair* who didn't question his comings and goings or how a single man had come to adopt an orphan. And he had cherished the frail, little girl, who'd grown into a quiet, skinny teen and then a reserved, willowy young woman.

Justin stared at the gray light of early dawn coming through his window. He had no one but himself to blame for Trina's kidnapping. It had been his fault for being stupid enough to get involved with a twisted bitch like Elyse Greenwood.

The thought of Elyse made him shiver, and not just with disgust or anger at her betrayal. A sharp stab of lust pierced his groin, swelling his cock despite his attempts to suppress it. He hated her, but even after everything she'd done, his body still craved her. The images of her silky auburn hair glinting by firelight, her pale face hovering over his, her translucent gray eyes glittering with lust, set his heart racing.

His eyes closed as he gave into the sensation and recalled her smoky voice whispering in the dark.

"Not yet." She scratched sharp nails across his chest, leaving bloody welts in their wake. She squeezed his hips between her thighs and her inner muscles around his straining cock. "I'll tell you when you can come."

She'd used handcuffs on him that time. Not some sex-play version with plush lining, but the real deal, cold metal cutting into his wrists. His fingers gripped the bars of the headboard, arm and neck muscles corded with the strain of holding back. His body twisted helplessly on satin sheets, hips bucking up and down as she'd ridden him mercilessly for what felt like hours. Then the exquisite moment had arrived. With sweat dripping down his body, the salt stinging the scratches on his chest, Justin had finally received her permission.

"All right. You may come now."

The cock ring she'd fastened to the base of his shaft to prolong his erection couldn't hold him once she'd issued her command. Fire raged in his veins. His balls drew up tight and he'd thrust into her once more, driving deep inside her wet heat. The ring had broken as his cock swelled impossibly larger and his orgasm burst through him. The superb ecstasy of release had made him shudder and he'd cried out, a guttural surrender to her will.

Only then, distantly from the heights of his rapture, did Elyse cry out shrilly as she impaled herself on his shaft, her inner muscles clenching hard and milking him dry. "Bitch," she'd screamed, slapping his jaw and knocking his head to the side as she'd come.

Justin groaned at the erotic memory.

"Damn it!"

He threw the sheet off and got up. Stiff as a pole, his cock stuck out at a right angle from his body. He glared at his offending member. "Fucking hell."

He went to the bathroom again, slipping on the wet tile as he crossed to the shower and turned it on. As he was about to step under the cold spray to quell his raging hard-on, his cell phone rang.

It was Donald Walters, his KOTE Council liaison.

"Mr. Foster, there's a new situation we've become aware of in Raymond Brody's

organization. Since you're already familiar with his retreat facility and the Wellbeing group, you're in a perfect position to investigate the issue."

"What's up?" Justin's voice was calm, but his pulse raced. Could Walters possibly be aware of his collusion with Brody? Was this a test or a setup to expose him? Being a double agent made it impossible to trust anything or anyone, and despite his recent track record, Justin knew he wasn't a very good liar.

"We've managed to get hold of one of Brody's followers and remove the implant from her head. Our scientists and mages have dissected it and learned Brody is not only tracking his followers global-wide, but also has the ability to control their actions through suggestions planted directly into their brains."

"What's he making them do? Give him money? Sign over their real estate?"

"Well, that's the question," Walters said. "Since we don't have a current active list of Center for Human Wellbeing members, it's impossible to pinpoint suspicious patterns among them."

"You want me to secure a list of names? How am I supposed to do that? Brody knows I'm a Protector. There's no way I can get close to him or his organization." Justin hoped the logical argument would forestall Walters's request to involve him. His double-life and Trina's imprisonment would make any missions for KOTE risky.

"That's true." There was a long pause. "However, I understand in the past you had a ... personal relationship with Elyse Greenwood."

Justin swallowed. *Oh God no. How did they know? He'd been so careful to keep his private life private.*

"I know it's a lot to ask you to use that relationship to further KOTE's goals--"

"Sir, I no longer have a relationship with Ms. Greenwood. We haven't been involved in a long time."

"Less than a year, Mr. Foster. This woman is highly placed in Raymond Brody's organization. She must have access to all sorts of invaluable intelligence--information Mirabai Kashi wasn't able to secure when she infiltrated the organization. We want you to resume your relationship with Ms. Greenwood and find out everything you possibly can."

Justin closed his eyes and breathed deeply, forcing his clenched jaw to relax. "Mr. Walters, you don't understand. The chances of my gaining access to Brody through Elyse are non-existent. When I learned of her allegiance to the Destroyers, I broke off our involvement immediately. We didn't part under pleasant circumstances." He recalled the horrifying night he'd discovered Trina missing and received a call from Raymond Brody telling him she was under "his care" now. The realization that Elyse could have been the only one to betray him had been like a nuclear bomb going off inside his head. He'd been Brody's tool ever since, but certainly couldn't explain all that to Walters.

The KOTE representative didn't reply immediately. For a moment, Justin hoped he would be relieved of this duty.

"There's more," Walters finally said. "There are suggestions something monumental is about to occur. Signs of trouble in the spiritual realm are more vague than portents in the other elements, but this time both Spirit and Earth Keepers concur there's an impending danger to the earth."

An Earth Keeper might register a shift in magnetic currents or ley lines. A Water

Keeper might perceive unusual behavior in aquatic life and currents. But the Spirit Keepers' attunement was a finer, more delicate sort. The warning signs they identified would be undetectable to mortal man and hard to fathom for the average Terran as well.

"Ms. Kashi and several others have informed me something is beginning to happen, and this 'something' points directly to Raymond Brody and the Center for Wellbeing."

"I understand, sir, but it doesn't change the fact I don't have access to Elyse Greenwood. She wouldn't trust me even if I attempted to rebuild ... relations with her. There's no reason for her to believe my motives are sincere."

"Then it's up to you to make her believe, eh?" Walters's voice took on a sharp edge. His patience was wearing thin.

"Yes, sir." Justin's temper was also close to the surface. He'd been too well trained in obedience to his superiors by the CIA to refuse Walters's command, not-so-subtly couched as a request. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good. That's what I want to hear. Good luck." Walters dismissed him.

As Justin ended the call, it occurred to him he'd found it all too easy to capitulate. Somewhere inside, he'd known he wasn't finished with Elyse. He couldn't exorcise her from his mind. She'd pushed past all his defenses and made him trust her in ways he'd never trusted a woman in his entire existence. He'd surrendered not only his body but also his innermost self to her. And she'd cut him down, felled him like an oak tree with her lies and deceit.

It was Justin's turn to take control. He'd find her, seduce her and persuade her to believe he trusted her again--or at least to believe in his acute need for the amazing sex they'd shared. Then he'd make her pay for her betrayal, and at the same time find a way to rescue Trina from Brody's control.

Perhaps it would even be possible to cancel what he'd done and steal the damned box back from Brody before Algernon used it in whatever crazy, world-altering scheme he had planned. Maybe Justin could actually get his old life back, put everything to rights and make it as if he'd never betrayed KOTE.

Maybe then he could stop having nightmares every time he tried to sleep.

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"Elyse, could you come to my office please?"

Brody's voice on the interoffice phone, asking that question, sent a frisson of nervous tension up Elyse's spine. She wasn't oblivious to the fate of some employees who'd received a call to the Big Man's office. He could as easily be praising and promoting you for a job well done or eradicating you if you'd fucked up in one of a thousand ways.

"Certainly. I'll be right there."

Elyse rose, tucked in her blouse, and smoothed her skirt. She searched her mind for any transgression she might have committed lately, but as far as she knew, she was still on Brody's "good" list for her work with Justin Foster last winter.

"Damn it!"

There was Foster again, invading her brain. She hadn't been able to scrape him off the bottom of her shoe. He clung to it like a stubborn piece of tar, marring the smooth surface of her sole and making her walk with a figurative limp.

Use, abuse and lose. She mentally repeated her mantra, but unlike the memory of Justin Foster, the words didn't stick, at least not the last one. Elyse had tried, but couldn't lose him, couldn't shake him. He was always with her now. A dozen lovers since Foster hadn't been able to erase from her mind images of the things they'd done together and the way he'd made her feel. The mere memory of his name had her panties damp and her nipples aching. *Crap! Why does that man give me the female version of blue balls?*

"Damn him!"

"Did Brody just call you to his office?" Milton rolled his chair away from his desk and peered around the edge of the shared wall of their respective cubicles. "What'd you do? Is he pissed off?"

"I didn't do anything, Milton. Sorry, you're not getting my job today."

Elyse quickly checked her makeup in her compact mirror. Her auburn hair fell in glowing red waves, framing her strong-boned face and hazel eyes. She wasn't conventionally pretty or beautiful, but striking in a Meryl Streep kind of way. Plus, she'd been told, her body was as sexy as hell, curved in all the right places. And she knew how to carry it. Men always looked when she walked by. She smiled at her reflection, checking her teeth for lipstick then shut the compact with a snap.

Hell, maybe Brody was calling her to his office for a non-business related reason. The guy had to date somebody, right? Although she despised Ray, she wouldn't mind getting even closer to him. He was a stepping-stone in her ultimate plan to secure the elder Brody's attention and work for him. Ray was just a rung on the ladder as far as Elyse was concerned, and she'd do him if it advanced her agenda.

"Good luck," Milton called as she sashayed past him and the other office drones on her way to Brody's suite. It amused her that the headquarters of a pseudo-religious organization looked like any other corporate office. The games people played were the same get-ahead-at-all-costs tricks Elyse had seen at every place she'd ever worked--from bordellos to boardrooms.

As she ascended in the elevator then walked the long, plush-carpeted hall toward Brody's sanctum, Elyse reminded herself who she was. "You're a winner. You're bound to succeed. This is your chance. Seize it." Of course, she'd told herself the same thing when she served Justin Foster up to Brody like steak on a platter, and it still hadn't been enough to win her the promotion she'd deserved. Maybe she was finally about to get her reward for a job well done. She took a deep breath and knocked on Brody's door.

"Come in."

Elyse fixed her brightest smile on her face and swept into the room with confidence. "Good afternoon, sir."

Brody looked up from some paperwork. "Ms. Greenwood, You're looking exceptionally nice today."

He folded his hands on his desk and smiled at her. His dark hair was touched with gray at the temples, giving him a distinguished air and imparting an appearance of wisdom that was far from his true personality. Ray's voice was deep and mellifluous, as befitted an orator. Elyse found herself relaxing under its soothing spell even though she knew it was magically induced.

"Thank you. What can I do for you, sir?"

“Please, take a seat.” He gestured at the chair in front of his desk.

Crossing her legs demurely at the ankle, Elyse allowed her skirt to ride up her thighs, signaling her availability if that was what Brody was after.

He steeped his fingers beneath his chin and regarded her in one of his staged poses. “Ms. Greenwood, I don’t know if I properly thanked you for your help in securing Justin Foster.”

She lowered her eyelashes and smiled. “I was glad to do it. Anything to advance the cause of Human Wellbeing. I hope Foster has proved useful to you.”

“Yes. Indeed he’s been a valuable asset. More than I could have imagined.” Brody tapped his fingertips together. “With his ward in our control, he is as docile as a housecat.”

Elyse smiled thinly. The mention of Trina caused an unexpected twinge in her stomach, and the thought of Justin de-clawed, a caged tiger rather than a housecat, twisted her gut even harder. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy seeing the big, alpha-male Protector humiliated and chastened, but she wanted to be the only one to do it. A weakling like Ray Brody shouldn’t have control over *her* tiger.

“Well, that’s good, sir,” she replied.

“As I said, I’ve been remiss in rewarding you for your efforts and I want to rectify that.”

Her pulse fluttered, and her hands clenched in her lap.

“But, first, I wondered if you could do me one more favor, something that would absolutely ensure your elevated position within the hierarchy of the Center for Human Wellbeing.”

Not wanting to appear overeager she answered with a pleasant smile. “How can I help, Mr. Brody?”

“I want you to oversee a new project I’m developing. You’ll work closely with Justin Foster again. Get him to trust you, feed him information and then see what he does with it. The project will be fake, invented purely for the purpose of testing Foster’s loyalty. Having the girl gives me control over the Protector, but I need to know how much and how long I can continue to use her as a bargaining tool.”

She cleared her throat. “After what I did, I don’t see any way Foster would have anything to do with me, except perhaps to tear me apart with his bare hands.”

“Yes.” Brody rubbed the crease between his eyebrows with one finger. “I had thought of that. But, couldn’t you make him desire you enough to become involved with you again?”

The thought of coming into contact with Justin both thrilled and terrified Elyse. He’d surely kill her as soon as he saw her. Her pussy clenched and released as convulsively as her fingers. Aching with desire, her sex opened at the mere memory of Justin. In seconds her panties were drenched. The thought of seeing him again set her pulse racing and she felt more charged with life than she had in months.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to choose someone else to work with him on this sham project and report back to you. Why me?”

“I believe you have a special affinity with Foster.” Brody examined her closely and for once Elyse thought he might be more shrewd than she gave him credit for. “I think you have a connection with him that hasn’t been broken despite your betrayal. You can lure him into your bed and your confidence again and learn more about the man than

anyone else could. Are you willing to take this opportunity for advancement?"

Releasing a slow, even breath, she smiled brilliantly at her employer. "Absolutely, Mr. Brody. Whatever you want. I'm a team player."

Chapter Two

Contacting Elyse turned out to be much easier than Justin had expected. Before he could figure out a way to make his approach plausible, Justin received a call from Raymond Brody asking another favor of him.

“Mr. Foster, you did me a great service in returning my box. I know I may appear slow in upholding my end of the bargain, but believe me, your protégé is well and living a comfortable life. I do intend to release her into your care again, but I have one more task I’d like you to accomplish before Trina is returned.”

Justin sat at a glass-topped table on the patio outside his house, surrounded by potted plants and flowers Trina had lovingly grown. His lunch sat untouched before him as he stared at the rolling blue-green surface of the ocean at the foot of the bluff. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fork so hard in his fist it bent.

“I’m listening.”

“Good. Here’s the deal.” Brody was suddenly brisk. “I have a new project I’d like you to work on. I need your physical strength and your understanding of electromagnetic currents.” He paused. “And, I need you to work with Elyse Greenwood, who is in charge of the project.”

“What?” Justin was shocked at the coincidence. Simply hearing her name sent waves of mingled lust, rage, and shame through him. “No!” He refused flatly, without thinking. “Absolutely not.”

Brody sighed. “Come now. We’ve been through this before. Do you expect me to negotiate every time I want you to do a job? You must realize your allegiance is to me now. Even after you get Trina back, you’re mine. You’ve betrayed KOTE, which makes you one of us now—a Destroyer, as other Terrans call those of us with a more pragmatic bent.”

The ping of metal on stone caught Justin’s attention. He looked down at the fork he’d dropped on the patio floor. Brody was right. He was a betrayer. There was no way he could expect to fix what he’d done.

“What do you want me to do?” he almost whispered into the phone.

“There’s a reservation for you on Delta Flight 251 from LAX at 4:45 today. I’m at the Reno branch of the Center for Human Wellbeing. Elyse will pick you up at the airport and fill you in on the details.”

Already a ticket and plan in place. Brody obviously had no doubt Justin would obey. Bile rose in his throat at the humiliating subservience he was forced to endure.

“Fine.” Justin ended the call abruptly, taking that small shred of power for himself. He gazed at the tumbling waves with unseeing eyes, examining every angle of the latest turn of events.

KOTE wanted him to find out Brody’s plans by using Elyse. Brody was giving him the opportunity to learn everything as well as get close enough to Elyse to destroy her. The only thing stopping Justin from both serving KOTE and exacting personal vengeance on Elyse was Trina. He couldn’t do anything without putting her at risk, and still hadn’t the faintest clue where she’d been hidden. Months had passed. By now, the girl probably thought he’d abandoned her.

But getting close to Elyse and earning Brody's trust might raise an opportunity to discover Trina's whereabouts and rescue her. This was a golden opportunity that had dropped right into his lap. He'd be a fool not to take it.

* * * *

"Welcome all." Raymond Brody extended his arms in an inclusive embrace and smiled at the camera. "I wish I could personally greet each of you as you join us at the Retreat Center for Human Wellbeing, but, as you know, our movement is growing and I now have a schedule that takes me to locations around the world. Nevertheless, be assured I am with you in spirit if not in body and I personally guarantee that you will have a meaningful and rewarding retreat experience."

He babbled on some more about personal growth and coming to terms with inner demons, making sure to look directly into the camera. His aura was effective enough that he could reach his followers even at a distance, although he preferred to address them in person for maximum effectiveness.

Ray's smile extinguished the moment the camera lights went out.

"Perfect, Mr. Brody," the cameraman said. "We can add this address to the montage of appearances on your new DVD. The followers are eager for anything new. Your DVDs are vying with major movie releases in sales."

Ray nodded. "Great." He dismissed the camera crew with a wave of his hand and turned to his personal assistant. "What next?"

"You have a lunch appointment with some local ministers. They want you to join their ecumenical group to discuss your program to fight gambling addiction in Reno."

"Excellent." Ray wiped his face clean of the makeup that he'd worn for the filming. "A program I plan to set up in Las Vegas and Atlantic City as well." He smiled, pleased with the clever yet simple scheme that diverted money from the casinos straight into his pocket.

"But first, sir, your father is waiting for you in your office."

"What?" Ray tossed down the makeup smeared cloth. "Why didn't you tell me that right away?" He hurried out of the media room and headed for the elevator. "How long has he been waiting? You know better, Sondra. My father must never be kept waiting. You should have interrupted the taping."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry." She hurried along beside him. "I did offer him coffee while he waited."

"No! My father takes tea." Ray scowled at Sondra, who would not be his personal assistant for long at this rate. It was unfortunate she knew so much about his private business. She couldn't be fired, but that left only one alternative for her incompetence.

Ray paused in front of his office door, straightened his tie, brushed a hand through his hair and hoped there was no makeup staining his white shirt collar. He pushed open the door and entered. "Father! I wish you'd told me you were coming."

"Wanted to surprise you."

Algernon Brody didn't rise to greet his son. Flanked by bodyguards on either side, he sat in the leather chair facing Ray's desk. Algernon's hair was more silvery than ever. His straight, strong features seemed chiseled from granite. He appeared the archetype of a stern yet wise paternal figure. His was a perfect politician's face--or maybe the face of a god.

Ray sat down behind his desk. "How are you, sir?"

"Fine." Piercing gray eyes gazed into Raymond's stripping him bare. "How is your business going?"

"New converts every day, and new implants going in at the retreat center. Come election time I'll have all the constituents you need. With these implants, there's no chance of error. They'll do exactly as they're told."

"Excellent." The old man, and at two hundred thirty-two he was old even for a Terran, pursed his lips then released them. "What of the box I entrusted to you? Have you kept it safe as I asked?"

"Yes, sir." Brody thought of how close he'd come to losing it forever when Mirabai Kashi had stolen it. He almost worshipped Justin Foster for returning it to him. Almost. "Do you want it now?"

"In a moment. First, I have a question for you."

"Yes, Father."

"Tell me the truth now, because I'll know if you dissemble. Did you ever consider keeping the box and its contents?"

It was a Catch-22 situation. It would be a lie if Ray swore he'd never briefly considered keeping that power for himself. But if he told the truth, his father might have his head-- literally. There was no good answer to the question so Ray kept silent.

Algernon chuckled. "No matter. The answer is plainly written on your face, but the fact is, you *have* kept the box for me, demonstrating your loyalty. I am pleased."

Ray's heart swelled and the tension that had tied his stomach in knots from the moment Sondra told him his father was there dissipated. "Thank you. I mean, I was happy to hold it for you, sir."

The old man lifted a gnarled hand. "Now bring me the box."

Raymond rose and went to the wall safe hidden behind a gilt-framed Renoir. As he punched in the code on the keypad, scanned his thumbprint then leaned in for a retinal scan, he had a sudden sick premonition that he would open the door of the safe to find nothing inside. But when he pulled the door ajar, the little box stood in the center of the safe right where he'd left it, its polished wood reflecting the dim glow within.

Ray lifted the box in both hands, carried it to the desk and placed it before his father before resuming his seat.

Algernon's long, thin finger, tapped the top of the box. "Have you tried to look inside, I wonder? Have you dreamed about what it might contain?"

Ray cleared his throat. "I'll admit to curiosity. It's natural to wonder, but no, sir, I never tried to open the box." *Not that it would have done any good, because obviously you have it magically sealed with a password only you know.*

"When I told you that the contents of this box held the key to ultimate power and would change the world," the old man paused dramatically, and Ray leaned forward slightly, "I may have been slightly exaggerating."

It took Ray a moment to realize the wheezing sound coming from his father's lips was laughter.

"Actually, I may have been exaggerating a lot. Do you want to know what you have been guarding so diligently?"

Gas rumbled in Ray's stomach, he choked back the sour taste as it rose in his throat. "Yes, sir."

The old man muttered an indecipherable word, then his long-fingered hands lifted the lid of the box. Inside was even more smooth, polished wood, and that was all. The box was empty.

For a moment, Ray panicked. He wondered if Justin Foster had given him the decoy box instead of the real one. His father would kill him now. Then Algernon gave another dry wheeze and Raymond understood. There'd never been anything in the box. All the agonizing and trouble he'd gone through in wresting the box back from the KOTE people had been for a box filled with nothing.

He stared into the empty compartment for another few seconds then raised his gaze to his father's amused face. "Why?"

Algernon's laughter subsided. "To test you, son. You've been clamoring for me to take you on, to put you at my right hand and share my power with you. I had to know, once and for all, if you were worthy of being my heir. I knew it would be very tempting for you to try to seize power for yourself, but you didn't. You remained loyal to me, and that's a rare commodity."

"Yes, sir." Beneath his desk, Ray picked at a loose thread on his pants. He hated snags. They were unsightly. He would change to a fresh suit as soon as his father left, but meanwhile his fingers picked and picked.

"I'm sure you'll forgive me for putting you through this little test. You'll admit your track record for dependability has been less than stellar."

Algernon leaned back in his chair, the leather making a creaking sound as he shifted. He steepled his fingers under his chin and Ray realized for the first time that he copied his father's mannerism.

Ray nodded. Before founding the Center for Human Wellbeing, he'd spent many years enjoying the fruits of his father's wealth--drinking, drugs, sex, gambling. He'd wasted fortunes before Algernon finally cut him off.

"I've been pleased by your efforts to secure voters for me, but before taking you further into my confidence, I wanted to be absolutely sure of you. Now I am."

"I'm glad, sir." Ray's fingers moved convulsively against the slick pants fabric. The dangling thread was driving him crazy. In his mind it took on the proportions of an iron rod he must sever.

"So." All trace of amusement was erased from Algernon's face; his eyes sharpened beneath their jutting white brows. "Very soon now I'll show you what I've been working on. Winning the next presidential election is only part of my ultimate plan. By the time we're finished, the whole world will be at our feet." His eyes closed part way as though seeing his victory and savoring it. "The structure of the global economy and the organization of world leadership will be completely rearranged."

Opening his eyes, he leaned forward and stared at Ray. "The humans will beg me to take control of things. KOTE will be no more than a nipping flea at our flanks. I will assume the mantle of power. And you, boy, will sit at my right hand."

"Yes, Father." Ray stopped picking at the thread.

"Very well then." Algernon stood quickly. Age hadn't slowed him and, if anything, his strength seemed to be increasing. "I shall contact you soon. Meanwhile, continue to do as you have been, gathering voters for my campaign. Very soon I'll announce my candidacy. In these jaded times when neither political party can appease the people, I'll be all things to all constituents." He smiled at Ray. "And with the help of your block of

voters, I'll easily gain the White House." He held out his hand.

Ray rose and took it. His father's skin was papery dry, but his grip was strong.

Without another word, Algernon turned to leave, flanked by his silent bodyguards.

The door closed behind him and Ray stood staring at it for a full minute. Then he gazed down into the empty box for a minute more. *A test. All the dread and panic over this box for nothing but a stupid test.* He gently closed the lid of the box then hefted it in his hand. "Should have known it was empty. It's so light," he whispered.

Cocking his arm, he hurled the box across the room. Whatever protective spell had surrounded it was gone and now it was simply a wooden box. It hit the mahogany paneled wall and shattered, pieces raining onto the carpet.

"Your own son! Why did you have to test me? Why couldn't you just trust me?"

He looked down at his navy blue pants and the little snag that had grown to two inches due to his picking. Opening a desk drawer, he fumbled through it until he found a tiny pair of manicure scissors, smoothed the fabric and clipped the offending thread.

But it was too late. The snag was clearly visible. The pants ruined.

Ray walked from the office into his bedroom suite and opened his closet door to reveal a rack of suits, shirts and shoes. He chose a charcoal gray one, inspecting it carefully and removing tiny bits of white lint.

Why should he be his father's right hand? Why should he deliver votes to Algernon's campaign and take orders and tests for the rest of his life? Ray had power of his own now. People followed him. He would be a fool to give that control to his father. Why had he believed it was his only option?

After removing his blue pants, he dressed in the gray ones, tucked in his shirt, fastened his belt and slipped on his polished loafers.

Father was right about one thing. In these times, people were looking for a new party and a dark horse candidate they could believe in and trust. A charismatic figure everyone already admired would make a perfect politician.

Putting his arms in the sleeves of the new suit jacket, he checked to make sure that exactly a half-inch of white cuff showed at the bottom of the sleeves. "President Raymond Brody," he muttered, as he knotted a burgundy tie around his neck. "Will the Senate and Members of the House please rise for the President of the United States."

Ray smoothed his lapels and checked again for stray lint. He'd have to be clever and careful to stage this coup. He needed to learn more about his father's latest plan and become intimately acquainted with his inner circle to find out who was loyal and who could be turned. Then, when the time was right, he'd make his move, announce his candidacy and defy his father.

The old regime must die and a new sun rise. Ray smiled. He liked the play on words. Sun rise. Son rise. There was something almost messianic about it.

He turned and walked out of the office on his way to meet the local ecumenical group, quietly humming *Hail to the Chief*.