

**THE PARAGON**  
**AGENT STINGER SERIES**  
**BOOK TWO**  
**BY ZARA PHANH**

The Paragon  
Copyright © 2022 by Zara Phanh  
All rights reserved.

Visit my website at [www.zaraphanh.com](http://www.zaraphanh.com)  
Cover Designer: Lance Buckley, [www.lancebuckley.com](http://www.lancebuckley.com)  
Editor: Jovana Shirley, Unforeseen Editing, [www.unforeseenediting.com](http://www.unforeseenediting.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

## **CONTENT WARNING**

This novel is intended for mature audiences. It is set in a dark, gritty world and deals with mature themes including but not limited to: sex, suicide, war, abuse, assault, death, indentured servitude, human experimentation, criminal activity, and excessive swearing. It also ends on a cliffhanger, which some readers may find upsetting.

Please proceed with due caution.

## CHAPTER ONE

After six months, summer was finally reaching an end. Once the sun set beyond the sawtooth peaks of the Transantarctic Mountains, the soldiers of Camp Broken Hatchett wouldn't see it again until the end of the long, dark winter.

The threat of below freezing temperatures hardly put a damper on the base's mood. Soldiers in army-green titanium shell armor piled into the dining facility, or DFAC, before just as quickly piling back out, none of them pledged to any one nation or just cause. Dinner consisted of mystery meatloaf, expired dinner rolls, and syrupy, diced fruit—an extravagant feast for unfortunate souls who had been stuck with the same chili con carne-flavored MREs for two weeks straight.

The arid valleys of West Antarctica blackened as the sky began to dim. In a matter of minutes, hundreds had gathered at the base of a sloping hill near the center of camp, each of them encased in the growing shadow of a stone temple looming just above. An anticipatory energy was brewing, steady and muted yet prominent enough to set even the most boisterous soldiers on edge. A bonfire was being prepared on the crest of the hill, just inches from the temple's grand entrance.

Adam Ward, the commanding general of Camp Broken Hatchett, leaned against one of the temple's columns. He scanned the audience with idle interest, absentmindedly tossing an apple up and down in a gloved hand. Despite the blistering cold, he was dressed in a black dress shirt, slacks, and polished leather shoes, his woolen overcoat and scarf the only evidence of winter gear. His beard was groomed close to his square jawline, and the top of his hair was slicked back, either side of his skull shaved down to an impeccable fade. At first glance, Adam appeared far too clean-cut to be mistaken for a weathered soldier of the battlefield, yet his hardened amber eyes suggested otherwise.

Casting his gaze aside, Adam watched from the corner of his eye as the sun disappeared, taking what little color the land had with it. The never-ending cycle of daylight, followed by the never-ending cycle of night, never did bother him. After five successive years of being stationed at Camp Broken Hatchett, he liked to think that his mind and body had grown accustomed to the long-haul seasons, especially considering there was much in the way of science and technology to ensure the human body—average or otherwise—could withstand the pitiless climate of Antarctica. Even so, he still had his preferences. Being an appointed denizen of the shadows, naturally, he favored the familiarity of darkness over day, finding some small semblance of comfort in the twilight.

The first stars winked across the horizon, soon joined by thousands more. Drumbeats penetrated through the murmurs of idle conversation, silencing everyone and calling Adam's attention back to the scene below. Another group was now marching up the ascent, each of them bearing somber expressions blanketed in the cover of night. As if their silver hair and brightly colored eyes didn't already set them apart from the crowd, they donned leather and fur cloaks, carved-bone accessories, and flourishing tattoos that swept across their limbs like ancient texts on brown papyrus. Some were young; many more were old and fragile.

Leading them was a squat, elderly woman with beady eyes and thin lips that almost disappeared beneath a bed of wrinkles, her snowy hair falling over her left shoulder in a tight braid. She leaned against a gnarled walking stick at least a foot taller than her, but when she spotted Adam, she straightened her spine so she stood a little taller and narrowed her eyes. Adam simply bit into his apple, unsure of why she had felt the need to ruffle her feathers just then. Once she reached the bonfire, the elderly woman whirled around to face her audience. She opened her arms and looked to the stars.

The bonfire seemed to light itself on fire. The chanting commenced, led by the woman and her fellow elders.

It was hardly Adam's first time witnessing the ceremony. Every year, the Daogin, an indigenous tribe hailing from a now sunken island of little import in the East Siberian Sea, gathered at precisely the same time and place to partake in their age-old ritual. Even after Adam had built the temple on the summit, they continued to return to that same spot, only moving their bonfire a little forward.

There were many other choice areas throughout the camp that Adam could have chosen as the site for his behemoth structure. The recreation center, which was the most frequented area in camp, sat beside a large clearing, and seeing as soldiers had no choice but to visit the DFAC on most days, it would have been reasonable to erect a temple near there, but practicality would have suggested Adam had intended to construct a house of worship in the first place. Everyone else simply perceived his creation to be a temple, and Adam, being far too busy with more urgent matters, simply went along with it.

Not once had the Daogin asked why he had selected that particular hill, and not once had they openly shown him any signs of offense or resentment for his decision. Adam himself never bothered to explain his reasoning to them, having never cared about their thoughts on the matter in the first place. He was, after all, the man in charge. Here, his word was law.

Half an hour later, the chanting reached a dramatic climax. The rest of the Daogin now joined in, adding the highs and lows of small children and young men and women fresh out of their teenage years.

Only then did Adam notice the tension in his usually taut muscles loosening. His chewing gradually slowed to a halt, the sour-sweet tang of apple on his tongue growing milder. For some inexplicable reason, his mind began to stray. Abstract shapes took hold of his waking thoughts, the undefined globules like watercolor blooming into paintings.

Adam was confused, to say the least. At birth, he had been gifted with a photographic memory and a natural inclination for higher learning, yet for all his genius, he couldn't fashion fictional experiences out of thin air. Not unless he had witnessed them before with his own two eyes. He didn't even know what it was to dream, his unconscious mind simply incapable of the base human function. There were chrome solutions to this strange problem of his, of course: Sendai Night Pods found in any red-light district across the world, Third Eye occipital cortex implants, and even prescription stims that his insurance policy would happily cover—easy bandage fixes.

But what need did a man of his caliber have for such uninspired solutions in the first place?

Even with his deficiency, Adam still proved to be an effective asset. He was touted at HQ for having a ninety-eight percent mission success rate—a shining example to be followed—and had yet to show any signs of letting up. In the war room, he always stood as master strategist, utilizing pure logic and mathematical probability to deduce risk factors and best- or worst-case scenarios. His superiors and subordinates were oblivious to his utter lack of imagination, but even if they knew, he reckoned they would still laud him for his mental acuity.

The initial confusion soon subsided. His mind's eye could see the impossible now—blossoming flowers and green pastures beneath a clear spring sky, the grass disturbed by two pairs of petit footprints. A boy and a girl, no taller than Adam's hip, trailed after a flock of birds flying overhead, as if to follow the angelic creatures into the clouds. For a time, there were only the sounds of laughter and beating wings, of rustling grass and shivering trees, until someone called out to him.

*Adam.*

Abandoning the birds, the children now raced each other toward the source of this singsong voice. They managed only a few feet before slowing down to glance over their small shoulders. Round amber eyes studied him most carefully, full of expectation and wonder. Perhaps they meant to check that Adam was following after them, or perhaps they were confused as to who he was, just

as he was confused by them. Whatever the case, he remained rooted to his place in the meadows, his breath lost.

Never in his entire life had Adam seen those children. Never had he heard that voice calling out his name before. So, how could he explain this bittersweet pang of familiarity? How could nostalgia for an experience he'd never lived cause his chest to ache with such alien grief? There was a burning desire in him to follow the little ones, to find out where they would lead him, but it was impossible. That place, those two children, couldn't have possibly been a part of his memory. The very idea defied reasoning.

Yet, somehow, he was convinced. In his heart of hearts, he knew that this foreign vision belonged to him.

Adam forced his eyes shut. The fantasy and all its goodness disappeared at once, and when he opened his eyes again, he saw only the apple in his hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze, testing for its tangibility. For reality. Try as he might, however, the pain in his chest only persisted.

At the end of the first hour, the chanting died down to a low hum. The drums from before resumed, this time at a steadier pace. The older Daogin began to clap among themselves while their more spritely, younger counterparts left to join the soldiers down below. They scavenged the crowd as if searching for someone special in a forest of bodies, their bright eyes lingering teasingly on one face before moving on. Playful banter and catcalls ensued wherever they stepped, sometimes crass, sometimes dripping with desperation. It was no wonder that the Daogin chose the quiet ones.

It didn't take long for the bachelors and bachelorettes to make their selections. Willing victims were dragged away into tents, bidding their friends adieu before disappearing. Thankfully, there were no riots or angry outbursts this year. Not with Adam and his lieutenants watching over them all like a pack of hawks.

Night continued to wane. The unlucky soldiers sullenly parted for the barracks after finishing their meals, their shoulders slumped and their gait heavy with disappointment. Shortly after, the older Daogin stood and led the children away. All that was left was Adam and the elderly matron, who was still staring into the now-smoldering fire.

Adam probably should have left as well. It'd been more than thirty hours since he last slept, being far too busy with his duties as commanding general to rest, but instead of retreating to his own trailer, he found himself starting for the opposite direction. What with his insides still smarting with a phantom pain, he couldn't possibly hope to lay still in bed. Some meditation, he supposed, might do him good.

He was about to retreat into the temple when the matron suddenly spoke. Rarely did they ever address one another, their mutual silence sometimes lasting for months at a time.

“It is an ancient call,” she said, her voice gravelly from old age.

Adam glanced at her over his shoulder and saw she still had her back turned to him.

“To guide our lost ones back home. But perhaps some part of you already knew that, General Ward.”

Adam continued ahead, tossing the rest of his apple aside. There was nothing to gain in entertaining the old woman.

The doors to the temple shut behind him, and he took a deep breath, filling his lungs to capacity with fresh air. Moonlight flooded the room through stained-glass windows, highlighting his path forward.

At the end of the walkway was a single altar, plain but for a candelabra coated in melted wax. There were no effigies of worship or holy artifacts to speak of, not even offerings of fruit or the rare white lilies hidden deep inside Antarctica’s caves. Adam hadn’t meant to build a sacred place, yet an ancient and powerful force slumbered away in these primordial stones, invisible to all but him and the Daogin.

Removing a glove, he then ran a callous hand along the altar’s smooth black surface. The tips of his fingers came away with a thin layer of glimmering silver dust.

As he stood there in the hall of his own making, listening closely to the nothingness all around, serenity began to take hold. The vision from before returned, just as vivid as it had been when it first came to him. This time, however, there was no pain or doubt. There was only resolve as Adam attempted to follow the children, hoping they would lead him to the one calling out to him.

*Adam.*

“Kaiser?”

*Adam.*

“*Kaiser!*”

Adam was lanced back into the present. The children and the meadows dispersed, the mystery of the voice remaining unsolved as he realized another was calling out to him. It hadn’t come from any outward direction; instead, it fed directly into his thoughts.

“Agent Kaiser, do you copy?”

“Director Desmond,” Adam replied without actually speaking.

The moonlight faded, shrouding Adam in black. His hand fell limp at his side.

“Ah. There you are.” William Desmond—global director for Omicron Incorporated’s Earth branch, Adam’s master and principal—spoke with the steady air of confident authority. “I hope the evening finds you well. It *is* evening there, no?”

“Yes, sir. Just so.”

“Are you alone?”

Adam didn’t bother checking his surroundings. No one was permitted into the temple, except him. “I am.”

“Good. This is a matter of utmost importance, and I require your undivided attention. I’m sending over a couple of files regarding Dr. Gerarchi’s bioweapon. You remember that little pet project of mine, don’t you?”

Adam nodded despite Desmond being unable to see him do so. “The predecessor to the combat animarium,” said Adam, “The Lucifer Entity. I understand the bioweapon was nearly compromised a year ago, but I’m afraid I was never fully debriefed on what had transpired.”

“Yes, well, there was no need to, seeing as we managed to contain the situation.”

It was the only warning Adam would get, if one could even call it that. Within a blink, his mind was swamped with kilobytes of information at breakneck speed, his neural synapses inundated by image after image of a young man with bewitching blue eyes. An Omicron shadow operative not so different from Adam had been sent to Graves County to preside over the bioweapon after increasing reports of “risky behavior,” but no one could have predicted the catastrophic fallout that would ensue from their meeting. After the collapse of St. Cecilia’s Collegium, any matters regarding The Lucifer Entity were put on hold as Omicron deliberated on what to do, moving forward.

A few nights ago, board members and global directors from each of Omicron’s branches had at last come to a final agreement. Adam had been chosen to transfer the bioweapon to Camp Broken Hatchett for live testing. Should things go well, the entire project would then be relocated beyond the borders of the Milky Way, where more expansive testing could take place on the frontier.

“I have waited too long for this moment,” said Desmond. “We had all placed high hopes in Agent Stinger. Despite his impressive record, however, he failed miserably in containing the asset. Were it not for Ember Toyotomi, I would have personally disposed of him myself, but I trust you to do better, Kaiser. You are Agent Stinger’s superior in every way.”

Adam craned his neck side to side in an attempt to assuage the tension in the back of his head.

“With all due respect, sir, wouldn’t that be dangerous, considering Dr. Gerarchi’s most recent findings on the animarium?”

“You mean, the symbiosis.” Desmond chuckled dryly. “There is a stupidly simple solution—keep your distance. Whatever you might feel for him would merely be a chemical reaction of the body, no more unique than what we would feel in our day-to-day lives. You are not weak, like the others, Agent Kaiser. You are more than capable of handling this task.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. Something told him Desmond was making it out to be far too easy, but it hardly mattered. He was in no position to deny his principal.

“I’ll inform my officers of my absence and leave as soon as preparations are made,” said Adam, already thinking over the logistics of the mission.

“Never mind preparations! As of right now, escorting The Lucifer Entity to Antarctica takes priority over all else. Nothing gets in your way. *Nothing.*”

“Then, I’ll leave at once.”

There was a long pause. Adam wondered if Desmond had forgotten to shut off the neurocomms link.

“One more thing, Agent Kaiser.”

“Yes?”

“*Never* forget who you belong to. Life or death, I own you. Understood?”

“Understood, sir.”

## CHAPTER TWO

The neon-green stripes of Kennyman’s Diner stood out in stark defiance against the black sea of the Chihuahuan Desert. It was the last bastion of human civilization for several hundred miles around. Any farther out toward Middle America, and you’d hit the chemical wastes of the deadlands, where towering war machines too advanced to decommission still roamed free, unaware that the corporate wars they had been built for had ended decades before.

A black sedan sat idle in the parking lot, surrounded by semitrucks, motorcycles, and corporate-owned air carriers. Inside the restaurant, just a handful of Kennyman’s tables were occupied by patrons, clad in a plethora of plaid, leather, and jeans. Outside, however, a long line snaked around a solitary outhouse.

Several minutes had passed since Leon had first seen his contact enter the outhouse. His cigarette, which hung loose from the corner of his mouth, was nearly at its end. In a gloved hand, he absentmindedly shuffled a silver ring between his fingers. It was a simple little treasure, composed of sterling silver and engraved on its inside with a line of code. The car's radio droned low in the background, playing the song of an angel. It was a miracle, really, that even in the middle of nowhere, Leon could still hear such a heavenly voice.

There were better ways to go about this, of course. Practical, modern ways that involved more efficient transportation, less grime, no lines, and a wider selection of sinful pleasures. It wasn't like Leon or his client was hard up for credit, but Reaper had insisted they go about this the old-fashioned way. The senator, being a natural-born kiss-ass, had readily agreed.

Another minute passed by on Leon's wristwatch. Thirty more seconds, and he would have to get out of the car. He really didn't want to get out of the car.

Twenty seconds. Ten. At the same time Leon glanced up to check the outhouse, the ring fell from his hand and onto his lap. The song had come to an end, and Golden Johnson, the radio host, immediately jumped into some breaking news.

"This just in, folks! Now, hold on to your knickers, as this is going to be unsettling for some listeners. I've gotten word that disaster unfolded at a concert with Lucien headlining ... *cbkkk* ..."

Of all times, the radio chose that moment to begin cutting in and out.

"According to sources, paramedics were trying to get on ... fans were uncooperative. The situation ... security was *actually* starting to throw people off the stage! Can you believe it, Jim? I thought they were required to hire private police for concerts of this scale—"

The side passenger door opened. A portly man in a gray suit stumbled inside, the sudden addition of his weight sinking the car and causing it to bounce at the same time. The loose ends of his undershirt jutted from his belt, as if he'd been ushered out in a hurry, and his silk tie hung slack, like a noose around his neck.

Leon recovered his ring and pressed it into his inner pocket. He practically slammed the radio off.

"You don't have to leer at me like that, *bermano*," said the contact. He was a senator of Graves County, soon-to-be former. "After a recommendation like this, I don't plan on ditching you anytime soon. Actually, I think we ought to get to know each other better. Become real good friends, give each other more recommendations. Someone in your line of work could always use more friends, no?"

The politician grinned. Leon didn't reply. After all, Kennymen's was his number one spot to recommend to people he particularly disliked, and he had already heard the politician use similar lines on his housemaids before leading them into his basement studio to produce snuff porn.

Leon pulled out of the parking lot and entered the only paved road across the entire desert, tossing his cigarette out the window. The cheap sedan nearly vaulted at every bump along the way, but beyond that, the scenic drive was relatively straightforward—north to south, south to north—with no laws to worry about. No one ruled over these parts but scrappers, outcast gangs, and the cruel side of Mother Nature, all of whom were no strangers to Leon.

“Oh shit.” The politician started patting himself down. “You won't believe this. I think that whore filched my cigarette case. Fucking bitch!”

He turned and gave Leon the kind of look a wealthy man gave his criminally underpaid personal assistant. The kind that said, *Well? Aren't you going to do something about it, dumbass?*

Leon gave a flippant shrug. Who the hell would turn around for a cigarette case?

“C'mon. It'll be quick.” The politician tapped Leon's arm with the back of his hand to urge him on.

Leon's skin prickled with annoyance.

“Good time as any to kick the habit,” said Leon unsympathetically.

“Kick the habit? What are you, my mother? Get out of here! Besides, who are you to judge? I bet people like you keep way worse habits.”

“People like me?”

“Yeah, you know ... agents. The *special* kind. That *is* what you are, isn't it?”

Leon blinked. He was itching to turn the radio back on, so he could hear Golden talk about what had happened at the concert. Meanwhile, the politician babbled on and on about his damn cigarette case and how it had been a gift from a friend who had claimed to be a distant descendent of Genghis Khan.

Finally, Leon turned the radio back on, unable to resist his curiosity any longer. Instead of Golden Johnson, however, a mariachi group was in the middle of singing “La Llorona.” He scanned the stations, but “La Llorona” kept coming back, suggesting he'd driven beyond Golden Johnson's reach. Using a smart device to look up the news wasn't an option either, seeing as he hadn't been permitted to carry one with him for the mission. Exasperated now, he sighed.

“So,” said the politician, disrupting the mariachi group's chorus, “how'd a guy like you get into the bigwig business?”

“I got lucky.”

“Oh, please. You’re not fooling anyone here.”

Leon decided to humor the politician even further. “I have a degree.”

“Wow! Imagine that! An educated man in your line of work. You need a degree to work for the likes of Reaper, is that it?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care,” Leon replied stonily, somewhat offended that the politician would assume he was uneducated.

“Undergrad? Graduate?”

“Master’s. International affairs.”

In fact, Leon had just submitted his thesis a month ago. Running around in the field kept his body busy, but coming up with lengthy arguments for why intergalactic colonialism was no different than settler colonialism kept his mind from straying. The moment he allowed the mental gears to stop grinding, his thoughts would dash for the nearest exit, headed for places he couldn’t afford to let it go.

“Boy, times sure are changing. Back then, all you needed was a gun and a fat sack of balls. And a whole lot of that thing you call luck.”

A lonely speed limit sign, bent over from having been violently struck by something, appeared on the side of the road. He killed the headlights and veered off the main road, causing the car to lurch from the abrupt maneuver, and continued to drive at a slower speed.

“Christ!” The politician snatched at the door handle. “Think you can warn a brother next time? I’ve got a bit of a hernia I’ve got to ... watch out for ...” The politician trailed off. His mouth hung slightly open as he gazed out the window.

The mariachi group finished “La Llorona” and began strumming a guitar. Rocks and dried grass continued to crunch under the tires.

“Er, you sure we’re going the right way?” asked the senator. “M-maybe you made a wrong turn.”

“I don’t make wrong turns.”

“But there’s nothing out here.”

“There’s been nothing for miles.”

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. Leon could clearly see through the night-vision mode on his military-grade Oeda Optics that, out here, there was dirt, rock, and dried grass. And coyotes, of

course. Lots and lots of coyotes. Some in packs, others hovering along the fringes by their lonesome, their firefly eyes darting across the darkness.

“Turn around,” the senator demanded. As if remembering he was in no position to make demands, he added in a more groveling tone, “Please. I-I think I’m going to be sick.”

“So, roll down the window. Take in some fresh air.”

“Look, I’ll pay you. Whatever Reaper’s paying you, I’ll double—no, *quadruple* that. Shit, just name your price!”

“You think you can afford me?”

“What do you want, huh? A new car? A private jet? A mansion? How about this?”

The car jerked. Leon caught the politician’s fist midair, which held a rusty but still-sharp paper cutter. The sound of crunching bones and dislocated joints mixed with a shrill scream. The knife clattered onto the floormat as Leon shoved the politician’s crumpled hand back to him.

“You stupid motherfucker!” the politician shouted. Tears welled in his eyes, almost giving the appearance of someone capable of a wide and complex range of emotions. His fingers were bent in all the wrong directions. “You’ll regret this. I swear to God, you and Reaper both will regret ever messing with—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Leon snapped, thinking at the same time, *What the hell am I doing out here, wasting my time on this tonto? And on Reaper’s orders, no less.*

More than anything, he wanted to go back to Graves County. Or at the very least, check the news. *What happened at the concert? What happened to the singer?*

“Look,” continued Leon in a matter-of-fact tone, “no one will come for you out here. No one will care enough to avenge you or whatever. Not even your family. This is your final stop, so don’t bother struggling.”

“But Reaper, he swore up and down that I was going to be a free man. He said he was going to help me start a new life when this was all over. He said I could retire in Cancun, man. Fucking Cancun.”

“I literally just told you to shut the fuck up.”

“I—I have a family. A wife, two children. Twins even.”

Leon slammed the brake pedal. Another sedan had just rolled into view, slightly newer than the one Leon was driving but still a hunk of rusty metal.

He turned to look the politician in the eyes. “Get out,” he said.

“B-but what will happen to me? To all my assets?”

“Get. Out.”

“You can’t do this. It’s not fair—”

Leon punched the politician square in the face. He moved to do it again, but the politician scrambled out of the car first. Sighing and shaking his head, Leon stepped outside, glancing up to discover a night full of stars.

Twenty-five hours straight. That was how long they’d been stuck together. The trip would have gone much faster had he just been given an air carrier, but Reaper would have never passed up the opportunity to see Leon drive cross-country in a jelly bean. Leon’s principal, Ember Toyotomi, couldn’t exactly interfere on his behalf either. Since Reaper now reported all of Ember’s and Leon’s activities directly to Omicron’s global director, any misspoken word on her part could easily lead to Leon’s demise.

A figure emerged from the other vehicle. A man, judging from his broad square shoulders and towering stature. He wore a translucent white raincoat over a plain button-down shirt, looking rather like an office worker ready to brave a rainy walk home.

Leon closed the distance between them, both of them solemn. He didn’t know the other shadow operative’s name or his principal, but there was no need to know. Such information was hardly necessary to complete the task at hand.

The operatives exchanged car keys.

As they did so, the other agent asked, “You hear the news?”

A hot wind licked at a line of perspiration forming on Leon’s brow. “What?”

“Word is, he won’t make it to the end of the week. Director Desmond’s about to make some heads roll.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” If this was part of the job, Leon hadn’t been briefed about it.

“Don’t you think it’s time you paid him a visit?”

“Him?” Leon repeated.

“Don’t play stupid.”

“Who are you?”

Leon didn’t get an answer. The other shadow operative walked past him, barely grazing shoulders, before suddenly breaking into a sprint. He raced after the client, who was attempting to flee. Why the senator even bothered, Leon had no idea. There was no escaping a shadow operative in his element.

Leon slipped into the other car. He wrapped his fists around the steering wheel and forced out an unsteady breath, his gaze gravitating toward the deck. It still had a slot for CDs and another for tapes. A dinosaur of a machine. With a push of a button, he turned the radio on, filling the car with music from the same mariachi group from earlier. In the background, the senator yelped.

At some point, the incoherent babbling ceased. Leon looked up just in time to catch a blade piercing clean through the client's torso and reemerging on the other side. The agent reared his arm and delivered another blow, this time aiming for the throat.

The coyotes barked and yipped all around, as if they somehow knew what was coming and were cheering the shadow operative on. The shadow operative hunched over the fresh corpse, chopping away until the mass underneath him was more meaty mush than human. Once the agent righted himself, slicking his hair back with a blood-soaked hand, the coyotes rushed in.

Somewhere nearby, Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" began to play, causing Leon to jump in his skin. Searching the car, he soon found a burner phone in the glove compartment. He hesitated for only a second before answering. As he waited for the other person on the line to speak, he instinctively reached for the ring in his pocket. Still there, as it should be.

"Good evening, Leon." A distinctly feminine voice, smooth yet hollow.

"Mrs. Toyotomi," Leon replied. He swallowed, hoping she couldn't hear the tinge of disappointment in his tone. But who else should he have expected?

"The job with our mutual friend is going well, I presume."

Leon glanced up at the coyotes. They were still in the middle of downsizing their mincemeat dinner. The other shadow operative had already retreated to the car Leon had brought.

"Well enough," replied Leon, seeing there was nothing else for him to do.

Everything had gone according to plan. For the most part anyway.

"Anything to report?"

Leon bit into his bottom lip. "No, ma'am."

"I always can count on you, can't I?"

Leon lifted the ring out of his pocket. It was stuck on the first joint of his left forefinger, too small to fit around the entire length of the digit. Even so, it felt right. He balled his hand and pressed his fist against his forehead.

"Yes, ma'am." Such a simple answer, yet he'd had to squeeze it out of himself.

There was a pause on Ember's part. Leon tried not to think too deeply on what it could mean.

“Good,” she eventually replied. “Meet me at the Qamar Chateaux. And, Leon, dear? Take a cab.”

She ended the call before he could respond. Not that there was much for him to respond with other than, *Yes, ma’am*.

Leon stomped on the gas pedal and pivoted the car around. Graves County was calling once again.

**END OF PREVIEW**

(A/N: This is a work in progress. Content seen in this preview may not necessarily reflect final results.)